



The Stories of

The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea

Book 10

Lord Efran and the
Runaway Bride

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

While late summer in Westford could be broiling, on the hilltop and lands of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea, this September 1st was balmy. It was a perfect day for lingering in gardens, under trees, or on the elevated platforms looking out over the Sea (built so that people would stop climbing the ladder over the fence to the cliffs, which were dangerous). Late summer was also the season when faeries are busiest, so Kele came to Minka with a request while she was chickening.

Hovering above a nesting box while Minka reached in for the eggs, Kele said, “Minka, the faerie tree atop the fortress is getting far too crowded—there are fights and discord, which just won’t do! So the tree guardians have collected seeds, and are asking permission to plant faerie trees on the hilltop and on the plots down below.”

“Oh, Kele, I’d love to have the trees everywhere, but I’ll have to take this to Efran,” Minka said.

“Soon, Minka, please?” Kele asked, resting on Minka’s shoulder. She was the first faerie Minka had met—a lovely faerie with white hair, dragonfly wings, and a flowing purple dress—although she was experimenting with other colors as well, the black-and-white checks being a favorite.

“Yes, I’ll take it to him now,” she said. Having just finished her work in the henhouse, Minka departed unaware that she was wearing her chickening clothes (for the second time in ten days. The first time was to see Tess and Barr get married in the notary office.) These clothes were a set of pants, shirt and apron painted with colorful chickens, unique and eye-catching among Abbey Lands residents who were trying to cultivate a more sophisticated look.

Before going up to Estes’ workroom on the second floor, Minka stopped in the kitchen to drop off the eggs she had collected, 14 of them, which was good for henhouse number two (out of five). And as long as she was in the kitchen, she made a cup of mint tea for Commander Wendt.

Arriving in the workroom with the hot mug in both hands, she looked at the empty chair in which Wendt usually sat. She cried, “Where is the Commander?”

Efran, standing over a map on the worktable, looked at Estes and DeWitt (his Steward and Administrator), then said, “He’s not here right now, but your husband is, who apparently doesn’t count.” He had to move around the tree to say this. Yes, the faerie tree had germinated on the workroom table to emerge on the roof high above, sending roots to the caverns far below, and now had a healthy girth of 38 inches.

“Oh, don’t pout,” she said, coming over to place the mug on the table so she could reach up to kiss him. “I made him tea. But if he’s not here to drink it, I’ll have to.”

“What did you put in it?” he asked suspiciously.

“How awful you are!” she laughed. “Efran, the faeries are asking permission to plant trees on the hilltop and on the plots. They say the one tree is getting too crowded.”

He looked again at his administrators, seriously this time. “What do you think?”

DeWitt muttered, “After their help with DeVenter’s dragon, I’d let them roost wherever they wanted.” Estes merely looked up from his ledger to nod. Having been created by a combination of biochemistry and dark magic,

the dragon had disintegrated to ash within days of its demise on August 25th.

“Let’s . . . see how they do with one on the hilltop outside the fence to start with,” Efran said hesitantly. “We’d have to get permission from individual leaseholders for trees on their plots. Ryal will be helpful. Let’s you and I go down to ask him about it.”

“I’d love to,” she said, smiling up at him.

At that time, Wyeth, beaming, walked in with the Commander. “Ah! Captain Efran! Lady Minka,” Wyeth said, bowing to her.

Efran narrowed his eyes at him. “A happy Polonti is a suspicious thing. What’ve you been up to, Wyeth?”

“Captain, we have found that Commander Wendt can see me as he does the Lady Minka!” Wyeth said, greatly pleased.

Estes looked up, open-mouthed, and DeWitt exclaimed, “Really? In outline? Why, do you suppose?” Efran was interested and Minka conflicted as they studied the Commander and the Fight Instructor.

Wyeth said, “Yes, Administrator, in outline, but why I do not know, only, I have seen faerie for years.”

Minka roused herself to come kiss the Commander’s cheek. “I am very glad, Commander—that opens up great new opportunities for you. Please sit and have your tea.”

Wendt opened his mouth but Wyeth said, “I am sorry, Lady Minka, but I am to take him out to the sparring fields to watch, since he can see me.”

“But he hasn’t had his morning tea,” Minka objected.

“Forgive me, Lady Minka, but we do not want to keep the men waiting,” Wyeth said.

Minka looked up at the Polonti warrior, recently decorated with the coveted Meritorious Cross, and said, “I will fight you for him.”

The men, including Wendt, looked at her in astonishment. “What?” Wyeth said, uncomprehending.

“You heard me,” Minka said, tossing her curls, compliant without pomade. “I will fight you to keep him here for his tea.”

“Minka, I—” Wyeth, he of the gentle soul, newly married, could hardly express his consternation. Efran’s shoulders started shaking.

“You think I am unserious,” she said in her chickening clothes, “but I can take you down with a simple trick that Geneve [his wife] showed me.”

She took his large brown hand in her little ones and separated out a finger. Efran bent to the table, shoulders shaking and tears in his eyes, while Wendt watched the combatants in fascination. Despite his blind eyes, he could see both Wyeth and Minka in bright outline.

“This is very simple; I’ve seen her do it frequently,” Minka explained, attempting to bend his finger.

“May I show you how?” Wyeth asked submissively, head bowed.

“No, I can do it,” she asserted. By this time, Efran had to sit to lean his head on his arms on the table. Estes and DeWitt watched with smiling faces.

“There. Is that not excruciating?” she said, holding up his hand with one finger crooked.

“Minka, I am married,” Wyeth said plaintively, which caused Efran to fall back over the chair, holding his head to laugh.

“Who is that behind you?” Wendt suddenly asked.

Locked in the heat of battle, which to the uninitiated might look like holding hands, Wyeth and Minka turned to him. “What?” Minka asked. Efran stopped laughing to look.

“There is a third person behind you. Who is that?” Wendt asked. Minka and Wyeth, still holding hands, turned to look, but there was no one behind them; Efran, Estes and DeWitt were all at the end of the table behind Wendt.

“He’s gone now,” Wendt said. Disengaging, Minka and Wyeth looked back at him. There was a peculiar odor that lingered briefly before dissipating. Then Wendt held out his hand. “I’ll take the tea with me, Minka. Thank you.”

She went over to the table to get the mug and put it in his hands. “Enjoy yourself, dear Commander. You may not spar with Wyeth,” she said, pinning the Fight Instructor with a steely gaze. He smiled gently at her.

“Yes, Minka,” Wendt said, then took a sip. “Ah. It’s very good. Just what I needed. Lead on, Wyeth.”

The happy Polonti turned out, looking to make sure Wendt could follow, which he did. The four remaining in the workroom watched contemplatively.

Then Efran stood, wiping his eyes. “My day is complete, though it’s still morning and I can’t wait to see what else happens. Don’t start fights at Ryal’s,” he told his wife.

She shrugged. “If no one asks for it.”

Efran paused. He did not like to criticize her, but he disliked even more people laughing at her. “Your chickening outfit is—intimidating.”

She looked down. “Oh. That’s why Wyeth wouldn’t fight me.” DeWitt made a noise in his throat and Efran’s eyes started tearing up again. “I’ll go change,” she conceded.

“I’ll come watch,” he said, so they left the workroom.

After she had changed into a demure riding dress, they went to the front courtyard to ask for horses. There, they saw an Abbey man at the northwest corner of the fortress waving to them. He was pointing somewhere outside the fence on the path leading back to the woods, barracks and armory.

So Efran and Minka looked, and saw a new faerie tree growing in an otherwise barren area that had a view of the woods and part of the back grounds to the south, the Passage and woodland beyond to the west, and the plots and

meadowlands to the north. It was already six feet tall, and aggressively pushing upward and outward.

“That’s—a very good place for a new tree,” Efran said, waving in acknowledgment to the soldier. “But I thought you’d have to tell the faeries what I said.”

“Oh no, I’m sure they heard,” Minka said.

“Could the third person have been a faerie? The one that the Commander saw,” Efran asked.

She shook her head. “Then Wyeth and I would have seen him.”

“Huh,” Efran said. “Well, then.” He turned to look over the Abbey Lands from the hilltop. “Let’s put one tree on either side of the wall gates outside the wall. Leave room for the gates to open outward. The faeries would not allow anyone to climb the trees to go over the wall, would they?” he asked her.

“Oh, dear.” Her eyes widened at the thought of what the faeries would do upon an incursion into their tree. “They would prevent it most imaginatively. I shudder to think.”

“Good,” Efran said, turning his eyes elsewhere. “Let’s put another pair of trees at the bottom of the switchback. Be sure to leave room for large conveyances going up or down.” He then looked east. “Put another pair of trees at opposite points of the cavern lake.”

“Look,” Minka said, pointing. The wall sentries were ringing the bell as two trees began thrusting themselves above the wall at the points Efran had specified. He waved to the sentries far below; they received the signal and the bell went silent. The trees continued to grow.

Scanning the Lands, Efran said, “As far as individual plots, the faeries have permission to negotiate with leaseholders to have a tree on their plot. But all parts of the tree—branches, leaves, and roots—must be confined to that plot, unless the leaseholder of an adjoining plot agrees to it.”

“Yes, that makes sense—oh, my. Can you see them?” Minka asked.

“Apparently not. What?” Efran said, looking.

“Dozens of faeries just lit out for various plots and the wall. Oh, some are going to the lake to wait. I can’t imagine how crowded that one tree must have been getting,” she said. “And here come the trees at the end of the switchback.”

Efran looked down to see the rapidly growing sprouts below them. “Good. Those are well placed. All right, that should give them room to spread out.”

He looked up at a shimmering streak of light in front of them. A liquid voice said, “King Alberon extends *thankia* to the Lord Efran for his gracious accommodation of unmatched persons.”

Efran’s jaw dropped in delight, but he said, “Efran extends a most hearty welcome to King Alberon.”

The streak of light vanished, and Efran asked her, “That was their king?”

“Yes, that must be the regional king of faerie,” Minka said. “But what did he mean by ‘gracious accommodation of unmatched persons’?”

Efran laughed, “He picked up on a joke of mine from a couple of months ago. Remember the woman who objected to my kissing you in the foyer?” As they walked over to get their horses, he draped an arm around her shoulders and told her the history of Lady Nianne.

At that time, a new soldier was trying to find his footing in Towner’s unit. His name was Soames, and he was the son of the bookseller who had recently moved his shop from Westford to the Abbey Lands. Ever since Soames had caught sight of the red uniforms and watched the Abbey soldiers on duty or at practice, he had been enthralled with the army and anxious to sign up.

His father was reluctant to plunge his bookworm of a son into the rigors of army life, but Soames gave one good reason after another why he should be allowed to try. So in mid-August, Shardlow the bookseller gave permission for his only child to apply to the Abbey Lands army, which had a waiting list of hundreds of men wanting to join. And to universal astonishment, Soames was accepted.

The reason for his acceptance was his excellent language skills: he could read and write beautifully in the Southern Continental language, whereas most of the applicants could barely print their names. Captain Towner required an aide to help with correspondence, rosters, memos, and the like, which Soames was thrilled to do.

He was required to drill and learn arms, in which his skills were pathetic, but he ignored the ridicule and set his teeth to practice. As he was also efficient in dispatching menial, repugnant chores, he was never in danger of being released. But his greatest opportunity came in the discovery that new recruits were required to be tutored in the Law of Roman.

Soames knew of the Law, of course, but neither his father nor any of their acquaintances had a copy. Soames’ discovery of the great book in the fortress library was like the opening of heaven to him. Over and above the required hour a week of tutoring, Soames crept into the library at any free moment to study the book. He found it brilliant, concise, poetic and righteous; also, as a compilation of many different areas of law, beautifully organized—

Except in one tiny but significant area. In the back of the book was a catch-all section of various laws and addenda that had apparently been overlooked in earlier editions. And one of these addenda was a critical clarification of the rules for trials which seemed to Soames much too important to be relegated to the back of the book. So he never forgot it.

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Chapter 2

After Efran’s discovery that he could direct the placement of faerie trees by just speaking his wishes, it was no longer necessary to ask the notary about plots for them. But since Efran and Minka had horses and all, they decided to go on down to see Ryal and Giardi.

As they entered the shop to the tinkling of the bell, they saw Giardi manning the front counter. She took one look at Efran and started laughing. “Good morning, Giardini,” he said, smiling.

“Good morning, Efran. Minka. What can I do for you?” she sighed, trying not to laugh.

“Where is Ryal?” Efran asked, glancing at the back door.

Giardi began, “He was called to the gate—”

Efran interrupted, “Oh, there was no reason to disturb him about strange trees shooting up.”

She blinked at him. “I don’t know anything about that. A gate sentry rode up saying that there are messengers from Eurus at the gate with a message for your eyes only. But they refused to leave their weapons to bring the message up to the fortress and refused to hand the message to your men. However, they did agree to give it to the notary, so he just left to go fetch it.”

“Well then, I suppose we just wait,” Efran said, leaning on the counter to look at Minka. “I hope no one comes in looking for a fight.”

Minka shrugged in nonchalance and Giardi said, “My goodness, Efran, why would you expect someone to come looking for a fight *here*?”

“You never know. But Minka’s ready,” he said, clicking his teeth. “She has the finger squeeze down pat.”

“What’s that?” Giardi asked.

“This.” Minka reached over to take Efran’s finger.

“Ow!” he said, withdrawing his hand quickly. “How did you—why didn’t you do that to Wyeth?” he asked in surprise, shaking his hand.

“I didn’t want to hurt him,” she said.

He gaped at her. “You—didn’t want to hurt *Wyeth*?”

“He’s very sensitive,” she noted. “And I didn’t want Geneve to be mad at me.”

“But you’ll do it to me?” he cried, laughing again.

“You’re tough,” she murmured, raising her eyes. Looking down on her, he began calculating how long they had until Ryal came back.

At that moment, the door opened and Ryal entered, followed by the gate sentry Graeme. Ryal looked up in some surprise. “Well, that saved me a summons,” he said, putting the sealed message in Efran’s hand. Efran took it gingerly in his left to break the seal with his right. “What’s wrong with your hand?” Ryal asked in concern.

“Minka attacked me,” Efran said absently, reading. Graeme almost successfully suppressed a smile.

Ryal looked at Minka in astonishment while she looked off, a dangerous woman. Giardi said, “Honestly, Ryal, they’ve behaved like a couple of hooligans.”

“What—?” Ryal began, flabbergasted. Graeme did then smile.

Efran straightened off the counter. “Ho, listen to this: To Lord Efran blah blah, from Grand Councilor Cholmondeley of Eurus: ‘Urgently desirous of negotiating peace with you, we are standing by for the opportunity of talks. Please respond with permission to approach.’ What do you make of that?” He looked around at Ryal, Giardi, and Minka.

The three stared back at him, then Ryal said, “‘Standing by’ leads me to believe that they have negotiators closer than Eurus—possibly in Westford, waiting for your word.”

Efran looked back at Graeme. “Did you see anyone following the messengers?”

“No, Captain. But they’ve definitely not come straight from Eurus,” Graeme said.

“Ah,” said Efran. “Then . . . what is their game?” he mused in a whisper, eyes searching the ceiling.

“Are they actually desperate to negotiate?” Ryal asked.

“Possibly,” Efran said, “but only if they think they have leverage. What do they think they have?” The others were quiet while he searched. Then he observed, “In his last letter, Justinian said he thought he saw Adele entering the palace of Eurus.” He looked at Minka, who raised her head, and he asked her, “When did she escape the cavern the second time?”

She glanced aside, thinking, then said, “Two days after your trial. That would have been August seventeenth.”

“So she’s had almost two weeks to insinuate herself into the machinations for the throne,” he said, studying her.

“That’s plenty of time, for Adele,” she agreed.

“Then we’ll do this,” Efran said, tracing invisible lines on the counter. “Minka, the new barracks is just behind the first barracks right off Main here; Barr should be there today. Ask him to send two men up the new northbound road to check the Porterhouse Inn in Westford; see if they have a party from Eurus staying there. Have them go in work clothes and make sure they take a few royals. They’ll report to me in Estes’ workroom.”

“Yes, Efran,” she said, turning out in a swirl of skirt.

Efran gave the letter back to Graeme and said, “Go back to the messengers with the notary’s doubts about the authenticity of this letter. What proof do they have that this actually comes from anyone of importance in Eurus? Are we to give fortress access to unknowns on the word of messengers? Ask them anything you can think of to keep their attention on you until you see our men pass on the new road up to Westford. At that point, leave them waiting at the gate and come report to me in Estes’ workroom on the second floor.”

“Yes, Captain.” Graeme saluted and sprinted out.

Then Efran turned to Ryal. “If this plays out as I think it might, I will need you up at the fortress. Shall I send a horse for you?”

“No, Efran, I can ride up,” Ryal said.

“Thank you. Come straight up to the second-floor workroom.” Efran then turned his eyes to Giardi with a slight smile. “And I will see you later, Lady Giardini.”

She laughed again and Ryal rolled his eyes. Satisfied, Efran left.

He went straight up to the workroom to tell DeWitt and Estes about the letter and his suspicions about Adele's involvement. He told them that Ryal was on the way, as were Barr's men. "It will take them at least an hour, probably more, to get the information from Westford and get back here."

DeWitt asked, "What did you say was the name of the new Grand Councilor?"

"Umm. . . ." It took Efran a moment to remember it. "Cholmon something. Wait. Cholmonday. No, that's not long enough. Cholmondeley. That's it. Cholmondeley."

"Good heavens, how many rulers have they had since Cennick died?" DeWitt asked.

"Oh, let's see," Efran said, sitting to search the ceiling again. "There was General Shrubsole, who killed quite a few 'conspirators' before being put to death himself; then Rounsefell was the leading candidate until Leila refused to identify me, then Uxbridge put out the authorization to kill Schmolck—probably for evading taxes, the revenue from which they need very much. Then Justinian said that something happened to *him*, so DeVenter came on the scene with his invisible dragon, which we killed visibly, and Justinian, Sir Ditson, and Sir Nutbin attended DeVenter in his tragic accident which destroyed his shop, so he was out. And that paved the way for Grand Councilor Cholmondeley."

"And possibly Adele," DeWitt said.

Estes said, "I can hardly believe that Adele could walk into the palace of Eurus and be taken seriously."

"What if she had information to peddle about the Abbey Fortress or its lord?" Efran posed, leaning back. "She actually knows an exit, and possible entry, into the cavern underneath the fortress. She knows the layout of the plots and the construction currently underway. She knows much about the army. And she knows whatever she coaxed out of Bennard, which could be *anything*."

Minka entered at that time. "I saw Barr's riders off," she reported. "The new barracks is nice."

"Yes, it is," Efran said, "Show DeWitt your finger squeeze." DeWitt, Estes and Minka looked at him inquiringly, and he said, "Show DeWitt that you can really do it."

"Oh no," Minka said quickly. "He knows too much."

"Well then—Estes. Demonstrate it to Estes," Efran urged.

"You mean what she was trying to do to Wyeth earlier?" Estes asked.

"Yes. She can really do it," Efran said, swiveling to him. "Show him," Efran told her, jerking his head to Estes.

Her face screwed up in reluctance. "Noo, I don't want to hurt Estes." He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

DeWitt laughed, "Are you saying she did it to you, Efran?"

"Yes," Efran said darkly. The men laughed at him and Minka looked knowing.

Shortly, Ryal was escorted up and stopped dead to look at the tree. Efran said, "Oh, yes. Meet our faerie tree.

You will have noticed others sprouting up here and there.”

Ryal nodded. “Yes, the ones at the wall are terrifying the messengers.”

“Excellent,” Efran said.

“Oh, speaking of sprouting up—” Minka went down to get Joshua out of the nursery and bring him up.

Upon seeing him, Ryal looked almost astonished: “Good heavens, how he’s grown!”

“Eight months old today,” Minka said proudly, holding him up so that he could look around at the men. Then he turned his face back to her, laying a hand on her lips, and she kissed the baby fingers. With moist eyes, Efran watched her love and cuddle his son. Then she said, “Oops, time to change wraps,” and carried him out again. Inhaling, Efran watched them go.

Graeme came up to salute and report, “Captain, our riders made it up the northbound road some time ago, but the messengers were fearing for their lives if you didn’t get the message right away, so, here it is.” He laid the letter on the table with a long look at the tree growing from it. His eyes followed the trunk to the ceiling, where its branches spread to the seams to disappear. “May I . . . run up to the third floor to look at it, Captain?”

“Yes, but you have to go all the way up to the roof to see it, then come back down. We’re going to eat while we wait for Barr’s men to get back,” Efran said.

“Thank you, sir,” Graeme said, and trotted out.

Shortly after Graeme returned from the roof, and before Efran could eat, Barr’s men Mohr and Stites appeared. Saluting, Mohr said, “Captain, a contingent from Eurus arrived at the Porterhouse last night, consisting of three administrators, one woman, and twenty soldiers. All minus two soldiers are now waiting at the Porterhouse for the return of the two.”

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Chapter 3

“So, Cholmondeley and his party are waiting in Westford for the return of their messengers,” DeWitt said.

“There it is,” Efran nodded. “Thank you; you’re dismissed.” Barr’s scouts saluted and went out. To Graeme, Efran said, “Go tell the messengers I will accept a negotiating party of three into the fortress. They will be searched for arms before entering. Wait a moment.”

To Estes, he said, “Please write up a guaranty of safe passage for Grand Councilor Cholmondeley and two associates.” Estes nodded, reaching for his quill and paper. Then he checked the spelling of the Grand Councilor’s name on the letter.

To Graeme again, Efran said, “Present them the safe passage and alert the wall guards of the possible—probable—visit by the Grand Councilor’s party today.”

“Yes, Captain.” Graeme said. When Estes handed him the safe passage guaranty, Graeme saluted and went out.

“Now we wait. We had best wait to eat, as well.” Efran turned to ask a sentry to bring Minka up again with Joshua.

An hour later, Efran was surprised to hear from the wall sentries that Cholmondeley’s party was at the gates, requesting entrance according to the safe passage given him. “Already,” Efran marveled to Minka. “He must think that he has me in a head lock. I need to change into uniform. Then I’ll need Ryal, Estes, DeWitt, and you in the small dining room. Joshua goes back to the nursery. And please ask the kitchen to put out refreshments for eight.”

“Yes, Efran,” she said, standing, and he smiled at her.

When the Fortress leadership had gathered in the small dining room with refreshments on the sideboard, Efran sent word to have Cholmondeley and two of his associates brought up. Efran told his group, “When they enter, I will be the only one standing. You will not stand, even for the woman.”

“Adele?” DeWitt asked.

“Possibly,” Efran said cautiously.

So the group sat as Efran stood waiting. DeWitt and Estes opened ales; Minka took a cup of custard.

Soon, the door sentries brought in two nobles finely dressed and a veiled woman in black mourning. Efran bowed shortly to them. “I am Lord Efran; welcome to the Abbey Fortress. Allow me to introduce my Administrator DeWitt, my Steward Estes, the Abbey Lands Notary Lord Commander Ryal, and my wife, the Lady Minka. Please help yourselves to refreshments and sit.” He gestured to the three chairs around the north end of the oval table, close to the sideboard.

DeWitt brought out his quill set and paper to begin taking notes. Efran took his place at the south end of the table and looked attentively at the man standing at the center of the three chairs. The man courteously seated the woman on his left; the man on his right took a bottle of Goadby’s before sitting. The Councilor glanced around, and finally sat himself.

Of all the EurAsian antagonists that Efran had faced, this one struck him at first glance as the most serious. His clothes Efran discounted, being standard EurAsian luxury wear, but his clean-shaven face and short hair, his serious, evaluative gaze, his restrained movements and his study of the Abbey residents reflected a man who acted with great forethought.

Bowing his head briefly, he said, “Lord Efran, I am Councilor Cholmondeley. This is my advisor Oslac. And I believe the woman you know.”

At this cue, she lifted her veil, and Adele looked up with decorated eyes to say, “Hello, Efran.”

If the EurAsians were expecting astonishment or at least discomfort, they were disappointed. Efran glanced at her without responding and no one else said anything. Blankly, Efran sat back to ask Cholmondeley, “What can I do for you?”

Cholmondeley appeared mildly disconcerted as he looked to Adele. She, however, was undaunted, announcing,

“I have come for my son.”

No one dared react. Efran merely shifted his eyes to her to whisper, “You will never, ever take my son, whom you tried to abort and then abandoned.”

This was what she was hoping to hear, for she spread like a vulture over a carcass to say, “If you do not give him to me, I will take you to trial for rape.”

This promised an even worse legal nightmare than Efran’s trial for wronging Rounsefell. In addition to the humiliation of yet another public trial for immorality, a conviction of rape carried whatever monetary penalty the judge decreed. It would also negate the bequest of the Abbey charter to Efran, throwing its ownership and operation into doubt. It would envelope the Abbey Lands leaseholders, businesses and nobility in legal uncertainty for years.

Adele’s threat created a well of silence. After a few heartbeats, Minka broke it open with, “That won’t work, Adele.”

The flat statement in such stillness caused a few people to start. Adele turned to glare at her sister, but Minka continued, “You never knew that I was in the lower corridor watching when you went to his cell the first time. Oh yes—he was being held for hanging the next day [addressed to the Grand Councilor]. I saw you go in, and I crept up to listen. He said something dismissive to you, then I heard you slap him, and you came out furious. I was not watching the second time you went to his cell, because that was past my bedtime. But others know what you said to him then.”

Cholmondeley and Oslac stared between Minka and Adele. “Who are you to Adele?” Cholmondeley quietly asked Minka.

“I’m her little sister Sybil, Councilor Cholmondeley,” Minka said.

Ryal stirred. “If Lady Minka’s testimony is not enough to dash your expectations, Grand Councilor, please allow me to advise you further. Efran has spoken to me at length about the night of the baby’s conception—” he broke off to ask Efran, “May I repeat here what you told me?”

Efran barely closed his eyes to nod, upon which Ryal resumed, “That night was the only time they slept together. Surchatain Lightfoot, Adele’s and Minka’s—excuse me, Sybil’s—father, had ordered Captain Efran to be hanged for his refusal to sign the loyalty oath. As Minka stated, the night before his hanging, Adele came to his cell a second time, much later, to . . . lie on him unclothed. He asked her, ‘Am I worth saving tomorrow?’ and she replied, ‘Let’s find out.’”

He paused to let his hearers absorb that, then said, “The Abbey Lands is a distinct geographic entity established by charter of the Order of St. Benedict, and bequeathed to Captain Efran according to the instructions of the bequest. As a chartered entity, it follows the Law of Roman. According to that Law, a trial of rape, wherever the alleged act actually occurred, is held in a venue of the habitation of the accused, and the notary of that or the closest habitation judges at the trial. Therefore, I would be the judge, and from what I already know of the incident in question, I would have no choice but to rule him not guilty.”

Oslac said sharply, “Of course you, the lord and his wife would conspire together to discredit the lady!”

“How, when we had no idea you were bringing her?” Minka quietly rebutted him.

Oslac's mouth hung open, but Ryal continued, "Having been found not guilty, the accused party may sue for damages to his reputation for a false accusation. Adele, or whoever supported her in her accusation, would be liable for heavy punitive damages, assigned by the judge of the original trial for rape. And since I am very familiar with Adele's history, I would not be inclined to leniency in assessing damages."

Oslac protested, "But she did save him from being hanged."

"No," Efran whispered. "Minka did. And I married her."

Following that last blow, Oslac was flushed; Adele was looking away with jutted jaw, but Cholmondeley sat thinking. He was so calm, in fact, that it reminded Efran very much of Master Crowe's demeanor in carrying on meaningless negotiations with Efran while Crowe's men were taking the premises—

Efran rose abruptly to go to the door and quietly order a sweep of the ground and all entryways. Joshua's presence in the nursery was to be confirmed; the cavern under the cold storage room was to be checked, and the trap door secured. Having conveyed those orders in whispers, Efran resumed his seat. Then he sat watching the open door.

Oslac leaned over to whisper to Cholmondeley, who whispered back to him, but Efran seemed entirely disconnected from anything in this room right now; he was watching the door.

One by one, men came to him with discreet thumbs-up. Efran logged each one with a glance and a bare nod. Catching a glimmer of his concern, Minka rose with a gasp—thinking of Joshua in the nursery. But Efran's eyes darted to her with the barest shake of his head, and she sank back to her seat.

Catching a word or two of the whispers between the visitors, DeWitt told Efran, out loud, "They're discussing charging Ryal with corruption." Minka's mouth dropped open in outrage; Efran merely smiled. Ryal himself was clearly unperturbed by the threat.

But Estes leaned forward to tell Cholmondeley, "Be prepared to spend everything you have doing so, for Lord Commander Ryal came to us from Westford with a long and distinguished record. The Abbey Fortress will defend him vigorously." Cholmondeley briefly gestured a negative to his advisor, who sat back. Efran was still watching the door.

After the eighth thumbs-up, Efran leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. "What was your purpose in this?" he asked Cholmondeley. "You are not a stupid man. What did you hope to accomplish?"

Cholmondeley studied him likewise for a moment, then said, "I wanted to see if what she said was true."

"Are you satisfied with what you have learned?" Efran asked.

"I am . . . accepting," Cholmondeley said.

Having thoroughly humiliated his opposition, Efran said, "Well then, let's eat. It's about time for the midday meal, isn't it?" he asked his administrators.

They nodded, DeWitt chuckling, but Minka said, "I want the Commander to eat with us."

Efran glanced at her uplifted brow, then told the sentry at the door to bring Commander Wendt. "We'll make room," Efran added, looking around the nearly full table.

At this point, Estes rose. "Then please excuse me; I would like to go eat with Kelsey and Malan."

"Certainly," Efran said, nodding.

DeWitt also stood, gathering his notes and quill set. "I won't say that Tera has been complaining about the time I spend on the job, but I would like to be reminded which one she is."

There was light laughter. Efran nodded, but Minka cried plaintively, "Oh, poor Tera!"

As DeWitt and Estes were leaving, Wyeth brought Commander Wendt to the door. Efran stood; Minka only looked over smiling, so the guests did not know whether to rise or not. But Efran said, "Welcome, Commander. Come sit to Minka's right. You come sit as well, Wyeth."

Wendt assented; Wyeth said, "Thank you, Captain," as he guided Wendt around the table.

"Hello, Commander," Minka said, kissing his cheek. She glanced up to promise, "I won't hurt you, Wyeth."

"Thank you, Minka," he grinned, and Wendt laughed.

Efran sat back down and said, "Commander, Wyeth, we have guests from Eurus today. This is Grand Councilor Cholmondeley, his advisor Oslac, and, Adele." Halfway seated, Wyeth paused to look at her, note her widow's wear, glance at Minka's wry face, then resume taking his seat.

Adele stared at him momentarily, then decided to pretend that the stupid Polonti would be mistaken about whatever he said. (Minka had recently placed her in Involuntary Servitude with him and his housemate.) Adele darted a threatening glance at Minka, but she didn't see. And Adele didn't dare look in the direction of the Commander, whom her father had blinded. After that, he and she had sold Wendt to the Surchatain of Venegas.

Efran added, "Councilor, Wyeth is our latest recipient of the Meritorious Cross, which is the highest award the Abbey can give its soldiers. Commander Wendt is the Commander under whom I served in the army of Westford."

He left it there as maids began bringing in dishes of baked trout, garden greens, freshly baked cloverleaf rolls, peaches in cream, and Goadby's Best Ale. At a gesture from Efran, they began placing filled plates and glasses of ale in front of their guests before serving the Commander, Ryal, Minka, Wyeth, and Efran, in that order.

They all ate quietly for a little while. Oslac picked up the bottle to observe, "You have Goadby's down here."

Efran glanced up. "Yes, and Lord Goadby is opening a second plant on a plot below. You may have noted the construction on your way up."

"We did note the unusual trees," Cholmondeley said.

"Ah, yes, those are sprouts from seeds of the original tree you see on the roof," Efran said.

"Sprouts," Cholmondeley said. "The ones at the gates were eight feet tall and growing as we watched."

After a pause, Efran admitted, "They are a fast-growing variety."

“What are they?” Oslac asked.

Efran opened his mouth, then looked at Minka. When he couldn't get the words out, she said, “They're faerie trees, sir.”

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Chapter 4

Oslac stopped chewing. “Faerie trees.”

“Yes,” Minka smiled. “You really can't imagine that a normal tree would be growing up through the rooftop with its roots beneath the fortress.”

Oslac smiled at her, suspecting tomfoolery. The Eurussians had already decided that the rooftop tree was merely art. “How do we get the trees in Euruss?” he asked facetiously.

“The owner of the property must give permission for the faeries to plant the seeds. You need to be precise about where you want them,” she said.

Oslac began jovially, “Oh, well, have them put two by my front doors, and ring the back grounds with them, then—”

“You'd best stop there, sir,” Minka said. Adele snorted at her.

Efran stopped eating to look at Adele. Unwilling to allow her to abuse Minka at this table, he pondered how to focus attention on Adele instead. First, he had to sift through all possible topics, given those sitting here who had firsthand experience with her. So he said, “I am interested to hear why Adele is in mourning.”

Cholmondeley said heavily, “She had lately been married to Surchatain DeVenter, who was killed in a terrible laboratory accident.”

The Landers studied him. Justinian's report did not indicate that DeVenter had presented himself as Surchatain. Brows down, Efran looked at Minka. “That just happened—what day was that?”

“August twenty-seventh,” she said, wide-eyed. “Five days ago.”

“Did you marry him posthumously?” Efran asked Adele. This was a practice in some areas, though the Law of Roman disallowed it.

Cholmondeley replied, “No, but it was on his—sickbed.”

“You mean his deathbed? Why?” Efran asked, turning up his ale.

When no one answered for several long seconds, Efran suggested, “She needed the veil for this visit to make the surprise all the more effective.”

When no one rebuffed the suggestion, the Landers deduced that this may have been just the reason.

A few minutes later, Cholmondeley stood, placing his napkin to the side of his empty plate. "I must thank you for your gracious reception, Lord Efran. But we must start back now."

"As you wish, Councilor," Efran said, rising. He spread his hand in a signal to keep the Abbey residents seated.

Cholmondeley glanced at Adele, still in her chair. "But as Adele is family to you, we will leave her here."

The Landers looked up quickly. Efran said, "I regret that this is not an option for you. Adele is banished from the Abbey Lands."

"Banished?" Cholmondeley repeated in astonishment.

Efran said coolly, "Are you really so surprised, after what you heard today? As you have supported her in this ploy against me for whatever reason, you may take charge of her now."

"I don't believe we are obligated to rescue you from your family troubles, Lord Efran," Cholmondeley replied.

The standoff was looking tense when Ryal said, "Excuse me. Councilor Cholmondeley, was DeVenter Surchatain at the time of his death?"

"Acting Surchatain," Cholmondeley clarified.

"In good standing?" Ryal asked.

"Yes, of course," Cholmondeley said stiffly.

"Well, then, according to the Continental-wide Book of Notary Rules, the widow of a Surchatain or acting Surchatain in good standing is entitled to be supported by the Council for the rest of her life, or until she marries again. If the Council declines her support, she is entitled to bring suit against you, and would most likely prevail," Ryal said.

Cholmondeley and Oslac gazed sickly at Ryal, but Adele stood with a luxurious laugh. Ryal added, "All you need do, Adele, is go to your local notary and tell him that you wish to file suit against the Council of Eurus for failure to uphold the Provision for Widow of the Surchatain in Good Standing. You may file proactively to encourage a quick agreement with the Council, which must be in writing, of course."

In effusive gratitude, Adele threw her arms around Ryal's neck. "I'm so glad I was married to you, dear Ryal."

"For three days," Ryal acknowledged to people he couldn't look at right now.

"Three glorious days," Adele said, kissing his cheek. Turning in a swirl of widow's weeds, she took Cholmondeley's arm. "I see that we have much to discuss on our way back to Eurus, don't we, darling?" They turned out, accompanied by sentries to whom Efran gestured emphatically: *Get them gone.*

Seeing the Eurusians exit the front door, Efran let down in relief. He looked back to say, "Ryal, we should build you a palace for your worth to us."

Ryal looked off, smiling. Then to everyone's surprise, Wyeth said, "I have never been so afraid of anything, but

that someone would remember she was my servant. You must take away my Meritorious Cross, Captain.”

There was a stunned silence until Minka cried, “Wyeth made a joke! Oh, I am so proud of you!” Catching sufficient nuance of the Southern Continental language to make worthwhile jokes was difficult for many wild Polonti.

He grinned at her but Efran said in a tight, high voice, “Please do not hug him.”

Wyeth assured him, “Geneve will do that when I tell her, Captain.” Minka looked up to laugh at Efran, who surveyed the ceiling, nodding. Then he thought, *I need to know how Adele found out about Joshua.*

Nyland came to the door looking for Wyeth to drill the men, so while Wyeth stepped into the corridor to talk to him, Minka leaned to the Commander. “Are you all right?” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said. “Just tell me whether there is anyone standing silently at the end of the table where Cholmondeley was.”

She glanced over. “No. You see the third person again.”

“Yes,” he said.

“Can you describe anything about him?” she asked.

“He’s standing silently facing me. I don’t discern a neck, so the hair is either long, or he’s wearing a hood,” Wendt said.

“Tell me why you are saying, ‘he,’” Minka said.

“I don’t know. And, he’s gone again,” he said in mild frustration.

“I gather he’s not moving much. You’re not describing the movement of arms, or the head turning,” Minka said.

“That’s correct,” he said.

“All right,” she said, holding his hand. Wendt did not tell her that he suddenly perceived, rightly or wrongly, that the third person was Death.

Two days later, September 3rd, Minka received a letter from Justinian:

“My dearest Minka:

“I sincerely almost came flying down to your luscious arms in blind panic and morbid fear for my life when I saw ADELE outside the notary office in Euris on Sept the 2nd. I managed to evade her by leaping upon the step of a passing carriage, which then caused some tense moments for the lady within who nearly fainted upon what was hopefully the romantic attack of a stranger. But I disembarked again before she could pull me in through the window, so managed to wind my way back to the notary office to bribe the good notary to show me what she had been about.

“It was then I discovered that, with the assistance of Grand Councilor Cholmondeley, she had legally wed the trebly unfortunate DeVenter, who had suffered the loss of his skin, his workshop, and then his freedom by agreeing in groans with the suggestion that he should have Adele as wife to grieve him on his deathbed, where he found himself a day later. (Quadruply unfortunate, then.)

“So THEN she filed suit with the notary against the exalted Council to spur them to make haste to give her the satisfaction demanded by the Provision for Widow of the Surchatain in Good Standing. No one here, least of all the members of the Council, knew that DeVenter had been proclaimed acting Surchatain by Grand Councilor Cholmondeley after the terrible accident on August 27th before being wed on the 28th and passing out of this world on the 29th. And the GC also appears to have been ignorant of the Provision for WotSiGS.

“SO the GC Cholmondeley is no longer Grand, nor a Councilor, nor even available to anyone looking for him. It is too soon to say that he is dead, but the brightest signs point in that direction, because Blairgowrie has now been appointed Grand Councilor, and looks to be in the lead for Surchatain, should he survive. However, the Council can find no way to abort or delay the payments to grieving widow Adele, who has been promising the most amazing soirée once she gets the first payment, which I may have to gird up my loins to attend.

“An amusing side note that my kitten will appreciate: Council hanger-on Oslac has found his house virtually encased by the sudden appearance of trees remarkably similar to the one on your rooftop. Not only are they large and obstructive, but they seem to be disapproving of the unfortunate Oslac to the point that he is not allowed inside his own house. His wife, children and servants come and go as they please under the shelter of the trees, but Oslac, thrust aside by branches, has been relegated to sleeping, bathing and changing in the gazebo while his purse has been consistently found open and pillaged.

“And that is our situation in this crazy town. I am able to be frank with you because what was left of the army has evaporated over the last three changes in rulers, and I have a pair of ex-soldiers delivering my letters who simply run over anyone trying to stop them. I pay them well.

“Greet the Gargoyle for me, and tell him how fortunate he is to be one of the few remaining men in the Southern Continent to never have been married to Adele (although he did perform a function for her which is often, but not always, associated with the marital state, but I shall not belabor that point to my enchanting swan).

“Much love despite constant exhaustion,
“Your Very Own Justinian”

While she was running this letter up to Estes’ workroom, she did not realize that Efran was in the nursery talking to the matron Nesse while he held Joshua. Always excited to see his father, Joshua would exercise vigorously and try to talk in grunts and gurgles.

Efran bounced him lightly while telling Nesse, “I don’t want to post soldiers in or around the nursery; that’s just heavy-handed. But if Adele knows my son is here, others know, and there are children of administrators here as well. So I want your ladies to be aware of any strangers or lingerers who have no business around the nursery. I particularly want them to feel free to alert a soldier when anything seems wrong—there’s always a man at the rear door here.”

“That’s good to hear, Lord Efran. What has helped most is replacing the solid door with the half-door, which helps us keep an eye on who is coming and going in the corridor,” Nesse said.

“Ah. Please come to me with any problems. I’m—taking Joshua to see if we can find Minka now,” he said.

“That’s fine, Lord Efran,” she smiled.

Then he left with Joshua because he still felt uneasy that Adele knew. How did she find out?

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Chapter 5

When Efran appeared with Joshua in the second-floor workroom looking for Minka, he was surprised that she was there, and that DeWitt and Estes were both laughing at her, or something she was doing. At Minka’s back, Efran looked around in mild astonishment at the scene described.

She quickly turned, smiling broadly. But then she took the baby and thrust the letter at Efran at the same time. “Letter from Justinian,” she cooed to Joshua, who opened his mouth for a kiss, which she placed on his forehead. Efran looked at his administrators, who were now deeply engaged in their work.

So Efran looked down at the letter, but as Minka turned away, he caught her waist with one arm. “Where are you going, my enchanting swan?”

“That’s at the very end and you just started reading!” she protested.

“It caught my eye. I’m starting at the beginning now,” he said, eyebrows deeply scrunched.

“Well, you gave me a wet baby, so I’ll be back shortly,” she said.

“Luscious arms,” he said absently, reading. Minka hurried out.

When she tentatively re-entered the workroom alone, Efran looked up from the table on which the letter resided. “Come here, my wee kitten,” he said, patting his leg.

“Tell me you got more out of it than his pet names,” she sighed, nestling down in his lap.

“Yes. That Ryal is worth a mountain of gold to the Abbey,” Efran said.

“I don’t understand what Cholmondeley was trying to do,” she complained.

“Play a lone hand,” Efran said.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“Advance himself while keeping everyone else in the dark. No wonder he was so thoughtful. He had a lot to juggle, and that was before Adele knocked his feet out from under him,” Efran said, caressing her curls. Kele had shown her how to use just water to tame them.

She sat up. “So she’s banished from the Lands?”

“After threatening to take Joshua? Oh, yes,” he said. Turning to DeWitt, he asked, “How do you suppose she found out?”

“By asking someone who told her, most likely,” DeWitt said.

“But she thought he died,” Efran said.

“Then someone corrected her,” DeWitt replied, showing something on his sheet to Estes.

While Efran didn’t want to take the time to find out who told her, he knew he needed to. Minka sat up again, and he barely tightened his arms to encourage her to stay on his lap without forcing her to. There *was* a difference.

“I think Heye wants us to come down,” she murmured.

“Another box?” he asked.

“I . . . can’t hear well at this distance. But I think we need to go down.” She got up and Efran followed.

They stopped at the kitchen for a lantern, then went to the cold storage room where Efran lifted the trap door and descended first. Minka descended after him, and they saw Heye right at the ledge. She uncoiled her arms from a box, shoving it up on the ledge. Then she drifted back. Even Efran saw that something was wrong.

“No, Heye,” Minka said quietly. “Oh, Heye . . . you’ve done so much for us. . . .”

“What is it?” Efran asked.

“Ohh,” Minka moaned. She reached out to stroke Heye’s arm; another one uncoiled toward Efran, and he knelt to her.

“Thank you, Heye. Goodbye,” Minka said sorrowfully. Efran watched her great body slide down and disappear in the dark water.

“Why is she leaving?” Efran asked.

“Oh, she said she’s getting old. Her eggs that she was caring for have hatched, so she’s going out to Sea to die,” Minka said.

Efran shook his head. “That’s bad. If it weren’t for her, we never would have found the keys to the Destroyer. The fortress would be a pile of rubble by now.”

“I hope at least one of her babies will stay in the cavern waters to help us,” Minka said.

“And she left us a box,” Efran said, picking it up.

Minka sighed. “All right, she’s gone. We can go up, now.”

Taking up the lantern with the box, Efran looked despondently over the black water, then they both turned up the short stairs.

They dropped the lantern off at the kitchen, then took the box with them up to the workroom. Entering, Efran

announced, "Heye has gone off to die, but she left us one last box."

Estes and DeWitt looked up. Estes said, "I'm sorry she's gone."

DeWitt said, "Should you open that somewhere other than the work table? It's getting crowded from the last box."

"You are absolutely right, DeWitt," Efran said, looking around. "Unfortunately, it's the only table in here." DeWitt raised his hands in mild exasperation. Efran sat, turning over the box to look at all sides. It was heavily patinaed copper on which he couldn't find any markings. "Wait, there is something."

He stood, taking the box over to DeWitt. "There is something engraved on this side, but I can't read it." With that excuse, he put the box on the map that both of the other men were looking at. DeWitt, sighing the heavy sigh of the oppressed, got his magnifying glass to peer at the lettering. "L-E-I-M-A-Z," he spelled out.

"Is that right. Thank you," Efran said, taking the box as if he suspected DeWitt just made something up. Estes chuckled, shaking his head.

While Minka supervised, Efran sat to begin prying open the box. It was somewhat similar to the box with the keys to the Destroyer, in that there was a layer of insulation between the top and the bottom to keep out seawater. As with that first box, the insulation crumbled when disturbed, so that Efran was able to work the top off. When he set that aside, Minka leaned over to look.

"Oh, that's exciting," Efran murmured, tilting the box several different ways. DeWitt and Estes glanced over. "Dust," Efran said, pouring a little out on his hand, then wiping it back into the box.

"Be careful; it means *something*," Minka said.

"Oh, I'm sure," Efran said, setting it aside. "I just don't know what, yet." Remembering the cylinder that turned out to be the faerie tree seed, Efran took the box over to an unused corner of the room and put it on the floor near the east-facing window. "There," he said in accomplishment.

"Thank you, Efran," DeWitt said in pursed-lip acknowledgment.

"You're welcome," Efran said in like manner, looking around. Minka took his arm to lead him out.

At that time, Peri was at the courtyard gates with a canvas bag. She told the sentry, "Wyeth has left some of his things in my house which he may need."

Nodding, he opened the gates for her, then she repeated this assertion to the door sentry, who jerked his head toward the northwest corner of the fortress. "He's on the sparring grounds by now."

Peri nodded meekly, taking the bag around the corner of the fortress toward the back grounds. But she took care to circumvent the sparring grounds, sidling toward the back door. She wore a plain dress similar to what the fortress maids wore, and her long, dark hair was pulled back in the same way that they wore theirs. She slipped around the inattentive soldier at the back door to enter the corridor.

From the bag, she took out a short-handled cleaning brush and dustpan which she knelt to use on the floor immediately, as the corridor was occupied by soldiers. They passed her without a glance on their way out, and

she looked up to see that the corridor remained clear while she pulled a baby sling out of the canvas bag.

Stuffing the empty bag in a large pocket, she looked in the nursery to see it momentarily unattended. So she slipped in, glancing from crib to crib until she spotted the obvious Polonti baby with his black hair. Casting a glance behind her, she swiftly picked up the sleeping baby to begin wrapping him in the sling.

“What—? Who are you? What are you doing?” The young nursery attendant came out of the back room, staring at her. Peri began a cool explanation, but the girl began screaming, “Help! Guards!”

Arne appeared immediately at the door. “Put the child down, lass,” he said quietly.

Jaw tight, Peri said, “You don’t want me to drop him.” He stood fast, but the nursery attendant reached out in an attempt to retrieve the baby. At this, Peri held him up over her head. Rudely awakened, he started thrashing in her indifferent grasp. “Get back or I *will* drop him,” she said coolly.

More soldiers came to the door. The nursery matron Nesse was watching from the door to the second room. No one dared move.

The roots of the faerie tree had lain quietly coiled inside the nursery for so long that they were regarded as furniture by now. While soldiers and nursery workers watched wide-eyed, limber shoots sprouted from the thick root running along the wall. Peri, watching the people around her, did not see the roots climbing the wall behind her.

When pale shoots wrapped around Joshua, Peri looked up with a gasp. At the same time, thicker roots were wrapping around her body. She let go of the baby, who remained suspended in the shoots. In wide-eyed fear, Peri watched the roots fasten her firmly to the wall.

Numerous soldiers moved aside from the doorway for Efran to look in the half-door, seeing the situation at a glance. Minka pushed up beside him, eyes wide and lips parted.

Efran nodded to Nesse. “Please hand him to me.” As she went over to stand under the baby, still cradled in the air, the roots lowered him to her outstretched arms, and she brought him to his father. Holding him, Efran glanced down at Minka, and she exhaled.

Efran turned to Ellor to say, “You and Arne go search her house—number twenty-two.”

“Captain!” They saluted and went off at a run.

Then Efran instructed someone else, “Go get Wyeth.”

As that man slipped out the back door, Efran looked into the nursery. “Release her, please.” The roots loosened for Peri to come off the wall, dazed. Nodding at another soldier, Stephanos, Efran said, “Bring her out of the nursery.”

This large man stepped inside the doorway. Seeing the room crowded with cribs and babies, he gestured at Peri: “Come to the door unless you want me to drag you by the hair.” With clenched teeth, she complied.

He brought her into the corridor, but Efran just stood quietly playing with his son. Minutes later, Wyeth entered by the back door to grimly advance on Peri. Screaming, she backed up into Stephanos. He covered her mouth with a hand to quiet her.

“Wyeth. Wyeth!” Efran said. Trembling, Wyeth stopped to look at him. Efran said, smiling, “If you’ll be good, I’ll let you stay and watch.”

Regaining his composure, Wyeth breathed, “I am good, Captain.” Peri pretended to faint. Stephanos caught her.

Before long, Ellor and Arne ran up with a bulging satchel. Arne said, “We found a bag all packed with lady things and twenty-five royals, Cap’n.”

“Of course,” Efran murmured. Then he said, “Uh oh. It’s your turn now,” as he handed the wet baby to Minka.

She took him with a weak laugh, but Nesse said, “Let me do that, Lady Minka.” So Minka handed him off to her.

Efran looked back at Peri. Before he could even ask, she cried, “Adele! Adele sent the money and promised a hundred royals for the baby! I am desperate; I have no money and no way to—” She burst into pathetic sobbing and Wyeth lowered his head in anger and humiliation.

“Calm down, Peri; I’m not going to punish you,” Efran said.

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Chapter 6

Everyone looked at Efran, who was certainly smiling. “On the contrary, Peri, I’m going to have the men take you and your travel bag to Westford to hire a carriage to Eurus. You’ll have to pay for it yourself, but you seem to have plenty of money. You’re to go to Adele, wherever she is staying, and tell her that you must lodge with her from now on, because if she turns you away, you will go to the notary and tell him that she paid you to kidnap my son, and that I will back up your story. Even the widow of an acting Surchatain in good standing is not above charges for a crime.”

She considered this silently, as did everyone around them. Efran continued, “I’m sure you’ll be a great asset to her. You must make yourself at home in Eurus, because if you ever come back to the Abbey Lands, I’ll let Wyeth deal with you. I cannot guaranty that you would be safe even in Westford or Venegas—they are too close. But on the way up to Eurus, you will have plenty of time to think how you can make life interesting for Adele, won’t you?”

With a smiling frown, she shrugged. “I have skills,” she admitted.

“I’m sure you do. Wyeth?” Efran turned to him. “How do you think it will work between Peri and Adele?”

Repressing a bitter laugh, Wyeth said, “Good, Captain.”

“Well, then,” Efran said in a voice of accomplishment. “Ellor, you and Arne see that she gets a nice carriage from Westford to Eurus.”

“Captain.” They saluted, and Arne hung the travel bag on her shoulder. Peri held the strap, looking around in smiling disbelief at her good fortune. “Hop on it, lass,” Arne urged, and she turned up the corridor with them.

The group outside the nursery watched until Peri and the soldiers disappeared into the foyer. Efran turned smiling eyes to Minka, who breathed in mocking dread, “Oh, dear.”

Still disturbed, Wyeth began, “Captain, I am—”

Efran interrupted, “If you apologize for Peri, I will turn Minka loose on you with her finger squeeze.”

Minka looked coolly at Wyeth, who grinned, “She can really do it?”

“Yes,” Efran confirmed, working the fingers of his left hand.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Wyeth. Don’t make me,” she said.

He lowered his head, smiling, then bowed. “Please excuse me. The men are waiting to spar.” Minka waved him away; Efran looked off, satisfied.

Nesse, at the door of the nursery, said, “Lord Efran, I suppose we should talk about discipline for the worker on duty.”

Efran and Minka looked in at the young girl behind her, red-eyed. “What is your name?” Efran asked gently.

“Cordelia, Lord Efran,” she said tearily.

“Tell me what happened,” Efran said.

“Well, sir,” she said, wiping her face, “I stepped out to get fresh wraps from the closet in the other room, and when I came back in, she had picked up Joshua and was putting him in a sling, and I asked who she was and what she was doing, and she started giving me a story, so I screamed for the guard, and he came to the door, but she was holding him and I couldn’t get him away from her—” She dissolved in genuine tears.

Nesse looked back to Efran. “The second girl who was supposed to be on duty fell ill this morning, so I sent her home and was trying to get someone else to fill in.”

Efran said, “I see. But there’s no point in disciplining Cordelia, because she didn’t do anything wrong.”

The girl looked up, and Nesse said, “Thank you, Lord Efran. Now we’ll talk about my failure—”

“Matron Nesse, I don’t see that anyone failed—except possibly the guard at the back door, whoever that was. Peri should have been stopped there. But, Cordelia called for help; you were on hand, and you have the right to expect that kidnappers won’t be walking around loose in the fortress. It worked out well.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Nesse exhaled, and Cordelia hugged her.

Minka smiled at them as Joshua raised up in his crib, indignant at being ignored. “I’ll take him for his feeding,” Minka said, reaching out for him. So Nesse brought him over to her, and Cordelia brought her a bottle and drip rags.

As Efran walked them away, Minka murmured, “The hero of the story was the faerie tree.”

“Agreed,” Efran whispered, shaking his head.

Minka went with him upstairs to the workroom, where DeWitt and Estes looked up from their maps of prospective plots around the cavern lake. DeWitt asked, “What was that all about?”

Efran said, “Adele paid Peri to kidnap Joshua.”

His administrators stared in disbelief at him. Estes looked over at Minka sitting down to give the baby his bottle. DeWitt said, “I assume it was not successful.”

“You assume correctly, so I sent Peri back to Adele in Eurus to blackmail her,” Efran said placidly.

Estes said, “I can hardly wait to see Justinian’s letters about that.” Efran, snorting, came over to look at the maps with them.

After Minka had given Joshua his bottle, she put him on her shoulder and walked around the large workroom to burp him. Remembering the box that Efran had placed in the corner just a few hours ago, Minka went over to look at it.

Without picking it up, she saw that it appeared to be empty. But there was a faint gray line, like a trail, on the plastered wall extending up from a corner of the box to the bottom of the open window. She looked out cautiously, unable to see anything unusual on the exterior wall and certainly nothing on the ground two stories down.

So she took Joshua over to the table to tell Efran, “We’ll be out back.” He nodded, taking in the sight of the sleepy baby hunched up on her shoulder, and crinkled his eyes at her.

When she came out onto the back grounds, she saw that her favorite spot, the bench under the walnut tree, was currently occupied by Connor and his wife Lyra having a quiet moment. So Minka took Joshua around to the east side of the fortress.

Since there was nothing beyond the fence here but scruffy, rocky hillside, it was far less busy than the west side, with the woods, the barracks, and the new armory. The soil was also poorer, so there was little planted here as well. The farther she went around the fortress, the more the original meadowgrass prevailed.

Just the sight of it transported her to those first few days when Efran had brought her and four orphans to their safe place. He and she were already in love then, but he would not touch her because he believed her to be underage. It took a long ride to Eurus and back for her to bring her birth record from Auntie Marguerite proving that she was of marriageable age.

How much had happened since then! She could hardly take it in. But it was exhilarating to stand on this side of the hilltop and see almost to the east branch of the Passage, with all the land between belonging to the Abbey.

She continued walking along the path from the back door of the kitchen toward the grocer’s gate, looking up now and then to see when she got below the window of the second-story workroom. Finally locating the window above, she looked around for what might have dropped from it.

It took several minutes for her to find the faint gray line down the fortress wall. Once in the meadow grass, however, it was plainly visible as it parted the grass from the roots up. And she did not have to look far down the hillside to see that it apparently continued to trickle down to the bottom of the hill on the east side. The only way

to check farther was to walk down the switchback and go around the hill at the base to this point, and she couldn't do that with Joshua. So she just fixed in her mind as best she could the approximate location of the tiny stream, then she turned back to the grounds.

She carried Joshua across the entire back to the sparring grounds to watch Wyeth and Nyland put their men through their paces. She didn't get close, as she didn't want to distract them. So she walked a wide circuit around the sparring grounds to the north. When she had passed the horse training pens and stables, she glimpsed the new faerie tree reaching up almost to the second story on the west side of the fortress.

Looking at it from about thirty feet away, she was surprised to see a boy lolling in its branches. So she hurried toward it, getting as close as she could to the tree without going outside the fence. That put her within ten feet of the trunk.

The boy was sitting on a branch about eight feet off the ground, eating something small. He was Polonti, barefoot, in old, worn clothes, with irregularly cut hair that hung almost to his shoulders. He was skinny but muscled, prepubescent, perhaps eleven years old.

"Hello!" she said. "Are you enjoying our new tree?"

He glanced down at her, taking another bite. "It's all right. Don't know what the fruit is, but it's very good. Here." He tossed one down at her, which she caught with one hand. He raised up abruptly from the branch to get a better view of her. "Oops. Didn't see the baby there. Sorry."

"That's all right; I caught it anyway," she said proudly. Joshua was asleep on her shoulder. "Oh, it's an apricot! Which is strange; they should have ripened months ago."

"Don't know about that, but it's very sweet." He wiped his chin on his sleeve, and she ached to put him in clean clothes.

She took a bite of hers. "Oh, you're right! It's wonderful. But what else can you expect from a faerie tree?"

"A faerie tree?" He grinned down at her, which pierced her, for some reason. "I wish," he added.

"You don't believe in faeries?" she asked, studying him.

He laughed, which made her want to hold him. "If you know any, send 'em my way. Do they grant wishes?" he asked.

"Come inside. We'll feed you and get you good clothes," she said.

"Oh, I'm all right. I'd just like apricots for the rest of my life," he said, reaching up for another. He had beautiful hands.

"Come in and eat. We have the best kitchen on the Southern Continent," she urged him.

"The Southern Continent?" He looked down at her with a quizzical face, and she wanted to hold him again, badly. "What is this place?" he asked.

"This is the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Where did you come from?" she asked.

“I never heard of the Abbey Fortress. How far is it from Eledith?” he asked.

“Eledith! A very great distance,” she said, wondering. “Where have you been staying? Westford?”

“Westford,” he repeated intently, turning down toward her. “Is that near? I’ve read about it. I read *Ares of Westford*. I want to fight in their army.”

She gazed up at him, wondering at the drumbeat of her heart. “Come down from the tree.”

He hesitated. “Am I in trouble?”

“No!” she said. “I just want to see you closer.”

A knowing smile crossed his face. “You’re a pretty girl, but you look too young for me.”

She laughed. “How old are you?”

“Twelve,” he said. “How old are you?”

“I’m seventeen!” she laughed.

“You’re just a child,” he said mockingly.

Her heart leapt up again. He leaned his head back on the trunk, watching her sidewise while he ate, smiling down at her.

She began to tremble. “What’s your name?”

“Tell me yours, first,” he said.

“I’m Minka,” she replied.

“Minka. That’s a pretty name. I like that,” he said as if tasting it.

“Tell me your name,” she instructed.

He looked down at her. “Are you going to complain to someone about me?”

“No! I want to be your friend,” she pleaded.

“Oh. Well then. I’m Efran.”

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Chapter 7

Somehow, she had known that. He was too familiar. “Efran. At twelve,” she whispered.

“Minka. At seventeen,” he replied, grinning.

“Come down from the tree. Please,” she said, trembling.

He looked at her indecisively. “Well. . . .”

“Please,” she whispered.

“I won’t do more than kiss you. You’re too young,” he said definitively, dropping the apricot pit as he began to climb down.

“Seventeen is marriageable!” she objected.

Scaling down the trunk, he glanced over wryly. “You’re no older than fifteen. And don’t try to tell me that’s your baby. It’s Polonti.”

Hopping down to the ground, he walked over to within a few feet of the fence. Minka caught her breath, recognizing his stride. In his bare feet, he was eye to eye with her in low-heeled shoes. They studied each other for a few minutes. “You are,” she whispered. “Oh, I see it.”

He murmured, “You are really beautiful. Your hair . . . is. . . .” Then his face grew sad, and his eyes filled with tears. “I’ll kiss you, and fall in love with you, then I’ll see you with your parents on the street, and your father will spit on me.”

“Oh, Efran,” she said, pouring tears. She reached to him through the fence.

“Not today,” he said. “I’ve been hurt enough today. Maybe tomorrow.” And he turned around and walked back to the tree.

A voice behind her said, “Here she is, Captain! Over by the fence!”

“Minka! Are you all right?” There were running footsteps, then he turned her around to face him. “Why are you crying?” he asked in alarm. He took Joshua off her shoulder, still sound asleep, to lay him on his arm. “Minka?” he said again, searching her face.

She shook her head. “Efran, can you—?” She looked back to the tree, but the boy was gone.

“Will you come to dinner?” he asked guardedly. She heard, *Will you complain about me?*

“No. Yes—I mean yes,” she said.

“Come, then.” He took her hand, and she fell on him to hug him tightly.

Later that evening, he pressed her in bed: “Tell me what happened! You didn’t say three words at dinner and

couldn't even be bothered to tease Wyeth. What upset you so much?"

"I'm not upset. I just don't know how to talk about it yet. Don't worry; it's not bad; I'm just learning. . . . Oh, Efran, I love you. I'll always love you," she said brokenly.

"Well—good. I'm counting on it," he said in confusion. She usually sounded a lot happier when she told him that she loved him, but he pressed his lips into her neck anyway.

As soon as she could get free the following day—September 4th—she ran out the front courtyard gates and across the upper northwestern hillside to the faerie tree, where she was crushed to find it empty. Then she considered . . . yesterday she had approached the tree from the back grounds, with the fence in between them. Did that make a difference?

Just to see, she returned to the courtyard to walk west inside the fence. The stables and training pens filled most of the grounds here, but there was a clear space at the northwest corner that gave an unimpeded view of the faerie tree. Looking beyond the fence, she saw the boy climbing in the tree again. She ran toward the fence to grasp the balusters. "Efran!"

He looked down from a high branch. "Oh, hi, Minka."

"Why have you climbed so high?" she asked anxiously.

"To get the fruit in the upper branches," he said.

"Be careful," she said anxiously.

"Oh, I've been climbing since I was six and haven't ever fal—eiyahhh!"

"Efran!" she cried, seeing him drop.

But he smoothly caught the branch he had been standing on, then let himself down to a lower branch to sit with his back against the trunk. "Fooled you," he grinned.

She exhaled in relief. "Yes, you did. Come down and talk to me."

He eyed her. "Nah, I think I'll talk from here. Where I can look down on you."

"Is that important?" she asked.

"I like to keep a distance," he said, looking away.

"Did I offend you?" she asked.

"No," he said. "It's just . . . talking with you gets my hopes up that other Southerners won't spit on me, and, it hurts to get my hopes up. I'm always wrong."

"Not always," she said, gripping the fence. "There are . . . some Southerners, a few, who respect people for what they are on the inside. The lord of this fortress is a Polonti."

He directed a puzzled look down at her. “You talked about a fortress yesterday. Where is it?”

She half turned to gesture behind her. “Right—” Then she paused. “What do you see from where you’re sitting?”

He looked around. “Just . . . sky and clouds. Hazy clouds. Nothing really besides the tree.”

“But you can see me,” she said.

He looked down. “Yes. You’re behind a black fence.”

“You don’t see anything beyond the fence?” she asked.

“Nothing besides you,” he said.

“Come down,” she said.

Reluctantly, he turned on the branch and shinned down. Then he assumed his fighting stance—how he stood facing Nares, before she ran in between them.

Her heart almost broke. “Do you feel like you need to fight me?”

“A little bit,” he admitted.

“Why?” she gasped.

“I . . . don’t want to fall in love with you. It hurts too much,” he said, wincing.

“Can’t we just be friends?” she asked, pained.

“I don’t have friends. I have lovers and enemies,” he said.

“You’re *twelve*,” she protested.

“So?” he said, and she recognized that evaluative look.

“What about Therese?” she asked.

“She’s my teacher. She’s a nun; she doesn’t count,” he said.

“She will later,” Minka sighed.

He took a step toward her. “You don’t know me, but you really act like you care about me.”

“I know you better than you think,” she said, sagging against the fence.

He studied her for a long time. “Will you wait for me?”

She blinked at him. “What? Wait?”

“Yes. Will you wait for me to grow up?” he asked.

In a flash she remembered telling him that when he was her guardian: *I will wait for you to grow up*. “You mean, if I wait for you to grow up—”

“Then I could marry you,” he said. “Will you wait for me to grow up so that I can marry you?”

“Yes. Yes,” she laughed.

“I think you may actually mean that.” And he crinkled his eyes at her.

“I would love to marry you,” she said, crying.

“We would be happy together, don’t you think?” he asked. Then his face clouded. “Would you not cheat on me? You are beautiful, and beautiful women cheat on their husbands.”

“I am not beautiful, but no—oh, no, I’ll never cheat on you. And I will be a virgin when you and I marry,” she said.

He raised his brows in humorous skepticism. “Do you *promise*?”

“Yes,” she laughed as the tears ran down her face. “I can tell you confidently that I will be a virgin when you and I get married. And you will be the lover of my dreams.”

He took another step closer to the fence. “That . . . gives me something to hope for. I won’t remember this,” he suddenly realized. “But I will know deep inside that I will someday have someone who really loves me.”

“So much. So much, Efran,” she said, shaking.

He came up to the fence, then, and placed his hands on the balusters just to the outside of the ones she held. He brought his face close to hers, and she felt a white-hot jolt that dropped her to the ground.

“Lightning! Lightning out of nowhere hit the fence!”

“Was anyone close to it?”

“I don’t see anyone, Captain.”

“Well—go check all around the fence! Front and back!”

“Minka!”

“I don’t know, Efran—I’ve done all I can do.”

“Wallace, keep trying. Please. Please, Wallace. Keep . . . keep—there! Isn’t that a heartbeat? Listen!”

“. . . Yes. Yes, her heart’s beating now. It’s—slow and weak, but it’s steady.”

“Thank You. God of heaven, God of mercy . . . thank You. . . .”

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Chapter 8

Minka opened her eyes and blearily looked around. She was in her bed, and it was morning. She heard a quick intake of breath, feeling him close beside her. She reached a hand to stroke his head on her chest, but there was something in the way. She looked down at the white gauze on her hands, but stroked his wet hair anyway.

Efran looked up with red, watery eyes. “Wallace didn’t think you’d make it,” he said, shivering.

“I love you,” she said. She brushed the hair out of his eyes with wrapped fingers.

He exhaled, closing his eyes to drop his head back on her chest. “Wyeth found you at the fence, and ran you up to Wallace. You had no heartbeat,” he choked out. Gathering her tightly to him, he gasped, “I held you when we thought you were dead—the only one who has ever loved me—”

“I talked to you at the tree,” she whispered.

He breathed, trying to concentrate on what she was saying. “What?”

“I talked to the twelve-year-old you at the tree,” she said. “I saw a Polonti boy climbing in the faerie tree yesterday, and went over to talk to him, and found that it was you at twelve.”

He raised up to look at her, wiping his sweaty, teary face on his dirty sleeve. She laughed softly, “That’s just what you did. You told me about the people who spat on you on the street, and that you had no friends, only lovers and enemies. We talked, and you asked if I would wait for you to grow up so that you could marry me. I told you I would marry you, and I would be a virgin. You doubted that,” she smiled.

Although still trembling, he listened. She went on weakly, “You came to the fence, and when you started to kiss me, that’s when the lightning hit. But it was faerie lightning, Efran; I wasn’t in danger of dying, it was just to prevent our—crossing realms. You at twelve could not cross to me today; it would be against the laws of nature. But I am all right.” She pulled the gauze off her hands to show him her palms, which were red but not burned.

He stared at her hands. “What . . . would be the reason for all that?”

“It made me understand so much about you, and, about mercy and grace. You were so—jaded and hopeless at *twelve*, Efran—but look at what you’ve become.”

“Because of you,” he said.

“No!” she laughed. “Because of God, having them make you my guardian!”

He lay on his back to think about that, no longer trembling. “I know.”

After a moment, she asked, “Would you ask them to draw water for me to bathe, please?”

“Yes,” he said, getting up.

She listened to him go the outer door and talk to someone. Then he came back to say, “Wyeth stood guard at the door all night. He’ll be useless for instruction today.”

“Be gentle with him,” she said, and he glanced sideways at her. She almost laughed: “Yes, that’s what you did in the tree. Did you tell Wyeth that I am all right?”

“Yes. He cried,” Efran said.

“Then it’s good to see you so dry-eyed,” she said wryly, and he sat on the bed to hold her again.

When the tub was filled, Efran had her bathe, then followed her. Clean and dressed, they went to the dining hall to eat breakfast, so that everyone could see that she was all right.

Geneve and Wyeth came over to greet them, and Minka turned to Efran. “Weren’t you going to excuse Wyeth from duty today?”

He glanced at her, mildly disgruntled. “From morning duty, yes.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Wyeth said. “We are very glad you are well, Minka.”

“Thank you. I had angels watching over me,” she said. Geneve hugged her shoulders. Others came over to express good wishes, but Minka found herself blinking at dishes she usually devoured, so Efran took her back to bed for a while.

She stayed in bed for most of that day, but on the following day, she got up to walk down the switchback. From there, she went all the way to the bottom of the east hillside, where the trickle from the last box appeared to be collecting. But then she found that this wasn’t its final destination at all; being on a slope, the trickle was continuing down toward the east plots, or the road that ran behind them—she couldn’t tell exactly where.

Disappointed, she walked over to the switchback entry, and was turning into it between the lush faerie trees when a rider pulled up to her. Startled, she looked at Wyeth reining around. He glanced up the switchback to make a peculiar gesture, then dismounted. “Let me help you mount, Lady Minka. The Captain doesn’t know where you are.”

“Oh,” she sighed. “What did you do? What is this?” She tried to emulate the gesture he had just made.

“Close,” he said, demonstrating it again. “It is hand talking that the deaf use. I use it with my men sometimes when we are too far apart to talk.”

“How did you learn that?” she asked in admiration.

“My mother was deaf, and taught me early,” he said. “May I help you up, Lady Minka?”

“Yes, since you brought out such a large horse,” she sighed. So he boosted her up onto the saddle and took the reins to walk the horse up the switchback. This made her feel pretty silly, especially when Efran came out to the front courtyard to look toward the faerie tree. The gate sentry pointed him down the switchback, so Efran stood waiting, hands on hips. It might have rankled her had she not remembered 12-year-old Efran standing that way.

When Wyeth brought her into the courtyard, she slid off the horse to press against Efran’s chest and demand,

“Take me to Croft’s.”

He barely repressed a smile. “Would you like to tell me what you were doing?”

“Yes, at Croft’s,” she said. “And I want my own horse.”

He grunted, “All right,” then said, “Thank you, Wyeth,” as he took the reins. Saluting briefly, Wyeth turned away. Efran asked a stablehand for a mare for her, but since Croft’s was in sight of the gate sentries, he felt it unnecessary to take a man with them.

Because he still wanted to know what she was doing, they rode at a walk down the switchback so that she could tell him about her efforts to track the contents of the last box. He agreed that it was worthwhile, but asked, “Why couldn’t you take a man?”

“To the east hillside? I feel like it would be an insult to ask someone to go with me there,” she objected. “Besides, Wyeth was already looking for me because you were looking for me.”

“I wonder about that,” he muttered.

“Efran, I think he’s trying to make up for what Nares did. For some reason, Wyeth feels responsible for cleaning up after him,” she said.

“Ohh,” Efran said, enlightened. He added, “Yes, he married Geneve, too.” Minka nodded, although she felt sure that Wyeth married Geneve because he really loved her.

Since they arrived at Croft’s midmorning, it was not crowded at all. Efran and Minka were directed to a choice corner booth in front of a window, where they could look out at the construction of the stone wall surrounding the large community well. Efran turned his eyes contemplatively to the ongoing building projects and then back to his healthy, living wife. He breathed out in gratitude—the memory of holding her unresponsive body still made him tremble.

“Did you notice the faerie trees on the plots as we were coming down here?” she asked. “I saw four or five of them.”

He shook his head slightly, crinkling his eyes. “I was looking at you.” He glanced up with a smile at the barmaid who gave them their bottles of ale and glasses.

“I can’t get over talking to you as a twelve-year-old,” she said. “It was like going back to earlier chapters of a book that you started reading midway through.”

“I imagine so,” he murmured. “You called it a different realm. Does our past continue to exist, then? Does our future exist in another realm now?”

“God alone knows,” she smiled. “It was interesting that you said you wouldn’t remember talking to me, but you’d always know deep down that you would find someone who really loved you.”

He looked off, thinking. “Yes, that hope was always there, and I always discounted it—until you made me marry you,” he grinned at her.

“You also said you’d kiss me and nothing more because I was too young! You said I looked fifteen. And when I

told you I was seventeen, you said, 'You're just a child.' At twelve!" she cried quietly.

He laughed, "Yes, I had different rules for myself and everyone else. Therese had a job on her hands with me." Hazily recalling those years, he glanced over the patrons at the bar, then paused. She watched him think a moment, then call, "Clerk Wedderburn!"

A man seated at the bar seemed to flinch before turning around. "Ah, yes, Lord Efran."

Efran gestured to the barmaid. "Another ale for the clerk, Elspeth. Come join us, Wedderburn."

Alert, Minka watched as Wedderburn, whom she did not know, came over with a definite air of reluctance. "Good of you, Lord Efran." Given the choice of getting into the booth next to Efran or Minka, he chose Efran, while allowing so much room between them as to almost slide off the seat himself.

Efran leaned toward Minka to say quietly, "Wedderburn officiated at my hanging. He was also one of the clerks that came to the fortress to ask your father about his signature on the first decree he signed."

"Oh, how interesting." Minka's bright blue eyes turned to the clerk's rather sickly face.

"He was senile, wasn't he?" Wedderburn muttered.

"'Impaired' is a better word, I think," Efran said. "According to Adele, he was being poisoned by Graduliere, which would appear to be senility. Are you clerk for the new Surchatain of Westford?—Webbe?" Efran asked, still unsure of the name.

"Ah, no," Wedderburn said cautiously, nodding to the barmaid as she placed his bottle and glass in front of him. "I've registered with your notary as an information service."

"Very good. For whom?" Efran asked, turning up his bottle. Minka was only sipping hers.

"Whoever pays, Lord Efran," Wedderburn said.

"That's reasonable," Efran said. "We've had some interesting developments. Do you like the new trees?"

"Very decorative, sir," Wedderburn said.

"I thought so, too. Well, we have more stops to make," Efran said, lifting his face at the barmaid. When she came over, Efran put two royals in her hand. "For three ales and your tip," he said.

"Thank you, Lord Efran!" she cried.

He nodded at her, then told Wedderburn, "Carry on," as he nudged Minka out of the booth.

Wedderburn watched the lord and his lady walk out, then he slapped the back of the booth in frustration. Nothing good could come from the lord of the fortress inquiring after what information his service might be peddling.

As Efran and Minka received their horses from Croft's hostler, she mounted and said, "To Ryal's now?"

"How did you know?" Efran asked, smiling.

“Your mentioning the trees was a dead giveaway,” she said, and he laughed, given that it was no such thing.

They did indeed stop at the notary’s shop, where Efran tied the horses. After they entered, they had to wait, pressed against the wall. Ryal was registering both a plot and a firewood supply service in the eastern section for a new resident and his four burly sons. Once they left, the two waiting could let out their breath in the welcoming empty space.

“Good afternoon, Efran. Minka. Let me finish up and I’ll be right with you,” Ryal said, handing Giardi several documents to file. She smiled at the two; they smiled back and Efran was quiet.

“Now,” Ryal said, closing that ledger. “What can I do for you?”

“Yes, Ryal,” Efran began amiably. “Did Wedderburn register an information service with you?”

“Yes, Efran. It’s all legal,” Ryal said.

“Good. I want to know what information he’s selling to whom,” Efran said.

“I imagine you do, but I have no way of helping you acquire that information. I doubt that Geibel [the tax assessor] does either; he just looks at receipts,” Ryal said.

“So I will have to employ my own information agents. Is that what you’re telling me?” Efran asked with a cloaked smile.

“If you have anyone capable of such . . . clandestine work as information gathering,” Ryal said.

“Why, I think we might. What do you think, Lady Minka?” Efran asked, interested in her input.

“Perhaps Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin could work us into their schedule,” she suggested.

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Chapter 9

Immediately two faeries appeared on Ryal’s counter, both about eight inches tall. With copper-colored hair, Sir Ditson wore a purple suit that looked straight out of Justinian’s closet (and shrunk hundreds of times). Sir Nutbin was a squirrel in a plaid vest and monocle who usually sat on his haunches.

Sir Ditson said, “We would be delighted beyond measure to serve the Lord Efran and Lady Minka in whatever capacity they require, would we not, Nutbin?”

“You are so correct, Ditson!” said Nutbin. “We stand (or sit, as it may be) ready to assist in all eagerness.”

Giardi said, “Excuse me. I don’t think Ryal is seeing these wonderful people.”

They all looked at Ryal, who was scanning his shop in deep confusion. Efran asked, “Would you like to see and hear them, Ryal?”

“Anything on my counter, yes, I’d appreciate seeing and hearing, thank you,” Ryal said cautiously.

Whereupon the little man doffed his hat. “So pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Ryal; I am Sir Ditson and this is my associate, Sir Nutbin.” The squirrel bowed formally.

“How do you do?” Ryal said, slack-jawed.

Nutbin said, “Very well, thank you, Lord Ryal. Now, Lord Efran, if you would, kindly acquaint Ditson and myself with your desires in respect to our services.”

“Thank you, I will,” Efran said. “An information vendor named Wedderburn may have an informant in the Abbey fortress. I want to know who that is and what information he’s sold to Wedderburn.”

“We’ll be able to produce that in a jiffy, Lord Efran. Will we not, Nutbin?” said Ditson.

“Indeed we shall, my good Ditson,” said Nutbin. Then he pulled an enormous scroll from his vest, tightened his monocle, and yanked on the end to send the scroll careening over the counter to the floor.

Nonetheless, he caught the parchment at a particular point and said, “Here we are. The condensed records of the information sold to Agent Wedderburn by custodian Haight:

“One: Lady Minka patting the arm of Polonti Barr twice (selling price: one royal);

“Two: Lady Minka kissing the cheek of Polonti Nares once and later seen to be squirming and squealing in his embrace (selling price: three royals);

“Three: Lady Minka seen to be holding hands with the Polonti Wyeth (selling price: four royals);

“Four: Lady Minka seen to be carried up stairs by the Polonti Wyeth (selling price: ten royals);

“Five: Lady Minka seen to be riding on a horse led by the Polonti Wyeth (selling price: eight royals);

“Six: The Polonti Wyeth seen to be smiling at the Lady Minka numerous times (selling price five royals).

“And that is all the information that I have recorded from the custodian Haight to the Agent Wedderburn. Does that coincide with your recollection, Ditson?”

“Yes, Nutbin, that coincides exactly with what I have observed,” Ditson said. Upon that confirmation, Nutbin whipped the scroll so that it rapidly rolled up into his hand with a *pfffffft*. Then he stuffed the whole thing into his vest and smoothed it down so that neither wrinkle nor bulge appeared.

The four listeners were silent for a few moments; Minka had to grasp the counter to stay upright. “Why is he—reporting about me and the—Polonti?” she asked unsteadily.

Ditson said, “Our understanding, Lady Minka, is that Surchatain Webbe of Westford desires to see my lady featured in a morals trial for the entertainment of the Southern Continent and the reflected interest in the Lord Efran. Does that seem likely to you, Nutbin?”

“Yes, Ditson; according to what we have observed, Surchatain Webbe expressed a strong desire to direct attention to the Lord Efran in order to, quote, ‘cut him down to size,’” said Nutbin.

Efran looked at Ryal. “Who has standing to call my wife to trial for offense against morality?”

Ryal blinked. “Anyone, actually. The catch is, the evidence must be compelling and subject to cross-

examination. Historically, very few of these trials result in any official action against the accused. The whole point is the humiliation of it.”

“I don’t recall anything like this in Roman’s Law,” Efran said.

“There is only the barest reference to it in the Law of Roman. That has been expanded greatly over the years in the Book of Notary Rules. But because it’s mentioned in Roman’s Law, it applies here,” Ryal said.

“How can I defend her against this?” Efran asked. Ryal opened his mouth, shaking his head.

Ditson said, “May I make a suggestion, Lord Efran?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Thank you, Lord Efran. What we have observed is that such a trial may be nipped in the bud, so to speak, by demonstrating the unreliability of the source,” Ditson said.

Efran glanced away as if searching. “How do I . . . do that?”

Nutbin said, “We have a suggestion for that, Lord Efran, which you may choose to disregard due to the possibility that it could be considered underhanded in some quarters.”

“I’m fine with underhandedness here,” Efran said.

“Oh, well, then, that makes it rather interesting, doesn’t it, Nutbin?” asked Ditson.

“Yes, Ditson,” said Nutbin, “that does allow for a certain amount of free play.”

“What, specifically, do you suggest doing?” Efran asked warily.

Ditson and Nutbin looked at each other to communicate silently for a second, then Ditson said, “We suggest that Surchatain Lightfoot be resurrected in order to be observed plotting to retake the throne of Westford.”

There was a deep silence in the notary’s shop, then Efran said, “I don’t see how I can resurrect Surchatain Lightfoot.”

At that, Ditson flew off the counter and exploded into a semblance of Lightfoot yelling, “I don’t care who declared me dead; I intend to resume my rightful rule and who is going to stop me?” Then Ditson instantly shrank to resume his usual form and his previous position on the counter.

“That was amazing!” Minka said.

Efran thought out, “All right. If I’m understanding you, what you suggest is that I entertain your Lightfoot and discuss with him how to take over the throne of Westford. Haight observes this, reports it, and it gets spread throughout the Southern Continent while I deny any involvement. When nothing of the kind happens, both Haight and Wedderburn are discredited. Is that about right?”

“What an admirable uptake on the possibilities that our little scheme suggests! Wouldn’t you say so, Nutbin?” exclaimed Ditson.

“The lord is a natural in the art of misdirection, Ditson!” cried Nutbin.

“True!” agreed Minka, laughing.

Efran nodded. “Thank you. Here is the problem: I want to be careful not to incite any preemptive attacks on the Abbey Lands against Lightfoot, whom I appear to be supporting.”

“The lord has a firm grasp of all implications of the scheme, does he not, Nutbin?” said Ditson.

“Yes, Ditson; we can be confident of a successful campaign due to the lord’s command of all possible outcomes,” said Nutbin.

Ditson then replied to Efran, “Our suggestion would be that when Lightfoot comes to you for support, you inform him that you cannot help him, but the Council of Eurus has agreed to help him. We can also produce at least one of the EurAsian Councilors to discuss the planned attack with Lightfoot.”

“What do you think?” Efran asked, looking around at Ryal, Minka, and Giardi.

After a moment, Minka replied, “It sounds like fun. I have a question. How could Haight have observed all those different incidents of me with different Polonti?”

Ditson replied, “Lady Minka, your question is very sound. The answer is simply that he has a network of servants who report to him what they observe—for pay, of course.”

Efran and Minka looked at each other, then Efran asked, “Is Joshua in danger?”

Ditson said, “Our considered opinion is no, he is not, Lord Efran, because all of the servants are aware that any harm to the child would mean very unpleasant repercussions to anyone who was involved.”

“That’s good to know; thank you,” Efran said. “If Haight and Wedderburn are discredited, do you think that will break up this information-running in the fortress?”

Ditson replied, “When the money dries up, the activity for money also stops, Lord Efran.”

“Thank you,” Efran nodded. “Let’s see. Today is September sixth, so let’s plan our charade for the eighth, in the small dining room. We’ll have Lightfoot and—Blairgowrie from Eurus. Isn’t that who Justinian mentioned in his last letter as being the frontrunner for Surchatain?” he asked Minka.

“Yes, he’s the new Grand Councilor,” she said.

“Good. Well, Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, I am grateful for your advice, expertise and amazing abilities. We will confer again as needed. Thank you,” Efran said.

“We are honored, Lord Efran. Lady Minka,” Ditson said, and they vanished, bowing.

On the ride up the switchback, Minka and Efran were mostly silent. Then she said, “I can’t believe how much I’ve been spied on and reported on. I don’t know how long I can endure that, Efran.”

“Once we get through this immediate situation, we’ll address that, as well,” he said. Turning his eyes to her, he added, “I promise.” She smiled uneasily.

When they returned to the fortress, Minka went to the nursery to check on Joshua, and Efran went upstairs to close the workroom door and corral Estes and DeWitt by the window to tell them in whispers what they had discovered and what they were planning to do about it.

The next day, Efran made a point of being secretive about two mystery guests coming to the fortress. He cautioned servants to not ask questions and not talk among themselves about what they saw and heard.

Then on the morning of September 8th, only the most trusted soldiers were tasked with bringing two heavily cloaked individuals from Westford to the fortress in an Abbey carriage. These mystery guests were rushed from the carriage through the foyer into the small dining room, then the door was shut and two guards placed in front of it.

Efran sat with his mystery guests while servants brought in refreshments. Then when the room was cleared, the cloaks came off, and Efran regarded extremely convincing replicas of Lightfoot—whom he had known well—and Grand Councilor Blairgowrie, whom he knew only by description.

Then Efran spoke in a voice certain to carry outside the room. “All right, gentleman, let us begin. First, you, sir, I will simply refer to as ‘Surchatain,’ and you I will refer to as ‘Councilor.’ We will use no names. Now—”

“Where’s my daughter? I haven’t seen her for many months now, and I know she’s here! No, I won’t keep my voice down, and no, I won’t refer to her by that ridiculous name ‘Minka.’ She is Sybil and will always be Sybil!”

“Shhh, sir; please lower your voice. I know how difficult it’s been for you to stay in hiding for so long, but I cannot do anything to help you if you expose the fact of your—presence prematurely,” Efran said plainly.

Lightfoot roared, “I’ve waited long enough! I’m tired of hiding and I want to regain what is mine! Now how are you going to help me?”

Efran said, “Please hush, Surchatain. As I told you, I can do nothing for you without endangering my own standing. That is why I brought down someone who can help you. Councilor, please tell the Surchatain what you proposed to me earlier.”

Blairgowrie—the real one—might have been more renowned for his mellifluous voice than his appearance, which was unremarkable. That voice is what Nutbin (or Ditson?) reproduced so beautifully: “Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you and the former Surchatain, Lord Efran. What I propose is simply to divert to our illustrious guest the funds which are currently being paid to the widow of the acting Surchatain. With that, and the remaining monies of the former Surchatain who died in his bed, our guest will easily depose the silly little man currently on the throne of—”

“Shhh,” Efran cautioned. “I cannot help you, which means that you also must not state your plans baldly in front of me. I wish to remain ignorant of your designs as much as possible. So I will step out and allow you two giants of the Southern Continent to work out your agreement between yourselves. For now, go ahead and cover yourselves one more time while I bring in your refreshments.”

So they threw their hoods back over their heads, leaving bits and pieces visible while they sat together talking about “that idiot with all the courtesans” and “my daughter who’s making like a bandit with the widow’s payments” as maids went in and out with dishes. Efran made a point to try to hush them up or cover their faces while they talked, and they brushed him away, hands decorated with signet rings and sleeves embroidered in gold.

As he promised, Efran stepped out to nervously pace before the door while the pair inside got louder and louder, then lowered their voices in apparent agreement as to a plan. Brilliantly, they also let slip that something momentous was slated for September 15th.

An hour later, they flung the door open and emerged in their hooded cloaks to stride laughing together to the courtyard, where they were loaded back into the Abbey carriage (driven by Detler, attended by Barr and Lyte on horseback). The carriage was then driven up the north road out of sight of the Abbey Lands, where the soldiers lounged off the road with Goadby's until sufficient time had elapsed for them to drive the carriage back, empty of passengers but not cloaks.

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Chapter 10

After the visitors had left, Efran pretended not to notice the subdued excitement of the servants or the three who accompanied Haight to Croft's. (In fact, before September 6th, Efran would not have noticed any of this.) He also had dispatched a pair of former Westfordian soldiers, Connor and Neale, to sit quietly in Croft's and drink. Knowing Wedderburn by sight, they returned in a few hours stone-cold sober to report that Wedderburn, nervously watchful, had met Haight and his confederates to receive their astonishing information and pay them not very discreetly.

From that point, Efran waited. He also watched Minka go about her usual activities silent, withdrawn, without looking at or speaking to almost anyone. No, he wouldn't allow this to continue, but he had to address it cautiously. He discussed the situation in whispers with DeWitt, Estes, and Commander Wendt, whenever he was available. And he got from Nutbin and Ditson a list of the servants beside Haight who were earning snitch money on the side. He was dismayed at the number—almost a third of the servants at the fortress (all of whom were paid) were making money as informants on the side.

Five days later, on September 13th, Efran received an unexpected visit from a contingent of officials from Eurus and Westford—five of them, important, indignant, inflamed. Efran met them in the foyer guardedly. "What can I do for so many men of note?"

"Lord Efran, do you know me?" one nobleman asked in a mellifluous voice.

Efran studied him. "No sir, I don't believe I've had the pleasure of an introduction."

"Was I here in your fortress on September the eighth?" the same man demanded.

"Not to my knowledge," Efran said mildly.

Several officials spoke, then one overrode the others. "Did you have important visitors that day, Lord Efran?"

"Well, yes," he admitted. "We briefly hosted the traveling comedy team of Wormington and Tooze. I've seen them perform before; they're very entertaining, so when they were passing through, I gave them refreshments and a room to rehearse their routines."

The group stood before him slack-jawed. He looked at them in bemusement. “Did they perform for you in Westford? I don’t think they were going all the way up to Eurus, but I could be mistaken.”

One official asked, “What . . . routines do they perform?”

“Oh, several. They have one of haggling merchants, and one of thieves arguing, and one of bickering Surchatains, which I think is the funniest because they do impressions,” Efran said.

“Impressions,” one Councilor said, whom Blairgowrie regarded with vindictive triumph.

“Which routine did they rehearse while they were here?” another Councilor asked in dread.

Efran raised his hands. “I don’t know; I didn’t stay to watch. [Which was news to several servants.] Doane!” he called.

The wounded soldier came limping out of his cubicle. “Yes, Captain?”

“Did you hear any of Wormington and Tooze’s routine while they were here?” Efran asked.

“Yes, most of it,” Doane laughed. “It was really funny.”

“Which routine did they do?” Efran asked.

“Oh, the fighting Surchatains—the one where they get all dressed up in these fancy robes and then slap each other until they finally make up. It was great.” Doane started laughing all over again. Efran pretended not to see the confused faces of some of the servants who were standing around.

Turning back to the group, Efran said, “That was the one, then. Why?”

There was a brief silence, then another official asked, “Lord Efran, have you seen Surchatain Lightfoot lately?”

Efran’s look turned cold. “What are you getting at? Minka’s father was assassinated in July. She, I, and numerous of my soldiers saw it happen. The notary here has a complete record of it. Now, if you’re done with this nonsense, I have work to do.”

The group looked at each other, then one Councilor smugly turned. “I deeply apologize, Lord Efran; there has been a ridiculous misunderstanding. But I am personally very appreciative of your taking the time to clear it up.”

“You’re welcome. And who are you, sir?” Efran asked.

“I am Grand Councilor Blairgowrie of Eurus, Lord Efran,” he said, bowing.

“Ah. Then I am glad to have met you. May I offer you refreshments?” he asked, looking around the group.

“No, thank you, Lord Efran. We must attend to the ramifications of this absurd situation,” Blairgowrie said with a bow.

“Oh. I see. Well, God speed,” Efran nodded.

The group departed sullenly, except Blairgowrie, whose silver head was raised high in vindication. Efran

watched their carriage depart the courtyard, then he turned back in deep confusion. “Does anyone know what that was all about?” he asked, looking at the stonelike servants lining the foyer.

They melted away, glancing at each other, and at least twenty left the fortress that day.

The denouement came two days later, on September 15th, when absolutely nothing noteworthy happened.

Nonetheless, on September 18th, Efran received an official notification from Surchatain Webbe of Westford that Lady Minka stood accused of Public Offense Against Morality by her consorting in the open with various Polonti men other than her husband, and trial was demanded at the Abbey fortress on September 20th.

Efran took this notice to Ryal to have him urgently research options for handling it quietly. But as the point of the trial was public humiliation, Ryal could find nothing in the Law of Roman or the Book of Notary Rules to give them relief. So Efran had to go tell Minka what was coming down on her.

When he sat her down in their quarters and told her, she took the news quietly, but he watched her die inside. The light in her eyes went clean out. Still, she lifted her head and said, “I understand. I won’t humiliate you, Efran. I will abide.”

She even rallied to make a small joke about it: “You told me to stop kissing Polonti. I should have listened to you the first time.” But, of course, that was pointless when one of the charges against her was Wyeth carrying her apparently lifeless body up to the fortress physician.

Efran took the notice to Estes and DeWitt, who were appalled but helpless to ameliorate the situation. All they could do was begin making arrangements for the trial.

Word spread like wildfire, and all of Efran’s enemies from Eurus southward began congregating jubilantly at the Porterhouse Inn in Westford and even Croft’s Inn in the Abbey Lands. Even though this trial would not bring Efran down, it would break his spirit, and that would make him vulnerable to attack.

Except for quietly exultant servants, the fortress residents sank into the attitude of a death watch. Its soldiers were enraged, especially as this was not a battle they could fight with swords or bows. The new soldier Soames, the bookseller’s son who had become something of an expert in Roman’s Law, disliked the charges as soon as he heard them, but needed more information before he could act—*if* he could act.

Minka did not leave her quarters except to go to the nursery for Joshua. Efran watched her tend him as lovingly as ever; in fact, he seemed to comfort her more than Efran could. For there was nothing Efran could do but think, and pray.

He went to the keep to stand before the crucifix. Regarding this depiction of the Sufferer, of which he knew every crack and faded color, helped him focus his thoughts. “Christ . . . God who died, help me. I cannot defy the Law; it was written by Your inspiration. But—this is wrong, and I can find no help in the Law to make it right. I cannot let my wife suffer under the hand of my enemies like this, but I don’t know what to do. Help me. . . .”

Minka did not pray. In every previous crisis, she had poured out prayers to God her Maker. But this time she felt that, the situation being her own fault, it was fruitless for her to ask God to come to her aid. Fortunately, others did intercede for her, passionately.

On the morning of the 20th, visitors began flocking early to the dining hall to claim prime spots for the trial.

Surchatain Webbe, his wife, children, personal armed bodyguard, and acolytes were given second-row seats behind Ryal, who would act as judge, and Fortress administrators Estes, DeWitt, Commander Wendt, Lyte, Coxe, and Cutch. Efran did not claim a seat on this row. For now, he stood at the front along a side wall. Also claiming a seat on the second row was a blonde woman wearing widow's weeds with a veil over her face. But the people who counted knew who she was.

When the principals were seated and the crowd overflowed to the corridor, Minka was escorted in by Rigdon. She was wearing one of her regular riding dresses; her hair was smoothed with water but not pulled back. As he escorted her to stand on the small dais at the center front, her shaking was obvious to all, and elicited some jeers.

Efran continued to stand along the wall. Webbe pointed him out to his family. His wife snorted at his plebeian Abbey uniform while his 18-year-old son sneered at everything. The 11-year-old son looked overwhelmed, but the 15-year-old daughter looked over at Efran just as he turned to scan the audience. And something stirred inside her.

Ryal stood to face the audience, which quieted down in expectation. He began tentatively, "We are here for the trial demanded . . . of. . ." He was faltering because Efran was walking up to the center front behind him. Minka, head down, looked over as Efran came up to lift her off the dais and set her on her feet behind it. Then he stood in her place, spreading his feet in his fight stance. Since God had been silent up to the moment the trial began, Efran chose to act. Webbe's daughter watched, her heart pounding.

Looking around the hall packed with his enemies, Efran said, "This trial is a travesty. It is just for show, just to humiliate my wife, who has done nothing wrong. It makes a mockery of the law and of justice. Therefore, I will not allow it to proceed. Do with me as you will, Ryal, but I refuse to abide it; I refuse to watch my innocent wife be degraded for entertainment. This trial will not proceed."

This short speech created a tremendous uproar in the hall, and Soames walked out, having heard what he needed to hear. Ryal sat in perplexity and distress. Abbey soldiers along the walls watched the crowd as they jumped to their feet, shouting and thrusting fists into the air. The only reason the crowd did not rush Efran was the presence of these soldiers, who were poised to intervene if they did. Webbe's armed bodyguard were conflicted; they had no objection to the crowd's crushing the Abbey lord, but not until they could get the Webbe family out of the way.

All this time, Efran stood unbowed on the dais. Cutch and Coxe took the Commander from either side and shoved audience members away to get him safely out of the hall via the kitchen door.

Efran, watching the crowd call for his blood, was probably the only one to see Soames reenter the hall with the book of Roman's Law in his hands, open. Efran saw it at once, knew what it was, and knew that this young man in Abbey red had found something. The challenge lay in his getting to the front, for the unruly crowd pressed close together, thrusting forward bit by bit. They were blocked by the benches before them and their reluctance to trample Webbe and his family, but the masses behind them were forcing them forward by inches. They began falling over the benches.

Efran watched dispassionately as Soames, bearing the heavy book, went to the side of the hall where lines of Abbey soldiers stood. He told them something which caused them to forcibly push onlookers aside and make a path for him to reach Ryal. The notary was sightlessly flipping pages in the Book of Notary Rules, hopelessly lost in the dilemma before him. "Lord Ryal," Soames said, "I have—"

"Not right now, son," Ryal said distractedly, flipping pages as Efran watched.

“But, Lord Ryal, I have found—”

“Later!” Ryal hissed, the crowd breathing down his neck. Lyte had ordered soldiers to the front, but they also were having trouble getting through. The crowd was at the boiling point.

So Soames dropped the heavy book of Roman’s Law on top of the open Book of Notary Rules and pointed to a short paragraph in the Addenda. Ryal, reading it, froze. Then he stood.

“Surchatain Webbe!” he called loudly, who turned to look at him. “I ask Surchatain Webbe to read from the Book of the Law. Be quiet to hear Surchatain Webbe read!”

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Chapter 11

The crowd quieted down; some in the back even sat. Webbe, waving to his supporters, willingly came to Ryal’s side facing the audience. Soames stood beside the Surchatain to hold the heavy book steady for him to read from it. Looking down, Webbe began reading, ““The Prohibition of Show Trials.””

He stopped to read silently from there, but Ryal said, “Read this section aloud, Surchatain.” The notary, as judge, was the highest official at a trial, and even Surchatains were subject to his orders. The crowd went silent in curiosity.

Webbe, disgruntled, read, ““Trials that are shown to be meritless but for the intention to intimidate, harass or embarrass an enemy shall not be tolerated. Any person demanding a trial suspected to be merely for show must demonstrate privately to the satisfaction of a notary why it should proceed publicly before it is ever granted venue.””

Many in the crowd could not hear him and said so, but Ryal made it plain by shouting, “I declare this trial to be meritless and therefore illegal under Roman’s Law! You are all dismissed! You must vacate the fortress quickly and quietly now.”

The crowd stood momentarily frozen, so Efran commanded, “Comply or be compelled!” And he pointed to his soldiers.

They began shoving people out of the corridor to the foyer and through the doors. Seeing the Abbey soldiers’ involvement, Webbe’s bodyguard began to draw their swords, and Efran shouted, “Webbe! Disarm your men or they die!”

Webbe hastily gestured them to lay down their swords, which they did. Then he, his family, and his bodyguard waited quietly for the hall to empty so that they could leave. (When they finally did depart, their swords remained in the hall.)

More soldiers along the walls dragged out spectators, and the crowd began dissolving in disappointment. Efran, still standing on the dais, leaned down to whisper to a soldier at the front, who made his way to where the widow was approaching the side door to the kitchen. Apprehending her, he took her arm to escort her out to the front courtyard himself.

Dazed, Ryal turned to begin collecting his trial material on the table. Efran left the dais to tell him, “Come to the small dining room,” and he nodded.

Efran then went back to take Minka in his arms. Watching the hall empty from the safety of his embrace, she gradually stopped shaking. As Soames began to walk out with the Book of the Law, Efran called, “Wait, soldier!” He turned, saluting, and Efran took Minka by the hand to go over to him. “What is your name?”

“Soames, Captain,” he said, saluting again.

“At ease, Soames. When the men have cleared the fortress, please come to the small dining room,” Efran said.

Soames glanced around. “Yes, sir. I’m—new, and not sure where that is.”

Shaking his head slightly, Efran said, “Then just wait a moment, please.”

“Yes, sir,” Soames said, successfully refraining from saluting. “Lady Minka,” he nodded deferentially, attempting courtesy.

She lifted up from Efran’s chest. “You brought the Book of the Law to Ryal?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said.

“Hold your questions; he’s going to tell us all about it shortly,” Efran said, hugging her.

“Yes, Efran,” she whispered, but turned her blue eyes up to Soames, and he felt light-headed for a moment.

As the crowd thinned, Efran, Minka, and Soames left the dining hall to walk the corridor up to the foyer. Catching sight of Coxe and Cutch bringing Wendt into the foyer as well, Efran told them, “Bring him to the small dining room.” They saluted, moving off with the Commander between them.

Efran then lifted his chin at Lyte, who came over to receive his order: “Instruct Neale to see that they all leave Croft’s and the Abbey Lands, then come to the small dining room.”

“Captain,” Lyte saluted, glancing at Soames and the book before turning away.

“Come,” Efran tossed back at Soames, who followed as the Captain jerked his head at his administrators.

Shortly, Soames found himself sitting at an oval table in what he discovered to be the small dining room. Along with Captain Efran and the Lady Minka, he was sitting with the Notary Lord Commander Ryal, Commander Lyte, Administrator DeWitt, Steward Estes, and Lord Commander Wendt with his two aides. But the new recruit had no notion of all the names.

When everyone was seated and attentive, Efran said, “This is Soames; he says he’s new, and he’s going to tell us how he discovered what Ryal and I have been overlooking for weeks—years, now.”

Then everyone looked at Soames, who, a little dizzy again, recounted for them his badgering his bookseller father into letting him join the army, his interest in Roman’s Law, and his discovery of this important point buried in the Addenda. He opened the great book again to the pertinent place and shoved it across the table to the Captain.

Efran bent forward to read it, then leaned back in his chair, covering his eyes. “The only person I’ve ever met who reads addenda.” To Soames, Efran said, “While I am grateful you intervened when you did, it would have been helpful to have this information beforehand.”

“I didn’t know what the trial was about, Captain; I didn’t know until you spoke from the dais that the section was applicable and that you did not know about it, for some reason,” Soames said.

Ryal cleared his throat. “This was my failing, Efran. I should have checked the Addenda. I’m just too old to do this job properly.”

“Then what’s my excuse?” Efran asked. “With so much at stake, how did I overlook it? Besides, it seems you have a natural apprentice here.” Looking back to Soames, Efran said, “Would you be willing to train as Ryal’s apprentice if you could remain in the army?”

“Yes, Captain,” he said.

“Good,” Efran said, crossing his arms over his chest and looking to the ceiling. “I’m afraid we’re going to keep you pretty busy for a while. Lyte, I want Soames to receive the Meritorious Cross for his knowledge of and use of Roman’s Law today. [Smiling, everyone looked at the new kid while he sat stunned.] I want him designated as the Abbey’s expert in the Law. I want him freed up from all trivial duties to continue his studies and serve the Abbey in this capacity. Does anyone have anything to add?”

After a moment, Lyte said, “There are a lot of loose ends from today, Captain, especially with Webbe.”

“Yes, but I need a little while to think on that. I want another sweep today to make sure all trial visitors are gone from the Abbey Lands,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir,” Lyte said.

DeWitt looked at Soames to say, “We’re fortunate to have use of your talents, young man.”

“Thank you, sir,” Soames replied, steeling himself against fainting.

Efran hesitated; there was more that must be done, but this was not the place to do it. “We’re done for now. Thank you all. You’re dismissed.”

As they all got up, Efran took Minka’s hand to lead her back toward their quarters. “I want to get Joshua,” she said, so he walked with her to the nursery.

They looked in the half door to see him asleep in his crib, and Efran looked back at her. Reluctantly, she said, “We’ll let him sleep.”

So he took her back to their rooms and shut the door as she sat at the small table. He sat across from her, and she said, “I never imagined there would be so many people I don’t know who hate me.”

“They don’t hate you at all. They don’t even hate me. They just want the Abbey’s wealth,” he observed.

“Efran, I can’t live here anymore. It’s not safe anymore. I feel like I’m constantly watched,” she said, twisting her hands in her dress.

"I understand," he said quietly. "Give me a little time, please, to see if I can fix the problem. If I can't, you may . . . go wherever you want," he choked out, squinting to contain the tears.

Seeing the boy in the tree sitting across from her, she threw herself onto his lap. "Then fix the problem, because I can't abandon you."

"I will. I promise," he said, holding her tightly. "Would you . . . like to come up to the workroom? We're going to talk about what to do."

"Yes," she decided, so they went upstairs where Estes and DeWitt had just sat with Commander Wendt. Minka immediately leaned down to kiss his cheek. "Did you see the trial, Commander? Did you see what Efran did?" she asked.

"Yes, Minka," he said. She nodded, just assuming he would see her, which he did.

"Can I get everyone by the window, please?" Efran said quietly. They got up to move chairs. When they were settled, he said, "I need suggestions on how to get rid of our informants. Some left after our little show, but we still have a couple dozen who need to go."

"Why can't you just tell them goodbye?" DeWitt asked.

Efran said tightly, "They would retaliate with possibly more damaging information given to Webbe. I want them to think that leaving is their idea." Wendt nodded.

They were silent, mulling this over. "That's difficult," DeWitt finally said. "You can frighten them or give them incentive to go elsewhere. It's hard to change their thinking."

Wendt said, "But you can plant ideas. I'm fascinated by the fact that they seized on Minka's behavior with Polonti. I got the impression that she's affectionate with everybody."

"True," Efran said. Minka looked down, and he added, "But she wasn't affectionate to everyone who wanted her to be. That's probably the largest group on our list."

She looked questioningly at him and he replied, "You seemed to avoid the lechers. You liked to show affection to people who wouldn't misuse it." She looked away to think about that.

Estes said, "Go back to the question of Polonti. How many Polonti are on the list of servants you want to get rid of?"

"None, that I know of," Efran said. "On our list are the catty women who don't have the looks to draw men and the men who are always trying to gouge a little bit more out of you."

"Can you group them? Say, are they all food handlers? Garden help? Indoor servants?" Estes posed.

"They're all cleaners," Efran said. "What are you getting at?"

"How would they react if you put them all under a Polonti soldier as overseer?" Estes asked.

"Ohhh," said Efran, catching on.

“Someone ugly and brash,” Estes said. “Someone like—”

“Orrick,” Efran said. DeWitt gurgled as if he were being choked.

Estes continued, “And an assistant like—”

“Huish,” DeWitt offered.

Efran winced. “That’s harsh.”

“Yes,” said Estes. “You have a lackluster group of Southern servants, so you’re calling in Orrick and Huish to see if they can’t whip this group into cleaning zealots.”

“We might want to interview Orrick and Huish, then. Do you know whose units they’re in?” Efran asked Estes.

“Barr’s. As the newest Captain, he got saddled with the—less stellar,” Estes said.

“Then why are they still in our army?” Efran scowled.

Estes admitted, “They’re good fighters. Just . . . without much self-discipline. Barr’s ready to cut them.”

Efran narrowed his eyes at him. “We might get rid of a whole slew of undesirables this way.”

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Chapter 12

After they all took a moment to visualize Orrick and Huish as overseers, Minka asked, “Has Haight gone or is he still here?”

“He’s still here, trying to regroup,” Estes said.

“Who’s his supervisor now?” Efran asked.

Estes said, “He doesn’t have one; he oversees the second-floor cleaners and turns in their hours directly to Pieta”—DeWitt’s assistant.

“He’s about to get one. Get Orrick and Huish up here,” Efran said, smiling.

“You’re not going to let them in on what you’re doing, are you?” DeWitt asked.

“Oh, no, no,” said Efran. “We only want to emphasize that the group they’re getting is a bunch of slackers who need strong encouragement to work.” The others nodded; Wendt laughed.

Minka stood. “I’m going to go get Joshua and take him outside.” With a persistent air of listlessness, she looked to the place that comforted her most.

"I'll help you, Minka." Wendt stood.

"Thank you, Commander. I'd appreciate that," she said, taking his arm.

After they had left, Efran whispered, "This has got to work. She wants to leave the fortress." DeWitt and Estes looked at him in dismay.

Delegating the interview of Orrick and Huish to his administrators, Efran walked back down to the keep. He stood before the crucifix, looking up to the crown of thorns atop the bleeding forehead on the ten-foot-tall sculpture. In the original event, the Crucified's head bled because the soldiers used clubs to pound the ring of thorns down good. And that was just part of the torture He endured. Why, then, did Efran approach every new problem as something too heavy for God?

Efran lowered his eyes at his own faithlessness, then acknowledged, "The Law had what I needed all along; I just didn't read far enough to find it. Thank You for sending someone who did."

He paused in distress. "I need help again. I need the fortress to be safe again for my wife; I need to get rid of informants who seem to have embedded themselves in the walls, but I don't have much faith in our schemes. I don't know what to do. I don't know how to force them out without giving more fodder to my enemies. Please help me, again. You . . . have a way of working things out."

Minka, carrying a sleepy baby, walked out into the sunny September late afternoon with the Commander. He said, "That was a very fortunate find by Soames. We were supposed to follow the Law of Roman at Westford, too, but I didn't know it very well and didn't have time to learn it."

"It is a very big book," she said. Then she murmured, "I don't even want to look around. Can you tell who's watching us?"

"Why are you asking me, Minka?" he laughed.

She gasped, looking at his dark glasses. "Commander, I forgot that you're blind!" she whispered in horror.

"That's good. I like that," he said.

"No, it's terribly insensitive," she groaned, leaning her head down to Joshua.

"Why?" Wendt asked. "Why should my dominant trait be my blindness? Why can't it be my piercing intellect or my dashing good looks?"

She laughed, letting go of Joshua with one arm to hold Wendt's arm. "Oh, you're right."

"Sometimes it's good to be blind, Minka. Some things you need to make yourself blind to," he said.

"You're right again," she exhaled.

"Wyeth is running toward us," he observed.

She looked up quickly to see that he was right for a third time: Wyeth was running toward them. He stopped in

front of her with an anguished face, then bowed several times before even attempting to speak. “Wyeth, what is wrong?” she demanded.

“Lady Minka, a—a young Polonti who saw the trial today, and knew what you were charged with—is, ashamed, and is, sitting on the cliff to—to jump—”

“What?” she gasped, looking through the orchard to the fence where Wyeth’s sparring group was gathered. She could only glimpse them through the peach trees, and couldn’t see anything beyond the coops. Holding Joshua on her shoulder, she took the Commander’s hand to begin trotting toward the fence.

“I can follow you, Minka; let me hold Joshua while you go on ahead,” Wendt said.

She put Joshua securely in his arms, then turned to run behind Wyeth. He led her through the trees, between the coops and the compost bin, to come to the southwestern fence. The sparring group parted for her, but she could see nothing past the fence for the burly grapevines twining through the balusters. Coming closer, she spotted the young man sitting, head bowed, on the cliff where she had sat in her confusion and sorrow. “What’s his name?” she gasped.

“Chilcott,” Wyeth said at her side.

“Chilcott! You come over here right now!” she ordered. Startled, the young man turned. “Come here!” she insisted.

No one was known to refuse Minka’s orders. In some confusion, he got up from the cliff to walk to the fence. And she saw that he was a young teenager. “How did you get over?” she asked, not seeing the ladder (which was practically encased in vines).

“I climbed over,” he said cautiously.

“Did you really? How?” she asked. “Show me. Climb back over.”

Shrugging, he reached up for the top rail, bracing his bare feet on the threading vines to hop between the spears and land next to her. She grinned at him, so that he almost had to smile back at her. “That’s very good. You’d be useful on raids,” she observed.

He looked down and then back at her, hardly knowing what to make of her praise. While not as handsome as the 12-year-old Efran, he looked very much like him, and her heart went out to him. He also was eye to eye with her. “How old are you?” she asked.

“Thirteen,” he said.

“That’s very young to be in the army,” she said, glancing up at Wyeth.

He said, “He has no family.”

“Oh. This is a good place to find family. My name is Minka,” she said.

“I know who you are,” he said, distressed.

“Why does that bother you?” she asked.

“You—you are ac-cused of—of—” he stammered.

“Kissing Polonti?” she asked wryly. So she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. “I’m afraid it’s true.”

He stared at her in shock, as did some of those standing around. “It’s also true that I’m married to Captain Efran, who beat the tar out of the last man who tried to take it further after I had kissed him,” she said, brows arched. Chilcott watched her in bewildered fascination.

Led by Milo, Wendt approached with Joshua, awake and looking around. Minka added, “I kiss people who need to know they’re valuable.” Taking Joshua, she covered his cheeks with kisses. He opened his mouth in a baby laugh, and the men standing around smiled.

“This is my son,” she told Chilcott, and he looked wide-eyed at her. “Mine and the Captain’s. His name is Joshua,” she added.

“He is Polonti,” Chilcott said.

“As is my husband. Polonti are valued here; he collects them,” she said. Chilcott smiled, then looked at the blind man behind her. She reached back to draw the Commander up to her side. “This is Commander Wendt. He was my husband’s Commander in Westford. Efran says that this man was his father, just because the Commander valued him—sometimes chastised him, didn’t you?” she asked Wendt, smiling.

“A lot,” he replied. “He was pretty wild back then.”

Chilcott smiled, biting his lip. “So do what Wyeth tells you, and you won’t get chastised. Right?” she asked Wyeth, who smiled down at her. “I can’t kiss Wyeth,” she told Chilcott. “He’s married.” Chilcott laughed and Wyeth turned red.

Several men looked up to salute someone behind her, and she turned to see Efran approaching. “And there’s the love of my life,” she said.

Efran drew up to take Joshua off her arm. After noting the Commander, he nodded at Wyeth and glanced at Chilcott. Minka told Efran, “Out of all these men, I only kissed Chilcott.” The boy’s eyes widened in momentary panic; Efran winced but nodded.

Taking her husband’s arm, she told the boy, “Don’t be foolish. You need to grow up to make some girl very happy.” He ducked his head in self-conscious pleasure, and she turned to walk away with Efran, reaching her other hand to the Commander.

As the sparring group watched them depart, one man asked, “If I climb the fence and sit on the cliff, will she come kiss me?”

Wyeth turned. “No, because I will push you off. Back to the grounds, everyone!”

Early the following morning, September 21st, DeWitt gathered Haight’s cleaning crew along with the other three servants who were informants. After seating these twenty-one people in a corner of the dining hall, DeWitt brought in Orrick and Huish to stand before them.

DeWitt said, “Ladies and gentlemen, we have some exciting news. Since some of you have complained about the lack of direction for your duties [a convenient untruth], we want to give you all the help you need. So Orrick and Huish are here to answer any of your questions and, we hope, to make your day a little brighter as you go about your duties. And may I add that we at the Abbey fortress want you to know just how appreciative we are of what you do. Thank you all.” Raising a hand of benediction, DeWitt departed the hall.

Orrick, large and ugly, and Huish, smaller and uglier, turned to look at the group seated before them. Orrick said, “You have not been working very hard. You will start working hard.” His lips spread over his crooked teeth in a sincere smile.

Haight stood, smiling just as sincerely. “I’m Haight. And I have an offer for you.” He walked over to give Orrick and Huish a royal each. “We’ll do the cleaning, but we clean up much better in another job, and if you help us, you’ll clean up well, too.”

Orrick and Huish glanced at each other; Huish bit the royal, finding it genuine. “Go on,” Orrick uttered.

Haight leaned toward them to whisper, “A very high-placed man wants evidence against the Lady Minka that will stand up in court. Just yesterday she was seen flirting with a whole group of men, and kissed one of ’em. If we get more evidence like that, we’ll all be very well rewarded.”

And he gave Orrick and Huish another royal each. “Are you with us?” Haight whispered.

Orrick and Huish didn’t even glance at each other before nodding.

Sitting on a ceiling beam above them, Sir Nutbin said to Sir Ditson, “Oh, dear, Ditson, you were so right! The situation is just abominable. Unfathomable. But I don’t remember hearing the Lord Efran express a desire for our help here.”

“The reason for that, my worthy Nutbin, is that the assignment came from much higher up in the chain. *Much*,” Ditson said firmly.

Nutbin gasped, “Ditson! Do you mean—?”

Lips puckered in satisfaction, Ditson said, “Indeed I do, dear Nutbin. We have been regarded as worthy of receiving a command from the very top. So we must get on it, my friend, and prove our worth as goodfellows.”

“You have put it in a nutshell, Ditson! I am all atwitter to begin. But where?” Nutbin said, tail swishing in excitement.

“At the head, dear Nutbin. We concentrate on the head,” Ditson said, looking down on Haight’s bald spot.

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Chapter 13

Haight strode down the lower corridor, eyes and ears alert to every breath, every movement around him. Up the corridor a ways, he saw Exley, one of his more reliable sources, looking confused. Eyes narrowing, Haight drew up to him. "What is it, Exley?"

"Yes, sir, it's very strange," Exley said. "I can't imagine why the Lady Minka is whooping it up like that in the men's bathing room."

Haight jerked his head to look at the sign on the nearby door that said, "Men's Bathing." He put his hand on the door handle and paused, as he could not recall a men's bathing room inside the fortress, especially not right here in the first-floor corridor. But there was the sign that plainly read, "Men's Bathing." Cautiously, Haight put his ear to the door to hear masculine voices along with Minka's rich laugh.

So Haight opened the door and walked right in to be met by screams and a flurry of fleeing flesh. Some of those bodies, having wrapped towels around themselves, turned on him armed with pots, kettles (hot) and wooden-handled brushes aimed at his head.

Throwing up his arms, he floundered for the door, but the undressed women in the room had shut it immediately after his entry, which meant he took a fierce barrage of blows before being able to find the handle and then turn it.

At last, staggering out into the corridor, he was met by a sentry who, drawn by the ladies' screams, looked at him in astonished contempt. "Haight! Have you lost your mind? Why are you barging in on ladies bathing?"

Swaying, Haight looked back at the sign on the door, which read, "Women's Bathing." Exley was nowhere in sight. Glaring back at the sentry, Haight staggered up the corridor. Then he spotted the execrable Exley just ahead, talking to a group of servants.

Brimming with fury, Haight lit upon him: "You stupid lump, you sent me into the Women's Bathing Room! And I didn't see Minka anywhere in it!"

Exley, sounding much different than usual said, "You went into the Women's Bathing Room looking for Lady Minka?"

Haight blinked at the mismatched voice and face, and suddenly he was looking at Commander Lyte, who was regarding him in incredulous contempt. Haight looked around at the captains glaring at him, then from behind came solid wooden blows on his head, accompanied by the shrill screeching, "How dare you? How dare you? You filthy animal!"

With a cry, Haight lurched up the corridor to run through the foyer and out the front doors. He almost fell down the steps before staggering across the courtyard to catch himself by a hand on the gate. While one of the gate sentries watched him in astonishment, he looked aside at Minka in a riding dress. She turned her brilliant blue eyes to him with flush lips parted, curls lifted by a gentle breeze, and said, "You're not Polonti, but you're cute. Kiss me."

Gazing at her, he yielded to her command, and fell upon her to press his mouth to her luscious lips. She or someone seemed ambivalent about his acceptance of her invitation, because small fists landed forcefully on his eye and nose, and the toe of a boot slammed into his shin.

With another cry, he looked out of his undamaged eye at Squirt, the stable boy, aiming another clenched fist at Haight's battered face. Barely evading it, Haight fell away from the gates to run, limping, around the corner of the fortress toward the back grounds.

Here, Haight paused to assess circumstances. "I am not seeing what I think I'm seeing," he breathed. "The dam' faeries are having a spot of fun with me." He turned to glare at the faerie tree as it waved its branches insolently at him. Spotting an axe lying up against the fortress wall, he muttered to the tree, "Laugh while you can."

He strode over to pick up the axe and begin hacking at the base of the tree. It was wonderfully satisfying to see great chunks fly out with each stroke of the axe, but soon he heard a dangerous creaking, so he began desperately hacking on the other side of the tree to prevent its falling on him. Meanwhile, the men in Wyeth's and Nyland's sparring groups gathered to watch Haight flail at an iron fence post with a surveyor's stake.

At the sound of a tremendous cracking, Haight looked up in terror to see the tree with the face of Grendel and a hundred arms reaching for him as it fell toward him. He screamed, covering his head.

"Oh my goodness, are you all right?" said a soft voice. He looked out from his arms at Minka leaning over him with worried blue eyes.

"Oh, no. Ha ha ha ha—no, I'm not falling for that again," he said shakily, scooting away on his back. "No, you won't fool me again, you beautiful little vicious vision. You invite me to kiss you then punch me in the bathing room. No, no, you little demon—"

Great arms lifted him as he continued ranting for twenty paces, then Wyeth tossed him over the seven-foot front fence. Minka watched in dismay. "There's something wrong with him," she said as Wyeth stalked back.

He barely glanced at her before ordering his group, "Reform your lines!"

Haight rolled down the rough hillside terrain until landing on the switchback. From there, he got up and ran down the rest of the way to Croft's Tavern. Bruised, bleeding, and breathing hard, he bolted inside the tavern to stand swaying at the door, looking around. Spotting Wedderburn, Haight staggered over to him while the information peddler shrank down into the booth seat.

The entire population of the tavern watched Haight collapse onto Wedderburn's table, grasping his Goadby's to drain it in a matter of seconds. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, Haight belched and said, "We have evidence on Minka. She kissed another Polonti, but—there's some faerie shenanigans—"

"Shut up," Wedderburn hissed, glancing furtively around.

"No, you listen," Haight gasped. "Tell Webbe we gotta wait and see what's real, because, there's no men's bathing room on the first floor. Maybe on the second, but not on the first—"

"Shut your mouth and go away," Wedderburn said through gritted teeth.

A large man at the bar said, "No, don't go. I want to hear what evidence you've got on Minka. What's that about faeries?"

Haight stood erect on his feet to reply, "I see their game now. The faeries are trying to discredit me, by making me think Squirt is Minka so I'll kiss him. But he's not," Haight said firmly.

“Oh, I see,” the large man continued. “You kissed the stable boy thinking he was Minka. They are about the same size. And you,” he said, shifting his eyes to Wedderburn, “are selling all this to Webbe to embarrass her and her husband.” He turned up his bottle, watching Wedderburn squirm.

A second bar patron said, “And that fat little Webbe wants more dirt on her, so Haight here is out digging it up for him. Aren’t you a floor scrubber or something?”

“I am head floor scrubber,” Haight said, lifting his chin. Then he looked around suspiciously. “I think this is more faerie misdirection. Tell Webbe to wait,” he instructed Wedderburn, who was darting glances at escape routes.

Croft came up to them. “Look, you two, I don’t like to turn away customers, but Lord Efran has been very good to me; he made all of this possible. So you need to find another place to do your digging, Wedderburn. You, too, Haight. Get out and don’t ever come back.”

Haight started laughing at him. “I don’t know who you are really, but you’re not Croft. Are you a faerie?” Croft gestured to his bouncer, who came up to take hold of Haight’s collar and belt to assist him out. Wedderburn quickly followed under his own power.

Sirs Ditson and Nutbin sat on the chandelier, watching. “My goodness, Ditson, that fellow Haight did three quarters of the work for us! Humans have such febrile imaginations, do they not?” Nutbin inquired.

“Indeed they do, dear Nutbin, which causes the greatest amount of trouble for them. Well then! Shall we attend to the rest of the staff before we finish up with the head?” Ditson asked.

“That sounds just the ticket, Ditson. Let us away,” Nutbin said. And they were off.

Efran was trapped. At least twenty people surrounded him in the foyer, all talking at once. He did his best to listen, but even if he sat down with any of them one on one, he might still have difficulty understanding their complaints—except that they mostly had to do with Haight, or the cleaning staff, or by the cleaning staff.

“There’s no men’s bathing room in the fortress; that’s on the back grounds,” Efran murmured to one. To another he said, “She’s chickening, I believe,” and to a third, “No, I won’t punish Squirt for defending himself.” Finally he said, “Can I get you to—”

Five of Haight’s staff, all women, stopped in the foyer with their bags packed to look at Efran in righteous indignation. The eldest said, “We’ve cleaned up some terrible muck from your second floor, Lord Efran, but we draw the line at snakes.”

“Snakes,” he said.

“We will not be subjected to cleaning floors and then looking up into the beady eyes of a snake opening its mouth to bite,” she said, and the other women looked at him coldly.

“I’m . . . sorry,” he said. The insufficiency of this response was reflected in the stiff resumption of their stride to the front door. “Snakes,” he repeated in concern.

To the rest of the complainants, he lifted his hands. “I’m sorry; I can’t address all of you at once. I’m going to

ask the Steward or the Administrator to come down to the small dining room here to hear you. Can you form a line, please?—ah, don't fight; you'll all be heard." To a sentry, he said, "Get Estes and DeWitt down here, please—"

Everyone paused to watch Exley run in white-faced terror from the corridor, through the foyer and out to the courtyard gates, which the gate sentry got open for him barely before he could scale them.

As Efran was turning back around, Orrick and Huish pushed through the waiting crowd to stop before him and put two royals each in his hand. He looked at the royals, then looked up at them. Orrick said, "I don't want anything to do with it."

"Not with the bodies," seconded Huish.

"No dead bodies," said Orrick.

"Especially the ones that don't know they're dead," Huish added.

"Yes," said Orrick. "None of those. I'll kill, but not the same ones over and over. That's too much."

"Right. Can't pay me enough to do that. It's just not right," said Huish.

"Let's stop at Croft's," Orrick told him.

"Yes," he said, and took back the four royals from Efran's hand.

Empty-handed, Efran watched them walk out the front doors. In the next instant, the complainants around him scattered.

Minutes later, Estes and DeWitt appeared in the empty foyer. DeWitt said, "All right, Efran, here we are. What are you unable to take care of by yourself down here?"

Efran blinked at him, then said, "There are snakes on the second floor."

Estes inhaled, then said, "No, Efran, I don't believe there are. Have you seen snakes anywhere inside the fortress, DeWitt?"

"No, Efran. There are no snakes," DeWitt said.

Efran absorbed that, then said, "Next you're going to tell me that there are no dead bodies that keep coming back to life."

"That's correct, Efran," DeWitt said.

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Chapter 14

At that time, two of the recent complainants emerged from the corridor into the foyer with their bags packed and disappeared out the front door. They almost knocked over the person coming in, who was Shane, off-duty. “Captain,” he saluted, then nodded, “Administrator. Steward. I just came from Croft’s, and, witnessed something. I’m just not sure what. But, Haight came in—he’s one of the head cleaners, I think—he came in looking as though he had been fighting a unit all by himself. And he was blathering to Wedderburn about the dirt he had on Lady Minka—something about her kissing a Polonti. Only Haight told him not to take it to Webbe yet, because the faeries were acting up and Haight wasn’t sure what was real.

“Anyway, he was pretty incoherent and beat up—he had a black eye and bloody nose. Since it’s clear that Wedderburn had been paying him for information about the lady which he then sold to Webbe, Croft kicked them both out. He told them not to come back,” Shane finished.

Comprehension spread across all three men. Efran said, “Thank you, Shane. You’re dismissed.” Shane saluted and turned back out the front door.

Studying the other two, Efran asked, “Are we getting some unsolicited help?”

“Sounds like it,” DeWitt admitted. “But, you don’t really want to know, do you?”

“No,” Efran said crisply, and Estes shook his head.

Minka came swinging up the corridor. “What is going on here?” she asked in bewilderment.

Efran regarded her. “Are you really Minka or a faerie?”

She blinked at him, then pulled him down to lace her arms around his neck and kiss him. Estes and DeWitt looked off, smiling. His question answered, Efran raised up to sigh, “What’ve you been up to?”

She released him to vent, “This poor man was having some kind of fit, trying to chop down a fence post with a stake, and when I went over to see if he was all right, he accused me of being a demon! And then Wyeth threw him over the fence.”

“Just a normal day,” Efran said, shaking his head mildly. “Wyeth throws people over the fence weekly. Wouldn’t you say, Estes?”

“Twice a week, if they say anything derogatory about Minka,” Estes observed.

“That’s not funny,” she said darkly. “I’ve never kissed or hugged Wyeth.”

“You held hands with him,” Efran observed.

“He wasn’t bending his finger right,” she said, peeved. The men laughed.

Then Estes said, “Minka, I’m seeing something happen with the Polonti which I think I’d better explain to you.” She looked at him wide-eyed, then looked at Efran. He had his head down, but his brows were arched in agreement.

“You’re scaring me,” she said to both of them.

“Come in here,” Estes said, inclining his head to the open door of the small dining room.

“Can I come, even though I’m not Polonti?” DeWitt asked.

“Yes,” Minka said quickly.

“She’s afraid we’re secretly cannibals,” Efran explained. She looked at him very darkly. “It was a joke,” he said, but she did not forgive him.

The four of them entered the small dining room and Estes shut the door. As they sat around the table, Estes said, “All right, Minka, we’re going to cover a little Polonti history. For thousands of years, Polonti were ruled by a queen, a *moiwahine*. It wasn’t until we started having commerce with other people in the Southern Continent that Polonti adapted to the idea of a king, or a Surchatain, as he’s called in our area. But Polonti carry traditions in their hearts from generation to generation. Old legends that everyone thinks are dead, like the *aina*, spring up in a new generation because they never really died.

“The Polonti have a Surchatain in Eledith, I understand, but he’s too far removed for the Polonti here to know anything about him. Master Crowe was revered among Polonti throughout the area, but when Efran exposed him, that soured a great many of us. Nares filled that gap for a while, but he deeply disappointed those close to him, especially Nyland and Wyeth. Efran they look up to, but he’s been very careful to distance himself from the idea of his being a ruler, which I think is wise. But . . . he has a queen.” Estes looked at her, smiling.

“No, he doesn’t,” she said derisively.

Estes explained, “Their Polonti lord took to wife a beautiful young girl who has adopted his son as her own, and displays him to others as her own. She has been fiercely defensive of her adopted people—kissing them even after she was almost put on trial for kissing them. She exposed herself to renewed criticism by saving the life of a young Polonti who had seen that even the lord’s wife suffered from being friend to the savages. Their regard has taken root as respect for you, Minka—maybe it’s the faerie influence, or just the bond of belonging in the Abbey Lands. Whatever the reason, the Polonti here now consider you their *Moiwahine*, their queen.”

She stared at Estes in something like horror, then looked to her husband, who was smiling sympathetically. “Efran, what do I do?” she asked, trembling.

“Enjoy it,” he laughed lightly.

“No, I can’t—” She looked near to tears. “What do I do? How do I act? How do I avoid offending them? Or hurting them? Oh, I don’t want to be a queen!” She threw herself on him, burrowing into his chest for comfort. He put his arms around her, kissing her hair.

Estes said, “Would you like a suggestion?”

“Yes,” she said, sitting up.

“Do what you’ve always done. Be what you’ve always been. A queen’s smile will feed a Polonti spirit for a week. It’s not sexual, Minka, so don’t worry about that. It’s a bond of pride and respect. You love the Polonti, and they love you back in the ordained, historical, acceptable conventions of royalty. So, Efran is right: enjoy it,” Estes shrugged.

She stopped trembling as she thought through this. Then she looked at DeWitt. “What do you think about all this?”

“I understand it,” DeWitt said. “But I think it encompasses more than just the Polonti here. I think you are spiritually queen of the Abbey Lands.”

“You’re not helping,” she said sternly, which made them laugh.

“No, really,” DeWitt argued. “Efran, remember when we were talking some time ago about how much unwanted attention Minka drew, and I suggested she was something of an icon of the Abbey Lands?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

“You’re Queen,” DeWitt shrugged. “The difference is, Southerners don’t care for the concept of a queen, or a Surchataine, apart from her male counterpart, usually her husband, who is the superior of the two. So, you’re generally safe from the adoration that the Polonti want to show you.”

“Adoration?” Minka was back to being horrified.

They laughed again. Efran said, “Minka, it’s how we are: anything worth doing is worth overdoing beyond all reason. That’s the Polonti way.”

She smiled tentatively for the first time. “So, anytime I need a bodyguard, I pull out the first Polonti I see, and I’m good to go.”

“Oh, yes,” Estes said, but Efran winced slightly.

“What?” she asked warily.

“Don’t show favoritism picking bodyguards, or Arne will be crying for a week,” Efran said.

Even Minka laughed at that, observing, “So . . . there are worse problems I could have.” Efran nodded, smiling. “Except that Webbe is still trying to take me to trial,” she added.

Efran shifted. “We’re going to deal with Webbe. I’ll have you come to our strategy meeting.”

She nodded, then looked at Estes. “Do I wear a crown?” she asked, perhaps facetiously.

“That’s up to you, but be prepared for gifts,” Estes said.

“No!” She banged her forehead on the table. Laughing, Efran picked her up to put her on his lap.

“They’ll be small things—flowers, fruit, little oddities they find—just small delights,” Estes said.

“I can deal with that,” she said, immediately lifting up. “Does that mean I can kiss someone on the cheek who brings me a gift?” she asked Efran.

He looked at her, then closed his eyes to sigh, “Yes.”

“Are you serious?” she exclaimed.

Estes confirmed, “It’s a gracious gesture for the *Moiwahine* to bestow a kiss on a subject who brings her a gift.”

She straightened, looking around with renewed life. “I can do that.” Efran groaned faintly, leaning back in the chair.

Her face dropped again. “I won’t kiss Barr or Wyeth, but . . . I hope someone can explain all this to Tess and Geneve.” She looked up at Estes.

He nodded. “I’ll have them up to the workroom.”

“Thank you.” To Efran, she said, “I’d be furious if another woman was your Queen.”

“I get the best of both worlds. I sleep with the Queen,” he smiled.

“And bring me presents,” she reminded him.

He leaned back, groaning again. “I’ve gone from Lord Sovereign to consort to the Queen.”

Studying him, she observed, “You’re not prostrating yourself in adoration.”

He shook his head, smiling faintly. “That’s not my rôle. I am your guardian; I can’t protect you if I’m on my knees to you.”

She thought about his removing her from the dais to take her place. Then she looked at Estes. “You’re also fairly calm in my exalted presence.”

He laughed, sitting back. “I’m the Historian, the—Observer. I have to distance myself from all this to document it.”

“All right,” she said, glancing around. Her eyes landed on DeWitt, who smiled at her. “And you are sane,” she observed.

“I like to think so,” he laughed.

She sat thinking. “What about Haight?”

Efran replied, “We will monitor him, and all his informants, to see that they leave the Abbey Lands.”

“Where is Martyn?” she asked. “I haven’t seen him in forever.”

Efran said, “He’s with a group at the Sasany Fields, checking to see if anyone has restarted Crowe’s training camp. He’ll be back soon.”

“All right. I miss him,” she exhaled. “I’m tired; I want to go to bed.”

“Come have dinner,” Efran said, standing.

“No, not tonight. I just want to sleep,” she whispered.

With a nod to his administrators, Efran put an arm around her to take her to their quarters. But then he brought her a plate, of which he made her eat at least half.

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Chapter 15

Minka slept late the following morning (September 22nd), avoiding everything and everyone except Joshua and the Commander. She took them out to the walnut tree to put Joshua on the grass and sit on the bench to tell Wendt everything she had learned yesterday about her being Queen of the Polonti. She glanced over warily at the sparring grounds from time to time to make sure that Wyeth wasn't running over about someone else on the cliff, but his and Nyland's groups seemed to be holding their regular practice. (The archery groups usually practiced later in the day.)

Wendt listened quietly to Minka, digesting everything before commenting. "That's—amazing. The Polonti are very interesting, very—deep-rooted, culturally. No wonder they've survived as a race for so long."

"They're being pretty well diluted, with all the intermarrying. I do wonder why there aren't more Polonti women here," she said, looking vaguely around.

"That should be obvious: the big draw for Polonti here is the army, and only men fight," Wendt said.

"Yes, I know, but there should be women in—complementary roles. Wives, mothers, caregivers," Minka said.

"Well, I believe Efran explained that to everyone. Polonti women don't want to marry; they want to be free to 'trade up,'" Wendt said.

"That's so self-defeating. If Peri had married Wyeth when he asked, she would have been brought to the fortress with him when he was promoted and given his Meritorious Cross. Without that commitment, she had no claim on him," she observed.

"And there you have it," Wendt said.

At that time, Efran was sitting in the small dining room with Estes, DeWitt, his assistant Pieta, and Coxe. "Now," Efran said, scooting his chair up to the table. "Where are our informants? Are any of them still in the fortress?"

Pieta was shaking her head; DeWitt glanced at her and said, "Pieta says no."

"How do you know?" Efran asked quietly.

"None have reported for work this morning, Lord Efran. If they don't report in, they don't get paid," she said.

"That's a good start. Can you have someone walk around to make sure they're not lingering in the shadows?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord Efran," she said.

“Where is Haight? Do we know?” he asked around the table.

Coxe replied, “Cutch’s men say he’s staying with a sister who’s a spinner for Elvey. They’re keeping an eye on him.”

“Very good,” Efran replied. “Now, who knows where Orrick and Huish are?”

No one could give a definitive answer, then Estes said, “Last we heard, Croft dragged them dead drunk out of the tavern at closing last night. They weren’t there this morning.” That is because Croft, upon finding the pair still sprawled outside his tavern in the morning, had his bouncer drag them past the old stone bridge, off the Abbey Lands entirely, and leave them by the side of the road. The cotton supplier to Elvey, seeing them after dropping off his shipment, considered that his cousin always needed hands, willing or otherwise, on his farm north of Westford. So the man loaded up the bodies in his cart and drove off. Orrick and Huish did not appear in the Abbey Lands again.

Efran said, “Orrick and Huish told me that they were leaving because they didn’t appreciate dealing with the dead bodies that kept coming back to life. It was irritating to keep having to kill the same ones over and over.”

Coxe laughed, “I heard that Haight was ranting about the faeries yesterday. He may have been right.”

“Apparently so,” Efran said, hardly daring to look up over their heads for the risk of seeing one. After a moment, he said, “I don’t have everyone I need here for a meeting on Webbe, but we can entertain proposals. Anyone have a suggestion? I’d like to avoid a direct attack.”

There was silence around the table for a moment, then DeWitt observed, “Several people have suggested engaging the faeries again.”

Efran caught almost a glimmer in the room, then said cautiously, “They are ingenious and effective, but I’d like to keep them back as a last resort to avoid . . . unintended consequences,” he ended in a whisper. DeWitt nodded, laughing quietly.

The ceremony to award Soames his Meritorious Cross was held that afternoon in the dining hall. Abbey Lands residents made a decent showing, almost all of whom were customers of Soames’ bookseller father Shardlow, who had been bragging for two days now that his newly enlisted son had won the highest honor given Abbey soldiers. So they came to see if it were true, and discovered that it was.

Efran announced the award, how Soames had earned it, and why it was significant, then pinned the medal to his uniform jacket. Soames was steady on his feet during all that, but when Minka approached to lay a hand on his chest and reach up to kiss his cheek for his heroism on her behalf, he was definitely swaying. Towner caught him surreptitiously from behind.

But Captain Towner was also highly peeved to lose his scribe, so Soames proved his worth again in putting out the word among his literate friends that anyone who could read and write well could also find glory in the Abbey Army. Three scribes were attained through that means, and Towner was overjoyed to discover that one of them, Earnshaw, was already familiar with a bow and needed only grueling practice to attain Abbey standards.

Minka rested after the ceremony, then decided that she was up for attending dinner because Madea’s crew had prepared sweet and sour meats, including beef, venison, pork, and chicken, which were great favorites among

Abbey residents. Minka and Efran arrived a little bit later than he would have liked, because she could not seem to apply enough water to control her curls today. So, dismayed, she left them wild. (Kele, heavily involved in directing faeries from the original rooftop tree to new trees, had been unavailable to help Minka with her hair.) And Minka self-consciously entered the dining hall with downcast eyes.

The reverberations of booted feet scraping across the hall caused her head to jerk up, and even Efran glanced around. Polonti throughout the dining hall were standing, facing her with their heads bowed. Numerous Southerners, having no clue what was going on, stood with them so as to not be found lacking. Connor stood with his hands spread, laughing, as if expecting attention in return. (His wife Lyra continued to sit, looking off as she drank her ale.)

Arne stood because no one would show more respect to his Minka than he did; all the Captains stood because their Polonti unit members would be offended if they did not. Wyeth and Barr were standing, heads bowed, hands clasped in front of them, as Tess and Geneve looked at each other.

Minka, trying to smile, stumbled over the bench getting herself seated, so Efran steadied her with a hand. When she had sat, the scraping uniformly resounded, and everyone else resumed their seats. Minka looked to her husband in wide-eyed anxiety; he smiled in reassurance.

Madea's right-hand assistant Dobell brought over their plates and ale with an unprecedented bow, which alarmed Minka further. As he had put the beef in front of her and the chicken in front of Efran, she switched their plates and began eating.

She was unaware of a mildly entertaining drama playing out at a table across the hall: a little Polonti girl had been primed and given a gift for the *Moiwahine*, which she was anxious to present. But because it was considered rude to interrupt a sovereign's meal for any reason, the child's parents were endeavoring to make her wait. Unwilling to wait, the little girl broke free with a cry and began running to the *Moiwahine*'s table at the back of the hall. Her horror-stricken parents and older brother watched.

The child came up behind Minka to fall on her with the presentation of her gift: a small beaded clutch with an embroidered shoulder strap. Minka gasped, receiving the child with open arms. "Oh, my! Is this for me? It's beautiful! But it cost too much," she said in dismay.

"My *makuahine* make it!" the child cried.

"Mother," Efran whispered.

"Oh, your mother does beautiful work. I've never had anything like it," she said, placing the strap over her shoulder. With an arm around the girl, Minka asked, "What is your name?"

"Rida," the girl said, reaching up to feel Minka's curls. Her mother was watching in horror; her father and brother in interest.

"Rida. That's lovely," Minka said, caressing her shiny black hair in return. "Oh, I want to have a little girl who looks just like you some day." Efran continued to eat, ignoring the tears standing in his eyes. "Thank you. You're darling." Minka hugged her and kissed her; the father sat back and the mother put a hand over her mouth.

But the son, seeing the effusive reception his sister received from the *Moiwahine*, grabbed the tin fork beside his plate and ran to Minka as well—his father failing to catch him despite an admirable lunge.

Coming up behind his sister, who directed an angry little fist at him, the boy said, "I've brought you a fork, *Moiwahine*."

Minka laughed in delight. "Thank you! What is your name?"

"Crid, *Moiwahine*," he said proudly, staving off his sister's blows.

"Well, that's—" Looking down beside her plate, she saw no fork. So she looked back at the boy in wonder. "I don't have a fork!" The one she had been using was currently sitting on the bench beside Efran's leg.

"She didn't have a fork!" Crid said, raising his hands to his parents across the hall. His mother looked mortified but his father was laughing.

His sister, having seen Efran's stealth move, was en route to his other side to expose the deception when Efran picked her up, laughing, "No, no, let him have his kiss, *Kamali* [princess]." She squealed in his arms.

Minka was telling the boy, "You're too tall. You have to bend so that I can reach you." So he bent down to receive her kiss on the cheek. When he straightened, it was to look back at his father in deep shock.

Shaking his head, the father rose to trot to the back table and reclaim his children. "Thank you, *Moiwahine*. Thank you, Captain," he said, lifting his daughter and nudging his son's shoulder.

"They're adorable," Minka said. He bowed to her, dragging his children back to their table in a victory parade.

Other parents firmly held their offspring down to their seats, and Estes resolved on a schedule to post of times other than dinner when Minka would be available to greet children.

When Efran and Minka had finished eating, they stood to leave, and Efran put the extra fork on her plate. But the resounding boot heels on stone filled the hall again, and Minka jumped to see everyone standing again, except some Southerners who had caught on that this was something the Polonti did. So Minka effected a curtsy to the hall, which made numerous brown faces smile. Sure that they were laughing at her, she ran out.

When Efran and Minka got back to their quarters, she crawled into bed and hid under the covers.

Over the next several days, Minka tried hard to adjust to her new standing, but nothing seemed to relieve her anxiety over the prospect of giving offense to so many people who regarded her too highly. Efran tried once or twice to assure her that she need do nothing but what she was already doing, which seemed impossible to her. Then he said, "After the trial that Ryal stopped, you said you couldn't believe that that many people hated you. Now you can't believe that all these people love you. What do you want?"

"To be ignored. That's what I'm comfortable with," she said. He sighed.

On the fifth day after the aborted trial, September 25th, Efran got word that Haight and three confederates were seen skulking about the fortress grounds. They did not report to work, and apparently stayed out of the fortress altogether. DeWitt believed that Haight believed he could get his best information outside, where the Polonti drilled. Also, Haight and his band were wearing amulets that supposedly kept faeries at bay.

While his administrators watched quietly, Efran flung himself back in his chair in the second-floor workroom.

Then he said, “Sir Ditson, Sir Nutbin, I would be delighted if you would evict Haight, Exley, Ticehurst, and Ecgfrith from the Abbey Fortress and Lands so that they *never want to come back*.”

Immediately the two appeared in the boughs of the fortress tree that was growing out of the table. They bowed joyfully to Efran, Ditson saying, “Lord Efran, we are honored and delighted beyond measure to accomplish your command. Are we not, Nutbin?”

Nutbin was so excited that his monocle almost popped out. “Indeed we are, Ditson, and were so pleased to see them all wearing the dill packets. Personally, I love dill; it’s such a versatile herb. Is it not, Ditson?”

“Truer words were never spoken, Nutbin, so let us be off to our assigned play!” Ditson cried. They bowed to Efran and vanished.

A few moments later, Efran said, “I feel a little queasy.”

“It had to be done,” DeWitt said, picking up his quill.

However, as soon as the faeries were ready to get to work, they discovered that Haight and his party had left the fortress grounds for the day. So Sirs Ditson and Nutbin were forced to wait till the morrow to begin operations.

But they were not to have the entire party they expected to work on. For as Haight, Exley, Ticehurst and Ecgfrith gathered at Haight’s sister’s house, she came in to tell them, “I don’t care for what you’re doing at the fortress and I’m not going to have you in my house any longer. You leave in the morning and don’t come back. That goes for you, especially, Haight.”

“Eh, go on. We’ll soon have plenty of money to do whatever we like,” Haight muttered at her.

“Huh!” She swept out.

Exley glanced at his companions, then said, “Haight, we’ve talked, and, we’re done with this business. We don’t want to cross Lord Efran, and, we’re scared of the strange things happening in the fortress. We’re hiking up to Westford in the morning to get work there.”

“Cowards. Idiots. Bumpkins. You don’t deserve my leadership,” Haight muttered.

“As you say. We’re off in the morning,” Exley said, and Ticehurst nodded. Ecgfrith was too afraid of Haight to do more than sit there.

“Bah. Go on, then,” Haight growled. That night, he slept hardly at all on the pallet his sister had given him, the shrew.

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Chapter 16

Earlier that afternoon, Minka was cautiously skulking down the corridor toward the nursery, hoping to not be seen by anyone who would do obeisance to her. At the same time, Barr entered through the back door. She jumped, breathing, "Please don't bow, Barr."

He stopped to look at her for so long that she got even more nervous. Then he said, "Minka, you cannot change the fact that you are an apricot tree."

She blinked. "What?"

He came two steps toward her so that he could speak quietly. "Apricots are Polonti's favorite fruit. The taste, the color, the smell, the tree—we love all of it. But they do not grow in Polontis; it is too harsh. We must travel far south to find them." And she remembered the 12-year-old Efran eating apricots in the faerie tree.

"An apricot tree is what it is; it cannot change itself into any other kind of tree. But it is sad to see an apricot tree that refuses its fruit to people who are hungry for it," he said. She looked down.

He went on, "Almost a year ago, I was part of an army that attacked this fortress. But the Passage flooding drowned most of us—I was one of a handful that survived, who Captain Efran declined to kill. That gave me hope for service, but, I had been a slave, with a slave's feeling of worthlessness. And you came up to welcome me to the fortress with a kiss. Your kindness was like—the first time I tasted an apricot. Just to know that there was such a sweet thing in the world gave me hope that I would find more sweet things in it.

"You are an apricot tree. You produce sweet fruit because that is your nature. Don't deny your own nature," he said quietly.

While she stood stricken, he raised her hands to kiss them lightly in a gesture of affection and respect.

"Oh, Barr," she murmured.

He bowed to her, then went around her on his way.

Wrapped in a mantle of sweetness, she watched him go. Then her face changed and she demanded, "Barr!" He looked back at her, inquiring. She went up to him to ask sternly, "You didn't marry Tess because I made you, did you?"

He looked guilty, and she inhaled to express all the indignation inside her when he leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. Then he smiled, and she couldn't help smiling back. With that, he resumed his walk up the corridor.

That evening at dinner, Minka was back to her old scintillating self. She smiled sweetly and curtsied when the Polonti stood upon her entrance. However, both she and Efran were beginning to notice the dissonance created by this ritual of standing. The Southerners were unhappy that Efran's Southern wife had been appropriated for this special honor that they could not share, and this was starting to boil over in confrontations between Polonti and Southern soldiers. Meanwhile, Minka saw Tess and Geneve sitting unhappily while their husbands showed her adoration.

Still, tonight she was happy and bubbly and interested in all the children that clustered around her while her dinner sat untouched. Efran finally took her on his lap and set her plate in front of him to make her eat. She

laughed back at him, toying with the tin fork in her mouth, and he watched her, smiling. This largely put his fears to rest of her leaving the fortress.

After she'd eaten all she wanted—half the plate—she leaned back on his neck while he finished her plate. Feeling her inhale happily, he murmured, “Who did you talk to? The Commander?”

“Hmm?” she asked sleepily.

“When you do an about-face like this, it's because you talked to someone who told you something. Who told you what?” he asked.

“Barr told me about your saving his life when he fought against you as a slave,” she murmured.

“That's a good perspective,” he agreed. When he asked Barr later what he had talked to Minka about, Barr said, “Apricots.” So Efran just left it alone.

The following day—September 26th—Minka left Joshua sleeping in the nursery and went with the Commander to watch apples being harvested from heavily laden trees at the very back of the grounds. She and he arrived as the day's crop of twenty or more baskets was being carried in. The laborers gave her and the Commander apples to eat, which they enjoyed as they walked through the orchard, talking. To get the ladder out of the way till it was needed again, the harvesters had propped it against the grapevine running the length of the fence.

Haight stealthily appeared around the southwest corner of the fortress onto the back grounds, fingering the packet of dill on a string around his neck. “I'm ready for you, dam' faeries,” he muttered. “I have a lot to do today. But first—” He spotted Minka in the midst of the orchards at the rear of the grounds, and began striding toward her. “We'll take care of you. You're the cause of all our trouble,” he said.

Concentrating on what she was telling Wendt, Minka didn't even see Haight until he was upon her. Wendt felt the man beside them, but as Minka merely stopped talking, he waited to discover who it was and what he wanted. Haight grabbed her by her arms to begin dragging her toward the ladder. “What—what are you—?” she gasped.

Wendt watched her outline jerk away from him. “Minka?” he said in alarm. He began following, despite being unable to see anything except her outline.

She was so surprised by the sudden roughness that, although she struggled, she did not start screaming until he wrapped an arm around her ribcage and began hauling her up the ladder leaning on the fence. Numerous heads swiveled toward her screams, but no one could see what was happening for the trees. Tourjee dropped his spade and began running; soldiers at the rear of the fortress began running; Wyeth, Nyland, and their entire sparring groups began running. But by then Haight had her at the top of the ladder.

Watching her outline ascend kicking and thrashing, Wendt grabbed hold of her legs. Haight continued to pull, but now she dug her fingernails into his hand. He jerked it away, seeing something he wanted more. Wendt caught her as she fell, and she clutched him. Then she looked up at Haight jumping over the fence to begin running along the cliff.

A score of men had reached her by that time, but she gripped the Commander's hand to lead him along the fence, watching Haight outside it. He was laughing, pointing up to the clouds. “Look, you fools! There it is! And it's mine!” He walked to the edge of the cliff, arms outstretched.

Minka gasped, then saw Ditson and Nutbin sitting on the fence, watching as well. "Oh, Sir Ditson! Sir Nutbin! This is not a good trick; he'll fall!"

"Dear Queene," Ditson said, "this is not our doing. The man is in the grip of one far more powerful than we, and we cannot interfere. Is that not the case, Nutbin?"

"Yes, Ditson, that is exactly it in a nutshell. We have no hand in this, dearest Queene Minka," Nutbin said.

"Oh, dear," she breathed. To the Commander, she said, "He's at the edge of the cliff, reaching out toward something in the sky. I can't see what he's looking at. Can you?" she asked Wyeth, close by her side.

He shook his head, but Wendt apparently thought she was addressing him, for he said, "It's a palace with fields and orchards around it; servants all inside, a treasury full of gold, and a beautiful woman standing out front, arms stretched out to him."

"You can see all that?" she gasped.

"Vaguely, yes. Not with the clarity that he's seeing it," Wendt said.

They all watched in horror as Haight took a step off the cliff. His foot seemed to land on something solid, for he took another step up. Then another, and another. They all watched as Haight ascended an invisible stairway toward his dream.

Then suddenly Haight was falling. Arms flailing, he screamed as he plunged toward the Sea far below. Gasping, Minka turned away, and Wyeth held her tightly. The screams faded until they abruptly stopped.

Minka gently pulled out of Wyeth's arms; he let go and turned, instructing his men, "Back to the grounds." The rest of the observers dispersed.

Clutching the Commander's arm, Minka turned back to the orchard. "I lost my apple," she complained, looking around.

Efran, DeWitt and Estes emerged from the back door at that time; seeing her, Efran ran up for her to throw her arms around his neck. "Efran, the Commander saved me," she said.

"That's just another day for him. What happened?" Efran asked, holding her. His administrators ran up behind them.

So Minka and Wendt told them about Haight's delusion and what Ditson and Nutbin had said. From across the grounds, Wyeth glanced at the Captain holding his wife and nodded to himself. Then he looked over his ranks to say, "We are working on weak areas today. You must protect yourself from missteps." And he called up a volunteer to demonstrate.

"One more thing I found interesting, Efran," Wendt said. "The faeries called her 'Queene Minka.'"

The other three gaped at her. She looked away as though she'd been caught in a faux pas. "Queene Minka," Efran said slowly.

"They're just repeating what they heard," she said.

DeWitt was shaking his head. “There’s something about her, Efran—”

“The Commander and I are going to continue our walk,” she said, taking his arm. “I lost my apple.” Wendt pressed his lips together tightly as she turned away with him.

“The Queene has spoken,” Efran observed. She glanced back at him darkly but kept going.

That afternoon, Efran sent a message to his advisors alerting them of a strategy meeting for addressing Webbe’s aggression that would take place in the small dining room after dinner. Those asked to attend were Estes, DeWitt, Coxe, Commander Wendt, Commander Lyte, his Second Cutch, and the captains Towner, Younge, Neale, and Barr.

So, following dinner, after Minka had curtsied to the standing Polonti and Efran had escorted her back to their quarters, he kissed her and said, “Don’t wait up.”

“Why can’t I come?” she asked.

“I need the men to focus on the problem at hand and not just look at you,” he said. She seemed hurt, as though he were mocking her, and he asked, “Why do you think I’m joking? Don’t wait up,” he repeated. She let down with a disappointed sigh.

As he came to the door of the small dining room, he saw Clough coming out. Saluting, he said, “Commander Wendt is seated, sir.”

“Very good. Thank you,” Efran said, entering. “Good evening, gentlemen. Thank you for coming; apologize to your wives for me, but we’re going to sit here until someone comes up with the beginnings of a plan to address Webbe’s petty little underhanded ploys to embarrass and discredit me.”

He dropped into the chair at the head of the oval table, laced his fingers behind his head, and looked at them expectantly.

“Excuse me, Captain, but where is he ruling from?” Younge asked. The palace at Westford, home of Surchatains for centuries, had sunk on its unstable foundations fourteen months ago.

“I don’t know. Who does?” Efran asked, looking around.

Lyte replied, “He is renting Sandilands, an estate in the nobles district in Westford, one of the best.”

“Renting. Who owns it?” Efran asked.

“A Eurussian noble, Captain; I don’t recall the name right off hand,” Lyte said.

“Where is Webbe’s army quartered?” Efran asked.

Lyte raised his brows questioningly to Cutch, who said, “I understand he has perhaps two dozen at Sandilands, while another fifty or sixty stay at a farm called Eastaughffe that he owns outside Westford.”

There was a brief silence, then Efran said, “Is that why he’s using legal ploys against me? Because he doesn’t have the army to challenge me?”

There were nods around the table; “I would say so,” Lyte agreed.

Efran thought about that. “Then I should have Soames here to alert me as to what he’ll try next.”

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Chapter 17

“Webbe’s next legal attack would be something obscure, I imagine,” Wendt said.

Efran crossed his arms over his chest, scanning the ceiling. Then he looked to the sentry at the door. “Go find Soames—whose unit is he in?” he turned to ask.

“Mine, Captain,” said Towner.

“That’s right. Towner’s unit. Thank you.” Efran then said, “I should have remembered; you were the one complaining that I appropriated your scribe.” The men smiled and Towner nodded.

Efran leaned back again. “Webbe’s family lives at Sandilands with him, don’t they?”

“Yes, Captain,” Cutch replied. “His wife, two sons, eighteen and eleven years old, and a fifteen-year-old daughter.”

“So an armed attack on that house in a nobles’ district is a violation of Continental Law,” Efran observed.

“Yes,” Wendt said; several others nodded.

Soames appeared at the door, saluting. Efran looked over. “Thank you for coming, Soames; pull up a chair.” Efran waited until a few men moved their chairs to make room for him at the table, then he said, “I want to know if there is any action I can take against Webbe to forestall any other petty legal attacks.”

Soames narrowed his eyes, thinking, then said, “What else has he brought besides the morality charge against the Lady Minka?”

Efran exhaled, looking vexed. “Nothing else; the Provision for a Wronged Husband was brought by Rounsefell.”

Soames paled. “Good Lord. How was that ruled?”

“Oh, I was exonerated by Leila lying on my behalf,” Efran said. There were barks of laughter and fits of coughing around the table. “And Webbe has no standing to sue for that, because I haven’t slept with his wife.” Efran suddenly sat up in mild alarm. “Who is his wife?”

“Lady Palestrina, Captain,” Cutch said, laughing. “A large woman, in her forties.”

Efran exhaled in relief. “No, I am innocent there.” He had to wait for the laughter to subside, then asked Soames, “So how can I abuse Webbe with the law?”

Soames considered the question. “You can sue him for bringing an illegal suit against the Lady Minka.”

Efran winced. “No, I wish to bury that altogether. Give me another.”

Soames shook his head. “Give me time to research this, Captain.” He paused, thinking, then said, “Webbe quarters soldiers at his house in the nobles’ district, doesn’t he?” Seeing the men around him nod, he asked, “Has he ever deployed armed men against you here?”

Efran was dubiously shaking his head when DeWitt said, “He had an armed bodyguard at Minka’s trial. You had to order them to disarm after Ryal ruled the trial illegal.”

“Yes, that’s correct,” Efran said.

“This is his personal bodyguard? Who live in his house?” Soames asked.

“Yes,” Cutch replied. “They wear a special insigne.”

Soames leaned forward. “It is legal to have armed men in a nobles’ district for defensive purposes only. Deploying armed men from a nobles’ district to another city or entity is illegal, because the attacked entity cannot retaliate.”

As Efran thought about that, Soames stood and said, “Let me get the Law to make sure I’ve got that right.” He left while Efran continued to think, then returned with the great old book of Roman’s Law. He found the sections on quartering soldiers and illegal aggression, which he read aloud, and it was just as he had said. When he finished reading, he paused to look around the table.

Captain Towner observed, “But—he only brought a handful. Five.”

Soames replied, “The Law does not specify a number to qualify as aggression.”

Estes asked, “What actions count as aggression?”

Soames replied, “According to the Law, there are two classes of aggression: broad and focused. Deploying a force sufficient in number to harass or frighten residents of another entity is broad aggression. Focused aggression is being the first to draw a sword, fire an arrow, or strike with fist or weapon. Did his bodyguard draw before your soldiers did, Captain?”

“Yes, at least two of their men drew when my men started clearing the hall. Ours never drew at all, did they?” Efran asked Lyte.

“No, Captain, they did not, nor did they strike anyone,” Lyte said.

Soames said, “And in raising this complaint, the charge against Lady Minka needn’t ever be mentioned; it was irrelevant except for the fact of its being illegal.”

Efran leaned pensively on his elbows. “This interests me. Let me take it to Ryal; see what he says. Thank you, Soames. You are all dismissed hours earlier than I thought you would be.” The men rose, laughing in appreciation.

Efran went to his quarters to see a candle burning in the receiving room and another in the bedroom. He snuffed the candle in the outer room, then looked into the bedroom where Minka was raising up. “You startled me.”

“I know I promised you I’d be late, but Soames gave me an idea that I need to run by Ryal,” he said, sitting on the bed. “Would you like to go with me tomorrow to see him?”

“Yes,” she said, stroking his arm, and he leaned over her, smiling.

At the courtyard gates the following morning, September 27th, Efran requested horses for himself and her. Minka said, “We don’t need a bodyguard going to Ryal’s. Please just you and me go.” She was beginning to dread the conflicts that appeared to arise when a bodyguard was required for her.

“As you wish, O Queene,” he said, smiling.

She felt suddenly uncomfortable. “Don’t call me that.”

“I know; you’d rather be ignored.” He turned to watch their horses being brought.

She continued in discomfort clear down to Ryal’s notary shop, and stuck close to Efran’s side as he leaned on the counter to explain Soames’ idea to Ryal with Giardi standing by.

Ryal listened quietly to Efran’s explanation of what he wanted to do; Minka looked warily around the otherwise empty shop. She wedged herself into Efran’s side, and he unconsciously put an arm around her. “So, what do you think?” he finally asked.

Ryal exhaled, “Efran, that’s just the kind of petty legal ploy that you’re accusing Webbe of.”

“Yes, of course, that’s the point,” Efran said.

Shaking his head, Ryal said, “But since no one can seriously believe that Webbe intended to attack you with his personal bodyguard, it amounts to a show trial, and is therefore illegal. I won’t allow it, Efran. You’re just going to have to wait to answer his next complaint when he brings it.”

“No,” Minka whispered.

Efran looked down at her in surprise, then a flash of light from the other side of the small shopfront drew his eye, and a voice said, “Come, my Queene.”

“No—Efran—” Minka gasped, but she disappeared into the light. Immediately, it vanished.

Ryal and Giardi stood in shock while Efran looked wildly around the empty shop. “Alberon,” he gasped. Minka had said he was king of faerie in the area. “Alberon!” Efran roared. “You cannot have her! She’s not your Queene; she’s mine! Alberon! Give her back to me!”

He stepped away from the counter, fists clenched at empty air. “You—thief! Abductor! Liar! To thank me for giving your people trees and then take away my only love! Bring her back! This is wrong! Do you think I cannot fight you? That I won’t take away what I’ve given your people? Bring my Minka back!” he cried, striking at the emptiness in frustration.

Then he disappeared, leaving Ryal and Giardi clinging to each other.

Efran landed hard; dazed, he looked around the dim cave in which he lay sprawled. He sat up to lean back against rock, snorting, “Oh, this is clever. Was I making too much noise over your thievery in my own lands? You’re not only a thief, you are unimaginative, at that.”

His voice echoed in what was evidently a large space, with tunnels and branches disappearing into darkness. The source of the dim light in the cave was unseen. Neither were there furnishings or evidence of habitation that he could see. It was all quiet, until—

There was a scuttling, and Efran peered through the dimness. A giant spider, at least five feet broad from leg to leg, emerged from one opening to run toward him. Its fangs were long enough to pierce his leg clean through.

After the first shock of surprise, Efran fell back against the rock in laughter. “This is so very rich. You don’t wish to hear my complaints about your taking my wife, so you send your hairy little monsters to kill me. Do you think I care? Don’t you know my life is meaningless without her?”

The spider paused, then crept toward him almost cautiously. Efran snorted as he regarded the array of eyes, large and small, scattered among the black and brown hairs sticking up from its head. He tossed a pebble at it, uttering, “Do your worst, Fang, though I might give you indigestion.” The spider stopped.

Efran leaned his head back while the tears poured down his face. “Had I known this would be the outcome of the faerie tree, I would have destroyed everything from the barge.” He was only peripherally watching the spider slowly advance; he did not care. “God of heaven, cover her when I am not there for her anymore . . . in whatever realm she abides.” It never crossed his mind to fight for his life when he had lost her.

He closed his eyes to wait for the piercing—and from the size of that predator, he knew it would be bad. The hairs brushed his pants. “Joshua,” he whispered, swallowing. “Protect Joshua. Estes will take him; he will teach him the bow. . . . Toby, Noah, Ivy, and Pia. . . . You must find them good homes—they and the other children. . . . Who will inherit the bequest? . . . Ryal will decide.” Broken, he stopped thinking, and just waited for the pain that would end it all.

He waited for a long time, his eyes shut against the sight of the creature. When he still felt nothing, he finally opened his eyes to see the spider also waiting close to him. Efran watched while it slowly lifted a leg to place it on his leg. Then it reached the leg toward him as if asking to be touched.

Efran chuckled. The spider drew back in apparent caution, then stretched its leg toward him again. In trembling laughter, Efran asked, “Are you my ally now? Shall we band together to escape? That would make a wonderful story, Fang. I accept.” And he reached out to grasp the extended foot by its claw.

There was a searing, bright flash; Efran turned his face away, then looked back at a human-sized faerie slowly pushing herself up from the ground. Her delicately curling hair was almost white, flowing to her waist, and she was dressed in a gossamer gown of white silk, pearls, and what looked to be diamonds. It was only when she raised her face that he recognized her.

Springing away in horror, he cried, “What has he done to you? Minka!” He threw himself back against the opposite wall, looking far more fearful of her than of the spider.

“Oh, Efran, you passed the test! Oh, what? How am I?—Oh, it’s just an appearance—” She stood unsteadily to

begin brushing herself off. As she did, the gossamer fell away to reveal the riding dress she had been wearing. She continued to brush off her torso and her arms. “Is that better?” she asked.

“The hair’s not right,” he said guardedly.

“Oh.” She raised her hands to run them over her hair and then fluff it thoroughly. “There. How’s that?”

“Almost there.” He tentatively approached to begin smoothing it back himself, and its familiarity caused him to grip her in a crushing embrace, crying again. Wiping his face on his sleeve, he raised up to ask, “How do we get out of here?”

Then he fell down with her, and they rolled on the floor of Ryal’s notary shop. “Ryal!” Giardi cried. “Ryal, they’re back!”

Efran sat up, holding his Minka. “I will kill him,” he breathed.

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Chapter 18

“No, Efran, listen—it was all a big misunderstanding,” Minka said.

Ryal rushed in from the back, exclaiming, “Thank God!” The late afternoon sun poured in through the west-facing window.

“Then I will clear everything up for him,” Efran said, standing and hauling her to her feet.

“No, *listen to me*,” she instructed, and three attentive faces looked to her. “The confusion began when the Polonti began calling me their *moiwahine*. But when the Polonti used that word of me, the faeries decided that I was more appropriately their Q—*don’t speak the Q-word*. Then when you called me ‘Q Minka,’ that appeared to indicate your acceptance of my being their Q.” The other three listened open-mouthed.

She continued, “This is faerie law, which is as binding on them as Roman’s Law is on us. When you demanded me back after having given permission for me to be Q, you were required by law to pass a test of affection; you had to recognize me in an abhorrent form.”

“As the spider? But I didn’t recognize you,” Efran said, trembling. “I only decided that it wasn’t going to hurt me.”

“That was enough,” she said. “But now we must never speak the Q word, and must do something about the Polonti’s obeisance,” she said.

He thought about that, then said, “Is it enough if I get them to stop standing for you?”

“I think so,” she said. “That is the most obvious gesture.”

“All right.” He wiped his mouth, looking out the window. “Is it—how long were we gone?”

“Most of the day,” Ryal said. “I told searchers that you were conferring with Alberon.”

“Oh, we need to get back, then. Thank you, Ryal. Giardini,” Efran breathed. They nodded, and he led Minka out to their uncomfortable, unhappy horses.

As they rode up the switchback, the courtyard gate bell began clanging. Minka looked over to him. “You were missed.”

“Or you were,” he said.

When they dismounted in the courtyard, the Polonti gate guards saluted and bowed. “Captain. *Moiwahine*.” She flinched, but was not taken again. Other soldiers, both Polonti and Southerners, saw them come in and then ran to spread the word.

As Efran and Minka passed through the foyer, Estes and DeWitt met them. DeWitt said, “There you are. What did you have to talk to Alberon about all day?”

“We’ll cover that,” Efran said, nudging Minka into their quarters. “Is dinner being served?”

“Yes, just now,” DeWitt said.

“Go on in; I’ll be right there,” Efran told them, and they nodded, turning away.

In their receiving room, Efran told her, “Wait here. I will talk to them about the standing, then come get you.”

“Yes, thank you,” she said, collapsing into a chair.

Efran went on to the dining hall and turned inside. Polonti across the hall began to rise, then paused when it was apparent that he was alone. Everyone watched him walk to the front. He turned to the already attentive hall to say, “I’d like your attention for just a moment. Minka is in our quarters getting ready to come in to dinner. But when she comes, I would like for you to not stand.”

He paused, wetting his lips, while they all watched silently. “She loves you all; she is grateful for your affection and respect, but she is uncomfortable with the standing. She does not like her friends’ husbands showing homage to her, and she does not like Southerners feeling that they have to stand for her. Minka told me that she preferred to be ignored,” he admitted, raising his shoulders, which elicited light laughter.

“Any other way that you wish to honor her is fine; she is proud and glad to be given this rôle. But for the sake of unity in the Abbey, we both ask you to not stand for her. Thank you.”

He started to walk away, then turned aside to lean down and whisper to Estes. He nodded, then Efran resumed walking to the door while people all over the hall looked at each other. At that time, someone in the hall—a man—shouted, “Can we kiss her?”

Efran slowly turned. “Ask your wives.” He walked out to laughter.

A few minutes later, Efran re-entered the hall with Minka beside him. She sat quickly, smiling at those around her, and smilingly accepted the plate Dobell brought. Their adoptive children Toby, Noah, Ivy and Hassie (who had still not decided on her forever family) were eating with them tonight. (Pia seldom came in from the woods

unless Efran asked her directly.) No one stood for her, and there seemed to be a general sigh of relief in the hall.

Following dinner, Efran went to the small dining room, as he had warned Minka he would, to meet privately with Estes, Barr, Nyland, Wyeth, Conte, Stites, Dango, Goss, Krall, Koschat, and DeWitt, the only Southerner in the room. Taking his seat at the table, Efran said, “I wanted to explain to you more thoroughly our reasons for asking you to not make much of Minka being your—” he barely caught himself before saying the Q word—“your *Moiwahine*.”

He looked away as tears threatened again, and his hearers watched in alarm. “What happened today was not simply a meeting with Alberon, who is Lord of Faerie. It was to get Minka back, because he had taken her to his realm to be his—*moiwahine*, and I cannot even say the Q word because it may allow him to take her again.” He then explained to them Minka’s description of faerie law and his inadvertent permission for Alberon to take her.

He told them, “I think it stems from Minka’s being the first one here to see and speak to the faeries, and her encouragement of their help in fighting DeVenter’s invisible dragon. But—faeries seem to take things to the extreme as much as Polonti do, and, when there appeared to be competition for the right to claim her as Q, they—made their position clear. At any rate, I wanted you to know that our request to not show her homage was based on more than just hurt feelings.

“But”—he rolled his eyes—“as Estes and DeWitt will tell you, I cannot stop her from kissing you, so as long as your wives permit, it is allowed. Though I prefer it to be your children,” he grouched, and they smiled. “Are there questions?” he asked.

Barr lifted his head. “One wife threatened to leave her husband if he stood for Minka again tonight. He was prepared to see her go, but. . . .” Barr shrugged. Wyeth looked at him.

Efran said, “Minka told me she’d be furious if I paid homage to another woman as my Q. Southerners just don’t understand,” he smiled. They agreed. “Any other questions?”

At their silence, he said, “You are dismissed.” They left quietly. And Efran returned to his quarters to undress for bed, where he held his Minka all night long.

The next day, September 28th, Minka received her first letter from Justinian in over three weeks. She ran upstairs to Estes’ workroom with the letter unopened, barely giving Efran time to look up before throwing herself into his lap. “And there’s Minka,” Wendt said as Efran exhaled, receiving her.

Sitting up, she said, “Good morning, Commander; I’m afraid your tea will have to wait a little while. We finally got a letter from Justinian.” Efran kissed her head, smoothing her hair, which she had done nothing with this morning yet. Then he broke open the seal on the letter that she stuck in his face.

“I’ll wait; thank you Minka,” Wendt said.

“How did it come so early? Did they ride through the night?” DeWitt asked. Estes looked up from his ledger.

She said, “Almost. Not quite. They said they got in late last night and just got a room at Croft’s. I sent them to the dining hall for breakfast. You can read it any time now,” she directed Efran.

“Just trying to see the writing through the hair,” he replied.

“I can pull it back or cut it,” she offered, combing it back with her fingers.

“Or you could be still. There,” he said, and began reading: “‘My adorable Minka’—all right; he’s gone too far. ‘Adorable’ is too personal.”

“Shut up and read, Efran,” said Wendt.

“Yes sir,” he said, while Minka cuddled him happily. “‘My adorable Minka. I do apologize for not having written in several weeks, but have just been freed today from incarceration by the new Surchataine for insolence toward her at her soirée several weeks ago.’” Minka sat up, staring, as his voice reflected his own amazement. DeWitt, Estes and Wendt were silent, waiting for more.

Efran continued, “‘As you may have surmised from that one statement, our own Adele is the new Surchataine, being the new wife of the new Surchatain Blairgowrie. When Hartshough finally succeeded in discovering my whereabouts and our dear Marguerite informed the Surchatain, he had me released and tapped his precious wife lightly on the chin in rebuke. As far as the offense for which I was incarcerated, I do plead guilty for asking if the dress she wore had been imported from the Abbey Lands. (No offense to your excellent Elvey is intended; her purported inferiority is simply the accepted state of mind in these parts.)

“‘However, my incarceration was so fruitful as far as information gathering, I may contrive to insult the Surchataine again at some point, as long as I have access to Hartshough to get me out when I need actual food to eat. One of dearest Adele’s attendants is a lovely Polonti woman named Peri who frequently finds herself relegated to the dungeon for infractions such as the one for which I was found guilty without trial. And Peri talks. So I heard a great deal about a young Polonti named Joshua whom our dearest Adele paid her to kidnap, in which she surprisingly failed. Crushing, no one believes the woman simply because she failed. If it were true, she would have the young man in hand, no? At any rate, she performs other functions successfully enough to be retained by our adored Surchataine, despite her frequent lapses into incarceration.

“‘Since I have much more of interest to share with you, I will be making a trip down to the Abbey Wilds in the next few days. Hold your return letter; I will take it back up with me to share with our dearest Auntie.

“‘Greet the curmudgeon for me; I hope he appreciates what a treasure he has in our precious Qu—’” Efran broke off, then resumed, “‘Q. Your own Justinian,’ blah blah blah,” Efran finished, laying the letter aside. She picked it up to read the redacted parts. “‘We’ll have to apprise Justinian of certain unutterable words,’” Efran mused.

“No one seems shocked that Adele is now Surchataine of Eurus,” Wendt observed.

DeWitt shook his head and Efran said, “I will be shocked if she doesn’t bring the city to its knees in weeks.”

At that time, Commander Lyte appeared at the door. “Excuse me. Commander Wendt, we need you again at the lower barracks for just a little while.”

As Wendt stood, Minka jumped off Efran’s lap. “He hasn’t had his morning tea,” she objected.

Lyte looked at her in deep concern. “With your permission, Lady Minka, we will stop by the kitchen for his tea on the way out.”

Everyone, including Wendt, smiled covertly. Minka said primly, “That will be acceptable. Thank you, Commander Lyte. Enjoy yourself, Commander Wendt.” She went over to kiss his cheek and transfer him to the young Commander.

Lyte inclined his head. “Thank you, Lady Minka. Captain. Administrator. Steward,” he acknowledged them before turning out with the Commander.

She looked back victoriously at the men, who retracted their smiles. Efran shook his head gravely. “I’m sorry that no one wants to fight you.”

“Another time, perhaps,” she shrugged. Then she caught sight of the box still in the corner near the east window, and realized that she had not checked on its possible contents for weeks.

So she turned out abruptly. Efran called after her, “Take a bodyguard!”

“All right!” she called back.

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Chapter 19

Minka checked at the nursery to see Joshua playing on the floor with another child close to his age, maybe a month older. After watching him for a moment, she went out to the courtyard gates. “I need a horse and a bodyguard,” she said in resignation.

“That’s good, Lady Minka,” Ellor said. She pouted, not caring to be praised for doing what she was supposed to do. But she waited patiently until two horses led by a Polonti came out.

He drew up to her, bowing. “Stites at your service, Lady Minka.”

She looked at him darkly. “I know you. You’re too important for babysitting duty.”

His expressionless face broke into an affable smile. “May I have time off for pleasant outings?”

“Another charmer,” she said, eyeing him, then turned to the huge horse that had been brought her.

“Here, Lady Minka,” he said, keeping his smiling face down as he brought up a mounting block.

“Thank you,” she exhaled in resignation, stepping up on the block to reach the stirrup.

They rode at a walk down the switchback. Emerging between the trees on the end, Stites asked, “Where does my lady wish to go?”

“I’m on a very exciting hunt to find the end of a trail of gray dust.” She peered ahead at a 15-foot-tall hill of gray powder that men were carting off in wheelbarrows. Riding closer, she could see the tiny trail of powder extending up the east hillside to the fortress. Yes, this was the terminus of the trail of dust that crawled up the workroom wall and out the second-floor window.

“What is that and what are they doing with it?” she asked.

“That is lime, Lady Minka, that they are using to pave the new roads on the eastern section of plots,” Stites said.

Her mouth dropped in astonishment. Then Ernst, the stonemason, came over waving. “Minka! Thank Efran for getting the lime to us so quickly. I know he wanted all these roads paved right away, but I didn’t see how we were going to get the limestone processed as fast as we needed it. Also, they’re able to use it in the mortar for the wall and the community well. I don’t know how he did it, but it sure is a Godsend.”

When she was finally able to reply, she said, “I’m glad, Ernst; I’ll tell him.”

“Sure, Lady Minka. Hello, Stites.”

“Ernst,” Stites replied, nodding.

She looked around at the finished roads in wonder. “It glitters,” she breathed.

“That’s unexpected; I don’t know what accounts for it,” Stites said. “But all this has enabled them to build these roads after the pattern of Roman roads that have lasted so many years. You see how they’re raised in the middle, with ditches for drainage on either side? And with curbs and occasional mounting blocks. Also, they’re much wider than most roads you find in Westford or Eurus. But having enough lime is the sticking point to be able to do all that.”

She looked at Stites, speechless. “How did you know all that?” she asked in wonder.

He said, “Gerard explained it to us”—one of the Fortress’ building engineers. “Is that what you needed to see? It’s good of you to check up on that for the Captain.”

She nodded, then looked over what once had been only meadowland. “Oh! And I want to ride around the lake.”

“As you wish,” he said in satisfaction, and they rode at a walk toward the shimmering cavern lake where about a dozen people were fishing. The two large, lush faerie trees at either end waved to her in greeting. She watched a family picnic under the one at the near end. The parents seemed to be unaware that the youngest of the family was sharing a bite with a toad faerie on his shoulder. “Everyone seems to be enjoying the trees,” Stites noted.

“Yes, they are. Were you one of Crowe’s men?” she asked.

“No, Lady Minka; I was one of the survivors from Loizeaux’s army that got wiped out by the Passage flooding,” he said.

“Oh, with Barr?” she asked. As they talked, they continued to ride around the perimeter of the lake at a walk.

“Yes, he was also one of us, but I did not know him until we joined your husband’s army,” Stites said. Even while conversing, he was continually on watch.

“Another survivor,” she murmured. “You don’t act like a slave, either.”

“I’m not one anymore,” he said, smiling.

“Do you like apricots?” she asked.

“It’s my favorite fruit, when I can get it,” he admitted.

“Wait—you went with Efran and Barr to Venegas and brought back the Commander,” she said.

“Yes, I was honored to be part of that rescue,” he said warmly.

They completed a circuit around the lake. Minka had been looking for the Abbey children, but they weren’t here right now. So she sighed, “I suppose we’d better go back.”

“Was there something else you wanted to do, Lady?” he asked.

“Yes, but I don’t know what that was,” she complained.

He turned that charming Polonti smile on her again. “When you find out, ask for me, and I will rush out to take you.”

“All right,” she laughed.

They returned to the courtyard where he bowed to her again, then she went into the fortress. But she did not go upstairs; she was looking for something else. She went out to the back grounds to look around. Not seeing it there, she walked along the rear of the fortress until she came to the southwest corner. As the sparring groups had finished for the day, the archers were at their practice. So she turned north. Once she had passed the training pens and stables, she saw a young man sitting at the foot of the faerie tree.

Heart pounding, she walked over to the 7-foot-tall iron fence to watch him. He was sitting listlessly, his back against the tree, playing with a large, ugly knife. He was practicing flipping it by the blade to stick into the ground near his feet. He wore blue army pants and a white shirt that needed washing. His hair was skillfully cut but longish, almost to his collar. Because Efran’s hair grew fast.

It was quite definitely him, but leaner of muscle than he was now. And his face—

He paused throwing the knife to glance at her with such despondence in his handsome face that her heart almost broke. Then he said, “Go away. You’re too young.” And he flicked the knife especially hard to stick in the ground inches from his foot.

“For talking?” she asked.

“What’s the point?” he said without looking up.

“I want to know why you’re sad,” she said.

“Why?” he asked, looking up again as if waiting for a punch line.

“I want to see you happy,” she said.

The knowing look of the 12-year-old came over him, and he replied, “Like I said, you’re too young.” This time, the tossed knife caught the hem of his pants when it stuck.

As he leaned forward to retrieve it, she said, “Tell me about Commander Wendt.”

His hand froze on the knife and his eyes darted up. “How do you know about him?”

She shrugged. “He’s Commander of the army of Westford; you’re wearing part of their uniform. I’ve heard about him. I want to know more.”

He held the knife still, leaning his head back against the tree. “He . . . just pulled me out of the Red to make me Captain of it. I hardly understand why. . . . He’s the best officer I’ve ever known. He doesn’t waste lives. He never cuts corners; he plans like the devil, even small jobs.”

“Then what was wrong about Brier Ridge?” she asked.

He lifted up in astonishment. “How did you know about that? That was just—days ago!”

“Talk on the street,” she shrugged. “Why did you think it was poorly planned?”

Agape in fascination, he got up to sheath his knife and walk over to the fence. “Who are you?”

“My name is Minka,” she said, half-smiling.

“Pretty name. But who is Minka, who does she live with, and how does she know anything about what I think?” he asked with that evaluative look.

“Have you gotten your commendation yet?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “Not yet.” Something in his face alerted her to step back as he thrust a hand through the balusters, so he just missed catching the front of her riding dress.

“How do you know about me?” he asked intently.

“I’m in love with you,” she said.

He looked conflicted. “I don’t know you.”

“You will,” she said.

He squinted at her. “Are you a friend of Lady Leila?”

“Not exactly, but I know who she is. And she’ll do you a very good turn someday,” she said, smiling.

He came up to grip the balusters. “*Who are you?*”

She inhaled, smiling. “Your Minka.”

He backed away from the fence, watching her. Then he ran toward it to leap up, catching the top rail, and propelled himself up by planting his booted feet on the balusters. When she realized he was coming over, she backed away with a gasp.

But as he began to leap off the top rail, lightning struck the fence again, and he fell to the ground, crumpling on the other side. Minka was not hurt; she felt her hair stand on end, but she was far enough away to not get shocked. And she was confident that he would be all right, too. . . . Wouldn’t he? Because, he was just now in the second-floor workroom. . . . Wasn’t he?

Men were shouting as she ran toward the western fortress door. Dodging questioners, she ran through the foyer and down the corridor to the stairway. She ran up the stairs to hang in the doorway, gasping.

But she did not see him. “Where’s Efran?” she whispered.

DeWitt and Estes looked up at her, then DeWitt said, “We heard the lightning strike again, and he jumped up and ran out. You didn’t pass him?”

She turned around as Efran grabbed her up, almost shaking her. “How are you making lightning hit the fence?”

She seized him around the neck in relief. Then she backed away as he tried to kiss her. “That wasn’t me; that you, both times,” she said.

“. . . both times,” he said.

“Yes. When I saw you as a boy and then today. Were you ever hit by lightning? Like, eight, ten years ago?”

He stared at her, then said, “Yes. I think so. I was . . . sitting under a tree. A cloudless day, no rain, but . . . lightning hit the tree, and it knocked me out. . . . And I dreamed about talking with a girl who, knew Wendt, and Leila. . . .” He looked at her. “You were just now talking to me at the faerie tree.”

“Yes. It was days after Brier Ridge,” she said. “I’m afraid I told you too much. You jumped on top of the fence and almost came over—”

“So the lightning hit again,” he said. “I was at the point of killing myself then. Leila wouldn’t leave Rounsefell; she wouldn’t even stop seeing other men. I had no one all to myself. . . .” He struggled to understand this. “By coming to me now at the tree, you came to me in my dreams then, and . . . stopped me from killing myself. Didn’t you?”

“Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t understand how time and dreams work,” she said.

“I don’t either. But now you understand why I was mad at Alberon,” he said, and she reached up to him.

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Chapter 20

Wyeth and another man careened up to the doorway. Panting, they looked on as she disengaged from Efran in mild surprise. “Lady Minka! Are you all right?” Wyeth asked.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, abashed again.

“Did you see the lightning hit the fence?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” Wyeth said. He turned to nod to his companion, who ran off. “I was facing that direction, and saw the man jump up onto the fence. That’s when it hit.”

“You saw him?” Minka asked.

“Yes, but I did not find him under the tree. Who was it?” Wyeth asked.

“The faeries playing with us,” Efran said. “Thank you for checking up on her. You’re dismissed.”

“Yes, Captain,” Wyeth said, withdrawing with a bow to her.

Efran looked down at her again, evaluating. “Did you just now ride out?”

“Yes, before I went to the fence,” she said, remembering. “Ernst thanks you for all the lime to take care of the road paving and the mortar for the wall and the new community well.”

“. . . the lime,” he repeated, so she took his fingers to lead him to the box with its upward trail of dust going to the window.

“I finally found where that tiny little trail leads: to a small mountain of lime by the road. The workers were carting it off in wheelbarrows when Stites and I rode up—”

“You rode out with Stites,” he said.

She looked at him warily. “Yes. He’s the one who came when I asked for a horse and a bodyguard.”

“Good. That’s good,” he said, wiping his mouth. Glancing down at her again, he said, “Be patient with me. I just endured seeing you as a giant spider and then a faerie before I got you back as Minka.”

She leaned into him and DeWitt said, “I’d like to hear about that.” Estes had raised his face from his ledger. So Efran told them.

Two days later, on September 30th, Mohr, one of the two scouts whom Efran had sent up to Westford to watch for Justinian, came riding back alone. He was brought up to the second-floor workroom to report. “Captain,” he said, saluting, “Ayling and I spotted Lord Justinian’s carriage just north of Westford, and were riding up to meet him, when an armed group of about six or eight in purple intercepted it and forced the driver to detour. We followed at a distance as they took a turn-off to the east and then arrived at an estate with the sign of ‘Eastaughffe.’ We did not trespass, but I left Ayling there to watch while I came back to report to you.”

Efran looked back to DeWitt, who said, “Yes, Eastaughffe is Webbe’s property.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, then instructed Mohr, “Go ask Commander Lyte to give me five men of his choosing to ride to Eastaughffe and request the return of our emissary. When they are geared up in uniform, you will go with us to Ryal to file a complaint. We shall follow protocol in presenting our excuse to attack him.”

“Yes, Captain,” Mohr said, smiling.

“Dismissed,” Efran told him, then turned to DeWitt and Estes. “I’ll be changing into Abbey red. And arming.” They nodded.

Efran sent a man down to the notary’s shop to make sure Ryal was in, then he himself dressed and strapped on his sword. Going out to the courtyard, he found the chosen five gathering: Captain Barr, Conte, Tourse, Gabriel,

and Rigdon. Efran smiled: Lyte was taking the offense seriously.

They rode down to the notary shop, where Efran left the five outside to take Mohr in with him. Ryal was waiting at the counter. "Good afternoon, Efran. What do you need?"

"Hello, Ryal. I would like to file a complaint against Webbe for interfering with an emissary. My scout Mohr will give you the particulars," Efran said.

So Ryal turned to Mohr, who gave the notary the same account that he had delivered to the Captain and the Commander. Ryal listened, nodding once or twice, then took out his writing implements. "How many men do you have with you?" he asked, looking out the front window.

"Five," said Efran. "Mohr and Ayling are scouts, and will resume that duty as soon as we arrive and receive Ayling's report."

"Very well," Ryal said, writing. Efran and his men patiently waited. In a few minutes, Ryal brought out his stamp to authorize the document along with his signature, then blotted it and presented it to Efran. "Here is your demand for the return of your emissary Lord Justinian, and your authorization to use force if the demand is not met." He even provided a courier pouch to carry the document.

"Thank you, Ryal," Efran smiled.

As he took the paper in one hand to look it over, he pulled a royal from his pocket with the other. When he placed it on the counter and Ryal exhaled in exasperation at Efran's continual overpayment, Efran said, "Shut up. This is worth a hundred royals to me."

Ryal said grudgingly, "You are to report to me the outcome of this incident."

"Yes, Lord Ryal." Efran smiled at him as he folded up the document to fit in the pouch. Then he turned out, nodding to Mohr, and remounted still smiling. "Lead us to Eastaughffe, Mohr."

"Captain," Mohr said, spurring, and the five followed them.

They loped easily up the main north-south road and passed through Westford. Just past Willowring Lake, Mohr pointed right down an intersecting road. They loped up this hard-packed dirt road until they spotted a gated entry on the left with "EASTAUGHFFE" spelled across the top in elaborate lettering. The iron fencing continued for several hundred feet on either side of the gates, then turned at right angles to encompass the land leading to the house a hundred yards back. There were no sentries in sight.

Ayling rode up along the right fence. He saluted with, "Captain, they took Lord Justinian's carriage around the drive to the stables in the back and brought him and his driver into the house. There were at least a dozen men around the carriage; I've watched another twenty or so come and go; there may be fifty or sixty here. I haven't seen Webbe or any of his family."

"Very good, Ayling. You and Mohr follow us, please." He looked down from his saddle at the chain lock across the gates, then said, "Someone open this."

Barr and Rigdon dismounted at the same time. Rigdon reached into a jacket pocket for lock pick while Barr walked up to the gate to bend and look at the lock. Then he stepped back and kicked the lock so that it snapped and the left-hand gate sagged on a broken hinge. Rigdon replaced the pick in his pocket to open the right-hand

gate inward; Barr lifted the left-hand gate to move it out of the way. He paused to wet a finger and wipe the broken hinge as if that would fix it somehow.

Then they remounted behind Efran, who said, "Thank you, gentlemen. Let us proceed." They loped sedately up the paved drive to the house. At the large covered porch, Efran dismounted, and his party did likewise. "You five will attend me at the door; be prepared to draw. Mohr, you will remain here with our horses. Ayling, I'd like for you to slip around back; when we distract the crew to the front, see if you can locate Justinian's horse and carriage."

"Captain." Ayling saluted and began walking his horse around back.

Efran glanced over the five, smiling, "Let's go, gentlemen." They followed him to the door, where he pulled the chain of a clanging bell.

He had pulled it for a third time when the door was opened by a large individual in purple who stared down at the Polonti, saying nothing. "Good afternoon," Efran said, opening the pouch to shake out the document. "I am Lord Efran of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I have come to retrieve the Abbey emissary that you have illegally detained." With that, he held out the authorization.

The door sentry took it with a burly hand and wadded it up with both fists. Then he spat in Efran's face.

The shock of it sent the heel of Efran's hand into the sentry's face, and he dropped in the gush of blood. Stepping over the supine individual, Efran wiped the spittle off his face with his sleeve and directed, "Find him," gesturing to both sides, and the five spread out.

In searching the house, they found it unnecessary to draw their swords, as fists and elbows were entirely sufficient to subdue what opposition they encountered. Soon, they discovered what they wanted in the kitchen.

With Barr arriving through one door, and Efran and Gabriel through another, Justinian and his jailer turned one way, then another to regard them. Tourse then appeared, as well. The invading party stopped dead at the sight of the young girl in embroidered riding skirts, her long auburn hair gathered in a ribbon over one shoulder. She evaluated them without fear.

"And as expected, here's our escort," Justinian said, rising from his chair. "Chataine Ellacombe, may I present Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Efran, Ella is Webbe's daughter. She's scheduled to marry a son of Blairgowrie's in a few hours, and she doesn't want to. Hence, she waylaid my carriage to effect a rescue. You don't mind bringing her along, do you?"

"No, not at all. I'm delighted to oblige," Efran said, bowing. "However, she'll have to be prepared to swear to the notary that her leaving was voluntary. I've stolen my quota of brides." He looked at her; she eyed him back, saying nothing.

Tourse said, "Ah, beg pardon, Captain, buuuut, last I heard, Webbe's daughter was fifteen. If she is underage, her consent to being kidnapped means nothing. You'll be held criminal."

The men's heads swiveled toward her; she looked coolly at Efran. He said, "I'm sorry; he's correct. Unless you can prove you are of legal age, I will have to leave you here." Justinian looked at her, waiting.

With a sigh of exasperation, she removed the strap of a courier's pouch from her shoulder and opened it to withdraw a folded document which she handed to Efran. With his men around him, he unfolded it to read aloud,

“Record of birth: Ellacombe, female. Mother: Palestrina, Father: Webbe. Date of birth: September thirtieth in the year eighty-one thirty-eight from the creation of the world.”

He looked up at her quickly, and Justinian said, “Today. She’s of legal age, sixteen, today. Webbe and Blairgowrie wasted no time to seal their alliance.”

“Very well,” Efran said, handing the birth record back to her, which she replaced in the pouch.

Conte appeared at the door. “Captain, Lord Justinian’s carriage is ready and the driver in his seat.”

“Excellent. Come away then, friends.” Efran extended his hand toward the back door. Chataine Ellacombe replaced the strap on her shoulder and Justinian placed a hand at her back to hurry her along.

Ayling met them as they were exiting the back door into the stableyard. “Captain, a number of the men who were here have ridden off, leaving only a skeleton crew.”

“Ah. Something’s in the works,” Efran said, with a sidewise glance at the caged Chataine. As Justinian assisted her into the carriage, Efran looked up to the driver to say, “We’re going directly to the Abbey notary. We will escort you.”

“Aye, sir.” The driver touched his hat and clucked to the horse, snapping the reins.

While the carriage was driven around front, led by Rigdon, the men cut through the house to get to their horses. Webbe’s men, assaulted in their own quarters for no good reason that they could see, were picking themselves up resentfully. The door sentry who had spat on Efran still lay quietly where he had fallen, the authorization in his hand.

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Chapter 21

After checking to see that seven Abbey riders and the carriage with two occupants were with him, Efran gestured ahead, and they set out at a lope. They went a little faster on the return trip—if Ellacombe were really to be married in hours, someone would be arriving shortly from either Eurus to the north or Westford to the south. Efran didn’t wish to encounter such a party from either direction.

However, they crossed the old stone bridge south of Westford unhindered, and the carriage pulled up at Ryal’s shop. Efran dismounted, opening the carriage door for the passengers to step out. Leaving his men waiting out front, Efran escorted the Chataine and Justinian inside. “Hello, Giardini,” he said pleasantly. “We need Ryal again.”

“Hello, Efran. Of course, let me get him,” she said, going to the back.

Moments later, Ryal came out, looking over the three. Efran said, “And here we are, Lord Ryal, having freed our abducted emissary along with his abductor. Abductress? At any rate, this is Chataine Ellacombe, daughter of Surchatain Webbe. She is sixteen today and was to be married today, except that she does not want to be married today, so waylaid Justinian’s carriage in order to be rescued.”

Ryal lowered his brows at the three of them. “I see. Let me get a firsthand account of the incident. Lord Justinian, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

“Yes,” Justinian said, placing his hat out of the way on the counter and smoothing back his hair. He gave a brief, straightforward account, the notes of which Ryal recorded on scratch paper.

From his notes, Ryal then wrote up the account, reading it back to those at the counter. “Now, is this account correct?” he asked both Justinian and Ellacombe.

“Yes, Lord Ryal,” Justinian replied. Ellacombe only nodded, but Ryal accepted that to sign and stamp the document with his seal.

Then Ryal said, “Perhaps I should have asked for this first, but I need proof of Chataine Ellacombe’s age.” So she removed the pouch again to show its contents to the notary. He studied the document carefully, recording the information in the incident report.

Ryal then said, “I accept your proof of age. Now, having recorded the incident of your leaving with these men, I must ask, do you swear on your soul that you left voluntarily with them?”

When she paused, Efran leaned down to say quietly, “We told you all this before leaving. If you don’t swear before the notary that it’s so, I will turn around and take you back up to Eastaughffe to be married.”

“Yes,” she said. “I swear that I did leave voluntarily with these men.”

Ryal nodded and began writing in his book. But Efran cocked his head and said, “Say that again.”

Gritting her teeth, she said, “I DO SWEAR that I DID LEAVE VOLUNTARILY with you.”

Ryal glanced up, still writing, but Efran toyed with a silver piece left on the counter. “Interesting accent,” he murmured. “It’s not Eurasian. Not Westfordian. It’s almost. . . .” She looked intently at him, and he studied her brown eyes, broad forehead, and cushy lips—distinctive Polonti features. “Oh.”

He straightened, looking off. “It wasn’t me,” he said in the barest of whispers. Besides which, she was sixteen, which means he would have been not quite twelve when she was conceived—He paled, thinking hard. There was a woman, but, he couldn’t remember her name. . . .

“Here we are, then,” Ryal said, turning the ledger toward them. “Please read over the account and sign it, Chataine Ellacombe. You will sign as witness, Lord Justinian.” He and she leaned toward the ledger, both signing it readily. Ryal added, “I am keeping your birth record here for safekeeping, Chataine.” She nodded.

Ryal quipped, “We’re all done here, then. Thank you for following up, Lord Efran; that prevents my having to run you down.” Efran didn’t respond, as he was studying Ellacombe. Aware of that, she kept her face down for a moment, then defiantly looked him in the eye. And for a little while, they just looked at each other.

“It must be about dinner time at the fortress,” Justinian hinted.

“Yes. Come,” Efran said with a hand at her back to assist her into the carriage. And the party rode up to the courtyard gates.

Justinian took Ellacombe into the dining hall while Efran went to look for Minka. He found her coming out of the nursery with Joshua. “Oh, you’re back! Did you get Justinian?” she asked.

“Yes, and his abductor came along as well,” he said, extending his arms for Joshua.

“What?” she laughed, then said, “I just got him; you’ll get him in a little while. Now, what?”

“I’ll let Justinian tell you; he’s a better storyteller,” he said, raising his hands.

As Efran brought Minka to the back table, Justinian and Ellacombe turned on the bench toward her. Efran said, “Minka, I’m pleased to introduce Justinian’s kidnapper and Webbe’s daughter Chataine Ellacombe—”

“Just Ella, please,” she interrupted, looking back and forth between them, and to the baby as well.

“Ella! What a beautiful name! How did you decide to come to us?” Minka asked eagerly, sitting beside her with Joshua. So Efran sat on Ella’s other side, nudging Justinian down the bench. Having sat, Efran raised his face to Dobell.

Justinian leaned forward to reply to Minka, “She was running from an arranged marriage. You’ll be thrilled to know that I was her means of escape.”

“Of course you were! Justinian is so versatile, Ella. But tell me about it!” she demanded. So Justinian narrated the sequence of events while everyone ate and listened.

Minka exulted, “Oh, good for you for getting away! I did the same, except I didn’t have the courage to commandeer a strange carriage. And now I adore the man that I was supposed to marry then, except as a friend and not a husband, because I adore my husband as my husband now.”

“What?” Ella said, laughing. So, bouncing Joshua, Minka had to tell her the whole story of the handsome Polonti captain she found in her henhouse, and how he was made her guardian, but her father and sister stole her away to marry Graduliere’s son, only Efran stole her back.

Ella listened in bewildered delight. Then she observed, “You have so many Polonti here.”

“My husband collects them. They’re adorable. Oh, do try the custard. They’re replacing the wall of the conservatory now, by the way,” Minka added to Efran, who was finishing off his dinner. He laughed, shaking his head, and Ella laughed at him. Minka looked from Ella to Efran right beside her, and stilled.

Justinian began, “That’s our Quee—”

“No!” Efran clapped a hand over his mouth, which raised eyebrows around them. “I forgot to tell you: we can’t use the Q word, especially in regard to Minka. I will tell you why later.” Justinian nodded, removing Efran’s fingers from his face.

Meanwhile, Minka was stroking Ella’s hair. “Such an unusual color,” Minka murmured, shifting Joshua.

“It’s a henna wash, to make it red. I’m tired of using it,” Ella said with a touch of defiance.

“Oh. Then don’t. I don’t see why you should cover such a beautiful black. But I’m partial to black hair. Sometimes I won’t let Efran cut his just so I can play with it,” Minka said. He tossed his hair out of his eyes.

Ella turned to him. “You’re full-blooded Polonti,” she observed. He nodded. She began, “I’m . . .”

She was screwing up her courage to say something when Doudney leaned over him. “Pardon, Captain, but Surchatain Webbe and his wife are at the gates demanding to see you.”

Ella gasped, but Efran told her, “I will go talk to them. You stay here and eat. They cannot make you leave; you are of age. You are safe here.”

He rose, adding, “Justinian, you and Minka stay here with Ella. I’ll hear your report after dinner.”

“Yes, Efran,” Justinian said, and Minka nodded.

Efran told Doudney, “Bring them to the small dining room—just Webbe and his wife, no bodyguard. I’ll drag Estes and DeWitt away from their dinner to come sit with me.” He lifted his chin across the hall at DeWitt, who stood with a gesture of exasperation and went over to tap Estes.

Shortly, they three entered the small dining room to sit across the table from two highly indignant royal parents. And the moment that Efran looked at Palestrina, he remembered her. Only then, she was using the shortened name of Trina—the same as Bowring’s daughter.

Right now, she was expostulating angrily, jabbing at the table with a manicured fingernail. Webbe, beside her, could find no opening to say a word, so just nodded emphatically with her outpouring of indignation. She was overweight and heavily made up, fingering the expensive necklace that dangled down in her heaving cleavage. “You will get her out to this foyer *this very instant* or the repercussions will be enormous, Lord Whoever You Are—”

“Efran,” he said quietly. “I’m Efran, Trina.” He looked at her.

She turned to him in white-hot anger. “I don’t care what your name is,” she said slowly, emphatically, so that the stupid Polonti across the table would understand every word. “You will get Ellacombe out here at once or I will—”

She suddenly broke off, staring at him. He looked back at her contemplatively. The other three men at the table were silent, watching this personal cataclysm without comprehension. Lady Palestrina had turned to stone. So Webbe cleared his throat and said, “Really, Efran, we’re not understanding how you can justify this kidnapping.”

Efran glanced at him to say quietly, “Ella arranged it herself. She’s the one who had your men waylay Justinian’s carriage so that we would take her as well when we came for him. And that is exactly what happened. If you will check at the notary’s office here, you will find a sworn statement of the incident. As she is of age, today, we have accepted her application for refuge. She declines to come talk to you, and I will not force her.”

Webbe exhaled, raising his hands. “Well. Lessie? What do you think?”

She was still frozen, her eyes blank. Then she slowly got up and walked out. Webbe, flustered, scrambled up to follow.

Efran exhaled, leaning forward to put his face in his hands. “Minka knows,” he whispered.

While his administrators watched, he lifted his head and said, “Dansington has become the nursery for the

unwanted children of rich women. Without the dangers of abortion, they can ship off their babies where they'll be fed, cared for, and educated until such a time as the mother decides she has a use for them. But since Dansington is so isolated from Westford and Eurus, they've developed their own accent and speech patterns, so that children trying to acclimate in those cities have to relearn how to talk. It's difficult."

He looked at Estes and DeWitt, who were silent. "Ella has not yet shed that accent." His jaw worked for a moment, and he looked off with red eyes, shaking his head. "I wasn't quite twelve. Trina thought I'd be safe to play with. Apparently I wasn't."

"Are you sure?" DeWitt whispered.

"Fairly," Efran nodded. "Ella thinks so, too. And I'm sure Minka sees something there."

"Where did this take place?" DeWitt asked intently.

"Now there's the big discrepancy," Efran said. "It had to have been in Eledith, because I didn't make it down to Westford until I was fourteen. So—"

Estes said, "Sixteen years ago, Webbe was Eurus' emissary to Eledith. He made such a big deal of it—still does—and inflated his accomplishments so much, that the Council of Eledith finally put out a disclaimer about what he had actually done."

"Oh," Efran said, and was silent for a while. Then he said, "We need to have Justinian—"

At that moment Justinian put his head in the door. "Are you ready for me? Not that I have anything much to report, after this afternoon's events."

"Yes, come sit down, Justinian," Efran said. "Except—I don't want Ella left alone—"

Justinian snorted, "Oh, no worries. She's entirely comfortable, surrounded by a dozen of your worthy men."

"Ah. Good, because we need Minka, too." Efran looked to the sentry at the door. "Will you see if Lady Minka will come?"

"Yes, Captain," he saluted and stepped off.

Shortly, Minka came in without Joshua. But she stopped to kiss Justinian's cheek. "Oh, thank you; you're so sweet."

"I am," he admitted, not looking at Efran so that Minka's brazen show of affection would be that much more punishing.

She told Efran, "Justinian is giving up his suite for Ella. We'll eventually find another suite for him somewhere, but for tonight he's staying at Croft's. I've sent a man down there to reserve a room for him. Oh, and I've put one of the Polonti maids, Sudie, in with her. She's a very pretty girl; she'll help Ella be more comfortable about who she is."

"Do you know who she is?" Efran asked quietly.

"She's your daughter," Minka said.

Justinian's mouth fell open; Efran shot a lightning glance to DeWitt, who raised his hands helplessly. Estes leaned back, inhaling. Efran asked her, "How did you know?"

"Oh, there's a definite resemblance. But you told me," she said.

"What? When?" Efran demanded.

"Several times. You started to tell me about a woman who had used you when you were eleven, but it was too painful for you to talk about, so I stopped you. But then again, you told me when I talked to the twelve-year-old you at the tree, even though you didn't understand what you were saying," she said. She looked up to the ceiling and said, "The Abbey is for people who need to come home."

Efran lowered his head, whispering, "I will not cry."

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Chapter 22

Minka turned to Justinian. "What did you have to report before all this happened?"

He gestured helplessly. "That Webbe's daughter was marrying Blairgowrie's son. Adele had a big part in arranging that, so, it's a nasty cut for it to fall through." He informed Efran, "She'll be looking for revenge."

"As she ever has been," Efran said, eyes downcast. "Ryal is right, though: I can't meet attacks before they happen." He exhaled, then looked at Justinian. "How did Ella know you were coming then?"

"From what I understand," Justinian answered slowly, "the fact that it was my carriage she appropriated was an accident. She sent men out to detour the first carriage they found; I'm not sure she had a plan for what to do next. But when I arrived, I used my conversational skills to discover her agenda. And then it was obvious that she should be brought to the Abbey with us."

DeWitt asked, "Why didn't she just take her own carriage from Eastaughffe?"

Justinian shook his head. "The men had orders to keep her until Blairgowrie's wedding coordinator arrived."

DeWitt barked, "Then what did they think they were up to, going out to steal a carriage off the road?"

Justinian squinted at the wall over Efran's head. "Somehow she made them think that they were performing a necessary service for the upcoming nuptials. I'm not certain that I would follow the logic were I to hear it firsthand, but I have heard similar inventions elsewhere."

Minka laughed and everyone looked at Efran. "Anything's possible," he murmured to the table.

They covered a few more incidentals, then Justinian was sent off to Croft's Inn via his own carriage, with the understanding that he would stop at the fortress in the morning before heading back up to Euris. Then Efran fell into bed, gathered Minka into him, and dropped into a deep sleep.

Minka appeared fairly early in Estes' workroom on the following morning, October 1st. Here, he, DeWitt and Efran were discussing the ramifications of Ella's flight while Commander Wendt listened. They paused to smile at her; Minka glanced up, but she was concentrating on the hot mug of mint tea that she was carrying. "Good morning, Commander. I've brought your tea, but I'd like for you to come out to the gardens to drink it; it's such a beautiful early fall morning."

"Good morning, Minka. I'd love to, but that pesky Lyte has warned me he'll want me this morning. I'll drink the tea until he shows up." Wendt extended his hand toward her for the mug.

Minka stood there a moment unmoving; Efran glanced over. Then she said in a lower, rougher voice, "Hello, Commander. We're ready for you now. Please come out with the man who has your tea." Efran, Estes and DeWitt went prostrate in silent laughter.

Wendt paused, then stood. "Certainly, Lyte. I'll let your errand boy here carry the tea until we get out."

"Very good, Commander," she said in the same poor imitation of a masculine voice. With the mug in one hand, she took his arm with the other, glancing back to smile victoriously at the men who were wiping their eyes.

Out on the back grounds, she sat Wendt on the bench so he could drink his tea. "Thank you for playing along. I promise I'll give you up to Lyte when he comes looking for you," she said.

"I couldn't see anything else to do," he said, sipping from the mug. "It's very good. Thank you."

She hugged his arm, then said, "I suppose Efran told you about Ella."

"Yes, he did. And I also understand that you believe she is his child," Wendt said.

"Yes, it seems clear to me," she said. "But I wanted to ask you about something else. Efran told me that you promoted him to Captain right out of the Red—that he was never in the Blue Regiment."

"That's correct," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Several reasons. First, we'd had a lot of casualties that cut into our pool of potential officers. I had promoted Pindar to Captain of the Blue shortly before then—he was a good captain, but, he and Efran had too many fundamental differences for me to see Efran gaining much from being under him. Finally, Efran earned it. He has a kind of raw courage that inspires other men," Wendt said.

He went on, "I struggled with the decision for weeks, because he was so young—not more than twenty. Many of the men in his unit were older. But he was not green; even then, he had that indefinable quality of leadership. He also turned out to be a good tactician, which surprised me. And after the assault on Brier Ridge, I knew it was time."

"So what happened with Brier Ridge?" she asked in smiling urgency.

"Oh," Wendt laughed, "to way oversimplify it, there were two ways to approach that battle: one was the quick frontal assault that had a high risk of casualties and the other was the slow, calculated approach that posed less

risk to the men. Now you tell me which strategy Efran backed and which strategy I decided on.”

“I see,” she smiled. “Who was right?”

“Let me answer that by telling you that Efran would certainly have died had we done it his way, and I’m afraid that was what he expected,” Wendt said.

“Thank you,” she whispered, hugging him. With her head on his shoulder, she murmured, “The third person. Have you seen the third person again?”

“Not recently,” he said, finding that he couldn’t drink his tea with her head on his shoulder. So he did not drink his tea.

“I’m glad. I hope he doesn’t come back,” she said.

“AHEM,” someone said loudly, and Minka looked up. With a baiting smile, Connor said, “Commander Minka, Commander Lyte requests the presence of Commander Wendt if he’s done with his tea.”

“Let me check,” Minka said, looking into his mug. “Almost.”

So Wendt drained the mug and handed it to her, standing. “Thank you, Minka. It was very good.”

“I’m glad. You may take him now,” she told Connor loftily, who grinned at her before turning away with Wendt’s hand on his shoulder. Then she went in to check on Joshua.

While she was in the nursery, Efran and Ella were emerging from the back door onto the grounds. “What wonderful gardens,” she murmured, glancing around. “Oh, I see that your glass wall is almost entirely finished.”

She paused to look in the conservatory at the lemon, lime and orange trees in large containers. The workers parted to make room for her to see, but she backed away to not impede their work.

“Yes,” Efran said without looking. He was scanning for a less-busy place to talk. “The gardener wanted to take out these old tombstones over here, but Minka loves them, so convinced him to plant the roses around them,” he said, ambling over to the east side of the grounds, past the well.

Ella followed willingly to look at the roses, still blooming profusely, and read the epitaphs. “This Renée of Westford must have been someone very important.”

“Or someone anxious to not be forgotten,” he said absently. In an abrupt change of topics, he noted, “Your mother was very upset last night, but your father seemed more accepting of your decision.”

“I . . . appreciate your kindness, but, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do here,” she said.

Efran looked off, shrugging. “I suggest you not do anything right away. Just—look around. Get to know us.”

“Why do you care what happens to me?” she asked.

“Oh, this is hard,” he breathed. “Well, besides the fact that you’re young and vulnerable, I have strong reason to believe that . . . you are my daughter,” he got out.

“You?” she murmured, studying him. “I knew my father was Polonti—that’s unfortunately pretty obvious, but—how old are you?”

“Twenty-eight,” he replied.

She laughed, “Oh, then, you’re not my father, obviously.” He said nothing, only looked at her.

Her Polonti brows gathered. “You would have been—twelve. Or younger! Is that even possible?”

“Yes,” he said.

She stared at him, then shook her head firmly. “Oh, no. I can’t see that at all. A young boy and—my mother was twenty-eight when I was born! Oh, no. That’s not even physically possible, and it’s really ugly of you to suggest it.” She turned to run back into the fortress, and Efran sighed.

When he came in the back door a little later, he was told that Justinian was waiting in his carriage in the courtyard, so Efran went out to see him. Justinian chose to walk around while waiting, shaking out the sleeves of his new gold velvet jacket. Seeing Efran emerge, he said, “I have Minka’s letter to our dear Auntie in my bag. Do you have a letter for our inescapable Adele?”

“Nothing I could put in writing,” Efran said, looking down the switchback. The faerie trees at the bottom were lush and waving, their green and copper leaves flitting without any breeze at all.

Justinian said, “Well then, why am I here? If you don’t hear from me for a week or two, that means I gave Adele your message and went back to prison.” He hopped into his carriage.

“Then you can take me down the hill,” Efran said, placing a foot on the carriage step. He looked back to tell the gate sentry, “I’ll be down at the notary’s.” The sentry saluted. Justinian gestured up to his driver, who clucked to the horse.

As Efran rode down the switchback with one foot on the step and one hand on the mounting grip, Justinian murmured, “Did you talk to Ella?”

“I tried. She wasn’t having it,” Efran said. “I don’t blame her; I hardly believe it myself.”

“Is Minka sure?” Justinian asked, and Efran nodded. “Then she’ll come around,” Justinian said.

As the carriage approached the notary’s shop, Efran stepped off. “Stay away from the women.”

“But then I won’t learn anything!” Justinian called out the window, and Efran waved.

He entered the notary shop and leaned on the counter until Ryal came out. “Good morning, Efran. I finally finished compiling the account of Barthelemon’s warnings and your use of them to save the fortress. Here is your copy.” He handed Efran a nicely bound book titled, *The Warnings of Barthelemon of Occitania and How They Were Used by Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, to Save the Fortress from the Destroyer on August the Fourth of the Year 8154 from the Creation of the World.*

“That is very nice, Ryal,” Efran said, flipping through it. “I appreciate your work on that.”

“You’re most welcome. Now, what did you want to ask me about?” Ryal said perceptively.

Efran hesitated, tucking the volume underarm. “If you would, let me see Ella’s birth record again.”

“Certainly.” Ryal turned to the shelf behind him to remove a ledger and open it on the counter. Then he removed a loose sheet to hand it over.

Efran laid it on the counter to study it. “Ellacombe, female. Mother: Palestrina. Father: Webbe. Date of birth: September thirtieth in the year eighty-one thirty-eight from the creation of the world. Place of birth: Eurus.”

He raised up, turning the birth record to face Ryal. “I can’t read the notary signature. Are you familiar with him?”

Ryal glanced at it. “Myerscough. Oh, yes. He’s deceased now, but there was never any question about his work.” Efran nodded, and Ryal asked, “Have you some concern about the legitimacy of this record?”

“No,” Efran said quietly. “Only. . . .” A customer entered the shop, and Efran stood aside to let Ryal take care of his business.

When the customer left again, Ryal spent a few minutes finishing up the notations on his document, then he glanced at Efran, who was silent. “Only . . . ?” Ryal prompted.

“I believe I am Ella’s father,” Efran whispered.

Ryal absorbed that for a moment, then asked, “Did you see Lady Palestrina last night?”

“Yes. It took her a little while, but she recognized me,” he said.

“What did she say then?” Ryal asked.

“Nothing. She was too shocked. She just sat there in shock until she finally got up and walked out,” Efran said.

Ryal asked, “Did she not realize that you were Lord of the Abbey Fortress?”

“No, because the last time she saw me, I was eleven,” Efran said.

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Chapter 23

Ryal was silent for some time, then asked, “What does Minka say?”

“That I am,” Efran said.

Ryal took that in, then asked, “And Ella?”

“She was insulted that I would suggest such a thing,” Efran said, smiling faintly.

“To say it’s shocking is an understatement,” Ryal admitted.

“I never imagined. . . .” Efran trailed off, shaking his head.

He returned to the fortress, feeling at loose ends, but all he knew to do now was wait. Except that he did place Ryal’s book in a prominent place on the library shelves.

That evening, Wendt had dismissed his helper to get into bed by himself when an aura appeared before his blind eyes, and he looked at the shape of the third person before him. “Ah. Is it my time to die, then?” he asked.

A masculine voice replied (whether to his ears or to his mind, he wasn’t sure) “Not by my hand, but I have come to offer you second sight.”

“Second sight. What do you mean by that?” Wendt asked.

“That is the ability to see what others do not see,” the voice replied.

“Uh huh. And why are you offering that to me?” Wendt asked with heavy skepticism.

“Because although I cannot give you your sight back, I can yet give you something else,” it said.

“So you expect to take advantage of my blindness to give you a hook in my lip? No. Get out of here, whoever you are,” Wendt said, and the aura left. That is, it appeared to walk away. Wendt chewed on that for a while, then went to sleep, untroubled.

For the next several days, Efran left Ella to Minka’s care, seeing her only at dinner. She was courteous but distant, and Efran did not attempt to force any attention from her. He was just glad that the Polonti had stopped standing for Minka when she appeared in the dining hall, as that ritual would have been very difficult to explain to Ella.

Since waiting was always the worst part of any conflict for Efran, he spent more time than usual in the keep, looking for guidance from the Crucified, who was depicted in the ten-foot tall crucifix. There was never any question of praying to the wood, as it was only a symbol of the reality. In fact, when Efran prayed here, he usually looked up to the high windows above the crucifix.

During the stormiest days, there was still light from the windows, especially when there was lightning. Even at night, the Scripture on the wall opposite the windows would often be illumined by the pale blue light of the moon and stars. While he knew that prayer was essential, it did not make the waiting easier. And he was waiting to see how Webbe, Blairgowrie, and Adele would answer this kidnapping.

Efran’s scouts could watch the roads, but they had no ingress into the conference rooms and bedrooms where reprisals are planned. So on the night of October 3rd, after Efran had consoled himself with his Minka, he lay back in bed and groaned, “I wish I knew what they were planning.”

Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin immediately appeared standing on the footboard to bow, and Minka calmly covered herself and part of Efran with the bedsheet. Ditson said, “We are so glad, finally, to hear your call for help, Lord Efran. We’ve just been waiting on tenterhooks to get a word from you. Have we not, Nutbin?”

“Indeed we have! I, myself, have never felt so much like stretched woolen cloth as I have these last few days. But now we are delighted to bring to you a smidgen of information. Is that what you have there, good Ditson?” said Nutbin.

“Your eyepiece is in a pristine state of cleanliness to perceive that, good Nutbin, as you are absolutely correct. Shall I read a summary of the log, Lord Efran?” inquired Ditson. He pulled from an inner jacket pocket of his autumnal gold suit a notebook that measured about six inches long to his eight-inch height.

Efran shut his gaping mouth and said, “Ah, yes, certainly, as long as you’re here, you might as well read what you have.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran; you are too kind,” Ditson said. With a flurry of pages, he opened his notebook to read: “October first. Surchataine Adele, receiving news of Chataine Ellacombe’s flight to the Abbey Lands, screams invective directed at Lord Efran for several hours. October second. Surchatain Webbe, Lady Palestrina, Surchatain Blairgowrie, and Surchataine Adele meet with voices at highest volume for about three hours, during which time much invective is directed at Lord Efran but nothing concrete by the way of action is decided. October third. The parties mentioned in the entry for October second meet again, during which time Surchatain Blairgowrie reveals that his son the Chatain Eadgifu has eloped with a chambermaid (name not mentioned) so reprisals against Lord Efran are postponed by all parties except the Surchataine Adele.’

“And there, Lord Efran, is a complete and detailed report of the most important points of discussion bearing on concerns for reprisals by the parties affected by Chataine Ellacombe’s flight.” Ditson snapped his notebook shut in satisfaction.

Nutbin added, “We are overjoyed to have served you and fervently wish to hear your earnest wishes again, Lord Efran.” Bowing, they vanished.

With a hazy smile, Minka lay back on the pillow, watching Efran’s temporary paralysis. He glanced around to observe, “I wasted three days worrying about what they were going to do to me.” Then he looked down at her and murmured, “Where were we?” She reached a hand to play with his hair, laughing deep in her throat.

The following day, October 4th, Efran turned his attention to matters that Estes wished to cover with him. So while the Lord of the Abbey Fortress sat imprisoned by paper and parchments in the workroom, Ella and Minka, with Joshua, went walking in the glorious fall gardens.

Tall acidanthera were blooming profusely along the wall of the fortress, and in front of them were beds of low-growing chrysanthemums in deep red and creamy white. The pumpkins and squash were almost ready for harvest, and Toby brought Minka a dried gourd, which Joshua rattled with great enthusiasm. Toby also showed her and Ella the birdhouses that Tourjee the undergardener had carved from several gourds and fastened securely in the walnut tree.

Ella was surprised at the number of children at the fortress, so Minka had to explain that because the Abbey was bequeathed to Efran as an orphanage, they were required under their charter to take in unwanted children. “Then all these children are orphans?” Ella asked.

“Most of them. But Joshua is mine and Efran’s [that being the short version of a long story] and we adopted Toby, Noah, and Ivy. Those three were the first street children that Efran brought here. Oh, and Pia, but she stays in the woods all the time. Efran just loves children. He wants to take care of all of them,” Minka said.

“Even older children?” Ella asked skeptically.

“Yes,” Minka said.

Ella turned blindly so that they began walking near the archery and sparring grounds while both groups were at practice, and she stopped to watch in fascination. She unwittingly drew so much attention from the ranks that Wyeth approached her and Minka to bow. “*Moiwahine* Minka, my men are captured by your guest. I promised to tell them who she is if they will get back to work.”

Ella flushed in embarrassment and Minka laughed, “Ella, this is one of our fight instructors, Lt. Wyeth. Lt. Nyland is the one looking over from the other yard. Wyeth, Chataine Ella is the daughter of Surchatain Webbe. She’s here for an extended visit.” Joshua turned on her arm to study him.

“I am honored to meet you, Chataine. Please watch as long as you like; any man who does not practice will be knocked down,” Wyeth said.

“Thank you, I think,” she laughed, embarrassed, as he bowed and walked off again. “Oh, my, so many handsome men,” Ella breathed.

“I know,” Minka grinned.

“Do you like any of them?” Ella asked.

“Oh, I love all of them. But none of them can match my Captain,” Minka said. Ella looked down.

They continued to walk, and Ella stopped by one of the training pens to watch a man work with a foal. Minka looked warily at the faerie tree to the north, but no one was in it or around it. In a little while, they went on from the pens and stables. As they approached the tree, dominating the barren northwestern hillside, Ella put a hand on the fence to look up at it. “Is that another faerie tree?”

“It is,” Minka confirmed, bouncing Joshua, who wanted to get down.

“Do you see faeries?” Ella asked.

Minka looked. “Not right now, but they have to show themselves, and when they’re busy, they forget to.”

“Busy? Doing what?” Ella asked.

“Oh, there are all kinds of faeries doing all kinds of work. They help keep the trees and gardens healthy; they make sure the bees have pollen; they care for injured birds and ward off some predators. They do many other things I don’t know about,” Minka said honestly.

Studying the tree, Ella asked, “Do you think Efran is my father?”

“Yes,” Minka said, finally putting Joshua down on the grass.

“How could he be, so young?” Ella asked in distress.

Minka hesitated. “Some men mature early, even if they don’t look like it on the outside. Also, Efran told me a little bit about his early experience. It was very uncomfortable for him to talk about, so I didn’t try to make him.”

Ella turned to lean back on the fence. “I wish he were my father,” she blurted. “Webbe tries to not be around me at all. He doesn’t even like to look at me. But Efran looks at me as if he wants to be my father. Do you think he wants to be?”

“Yes, but, I think you need to ask him that,” Minka said, watching Joshua scoot away.

“I’m afraid. I think I made him angry when he tried to tell me he was my father and I got mad and ran off,” she said.

“That kind of thing doesn’t make him angry, it makes him sad,” Minka said. “Would you like me to take you to talk to him?”

“Yes,” Ella said, lifting off the fence. “Yes, Minka, I would.”

“All right; let me drop off Joshua in the nursery and then we’ll go up,” Minka said.

Efran, Estes and DeWitt looked up as Minka and Ella came into the workroom. “Efran, Ella would like to talk to you,” Minka said.

“Of course. Sit down,” he said. It never occurred to him not to talk in front of his administrators. And witnesses were just what Ella wanted right now.

She sat one chair down from Efran while Minka stood away from the table, reluctant to interfere. At his look, however, she did sit, only two chairs down from Ella.

Ella was studying the tree as if drawing courage from it. “Do you really believe you’re my father?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

She looked down. “Do you—do you *want* to be my father?” Her voice trembled slightly.

“Yes. I want to take care of you as a father. I want you to look at me as your father,” he said.

“But do you want to be my father to other people?” she asked stiffly.

He hesitated. “I’m—not sure what you mean.”

She faced him, then. “I want you to be my father publicly. I want public acknowledgment that you are my real father. Will you do that?” Her lip quivered, but she did not cry.

Efran swallowed. “Yes, but, we’d have to go to the notary.”

She stood. “Then let’s go.”

“Yes,” he said, standing. He wiped the sweat from his upper lip as he glanced back at Estes and DeWitt, who nodded.

Then he looked intently at Minka, also standing. She asked, “May I come?”

“Yes,” Efran and Ella said at the same time, in the same voice. They glanced smilingly at each other, and Minka inhaled in vindication.

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Chapter 24

Efran, Ella and Minka received horses in the courtyard, where Efran noted that Ella was quite comfortable mounting by herself and handling the reins. Then they rode down silently to the notary shop.

When they entered, Ryal was assisting another customer with Soames by his side, listening as Ryal explained the procedure for registering a business in the Abbey Lands. Soames glanced up to nod at his Captain, who smiled slightly.

When the customer left, Ryal looked up at the three waiting. “Good morning, Efran, Minka, Ellacombe. What can I do for you?”

Ella lifted her face to answer, so Efran closed his mouth. She said, “I want to correct my birth record. I want it to show that Efran is my father.” Ryal nodded slightly. Admirably blank, Soames turned to retrieve the appropriate ledger of birth records and place it on the counter.

“Come in back, please. You as well, Soames. Giardi?” Ryal called, stepping to the back door. They heard her answer, and he said, “Can you man the front counter for a little while?”

“Yes,” she said, entering. “Oh, good morning,” she said to the three waiting, then took her place behind the counter.

“Good morning, Giardini.” Efran smiled at her, which was all it took to start her laughing again.

The five of them went into the back room, where Efran pulled out more chairs for them to sit at the small table. Soames held the ledger on his lap for the time being as Ryal pulled out paper and his quill set. Dipping the quill, he headed the sheet, “Notes on corrections to Ellacombe’s birth record, October 4 of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.”

Then he said, “We must administer oaths now. Lord Efran, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

Ryal asked, “Chataine Ellacombe, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” she said in restrained excitement.

“Now,” Ryal said, “Efran, you mentioned something of this to me several days ago. Please tell me for the record how, why and when you began to suspect that Ellacombe was your daughter.” Efran paused to find a starting

place, whereupon he told of noting her Polonti features and Dansington accent, then recognizing Palestrina when she and Webbe came to the fortress to demand Ella's return.

"Did she recognize you?" Ella asked intently.

"Not at first," he said, turning to her. "But when she finally stopped shouting to look at me, she—froze and said not another word until she got up and walked out a few minutes later."

"Did Webbe notice?" she asked.

Efran shook his head. "All he knew was that he finally had a chance to ask me what we were thinking to kidnap you, and I had a chance to tell him that it was all your idea."

Lifting her face, she told Ryal, "He can't stand to even look at me. My brothers treat me with contempt. Palestrina does everything she can to hide the fact that I'm part Polonti—" She lifted a strand of her henna-tinted hair. "I'm tired of being ashamed."

Efran reached an arm around her, which she accepted. But she fought the tears, observing, "You're such a handsome man. If my mother had been at least pretty and not fat, I would have been beautiful."

Efran quietly laughed. "That depends on who you want to be pretty for. Polonti men generally don't like skinny women; they like their women to be more—substantial. Voluptuous."

She laughed, and Minka said, "There. Look at that, Ryal."

Ella looked at her, and Ryal said, "Interesting. Efran, if you and Ellacombe will please smile at me, broadly. . . . Turn your face directly to me, Ellacombe." Soames left his chair to kneel behind Ryal and look.

They did as he instructed, and Ryal studied them, taking notes. "Besides the obvious Polonti features of smooth black hair, brown eyes, and broad foreheads, I see a definite similarity in the shape of the jaws, the lips, and the teeth. Is that what you're seeing, Minka?"

"Yes, but also the high cheekbones, Ryal," she said, looking between the two.

"Yes, you're correct," Ryal said.

Soames observed, "She tosses her head the same way he does. There is also a similarity in the hands."

They all looked down; Efran put a hand on the table and Ella placed hers beside it. Minka gasped, "Oh, you're right! Ella has his beautiful fingers."

Ryal was scratching with his quill pen. "Despite the secondary differences of gender—her hands being smaller—the shape of the hands and fingers is definitely similar."

Ella inhaled as if this were an accomplishment.

"Well," Ryal said, leaning back, "what remains is probably the most important piece of evidence, and the most difficult. Efran, you must recount to me the incident or incidents of copulation, and your age at the time."

Efran leaned back, paling. "Not in front of Ella."

Minka stood. "Come, Ella. We'll wait out front." Ella nodded, rising to leave the room with her.

When they were safely gone and the door shut, Efran braced his head in his hands, elbows on the table, to whisper, "It was in Eledith—two or three times, I don't remember how many. I was a few months short of my twelfth birthday. . . ."

A moment later Ryal stuck his head out the door. "Minka, Efran said that Estes told him that Webbe had been emissary to Eurus sixteen years ago. I need his testimony. Will you please ask him to come down here for just a moment?"

"Yes. I'll be right back, Ella," Minka said, turning out. Ella nodded, twisting her hands in unconscious excitement.

Some minutes later Minka returned alone, laughing. She opened the door to the back room to say, "Ryal, Estes says he'll come if he needs to, but he found the information in your ledger of council notifications of the year eighty-one forty."

Soames sprang up from his chair to look along the back wall of old ledgers. "Where—?"

"There on the second to bottom shelf," Ryal said. Soames pulled out a dusty ledger and began flipping through it.

Efran squinted at Minka. "What was he looking for about the Council of Eledith?"

She shook her head. "He was looking for actions by the Council of Eurus when he was researching a defense for your trial. If you want to know more, you have to ask him."

"Got it!" Soames exclaimed, and brought an old document to the small table. Giardi had come to the door to watch.

They all crowded around as Ryal picked it up to read: "A Declaration of the Council of Eledith:

"We of the Council of Eledith are immeasurably grateful for the service of Emissary Webbe of Eurus in Eledith from the years eighty-one thirty-six to eighty-one thirty-eight. His contributions to the areas of rural beautification and vista development cannot be overstated. However, he did not contribute to the literacy initiative headed by Councilor Kaiman nor the eradication of scurvy headed by Councilor Makan.

"While we regret the confusion, we remember fondly the joy brought to our streets by Emissary Webbe, his lovely wife Lady Palestrina, and their charming tot Cyneheard.

"Signed and sealed by the Council of Eledith on this twenty-fifth of May in the year eighty-one forty from the creation of the world."

Jaw slack, Ryal looked up at them. "This is irrefutable proof that she was in Eledith during the time of Ellacombe's conception."

He laid the paper back down, hand trembling slightly. "I have never received such compelling proof for something so hard to prove. Given this documentation, the firsthand testimony of Lord Efran and Chataine Ellacombe, and disinterested observation, I find Chataine Ellacombe's birth record to be fraudulent, and hereby

issue a new birth record stating Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, to be Ellacombe's father."

There were exhalations of excitement, but Ella said, "I want to change my name! I want it to be just Ella. That's good, isn't it?" She looked to Minka and then Efran.

"That will be done," Ryal said, pulling out more parchment and his seal.

Efran nodded, standing, and Minka cried, "That's lovely! You're not a rooster; you don't need a comb."

"Yes!" Ella cried, fists clenched in exultation. She jumped up to face Efran, breathing, "You're really my father."

He nodded, smiling. "It's all official."

With a wrenching cry, she threw herself on him, and Efran held her gently. "I can't believe it," she said, pulling away to wipe her eyes. "But will you love me? And not be ashamed of me?"

He shook his head. "You are truly my daughter, and truly Polonti. Half measures don't count."

"Eeee!" Pressing her knuckles to her face, she spun in circles. Minka watched laughing and crying. Ella stopped suddenly. "That makes you my stepmother."

Minka nodded, and Ella said, "But you're too young and sweet to be a stepmother."

"Then I will be that friend you can't get rid of," Minka said. They laughed, and Efran pulled her toward him.

Ella looked away thoughtfully. "I had friends at Dansington, but we were not allowed to know anything about each other; we knew that we would soon leave and never see each other again. So we were careful not to love each other." Her eyes clouded with tears, but she lifted her face resolutely. "I will not cry."

The sudden laughter startled her, but Efran said, "You even use my stock phrases."

Ryal was writing. "I don't believe I've ever corrected a fraudulent birth record. But I know that any changes to it require notification to your parents—at least to your mother—and a copy of your corrected birth record sent to her."

Ella began, "Oh, send one to that awful woman, Blairgowrie's wife Adele—" And there was another burst of laughter.

"Oh, dear," Minka said, "Adele is my sister."

Ella gazed at her. "Your . . . sister?"

"Yes, and she's been after Efran for forever," Minka said.

Ella looked dazed. "I feel like I'm in the middle of a faerie tale, with handsome knights and beautiful faeries and ugly monsters."

"And the good always wins," Minka said.

“Ohhh.” Ella closed her eyes. Then she looked at her father in hope and fear. “Will you tell the people at your fortress?”

Glancing outside, he said, “It should be just about time for the midday meal, so the dining hall will be fairly full. We’ll go announce it now.”

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Chapter 25

Ella gasped, then said, “This is not real. This is just a story, or a dream. I’m dreaming underneath that faerie tree.” She led as they all went out to the front room of the notary shop, where she looked through the window toward the majestic tree at the top of the northwestern hillside.

From behind his counter, Ryal said, “Here, perhaps this will help wake you.” When she turned, he handed her a paper, and she looked at the signed, sealed document proclaiming Efran as her father.

Ryal leaned under the counter to withdraw something. “Fold it carefully. Here’s your pouch.”

“Let’s go,” Efran said. Unnoticed, Minka leaned over to open the counter drawer and put a fistful of royals in it.

With Ella’s new identity in the pouch slung over her shoulder, they went out to their horses. Inside, Soames turned to Ryal. “I had no idea that being a notary could be so exciting.”

Raising his white eyebrows, Ryal said, “Ho, let me tell you about Efran’s trial for Provision for a Wronged Husband.” Soames followed him eagerly to the back room.

When Efran, Minka, and Ella arrived at the fortress, Efran took them directly to the dining hall, where their entry was noted by a number of people. He scanned the hall as he escorted Ella to the front. The large hall was fairly full, but, not seeing essential people, Efran leaned over to whisper to a sentry, who ran out. Then Efran talked quietly to Ella while they waited. Minka chose to lean against the wall halfway back from the front. Diners who noticed this quiet positioning put down their forks to watch.

Shortly, Estes and DeWitt appeared at the back of the hall. Seeing them, Efran took Ella to the center front, and the hall quieted. “I would like your attention for just a moment,” he began. “Many of you recognize Ella, who will be staying with us. She has been introduced to you as Surchatain Webbe’s daughter. But that is not the case. With Ryal’s help, we have been able to prove that Ella is my daughter.”

He looked around the hall, which was deathly still. After a moment, Connor stood. “Congratulations, Captain, Ella. May we ask questions?”

“Yes,” Ella said, straight backed. “Let me answer the most obvious questions up front. I am sixteen; my father, Lord Efran, is twenty-eight. My mother, Lady Palestrina, is forty-three. And Ryal has documented proof that she was in Eledith at the time of my conception. Any other questions?”

From the back of the hall, DeWitt said, “Efran, congratulations on acquiring a beautiful, articulate and courageous daughter. Does Webbe know?”

Efran glanced at Ella. She turned slightly to him, so he said, "Thank you, DeWitt. Ah, Ryal is sending a notification to him and Lady Palestrina, along with a corrected birth record. He's also sending one to Blairgowrie's wife Adele."

Light groans and strangled laughter went up around the hall. Efran looked around for a moment, then said, "While we wait for a reaction from Westford and Eurus, we're going to eat."

Tourse stood. "One more question, Captain." The hall stilled again; Efran paused with a faint smile. Tourse asked, "When can we expect Webbe to file suit for half the Abbey Treasury?"

Mouthfuls were spewed all over the hall. Ella narrowed her smiling eyes, gleaning something of the question's audacity. Efran said deliberately, "About the same time I decide whether to censure you or commend you."

"Very good, sir, thank you," Tourse said, sitting again, and several men leaned over to pat him on the back or shoulder.

A while later, after they had eaten amid congratulations and introductions, Efran caught Tourse in the corridor. "How is Bennard doing?" he asked quietly.

"Slaving away at the menial duties that fill his day, and will continue to fill his days for the foreseeable future, Captain," Tourse said.

"Did he tell Adele about Joshua?" Efran asked.

"Not in my hearing, but probably," Tourse said. "She did ask what happened to the baby she had birthed; Bennard didn't answer while I stood on his foot, so I'm sure that told her three-quarters of what she wanted to hear. Do you want to talk to him?"

Efran looked at the floor, thinking. "No," he said, patting Tourse's shoulder as he walked off.

Two days later, October 6th, Webbe appeared at the Abbey wall gates in high dudgeon. When told, Efran asked the gate sentry, "How many in his bodyguard?"

"Five," the sentry replied.

"Fine. Hold him at the gates until five of ours get out there to accompany us to Ryal's. I will be out there shortly to ride down," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain." He saluted and ran out.

Efran sent a man up to tell Estes and DeWitt where he would be, then he went looking for Ella and Minka. He found them, as he expected to, walking the back grounds, splendid in the fall. He caught Minka up on one arm to kiss her lips, then kissed Ella on her forehead. "Webbe is here," he said. "I'm about to take him to Ryal's to show him the evidence. Either or both of you are welcome to come."

Minka shook her head. "I don't need to afflict him further."

"It would be fun, but that's your choice," he said. "Ella?" he asked, turning.

She debated a moment, then said, “Yes, I will come.”

“Very good,” he said. He paused to kiss Minka again because he liked to, then he walked his daughter around the west side of the fortress to the courtyard, where five Abbey soldiers were in the process of receiving their horses.

“Oh, you’ll need to ride with me or one of my men. Which do you prefer?” Efran asked Ella.

She glanced up shyly at the attentive faces turned to her and said, “I’ll ride with you—What do you want me to call you?” she asked him.

“Whatever you like,” he said, mounting. Then he reached a hand down to her as the sentry assisted her up behind his saddle.

“I don’t know,” she laughed. “I’ll have to think about it. Isn’t it silly?”

“What did you call Webbe?” he asked, turning down the switchback. Webbe was watching from the wall gates with an offended air as Efran rode out with his daughter. It did not help that the faerie trees at the gates were snatching at Webbe’s hat and poking his bodyguards.

“I didn’t call him anything. I hardly ever saw him,” she murmured. “May I just call you ‘Efran’?”

“Yes, but you may want to use ‘Papa’ when asking for money,” he said, looking back at her.

She laughed, holding his waist. “‘Papa,’” she whispered, laying her head on his back. “‘Father,’” she tested on her tongue as they progressed down the switchback. Still at the wall gates, Webbe was waving, trying to catch her eye so that she could see how hurt and offended he was, but she was busy holding on to her handsome father, trying to decide what to call him. “Let me think on it,” she murmured. He nodded, smiling. So far, this father business was rather nice.

When they arrived at Ryal’s, an Abbey rider dismounted to help Ella down from the horse and Efran waved to the gate sentries to let Webbe and his bodyguard through. As they pulled up to the notary shop, Efran told Webbe, “All soldiers will stay out here. You come in with Ella and me to look at Ryal’s files.” Efran dismounted to put a hand at her back. Both glanced at Webbe struggling down from his horse.

They three went into Ryal’s shop, where Giardi looked up from behind the counter. “Hello, Efran, Ella. How are you?” she smiled, particularly at Ella.

“We’re doing wonderfully, Giardini,” Efran replied. “Webbe here is all agog to see Ryal’s information on Ella.”

“Oh, let me alert him, then have you come to the back,” she said. While they waited, Webbe was breathing and trying to think of what to say to Ella, who was holding Efran’s hand. She had mostly forgotten that her former father was even there.

Ryal came to the door of the back room as Giardi reemerged to stand behind the counter. He said, “Efran. Ella. Surchatain Webbe, come on back.”

They went to sit around the small table in the back room, where Ryal handed Ella’s file to Webbe. “Here you are, Surchatain: all of the information I used to make my decision,” Ryal said.

Flustered, Webbe glanced at the folder without opening it. “I—just want to know why you would do this,” he said, blinking at Ella in deeply offended ignorance.

“Do what? Seek the truth?” she asked.

“Hurt your mother like this!” he whispered as if it were too offensive to say out loud.

Ella laughed. “She deserves to be hurt for what she did. Don’t you even care that she cuckolded you with a child?”

“What are you saying?” he said, outraged.

“Are you that stupid? Or do you just not want to know? Efran is my father! He’s twenty-eight now! Can you figure out what that made him sixteen years ago?” she asked intently.

“That’s an outrageous lie,” Webbe said, shaking.

“Look at me,” she said. “Look at my face and my hair. Now look at him. What do you see?” she demanded.

He glanced at Efran, but sat breathing in indignation. “I see an ungrateful, hateful child,” Webbe said.

She looked at Ryal and Efran in disbelief. Efran told Webbe, “The evidence is right here,” laying a hand on the file.

“Nothing can convince me that this is anything but a nasty trick,” Webbe said righteously.

Ryal said, “Then that makes me complicit in a crime. Is that what you’re accusing me of?”

“You have to bear that on your own conscience,” Webbe said stiffly.

“Are you charging me with perjury as a notary? I will draw up the accusation here and now,” Ryal said.

Webbe hesitated, eyes darting around. “I will confer with my wife.”

“If I hear that you have told *anyone* I have put my seal on false information, I will charge you with defamation. Then *this file* with the evidence against *your wife* will be open to *public view*,” Ryal said slowly and emphatically.

“If I were you, I would look at it.” Efran opened the file and took out Ryal’s notes on his interview of Efran. This he stuck under Webbe’s face so that he had no choice but to see the words.

Sweating and blinking rapidly, Webbe looked at the ink marks on the paper. When he got to the end of the page, Efran put that sheet aside and held up the next. He could see that Webbe was taking it in because of his white face. By the third sheet, Webbe was holding the pages himself. They shook in his hands as he read, and Efran pitied him.

When Webbe had gotten through all seven pages of Efran’s testimony, he carefully laid them aside, then sat blinking, occasionally glancing around. Abruptly he stood and made his way to the front like a drunken man, holding himself up from wall to wall. And he left the shop.

The three at the table stood to watch out the window as he remounted with help from a soldier and spurred north. Efran's men looked back at him, but he shook his head; there was no need to follow them. Then he, Ella, Ryal, and Giardi stepped outside to watch Webbe and his men ride through the gates and over the old stone bridge.

"That broke him," Ryal murmured.

"He knew that it would," Efran whispered, his arm around Ella's shoulders. Then he sent two of his men, Graeme and Stephanos, to ride up to Westford as scouts, just to watch and listen.

Two hours later, Graeme returned to report, "Captain, when Webbe arrived home at Sandilands, he apparently went directly to Lady Palestrina's rooms and choked her to death. He's still sitting in her rooms, and there's chaos in the house."

"Where is Stephanos?" Efran asked.

"We agreed that he should stay and watch," Graeme said.

"Go bring him back. Report to me when you get here," Efran said.

"Captain." Graeme ran back out to remount and take off down the switchback.

Efran turned heavily back into the foyer and then paused at Ella's watching. "What did he do to her?" she asked.

"Choked her to death," Efran whispered. "Come here."

She came to his arms as instructed, but was restless. "I think I need to talk to Minka," she said, pulling away, so he let her go.

A little over an hour later, Graeme returned with Stephanos. They had nothing definite to report, as there was apparently an ongoing standoff between Webbe's soldiers and those employed by neighboring nobles. Webbe was still inside his house. So Efran sent Graeme and Stephanos up to report to Estes and DeWitt.

Then he went to the back grounds to look around, and saw Minka and Ella on the bench under the walnut tree. Since Minka was trying to contain nine-month-old Joshua and talk to Ella at the same time, Efran felt entitled to walk over and relieve her of him. Joshua greeted him with many happy slaps, but still wanted to get down to play in the dirt.

Toby came over with a couple more dry gourds, so he and Joshua rattled them rhythmically while Joshua periodically screamed (or sang) in delight. "Learning a love of music, that's good," Efran murmured, as he himself was musically illiterate. Polonti music tended to be evenly divided between love songs and battle songs, and Efran always preferred to do both rather than sing about them.

At that time Routh, who was front-door sentry, ran out to Efran. "Captain, there's a boy that just came walking down the main road, walked clear up to the courtyard; sentries let him through. He's standing in the foyer but won't talk to anyone."

"Is he well-dressed or in rags?" Efran asked.

"Well-dressed, but pretty dusty from a long walk," Routh said.

Efran looked back to the bench. “Ella?” She looked over. He asked, “Is your younger brother at home?”

She slowly stood. “Yes, he should be.” Minka stood as well to pick up Joshua and kiss Toby, who was listening.

“Come see if this is him,” Efran said. So they all went in to the foyer. Standing in the middle of it was a boy with sweat-streaked hair. He was wearing a nice suit and good shoes, all covered with road dust. And he was staring ahead with blank eyes.

“Alcund,” Ella gasped, and dropped down beside him to wrap him in her arms. Toby came up beside her to study the boy. They were about the same size. Alcund turned in his sister’s arms to look at him.

“Where is your other brother? Cyneheard?” Efran asked.

Ella looked up. “He’s at university.”

Efran nodded. “Toby, you and Ella take Alcund to the kitchen; see what they’ve got ready.”

“Sure, Efran,” Toby said, taking Alcund by the hand. He was holding Ella with his other hand. Efran watched the three of them walk down the corridor and turn into the kitchen.

As sunset spread out across the western sky, Efran held Minka on the raised platform to watch the dying sun light the Sea on fire. “Did it bring back bad memories?” she whispered. “Did it hurt to talk about it?”

“No,” he said, surprised. “It stopped hurting when I stopped bedding other men’s wives, and got my own love. Now, it’s just . . . distant facts, something that happened that doesn’t affect me any more.”

“Oh, Efran.” She turned on his chest. “You have a daughter, and a new child for the Abbey.”

“Yes,” he said, watching the sky blaze. “How do these things happen?” he marveled.

“It was all planned. All part of a story,” she murmured.

“Yes,” he said.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on October 6th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

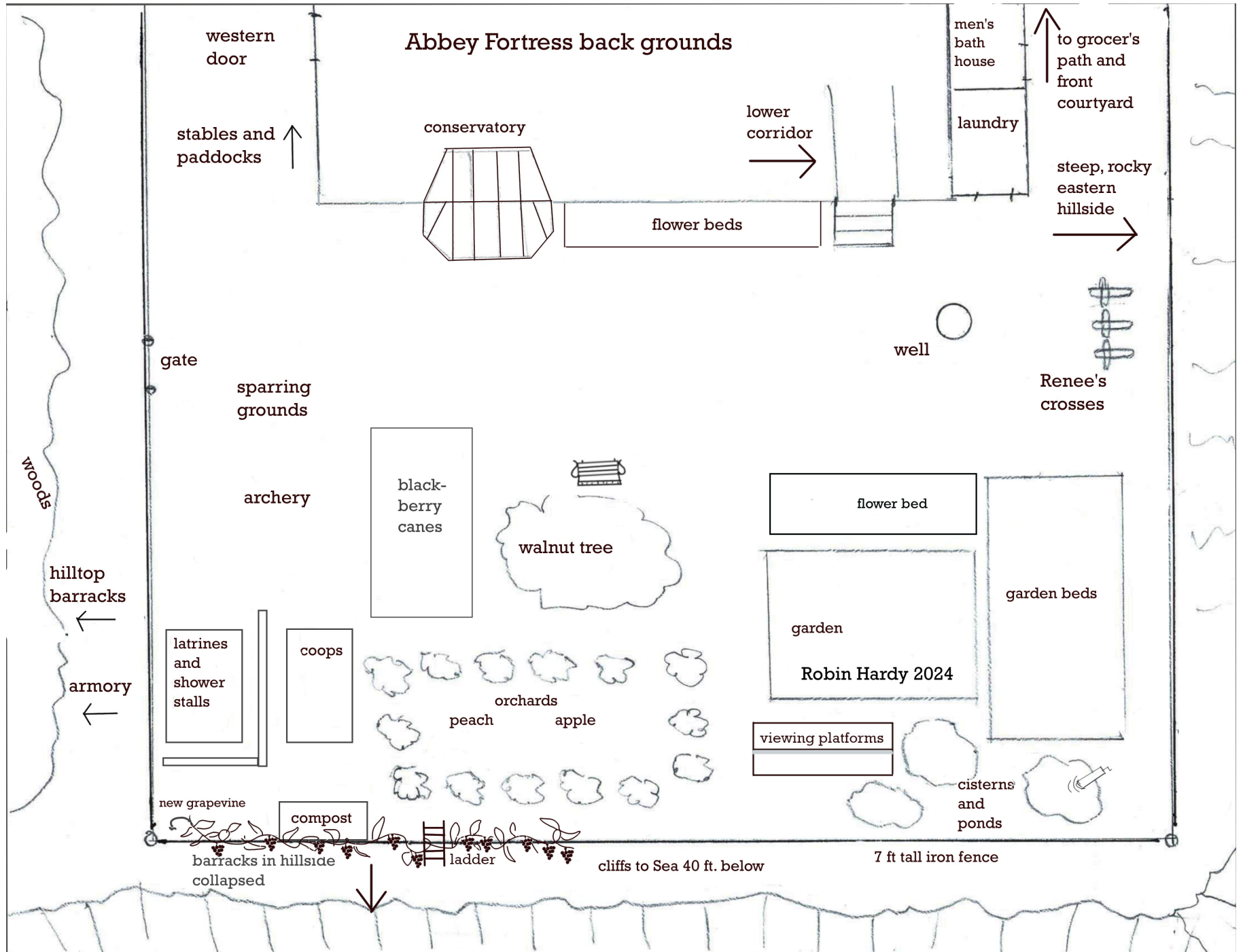
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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Runaway Bride* (Book 10)

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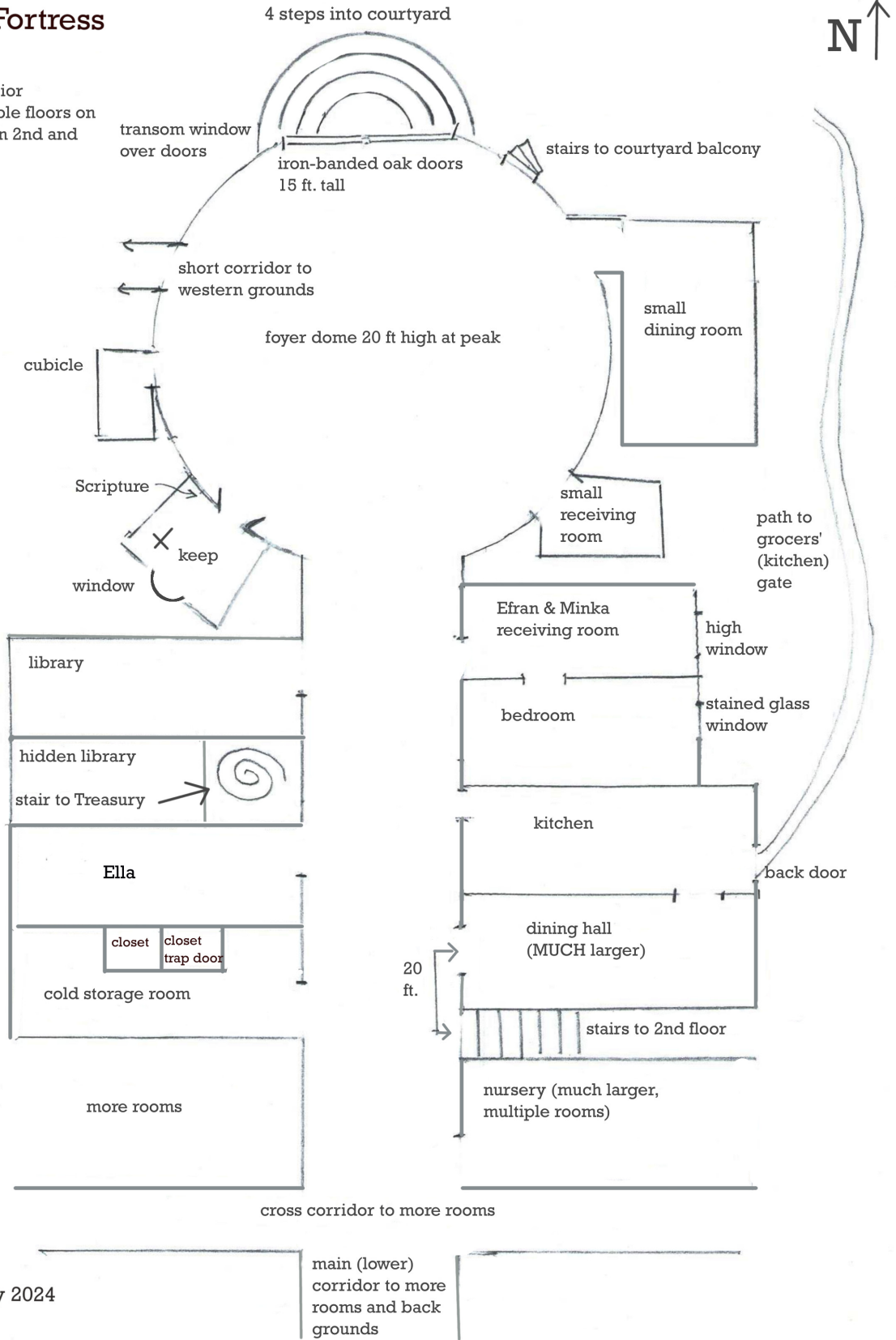
acidanthera—ass eh DAN ther ah
 Adele—ah DELL
 aina—AY nah
 Alberon—AL ber on
 Arne—arn
 Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon
 Bennard—beh NARD
 Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree
 Bowring—BOWE ring
 Chatain—sha TAN
 Chataine—sha TANE
 Cholmondeley—chall MON deh lay
 Clough—chloh
 Conte—cahnt
 Cordelia—cor DEEL yah
 courtesan—KOR tuh zahn
 Cyneheard—SIGN herd
 DeVenter—deh VEN tur
 Doane—rhymes with *loan*
 Dobell—DOH bull
 Eadgifu—ee YAD gif oo
 Eastaughffe—EAST off
 Ecgfrith—ECK frith
 Efran—EFF run
 Eledith—ELL eh dith
 Ellacombe—ELL eh cohm
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 execrable—ECK suh kruh buhl (very awful)
 faux pas—foh pah (a social blunder)
 Geibel—GUY bull
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goss—gahs
 Graduliere—gra DUE lee air
 Graeme—GRAY em
 Haight—hate
 Hartshough—HART soh
 Heye—HAY yuh
 Huish—whoish
 insigne—en SIN yeh
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 kamali—kah MAH lee (princess)
 Kele—kay lay
 Kelsey—KELL see
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Leila—LYE la
 Loizeaux—lwah ZOH

Lyra—LEER ah
 Madea—mah DAY ah
makuahine—mah koo ah EE nee (mother)
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 mellifluous—meh LIH flu uhs (pleasant to hear)
 Milo—ME low
 Minka—MINK ah
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee (queen)
 Nares—NAIR es
 Nesse—ness
 obeisance—oh BAY sense
 Occitania—awk si TAIN yah
 Palestrina—pal es TREE nah
 Peri—PARE ee
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pieta—pie ATE ah
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 Renée—ren AY
 Rida—REE dah
 Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
 Sasany—SASS an ee
 soirée—SWAH ray
 Stephanos—steh FAHN os
 Stites—stights
 Surchatain—SUR cha tan
 Surchataine—sur cha TANE
 Sybil—SEH bull
 tactician—tak TEH shen
 Tera—TEE rah
 Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
 Tourjee—TUR jee
 Trina—TREE nah
 Venegas—VEN eh gus
 Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
 Webbe—web
 Wedderburn—WED er burn



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors

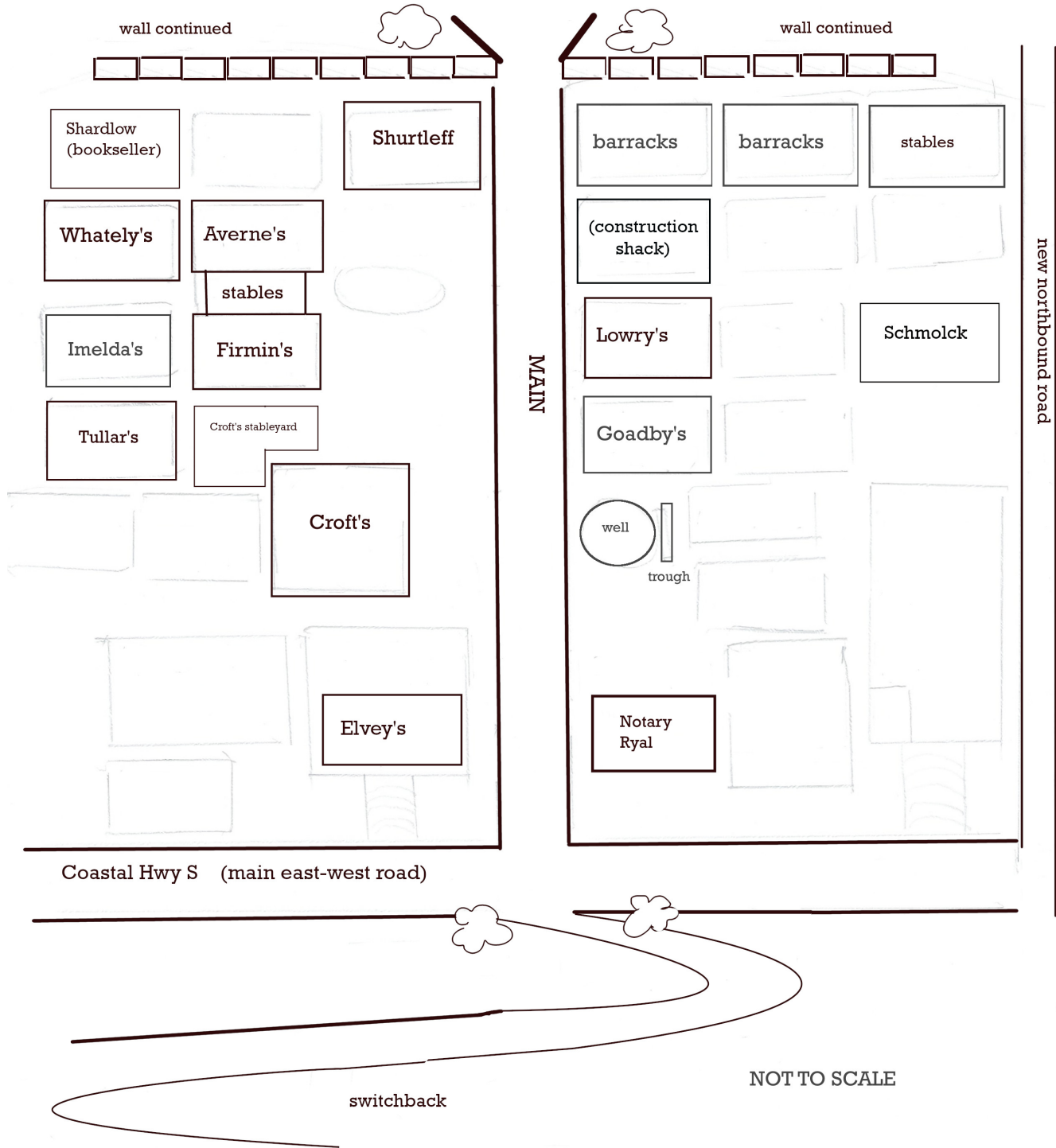


NOT TO SCALE

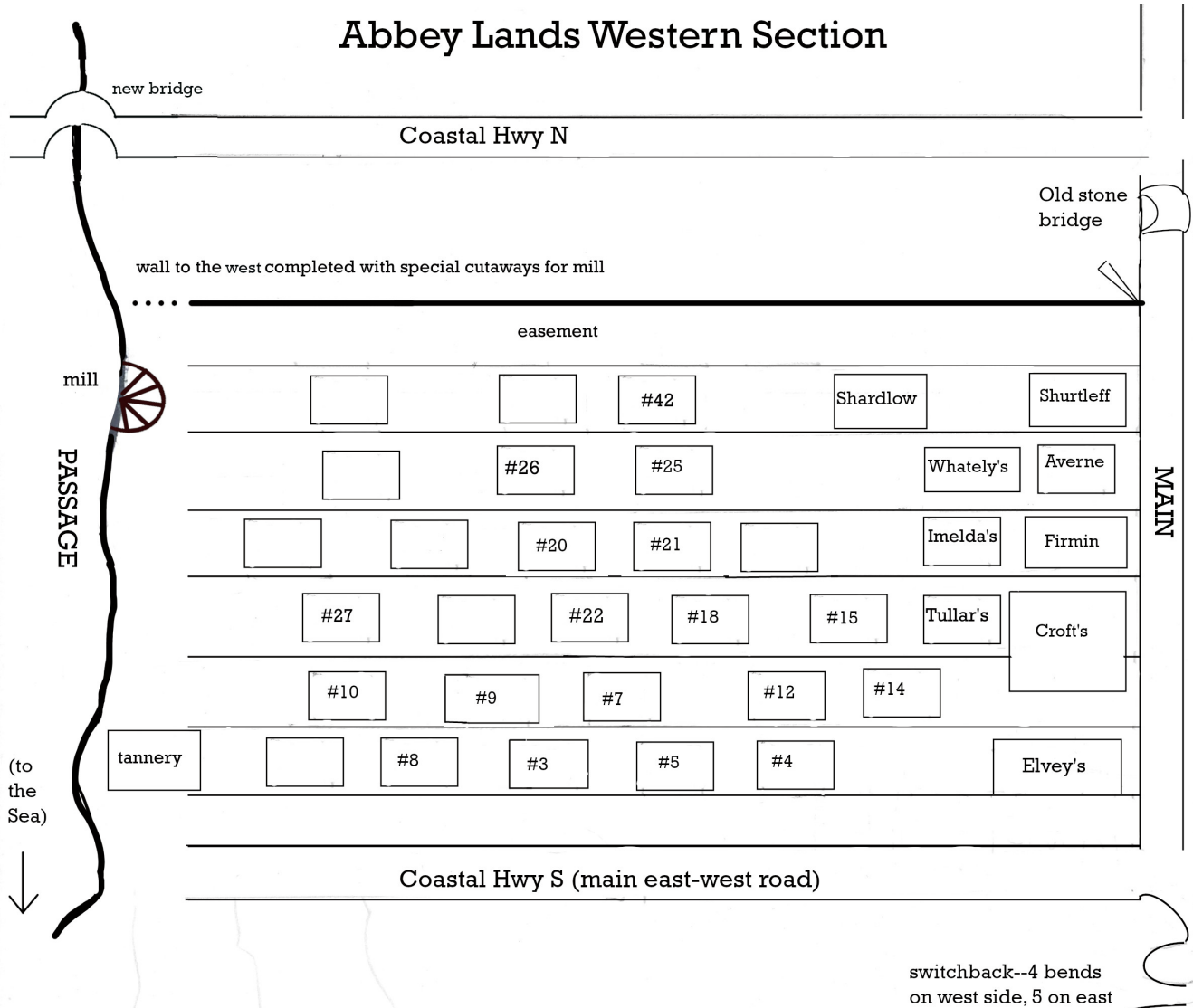
Robin Hardy 2024

main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Lands Main Road



Abbey Lands Western Section



KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening

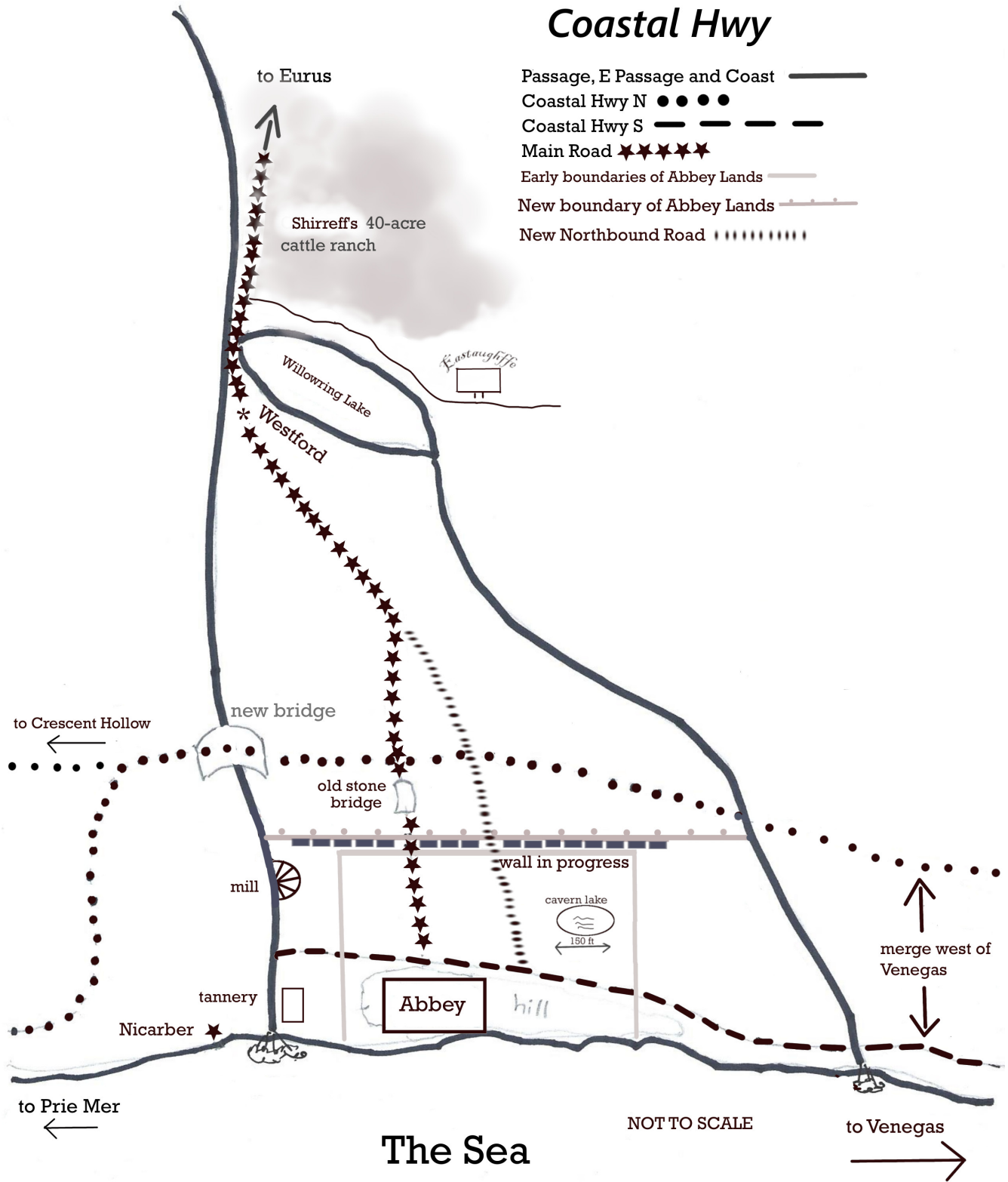


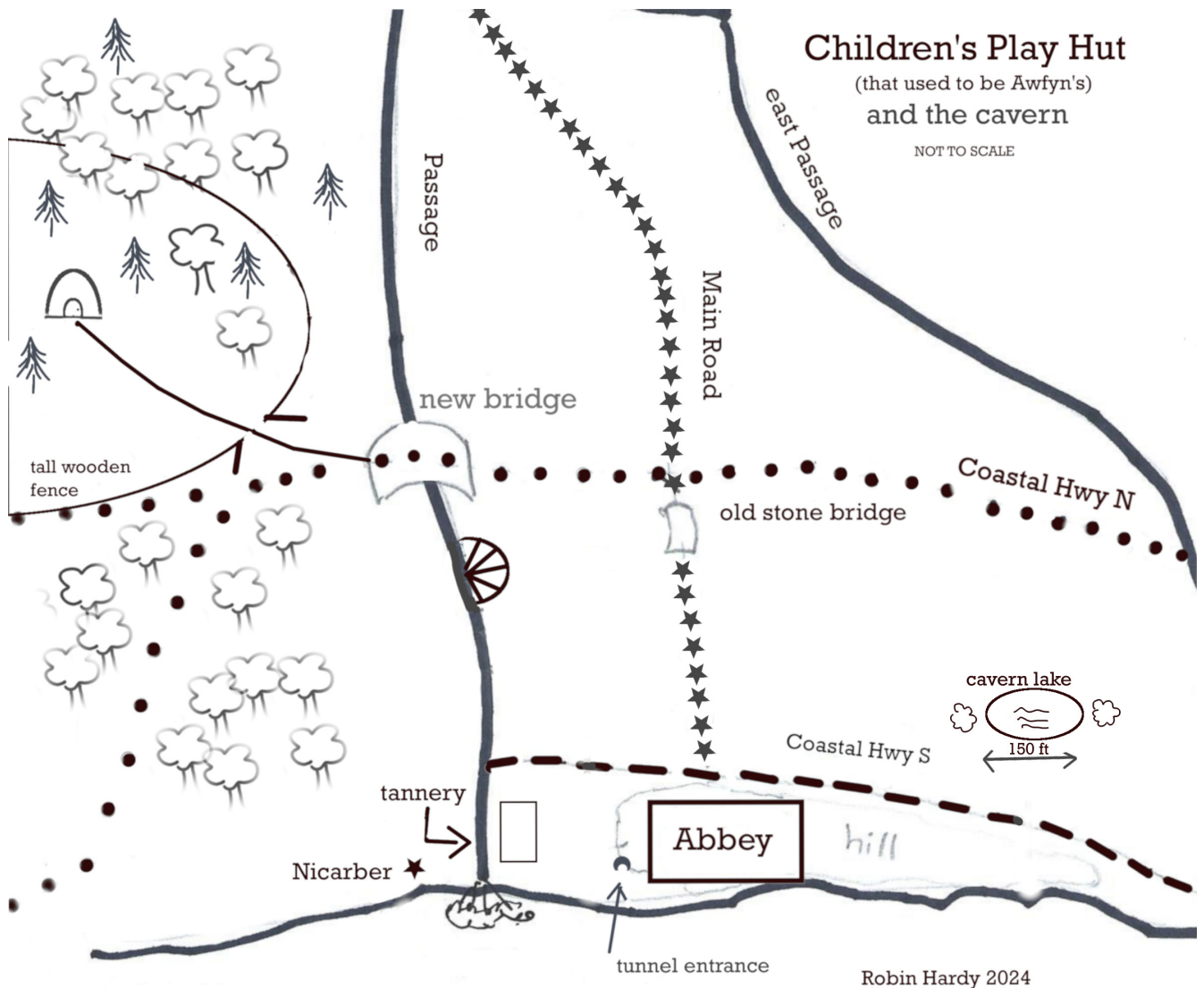
woods

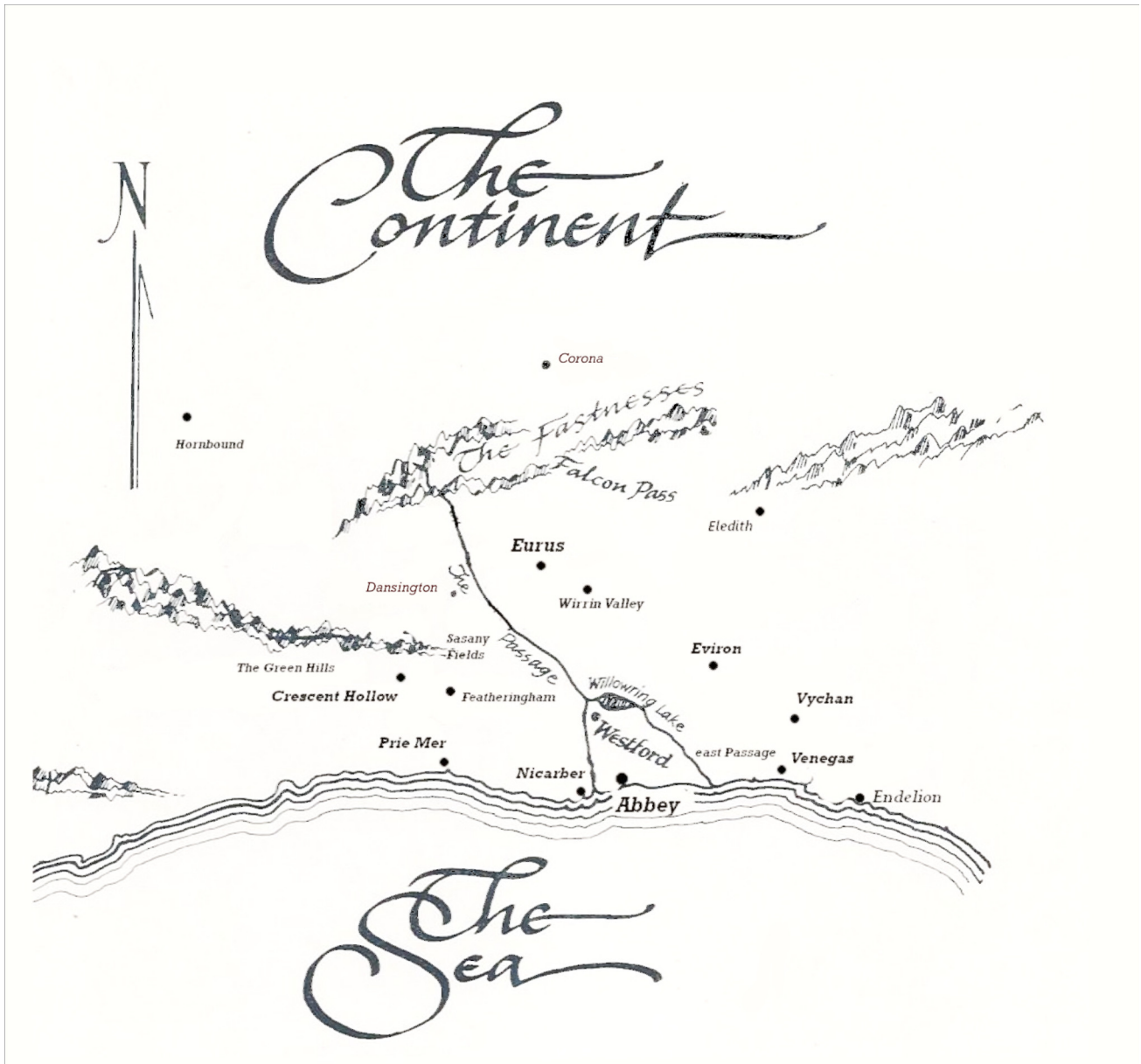
7 ft tall iron fence

FORTRESS

Coastal Hwy







Efran and Palestrina Meet Again (Book 10:
Lord Efran and the Runaway Bride)

See the Notes--Robin Hardy



The setting for this delightful encounter is the kitchen in the [palace at Versailles](#),¹ into which I just imported Efran, Palestrina, and Webbe, table and all.

The ensembles for my characters came from all over. Palestrina's body was supplied by [Rebel Wilson](#),² but the face is from an adorable model whose link I lost. Efran's backside was borrowed from [this](#)³ happy young man. Honestly, though, I had the most fun with the [furniture](#)⁴ from Wikimedia Commons. Sadly, there wasn't room for the whole set, so the table is the sole survivor. But I let Efran sit in the fun [starburst chair](#).⁵ The beautiful wine and fruit set came from [here](#).⁶

You may recognize Webbe as the famous [Fat Man](#).⁷ Wikipedia insists, "[T]he portrait cannot be viewed as satire, mocking or judgmental. The man has an alert appearance and intelligent, reasoned eyes, and the close cropping against a light coloured background seems deliberate, probably intended to convey the weight of his personal presence and charisma." At any rate, Webbe doesn't seem overly concerned with his wife's trauma, as he's all decked out in a [fancy suit](#)⁸ with a drink in hand. Whether Webbe actually has the characteristics Wikipedia ascribes to the Fat Man or not, he's about to make himself very well known.



Robin Hardy
April 30, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [DiscoA340](#) on Wikimedia Commons
2. Photographed by [Eva Rinaldi](#) on Wikimedia Commons
3. Photographed by [Leah Newhouse](#) on Pexels
4. It is an exhibit in the Germanisches National Museum in Nuremberg, Germany, photographed by Daderot.
5. In the Oakland Museum in California; photographed for Wikimedia Commons by owner Cheryl R. Riley
6. Photographed by [buzilkin](#) on Pixabay
7. This image on Wikipedia is from the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.
8. On rawpixel, the Man's Suit by Henry de Wolfe is from [The National Gallery of Art](#).