



The Stories of
The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea

Book 8

Lord Efran and
the Destroyer

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Now that Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, had a firm grasp on the concept of granting titles of nobility, some at the Abbey fortress thought he was taking it a little too far. Merely a week after awarding the Notary Ryal the title of Lord Commander (one level below Efran's own), he awarded DePew the title of Lord Officer (the same as Justinian's, one level below Lord Commander) for his generous investment of thousands of royals in Abbey Lands buildings, on which he was receiving a nice return. Originally from Eurus, DePew had made his home and his burgeoning construction empire in the Abbey Lands.

Further, Efran designated the moneyer Meineke, the textile titan Elvey, and Goadby, the producer of the universally acclaimed ale, all Members (one level below Lord Officer). As one of the requirements for entitlement was living in or operating a business in the Abbey Lands, Efran dangled the prospect of a title to encourage Goadby to open a plant on a double Abbey plot. He could hardly move his fields and vineyards from the Crescent Hollow region, but a second plant on the Abbey Lands made sense, being both a major consumer and distributor of his product.

Titles of nobility in the Abbey Lands were not merely decorative: they conferred tangible benefits such as tax incentives and a voice in important community issues. But they also required contribution to the Fund of St. Benedict, which provided emergency assistance to those in the Abbey Lands outside the fortress. (This fund was usually referred to as the "Widows Fund" so that Efran would not have to answer, again, the question of, "Why does St. Benedict need help from me?") Those nobles who donated a certain proportion of their income were exempted from taxes altogether.

The titles awarded above were understandable, if excessive, but then Efran stunned the whole Southern Continent by naming Nares, the Polonti trainer in battle skills, as Lord Officer.

Nares had helped instill in 15-year-old Martyn skills and poise beyond his years while he was at camp in the Sasany Fields. When Nares came with Martyn to the Abbey fortress, and Efran saw him at work, he knew they must give him formal standing. But Nares declined a position in the army. Being middle-aged, in his forties, he was there only to pass on the benefit of his expertise. So Efran awarded him a house and a title to keep him at the Abbey.

Efran almost enjoyed the resultant outrage from some quarters; he listened, smiling, to complaints made to his Polonti face that Polonti were too uncivilized for such honors. And he told others who threatened to leave the Abbey Lands that he was sorry to see them go, and how soon could they vacate their plots? Sadly, no one actually left, so DeWitt and Estes had to continually send the surveyors out to mark new plots in the eastern section.

Others who noticed the honor given Nares were less outraged. Men began streaming to the Abbey fortress wanting to train under him. By agreement, however, he trained only Abbey soldiers. Therefore, the Abbey army suddenly had a waiting list of hundreds wishing to join. Without the facilities or the infrastructure to handle that many new recruits, the Abbey leadership realized that the army needed a Commander.

From the beginnings of the army 14 months ago with 40 men, Efran had been its de facto Commander. With the explosive growth that the Abbey Lands had seen, that was no longer possible. So Efran, Estes and DeWitt began looking around for a new Commander.

Both Estes and DeWitt were qualified—DeWitt exceedingly so—but, being married, they both preferred the

rôles they had now as Steward and Administrator, respectively. So they had to look at the men who already had leadership positions in the army. And for a model, they looked to the Commander under whom they had all served at Westford, Wendt.

“Whatever happened to him?” Estes asked. “He just disappeared.”

“One of the new lieutenants under Brengleigh told me he had been deposed,” Efran murmured.

“Brengleigh? From the kitchen?” DeWitt sneered in disbelief.

“Exactly what I said,” Efran laughed. “No, I wish I knew what happened to him. He was far above everyone in his—perception, his acuity. I don’t know how many times he saved a situation just by stepping back and looking at the whole picture.”

“He took in everything,” DeWitt murmured. “Small things I would have discounted. And he would never surrender. If he couldn’t fight you to your face, he’d burrow underneath and fight you from below.” DeWitt had been Wendt’s aide, or Second in Command, as it was more commonly called.

“Well—who on our list comes closest to that?” Estes asked.

“All of them,” Efran said, shaking his head.

“Cutch and Lyte, for my money,” DeWitt said. “But Cutch is young, like, twenty-five.”

Estes noted, “He can be impetuous, as well. Commander has got to keep his head.”

“Lyte’s the one who brought up all Arenado’s fireballs from the Sea,” Efran murmured. “He was also a defector from the Eurussians who attacked the first time.”

“Should that matter?” DeWitt asked.

“No,” Efran said. “None of us went around choosing which side we’d fight on. I consider him a valuable transfer.” (Possibly insignificant note: At 13, Efran indeed chose which side he’d fight on, and spent most of the year walking from Eledith to Westford.)

DeWitt and Estes agreed, so, to Lyte’s surprise, he was offered the position, which he accepted with humility. And Efran began angling to promote Barr to the vacancy of unit commander.

But Barr’s promotion had to wait, because another, unexpected reaction to Nares’ entitlement cropped up: On July 20th, Efran received a messenger from Surchatain Clonmel of Venegas, who was Polonti. Efran met the messenger in the Abbey foyer. He bowed and said, “Lord Efran, greetings from Surchatain Clonmel, who wishes to invite you to come talk of our mutual interests. Since we are so close, you need not commit to a certain day; the Surchatain will see you whenever you arrive.”

“Well—that’s very gracious. How long did it take you to ride here?” Efran asked.

“Merely three hours, Lord Efran.”

“That is close. Yes, we should meet. Thank the Surchatain; tell him I’ll clear my schedule and try to come within the week. What is your name?” Efran asked.

“Scriven, sir,” he said.

“Very good. You’re dismissed,” Efran said.

The messenger bowed and departed; Efran watched through the open foyer doors as he reclaimed his horse, being watered by a gate sentry, then turned down the switchback to ride away.

Thoughtfully, Efran trotted upstairs to Estes’ second-floor workroom. There, he and DeWitt were finalizing plans to allow exploration of the caverns on the land about a mile east of the hill. “What have you decided?” Efran asked.

DeWitt raised up from their maps. “We’re going to allow strong, experienced volunteers to go down with ropes and lanterns. They’re taking bait to test for eelfish—any found will abort explorations until we figure out what to do about them. We’re hoping, if all goes well, to open the caverns to visitors.”

Efran nodded. “How close are the plots getting to the hole?”

“Oh, still a half mile off,” DeWitt said. “But our expansion is just—unbelievable. The one thing that most concerns me now is our need of lime for road paving and mortar. We’re running low already, and we have the construction of three new barracks underway. They’re spread along the north wall, because that just seemed the best way to work it. The first barracks, right off the main road at the wall, is almost finished.”

“Good,” Efran said. “Then you can move the men out of the cliffside barracks.” That is, the cliffs over the Sea were actually dug out to accommodate two barracks.

“Yes, that’s already in the works. Those were a good stopgap measure, but now are too small to be useful,” DeWitt said. “We also have five new wells being dug for the plots that are too far from the Passage. We never imagined to have plots that far away.”

“Right. Keep them working on the wall,” Efran said.

DeWitt replied, “Certainly. Ernst [the stonemason] is being a slave driver.”

Efran smiled and Estes added, still on the cavern, “We’re talking about restricting the area immediately around the opening to livestock, for safety’s sake.”

“That may be best. Well, Surchatain Clonmel of Venegas has invited me to come visit and talk Polonti,” Efran said. To the sentry at the door, Finn, Efran said, “Ask Lyte to send Barr and another Polonti to scout out Venegas. Have them wear traveling clothes, not uniforms. They’re to just ride out and look, stay overnight, get a general sense of conditions there, then come report to me.”

“Captain.” Finn saluted and turned away.

DeWitt said, “It’s about time we establish some communication with Venegas. Strange that it’s so close, yet we know next to nothing about them.”

Efran agreed. “The only one I know from Venegas is Lord Barnby, who is not Polonti, and that was not the most genial contact. I don’t even know what his business is.”

With nothing to add, Estes and DeWitt returned to their map, and Efran went downstairs to look for Minka.

Neither she nor Joshua was in their quarters, so he went to look on the back grounds, and saw them on a blanket under the walnut tree—one of her favorite spots. Joshua looked to be scrunching up the blanket underneath him in his efforts to propel himself off to worlds unknown. Not yet seven months old, he had a lot of exploring to do.

Efran walked over to throw himself down on his back beside them, and Joshua excitedly reached out to slap his face. Minka leaned over him, asking, “Did you see the buckets and buckets of crayfish the kitchen brought up?”

“Ooh, for dinner, I hope,” he said, lifting Joshua onto his chest.

“I’m sure, but I couldn’t bear to eat any. They’re so cute,” she said.

“‘Cute?’” he repeated, eyeing her.

“Oh, yes, with their sweet little claws that they wave around. I just want to pet them,” she said.

He lifted up on his elbow. “Their ‘sweet little claws’ can give you a nasty pinch.”

“Not if you hold them right. I did play with a few in the kitchen. And I kidnapped a few for the children in their hut. Toby and Tarrant asked nicely, and promised to take good care of them without getting hurt,” she said.

He lay back to laugh. “They’ll escape and start breeding.”

“Is that wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head. “Not if you want them to. At any rate, I’ll probably be visiting Venegas in the next few days.”

Her eyes widened in caution. “Barnby?” she asked.

“No, no—the Surchatain is Polonti, wants me to come visit. DeWitt and Estes want to get rid of me for a few days so they can get some work done,” he murmured, admiring his son.

“So you’ll be staying overnight?” she asked, pouting.

“Probably just one night. I know you need your sleep,” he said, smiling up at her, and she leaned over to kiss him lightly.

One of the men, Serrano, ran up to tell him that Barr and Melchior had just ridden off for Venegas. Efran acknowledged that, then asked, “Is Melchior one of Crowe’s men?”

“Yes, Captain; Barr chose him to go along,” Serrano said.

“Ah. Good,” Efran said.

Great bowls of boiled crayfish did appear in the dining hall that evening. The men, including Efran, enjoyed them very much. Minka and the children refused to touch them, and Ivy shed tears.

Barr and Melchior returned from Venegas in the late afternoon of the following day, July 21st. They came up to

Estes' workroom to report to Efran, Estes, DeWitt and his assistant Coxe, who was getting approval for Cutch to be Commander Lyte's Second in Command. The titles of the unit commanders would also be changed to "captain," as the army of the Abbey Fortress was becoming more real and serious by the day.

Efran had Barr and Melchior sit with crayfish and ale to make their report. Barr began, "Captain, we rode around, stayed overnight in the inn as instructed; saw nothing remarkable. Venegas is rather small to have a Surchatain, not more than a thousand, I'd guess. There's no dominant industry—the oaks don't extend that far to the coast, and there's no shipping nor fishing for the cliffs, no suitable harbor within miles. They do seem to have good barley and wheat fields, but no grain mill, that we saw. There is a lumber mill that processes Monsell's oaks, but the supply appears to have dropped off recently. Whether the lumber mill is convertible to grain processing, we don't know." He cracked crayfish shells as he talked.

Efran asked, "Did you happen to find Barnby's business? He came complaining of damage to his buildings almost a year ago, when I blew up Arenado's hut."

Melchior nodded and Barr said, "Yes. He has a brewery for beer, which he calls 'Barnby's Best Beer'—" At the laughter of the other men, he smiled. "Yes, he's trying to compete with Goadby's Best Ale, and his brand is all over Venegas, but—we had it at the inn and it's not nearly as good." Melchior shook his head in agreement with Barr's judgment here, a Goadby's in hand.

Barr continued, "At any rate, there are small shops and other concerns, but those of the Abbey Lands already outstrip them."

"Ah," Efran said, looking smug. "Is there a palace?"

Melchior shook his head; Barr said, "We inquired; the residence of the Surchatain is an estate in the center of the city named Borthwick. Nice enough, but not a palace."

Efran asked, "Are there Southerners besides Polonti?"

Barr squinted, then looked to Melchior, who replied, "A minority, perhaps one in four, Captain."

Efran nodded, and there was a space of silence while he thought. Then he looked around to ask, "Any other questions?"

DeWitt leaned back to ask, "What's near Venegas? Is there anything on the coast?"

Barr looked to Melchior, who said, "Yes, there's a small port city, Endelion, less than two hours east of them. I heard they're dredging harbors."

"That's good," DeWitt said.

With no further questions, Efran said, "All right, Barr and Melchior, we'll leave early tomorrow morning. Wear your uniforms, but pack regular clothes, and get two more Polonti to come with us. Take . . . inconspicuous weapons. Knives. Estes, we'll need some show-off money." Estes looked up wryly to nod.

"You're dismissed. Thank you," Efran said, and they rose.

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Chapter 2

The next morning, July 22nd, Minka was one of those in the courtyard to see the party of Polonti off to Venegas. She looked resigned as she straightened Efran's undyed linen jacket trimmed in gold. "Don't ruin this one," she murmured.

"Why not? It's almost a tradition now," he said, smiling.

She groaned, "Will you be gone just one night?"

"I expect to shake hands, eat dinner, and ride home tomorrow morning," he assured her.

"All right," she sighed, reaching up for him to brush his lips to hers. He crinkled his eyes, and she pouted back at him.

The party rode out of the gates and down the switchback. Besides Barr and Melchior, there were Nyland, one of Crowe's former men, and Stites, a fellow slave with Barr who had also signed up to fight for Loizeaux to gain his freedom. Like Barr, they were all committed to the Abbey Lands now, learning the Law of Roman. They were in their dress uniforms of deep red trimmed in gold, although they had tradesmen clothing packed in their bags.

Barr rode in front with Efran to point out the fastest route that he and Melchior had found, which was simply to follow the coast east. The main east-west road at the foot of the switchback led directly to the coastal highway south, which terminated at the Passage on the west but continued past Venegas on the east. (The Abbey men were paving another old east-west dirt road just north of the old stone bridge, the coastal highway north, which led to the new bridge over the Passage on the west. Progressing east past the Main Road, this road continued in a relatively straight line until intersecting the new northbound road. The coastal highways north and south merged along the coast just west of Venegas.)

Although the coastal highway to Venegas was not paved, it was mostly soft limestone, and the day was dry. The party loped easily the whole way, and the horses required only one brief stop to rest and drink before they entered the outskirts of Venegas with its fields and small houses.

Riding through the city, Efran found Barr's description accurate. The uniformed party drew modest attention as they passed, but there was no hint of alarm or aggression. Barr directed them to the estate in the center of the city; Efran, as a soldier, evaluated it in terms of security and defense, and found it—middling.

Efran and his party dismounted at the gates. He told one sentry, "I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, responding to Surchatain Clonmel's invitation to visit. The messenger Scriven can identify me."

"Very good, sir. We'll tell the Surchatain of your arrival," he said, opening the gates for Efran's party to walk their horses on through.

In the courtyard, the party gave up their horses to stablehands, then waited until a robed official appeared on the steps to welcome them. Followed by his men, Efran mounted the steps to the official, who bowed. "Lord Efran, it is a pleasure to receive you to Borthwick. I am the Steward Theodulph. Please enter."

He turned to lead the Abbey party into the receiving room of the house. Here, a maid entered with a serving tray which held bottles. She set this on a sideboard to begin distributing Barnby's Best Beers to Efran and his men. Theodulph said, "Please refresh yourselves, gentlemen, while I see if Surchatain Clonmel is available."

"Thank you," Efran said, nodding to the girl who gave him a bottle. Then she and the Steward turned out. Being thirsty after their ride, Efran's men did open the bottles to drink, but soon put them back down on the sideboard. It wasn't Goadby's by a long mile.

While waiting, Efran surveyed the receiving room and the attached sitting room, in which a large window overlooked a garden. Efran stepped into the room to look out at the trees and flower beds, and the back gate of the garden.

Then he looked down at the chair placed in front of the window. It was not facing the window, but a blank wall. And the cushioned seat of the chair was marked with the indentation of a person's rear and thighs. Someone sat in this chair for so long as to leave deep, permanent impressions. Curious, Efran lifted a chair leg to find an equally deep indentation in the rug beneath it. Who would sit here for so long, and why?

He heard a woman's voice from the receiving room. "Well, thank you for waiting. And which of you gentlemen is Lord Efran?"

He came to the doorway of the sitting room. "I am, Lady," he said, bowing.

She turned to him. Like everyone he had seen so far, she was Polonti, quite lovely, and quite tall—almost as tall as Efran. She was richly dressed, indicating her status, and had the knowledgeable look of a woman aware of her power. Efran had found that most Polonti women were like that: aware of their power over men. Even those who were not beautiful were alluring.

She evaluated him, almost sizing him up as either an adversary or a lover. Efran glanced away; this was why he disliked negotiating with women: they were all Adele to some degree. As he opened his mouth to inquire after Surchatain Clonmel, she said, "I am Surchatain Clonmel, Lord Efran."

His men looked startled; Efran paused, then asked, "Is there a reason you do not use the feminine title, Surchatain?"

"Yes," she said. "I find it offensive. The ruler should have the same title regardless of sex."

"As you wish," he said indifferently. Personally, he was strongly attached to historical conventions, and her decision to cloak her sex before their meeting seemed to him a petty power play. He already discounted her.

"How enlightened you are, Lord Efran. And why are you not using the title of Surchatain?" she asked.

"Because I am not Surchatain. The charter under which I operate specifies my title as Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands," he said.

"I had assumed you were Surchatain of Westford," she said, as if suspecting him of prevaricating.

"No," he said. "That is—Webbe?" he asked, looking around at his men, who nodded. "Surchatain Webbe." The fact that Efran was unsure of his name indicated what he thought of the Surchatain's status.

"Well, then. Come, let's discuss our interests over the midday meal. It will be ready soon," she said, turning.

But movement in the sitting room caught Efran's eye, and he turned to look at a white-haired old man shuffling to the chair in front of the window. He wore dark glasses, apparently being blind. The man sat, then turned his face toward the sound of voices in the receiving room. Watching him, Efran got the shock of his life to see that it was Commander Wendt.

Efran said nothing at first, and was careful to show no change of expression. "Well," he said finally. "Who is the old gentleman?" This was the greatest shock: the last time Efran had seen Wendt, who was in his mid 40s, his hair was brown. He was a Southerner, not Polonti.

She glanced into the room with a peeved expression. "I don't know. He won't tell us."

"Where did you pick him up, then?" Efran laughed.

"In Westford. He was someone that Surchatain Lightfoot disliked very much, so had him blinded. He must be someone of import, though. At any rate, when Lightfoot and his daughter needed money, she offered to sell him to me for fifty royals. She said his name was Went, or something. So I bought him. I've kept him for months, hoping to learn something, but since he's being so difficult, I'm going to have an interrogator work on him," she said as if the man in the next room were deaf as well as blind.

Efran listened, fighting for self-control as he regarded the degradation of his revered Commander. To add insult to injury, they had dressed him in a ragged minstrel's vest, with faded ribbons and tarnished bells.

Did she notice his reaction? She was watching him, so he edged up closer to her. "Do you know," he whispered, "I have a man at the fortress who does beautiful work, quickly. Let me take him and work him over for you," he suggested, looking down at her.

Now she felt in her element. "I'll think about it," she said, parting her lips at him. "So, let's all go eat." With a swirl of her dress, she turned in to the dining room. Efran wiped the sweat from his upper lip, glancing intently at his men. They looked at him, then at the man in the sitting room, but none of them knew who he was.

They all went into the dining room and sat. Efran pretended to listen, nodding when appropriate, and eating bites of what tasted like paper on the plate in front of him. He drank Barnby's bitter beer, smiling at Clonmel's little jokes, and made complimentary comments about whatever it was that he was chewing.

When the plates were finally taken away, Clonmel rose and said, "Now, Lord Efran, allow me to take you on a tour of our city."

He stood. "I would enjoy that very much. Ah, let me visit your garderobe first."

"It's out back," she said, with a curt nod.

So Efran swung to the back door with a lightning glance at Barr, who received the order to follow. As Efran went behind the privy to unbutton his pants and rid himself of Barnby's, he whispered to Barr, "That man is someone very special. Somehow, we've got to get him back to the fortress. Guard him while I am gone with Clonmel."

"Yes, Captain," Barr said as Efran shook himself and rebuttoned his pants.

So Efran went out to the courtyard with Clonmel and watched dully as his horse Trud was brought around, then her horse emerged decked with ribbons and bells to make sure everyone noticed her with the Lord of the Abbey

Lands. They mounted and began the most torturous ride that Efran had experienced since the grueling march of '48, which lasted 40 hours straight.

She showed him Barnby's Best Beer brewery inside and out, and Efran thanked heaven that Barnby himself was not present for this tour. She showed him dreary little shops that were eclipsed by anything on the Abbey plots, including the cavern. She pointed out a scowling butcher and glaring baker, and Efran thought that Polonti must be very unhappy creatures. He also didn't see any Southerners.

Except—when she dismounted to talk to the florist, Efran saw an old street sweeper who looked very much like the Commander. So with a glance at her, Efran dismounted to dig into his pocket and press a royal on him. “Come to the back garden at Borthwick—don't let anyone see you—and I'll give you more.”

The street sweeper peered at him, but pocketed the royal and nodded. Efran barely had time to remount before Clonmel turned to him and said, “I don't have my purse. Can you give Spratt a silver piece for the flowers?”

Efran dug in his pocket and leaned down from the saddle to give him a royal, worth 30 silvers. “That's all I have. Keep the change.” Spratt grinned, accepting it, and Clonmel looked satisfied.

Finally, with an armful of flowers that the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands had bought for her, Clonmel condescended to turn her horse back toward Borthwick. Efran thought he would faint with relief. On the way, she said, “I suppose we've been gone long enough. You seemed so taken with the old man, I didn't want you to watch him being interrogated. But it should all be over by now. Personally, I don't care to watch the interrogator work, but he gets results.”

“That's fine,” he said, trusting Barr.

When they arrived at Borthwick and the stablehand took their horses, Efran leaned over to mutter to the groom, “Leave him be; he's developed a terrible biting habit, so I'll come back out to tend him.” The man took the horse at arm's length.

Then Efran followed Clonmel into the receiving room, where they looked at four innocent Abbey men innocently occupied with reading, or tossing the dice, or dozing. Efran saw that they had changed out of their uniforms into tradesmen clothing, but Clonmel appeared not to notice. Both she and Efran looked toward the sitting room, where the Commander serenely sat by the window as he obviously had done for months.

Clonmel's black brows drew down. “Has no one come?” she asked Efran's men.

“No,” they innocently replied, shaking their heads and looking vacant.

In aggravation, she threw the flowers down and went out. Barr hissed at Efran, “We need to leave quickly, Captain.”

So Efran turned to Nyland and Stites. “Go saddle our horses and take them behind the floral shop up the road. If anyone questions you, tell them we have to go search for the interrogator.”

“Captain.” They two slipped out.

Efran took Barr and Melchior into the sitting room to lean over the man in the chair and whisper, “Commander, it's—”

“Hello, Efran,” he said calmly.

Efran exhaled, “Please come with me, sir.”

“Gladly, Captain.” Wendt stood.

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Chapter 3

Efran and Barr took Commander Wendt out into the garden while Melchior kept watch at the entry to the sitting room. When Efran stopped to look around, the street sweeper stood from concealment. “Hiya, there’s a dead man back here.”

“Don’t mind him,” Efran said. He took off the Commander’s black glasses, pausing in shock at the cloudy orbs that had once been his eyes and the terrible scars around them.

Breathing erratically, Efran stripped Wendt of the hateful vest, which he took over to put onto the street sweeper. Placing the glasses on his face as well, he took the man back into the sitting room and planted him in the chair. “Just sit there for a while and pretend to be blind. No one should bother you,” he said, digging in his own pocket for another four or five royals that he stuffed into the vest pocket.

The street sweeper nodded, getting comfortable in the chair, and relocated the royals to his pants pocket. Melchior whispered, “Clonmel’s coming.” She was berating someone as she approached the receiving room.

“Let’s go, then.” Efran and Melchior hurried back out to Wendt and Barr, waiting by the garden gate. With Efran and Barr on either side of the Commander and Melchior casually following, they slipped out into the street. “Nyland and Stites should meet us behind the florist shop with the horses,” Efran whispered.

Wendt said, “Good, but Spratt is a favorite of Clonmel’s; he will report you.”

“If he’s able,” Efran breathed. They went up the street watchfully, being mostly ignored. “Here,” Efran whispered, and they drew their prize behind the florist’s shop to wait. Unavoidably, Efran was still in his conspicuous dress uniform of undyed linen edged in gold.

A customer alerted the florist to loiterers behind his shop. So he stuck his head out the back door to look them over, grinning. “This looks like something I need to raise a hue and cry about.”

“Here.” Efran dug in his pocket for the last of his royals, which he gave the florist.

The man looked dissatisfied. “I need more than that.”

“Here,” Melchior said, leaning over with outstretched hand. And he popped the florist with a fist to the temple just hard enough to knock him out.

Efran and Melchior then stretched him out on the floor behind his counter as Nyland and Stites came trotting up with their horses. Efran leapt up on Trud. “Get him up here behind me.”

"I can do it, Efran," Wendt said. He found the stirrup, gripped the saddle, and brought himself up behind it with surprising agility. The others mounted, and they began an easy lope to the road that led west to the coastal highway.

"Can you hold on, sir?" Efran asked.

"Yes, Efran. You can stop crying," Wendt said.

"Yes, sir," Efran said, wiping his face with his sleeve.

Efran watched anxiously over his shoulder for pursuit or suspicious glances, but no one paid any attention to them. He would have been gratified to know that Clonmel passed the sitting room moments after they had departed the garden. She glanced at the old man in the chair, then looked around the empty receiving room in displeasure.

When she went out to the stables to find her visitors' horses gone, she opened her mouth in fury, but the stableman told her, "They've gone to search for the interrogator, Surchatain."

Despite the unlikelihood of it, she accepted it because she wanted to. So during the crucial minutes that her men could have caught the Lord of the Abbey Lands with her mystery man still in the city, she went upstairs to change into evening dress. Then she came back down to the receiving room to spread out on a divan and wait.

Growing impatient, she went up to change again into a riding skirt in which to go find the Lord of the Abbey Lands and bring him back. She no longer cared about the interrogator.

Almost an hour later, when the Abbey riders were well on their way home, the Surchatain's gardener spotted some disorder among his bayberry bushes. Investigating, he cried out, "It's Gottschalk! His neck's broken! Help!"

As the gardener ran into the house through the sitting room and into the receiving room, the street sweeper got up to remove the vest and glasses. Leaving them in the chair, he departed into the garden and out the back gate. The Steward, Theodulph, then ran into the receiving room to hear the panicky gardener's complaints. Looking toward the garden, he spotted the vest and glasses on the otherwise empty chair. "They've taken him," he breathed.

So Theodulph ran out to ring the emergency bell. As men responded, he ordered their Captain, "That lord of the Abbey Lands has taken the blind man. Ride after him! Go!"

So the Captain went out to the stables to order his men, about twenty of them, to mount up. The Abbey men, having to go slower with two riders on one horse, were still within reach of fast pursuers. So the Venegasans set out to pound down the road westward. As they passed Barnby's brewery, one rider drew up to the Captain and shouted, "You know we're chasing the man who killed Awfyn the giant?"

The Captain slowed, raising his hand in a signal to the riders behind him, who also slowed until they stopped. Contemplatively, he said, "Shame we couldn't catch him." Then he nodded back to the brewery, and they all turned back for some refreshment before reporting their failure.

By this time, the Abbey riders had passed the east branch of the Passage, and were riding into the golden glory of late afternoon. Hearing and feeling Efran's shuddering breaths, Wendt knew that he was still crying, but only

shook his head. Efran was a good man; Wendt just hoped he'd learned to stay out of married women's beds.

Shortly, the group passed the cavern on the Lands. As they started up the switchback to the ringing of the courtyard bell, Efran turned his head to tell Wendt, "We are at the fortress of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea, Commander. This is my home now, and, my charter. We have many men here from the Westford army."

"Interesting," Wendt said.

When they passed through the courtyard gates, Efran twisted in the saddle to instruct, "Ease him down." Two sentries did so respectfully, grimacing at his ravaged eyes.

Estes and DeWitt came out to see whom Efran had brought. DeWitt gasped, "Commander!"

Wendt raised his face. "Ah. DeWitt. How are you?"

No one had ever seen DeWitt express much emotion, but today he reached out to grasp his Commander around the shoulders. Wendt said, "Please don't cry, DeWitt; I've had all I can take from Efran today."

Standing by, Efran wiped his eyes with a thoroughly sodden sleeve. "Get him to the small dining room. I am not crying," he clarified.

Estes took Wendt's hand to shake it. "Commander, you won't know me. I'm Estes; I was in Efran's regiment."

"Oh, yes, you also went down to Prie Mer after the hurricane. I hope you received your commendation, at least," Wendt said.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Estes smiled.

Not wishing to subject the Commander to undue scrutiny or curiosity, Efran restricted those in the small dining room to himself, his traveling party, Wendt, Estes, DeWitt, and Cutch, who had been a rising star in the Westford army. Efran asked for dinner for them all and shut the door.

Minka, arriving late to the courtyard to hear that Efran's party had returned with a guest, asked, "Well—where are they?"

"The small dining room, Lady Minka," the sentry, Mathurin, replied.

"Oh. Thank you," she said. So she went to the small dining room and opened the door.

As the men looked toward her, she glanced around, smiling when her eyes lit on her husband. But then she looked at the man with white hair and cloudy white eyes. Her face drained, and she fell to the floor with an anguished cry.

In pity and impatience, Efran moved to pick her up, but she twisted out of his hands to throw herself on Wendt's knees, sobbing. "Oh, that's Sybil," he said, with a sympathetic hand on her shaking back. "Sybil, don't cry, sweetheart. I am well."

The men watched in stricken silence as she raised her face, trying to form words, then lowered herself to his knees again to cry wretchedly. Efran, his own eyes still watering, reached down to pick her up bodily and sit with her on his lap. "If you will be quiet, the Commander can tell us what happened," he told her gently.

Shakily, she nodded, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “Yes, Efran,” she whispered.

Wendt then laughed. “Captain Efran, the bride stealer! I should have made the connection.”

“Yes, and to Lady Marguerite, I am her darling Sybil’s handsome man,” he added distractedly. Minka got off his lap, and he reluctantly let her go to hug Wendt’s neck and kiss his cheek. “It’s good to see you alive,” she said, still shaky. “I’m sorry I fell apart. I am very glad to see you.”

“Thank you, dear,” he said, patting her hand. “Go back to your Efran; he’s a jealous man.” Efran looked off guiltily, and Minka reseated herself on his lap.

“The rest of us are quietly waiting and not crying, Commander,” DeWitt said, eyes wet.

Wendt sighed. “Before Lightfoot came down to become Surchatain of Westford [a mere 15 months ago] I was presented with the loyalty oath immediately. I refused to sign it, so was ordered to be hanged. But when they took me to the gallows, the men revolted and almost deposed him before he even got there.”

Minka turned to Efran. “You would have fallen ill by then.” He nodded.

Wendt continued, “The army relented only when Lightfoot’s representatives swore that I would not be killed. But his advisors did not trust me, with good reason, so they decided to neutralize me. They got acid from the chemist and strapped me down to a table in the surgery. But—little Sybil came wandering in, looking for medicine to help someone who was sick. She saw what they were about to do and threw herself on me to stop them.

“They didn’t know what to do for a while; they couldn’t pry her off me without hurting her—which would be reported. So they finally told her that they decided not to do it. They swore to her that they would not hurt me. They convinced her to get up so they could unstrap me . . . then held her back while they poured the acid on my eyes anyway, making her watch. Her screams were attracting attention, so they hauled her away—somewhere.”

The men looked at Minka. Seeing their eyes on her, she murmured, “They just threw me out of the palace. I went down to the river to drown myself. But when I got there, I heard the chickens in the henhouse—they were locked in, and wanted out. So I started taking care of them—and two days later—” she looked at Efran with watering eyes—“I found you lying in it. And I put everything away but your smile.”

Efran and Minka looked at each other’s tears. DeWitt lifted his head to sigh, “Then what, Commander?”

Wendt exhaled, “They moved me around from place to place while I recovered, all of us hoping I would die. Then Lightfoot and Adele sold me to Clonmel for fifty royals,” he laughed dryly. “She didn’t understand who I was, and I would tell her nothing, so today she had summoned an interrogator when this Lord of the Abbey Fortress appeared on her doorstep. The moment I heard his voice, I knew who it was. So I came out to see if he would know me. He can tell you the rest better than I can.”

After a moment to pull himself together, Efran had taken up the narrative when kitchen assistants knocked on the door with dinner. Sausages, bread, greens and ale were brought in and set around the table. “I’ll tell you my part of it when the Commander starts eating,” Efran said.

Wendt, smiling, took a swig from the bottle, then said, “Oh, my. Someone read me the label.”

“That is Goadby’s Best Ale, Commander, and Lord Goadby is opening a second brewery here on the Abbey Lands,” Estes informed him.

“Excellent. Do continue, Efran,” Wendt said, picking up his fork.

So Efran told them what happened up to his and Clonmel’s return to find no interrogator. He looked down the table at his men. “I wasn’t there when the interrogator had his accident.”

Melchior said, “Yes, Captain. He came in and started setting up his tools around the Commander. The Steward had let him in; apparently Clonmel doesn’t like watching him work. So I asked him if I could help. The man said yes, so I broke his neck and took him out to the garden.”

Wendt said, “Thank you. And your name is—?”

“Melchior, sir.”

“Very good,” Wendt said.

Looking at DeWitt, Efran said, “They’ll all receive commendations—Melchior, Barr, Nyland, and Stites. All Polonti, Commander.” DeWitt and Wendt both acknowledged that.

From there, Efran recounted his and Clonmel’s return, her aggravation at the missing interrogator, and Efran’s offer to find him. “I don’t know why they didn’t catch us; it was the shakiest plan since Brier Ridge,” Efran said judgmentally.

Wendt lifted his head to laugh. “Didn’t I give you a commendation so you’d shut up about that?”

“Yes, that didn’t work either, Commander,” Efran said, unrepentant. The men laughed, but DeWitt shook his head: the assault on Brier Ridge had been in every way successful with a minimal loss of life. Efran breathed in satisfaction, “But we got you away from her.”

“Captain,” Stites said, and Efran turned to him. “We rode straight back here on the coastal highway. If Clonmel comes after the Commander, she’ll have a straight shot here as well.”

The entire table sat back, groaning. Efran exhaled, “Thank you for pointing out the obvious, Stites. DeWitt?”

“Yes, Efran—we’ll get men to work constructing gates across the coastal highway at the far eastern aspect of the hill, and wooden fencing up to the north wall. Meanwhile, we’ll keep a unit stationed out there,” DeWitt said. Standing, he added, “Excuse me while I go talk to Gerard and Lyte about that. I’ll be right back.” He walked out.

The rest of them sat thinking for a moment, then returned to their dinner. Efran looked at Minka, still on his lap. Pale, she was the only one not eating, so he gripped her hand under the table and she smiled at him weakly.

As the rest of them ate everything in sight, Estes said, “One more thought. Do you remember any of the men who took part in your blinding, Commander?” DeWitt reentered at that point to reseal himself.

Wendt paused, then shook his head at the question. “They were careful to say no names around me.”

Estes looked at Minka. “Lady Minka? Did you recognize any?”

“No,” she murmured. “I didn’t even know your Commander’s name. Only, they told someone named Nusbaum to take me out, and he did.”

“Oh, yes,” Wendt said. “I’d forgotten that. ‘Nusbaum, get her out of here.’ But he was not one of mine.”

The others at table glanced at each other. Cutch said, “We have a Nusbaum in the ranks. Don’t know if it’s the same one.”

“Summon him,” Efran said. Estes, who was closest to the door, got up to open it and speak to the sentry, then sat again with the door still open.

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Chapter 4

The men finished dinner leisurely. Wendt, having cleaned his plate, said, “Excellent meal.”

“I have the best kitchen on the Southern Continent,” Efran said absently.

A man appeared at the door to salute DeWitt, directly across from him. “Nusbaum reporting. You summoned, sir?”

A few of those around the table glanced at Minka, but Nusbaum did not notice her leaning forward to look at him around Efran. Her eyes got wide, and she hid her face on her husband. Efran flashed a confirming glance to DeWitt and then Estes, but said nothing. Speaking was not necessary, because everyone except Wendt and Nusbaum knew that she had identified him.

DeWitt looked down, then at Wendt. “What should we do, Commander?”

Nusbaum, in the process of looking from person to person, finally landed on the man with scars and blank eyes. Face draining white, Nusbaum just stared at him.

“I assume that’s him,” Wendt said.

“Yes, sir,” DeWitt replied. “What should we do?”

“Nothing,” Wendt said. Efran shook his head briefly; he would not let him remain at the Abbey.

DeWitt looked back at Nusbaum. “You’re dismissed.”

Nusbaum left. Efran had underestimated the punishment, because no one saw him again.

Efran stood, and the rest of the men stood as well, full and exhausted. “Have you got a good room for him, Estes?” Efran asked.

“Yes, right on the first floor. It just needs stocking.” Estes left to see to it.

Wendt remained standing by his chair. Minka, still pale, left Efran to go put her arms around the Commander. He held her like a father, and anyone who hadn't already cried was doing so now. She lifted up to say, "Efran has a baby. Do you want to see our baby?"

"Yes, Sybil. What did he call you? Minka?" Wendt said.

"Yes, my name is Minka now. I'll go get him and bring him here," she said, turning to the door. Eyes red, Efran inhaled deeply watching her leave.

"I'm glad, Efran," Wendt said.

"Thank you, sir," Efran whispered. He looked down at his soggy linen jacket, having no more sleeves to wipe his face on.

Only a moment later, Minka was back, carrying a sleeping baby. She went up to Wendt and lifted one of his arms. At this signal, he lifted the other, and she placed the baby in his arms. "His name is Joshua," she said. "He's six months old, and totally Polonti."

The men smiled; Wendt held Joshua on one arm in order to run his other hand lightly over the baby's features. "Good shoulder development. He'll handle a bow well," Wendt said.

Efran blinked. "You're about the third person to say that," he murmured.

"Whose opinion would count besides mine?" Wendt said, handing the baby back to her. "Thank you, Minka."

"You're welcome," she whispered. She turned out, cuddling Joshua.

Estes entered around her, then went over to stand beside Wendt. "Commander, please come with me and I'll show you your suite."

"Thank you, Estes," Wendt said, moving to follow him.

"Commander," Efran said, looking up at the ceiling.

"You again? Yes, Efran," Wendt said, pausing.

Still looking at the ceiling, Efran said, "We have hundreds of men on a waiting list to get in the army. We just named a new commander and second. We have no idea what we're doing. We need—we need—"

"Of course, Efran. I'll walk around with you to look at what you have and what you need tomorrow. I need to go rest. And I'm tired of sitting down," Wendt said, dryly humorous.

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Efran said.

Estes took the Commander out, but Efran, thinking they might want a room for him in a less busy corridor, went up to the third floor to see what they had available here (as the second floor appeared to be entirely full). Efran looked from room to room, even glancing at the screen that sat in front of the door with no key at the end of the corridor. No one could find a key for it, but it drove the cleaning mistress crazy for new maids to continually ask her for the key, so they simply covered the door.

After looking at everything available up here, Efran decided that a nice first-floor suite was preferable anyway, and went downstairs.

That evening, Efran held his wife tightly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Minka, done crying, lay in his chest with her eyes barely open. “I had locked it away. Never thought about it; never remembered until I saw him today.”

“My poor Minka,” he murmured, pressing his lips to her head.

“It was not a coincidence that you decided to go to Venegas today,” she observed.

“No, it wasn’t,” he agreed. “I thought she was blustering about an interrogator. She wasn’t. Then Lightfoot and Adele selling him for fifty royals—! I will never understand it.”

“Me neither,” she murmured, but did not tell him that she intended to find Adele and make her explain it.

The following day, July 23rd, Wallace examined the Commander, finding him healthy aside from the obvious wounds. The doctor provided him with another pair of dark glasses, and DeWitt assigned him two full-time aides—young, promising soldiers by the names of Willis and Clough—one to run messages and one to describe whatever it was he needed to see. Then DeWitt and Efran abandoned everything else to walk Wendt around the hilltop, explaining to him what was there and what they wanted to do. Incidentally, this was after Efran had conferred on him the title of Lord Commander.

Wendt just absorbed everything at first, asking questions. One question was why they had so many new recruits all at once. So the men told him all about Master Crowe and Fanny attempting to overthrow Cennick using Marguerite’s mansion as his base, and how Efran had defeated the Polonti master in hand-to-hand combat.

All this took time, so Minka was free to pursue her own designs. She dressed in a subdued riding skirt—not pants today—and made sure the purse hanging on her belt was well-stocked with royals.

Then, knowing she must take a bodyguard, she debated a long time about whom to ask. Finally, she went to the front courtyard to request a horse and Geneve, if she were available. She was the only active woman in the Abbey army (as Tess had not yet been fully approved by her captain).

When Geneve appeared, Minka said, “Thank you for coming. Have you heard about Efran bringing back Commander Wendt?”

“Yes,” Geneve said quickly. “Everyone knows. We’re all just in awe.”

“Good. Let me tell you what I want to do. Then if you’d rather not, you’re free to decline.”

So Minka told Geneve her designs, to which she replied, “That’s very courageous, Minka.”

“Maybe,” Minka said. “I will listen to any suggestion except, ‘don’t do it.’” Geneve grinned.

When they had received their horses, Minka made sure the sentry knew that she was with Geneve to visit some Abbey shops. This information the sentry promptly sent to Efran.

First, the two women stopped at the notary shop. Entering to the tinkling bell, Minka found Giardi at the front counter already. “Good morning, Lady Giardini,” she said without thinking.

“Oh, Lady Minka!” she said, putting a hand to her chest. “How did you know we were married?”—which would explain Giardi’s title.

“You and Ryal? When?” Minka asked in delight.

“Three days ago,” Giardi said shyly—July 20th. “My husband died in April.”

“Well then, it’s about time. Congratulations!” Minka said.

“Thank you, dear. What can I help you with?” Giardi said, anxious to change the subject.

“I want to know which plot Hassler is on,” Minka said. This was the last man she had seen Adele with a month ago. Beyond that, she knew nothing about him.

As a shade of concern passed over Giardi’s face, Minka added, “This is my bodyguard Geneve. She is in the army.”

“Oh, that’s good. Then let me look,” Giardi said. She moved a rolling ladder to a certain location in front of the shelves, then climbed it to remove a bulky ledger from the top shelf. Geneve stood beside the ladder to raise her arms for the ledger, which the older woman handed down to her before attempting to descend.

As Geneve placed the ledger on the counter, Minka came behind it so they both could watch Giardi leaf through the lessee book—the register of all tenants on Abbey plots. “Hassler,” she murmured, her forefinger running down entries. “Here he is, number forty-two in the western plots—a tool sharpening shop. Oh, dear, there’s notice of an eviction warning four days ago. He’s behind on his rent.”

“Has he been evicted?” Minka asked, leaning over to look at the entry.

“Not yet. They’re given a grace period of a week to make any payment at all,” Giardi said.

“How much does he owe?” Minka asked.

Giardi said, “I don’t know exactly—his rent is twenty silver pieces a month, and that’s paid at the fortress. Not here.” (As shops and houses exploded in the months to come, notaries began accepting lease payments on behalf of the Fortress.)

Minka stared at her. “Twenty pieces? That’s less than a royal. Some shops make that in an hour or two.”

“Yes, rents are cheap, which is one reason people are flocking down here,” Giardi said.

“All right, we’ll go have a look. Geneve, please reshelve the ledger,” Minka said.

“Yes, Lady.” Geneve took the large ledger to climb the ladder and put the book away. Then she climbed down and moved the ladder to its standing location.

Meanwhile, Minka was asking Giardi, “Where is Ryal?”

“Oh, he took Lord Commander Wendt’s entitlement document to the jeweler to have his badge made. Efran wanted that done right away,” Giardi smiled.

“Is Lord Ryal wearing his badge?” Minka asked, smiling. Geneve returned to stand by her charge.

“Oh, how you tease, Lady Minka!” Giardi cried. “No, but he has it framed on the wall.”

“That’s even better. Thank you, Giardini,” Minka said, turning out with her bodyguard, and the notary’s wife waved.

On horseback, Minka and Geneve located Hassler’s shop and house (in the front and back, respectively, of one building), which did not look promising on first glance. The sign advertising “Tool Sharpening” was crooked, and the small front yard unkempt, with the original meadow grasses a foot high.

The women tied their horses to the post out front, then mounted the steps to the front door, which Geneve opened. Inside, there were a few tools displayed on the wall, a dusty front counter, and idle sharpening equipment behind it. Seeing no one, Minka rang the bell on the counter.

A few minutes later, the shop proprietor emerged languidly from the back. He was a good-looking man, but had a sullen, defeated air which Minka was beginning to recognize as a hallmark of Adele’s presence. “You ladies need your tools sharpened?” he asked sardonically.

“I am Adele’s sister. I want to speak with her,” Minka said.

He regarded her, then shrugged. “I’ll ask.” He went to the back again; Minka and Geneve listened intently to the faint voices, but Minka couldn’t tell if one of them was Adele’s or not.

Hassler reappeared at the front counter to say, “Sorry, she’s busy.”

Minka regarded him. “I want to see her. I want to know that she’s all right.”

He put his head on one side in mild exasperation, then went to the back again. The voices were a little stronger; from the tone alone, Minka was fairly sure that the other was Adele.

Hassler came out front again. “She said she’s fine.”

Minka leveled a gaze at him. “Produce her or I will get soldiers to do it.”

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Chapter 5

Hassler squinted at Minka. "Do the soldiers come running when you snap your fingers?"

"Yes. I am Lord Efran's wife," she said.

He looked at her, then looked at Geneve in her summer uniform beside her. Then he went to the back once again, and the voices were so much louder that the women in front could discern every word of the argument. But Adele herself stomped out this time, shouting, "What do you want? I'm fine! Go away!" She looked as unkempt and unhappy as the shop itself.

Since Hassler was behind Adele, Minka said, "I will pay the shop owner a royal if you will stay out here and answer some questions."

Adele sneered at her and turned to the back again, but Hassler blocked her. "You've been here for weeks and haven't done a dam' thing. You can talk to your sister for a while."

"Or what?" she jeered.

"Or I'm tossing your butt out," he said.

Adele looked away in aggravation, then turned around to Minka with a hard face, waiting. Minka looked to Hassler. "May we have chairs?"

He nodded, glancing at Adele as he went to the back. Shortly, he brought out three chairs which he set in a grouping to the side of the counter. "Thank you," Minka said, sitting. Adele flounced down to a chair but Geneve remained standing.

Minka was silent a moment, then asked, "Do you remember Commander Wendt?"

"No," Adele said flatly.

"The man Father had blinded," Minka said.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Adele said, studying her fingernails, which needed a manicure.

"The man you sold to Surchatain Clonmel for fifty royals," Minka said.

Hassler, who had been listening unobtrusively, now drew up to the other side of the counter to listen. Adele looked at the wall with a brief shake of her head, but didn't deny it.

"You sold the Commander of the Army of Westford to Surchatain Clonmel of Venegas for fifty royals after Father had him blinded with acid," Minka said.

Without replying, Adele sat back and folded her arms in a posture that said, *So?*

"I want to know why," Minka said. "I want to know how you and Father justified this to yourselves."

After a few moments of silence, Adele said, "We were desperate for money."

Minka blinked at her. “You led an army of thousands against Efran.”

“That’s why we needed money! We didn’t get anything for it!” Adele shouted.

Minka pondered this. “I don’t understand. That was Loizeaux’s army. You and Father were staying with Graduliere at Blature’s estate by that time. And you had married Graduliere by July.”

Adele shrugged and Minka asked, “When did you sell Commander Wendt?”

“I don’t remember,” Adele said.

“Was it before you moved in with Graduliere?” Minka asked.

“Yes. He didn’t want to have to take care of him,” Adele muttered.

Minka was silent for a few minutes. Then she said, “Adele, tell me that it was wrong. Tell me that you regret it.”

Adele shrugged. “What difference does it make now?”

“I want to know that you are not a monster,” Minka said. Adele rolled her eyes. “I want to know that you’re done destroying people.”

“Go on,” Adele said derisively.

“All right, I will.” Minka said, standing. “Don’t come to us again. If you need help, go get a job at Elvey’s. She’s constantly hiring, and her people will train you. Croft’s is hiring, as well.”

Walking over to the counter behind which Hassler stood, Minka dug in the pouch at her waist and laid four or five royals on the counter. “Clean up your shop. Mow the yard; get in more tools to sell. If you will stock garden hand tools, I will buy them from you,” she said quietly, downcast.

Hassler slowly took up the royals. “Thank you. I will,” he said.

Minka and Geneve left the shop. Hassler looked at Adele, still seated, and said, “Get out.”

Outside, Minka asked Geneve, “Would you like to go to Croft’s?”

“Yes,” Geneve smiled.

“Then let’s,” Minka said, untying her horse’s reins. As they rode, Minka asked tentatively, “How is Tess doing?” It had been a little over three weeks since the three of them had eaten at Croft’s.

“Eh,” Geneve said reluctantly. “She seems to be having trouble finding her footing.”

“Why is she so angry?” Minka asked.

“I . . . think it has to do with her brother being given opportunities that she doesn’t get, even though she feels that she’s more qualified,” Geneve said.

“Oh. Well, Efran is fair, and so is Neale, and you’re doing splendidly, so she’ll be given the same chance here,” Minka said firmly.

They walked their horses up the road and over to the next section where Croft’s had expanded to a quadruple plot to accommodate the inn and stables. Since it was almost noon, there was a line of people waiting to get into the tavern. Minka and Geneve gave up their horses to the hostler to go to the end of the line, but Croft was too alert to allow Lord Efran’s wife to stand in line. A tavern employee came out immediately to bring her and her bodyguard to a corner table.

So Minka and Geneve were comfortably inside when a hundred armed men, led by Clonmel in war dress, approached the Abbey hill via the coastal highway as Stites had predicted. Cutch, in command of the defense of the Lands here, sent a man up to the fortress and arrayed a battery of archers along the gaping point of entry. When Clonmel’s small army drew within hailing range, Cutch shouted, “Go to the wall gates, or we fire!” After a short discussion between Clonmel and her commander, she complied.

By the time Efran, DeWitt, and Wendt got to the courtyard to look, Clonmel’s men were cooperatively gathering at the front gates. A wall gates guard, Graeme, rode up to the courtyard to salute. “Captain, Commander— Surchatain Clonmel demands her property back.”

“I’m touched and flattered,” Wendt replied.

Efran told Graeme, “Invite her and two men of her choosing to come up and speak with the Commander. I guaranty safe passage.”

“Captain,” Graeme said, then spurred out of the gates to descend the switchback in a slow, balanced lope. Those in the courtyard watched him arrive at the wall gates to give his message. Clonmel looked toward the men in the far-off courtyard, then she and two male riders were let through the gates to begin loping down the main road to the switchback.

“Ah. Clonmel has accepted, and is now coming with two subordinates,” Efran told Wendt, who raised his face. To a courtyard sentry, Pleyel, Efran said, “Bring them to the small dining room.”

Pleyel saluted, then Efran and DeWitt took their Commander inside. (At any obstacle, such as steps, Efran or DeWitt would stop and say, “Ascending steps here. There are four broad steps.” They found that after only once or twice, Wendt would remember how high and broad the steps were, and ascend them easily. Walking, Wendt preferred to place his hand on the shoulder or back of the man leading him.)

Efran and DeWitt sat Wendt in the small dining room and asked that refreshments be brought. Efran also summoned Stites and Barr, in case they might have anything to add. (Melchior and Nyland had other, more important duties at this time.)

Shortly, Clonmel and two of her military arrived. Efran, DeWitt, Stites and Barr stood; Efran had asked Wendt to stay seated. Efran said, “Welcome, Surchatain Clonmel. This is my Fortress Administrator DeWitt and my traveling companions Stites and Barr, whom you may recognize. You know Commander Wendt. Would you introduce your associates?”

Clonmel said, “This is General Sewell and Major Hearn. We require that you return Wendt to us.”

“Please have a seat,” Efran said, gesturing, as he and his associates sat. Turning to someone at the door, he asked, “Do you have the money?” There was an affirmative reply, so Efran gestured to Clonmel. An Abbey

sentry approached to lay a pouch on the table in front of her as she and her men sat.

Efran said, “Although your purchase of the Commander was illegal under Continental Law, I am reimbursing you your fifty royals. We will not give you our Commander back. However, you may ask him anything you like.”

Clonmel replied to Efran, “Your men murdered my interrogator, for which I demand satisfaction.”

“Your interrogator was about to cause additional harm to our Commander, which my men correctly prevented. I offer no apology nor recourse for that. Is there anything else?” Efran asked pleasantly.

General Sewell asked, “Why do you call him your Commander?”

Efran turned to him. “Because, General, he was Commander of the Army of Westford under whom I served as Captain of the Red Regiment. He was decorated, dedicated, effective, humane—any superlative that could apply to an officer describes him. We not only value him for his service then, but we require his knowledge and experience now in guiding us in the expansion of our army.”

“I paid for that knowledge and experience,” Clonmel said stiffly.

Efran opened his mouth, eyes glassing over, but Wendt said, “Pardon, Surchatain, but under military law, I am not required to cooperate with my captors.”

DeWitt added, “Under Continental Law, torture is also prohibited.”

Efran said, “Surchatain, had you informed me that you had Commander Wendt, I would have paid you whatever you asked for him.”

General Sewell said, “We are not understanding how this man you say you value so much was blinded and discarded by you.”

Efran started swaying in his seat, but Wendt said, “Let me outline what happened. After Surchatain Lietes died with no heir, a council of Westford with Eurasian interests appointed a Eurasian Counselor as Surchatain of Westford who knew nothing of our law, the Law of Roman. He began to reign as a despot, requiring a loyalty oath on pain of death. Because I refused it, they brought me out to be hanged, and my army revolted. The new Surchatain forestalled them by canceling my hanging, but neutralized me in secret by blinding me. I have learned since then that the army disintegrated, the palace collapsed on its foundations, and Westford itself has been emptying into the Abbey Lands.”

There was a momentary silence. “Then who sold him to us?” Sewell asked.

“I understand that it was the new Surchatain and his daughter,” Efran said. “He himself was assassinated shortly thereafter.”

In the ensuing silence, Sewell looked at Clonmel and shook his head slightly. She looked away, angry and dissatisfied. “You injured my florist.”

“I am very glad to not have killed him,” Efran said, jaw working.

Sewell sighed, “Let us go back and take counsel, Surchatain. I don’t see what more we can do here today.”

The Abbey contingent stood, led by Efran. “Thank you for your frankness, General. We agree with you.”

Clonmel glared at her general and stood to sweep out of the room, Sewell and Hearn following. Hearn carried the pouch of royals. Efran and DeWitt followed them.

Clonmel strode out to the courtyard to demand her horse, but the Venegasans had to wait for them to be brought around. Sewell raised his hands to Efran in a mute apology and turned to speak to his Surchatain, but she rebuffed him.

The horses arrived; the visitors mounted and were escorted down the switchback and up the main road by two Abbey sentries. Efran, watching them, smiled. Checking the coastal highway to the east, he found it satisfactorily guarded by a hundred Abbey archers. Then Efran asked Pleyel at the courtyard gates, “Where are Minka and Geneve?”

“Last I saw, they stopped in the tavern, Captain,” he said.

“Good.” Efran joined DeWitt as they returned to the small dining room where Wendt remained seated with Stites and Barr. “They’re leaving by the main road,” Efran told them in satisfaction.

Wendt observed, “Her general is about to get himself deposed.”

“That’s unfortunate, since he was the only one listening,” Efran murmured.

As the party from Venegas was being escorted up the road toward the gates, Sewell was studying the businesses lining the road. He came to a stop looking at the tavern and newly expanded inn. “May we look inside?” Sewell asked their Abbey escort. Clonmel’s eyes flicked at him, then the tavern.

One sentry paused, looking up to the switchback, but the principals had gone inside the fortress and only the courtyard gate guards remained. He looked at the other sentry, who shrugged, “I don’t see why not.”

So the two sentries and three visitors dismounted to enter the tavern and stand at the counter to look around. Sewell was telling Clonmel, “Something like this would be a tremendous boon to Venegas.”

She scanned the crowded room thoughtfully. A woman in an Abbey army uniform turned to scrutinize them. Clonmel discounted her as a token, then looked at the young woman beside her, merely a girl. But the man behind the counter was saying, “Always a pleasure to serve Lord Efran’s wife.” The girl looked up to answer him with a smile.

Clonmel’s face registered malicious delight. Geneve was watching her, but Minka was in between them. Clonmel put a hand to the sheath at her belt and Geneve pushed forward, only to be blocked by a patron shoving his way to the counter.

In a flash, Clonmel grabbed Minka from the back and put a knife to her throat. “Now we talk!” Head and shoulders taller than Minka, she held the girl tightly to her chest by an arm across her collar bones.

Chapter 6

Sewell cried, “No, Surchatain!” The Abbey sentries were several layers of people behind them.

In the seconds that it took for the people around them to realize that something was happening, Geneve shoved past the man blocking her and grabbed Clonmel’s wrist, digging her fingers in among the tendons to incapacitate the hand holding the knife. Then she swiped her own knife across Clonmel’s throat.

As the blood gushed down over Minka’s head, people started screaming and stampeding to the doors. Geneve kicked Clonmel aside and grabbed Minka’s arm to throw her under a booth table. Then she stood at the table with her bloody knife at the ready, watching the tumult of people run by her, pushing and shouting. When the tavern had cleared, she knelt to look under the table. “Are you all right, Lady Minka?”

The sudden emergence of screaming patrons from the tavern caused the guards at the courtyard gates to ring the bell. Because the sentries at the wall gates had seen the party approaching, they had unlocked their gates. So the waiting Venegasan soldiers, seeing their leaders apparently embroiled in an attack, pushed open the gates, overrunning the two Abbey sentries to rush to the defense of their Surchatain, swords out.

At the alarm, Efran and DeWitt ran to the courtyard to look down the main road in consternation. “To arms!” DeWitt cried. “Armor! Swords! Horses!” As the call was repeated, Efran went to the top of the switchback, heart in his throat. Clonmel’s soldiers were attacking the tavern—where Minka and Geneve were eating.

“Horse!” Efran shouted.

“You’re not dressed out, Efran! Get back here!” DeWitt ordered.

Efran didn’t even hear him. He pulled an outgoing soldier down from his horse and jumped up in his place. Then he began loping down the switchback, streams of Abbey soldiers behind him.

As he came off the switchback, he perceived General Sewell on his horse, ordering his troops back. Efran reined up, watching. The general was screaming at them to go back to the gates.

So Efran turned to his oncoming troops to whistle loudly and hold up his hand in a command to stop. With as much confusion stopping as there had been starting, they did finally pull to a stop on the road and the switchback.

Then Efran walked his horse forward where a few people lay on the ground, wounded. Efran turned to shout, “Medic!” which was repeated up the switchback. And he turned back toward the tavern.

The General had dismounted to walk over to Efran. He was shaking his head, saying something, but all Efran could see was the blood covering his hands and his uniform. So Efran fell out of the saddle to run into the tavern.

There, Efran looked around at the tables overturned, the spilled food and broken dishes, and—Clonmel, covered in blood, lying still on the floor.

Raising his eyes, Efran saw Geneve standing before a booth table, watching him. He looked at the bloody knife she was gripping. When she saw him look over, she stood aside from the table. “Here, Captain.” She thought her manner adequately conveyed that everything was under control.

He went toward her, almost skidding on the bloody floor. Geneve nodded under the table, so Efran bent down to look. “Minka?” he whispered.

A head covered in blood raised up, and he passed out.

It was only momentary, however—he came to with Minka cradling him. “Efran! Are you all right?”

“Minka,” he mouthed, looking up at her from her lap. She wore blood on her head like a mourning scarf.

“Oh, I’m such a mess. But I’m fine. I’m not hurt, Efran. A woman pulled a knife on me, but Geneve killed her. Oh, this is horrible. Oh, all this blood is awful. But it’s not mine,” she rambled. “Oh, I want to—”

“Here, Lady.” Geneva stood at the back door with a large bucket of water. “Come lean your head over the threshold; we’ll wash most of it out.”

“Oh, thank you.” Minka scrambled up as Efran reached out, missing her by inches. She went right to the back door as Geneve instructed, leaning over her knees so that Geneve could wash the worst of the blood out of her hair.

A crowd gathered behind Efran as he got to his feet. “Where is . . . yes, Sewell,” he muttered when the general came up.

Sewell looked as dazed and distressed as Minka. “Lord Efran,” he began. “I . . . the Surchatain saw your wife, and, put a knife to her throat, to, take her hostage, I think. Her bodyguard came up, and . . . I—”

“What were you doing here?” Efran asked.

“I had asked to see the tavern as we passed, Lord Efran. I told the Surchatain that we should build one like it. But then, Clonmel—” He was too distressed to complete the thought.

“All right,” Efran nodded, looking again at the doorway where Geneve was pouring a second bucket of water over Minka’s head and shoulders. “Let’s go talk to the troops,” he said, patting Sewell’s shoulder.

Outside, Efran looked up at Cutch on horseback to tell him, “Surchatain Clonmel attempted to take Minka hostage, and Geneve killed her. Minka is fine; Geneve is due another commendation. General Sewell prevented our troops from killing each other, so . . . we need a shroud, and horse and cart for Clonmel’s transport back. I need volunteers to help Croft clean up his tavern, and, ask Estes to compensate him for the damage.”

“Yes, Captain.” Cutch turned to begin giving instructions.

Efran exhaled, looking at the Venegasans walking their horses back out the gates. Sewell was waiting behind him. Efran clapped a hand on his shoulder. “I could work with you. Come.” Efran paused to watch Minka and Geneve ride up the switchback to the fortress.

He walked Sewell back to the gates to address the Venegasan soldiers, particularly Major Hearn. “I regret the death of your Surchatain, but I am very grateful to General Sewell for preventing further loss of life on both sides. I have ordered a cart for her transport. While I would not interfere in your affairs, I wish your Council to know that I would be eager to cooperate with Sewell as your Surchatain.”

Some of the men nodded, but most of them looked dark and angry. Major Hearn reached out to shake his hand. "Thank you, Lord Efran."

Shortly, the horse, cart, and shroud arrived, which Efran handed over to Sewell. Then Abbey work crews arrived with shovels, brooms, boxes and carts. Some of the unusable debris was taken to a designed trash plot to be buried; spoiled food was gathered for animals or dumped in the Passage, and the pieces of glass collected for the gaffer to crush and remelt into new glass.

Efran watched while Clonmel's body was wrapped and loaded into the cart, then the Venegasans departed. From the wall gates, they had to go the long way through the meadowgrass around the plotted Lands to intercept the coastal highway south. When they were well away, Efran appropriated a horse to take him up the switchback.

In the fortress, he went first to his quarters, where he found Minka clean and newly dressed. He took her in his arms to groan, "How can I ever let you out of the fortress and keep you safe?"

She pulled back in dismay. "But you did," she said. "My bodyguard did her job, and God's angels assisted her to reach me in time. What more do you need?"

He shook his head. "Not ever to see you covered in blood like that again. I will have nightmares for weeks."

"Then stop inviting lunatics to the Abbey Lands," she huffed. "I need to go get Joshua."

"Yes, Lady," he said, smiling as she turned down the corridor.

At that time, a sentry requested the Captain's appearance in the small dining room. Efran went tiredly; there would be discussions.

He entered the room to sit at the oval table, noting Wendt, DeWitt, Estes, Cutch, and Geneve. Efran said, "Well, Commander, have you been briefed on our excitement at the tavern?"

"Yes, Efran," he said. "A good job by Minka's guardian."

"And another commendation," Efran said, regarding her. "Gabriel will be afflicted; I don't know how many he has."

"Three, Captain," she said, smiling.

"Ah. He will still be aggrieved. Geneve is Gabriel's sister, and the first woman in our army, Commander," Efran said.

Wendt slowly nodded. "Few women are capable. You made a fortunate choice, Efran."

"Thank you, sir," Efran said. Geneve glanced down, full at heart. Looking around, Efran said, "What do we still need to cover from today?"

Estes said, "We were discussing what needs to be changed in protocol, and who should be disciplined."

Efran sat back, crossing his arms over his chest and looking up at the ceiling. "Nothing. No one. The pivotal failures were Sewell asking to see the tavern while Minka was inside, and Clonmel recognizing her and deciding to act on that. I will not restrict Minka from going anywhere she wishes on the Lands, or invited guests from

looking at anything they want to see. Minka's suggestion was that I stop inviting lunatics."

The others laughed. After a moment, Geneve said, "It may be relevant that the tavern wasn't our first stop, Captain. Lady Minka wished to find her sister and talk to her. And she did that." Then Geneve told them about their stop in Hassler's shop and everything that transpired there. They all listened quietly.

Then Efran said, "So, according to Adele, they sold the Commander to Clonmel before they moved in with Graduliere at Blature's estate."

"Yes, Captain," Geneve confirmed.

Efran looked at Wendt at the other end of the table. "Does that agree with your recollection, Commander?"

He had to think about that, then finally replied, "It's hard to say. There were side stops before I was transported to Venegas. I stayed for several months with a Lord Gladden and Lady Vories."

DeWitt said, "Oh, well, then we must have them in for a chat. Don't you think, Efran?"

"Yes," he said, sweating.

Wendt said, "DeWitt, you and Estes talk to them. Efran might better sit out." Because Wendt remembered her.

Efran protested, "Oh no, I want to be there." He listened quietly while a messenger was summoned to ask the Lord and Lady of Westford to drop in at the Abbey fortress tomorrow. Being involved with the new crisis, Efran was only vaguely aware of the group breaking up after that.

He was recalling a half-dozen trysts with Lady Vories about three years ago, when he was a Captain and Wendt was his Commander, long before he knew Minka. During Efran's last rendezvous with the lady, he became aware mid-coitus of her husband's entry into the house, so had promptly left by the window. It so angered her that she went to his Commander to complain that Efran had made improper advances to her. Wendt had promised her an investigation, then privately dragged Efran over the coals for bedding married women. And that was it. If Wendt had handled her complaint according to protocol, Efran could have been disciplined, demoted, or dishonorably discharged from the army.

Efran had told Minka about all that, but the lady's appearance in the fortress had precipitated a crisis of confidence for Minka that he had hoped never to repeat. So now he must tell her that the lady was coming again. As Efran left the dining room pale and sweating, Estes and DeWitt glanced at each other, and DeWitt raised his brows. Efran's activities had been well known.

After checking their quarters, Efran looked out back to see Minka sitting with Joshua on a pad under the walnut tree. Although mid-July was broiling in Westford, the weather was barely warm on the hilltop by the Sea. So he went over to sit on the pad with them.

She looked up, smiling, then said, "Oh no. What is it now?"

He opened his mouth, but upon looking down at Joshua, said, "He's sitting up!" He was, until looking up at his father caused him to fall over onto his back. He started crying in aggravation, so Efran picked him up.

"Yes, he's been working so hard at it," Minka said. "Efran, what's wrong?"

Holding Joshua, he exhaled, “Lady Vories and her husband are coming to the fortress tomorrow. She’s one that I had—and told you—and then—”

“Oh, Efran, please stop worrying about it. I trust you, and I don’t care who comes to the fortress. I trust you,” she said.

“Thank you,” he murmured, holding her on one arm with Joshua on his lap.

But he did not sleep that night.

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Chapter 7

When Lord Gladden and Lady Vories arrived at the fortress mid-morning of the following day—July 24th—they were escorted into the small dining room with refreshments on a sideboard. The Abbey leadership wanted Wendt to hear what was said, but knew that his presence would dampen the possibility of frankness. The Commander himself said that he’d be content to hear a synopsis afterward, as he’d rather walk around than sit in a meeting. So they released him to his handler Willis.

When Willis brought him out to the gardens, Minka came over at once with Joshua asleep in a sling on her chest. “Hello, Commander! May I show you around?” she asked, taking his arm. Willis bowed and withdrew as she put the Commander’s hand on Joshua’s back. “He’s been working very hard trying to sit up and crawl,” she explained.

“That’s good exercise. He’s pretty big for six months old,” Wendt said.

“He’s closer to seven months now, and growing well for coming a month early. Oh, the blueberries are ripe! No one will mind if we snack on them,” she said, picking a cluster to place in his hand. He promptly ate them.

“The lilac is almost overwhelming here. Some people don’t care for the smell. If you start sneezing, we’ll walk elsewhere,” she said authoritatively. “Oh! And the mint—” She picked a sprig to hold it under his nose. “It makes the best tea. Very invigorating when it’s too early for ale.”

He smiled. “That’s very pleasant. Brings back memories of the gardens at Westford.”

She cuddled his arm. “I’m trying hard not to ask you about Efran in those days.”

He laughed. “Well, I’m going to ask you about this henhouse.”

So she told him about Efran’s fever, and the near hanging, and his guardianship, and Adele’s attack with Loizeaux’s army, and Auntie Marguerite’s proof of her age. “So we went to the notary in Westford to claim the bequest of the Abbey, but I made him marry me first,” she ended triumphantly.

“Remarkable,” he murmured. “He is a different man, Minka. He’s found what he was looking for.”

“So have I,” she whispered.

In the small dining room, Efran was sitting with DeWitt, Estes, Lord Gladden and Lady Vories. The lord was fat and self-important, with a lush combover that was intricately styled to hide any hint of scalp. The lady was still beautiful in her mid-thirties, with profusely curling ginger-brown hair. Today, she had the good sense to wear little makeup and a modest dress.

She scrupulously avoided looking at Efran, who did the same, but Gladden pinned him with a glare. “You cut your hair.”

Efran blinked; Vories turned red; Estes and DeWitt sat quietly. While Efran and the lady were remembering that his hair had been longish when she knew him, the lord was recalling seeing him here at the fortress about seven months ago, when his hair was so long that Minka had to tie it back for him.

Finally Efran stammered, “M-minka sets the length.”

“Minka? Who is Minka?” Gladden demanded. He had met her, but the memory of Lord Efran’s long, full, black hair eclipsed everything else.

“My wife,” Efran said, sitting back in composure at the mention of his anchor.

Gladden observed, “Oh, you got married. That’s good. Some of my friends were suspicious of you, young man, perhaps with reason. But I told them, ‘What you need to do is keep your wife in pearls and dresses.’ A woman won’t risk losing her pearls and dresses.”

Efran nodded, biting his lip, and DeWitt cleared his throat. “Lord Gladden, Lady Vories, thank you for coming today. We’re trying to clear up some questions about the recent history of Westford. I seem to remember that you were caretakers for Commander Wendt after his blinding. Is that correct?”

“Oh, what a fiasco that was,” Gladden said, shifting in the tight chair. “The man was in such pain constantly. I told Lightfoot, ‘If you’re going to do that to him, why not kill him and be done with it?’ He had some babble about the army, which was ridiculous. ‘You’re in charge of the army now!’ I told Lightfoot, the fool. ‘They do what you say! You can put this man out of his misery, and ours while you’re at it!’

“Oh, the man crying for death, the bandages sticking to eyes that wouldn’t heal—oh, it was so disgusting. The constant medications, the bleeding and the discharge—ugh! Then trying to feed him, and clean him up after he vomited or defecated for the pain—we lost three servants because of him! It was absurd to put that on us, so I finally told Lightfoot, ‘I want him out of this house; it’s too much for my wife to have to listen to that—’”

“I slept with your wife. Repeatedly,” Efran gasped, raising his wet face.

DeWitt threw up his hands; Vories stared wide-eyed at Efran; Gladden looked confused. Estes stood and said, “Perhaps we’ll cover this later. Thank you again for your time. The men here will see you out.” Estes opened the door to the sentries.

Vories flew out, but Gladden was slower to get up from his chair. “What did you say?” he asked Efran.

“Nothing; he’s having an emotional moment right now. We’ll just let him cry it out,” Estes said, nudging the lord to the door.

“Brandy,” said the lord as he was being shoved out the door. “Brandy’s good for that; ale isn’t strong enough—”

Then he was dispatched into the hands of the door sentry.

Efran hung his head, tears still dripping. He raised up once or twice, breathing to get himself under control, then collapsed over his knees again. Estes said, “It . . . it is hard to hear what he went through—”

Minka and Wendt had come to the open door. Looking at her husband bending over his knees, she gasped, “Efran! What happened?”

“Oh, he’s crying,” Wendt said. “I told you to sit out, son.”

Efran lurched up to seize Wendt around the shoulders and hug him tightly. “You were my father,” he said shakily.

Wendt patted his back. “You needed one.”

Minka, tears in her eyes, beamed. “He’s come home!”

Efran let go of Wendt to grab her up, then. Wendt sighed, “I suppose so.”

After a few moments, Efran raised up, lifting one hand to caress Minka’s face. Then he looked at the wall to say, “I killed Pindar”—who had been Efran’s best friend and Captain of the Blue Regiment.

The shock of it reverberated through the room. “Why?” Wendt asked quietly.

Efran looked down at her beautiful blue eyes fixed on him. “Lightfoot made me her guardian. But then they decided to take her to Eurus, and Pindar took her from her room by force while I was gone. Took Bastard as well—the only horse left. Toby told me where she was—Pindar had taken her to the house over Aron the Jeweler’s shop. I climbed up the ivy to watch him come into the bedroom and slap her because she wouldn’t stop crying.”

He looked over to DeWitt and Estes, both watching stonily. “I got in through the window while she was asleep and looked down the stairs to see that he was the only one there. So I came down the stairs and waited for him to turn around and see me before I slit his throat. Then I carried her out, and put her on Bastard, and brought her and Toby here.”

He paused in the silence, then said, “I will accept whatever punishment you order, Commander.”

Minka, eyes wide in fear, looked at the blind man. No one said anything. Then Wendt sighed, “Efran, I’m afraid I don’t have the heart to do anything to you. Pindar brought me in to the surgery to be blinded. I had no idea what was about to happen.”

They all looked at him in shock. DeWitt said, “You didn’t mention that earlier.”

“There was no need. I knew he was dead, but didn’t know that Efran had killed him for taking his charge, which is a legitimate use of force by a guardian,” Wendt said. After a moment he added, “Apparently Efran needed to get it off his chest. A re-awakening conscience is a good thing.”

Efran was looking down at his charge, caressing her face and her hair. “Minka didn’t know,” Efran said. “Are you afraid of me now?” he asked her.

She shook her head. “You don’t scare me. You fainted when you saw blood all over me.”

The other men exhaled in light laughter. “Did he, now?” Wendt said.

“Yes,” she said, turning to Wendt as if he could see her wry smile.

“Yes, but only for a minute,” Efran said, gathering her shoulders to him again. “They should never have made me your guardian, but when they did, they made me your guardian for life.”

That evening, Efran climbed into bed in utter exhaustion. Minka held his head, stroking his hair back from his face. With his eyes shut tight, he looked startlingly like Joshua asleep after a hard day’s exercise.

The following day, July 25th, Minka received a letter with unbroken seal from Justinian in Eurus. It read:

“My dearest Minka:

“The most amazing news! We are all agog. The scruffy Polonti band that had taken our dear Surchatain Cennick’s Fanny has dropped her off again at the entrance of the market district. Unfortunately, before they could be apprehended and punished, they fled again in the lady’s carriage. No one knows what these miscreants think they are going to do with a lady’s carriage, but all are aware that it could be used for nefarious purposes, despite the elegant gilding.

“I miss your sweet face, my little pumpkin, and I can hardly wait to see you again. But the situation here is so tense as to what our admirable Surchatain will do with his freshly returned somewhat wife, I cannot abandon my post.

“Much love and many kisses,
“Your Justinian”

Rather than afflict her husband with Justinian’s flirtation, Minka decided to just deliver his news verbally. So she went up to Estes’ workroom to find it full of men: Efran, Estes, DeWitt and Wendt. First, she went over to greet the Commander in his chair. Leaning down to hug his shoulder, she kissed his cheek. “Good afternoon, dear Commander. I hope they are not abusing you with work.”

He replied, “Just a little, thank you, Minka. But you know, I think I would like to try a cup of that mint tea, if you—”

“Oh! I’ll be right back!” she cried, running from the room.

Wendt paused. “Did she leave already?”

Efran glanced up from the maps in front of him. “Be careful asking her to do anything; she will do it with vigor and dispatch. And no, I’m not at all offended that she ran to oblige your offhand comment without even looking at me,” he added lightly.

DeWitt said grimly, “The drama at the Abbey is beyond belief, Commander.” Wendt laughed and Efran expelled a gentle breath in satisfaction to hear laughter from a man who had suffered so much.

Minutes later there was the sudden appearance of two people at the doorway. Minka cried, “Oh, excuse me! Did I splash you?” at the same time that Captain Neale was saying, “My fault, Lady Minka; please excuse me.” And Minka was insisting, “Oh no, you were already in the door when I tried to slide by. That was my doing.”

By the time Neale was insisting again that it was his fault, all of the men were laughing silently or shaking their heads. Minka entered with a lovely mug of tea and Neale followed with a wet sleeve. He stood before Efran without speaking while Minka placed the mug on the work table beside Wendt’s chair.

Guiding his hand to the mug, she said, “I hope it’s not too hot. I added honey; if it’s too sweet I will fix you another cup.”

“Thank you, Minka,” he said, lifting it gingerly to his mouth.

She watched him a moment in satisfaction, then, oblivious of Neale’s waiting before Efran, told him, “I just got a letter from Justinian—he said that the Polonti who stole Fanny brought her back to dump her at the market district but kept her carriage.”

“What?” Estes looked up.

Efran laughed, “Where is the letter?”

“Downstairs,” she said evasively.

“How long did they have her?” DeWitt asked.

“This last time?” Efran said. “It will have been about—three weeks. Looking back at Minka, he said, “You don’t want to show me the letter.”

“That’s all the news,” she said carelessly, then looked at Wendt. “How is the tea, Commander?”

“It’s excellent, Minka,” he said, risking no other reply.

“Good. Well—oh!” Seeing Efran’s expectant brows, she quickly went over to his chair to bend down and lightly kiss his lips. He opened his mouth preparatory to speaking, but she added, “Neale is waiting to talk to you.” Skirts swinging, she departed the room.

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Chapter 8

Efran watched her go with a hazy smile, then looked up at Neale. “So, about Shanko?”

“Yes, Captain,” Neale exhaled, “he’s just not cut out for soldiering. I’d use him for running messages, but am afraid he’d be recognized in Euris. He wants a position, just isn’t keen on learning anything.”

Efran winced, then looked over to Wendt. “Do you have any suggestions, Commander? This is a young Captain of Cennick’s that got himself captured getting too close to the wall. His mother is a friend of Marguerite’s who wants him down here out of harm’s way.”

“You might see if any of your businesses need guards,” Wendt replied.

Efran agreed, telling Neale, “Send someone to check with Croft’s or Elvey’s.” Efran started to suggest that Shanko keep an eye on the boys building their storage shed, but decided to use someone more reliable for that, such as anyone else in the army.

“Yes, Captain,” Neale said, then paused with another thought.

“Uh oh. What else?” Efran asked, edging forward in his chair.

“Tess,” Neale said. “She’s unacceptable, Captain, and not because of her sex. She’s overly aggressive and, indifferent to following rules.”

“ARGHH,” Efran vented, leaning back. “We are not a nursery. Commander, Tess is Shanko’s seventeen-year-old sister who also wanted to join the army. Do you have any thoughts regarding her?”

“Have her attend me,” Wendt said, putting down his empty mug.

Efran eyed him reluctantly, then told Neale, “Summon her.”

“Captain.” Neale saluted and left the room.

“What do you want me to tell her, Commander?” Efran asked.

“Tell her that she’ll be attending me,” Wendt said. Efran shook his head and Wendt added, “Don’t shake your head at me, Efran.”

Estes and DeWitt smiled watching Efran freeze guiltily, then he said, “Yes, Commander.”

Shortly, Neale entered with Tess. She strode up to the table to stand defiantly before the Captain. Neale told her, “Salute and give your name, soldier.”

She rolled her eyes but straightened, saluted properly, and said, “Tess reporting, sir.”

“Tess, this is Commander Wendt. You will be attending him,” Efran said, nodding toward the chair in which Wendt sat. She glanced at him, then looked back at the Captain dubiously. He looked down at the paper currently in front of him.

She didn’t move. Wendt stood and said, “Let’s go for a walk out back, Tess.”

She approached him hesitantly. “Do I—take your arm, or what?”

“I will put my hand on your shoulder while you walk,” he said. So she awkwardly stood with her back to him; he raised his hand and she put her shoulder underneath it. Then she began slowly walking toward the doorway as he followed. The men in the room evaluated that a moment before resuming their work.

A sentry, Ellor, came to the open door. “Pardon, Captain—a messenger from Cennick has arrived with a sealed message for you alone.”

"I am favored," Efran muttered, rising. "In the receiving room off the foyer?"

"Yes, sir," Ellor said, standing aside for Efran to pass before him.

Efran trotted (carefully) down the stairs to advance up the corridor to the foyer and swing into the receiving room. "I am Captain Efran," he told the messenger, who saluted, handing him the sealed letter. As Efran took it, he nodded to the flatbread and bottles of ale on the small table. "Help yourself."

"Thank you, sir." The messenger immediately picked up a bottle.

Efran broke the seal and opened the parchment to read:

"To Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands
"From Surchatain Cennick of Eurur

"Efran, I have done some stupid things, but nothing was stupider than sending troops to try to get Moultry back from you. I let my pride get the best of me. The situation is, I want her back because she may be carrying my child. I have no other children—Kel was infertile and Adele's was obviously not mine. If you will send her back, I will consider it an act of great friendship."

Efran mulled over this for a little while, then told the messenger, "Have all the refreshments you want; rest if you need to; I will investigate his request."

"Thank you, sir," he said, and stretched out in a chair.

Efran went to Ellor at the courtyard door. "Find Moultrie at Elvey's and put her in the small dining room—there should be refreshments. I'll be in my quarters"—where he expected to find Minka.

"Yes, Captain." Ellor went out, calling to someone in the courtyard to take his place.

Letter in hand, Efran turned down the corridor to open the door to his quarters. Minka looked over, having just changed Joshua's wraps. She handed the sleepy baby to him to hold, causing him to crush Cennick's letter in the process. Then she turned to wash her hands in the washbasin. Efran watched Joshua blink up at him with heavy lids, then give up and close his eyes. Minka took the baby to put him gently in his crib in the bedroom while Efran waited in the outer room.

The moment she came back out, Efran swept her up, still clutching Cennick's letter. "Show me the letter from Justinian."

"No," she said with a devious smile.

"You think to keep a secret lover?" he murmured into her hair.

"This is Justinian we're talking about," she chortled.

"Then show it to me," he breathed, pressing her harder.

"I've hidden it where you'll never find it," she said defiantly.

“On top of a book somewhere?” he asked—that being the last place she had hidden the key to the Treasury before giving it to Estes to hide.

“You’ll never, never, never find it,” she declared.

He looked down at the short line of books on the table. Sitting in front of them was an open letter, which Efran picked up. Cennick’s letter was still in his other hand. She looked down. “How did you know where to look?”

He uttered a dry laugh, reading, then tossed it back down on the table. “His ‘somewhat wife’?”

“Is that what you got out of it?” she asked. “Am I not your little pumpkin?”

He shook his head slightly, smiling. “No, I—never thought of you as a pumpkin.”

“Well, you’re not very romantic,” she sniffed.

He had lowered his face to hers again when Ellor knocked. “Captain? Moultrie is in the small dining room.”

“Coming.” Efran raised his face and took her hand. “I need you.”

With Minka in one hand and the thoroughly crumpled letter from Cennick in the other, Efran went to the small dining room. Moultrie was sitting at the table with an ale and a slice of shortbread. “Matron Eola is going to cut me if you keep taking me off the line,” she said resentfully.

“We will try to make her understand that this is important. Please look at this letter I received from Cennick today,” Efran said, smoothing it out on the table in front of her. Minka sat a few seats down from her with a raspberry tart from the sideboard.

Frowning, Moultrie leaned over to read the letter. She took her time over it, brushing away shortbread crumbs. Then she raised up in indignation. “If he wants me to come back because he wants the baby I’m carrying, then he has to marry me! I’m no guttersnipe. I was raised in an upper-class household. I can even play the harpsichord!”

Efran paused with an open mouth, then said slowly, “Well, then. . . .” He went to the sideboard to get out quill and paper. “Tell him. I will send your reply with mine.”

Lips pursed, she took the paper and quill to write a short but emphatic letter. Ending it with a splotch, she said, “There!”

“Good.” Efran gave it to Minka before even reading it. “Please copy her reply for Estes.”

“Of course,” she said, dipping the quill.

Efran took a royal out of the sideboard and directed Moultrie into the foyer. Putting the coin in Ellor’s hand, he said, “Take her back down to Elvey’s, please. Give that to Matron Eola; ask her not to penalize Moultrie for our taking her off the line.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said. “Come on, dear,” he urged Moultrie, who went out with him. Efran paused, smiling—Ellor was the fatherly type.

Returning to the small dining room, Efran sat to take Moultrie's letter that Minka held out to him. Moultrie had written, "Cennick yes I am carrying YOUR baby and if you want me to come back with this baby you will need to make ME your wife and I am MOULTRIE. Signed, MOULTRIE."

"Ooh," Efran said, wincing. He took up the quill Moultrie had thrown down. "Let me add my blows." When finished, his letter to Cennick read:

"July 25 of the year 8154

"To Cennick, Surchatain of Eurus
"From Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands

"I informed Moultrie of your request and invited her to write a reply, which you will find with this letter. I await further communications as to your wishes."

Efran gave that to Minka to copy as well, and asked her to take it all up to Estes to be logged, sealed, and sent. "The messenger is in the receiving room off the foyer, probably asleep," he said absently.

"All right," she said, writing.

He leaned over to interrupt her with a light kiss. "I'll be on the back grounds."

She regarded him. "Take a bodyguard."

He lowered his chin at her and turned out.

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Chapter 9

Efran stepped out of the main back door to look over the gardens and grounds. He spotted the Commander walking with Tess among the flower beds, and paused to watch from a distance.

"Smells nice over here. Describe these beds for me, please," said Wendt.

"I don't know the names of the flowers," Tess said, looking off in boredom.

"Then just describe them," Wendt said.

"Well," she said, looking down, "these are short, squatty plants with yellow and blue flowers. . . . Over here is a taller plant with little white flowers that look like bells hanging down. They're kind of pretty. . . . Here are some more blue flowers with little yellow centers. It's a small bush but it's spread all over—looks like it's growing into the next bed."

“Ah. Those sound like primroses. Is there a scent?” Wendt asked.

Tess knelt down to sniff. “Not much, that I can tell,” she said, standing again.

“Where is the sun?” he asked.

“About thirty degrees off the horizon,” she replied.

“Then it’s too early. They release their fragrance at night,” he said.

“I see,” she said flatly.

“If we came out here at night, the fragrance would almost overwhelm you. If you closed your eyes, you could imagine being an insect surrounded by a forest of blooms,” he said.

“Uh huh,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“I’ve learned to appreciate that. I was out here last night, just enjoying the night fragrance. There are some things you can’t really appreciate until the light is taken away,” he said.

She looked at him. “You . . . can’t be glad they blinded you.”

“But I am,” he said. “It was either that or hanging. In the first few weeks after they did it, I would have said—did say—that I preferred to die. But now, especially here, I’ve come to perceive so much more than I did when I could see.”

“What can you perceive?” she asked.

“Emotions. Anger, fear, love—they just roll off people like waves. I can perceive them in a way now that I never imagined when I had my eyes,” he said.

“What do you perceive rolling off me?” she asked, with an ironic twist of her lips.

He was silent a moment. “Grief. And fury.”

She turned her face away, clenching her jaw. Then he said, “And by your breathing, I can tell that I am right. Who are you grieving?”

It took her a few minutes to answer. “I was in love with a man who was called up to serve in Cennick’s army. He was killed the first day by an army of Polonti attacking the palace. He was Polonti, and they killed him anyway because he was wearing the wrong uniform,” she said, trembling. “I want to fight, and kill, the men who killed him.”

“Oh. Well, get busy. Some of them may be here,” he said.

She turned to him. “What?”

“Captain Efran defeated the leader of that Polonti army—his name was Crowe. So after he was dead, many of the men who had served under him came here to serve under the Captain,” Wendt said. “A soldier’s job is to kill the men wearing the wrong uniforms. So you must find another reason to fight and another man to love.”

She opened her mouth helplessly, then fell on him to cry.

Watching from a distance, Efran shook his head when he saw Tess fall on Wendt in an emotional embrace. *He's adopted another wild child*, he thought.

Efran carefully circumvented them to head for the practice grounds within the fence, where a large group of men was gathering. This was the signal that Nares was about to hold a training session. Efran picked up his pace to a trot; the men saw him coming and parted like the Red Sea before Moses, smiling. Efran took a prominent place before them in expectation.

Shortly, Nares strode out to stand before them. Usually, he called for volunteers, from whom he picked one man on which to demonstrate tactics. It was a daunting honor to face him; he never hurt anyone seriously, but the humiliation of being laid flat on one's back within the first ten seconds made some men pause before raising a hand to be picked.

Not Efran: whenever he was available, he leapt at the opportunity to be humiliated by Nares because of what he learned in the process. And he was apparently Nares' favorite sparring partner. So when the great warrior appeared and looked them over, Efran walked up to him, smiling. Then Efran's face changed in alarm, and he said, "Don't let Minka see!"

Most of the men wheeled to look, but Efran punched Nares hard in the diaphragm—or appeared to, when Nares took his wrist and flipped him neatly onto his back. Efran kicked one foot out from under him, so Nares hopped onto the other, lifting the kicked foot over Efran's stomach as he was rolling away to regain his footing.

There followed a few minutes of intense sparring, during which Efran managed to land a blow to his face before Nares swept both feet out from under him and landed beside him with a knee on his throat. "I give," Efran groaned, laughing.

Nares hoisted him up, correcting him, "You forget the feet when you strike with fists. You must spread the weight. And do not look at my eyes; look at my body. *Manao*"—which was the Polonti word for situational awareness, the comprehensive view in an instant.

"I will bear that in mind, but I get a point for the blood," Efran panted. Nares put a finger to his nostril to look at the tiny issue of blood, then nodded.

"Next," Nares said. Several men raised their hands, but Geneve stepped up to take Efran's place. The men watched in interest, but Nares pointed to Barr, and she was forced to step back.

After the training session, Geneve complained to her brother Gabriel about Nares' refusal to spar with her. "I think I've proved myself enough to get the chance," she vented.

Gabriel replied, "Geneve, you're letting your commendations go to your head. You're not a sparring partner for someone like Nares; he's physically so far above you, he'd kill you without meaning to. Yes, you stopped the Captain with a finger because he wasn't willing to hurt you. Nares holds back sparring with *him*; he can't hold back enough to spar with you."

"If this is about technique, the physical differences shouldn't matter. He taught Martyn," she argued.

"That doesn't mean he sparred with Martyn, and I'll bet you ten royals he didn't. He's the master; you let him

teach you however he sees fit,” Gabriel said. Vehemently disagreeing, Geneve turned away.

That evening, when she was returning to the small Abbey house she shared with a woman who worked for Elvey, Geneve saw Nares enter his house a few doors down. She was surprised; she knew he had been given a house, but thought he would pick out something grander, given his title of Lord Officer.

On impulse, she turned to march down the street and knock on his door. When he opened it, she said, “Please pardon my intrusion, Lord Officer Nares. May I speak with you?”

He opened the door; she entered and he shut the door behind her. Geneve glanced at the bare sitting room before turning to him. He stood very still watching her while she regarded his lined face and the sprinkling of gray in his hair. He was in his forties—probably 42 or 43. He was about seven inches taller than she, and at least a hundred pounds heavier. His physical presence was so intimidating, she had to collect herself a moment to speak.

“I consider myself a serious soldier. I know that I am physically inferior to most of the men, but I am as eager as any of them to improve my fighting skills. I would appreciate being given the opportunity to spar with you,” she said.

He blinked and shook his head slightly. “I . . . cannot.”

“I don’t understand why not,” she said levelly.

“It is—not done. I could not touch you but in . . . gentleness,” he said, struggling with the language.

“Because I am a woman?” she asked stiffly.

“Because you are you,” he said.

She looked down, aware of the thumping of her heart. “That’s not what I came here for,” she said. So she turned back to the door. “I apologize. This was not a good idea.” She put her hand on the door latch, pausing at the lack of response.

So she looked back to see him waiting for her to do whatever she decided. But there was something in his eyes—a longing, a pent-up desire—She threw herself on him, planting her mouth on his, and he held her gently in arms that encompassed her.

Geneve didn’t make it back to her own house that night. But the next morning, July 26th, she and he were seen walking to the notary shop together, and suspicions were confirmed when nosy persons asked to look at the book of marriage licenses.

Efran, Estes, DeWitt and his newest bookkeeping assistant Pieta were in the workroom when a fortress worker, Hosmer, stuck his head in the room long enough to say, “Yes sirs, Nares and Geneve just got married.”

They all stared after him as he walked away again, then they looked at each other. “What is going on here?” DeWitt said rhetorically.

“She’s been wanting to spar with him,” Efran said, smiling. Then his face grew wary. “Where are Wendt and Tess?”

Efran was looking suspiciously at Pieta, who had just asked DeWitt a question about the benevolences, when Tess led the Commander into the room. She seemed so calm and relatively happy that no one dared say anything for a moment. Wendt turned his head to listen. "Is no one here yet?"

Tess looked up in mild surprise at the silence, so the men all spoke at once. After the cacophony died away, DeWitt said, "We're just waiting to hear how you're getting along." Fortunately, he had drowned out Efran asking if they were married yet.

"No, Efran, we're not," Wendt said. Tess looked questioning and DeWitt covered his face with a hand.

Tourle paused at the door with a brief salute. "Messenger from Venegas, Captain, who's returned the horse and cart we loaned them."

Efran stood. "Yes, thank you." On his way out, he patted Wendt on the shoulder. "Don't do anything hasty."

"Thank you, son," Wendt said dryly.

In the receiving room off the foyer, the messenger from Venegas bowed to Efran. "Your cart has been returned, Lord Efran. Surchatain Clonmel has been put to rest, and the Council is now deciding who should rule in her place."

Efran replied, "I understand. My preference, if I may express it, would be for General Sewell. He prevented our armies from destroying each other after Clonmel tried to take my wife hostage. I would be honored to be his ally."

"I will repeat your words, Lord Efran. The Council sends thanks for your act of respect."

"You're welcome. Dismissed," Efran said. The messenger bowed and departed on horseback.

As Efran was coming back through the foyer, Minka ran in from the corridor with wide eyes. Seeing him, she merely changed her trajectory to leap on him with an exuberant kiss. He caught her to receive her kiss, despite being thrown back a half step.

She broke off before he wanted to disengage. He was leaning down for more when she said with shining eyes, "Geneve and Nares are married!"

"Yes, I heard," he smiled down at her.

"Polonti men are such wonderful lovers," she sighed.

At that, his brows drew down. "Wait, what? Who all do you know to be a wonderful lover?"

"Oh, Kelsey and I talked all about you and Estes," she said to his open mouth. Then she asked, "Do you think Tess would be good for Barr, or drag him down? I don't want him to be hurt again," she said critically.

"Let's—discuss it at dinner," he said, gesturing down the corridor toward the dining hall.

She turned in a flurry of skirts, mentally tabulating the positives and negatives of this particular match. "I saw her with the Commander in the gardens," she said thoughtfully.

“She’s been assigned to attend him for the time being,” he said absently.

The newlyweds did not show up in the dining hall that night; Gabriel did, because he was hungry. He rebuffed all questions about his sister and started shouting at people who continued to ask. Finally, he took his plate elsewhere to eat in peace.

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Chapter 10

Two days later, on July 28th, Minka received another letter from Justinian, merely three days after his last letter arrived and the letter from Moultrie had been sent to Cennick.

“My dearest Minka!

“The excitement is almost too much—I fear I may have to lie down tonight and miss Lady Clairvaux’s soirée in honor of Surchatain Cennick, but that would be heartbreaking. I will soldier on, somehow.

“Here it is: Lady Fanny is demanding to be named Surchataine upon her return to duty (so to speak) as Cennick’s adoring wife, with a monthly allowance of 1,000 royals. I dare say that’s more than the Gargoyle gives you, my sweet kitten, is it not? And such a sum may prove inconvenient for our dashing Surchatain.

“And! There seems to be a complication which may involve a courtesan who is in the family way, although no one here is repeating such a base rumor involving anyone alive at the palace in Eurus today.

“So there is all the news for now, my dear pet—no need to share any of it with the Gargoyle. You may look for me late on the 29th.

“Much love and many kisses,
“Your Own Justinian”

“Oh, dear!” Laughing all the way, Minka ran it up to Estes’ workroom. She entered in a whirlwind, looking at the raised faces, Efran’s among them. First she went to Wendt to kiss his cheek exuberantly. “Dear Commander, you’re looking well. You’ve gotten some sun! How are you?”

“Better than ever, Minka,” he said, smiling. He had just returned from a profitable walk and talk with Tess, who was wavering on her commitment to the army.

“I’m so glad. Dear Estes, and DeWitt—hello, Pieta! Are you enjoying the work? DeWitt is such a good man,” she said.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” she said, repressing a smile as she glanced at her superior. He exhaled, smiling but conflicted.

"I saw Kelsey and Malan this morning, Estes. Oh, he's so big! He and Joshua will get in so much wonderful trouble together," she exulted. From the moment she had entered the room, the letter in her hand had not ceased to flutter conspicuously.

"I expect so, Minka," Estes laughed quietly. Patiently smiling, Efran watched her and the letter.

So she flung herself into his lap to surrender it. "Read it to everyone, please," she said.

Settling her on his lap, he cleared his throat and read the letter aloud. There were a few chuckles, but the listeners were mostly quiet, picking up on the unwritten message. "Moultrie's letter to Cennick has been received, read, and leaked," Efran said.

DeWitt asked Minka, "Was the seal broken?"

"No," she said, turning to him.

"This Justinian is a clever man," Wendt murmured.

"Yes," Efran said. "There must be more he didn't want to put in writing in any form, which is why he's coming down." He snuggled her under his chin.

Minka said, "He's waiting. I hope he's careful. At least his title will help protect him."

Wendt leaned forward. "Did he receive his title from you, Efran?"

"Yes," Efran said, whereupon he had to give the Commander the whole crazy history of Justinian's relationship with the Abbey, including Graduliere, and Adele, and unexpected acts of heroism.

Wendt sat back to listen, then observed, "What an interesting effect this place has on people."

Minka sat up on Efran's lap. "You feel it, too, dear Wendt."

"Oh, yes, Minka. There's a—palpable energy here. Subtle, but real. And largely untapped power," he said thoughtfully.

Efran considered that. "How do we . . . tap into that?"

"I couldn't tell you," Wendt said. "I've never encountered anything like it before." He also got the sense of a dark, deeply buried power, but it was so vague that he decided not to mention it.

Minka turned to Efran to murmur, "The power flows when you need it." And he remembered killing Awfyn with a chance throw.

"I'm off," she said, rising from Efran's lap so abruptly that he missed in his attempt to catch her departing skirt.

"Why?" he asked.

She turned back with her devious smile. "Nares is returning to sparring lessons today." After marrying Geneve two days ago, neither he nor she had been seen on the practice grounds.

Efran rose to go with her.

They emerged from the fortress onto back gardens in full summer glory. Harvests of all kinds of vegetables and fruit were in progress. Minka pointed to the yet-growing pumpkins: “Little pumpkins.”

Efran stopped to look at them—small, sweet things, unblemished, with smooth skins, rounded sides, and delicate, curling tendrils—“You are a little pumpkin,” he admitted, and she grinned.

They walked over to the practice fields where the troops were just now gathering to watch the sparring. Since all of them had heard about Nares’ marriage, most of them were eager to try him out in his new frame of mind. Geneve walked over to sit near the front; the men made room for her, but no one dared ask her anything. That would fall to Minka later.

Nares then walked up to the front as usual, and the men sat up in anticipation. He was markedly relaxed and smiling—a state in which no one had ever seen him. He looked at Geneve, who smiled warmly at him, then he looked over to Efran on the sidelines. With Minka beside him, he shook his head slightly. So Nares looked over the crowd of men, from which scores of hands were raised.

He pointed, whereupon two men stood to argue about which one of them he had pointed to. Nares said, “You both come.” So they walked up to him together.

Nares put one man on either side of him, then said, “When this man [pointing at a man seated in front] says ‘go,’ you will both attack.”

Two of the three looked at the designated starter. Without turning his head, Nares observed the stances and distance of the two on his sides. “Go!” the man shouted.

Barely moving, Nares took out the man on his right with a blow to the stomach and the man on his left with a clip to the side of the head. They both dropped at once. The man on the right threw up and the man on the left lay still. Nares leaned over him, then turned to call, “Medic!” He was carried off, but awoke shortly with a headache.

“I am wrong,” Nares said regretfully. “We will take one man at a time to work on actions. Next.” He looked again at Efran, who smiled, glancing at Minka beside him. She threw an arm across his chest to prevent his accepting the invitation.

So Nares looked at the smattering of hands raised, and chose another man who came up sweating but ready. With him, Nares parried his blows and struck gently in response, accompanied by a running commentary on positions, stances, placement, timing. When Nares was done with him, he went back to his place, arms raised in victory that he was still on his feet. And Nares called for another.

After a productive hour, Nares bowed and withdrew to other duties. Minka ran to Geneve as she stood, grasping her hands. Efran had to watch from a distance as Minka breathlessly asked her, “Will you go with me to Croft’s for a little while?”

Geneve glanced down, but smiled. “Yes, of course. Let me find my captain—” But Neale, seeing her, waved her on.

“Thank you!” Minka breathed. Many smiling eyes watched her drag Geneve off the grounds toward the front courtyard. They murmured together while waiting for their horses.

On the way to Croft's, they spotted a new shop. Minka screeched quietly, "Look! Imelda's Beauty Potions!" They both laughed, then Minka said, "Wait a minute. I might need to stop and look around."

"Right," Geneve laughed. "I'll wait for you at Croft's."

"No, I'm coming," Minka said, but did glance back at it, to remember where it was.

And at Croft's, they two shared a whispered, giggly, confidential hour in a corner booth, shielded from all listeners. The young women finally left on horseback at a walk, still talking, to arrive at the fortress in time for dinner.

Efran was waiting for them, or rather Minka, at the door of the dining hall when they both appeared. As he took Minka's arm, he nodded, "Geneve," trying not to smile. But after an hour of hearing all about him, she smiled broadly. Smile fading, he glanced down at his innocent-looking wife.

When they sat with their plates of trout, squash, and candied marigolds, Efran leaned down to Minka's ear. "What did you and Geneve talk about?"

"You and Nares," she said, smiling at her plate.

He had to look up and reply to someone who made a comment to him. When it was safe to speak, he leaned down to her again to ask, "What did you say about me?"

She looked up at him with mischievous eyes while she toyed with a candied flower at her lips, tasting it bit by bit. As he watched her, his breathing altered. "That you're wonderful," she murmured. He turned to finish his plate quickly.

The following day—July 29th—the door sentry, Mohr, found Minka as she was bringing Joshua in from exercising in the sunny garden. Having been fed by Bethune before then, he was nodding himself to sleep. Mohr said, "Lady Minka, Croft has asked you and the Captain to come to his tavern. The Captain is otherwise obligated, so requests you go with the guardian that presents in the courtyard."

"Yes, of course," she said. "Let me put Joshua in the nursery. Do you know . . . why?" It was unusual, though flattering, for Efran to entrust something to her alone that he had been requested to see to.

"I believe it involves your sister, Lady," Mohr said uncomfortably.

"Ohhh," Minka said. "Yes, I'll be to the courtyard directly." He bowed and departed; Minka turned into the nursery to hand over the sleepy baby to one of the two attendants on duty. After the young girl took him, cooing, Minka glanced around at the quiet and orderliness—yes, the new matron, Nesse, was working out well.

Minka went out to the courtyard to find Tourse waiting with two horses. "Tourse! I am very happy to see you again. I understand this involves Adele." She paused with an inadvertent look of dread.

He bowed. "Lady Minka, between the two of us, we shall subdue the dragon so nicely that stained-glass windows will be crafted in our honor."

She laughed, mounting the horse brought to her. "We'll need spears. Dragon slayers always use spears, don't they?"

“Occasionally knitting needles, but Croft’s will have forks as well.” He leapt on his own horse. “Forward to battle, my lady.” She laughed, then sighed in reluctance.

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Chapter 11

Minka and Tourse gave up their horses at Croft’s, then went in to find a somewhat unruly crowd gathered at the bar. Croft’s voice was heard admonishing patrons to back away, then there was Adele’s luxurious laughter. Tourse cleared the way for Minka to push forward until she saw Adele sitting on the bar with her blouse hanging loosely off her shoulder. It was hard to tell if she were drunk or merely enjoying the scene she was creating.

Minka asked Croft, “How much has she had to drink?”

“Two ales, Lady Minka,” he replied—enough to make her giddy, but not drunk.

She gave him a royal, which was more than enough to cover the cost, then told him, “Tell your people that I will pay for her food, but nothing more for her to drink but water.”

“Yes, Lady. Thank you. Can you—encourage her to leave now?” he asked.

Minka nodded, raising her eyes as Adele looked at her through slitted lids. Tourse began smilingly nudging the men away. “Back off from the lady, gentlemen. I don’t want to hurt any of you.” They went back to their seats to watch from a distance.

Mentally searching, Minka looked around blankly for a moment. “Where are you working?” she finally asked. Adele laughed. Minka then asked, “Where are you staying?” It had been about a week since they had talked at Hassler’s shop. Again, Adele just looked at her with a mild snort.

Minka had almost given up in despair when she remembered something significant, something amazing, something applicable . . . from the Law of Roman.

Evaluating, she looked back at her sister and smiled. Adele narrowed her eyes at her, just daring her to try something. Minka took the dare.

“Come with me,” she said, stepping away from the bar. Adele chuckled at her. So Minka said, “If you won’t come with me willingly, I will have this soldier carry you. Which would you prefer?”

Tourse stepped up with a ready, willing and evil smile. Glancing at him, Adele slid down off the bar to walk beside her sister.

They went out to the posts where their horses were tethered. A crowd from the tavern gathered at a discreet distance to watch. Untying her horse, Minka said, “She’ll have to ride with you, Tourse. We’re going back up to the courtyard.”

“Yes, Lady,” he said. Before Adele could say a word, he had hefted her to sit on his horse behind his saddle. She

screached at him as he expertly mounted to sit in the saddle in front of her. The group from the tavern applauded, which he acknowledged with a nice gesture.

“Very good,” Minka said, turning her horse to trot up the road to the switchback. Tourse followed at a like pace, which was, of course, terribly uncomfortable for Adele, who complained loudly and shakily. And as her dress was not made for riding, she inadvertently showed a lot of leg. The tavern crowd followed as far as they could.

A modest contingent of soldiers was on hand at the gates to watch the three of them enter. Here Minka paused. Adele glared at her as Minka decided, “Bring her please, Tourse.”

“Certainly, Lady Minka,” he said as she directed her horse around the side of the fortress to the stables. Tourse followed with Adele still behind his saddle.

They surrendered their horses at the stables, then Minka began walking toward the practice grounds. With an eye on Adele to see that she accompanied him, Tourse trailed the lady. Approaching the grounds, Minka stopped a soldier. “I would like to speak to Lord Officer Nares. Please see if he is available.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, glancing at the two behind her. Then he set off at a sprint for the barracks.

Minka turned to smile at Adele, who was watching suspiciously, and at Tourse, who was watching in great interest. Shortly, Nares emerged from the barracks to stride quickly toward them. Minka began walking to meet him, and Tourse kept up with her. He had to stop and pivot for Adele, who was eyeing the master in apprehension.

Nares and Minka met in the middle of the practice grounds as soldiers gathered at a discreet distance. Nares bowed deeply to her. “Nares comes at my lady’s summons,” he said as if he were a servant.

“Thank you, Lord Officer Nares. Behind me is my sister Adele. My husband and I have been responsible for her for months now, yet she refuses to work or stay married to—anyone. Therefore, I am relying on the provision of Involuntary Servitude in the Law of Roman. I am asking you, Lord Nares, if you will find a buyer for her. The purchase price is zero. I am merely asking that she be treated humanely.”

He paused while everyone around gaped. Then he said, “You are . . . selling her as a slave?”

“Yes, basically,” Minka said.

“You can’t do that! Slavery is against the law! Call Efran!” Adele cried, and some of the men looked at Minka dubiously.

She turned to one of the men behind her. “Please go get the book of the Law of Roman from the library and bring it out here.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, and ran off.

Adele continued to scream at her, which drew a larger crowd. Looking between the sisters, they all waited through the hardest few minutes of Minka’s life. Nares was staring at the ground. Then Adele changed tactics to begin crying and pleading, “She’s going to sell me like a slave! This is just wrong. How could anyone be so cruel to family?”

This got results, in that the men looked hard at Minka, some glaring, some making unobtrusive fists. While

Nares' eyes were lowered, Tourse stood beside Minka to return icy stares to those around her. He had seen enough at the tavern to understand her dilemma. She glanced up in gratitude to him—the looks that she was getting from the men, some of whom she knew, would have frightened her if he weren't there.

Finally, the soldier came running to them with the great book. Following him was the Captain. At his approach, Adele sniffled, "Finally! Efran will help me. He understands." It took everything Minka had to not crumple then.

As the soldier drew up with the heavy book, Minka said in a slightly quavering voice, "Hold it, please, while I find the passage." He hefted the book for her to open and browse pages. She glanced up at Efran standing silently behind him. She was the one on trial here. With her mind a blank in the oppressive silence, it took her longer than she thought to find the needed page.

"Here it is," she said at last. Then in a stronger voice she read, "If a child or dependent of maturity, that is, of sixteen years or older, proves to be a burden to his parents or relations by refusing to work in an honorable profession, or by continually causing trouble or mischief, the party that is held responsible for him may consign him to involuntary servitude to another party for whatever length of time the responsible party shall ordain. The responsible party may ask for and receive whatever payment the purchaser agrees to. The child or dependent so consigned may appeal to the notary or ruler of the district in which the consignment occurs, whose decision shall be considered final."

Then she looked up at Efran. "Adele was creating a scene at Croft's, refusing to leave or pay for her ale. She won't tell me where she's working or who she's living with. So I am asking Lord Officer Nares to find a buyer for her."

Everyone looked at Efran while he regarded Minka with parted lips. Then he asked, "For how much?"

"Nothing," she replied.

He raised his brows, looked over and said, "Do it, Nares."

Nares saluted in response. "Yes, Captain." Efran then appropriated the book and walked back to the fortress with it. Nares turned to Adele. "Come with me."

She started screaming at him now: "No! And you keep your filthy paws off me, you—"

Nares said, "You will be quiet or be gagged." She fell silent at that command, gazing at him. Then he repeated, "Come with me."

He turned and walked away two steps as she stood frozen. So he turned back to say, "You will walk or be dragged." Huffing in anger, she went quickly to follow him.

They all watched Nares take her away. Then Minka lowered her head and began to cry. Shuddering with sobs, she turned to blindly begin walking back toward the fortress. Tourse ran to follow her, offering his arm, and she took it. The men soberly went back to their work.

When Minka and Tourse reached the back door of the fortress, she said, "Thank you, Tourse. I'm fine now. You're done."

"Yes, Lady," he said quietly, watching her walk in.

Minka went to the nursery to get Joshua, even though he was still asleep. She cuddled him to her chest, taking him to the quarters she shared with Efran. Then she laid him down in his crib and stretched out on the bed next to the crib to cry silently.

A minute later she heard the outer door open, so she sat up quickly and wiped her face. Efran came into the bedroom. He began, "I—I'm sorry to have left you—I didn't realize—"

"No, you did the right thing," she said quickly. "Had you stayed, Adele would have argued, or pleaded, or tried to get out of it. The best thing you could have done was what you did. I just didn't realize how hard it would be to sell my sister," she said, trying to laugh.

He sat on the bed beside her, chastened. He looked down at Joshua, still asleep, and said, "Actually, that was brilliant. I . . . had forgotten that section. But it fits. What was going on in the tavern?"

Minka said tiredly, "She was just making a spectacle of herself sitting on the bar, half undressed, drawing a crowd of men, as usual."

He gathered her to him. "I am very proud of you. That's the best thing that could happen to her at this point. And it was smart to ask Nares; he'll see that she gets placed with someone good."

"Whoever it is, she'll seduce him, then belittle him, then he'll give her back to Nares," she said dully.

"There'll be no refunds," he said firmly.

She laughed a little. "Thank you for supporting me. Adele had most of the men on her side," she said, stinging.

"Not now," he said.

A sentry came to the outer door. "Captain?"

"Yes," Efran said, getting up to go to the door and receive a summons elsewhere.

Minka lay down again and closed her eyes. She didn't know how long she slept, but woke when Joshua began making hungry noises.

Groggily, she rose and went down the corridor to a cold storage room for a bottle. As she was taking it back to her quarters, she heard behind her: "Lady." She turned to see Nares approaching. He drew up to her and bowed. "Lady Minka, your sister has been put with my lieutenant Wyeth. He will teach her and not hurt her."

"Thank you, Nares," she said, turning away.

"Lady," he said again, and she turned back. "I did wrong, to not take her away at once. I ask your pardon."

"Oh, no, Nares! You did the right thing to wait for the Law book and for Efran's word. No, you mustn't apologize for that, because there's no question now that it was the right thing to do." She sternly repressed the tears, being sick to death of crying over it.

He looked conflicted, and started swaying just like Efran did. That made her smile, and she said, "I love Geneve. I'm so glad you found each other." He looked mildly surprised. Then she stretched up to kiss his cheek. "I have to feed Joshua now."

While he stood dumbfounded, she turned and walked away, unaware that she had been observed. And the observer ran up the stairs.

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Chapter 12

“Lord Efran,” the custodian said.

“Yes,” Efran said, eyes still on the map of new eastern plots that DeWitt and Estes had finished. Looking up, Efran asked Estes, “How many does this make in all?”

Estes began a tentative answer but the custodian said, “Lord Efran, she kissed another man.”

The men stilled, and DeWitt began a slow burn. Efran began, “Haight, everyone knows by now that—”

“The new Polonti master,” Haight said, brow wrinkled. “He don’t know. He looked mighty taken.”

Exhaling, Efran tossed down the map and stalked out the door. “Efran!” both DeWitt and Estes shouted.

When Minka entered her quarters, Joshua was working up to a good cry, so she sat and fed him, talking to him. Once he drained the bottle, she put him to her shoulder. He burped rousingly, then opened his mouth in a baby laugh, and she laughed with him.

She heard the outer door open, but paid little attention, watching Joshua laugh. Efran came in abruptly to take him out of her arms and put him in his crib. She looked up in shock. His face was pale, and he was trembling slightly. “Minka.” He took her upper arms. “You must not kiss Polonti. They will misunderstand. They think a woman’s kiss means that you want to sleep with them.”

She stared at him. Her kiss on Nares’ cheek was such a spontaneous gesture, she didn’t even remember doing it. “You’re hurting me,” she whispered, stunned.

He let go. “Stop kissing men.” He raised his face in exasperation and turned out again.

Minka sat still as the ground crumbled under her feet. She started out the door, then paused to turn back to the baby trying to roll over in his crib. So she lifted him out, kissing him, and took him down to the nursery. She smoothed his fine black hair, handed him over to the attendant, then went out.

It was late afternoon. She went to the front courtyard to tell the gate sentry, Detler, “Get me a horse.”

“Yes, Lady,” he said, gesturing. He watched in mild concern as she waited stonily, looking down the main road. The stablehand brought a small mare that she often rode. She mounted, kicking her skirt out of the way to turn immediately down the switchback. “Lady—Lady Minka! Wait!” Detler cried. She was loping down the switchback with abandon.

Panicked, Detler cried, "Soldier! Get a rider after her!" But in late afternoon, no one having been summoned to ride with her, no one was immediately prepared to pursue her. Detler watched in consternation as she departed the switchback to ride directly up the main road. The wall gates stood open for traffic as usual, and she threaded her way past carts, wagons, and other riders to exit and disappear over the old stone bridge. Overhead, storm clouds were gathering, but she paid no attention.

In Estes' workroom, Efran was sitting with his head in his hands while he received a solid thrashing from DeWitt. "Stop listening to corridor spies who come tell you every little thing Minka does. She's a kisser. She kisses babies and horses and plants and cooks and Polonti. You will crush her if you try to force her to stop showing affection. You might as well choke the breath out of her."

"I know," Efran gasped. DeWitt fell silent, looking at Estes, who shrugged and nodded.

"Go apologize, son," Wendt said quietly.

"Yes, sir," Efran said, rising.

At that moment Towner came to the door. Previously a unit commander, he had been appointed one of Commander Lyte's captains. His bearing was so calm and grave that Efran, DeWitt and Estes looked at him in alarm. "Captain," he said, saluting. "The Lady Minka just now rode out of the gates up the main northbound road without an escort. Although we lost sight of her, Commander Lyte and Rigdon have ridden out in pursuit."

"Thank you, Towner," Efran said, barely audible. Lightning crackled outside, and sheets of rain began pelting the glass window.

While waiting for word from Lyte and Rigdon, Efran went to stand before the crucifix in the keep and contemplate his stupid and dangerous jealousy that had finally driven Minka away. He knew how fragile she was today, after having given up her sister to involuntary servitude, but he still berated her for doing what she always did. "God of heaven, forgive me. Bring her back safely please, and I will never be so careless with my treasure again." Head hanging, he turned to sit at the base of the crucifix.

Minka had passed through Westford when the first few raindrops began splattering the northbound road, already dark. She pulled up on the reins to slow the horse, who was breathing hard, and the rain began pouring down. "Oh, this is stupid. I'll never reach Marguerite's tonight," she murmured.

Looking ahead, she saw a carriage pull up on the side of the road for the driver to extend the leather top. The passenger got out to assist him in order to get it done quickly, so Minka tapped her horse to walk up to them. "And here you are saving me again," she said.

Justinian looked over. "Minka! What are you doing out here with no cloak and no Gargoyle? Get in! We'll tether the horse behind us."

"Thank you," she sighed. Dismounting, she climbed into the comfortable carriage while Justinian and his driver finished attaching the top. Justinian plopped in beside her, both of them wet, as the driver fastened an extender from the rear of the carriage to the horse's bridle. Then he quickly got into his cloak as the rain began coming down harder.

They passed through Westford without stopping, so never had a chance to see Lyte and Rigdon searching the streets, inns, taverns and shops that were still open. Justinian took off his hat to place it on the facing seat. Then he leaned back to regard his companion sympathetically. "My little Minka looks unhappy. What happened?"

“Oh, nothing, really. I got tired of the gossip and decided to ride up to see Marguerite,” she said, playing with her skirt.

“That was very foolish,” he said, sounding surprisingly unlike himself.

“I know. Don’t holler at me; I’ll get that when I get back,” she said. Then she looked at him quickly. “You said you were coming today! If you’re riding down instead of writing, it means you know something interesting. What?” The carriage lamp cast barely enough wavering light in their direction for them to see each other.

The rain was pelting hard on the leather top, so Justinian had to lean close to talk. “WELL. Lady Fanny has apparently gotten wind of the courtesan who’s carrying a Cennick, Junior, and has demanded that the lady and her spawn not be permitted anywhere in Eurus—which is directly contrary to his desires, of course. But Lady Fanny is his wife, whereas the other is not. SO, the situation is rather tense, and everyone who is not married to him or bearing his child is keeping a low profile.”

“Oh, dear,” she murmured.

“It gets worse. Lady Fanny, as you must know, has had her own share of dalliances with men who are not named Cennick, so he appears to be compiling a record of those as weaponry,” Justinian said.

“Oh NO,” Minka said. Then she mused, “I wonder if she gets in trouble for kissing other people on the cheek.”

Justinian puckered his lips, perceiving the problem that had made her desirous of running to Auntie Marguerite. “There’s a way of helping that, you know.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Lead with the hands,” he said. “When I’m coming upon a lady whose cheek I’d love to smooch but her hulking husband is standing behind her, I lead with my hands.” He demonstrated stretching out his hands in front of him. “When I get close enough to grasp the lady’s hands, I stop. That way my lips stay safely away from her cheek and I live to flirt another day.”

“I see,” she said, smiling. “Yes, I think I can do that. I think that would set poor Efran’s mind at rest.”

“Yes, I’d appreciate that,” he said in Efran’s voice. This set her laughing almost all the way to the Lands.

Shortly, the carriage pulled up to the Abbey Lands’ wall gates, where Justinian leaned around the carriage top far enough to be recognized by the gate sentry, who did not see Minka behind him. They pulled on through the gates and up the switchback in the pouring rain.

The driver got as close as he could to the fortress steps before hopping down to open the carriage door, but there was still a deluge between the passengers and the doors. While a sentry ran over to open the tall, iron-banded doors, Justinian grasped Minka’s hand to cry in Efran’s voice, “Run for all you’re worth, my little pumpkin!”

They bounded out of the carriage, ran up the steps, and careened into the foyer, dripping and laughing. Then they both looked up to see Efran slowly emerge from the keep.

The joviality died at once. “I’ll be in the receiving room drinking,” Justinian said, shaking off water before shutting himself in said room.

Minka lowered her head at Efran's approach. She began explaining, "He—gave me a ride back when the rain started coming down. I just met him accidentally on the road; we weren't anywhere together. I was just going—" She paused, realizing that if she kept talking, she would implicate herself in something that never happened.

She tensed when he put his arms around her. "Can you forgive me?" he whispered. His eyes were red, but he was not crying.

She did not look up. "Of course. I'm sorry I keep forgetting; I'll try to remember not to—"

"I don't care," he said. "You may kiss whoever you like. I—will conquer this jealousy. I will not let it kill your love for me—if you can still love me." He paused at the chilling realization that his fathering a baby by Adele was less of a threat than his possessiveness.

"Of course I love you," she said, putting her arms around him so that he got almost as wet as she was. He was careful not to look in her eyes because he didn't think he could survive seeing the adoration gone again.

The foyer doors blew open again for Lyte and Rigdon, drenched and discouraged, to enter. When they saw Efran and Minka standing before them, they exhaled, smiling. "Thank God," Rigdon uttered.

"My day ends upon success," Lyte said, saluting, "Captain."

As Rigdon saluted, Efran nodded. "Thank you. Go get you dinner."

"Yes, sir," Lyte said. "Lady Minka," he bowed, dripping.

"Thank you, Lyte. Rigdon," she murmured, chagrined. She had lit out without regard for the certainty that someone would be out searching for her.

The men passed on through the foyer. Efran turned back to Minka, gently taking her hand. "Will you come in to dinner?" he asked, jaw working.

She very much did not want to, but could see that it was important to him. "Yes, of course," she said, drooping. "Um, I need to change," she added, gesturing to the puddle at her feet.

"Oh. Yes. I'll wait out here," he said, walking her to their door.

"Thank you." With the inevitable before her, she went in to throw off her heavy, wet riding dress and yank on a dry one. She reemerged within seconds.

He clutched her hand. Periodically, he remembered to loosen his grip so that he wouldn't hurt her, but his fingers invariably tightened again as they walked the short distance to the dining hall. She said nothing.

He took her into the hall to sit her at a table in the back, where they usually sat. Feeling eyes on her, she kept her head down. But Efran did not sit; he began threading his way to the front of the hall amid people who wanted to clap his shoulder or speak to him. Minka glanced up; of course, they were all congratulating him on her return. She lowered her eyes again, just wanting to crawl under the table.

Someone bent down beside her; Minka started as Geneve hugged her shoulders tightly, whispering, "You are such a dear."

Minka looked at her in bewilderment. Behind Geneve, Nares was looking at Minka in a way that made her slightly uncomfortable.

Efran finally made it to the front of the hall, where he faced the diners. “I’d like your attention for a moment,” he said. The din died immediately, as he was hardly speaking loudly enough to be heard halfway through the hall. In a stronger voice, he said, “I have a—general announcement to make. I appreciate that you want me to be aware of everything that goes on in the fortress, but—some things are now . . . off limits. Unless you are a bodyguard, I will hear no more concerns about what my wife is doing. She is permitted to be—unguarded in her own home. If I am confronted again with criticism of her, I will put someone out of the fortress. And it won’t be her. Thank you.”

As he turned away, several people—including Geneve—began clapping, and immediately the hall was filled with energetic applause. Finally dropping tears, Efran went to the back row where Minka jumped up to kiss him, and he bent to cry in her hair.

His self-humiliation in making what amounted to a public apology to her unleashed some strange power. The number of hugs and kisses that occurred between various people in the hall at that time cannot be tabulated. Justinian, wandering in, found the scene so compelling that he had to join in the fray, and Minka was an early target. But he was the only male besides Efran who dared kiss her, even on the cheek.

Nares got kissed on his cheek so frequently that he began to enjoy it a little too much, so that the last several women who kissed him got a return kiss on the lips. Seeing this, Geneva called a halt to it. Then he and she were seen to have quiet but vehement words.

Tess kissed Barr twice forcefully enough for him to finally kiss her back. Other people who had been too shy to even speak to someone else who made their heart beat faster now found the perfect opportunity to express a little love. And some people forgave other people wholly. When Efran finally looked in her eyes, he found the adoration undimmed.

After dinner, Minka and Efran held each other in bed while the rain beat on the stained-glass window. “I can’t believe you went to the front of the room to tell everyone to shut up about me,” she murmured.

“It was overdue,” Efran said. “But now they’re on alert, and so am I. Minka, I—I—”

“No more apologizing, Efran. We both know better what to do.” When she raised up to look over the side of the crib, he had to fight with himself to let her go. *This is bad*, he thought bleakly.

When he didn’t hold her down, she turned back to cuddle him. “Did I tell you that Joshua laughed at me today?”

“Did he? Really?” he asked, lifting up.

“Yes! Next time he does, I’ll see if I can get him to hold it long enough for me to run him up to you,” she said happily.

“Thank you. Thank you,” he breathed. *God of heaven, thank You for second chances.*

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Chapter 13

Justinian had to wait till the following day to give his report, as Efran had made himself unavailable after dinner. But that day, July 30th, they sat in the receiving room off the foyer for Justinian to tell Efran everything he had told Minka in the carriage last night.

“Who will win, in your opinion?” Efran asked.

“Unless Lady Fanny has more weaponry up her sleeve, Cennick will. He has the power,” Justinian said, upending an ale.

“Then Moultrie needs to stay here,” Efran mused.

“Oh, yes,” Justinian agreed.

“But Cennick wants her in Eurus,” Efran muttered.

“It’s not safe for her,” Justinian objected.

“So I’ll just have to put him off,” Efran said. Justinian nodded, and Efran asked, “What are your plans?”

“Oh, I must get right back up,” Justinian said. “Have my letters to you been opened?”

“No, all the recent letters have been unread,” Efran said.

“That is good to know,” Justinian said.

They were quiet a moment, then Efran, looking down, said, “Thank you for bringing Minka home last night.”

“She was on her way back. I just saved her from getting wet, or, very much wetter,” Justinian corrected himself.

“Did she . . . tell you why she rode off?” Efran asked reluctantly.

“Not precisely. She was upset for having upset you, is about all I could tell,” Justinian said indifferently.

Looking off, Efran said in a low voice, “It will not happen again.”

Justinian raised his brows. “Good.”

But as of that morning, there had been a development of which Justinian—and everyone else—was unaware. Cennick and Fanny, concluding a successful reconciliation in bed, were discussing the problem of Moultrie. “I don’t care about her, but I want the baby,” he complained.

Fanny, who did not want to be required to give Cennick a baby, was sympathetic. “Well, that’s so easy. Just go get her and bring her up here until she has it.”

“You want to tell me how to get past Efran?” he asked tightly.

“You don’t have to. My contacts there tell me that she’s back working at Elvey’s. Just send someone down there—not soldiers, just one person—to ask for her and bring her up here,” Fanny said.

Illumination filled him. “Then after she has the baby—”

“You can get rid of her however you want,” she whispered, pressing up against him.

“Of course,” he laughed, and embraced her again.

Today was also the first day of Adele’s new position as involuntary servant. After sleeping in a spare room on a pallet at Nares’ and Geneve’s house, she was taken by Nares to the barracks, where he handed her over to his lieutenant Wyeth, also a Polonti. He was younger than Nares, probably Efran’s age (28) and nice-looking, for a Polonti.

“I will get her in, then return, Master,” Wyeth said. Nares grunted assent, waving him away.

From the hilltop barracks, Wyeth walked Adele down to a small house on the plots. He let her in to sparsely furnished but clean rooms. Adele glanced around listlessly, then said, “I haven’t had breakfast yet.”

“Oh.” Scrounging in the small kitchen, he pulled out some stale bread and poured a cup of flat wine. Adele ate and drank all of it, then raised her blue eyes to him.

“I need to bathe,” she murmured, parting her lips.

“I know,” he said, wrinkling his nose slightly, and Adele blinked. “Here.” He took her to a small back room which held a half-bath. There were cloths and towels and soaps as well. He picked up a wooden bucket to hand to her. “The well is close, at the corner.”

She sighed, looking at his nice shoulders. “I’m not very strong,” she murmured.

“You will get strong,” he said, half-laughing as he dropped the bucket at her feet.

The front door opened, and Wyeth immediately went over to take a canvas bag of produce off the arm of the Polonti woman who entered. Seeing Adele, her face screwed up in mild disgust. “This is it?” she asked.

“She cost nothing, Peri,” Wyeth shrugged, taking the bag to the little kitchen. They spoke in the Polonti language.

“I see why,” she said. Adele glared, catching the gist of their conversation. The woman unloaded the rest of the bags she carried in the kitchen.

“You will have fun,” he assured her, leaning over for a kiss. “Peri,” he whispered, “Nares has promised me more pay. We should marry. Important men here marry their women.”

“Hmm,” she said skeptically. “Let us see if Nares keeps this promise.” She wrapped her arms around his neck to give him a nice send-off. “Bring me fish today.”

“I will,” he promised, disappointed. Adele watched in dismay as he left.

The woman, Peri, turned to curtly order, “You stink. Go bathe.”

Adele shrugged. “There’s no water.”

Peri peered at her. “You draw water, stupid.”

“I’m not strong enough,” Adele protested warily.

“Oh!” Peri exploded. She grabbed up a slender bundle of reeds to begin whipping Adele about the face and arms. It stung, but left no marks. “Bucket! Well! Now!” Peri ordered. Adele shrieked while the woman chased her to the back room. Grabbing the bucket, Adele ran out of the house while Peri prompted her with the reeds.

That morning, when Bethune had finished nursing Joshua, she brought him to Minka and told her, “He should be ready to start solid foods, dear. Pick some ripe fruit—blueberries are excellent—and mash them up well. See if he’ll take a bite or two.”

“Oh, that’s a wonderful idea. Thank you, Bethune,” Minka said. While Bethune went elsewhere, Minka took Joshua to the nursery, then stopped by a storage room for a small basket. This she took with her down the back corridor.

There, she saw Nares step in. This surprised her, as she knew he had morning duties. Looking up, he saw her and smiled. “Minka. I found you.”

“Hello, Nares,” she said cautiously.

He came up close to her, and she backed away. “Where you going?” he asked, catching her around the waist.

She dropped the basket. Behind him, someone else entered the corridor from outside. “Nares, let go of me please,” she said shakily.

“But I want to hold you,” he said, drawing her into him. “You kissed me.”

Her face drained at the sudden realization that Efran might have been right about not kissing Polonti men. “It was just—No! Stop it, Nares! Let go of me!” He was nuzzling her face and neck, holding her up against him.

As she started crying, trying to push him away, she heard Connor’s voice behind him: “Master Nares, they’re waiting to see you spar. You may have a new challenger today.”

“Oh?” Nares turned, loosening his hold on her. Minka tore away to run to the nursery.

Nares waved at her fleeing back, then went out into the yard. Connor looked after Minka. Sighing in dismay, he began ascending the stairs to the second floor.

When he appeared at the open door of Estes’ workroom, Efran, Estes and DeWitt looked up from the maps spread before them. Estes halted mid-sentence at Connor’s face. Upon the sudden silence, Commander Wendt turned his head. “Captain,” Connor said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. Efran slowly rose to a stand.

“Minka did nothing wrong,” Connor blurted. “Nares caught her in the lower corridor, and, tried to, ah, but, I distracted him with the sparring, and she got away.”

“Is she all right?” Efran asked quietly.

“Yes, Captain, just shook up. She ran to the nursery,” Connor said.

“Thank you, Connor. I’ll take care of it.” With a vague smile, Efran began to calmly walk out.

“May I come?” Connor asked.

“Yes,” Efran said over his shoulder. Then he was gone, with Connor following.

“Get me out there,” Wendt ordered, standing. DeWitt and Estes quickly came forward.

Efran exited the back door of the fortress, turning toward the sparring yard in the distance with Connor following about six feet behind. Connor didn’t wish to follow closer, giving the impression of a second. This was all the Captain’s show.

Toby, Noah, Ivy and their friends Erastus and Hassie saw Efran come out the back door to walk in a clear direction. Recognizing something dangerous in his stride, Toby started following him, and they followed Toby. The undergardener Tourjee, who felt responsible for the children when they were on the grounds, saw them run off. He went after them, calling. The head gardener Garrett, seeing Tourjee leave his assigned duty, looked over at Lord Efran striding purposefully. Garrett dropped his spade.

Greves, the soldier in charge of stable maintenance, always kept an eye on sparring matches, but today he watched in heightened interest. Squirt came up beside him, seeing the Captain’s approach. Greves pushed the boy lightly away. “Get back to work.”

“Yes sir,” Squirt said, not moving a muscle but for his eyes to follow the Captain.

Nares, standing at the front of the practice field, looked over in hope at Efran’s advance. The lines of men seated on the ground before him watched in anticipation: the Captain always provided Master Nares with an entertaining bout. Martyn, sitting on the sidelines, stood in concern. He perceived the aggression in Efran’s walk, which was not at all how he approached a sparring match.

A few other soldiers who knew Efran well also saw the danger signs. Gabriel squinted in wonder, especially seeing Connor follow diligently. “What the—?” He looked over at his sister Geneve in sudden concern.

Arne, seeing the Captain come, abruptly laughed. Lwoff, with his acute sense of impending calamity, ran from the armory outside the fence to hang on the railing. “‘Ey, Cap’n!” he cheered.

Efran’s hazy smile broadened as he drew up to the Master. When Nares fully turned to him, Efran twisted to bring his booted right foot up solidly between Nares’ legs. Many of the men gasped; a few bent over in sympathetic pain. This was no way to start a sparring match.

As Nares buckled, Efran began punching him very hard in the face. Again, he was not sparring; he was beating furiously. Despite Nares’ thick neck muscles, his head bounced back with each blow. When he got his fists up to protect his face and half straightened, Efran lowered his sights to drive body-powered punches into his gut. Nares doubled over and Geneve half rose in horror.

Admirably, Nares rose to fight, getting a clean, if subdued, jab in to Efran’s stomach. Shaking it off, Efran

grabbed his fist with both hands and twisted it, kicking Nares' leg out from under him to bring him crashing to the ground—a move Master Nares had taught him. When Nares rolled onto his front, Efran stomped on his lower back, provoking a groan from the master. As the men watched in uneasy fascination, Lwoff's high-pitched laughter pierced the thumps and grunts.

Efran bent over to grab Nares' hair and lift his head. Leaning down to his ear, Efran hissed, "Minka is not available." Nares grunted in acknowledgment; Efran shoved his bleeding face into the ground and walked off, attended by dumbfounded silence.

Geneve lurched to a stand and angrily began running after him. Connor blocked her. Holding her arms, he said, "There's a reason." She glared at him briefly, then turned to run to the front of the lines instead and kneel beside her husband, who was slowly getting up.

As Connor turned away, he found Gabriel blocking his path. "Tell me," he said quietly. Shrugging in reluctance, Connor did. A few around were listening, so within minutes, almost everyone knew the reason. With sparring done for the day, the soldiers went back to work.

When Efran stopped at the well to wash blood off his hands, Noah said to the other children, "Let's go ask him"—continuing a debate about what they had just seen.

Toby said, "No, let him cool off. We'll find out later." And his wise words were absorbed by others standing around, who slowly resumed their duties.

Efran's administrators returned to the second-floor room with the Commander. On the way, they finished narrating to Wendt the short, one-sided fight. "That's old Polonti reckoning," Estes murmured. "Nares will understand. He'll never touch her again."

They had reseated themselves around the workroom by the time Efran walked in, shaking his hand. "I may have broken a few fingers," he muttered. Then he looked over at the surveyor's drawings. "What have you decided about the caverns?"

Minka, oblivious to all this, emerged warily from the nursery to see the back corridor clear, and decided that Nares had probably gone to his work. So she picked up the dropped basket to resume her quest for fresh fruit. But Geneve entered abruptly through the back door. Minka stopped dead. Seeing her, Geneve came up to ask bluntly, "What happened with Nares?"

Open-mouthed, Minka whispered, "Why?"

"Efran just came out and beat him into the ground," Geneve said tightly.

Struck dumb in horror, Minka stared at her, then dropped the basket to run up the stairs. She ran down the second-floor corridor to the workroom. Wheeling into the open door, she gazed at Efran seated calmly at the table. He looked up, mildly questioning.

She launched herself with a cry onto his lap. He leaned back to wrap her in his arms, inhaling in contentment. Whatever motivated her to jump him, he welcomed it. Holding him tightly around the neck, she cried, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll never kiss another man!"

"Shh. It's all right," he said, smiling over her head. "It was fun."

She pulled back, gasping, “Are you hurt?”

“I may have broken a couple of fingers,” he said, tentatively working the fingers of his right hand.

“Oh!” She jumped up to grab his left hand. “We’ll get Wallace to look at you right away.” So he allowed her to authoritatively lead him out. DeWitt and Estes looked at each other.

With the perception of the blind, Wendt laughed, “And there’s the other reason.”

About half an hour later, Minka returned him to the workroom. Upon entering, she announced, “Wallace thinks they’re only sprained, but he splinted them just in case.” She held up Efran’s right hand, with the two center fingers wrapped. “Oh, hello, dear Commander. I can still kiss you. But no one else. Except Malan,” Minka rambled.

Still flustered, she sat Efran in a chair. “I’ll come check on you later. But Bethune thinks Joshua can start on solid food, so I need to gather blueberries to mash up for him.” She kissed him tenderly, then pressed her forehead to his. “Oh. I’m such an idiot,” she moaned.

“No, now, hush. You can’t help being desirable,” Efran said, brushing her hair back with splinted fingers.

“I can help *kissing men*,” she said, grieved. Then she went right over to kiss the Commander’s cheek. “How are you? Where is Tess?” she asked, looking around.

“I’m doing well, Minka. Tess has decided she doesn’t need to be in the army, so she’s helping train horses, and seems to be doing it well,” Wendt said.

“Oh, I’m glad. Then would you like to come out to the gardens with me? I still need to gather blueberries to mash up for Joshua,” she said.

“I would love to, Minka.” He stood, and she held his arm on the way out.

The three men watched them go, then DeWitt leaned back in his chair. “So it was fun, was it?”

Efran, still smiling, turned his eyes back to him. “Yes.”

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Chapter 14

Discovering that Adele had no other clothes to wear besides the filthy dress she had on, Peri gazed at her in curiosity. “Who are you? Where have you been living?”

“I am the sister of Lord Efran’s wife. I used to live in the fortress,” Adele said, wounded.

“Ah hahahaha!” Peri screeched in laughter, then went digging among her old clothes. “Here.” She tossed Adele a baggy old dress. “Put that on after you clean up. Now go!”

“I need lingerie,” Adele said with dignity.

Peri squinted. “Lawnsheyay? What is this?” She had a strong Polonti accent, as that is what she and Wyeth usually spoke.

“Underclothes,” Adele said through gritted teeth.

Peri looked at Adele’s hips and laughed hysterically. “I have nothing that you will fit—you are too fat! Now get bathed. You stink up the house!” She took up the reeds to encourage Adele to pick up the bucket and take it out. Adele grabbed it to run out the front door.

Once out of the house, she looked around for the supposed well, and saw it way down at the end of the road. “What?” She dropped the bucket and baggy dress, groaning. “I’m not carrying a bucket back and forth to that stupid well. . . .”

Past the next block, she saw Mouris’ plant shop. Leaving the bucket and the dress, she crossed over the road to look. In the open front area, the shelves were stocked and orderly, but no one was here. So Adele went back toward the living quarters. The door was shut but unlocked. She opened it and went in.

In the bedroom beyond the front room, a young woman was asleep in the bed. In the attached bath, a tub was filled and waiting. So Adele quietly stripped, bathed, and washed her hair. She then riffled the chests to find lingerie, some of which were hers (that Mouris had bought). The closet yielded several dresses, also hers (that Mouris had also bought). She appropriated these, plus shoes and a velvet bag. She also took a brush and a few other grooming implements. Without taking the time to use them right now, she put everything in a large canvas tote.

On her way out, she picked up her dirty clothes from beside the tub to carry them away. The girl was still asleep. Then, on a thought, Adele stopped at the shop’s back room. Here, she rummaged in Mouris’ various hiding places (which he thought so clever) and took out his locked money box. Needing nothing to unlock it but a hairpin (which she’d left in the top drawer of the desk back here), she unlocked the box and flipped it open.

“Why, hello,” she breathed at the numerous royals lying here, beckoning, crying out to be taken. (These Efran had given Mouris in compensation for Adele’s disastrous effect on his business after he had taken her in, and all.) After putting a few in the pocket of her dress, she emptied the whole box into the velvet bag, which she replaced in the canvas tote.

Leaving Mouris’ shop the way she had come, she tossed her dirty old dress and bloomers into a yard of goats, then walked down to Croft’s Tavern. Here, she paid for and received a nice beef stew and ale. She ate quickly and quietly, ignoring all looks, gestures and comments.

Upon leaving Croft’s, she returned to Wyeth’s house—a one-level structure with a small back lot. Having briefly occupied this house before, she was familiar with it. So before going inside, she paused to look over the lot.

It was untended, for the most part, with a small statue of some silly naked Polonti figure in the corner that had not been here before. Glancing around discreetly and seeing no one within view, Adele tilted the plaster statue to find that it was hollow, with just enough room inside for her velvet bag of royals. This she stuffed into the statue, then righted it on its stand.

With the royals in her pocket, Adele went back to the front of the house to pick up the bucket with the old baggy dress stuffed in it. When she walked in the door, Peri met her immediately with the reeds. “Where have you—” Her tirade was cut short as she stared at Adele’s dress.

Dropping the bucket, Adele said, "I'm terribly worn out today. Do you mind if I take the day off?" Then she laid a royal on the table and sank wearily into a chair.

Peri picked up the coin to study it. "This is real. Who did you steal from?" she demanded.

"It's mine. I just wasn't able to get it until today," Adele said languidly. "May I have a cup of wine, please?"

Peri regarded her suspiciously, but poured her a cup.

When Efran and Minka walked into the dining hall that evening, everyone looked over. He was relaxed and smiling, with a hand at her back as she carried Joshua. "He's laughing, but I can't ever get him to do it when you can see it," she was saying.

"Then I had better stay with you," he said, lifting his chin at Dobell, Madea's top assistant cook. Knowing what they preferred, Dobell brought Efran a plate of beef and vegetables with his ale; Minka got the fresh fruit of the day and chicken with her ale, which she seldom finished.

With the privilege of adoption, the children were the first to converge on Efran. Hassie (who had not yet decided on her forever family) climbed right up on Efran's lap to announce, "You are the strongest one here."

"Not really. I have to do whatever Minka tells me to," he said, negotiating his forkful around the child. He looked at Minka to make sure he caught the flash of adoration in her eyes, which he never got tired of seeing.

"Will the fight master have to leave, Efran?" Toby asked, close at his side.

"Oh, no," Efran said, glancing up at him. "It was just good Polonti fun." Numerous ears nearby were listening.

"Will you teach me to fight like that?" Noah demanded.

Efran shook his head. "You'd hurt me, Noah, then we'd both get in trouble with Minka."

The children laughed, and Minka cried, "There! Look!"

Heads swiveled to see Joshua with a wide-open grin, and he uttered, "Uhhnh!" The children (and a few others watching) laughed again, so Joshua waved with his next belly laugh.

Wendt entered on the arm of his attendant Clough. Minka, seeing him, exclaimed, "Oh, sit by me, dear Commander. The children are making Joshua laugh!"

"I heard, but thought it was Efran," Wendt said, sitting as directed by Clough, who then left to get their plates.

"Good evening, sir," Efran said, looking around Minka to him. In the eight days since they had brought him to the fortress from Venegas, he looked so much healthier.

"Efran," Wendt returned. "If you had fought like that under me, we'd have taken over the Southern Continent."

"I couldn't. I didn't have Minka then," Efran said before taking a swig of ale. He glanced at her to bask in the light from her eyes.

Erastus appeared suddenly behind them. “They got the new ponies in!”

The children around Efran scattered. In bounding off his lap, Hassie upended his ale all over him. He looked to Minka for sympathy, and she put her nearly full bottle in front of him. In compensation, he gave her his nearly empty one.

Martyn sat in the newly vacant place on the bench to Efran’s left. He looked over as Martyn said in low voice, “Some of the new Polonti think you will dismiss Master Nares now.”

“Oh, no,” Efran said. “He’s more valuable than ever.”

Martyn wasn’t entirely reassured. “Is Minka all right?” he asked in a near whisper.

“You tell me.” Efran leaned back to give him a clear line of sight to her.

Martyn looked past him at Minka holding Joshua, laughing to the Commander about something. Catching sight of Martyn, she broke into a glittering smile before her face abruptly darkened. “Martyn! Oh, dear, you look different by the day. Please don’t become a grown man so fast; I love you as a boy so much.”

“I will try, Minka,” he smiled back at her.

Other men who passed their table nodded or saluted Efran. He smiled and returned their greetings, and they regarded his wrapped fingers. After an all-out fight with Master Nares, that’s all he had to show for it. But he’d had the element of surprise, which he had fully exploited—unfairly, some thought, for sparring. Then again, he wasn’t sparring, but justifiably defending his wife’s honor.

That evening, Efran enjoyed his wife thoroughly, who thoroughly loved him back. Snuggling down into him, she murmured, “I’m glad I didn’t see it.”

Efran’s eyes barely cracked. “You wouldn’t have enjoyed it nearly as much as I did. Polonti fight for entertainment, but I usually have to be careful not to hurt someone. Today I didn’t.” He exhaled in satisfaction.

She lifted up. “Were you that angry with him? He didn’t hurt me, Efran.”

He lay back to regard her. “Good, because then I would have killed him. We Polonti need clear boundaries, Minka. I had very clear lines around young girls, but no one ever thrashed me for having his wife. Nares had to learn that some married women are not to be touched.”

“I hope you didn’t hurt him badly,” she murmured.

“Geneve will be mad at me for a while. But that’s part of his training,” he said, closing his eyes again.

“Poor Geneve,” she mused, almost asleep. “She’s the one who would kill him.” He didn’t reply, and she was soon asleep as well.

At that time, Geneve was sternly rebuking Nares for having grabbed Minka. This only made him angrier, as he was not used to anyone telling him what he could do, especially a woman. Then they discovered that he and she had very different ideas about what being married meant—he considered it pretty much the same as taking on a new recruit; she thought it meant he couldn’t touch *any* other woman.

After having placated her with a few grudging words, he lay in bed, stewing.

The worst part of it was being humiliated in front of all the men. This made him burn. But the answer to that was very simple, and he would arrange it at once. He relaxed in satisfaction, his thoughts turning to the pretty maid who worked in the small dining room, and he smiled.

On the day following, July 31st, Efran and Estes were rolling up cavern maps to take with them to the eastern section when the door sentry Graeme came up to the workroom. "Pardon, Captain. Mouris would like your ear."

"Again." Efran drooped. "Bring him up here."

"Captain." Graeme saluted and disappeared.

Dropping the maps back to the table, Efran told Estes and DeWitt, "Whatever he wants, the answer is no. Hold me to that."

They wryly agreed. Commander Wendt was out with Commander Lyte and his new captains hearing their questions about the division of units, protocols, pay, record-keeping, and all the minutia of organizing an army.

Graeme escorted Mouris to the workroom and stood back in the doorway. Efran, sitting on the edge of the table, barely opened his mouth before Mouris exclaimed, "Adele stole most of the fifty royals you gave me!"

All three men stared at him, and Efran finally said, "Well, shake her until she lets go of them."

"I don't know where she is," Mouris said, and waited.

"I don't either," Efran said. "I'm very sorry." Turning to take up the maps again, he said, "I'm ready to go, Estes."

Mouris began shouting and DeWitt said to him, "Wait. Be quiet. Just out of curiosity, how do you know it was Adele?"

"Because she took a bath and stole some dresses as well," Mouris said.

The men squinted at him, and DeWitt said, "Were you too much of a gentleman to stop her until she had dressed and left with your money?"

"No, no," Mouris said impatiently, "I never saw her. Neither did my assistant. But the bath water was used and the dresses were gone."

Efran looked expectantly to DeWitt, who said, "Then you don't know that it was Adele, in fact."

"Yes, it had to have been! Because she knew where my money box was," Mouris argued.

"When was she there last?" DeWitt asked curiously.

"About—a month ago," Mouris said.

“And she left because . . . ?” DeWitt asked.

“She was sleeping with another man on my sheets,” Mouris said angrily.

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Chapter 15

“All right,” DeWitt said. “Adele left a month ago under disreputable circumstances, and you never bothered since then to change where you kept your money box. How did she get in?”

Mouth hanging open, Mouris said, “The door may have accidentally been left unlocked.”

“Who was at your shop?” DeWitt asked.

“My assistant,” Mouris said. “She was working at Elvey’s but decided she needed more interaction with people and came over to me,” he added unnecessarily.

“Well then, why didn’t your assistant stop her? Or say something?” DeWitt asked.

Mouris’ eyes glazed over slightly. “She may have been asleep.”

“Sleeping? In your shop?” DeWitt asked.

“In the rooms in back,” Mouris clarified.

“Which room was she sleeping in?” DeWitt asked.

“The bedroom,” Mouris said.

“Where Adele took a bath?” DeWitt asked. Efran and Estes were just enjoying the give and take, at this point.

“No, the bath is attached,” Mouris said.

“To the bedroom,” DeWitt said.

“Yes,” Mouris said.

“So your assistant can positively identify Adele as the thief?” DeWitt asked.

Again there was that glazed look. “She didn’t wake until Adele was gone,” Mouris said slowly.

“Then how do you know your assistant didn’t take the money?” DeWitt asked.

“She doesn’t know where I keep it,” Mouris said firmly.

“But the woman who left a month ago does,” DeWitt said. Mouris just breathed.

There was a period of silence, then Efran said, “The procedure for a criminal accusation is to file a complaint with the notary. He’ll investigate it, and—”

“I want reimbursement of the money she stole,” Mouris said firmly.

Efran said in a low voice, “Why should you expect that of me?”

“She’s your wife’s sister,” Mouris said as the end to all arguments.

Efran’s eyes got hard. “I am not responsible for Adele. But you are responsible to lock your shop and secure your money.”

He had lifted his face to Graeme when Mouris said, “Just tell me where she is.”

“I. Don’t. Know,” Efran repeated slowly.

“Is she here on the Abbey Lands?” Mouris asked.

“I hope not, but *I don’t know*. Get him out,” Efran finished to Graeme.

Before Graeme could take his arm, Mouris stalked out. But he became a man with a mission: to find Adele and recover his royals. Of the fifty that Efran had given him, he still had seven (after having spent three) which, frankly, was plenty for him to run his shop until he should recover. But the loss of forty royals was enough to plunge anyone into monomania. So while his assistant ran his shop, Mouris began hunting for Adele.

That day, Adele began her first full day in involuntary servitude to Nares’ lieutenant Wyeth and his woman Peri. So after Peri had kissed Wyeth goodbye that morning, she turned to Adele, brandishing the reeds. “You had a nice rest yesterday. Today it’s work.”

“I’m still so weak from all the hardships I’ve endured, being thrown out of the fortress so unkindly and all,” Adele said, studying her chapped hands. “So I will give you a royal every week that you let me just rest and recuperate.”

“You gave me one for only yesterday,” Peri said watchfully.

“That was just to show you I have them. How much does Wyeth earn in a week, anyway?” Adele asked. She guessed, correctly, that it was less than thirty silver pieces, which equaled a royal.

Peri wavered. “You have to pay in advance.”

Shrugging, Adele put a hand in the pocket of her dress and pulled out a royal, which she placed on the table. “That’s for a full week. Seven days,” Adele said. Peri eyed her, then took up the royal and turned away.

Adele lounged until Peri left the house, then she went back to the small room that had been given her. She remembered this house and particularly this room. Moving aside the pallet, Adele stepped tentatively around the floor until a certain floorboard gave slightly. She went to the kitchen for a knife which she brought back to gently pry up that floorboard, revealing a hiding place. She smiled in satisfaction.

Then she went outside to putter in the yard, waiting until no one was in view. She tilted the little statue to remove

the velvet bag, which she took to her room. Here, she tucked it in the earthen space under the floorboard, after removing just a few more royals to the pocket of her dress. She replaced the floorboard as it had been and dragged her sleeping pallet (ugh!) back over it.

To reward herself for such a successful undertaking, she walked to Croft's for a nice midday meal. After she was seated at the bar and had ordered an ale and the day's stew, the barkeeper said, "Heya, Adele, what've you done? Mouris was just here asking if anyone had seen you."

Her heart skipped a beat, but she said languidly, "He misses me, the poor dear."

The barkeeper laughed, "Aye, and he also misses his fifty royals he says you stole. And he's offering a reward to anyone who brings you in to him."

"Really. What an ass," she said. But she ate quickly, and then ordered three bottles of ale, bread, and a crock of stew for the morrow.

When she paid for all this with a royal, the barkeeper looked at it, then at her, with an ugly laugh. "Just get me my change, Ackley," she said. He did, but glanced up at two men who had entered.

Taking her canvas bag of ale and food, Adele quickly covered her head (and her blonde hair) with the scarf that had been on her shoulders. Then she lowered her face to brush past the men, saying, "Pardon, if you will," with Peri's accent. They moved aside before catching the barkeeper's eye.

Head covered, Adele swiftly walked back to Wyeth's house. "Beast! That beast," she fumed of Mouris. "I'll beat him but good." She entered the house before Peri returned, put her purchases in her room, and began pacing. "I need to get a few more things before word gets out so that I can't go anywhere."

So she took off the nice dress from Mouris' closet and put on the baggy brown dress that Peri had first given her. Then she bound up her hair tightly and covered it with a scarf. Finally, she took up a housewife's basket and went out.

Efran and Estes entered the gate of the wooden barricade around the opening of the cavern, and Efran knelt at the edge to look down in it. A rope ladder descended from the surface to a ledge about twenty feet below—probably the same one Toby and Tarrant had been stranded on. From there, a second rope ladder descended to a wider, longer ledge another thirty feet below that. This ledge was level with the water, which filled the cavern.

The reason he could see all this was due to the torches that were set in braces screwed into the rock all along both ladders and ledges. "Do you want to go down and have a look?" Estes asked.

"Yes," Efran said, gripping the rope and stepping down on the first rung. Immediately he noticed that the rope had been secured to the wall with steel pins to prevent the rungs from folding under weight.

"Excellent," Efran said. He descended easily to the first ledge, stepping off the rope to look around. The torches illuminated the columns and ridges along the cavern walls. But the water was still inky black. This ledge did not feel familiar to him, so he stepped over to the second ladder. This he descended to the lower ledge where the water barely crept up to his boots.

Closing his eyes to reproduce the darkness, Efran felt along the wall and recognized this as the ledge from which he had begun his last climb. "That was a long way," he murmured.

“Efran?” Estes called. “Any problems?”

“No, I’m only looking around. This lower ledge is the one I climbed from,” he said, looking up at the dot of Estes’ head in the circle of light.

Estes said something in reply which Efran couldn’t quite hear. But he sat down, and then lay down on the ledge to mimic his sleeping position. Again he closed his eyes—yes, this was definitely it.

A wash of water soaked him, and he quickly raised up, reaching for the ladder. But a broad, grinning mouth extended up over the ledge.

Hello, Efran Swimmer.

“Swimmer! Good to see you! Then this cavern must connect with the one I always come to.”

All connects.

“I suppose so. Are the eelfish gone?”

Heye eat the eelfish.

“Good. That’s good, Swimmer. There may be more people crawling around down here soon.”

In reply, Swimmer blew a stream of fishy water over Efran and submerged again. Shaking his wet hair out of his face, Efran turned to grasp the ladder.

“Efran! What happened?” Estes called.

“Big fish came to say hello. I’m coming up,” Efran called back.

“Minka? May I talk to you?”

Minka turned as Geneve came up the lower corridor that ran by the kitchen. “Yes, of course, Geneve,” she said, heart sinking.

“I talked to Nares. He was very apologetic, but he doesn’t understand what he did wrong. I need to know what happened,” Geneve said.

Minka inhaled, glancing off reluctantly. “He . . . held my waist, and pulled me close, and . . . kissed my hair and my face,” she mumbled.

“Is that all?” Geneve asked.

Minka’s eyes shot up. “It—was more than I was prepared for.”

“Oh, it was quite inappropriate. I meant, did he do anything more than that?” Geneve said.

“No, someone called to him about the sparring match about to start, so he left,” Minka said.

“I see. All right.” Geneve went around her to the front doors. Watching, Minka frowned. Was there something missing from that conversation?

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Chapter 16

After talking to Minka, Geneve went out to the courtyard gate sentry. “Where is the Captain?” she asked.

“Ah, down looking at the cavern on the east section,” Koschat replied, studying her.

“Very good,” she said crisply, walking through the gates to look down the switchback and the road beyond. Yes, she could see him and Estes on their horses walking back toward the road. So she just began walking down the switchback, which would put her where she needed to be when they came to the road.

“If we can map the cavern waterways from the east section to that below the cold storage room—” Efran broke off as Estes cleared his throat and nodded ahead. Efran looked over to see Geneve waiting for him at the upcoming intersection.

He sighed, “Go on ahead, Estes; I’ll see you in the workroom.”

“Good luck,” Estes muttered.

Still soaking wet, Efran flashed him a dry smile as he pulled up beside her and dismounted. “Hello, Geneve.” He dripped coming down from the saddle and Estes rode a wide arc around him and Geneve.

“Captain,” she said. “I wanted to talk to you about Nares,” she began. He said nothing, so she took a breath and went on. “You . . . hurt him pretty badly. I had Wallace look at him. He’s not sure whether there might be permanent damage.”

Efran still said nothing. Mildly agitated, Geneve said, “I want you to admit that your attack on him was—excessive.”

“No,” Efran said, shaking his wet hair out of his face again. As she became almost irate, he said, “Geneve . . . Nares and I are very much alike. We don’t understand that Southern women do things they don’t mean. Someone has to beat that into us.”

She inhaled. “You’re saying that because Minka kissed him on the cheek, he felt entitled to—take it further.”

“Yes,” he said. “He told her so.”

“How?” she said, brows drawing down. It was hard to take him seriously when he smelled like long-dead fish.

“He told her, ‘you kissed me,’ when he grabbed her,” Efran said.

“She didn’t mention that,” Geneve said dubiously.

“She told me what she might not be willing to tell you,” Efran said.

She absorbed that, then said, “Regardless, you may have impaired his ability to father children.”

“Nares has children,” Efran said, impatiently looking off, then caught himself. “You mean, with you?”

“What do you mean? Yes, with me!” she said, offended.

“No, I think he’ll be fine, Geneve. We’re practically indestructible,” he said with a half-smile. As he looked contemplatively over the road, he saw Adele emerge from the grocer with a full basket. She wore a dowdy dress and a head scarf, but Efran would know her anywhere: it was Adele.

He looked back at Geneve, who was struggling with doubt and dismay. “Geneve, if you want to help him, make him understand that you’re the only one he can paw now. He’s been in Sasany Fields for however many years teaching men to kill each other. And suddenly he’s wandering around a fortress full of beautiful women. He needs guidance. Forceful slapping.”

Geneve nodded, looking about to cry, so Efran asked hastily, “Would you like a ride up?”

“No thank you,” she murmured, eyeing his wet, slimy clothes.

Since this was as he hoped, he mounted and rode up alone. And with this conversation, he knew he’d probably never have any other women in his army—there was not a man on the Southern Continent who would presume to question anything he did to the fight master for touching Minka. And only Efran’s regard of Gabriel’s service allowed Geneve to speak so presumptuously to him about *anything*.

When Efran gave up his horse at the courtyard gates, Koschat, a Polonti, muttered, “Women.”

Efran looked at him in surprise, then saw him glance down at Geneve ascending. Efran nodded wryly, turning to the steps. He dripped his way through the foyer and to his quarters, catching Arne on the way: “Fill me a tub, please.”

“Been swimming in the caverns again, Captain?” he asked in mild disapproval.

“What—? Go get me a tub!” Efran demanded, laughing. Arne, who had earned his right to be presumptuous through his own service, turned away, tsking.

As a stream of men brought in a tub and buckets of water, Efran began stripping off the clothes that smelled strongly of fish guts. Minka came in around them in bemusement, then saw him and wrinkled her nose in dismay. “You went swimming in the caverns again. At least you weren’t wearing your dress uniform,” she considered.

“No, no, it was accidental,” he insisted, peeling off his wet, slimy pants.

She stood back out of the way while the tub was being filled, then she locked the door as he sat to lean back against the padded rim in satisfaction. “Bathe me,” he demanded, smiling. So she knelt by the tub and pushed his head underwater.

When they were both clean, dry and dressed, he said, “Now. Did Nares tell you who agreed to take Adele?”

“Yes,” she said, straightening her riding skirt. “Ah, yes, he said he placed her with his lieutenant Wyeth.”

“You don’t wear your pants anymore,” he suddenly observed.

“I do when I need to work. But my riding skirts are more expressive,” she said loftily.

He blinked at her, then said, “Wyeth. Good. Come with me, please. I will need you.” She glowed at him, so he took her hand to make sure that she kept up with him.

They went upstairs to the workroom where DeWitt and Estes looked up at their entrance. “Where is the Commander?” Efran asked.

DeWitt replied, “Still tutoring Lyte, which he may be doing for weeks. It was a Godsend to get him out here when you did, Efran.”

“Not my doing,” Efran said, shaking his head. “Now. Estes, I need to see where Wyeth lives. I assume he has a house on a plot?”

Estes went over to a shelf for a ledger. “Wyeth. One of Nares’ subordinates. He took Adele, didn’t he? Yes, he’s in the western section. Let me see. . . . Oh, yes, number twenty-two. That was vacated after Colfox was evicted for housing underage prostitutes, so Wyeth was able to snatch it up pretty cheaply.”

“Twenty-two. Oh, yes, I remember where that is,” Efran said without looking at Minka, whose face was lowered. “Good. That’s where we’ll be, then. I’m going to shake Mouris’ money out of Adele.”

“Good luck. Again,” Estes said, and DeWitt raised his brows.

At the courtyard gates, Efran requested horses for himself and Minka. While they waited, she asked, “What is this about shaking her for Mouris’ money?”

So he told her about Mouris’ visit, and his deduction that Adele was the one who had stolen his money. “Of course that was her,” Minka said, watching as their horses came around.

Efran nodded with a half-smile. “We knew that, but he needed some abuse.” Then he paused at her mounting in a swirl of skirts. “I see what you mean,” he noted—about the skirts being more expressive.

They arrived at Number 22, with the number and name “Wyeth” on a signboard out front. There was a post with a ring, so Efran tied the horses as Minka waited at the door. Then he mounted the steps to knock.

Shortly, Peri opened the door, looking at him in alarm. He said genially, “Hello. I am Efran; this is my wife Minka. She is Adele’s sister. We want to speak to her, please.”

Peri opened the door wide, stepping back, and gestured to the shut door of Adele’s room. Efran stood back from it to glance a mute request to Minka. Understanding him, she went to knock on the door. Adele shouted, “I’m still resting. Leave me alone!”

Minka looked back at Efran with a wide-eyed grin. He glanced at Peri, who lowered her eyes. Then Efran went to the door and said, “Adele, I want to talk to you.”

Shortly, the door opened. Adele let Efran enter, then shut the door on Minka. So she and Peri stood just outside to listen.

Adele flounced down in a chair to resume carefully trimming her fingernails. Efran said, "Where is it?" He walked around the small room, looking. Then he opened the chest to rummage through it.

"Where is what?" she asked indifferently, studying her nails.

"Mouris came to see me this morning. He's missing a lot of money, and thinks you had something to do with it," Efran said. He continued to look around the room, tapping the walls here and there.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she murmured.

"Colfox had hiding places in this house," he muttered, scanning the ceiling. When that looked to be intact, he turned his attention to the floor, and began stepping on floorboards one at a time.

"Efran." She stood to put a hand to his chest. "You've no idea what I'm enduring here. The woman beats me." She choked on a sob.

He smiled. "It's in the floor, is it? You want to show me where, or are you going to make me walk around the whole room?" He continued stepping on floorboards, kicking aside the pallet.

She sat, crossing her arms as he methodically stepped on each floorboard. One yielded tellingly, and he glanced at her sullen face. Kneeling, he withdrew his knife to pry up the floorboard. He shifted to keep an eye on her, resheathed his knife, and reached into the opening to withdraw the velvet bag.

Hefting it, he stood. "Yikes, how much have you spent already?" He opened it, then tossed three royals onto the table. "I'll let you keep a few for his stupidity."

Efran exited the room to place the bag in Minka's hands with a light kiss. "Carry this for me." Then he took her hand to leave.

Peri watched them go, then went to the door of Adele's room. "You stole that money!"

"Oh, shut up," Adele said. "I still have a lot hidden, and I paid you for this week."

Peri stepped back to think about that.

Efran and Minka rode over to the southernmost block and tied their horses in front of Mouris' shop. They entered, Efran carrying the velvet bag (which was heavy). The girl behind the counter looked over to say, "Hello! Welcome to Mouris' Plant Shop. My name is Dix. Can I help you find anything?"

She was cute in a vacuous way, with a high, squeaky voice. Shanko was lingering at the counter, purportedly as guard, but more obviously trying to make headway with her. But she, being on duty, ignored him.

Efran asked her, "Is Mouris here?"

"No sir; he's out right now," she said sorrowfully. "May I take a message?" she asked, brighter.

“Yes,” he said, smiling to restrain the laughter. “Please tell him that we have his money. He can come get it from Doane in the fortress.”

“Doane in the fortress,” she repeated to herself. “Yes, sir.”

“Thank you,” he smiled.

“You’re welcome!” she squeaked brightly at him.

As he and Minka turned away, another man entered the shop, and she said, “Hello! Welcome to Mouris’ Plant Shop. My name is Dix. Can I help you find anything?”

He leaned on the counter to say something, to which she replied, “Yes, sir; it’s on the next aisle. May I show you?” He decided that she could.

Minka mounted while Efran untied their horses and threw her reins up to her. “If Mouris hangs on to her, his shop will do fine, whether he’s there or not,” he observed.

“She’s cute,” she admitted, smiling. “However, you’re not interested.” She settled (what she imagined to be) a threatening gaze on him.

“No,” he smiled up at her. “I’m not.”

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Chapter 17

Efran and Minka returned to the fortress with Mouris’ recovered royals. On entering the foyer, Efran said, “Let me just hand the money over to—”

“Doane!” she cried. “Look at you!”

“Lady Minka. Captain,” he said, walking over to them with a pronounced limp. “Yes, I’ve been working pretty hard; got a ways to go yet. Did you need me?”

“Yes,” Efran said, handing him the velvet bag. “Here’s what’s left of Mouris’ money; I’ve told him to come get it from you. If he complains about how little it is, tell him too bad; that’s it.” Efran glanced back at the door sentry, Caswall, to make sure he heard as well. “This is all Mouris gets and I don’t want to hear from him again.”

“Yes, Captain,” Doane said, and Caswall saluted.

As Minka and Efran left the foyer, she said in a voice of accomplishment, “I didn’t hug Doane or anything, even though I wanted to.”

“That’s good.” He wasn’t smiling, even though he wanted to.

As they walked leisurely up the corridor, he said, “That was fun, getting the money from Adele.”

She laughed, "I'm afraid it was."

He put an arm around her. "I forget how fun you are to do things with."

She looked up at him adoringly. "I love to do things with you."

He stopped. "Would you like to go see the cavern? They've put rope ladders down it, and torches all around it."

She paused in awe. "The one you climbed out of?"

"Yes. We're talking about opening it for people to look around," he said.

"Yes! Oh, yes, I do!" she said.

"Then I'll take you first thing tomorrow," he said. "Though you will need to wear pants to climb down the rope ladders."

"I can't wait!" she squealed.

He grinned. "Let's go get dinner, and, find something else to do until tomorrow."

"All right," she murmured, leaning into him.

That day, the Council of Venegas made their decision as to the rulership of their city. They chose a warlord named Hemy, and demoted General Sewell down to foot soldier for his failure to defend Surchatain Clonmel. Furthermore, the Council voted unanimously to attack the Abbey Lands at night, and slaughter its people in their beds in retribution for Clonmel's murder. According to the astrologer, the best night for that would be August 3rd—in three days. So they began to lay careful plans.

After Minka had taken care of Joshua's needs the following morning (August 1st), she presented herself in pants in Estes' workroom. "I'm ready to go," she announced.

Smiling, Efran got up from the table as Estes and DeWitt looked over. "Minka wants to see the cavern," he explained.

"Good for you, Efran," DeWitt said.

"Have a good time," Estes said.

They went out to the courtyard, where Efran asked for two horses and a couple of men to ride with them. Seeing her excitement reminded him of how happy she had been when, as her newly appointed guardian, he took her out to see the hens. His smile fading, he realized that he was already deeply in love with her then.

Shortly, Hawk and Barr came around the corner leading four horses. Hawk was laughing and even Barr was smiling. "What . . . ?" Efran began.

"Captain," Hawk said, trying to stifle the laughter, "when we were all told that you and the lady needed a

bodyguard to ride out to the cavern, there was a fistfight as to who would go with you. Barr and I won.”

“Oh, you’re funny,” Minka said, hopping up on the little mare and proud of herself for doing it well.

But Hawk showed Efran his bloody lip while Barr admitted, “I’m afraid it’s true, Captain.”

Efran said, “We need a better way to determine that, then. Oh, I forgot—Barr, go get us a lit torch and four or five replacements for those that have burned out.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, going inside to the kitchen and storage room. Shortly, he came out to hand the spares to Hawk while carrying the lit torch himself.

They all mounted and rode at a relaxed walk to the cavern in the early August sunlight. Because there was no hurry, they walked and talked, looking at the newly paved roads and those that were now being paved. Since the western section of plots was almost full, the leasing of eastern plots was brisk. Efran looked at the shops and houses being built, the new wells being dug, and the progression of the stone wall eastward, and felt deeply grateful for it all.

Then he belatedly remembered Estes complaining that their supplier was running out of mortar for the wall. They were getting low on lime, as well, but that wasn’t as critical a need as the mortar. Turning to Minka, who was chatting happily with Barr, Efran said, “Remind me to check with shops on the plots that might be carrying mortar. They’re running out of it on the wall.”

“Of course,” she said brightly.

Approaching the wooden barricade around the cavern opening, Minka grew quiet, observing. They dismounted and tethered the horses outside the barricade, then Efran took the lit torch. “Let me go down before you, Minka. Barr, you come down after her; Hawk will stay above.”

“Yes, sir.” “Captain,” they acknowledged.

Efran descended the rope ladder to the first ledge, lighting a torch or two along the way. He moved aside for Minka to descend after him, looking all around. “Oh, my,” she murmured.

Then he went down the second ladder, lighting three more torches and calling up to Barr for two replacements. Gaining the last ledge, he put the lit torch in a bracket so he could hold Minka’s waist as she set foot on the ledge and turned to look over the water.

“This is the ledge I climbed up from. I somehow missed the one higher up,” he said.

She turned to peer up. “That’s so far!” she whispered. Barr had stopped on the first ledge; Hawk was looking down from the ground above.

Then she turned back to survey the dark water, where a broad, slow wave emerged. Efran didn’t see, as he was looking at the columns he had climbed. She was concentrating on the water as if listening. “Yes,” she said. He glanced at her questioningly.

There was an abrupt swell of water over their feet, and Heye surfaced, blowing out of her siphon. Efran instinctively grabbed Minka. “That’s Heye—she won’t hurt you, she just likes to see—”

“How?” Minka asked.

“With—her eyes. In her head, there,” Efran said in mild confusion. She didn’t seem to be listening to him.

Brows drawing down, she leaned over in intense concentration. “Yes,” she said again.

Efran watched Heye’s arms encircle Minka and pull. “No!” he shouted, but Heye pulled Minka off the ledge into the water.

Since Efran wouldn’t let go of her, he was dragged down into the water as well. But he could not hold onto her underwater, as Heye’s great bulk came in between them. Minka was ripped from his arms and carried down.

He strained to see, but the turmoil in the water raised up sediment so that nothing was visible. Efran swam down forcefully, squinting into the turbulent water. He saw a rectangular shape below, and Heye’s bulk around it, but Minka he could not see.

Finally, lungs bursting, Efran surfaced, holding onto the ledge while panic gripped his chest. Barr surfaced, then dove again. “Captain! What’s happening?” Hawk cried from above.

A moment later there was another great swell which blinded him, washing over him onto the ledge. But when he opened his eyes again, Minka, dripping, was on her knees on the ledge, looking at him anxiously. “Are you all right?” she asked, pulling on his arm.

Gasping, he hoisted himself up to the ledge to fall on her. “Can Barr get out?” she asked from underneath him.

Breathing deeply, he looked over at Barr dragging himself over the ledge. “Yes,” he gasped. “Minka—” He gripped her again just to make sure she was there and breathing. Barr turned his head to squint at her. “What—what—” Efran couldn’t form words after the terror he had just experienced.

“Oh, Efran, the most amazing thing!” she said, pushing him off her to sit up. Hawk had descended to hang on the lower rope ladder and stare. She went on, “Efran, there’s a barge down there! And there’s something on it that belongs in the fortress. Heye can take me down to it so I can get it and bring it back up.”

“Not you. Let her take me down,” Efran panted.

Minka looked distressed. “She doesn’t want to, Efran; she can’t communicate with you very well.”

Chest still heaving, he gazed at her. “She talks to you?”

“Of course she does. She didn’t just grab me off the ledge; she told me about the box and asked if I wanted to go down and get it. I told her I did, but when she took me down, I couldn’t find it right away, and by the time I did, she had to bring me up for air,” Minka explained. “Let her take me down again and I’ll be quicker about getting it because I know where it is now.” She stood up.

“No!” Efran said, lurching to a stand. “Back up the ladder,” he ordered.

“But, Efran—”

“Go up now,” he said. Exhaling in disappointment, she complied.

The men snuffed the torches on their way up and remounted. The ride back was excruciatingly silent. Efran knew that he was in the wrong, but couldn't bring himself to admit it. Neither could he watch her disappear underwater again.

While Efran and Minka were at the cavern, Mouris came to the fortress for his money. As instructed, Doane gave him the velvet bag. Looking in it, Mouris said, "This is only about half of my money!" He poured out the royals on Doane's desk to count them. "There are only twenty-six here! Where is the rest of it?"

"I don't know, sir. The Captain said that's all he recovered, so that's all you get," Doane said coolly.

"That's unacceptable!" Mouris said, pounding on Doane's desk.

Doane stood. "Get out." The door sentry, Arne, brought his great bulk over to see what the pounding was all about. Mouris, flicking his eyes to him, took his 26 royals and left. Stalking down the switchback to return to his shop, he breathed, "I'll find her. I'll find her and get the rest out of her. I'll make her pay, one way or another."

After changing into dry clothes, Efran retreated to the work room to sit and brood. Estes and DeWitt regarded his silence for only so long, then made him tell them what happened. Reluctantly, he did, and they listened quietly.

After a pause, DeWitt said, "So there's something on the barge underwater that belongs in the fortress that Minka can get safely but you won't let her because . . . ?"

Efran looked at his feet, unable to reply. The other two returned to their work and said nothing further about it.

An hour later, Gabriel appeared at the workroom door. "Captain, Nares has issued a challenge to you for a second fight," he said, pale.

Efran looked at him, then stood. DeWitt threw the book in his hand across the room. "No, Efran! That's stupid pride!" But Efran walked out.

As he exited the back door and began walking across the grounds, word spread like a flood that there was to be a no-holds-barred rematch between Efran and Nares. Everyone dropped whatever they were doing to run to the sparring grounds. But Martyn, shaking his head, ran to look for Minka.

He found her in the nursery. "Minka," he panted, "Nares has challenged Efran to a rematch. He's on his way out there now."

Minka froze, staring at him, then put Joshua back down in the crib and began running down the back corridor. Martyn followed.

She ran as hard as she could, watching as Efran entered the sparring grounds. She could see Nares, his massive fists clenched, waiting. A sob rose in her throat, but she just ran all the harder.

Efran reached the front of the grounds, filled with spectators, where Nares waited. Efran turned to face him, spreading his feet in a fighting stance. One of Nares' lieutenants stepped between them to say, "Ready? . . . Go!"

Chapter 18

At the moment of “Go!” Minka ran in between them, facing Efran. Nares barely managed to avoid hitting her. Panting from exertion and fear, she stood glaring at Efran, saying nothing. She just stood between them.

As Efran looked at her, the tension and anger drained out of him. Though only seventeen, and small for her age, she was full of courage. He should be proud of her for that, and not suppress her for the sake of his stupid pride. He smiled at her, and tears filled her eyes: she knew that smile of resolve, and feared it meant that he was going to fight Nares anyway. But she misunderstood what he had resolved.

“Move her, Efran, or I will,” Nares said.

Efran glanced up at him, then looked out over the spectators. “What do you say, Geneve? Should we fight?” he called.

“No!” she said angrily, already standing.

Efran shrugged at Nares. “Wives get the last word.” He reached an arm to Minka, who fell on him, crying.

Then he walked her away from the sparring grounds, consoling her with his arm tight around her. She clutched him, still crying. Seething with anger and frustration, Nares lowered his fists, watching him walk off with his young wife. The spectators dispersed, many of them breathing in relief. Martyn closed his eyes to thank God that Efran was not that stupid.

But some of the men had thoughts. Rigdon walked up to Nares and said, “What were you thinking, to issue a challenge to Captain Efran? Do you not know who he is? He is *Lord Sovereign* of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and just because he’s not afraid to spar with you doesn’t give you the right to challenge him to anything. *He is your superior*. Do you understand? If you don’t, and you try to fight him again, it’s going to get ugly for you, *Master Nares*.”

A number of Efran’s men, including Polonti, collected behind Rigdon in support of his warning. Nares looked at him without replying, then turned away. But he vowed inwardly that he would have revenge for being humiliated in front of the men.

As Efran and Minka went back into the fortress, he said, “Will you come up to the workroom for a minute?”

“Let me feed Joshua, then I’ll be up,” she murmured, wiping her tears.

“Thank you,” he said, kissing her head, then he went on up while Minka consoled an angry baby.

As Efran reentered the workroom and sat, Estes said, “Thank God.”

DeWitt asked, “What happened?”

Efran looked up wryly. “Minka stopped the fight, and Geneve seconded that.”

Estes leaned back to laugh, “Women to the rescue. You and Nares would have killed each other.”

Efran shook his head. “He would have ground me to bloody dust.” He leaned back, hands clasped on his head, as he pondered his narrow escape.

DeWitt and Estes went back to work. Efran waited.

Not long afterward, Minka came in, smiling. “Joshua had his bottle, then ate a little bit of the mashed blueberries, but mostly played in them. His whole face and hands are now purple.”

“Just like you and Toby that first day,” Efran said, remembering. It was hard to believe, but that day had been only about fifteen months ago.

“True,” she said, embarrassed but smiling.

Efran leaned back, looking at her. “Do you still want to dive for the box?”

DeWitt and Estes looked up quickly; Minka’s eyes got wide. “Yes!”

“Then you will,” Efran sighed. Looking at the other two, he asked, “Do you want to come?” In response, they both stood to put aside the paperwork in front of them.

So Efran went to the door to ask Melchior, who was standing sentry, to get them six horses, Barr and Hawk, and a lit torch. Then he looked back to Minka, who was grinning in her pants.

The augmented party set out once again for the cavern. Efran’s stomach was tied in knots, but Minka’s exuberance made the other men smile. DeWitt asked, “How big is the box, Minka? Are you sure you can lift it?”

Efran looked over in alarm, but Minka said, “It looked just about so—” She let go of the reins to hold her hands about eight inches apart. “So unless it’s full of gold, yes, I should be able to bring it up.”

“Then why couldn’t Heye?” Efran asked.

“She was afraid of breaking it. She said it mustn’t get broken,” Minka replied. Efran nodded uneasily.

At the cavern, Efran had Barr go down first to light all the torches. Then Efran descended, followed by Minka and Hawk. Estes and DeWitt looked down from above.

On the lowest ledge, Minka kicked off her shoes and stood at the edge, watching for Heye. “I hope she’s not busy,” she murmured anxiously. Efran suddenly pictured the octopus at a tea party and uttered a weak laugh.

They waited a while; Efran watched Minka clasp her hands in anxiety lest Heye not come. Then she said, “There she is!” The men looked over at the swell of water rising, and Heye’s eyes appeared.

“He says I can go now!” Minka exclaimed, and Efran winced. “I’m ready!”

While Heye’s arms wrapped around her, Minka took a deep breath. Efran turned away, unable to watch her being taken underwater. The men watched the black swell subside and started counting seconds mentally.

Efran could hardly bear to look, but neither could he look away. He glanced up once or twice, trying to quell his trembling while the moments passed one after another. How long had it been? How long would it take?

Suddenly the swell reappeared and Barr leaned over expectantly. Heye's arms brought up Minka in a rush of water; Barr and Efran grasped her arms from either side to bring her over the edge standing up. She was tightly holding onto something. She exhaled, "Got it!" And she placed the box in Efran's hands.

"Thank you, Heye!" she turned to call, and the octopus waved an arm as she receded underwater. Meanwhile, Efran was looking at a copper box, mostly covered with a green patina. It was about ten inches long, five inches wide, and four inches deep. He did not shake it, but could tell there was something inside.

"You did well," he croaked, gripping her wet head with one hand to kiss her.

"Yes, I did," she exulted, leaning on him to pull her shoes back on.

He cleared his throat. "On up, now," he said, and she lifted a foot to begin climbing the rope ladder. Efran followed her with the box; Hawk followed them, and Barr brought up the rear, snuffing torches as he went.

Estes and DeWitt lifted her out of the cavern opening, and the other three men followed her out. Efran handed the box to DeWitt. "Hmmm. Old, very old. Hidden openings. Faded script on the top here. We'll have to look it over. Well done, Minka," he said, looking up at her.

"Thank you," she said proudly. "Now I have to change again," she murmured.

"We'll get you back to do that," Efran said. He lifted her onto her horse just because he wanted to, and she smiled down at him.

Back at the fortress, Minka told him, "I've got to see to Joshua, but I want to hear what's in the box."

"You will," Efran promised.

So he took it up to the workroom where the three of them could examine it on the large table. First, they looked for any possible way to open it. The only decoration was a rosette in the center of the top. There was plating on the corners that looked to be brass overlaid on the copper, and lines that could have been seams, but no hinges or keyholes. Estes' gentle pulling or pushing on the plating produced no result.

Leaving that for now, they went to the inscription. Peering at the faded writing on the top through a magnifying glass, DeWitt copied it letter by letter until he had:

Abadiá de Saint Benoît sur la Mar
Claus de le Destroier
Kiika Mea Luku

DeWitt looked at Estes. "Isn't that Polonti?"

Estes squinted. "The third line is, yes—old, old Polonti. The first line obviously refers to this Abbey. If I'm interpreting the third line correctly, it says . . . 'keys to the destroyer.'"

The men were quiet a moment, then DeWitt said, "Is this something we *want* to open?"

“Or something we need to open?” Efran murmured. He looked off. “It strikes me that we need to show it to the closest thing to a historian we have,—”

“The notary. Ryal. *Lord Ryal*,” DeWitt said, remembering.

“Yes,” Efran said, smiling. “Give me something to wrap this in, and I’ll take it down to him.” So Estes turned to the cabinets for one of the canvas bags they kept on hand.

After wrapping it up in the canvas, Efran took it downstairs where he looked in one doorway after another until he came to the back door. From there, he saw Minka with Joshua on the mat. She had a book, but wasn’t even trying to read, for the baby was now crawling efficiently enough to leave the mat.

Efran watched for a minute, smiling. Very few people here seemed to know or remember that Minka wasn’t actually Joshua’s mother, because she loved him just as though he had been conceived in her and birthed by her. Efran went out to sit on the mat beside her.

She turned to him in laughing exasperation. “Look at him! I can’t just sit with him anymore.”

“Thank you,” he whispered. He wanted never to take for granted the way she had accepted his baby by Adele.

“You’re welcome! Did you get it open?” she asked—about the box, obviously.

“Not yet.” He lifted the canvas-wrapped box. “I’m going to take it to Ryal whenever you can come with me.”

“Oh, good! Joshua will tire pretty quickly, I hope.” She watched him energetically kick the mat behind him.

Efran leaned over to pick him up by the midsection and hoist him in the air. Laughing, Joshua did his frog kick, taking swipes at Efran’s face. “Little warrior,” Efran said.

“Happy little warrior,” she said, leaning on his arm. “He almost never cries, unless I’m late with a feeding.”

“Just like me,” Efran said wryly. As he held the baby to his chest, Joshua opened his mouth in a huge yawn. “Here we go,” Efran said, standing with the baby on his left arm and the box in his right hand. Minka picked up her mat and book, and they went inside.

Joshua took to his nursery crib without much protest, so Efran and Minka went out to get horses. Efran declined an escort because he did not want any word about the box getting out yet. So he and she rode amiably to the notary shop, one of the first built on the Abbey Lands, about a year ago.

Entering as the bell tinkled, Efran saw Giardi standing at the front counter, and he slowly smiled. As soon as she saw him, she started laughing. “Hello, Efran, Minka. What can we do for you?”

“How are you, Lady Giardini?” he asked. Minka pursed her lips at his smooth tone. He would be teasing Giardi forever for almost having caught her kissing Ryal. They had been married for twelve days now.

“I’m doing well, Lord Efran. And you?” she asked formally.

Ryal came through the door from the back room. “It’s ridiculous that I have to chide you for flirting with my wife in front of Minka. How are you, dear?” he asked her.

“Doing wonderfully, dear Ryal,” Minka laughed. Ryal was in his 80s; Giardi in her 60s.

“Not merely flirting. I genuinely need help,” Efran said, extracting the box from the canvas. “What can you tell me about this?”

Giardi looked over as Ryal began examining the box. “Amazing. Where did you get it?”

“Minka helped us retrieve it from a sunken barge in the cavern,” Efran said.

After a few minutes’ study, Ryal said, “The third line here looks like Polonti lettering.”

“Yes, old Polonti, Estes says,” Efran told him. “He translated it as, ‘keys to the destroyer.’”

Ryal breathed, “Really? How interesting. And strange. Let me see if we can translate the first and second lines for you. Wait a moment.” He went into the back room to shortly return with a large old book. “The *Universal Book of Languages*,” he said, laying it on the counter to open it up. “I rarely have the opportunity to use it, so this is a treat,” he murmured.

He was silent for some time, turning pages as he looked back and forth from the box to the book. Landing on a certain page, he studied it and the following pages. Then he said, “Here we are. These lines are in Occitan, hundreds of years old. The first line refers to the Abbey as the owner of the box and its contents. The second I believe also says ‘keys to the destroyer.’”

“Do you have any idea how to get it open?” Efran asked, leaning forward on the counter.

“The form of the box suggests a reliquary, but not with that inscription,” Ryal murmured. “Also, the box is sparsely decorated for a reliquary. So I am assuming that the decorations on it are functional. Particularly interesting is the engraved rosette between the lines of text. Does it remind you of anything?”

Efran stared at the rosette, then looked hazily in the middle distance. “Scallops.”

“Yes, doesn’t it?” So Ryal pushed on the rosette with a forefinger, and the brass plating on the four corners of the box sprang up. This unlocked the top from the bottom, so that Ryal was able to gingerly work the cover off the base.

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Chapter 19

It required a few minutes for Ryal to lift off the cover, the insulation of which was considerably corroded. It had done its job, however, in preventing water from reaching the contents for an untold number of years.

As he finally detached the lid, causing the rubber to crumble away, all four of them looked into the box. There was a ring of three old iron keys lying on small sheets of very old vellum. Ryal gently separated the sheets of vellum, handling them by the edges only. “Here is more in the Polonti language, which I will let Estes translate. Let me translate the Occitan for you.”

Referring to the old book of languages, Ryal pulled out paper and quill to begin writing. Efran glanced down at

the vellum, seeing a lengthy paragraph. So he looked out the window as he waited. Watching Mouris stalk angrily out of Croft's Tavern, Efran hoped the man could just get past the missing royals and resume his life.

Ryal said abruptly, "Giardi, please get the *Book of Years*—it's the old brown cloth-covered book on the bottom shelf in the back room. It will be coated with dust, I'm afraid."

"Appropriately titled, then," she quipped, turning to the back room. In a few minutes she returned with the small, slender volume.

"Thank you, dear," Ryal said, taking it up to search pages. He stopped on a page, looking back and forth from the old book to the old vellum. Then he gasped. Efran turned and Minka stared at him. Neither had ever heard Ryal encounter anything to make him gasp. But he continued writing, though a trifle sloppily now, being less careful with his quill.

A leaseholder entered to register his plot; Giardi took care of his business smilingly, so that he paid and left with a smile. Meanwhile, Ryal wrote.

Finally, he put down the quill with a trembling hand, and all three looked at him. "Efran, here is what it says: 'These be the keys to unlock the Destroyer, confined by Barthelemon the First in the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea. As agreed between the Destroyer and Barthelemon, he is to be released by the Lord of the Abbey Fortress no later than noon of August the fourth in the year seventy twenty-five, else the Destroyer will be given power by the God of Heaven and Earth to crumble the Fortress to the ground.'"

Ryal paused to look up at Efran. "The year is given in Occitania calendar years. The *Book of Years* contains comparisons of calendars around the Continent throughout known centuries. By extrapolation from the years recorded, I have determined that the Occitania year seventy twenty-five corresponds to our year eighty-one fifty-four. This year."

"This year," Efran repeated in shock. "August fourth of eighty-one fifty-four is—in three days."

"Yes. You have three days to unlock the Destroyer before he destroys the fortress to get out. Here, there is more," Ryal said.

And he read from his translation: "'There will be three warnings given to the Lord of the Abbey Fortress that the time of release of the Destroyer is at hand. The first warning will be a collapse on the grounds of the Abbey Fortress on August the Second. The second warning will be a collapse on the hill of the Abbey Fortress on August the Third. The third warning will be a collapse of a wall of the Abbey Fortress on August the Fourth. On that day, if the Destroyer is not freed by noon, the Fortress itself and in all will collapse, for the Destroyer goes out to enact judgment in his given realm upon those of evil heart, who plot destruction of the innocent upon their beds.'"

Characteristic of conscientious translators, Ryal added, "I am unsure whether 'upon their beds' refers to those who plot destruction or to the innocent. And while I cannot translate the Polonti, it looks to be the same information." Replacing the vellum in the box with the iron keys and his translation, Ryal handed it all back to him. With the insulation disintegrated, the lid fit loosely.

"Then I have work to do," Efran said in shock. "I have three days to find and unlock three doors."

"That appears to be the case," Ryal said quietly.

Efran looked to Giardi. "I would appreciate your help." She had been blessed at birth with the gift of helping.

"Certainly, Efran," she whispered.

He looked at Minka. "And your prayers," he said.

"Always," she said, looking up at him.

"Let's go, then," he said, taking a royal from his pocket to place on the counter. As Ryal opened his mouth to protest, Efran turned his eyes to him. "I may be transferring more than that to you in a few days." The prospect settled around them like a dark cloud.

With the box in one hand and Minka in the other, Efran went out in the golden sunshine late on a gorgeous summer day, mild in its heat for the proximity of the Sea. Before mounting, he looked up to the vast covering of sky. *God of heaven, and earth . . . You must show me the doors. For the sake of all those in the fortress and on these lands, I beg You. . . .*

Shaking his head, Efran lifted his left hand to the pommel to mount, his right hand clutching the box.

In the foyer, he took the key ring to place in his pocket, then gave Minka the box. "Take this up to Estes and DeWitt, please. I'm going door hunting." She nodded, smiling at him.

Efran paused in the foyer to take out the keys and study them. First, they were all the same size, larger than most of the keys he had seen to interior doors of the fortress—only the courtyard gate key was larger. Did that indicate an exterior door? No, Efran felt sure from the wording of the instructions that the doors he needed were inside the fortress.

Next, he saw that the keys had a different number of bits—the first key had one, the second had two, and the third key had three bits, which indicated a progression in the complexity of the locks. How could there be three locked doors to one enclosure? Most likely, he had to pass through a series of enclosures to reach the final one.

So Efran began his search at the very top of the fortress, the bell tower on the roof, and worked his way down. He looked in the bell tower itself; he entered every door to look for other doors; he ascended one stairway after another to look for locked doors.

It took him about three hours to search from the roof to the first floor. There was no basement—of this he was sure, because he had entered every first-floor room looking for interior doors, and found none with large enough locks to accommodate his keys. And Minka had found no other trap doors when she had earlier searched.

After dinner, he conferred with Estes and DeWitt. "I am missing something; I am overlooking something. What?" he asked.

They did not know, but neither did they seem concerned. DeWitt said, "Ryal may be mistaken about the year. Or it may be a legend, or simply a fabrication. Doesn't it sound too fantastic to be real?"

"If Ryal is correct, and it is real, the first warning, a collapse on the grounds, will be tomorrow. I'm just concerned that no one gets injured, or suffers a loss," Efran said, visualizing a house collapsing into a sinkhole. They agreed.

On the following day, August 2nd, Efran began his search again. This time, it occurred to him that the doors may be hidden. So when he searched this time, he concentrated on corridor walls in which a door might be obscured. When he found nothing in the corridors, he searched even bedroom walls and wardrobes for occult openings, apologizing to second- and third-floor residents again.

Halfway through this endeavor, in midmorning, he felt a faint tremor. With constricted breath, he ran out to the front courtyard. "What was that? That shaking. What was it from?" he demanded, looking over the plots below.

"We felt it, too, Captain, but don't see anything amiss," Ellor at the gate replied.

"Get me a horse," Efran ordered, still looking, and the order was passed along.

Nyland, the other gate sentry, was looking east. "Cavern barricades?" he said, squinting.

Efran spun to look. It was hard to tell from this distance, but he also could not see the wooden barricades around the cavern opening.

Barr brought Efran's horse, and another for himself, expressing his intent to ride out with him to look. Efran accepted with a nod, leaping up to the saddle, and they took the switchback and the road east at a gentle lope. "I don't see the barricades," Efran said tensely.

"Because they're gone," Barr said.

The closer they rode to the cavern, the more it looked as though the barricades had simply vanished. But there was a dark opening in the ground ahead, so out of caution, they left their horses about 30 feet away from the darkness and went toward it on foot.

Warily, they drew up to the edge of the opening to look down into what was now a pit about sixty feet deep. The opening in the ground that yesterday had a diameter of twenty feet now measured at least forty. At the bottom was a mixture of dirt and debris—wood, rope, grass, rock—all being absorbed even now from below into the cavern waters.

"This is the first warning: a collapse on the grounds on August second. It's real," Efran said tightly. And he realized, had he delayed *one day* in letting Minka dive for the box, it would have been too late: the barge was now completely covered with debris from the implosion.

"What is real?" Barr asked, so Efran told him about it.

Barr listened quietly, then said, "You will find the doors."

"How do you know? I've been looking since yesterday," Efran said.

"Because you are lord of the fortress. You will find the doors," Barr insisted. Groaning, Efran walked back to his horse to remount.

Back at the fortress, he went up to tell Estes and DeWitt that the first warning had just occurred. After Efran had described the cavern collapse in detail, DeWitt said, "That appears to qualify as a warning, although technically, it didn't happen on fortress land."

"Yes, it did. The Abbey owns all the land clear to the east branch of the Passage," Efran said, agitated.

DeWitt shrugged, and Estes said, “We’re confident you’ll find the doors, Efran.”

Throwing up his hands, Efran went to look for Minka. After coming off the stairs, he headed down the lower corridor toward the back door, which stood open. Nares, who had been watching for him, saw him coming and slipped out of the door to stand beside it on the outside. Listening to the approaching footfalls, he raised his fists.

“Efran?” Minka said, coming out of the nursery as he passed.

Practically at the back door, Efran returned to her for comfort. “We just got the first warning,” he said, and again described the cavern’s collapse.

She listened in all seriousness, then said, “All right.”

“What? No, it’s not all right,” he said, wondering why no one believed him.

“But it will be, Efran. You’ll find the doors,” she said, drawing into his chest.

He held her. “Why is that all I’m hearing from you people?” he demanded.

“Because it’s true,” she smiled. He groaned, turning to head back upstairs, and Nares withdrew from the back door.

Efran ate very little that evening, and slept worse. Since he was thrashing again, he crept out of bed to go sleep in his old spot at the foot of the crucifix in the keep. When he awoke hours later to find Minka tucked in his side, he gave up and carried her back to bed to lie down beside her.

The next morning, August 3rd, he realized that he had not searched any storage rooms for hidden doors. This was significant, because the rooms that now contained nothing but shelves had once been open to other uses. So Efran had four volunteers come help him move shelving, and he began to diligently inspect the walls.

Midmorning, Stites, a Polonti, ran in. “Captain, you are requested out back. The lower barracks has fallen into the Sea.”

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Chapter 20

Stomach dropping, Efran followed Stites out the back door where a number of men were standing at the ladder over the fence which led to the hillside barracks. As Efran began to climb the ladder, Caswall, said, “Careful, Captain, there’s been a landslide. The whole lower barracks is gone.”

“How many were inside?” Efran asked tensely.

“No one, Captain, It’s been used mostly as a junk room lately,” he replied.

Efran exhaled in relief. “And the upper barracks?” This was the first one built in the hillside.

“Still there, though everyone got out with their gear,” Caswall said.

“Good. I’m going to have a look. I’ll tread lightly. Everyone else stay back,” Efran instructed. Nares watched from the rear of the group.

Efran climbed the ladder and descended the other side to walk gingerly toward the edge, testing the ground with each step. But he could see that it had not been disturbed here; the landslide had begun farther down.

At the edge, Efran leaned forward to see the gouge in the hillside where the barracks had been, and the splintered remains of it in the surf below. *Here is the second warning: the collapse of the Abbey hill*, he thought. No, that wasn’t the precise wording. What was it?—a collapse on the hill of the Abbey Fortress on August 3rd. The warning did not consist of the collapse of the whole hill.

It suddenly dawned on him how—merciful the warnings had been. No one had been killed or injured in either so far. But if the fortress collapsed, there would be no mercy, unless Efran took measures to insure his people’s safety.

Thinking, Efran climbed the ladder over the fence back to the fortress grounds, where he brushed past Nares without even seeing him. Nares watched him with unblinking eyes. When he had attempted to hold sparring practice as usual yesterday and today, almost no one showed up—just a few of Crowe’s former men. The rest were distancing themselves from him. He thought it was because of his humiliation at Efran’s hands in a surprise attack, when in reality, it was Rigdon’s censure hitting home. Whatever the reason, Nares was no longer respected. For this, he blamed Efran, and it inflamed his desire for revenge.

Meanwhile, fifty Polonti warriors of Venegas were making ready for the surprise attack that night on the Abbey Lands residents in revenge for the death of their Surchatain.

On his way back from viewing the fallen barracks, Efran paused to watch Commander Wendt in conference with Lyte and his captains on another part of the grounds, and he wondered if it would be all for nothing. Then he went up to the workroom. Estes and DeWitt looked up as Efran said, “We just got the second warning. A landslide took out the lower barracks.”

DeWitt said, “I’m surprised that hasn’t happened before now.”

“But it happened at the time the warning said it would happen. Why don’t you believe me?” Efran asked.

Estes interposed, “We do, Efran. We just are counting on you to take care of it.”

Efran shook his head. “But I’m not. I can’t. I don’t know where else to look or what else to do. We need to think about evacuating the fortress.”

“God will show you what to do, Efran,” Estes said.

Efran uttered a laugh of helplessness. “Then why hasn’t He? I’ve been pleading for Him to help me ever since I first heard the warning.” On a thought, he asked, “Don’t you want to get Kelsey to safety?”

“Is Minka leaving?” Estes asked. Then he addressed a question to DeWitt about something else.

Efran turned out to trot down the stairs. Nares was watching at the back door, but Efran turned off the stairway to

the nursery. Not seeing her or Joshua, he went on down the corridor to their quarters, and opened the door.

She was sitting on the daybed feeding Joshua his bottle. She looked up to Efran to laugh, “He’s getting bored with the bottle, blowing bubbles in the milk!”

Efran sat on the daybed beside her. “Minka, I want you and Joshua to get out.”

She looked at him with sympathetic eyes. “Where would we go, Efran?”

“Anywhere but here,” he urged.

“Where? To Westford? To Marguerite’s? With Cennick on the throne? And all our children? Which of the orphans will we leave behind?” she asked quietly.

“Then go stay with anyone on the Abbey Lands,” he groaned.

“Efran, if the fortress really does collapse, then the Abbey Lands are doomed, too. They cannot survive without the heart and the brain,” she whispered.

He closed his eyes in near despair. “You’ll find the doors,” she said, laying her head on his shoulder. He covered her and Joshua with his arms.

He spent the waning hours of daylight searching the storage room walls, then had everything put back by the time darkness fell. And he went into the keep to sit before the crucifix on his knees.

About that time a raging thunderstorm blew in from the Sea to batter the coast, including the Abbey hill and Venegas. The force of the storm was such that the Venegasans decided that their astrologer had been mistaken and that the opportune night for the attack on the Abbey Lands was August 4th, the following night. So they put their gear up for the evening and went to bed.

Others were also preoccupied that evening. While Geneve cuddled Nares, he lay awake thinking about how to catch Efran outside the fortress, and what blows he would land first, in case he was stopped.

Fanny and Cennick lay in bed discussing the best way to get rid of Moultrie once she had delivered her—his—child, and laughing about how stupid she was. Fanny was very good at mimicking her childish voice. Because of the heavy rain, which reached to the palace district of Eurus, it would be tomorrow or the next day before they could dispatch her transport.

With Dix asleep beside Mouris on his silk sheets, he pondered how to find Adele. He knew that she was living in a house on a plot, but couldn’t ever follow her far enough to find out exactly where. Did she know he was trying to find her? Who could he pay to tell him which house she was living in? Yes, he’d give up a few of his remaining royals for that. But he *was* going to find her and, just like Efran said, shake every last royal out of her.

Following dinner, which Efran did not eat, he sat before the crucifix. When he did not come to bed, Minka brought a pillow to lie down beside him. He turned to her in the dense darkness. “Minka, go to bed, please.”

“I can’t as long as you’re here,” she whispered back.

He leaned over to kiss her, but remained on his knees before the crucifix. He sat there, listening to the rain beat for hours on the window above, and when it finally stopped raining, he fell asleep on his knees.

Efran startled awake in the darkness. He knew it was morning of the last day, though he didn't know what time it was. There was no hint of sunrise yet. He rose on practically disabled knees to feel his way to his quarters and use the garderobe. Then he returned to the keep to lie down beside Minka. When the fortress came down around them, he wanted to die by her side.

He woke again with the light from the high window in his eyes. Minka was still asleep but stirring. He bent over to kiss her and stroke her unruly hair, which he loved so much. She opened sleepy eyes at him, and smiled. "It's not too uncomfortable," she murmured.

"Not with you here," he whispered, throwing his head back.

"Oh, dear," she said, reaching up to brush his hair out of his eyes. "You need it cut, don't you?"

"It doesn't matter," he said sincerely.

"You can go ahead and cut it. Just a little off the front," she allowed grudgingly. He only smiled. "What time is it?" she asked, looking up at the light.

"I have no idea," he replied.

"Oh, I'd better go get Joshua. He's starting to try to climb out of the crib," she said, rising.

"Better go catch him," he said, believing that they would all be dead by the afternoon.

So she yawned and stretched, then got up, taking her pillow. Efran watched her go, then turned his eyes up to the crucifix in the morning light and waited.

His knees were too sore for continued kneeling, so he sat cross-legged instead, watching the light grow stronger through the window. Again, as it did every morning, the light illumined the verse on the wall: "For God alone my soul waits in silence."

That is true, he thought, until he looked at the next lines: "He alone is my rock and my salvation; my fortress. I shall not be shaken." He smiled at that. *Really? We'll see.*

He listened to the morning bustle in the foyer beyond the keep as he studied the Sufferer, and wondered if it would hurt more to die by being crushed by rock than being nailed to hang on a tree. No, he thought, the rock of the fortress would kill them pretty quickly, whereas the Crucified had been beaten to a bloody pulp first, then whipped with metal-tipped leather thongs before being nailed by his hands to a beam that was set up for the enjoyment of passers-by. And even then, he lasted six hours, never losing consciousness through any of it.

About midmorning, Detler swung into the keep. "Captain, you're wanted out back. Seems the back wall of the conservatory has fallen."

"I'll come look," Efran said, slowly rising on crimped knees. While Detler ran ahead, Efran followed tentatively. *And that's the last warning: a wall of the fortress collapsing.*

He exited the back corridor, seeing the crowd already gathered around the broken glass. As he looked at it, Efran couldn't help but notice that if any wall had to fall, this one was the best to go. The conservatory was a new

addition to the fortress, not load bearing at all—it was just glass, easily replaceable. And Garrett had mentioned a new technique he wanted to use for installation if anything ever happened to this one.

While he was thinking on this, Nares was working his way through the crowd toward him. Careful to be inconspicuous, he drew closer and closer till he was within striking range.

Suddenly Arne blocked his path. “Heya, fight master, what are you doing here? Get back to your sparring grounds.”

His derisive tone made Nares clench his fists. But since a few other men looked over, and Arne was not his target, Nares turned away. They *would* spar today; he would call together his most faithful men, and he would spar with *someone* today.

Efran was still regarding the remains of the conservatory wall. Then he went back into the fortress. He couldn’t let it fall on Minka without taking him as well.

How much longer did they have? Perhaps an hour, Efran guessed.

He returned to the keep to raise his eyes to the Scripture again. “On God rests my screen and my credibility.” Then he blinked. “What?” he laughed. “*Screen*? Where did that come from?” And he started trying to remember what was significant about that.

Screen. “You use a screen to hide things,” he thought out. “There was a screen. . . . Someone used a screen. . . .”

Then his face cleared in shock. “The cleaning mistress used a screen to cover a door that no one could open.” And he had looked at that screen for so long, he never even saw it anymore—not even when he was looking for a door that no one could open.

Slowly, mechanically, Efran raised his gimpy knees to ascend the stairs to the third floor. And there, at the north end of the corridor, where it had been unseen for months, was a blank screen on a wooden frame. Efran went down the corridor to pick up the frame and move it. Behind it was a door with an abnormally large lock.

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Chapter 21

Efran slowly removed the old iron keyring from his pocket to look at the keys. Hesitantly, he selected the one with only one bit. He bent to look at the keyhole, seeing nothing through it but blackness beyond. But he inserted the key and carefully turned. The wards clicked, and the door eased open. Efran pulled the handle to open it fully.

A narrow corridor lay before him, and a second door. With no windows in the corridor, it should have been dusky, but both corridor and door were illumined with a soft white light for which Efran could see no source. As though dreaming, he went to that door, lifting the key with two bits. He inserted this into the lock as before, and turned. Again the door eased open toward him, almost with a sigh of relief. He opened it fully by the handle.

Before him lay another short stretch of corridor, and a third door. These he saw in the same white light, though

this door was even farther from the third-floor windows. But as he advanced, he saw his feet as dark shadows against the floor.

When he looked up at the door, he stopped in midstride. It was a huge, ancient door, with carved panels and traces of paint. At first he could see no way to unlock it, until he spotted the lock just below a rusty iron ring on the left.

Now his heart began thumping, knowing that there was something awful, in the old sense, behind that door. With a shaking hand, Efran brought up the third key and fit it to the lock. This time when he turned it, there was no need to pull on anything. A waft of cold air blew the door fully open, and Efran stood back out of the way.

He was paralyzed with fear as a shadow emerged from the tiny room beyond the door. The shadow rolled out heavily like smoke, then paused beside him to coalesce into a vague shape. There was a hooded head that turned toward him, and black orbs that pierced deep inside him like a scalpel, or the glare of the sun. His soul was laid open for inspection, and the terror of that examination was unlike anything Efran had ever experienced.

After dissecting him for an instant, the shape dissipated into the air . . . and was gone.

Efran collapsed to the floor against the third door, inadvertently closing it again, and he looked at the keys as they disintegrated into dust in his hand. In partial consciousness, he realized that his knowledge of this door had been screened in his mind until just now. He had been deliberately prevented from remembering it until the last minute. Why . . . ? He blacked out.

Minka, outside the nursery, looked up at something like a cold waft of air passing over her head, but it was there and gone. "Efran?" she murmured. "Where are you?"

In the workroom, Estes and DeWitt looked up at the same time. "He found them," DeWitt said. They both got up and left the room.

In the notary shop, Giardi gasped, and ran from the counter to the back room. "He did it! Ryal, Efran opened the doors!" Ryal caught her up in a grateful hug, and they both cried.

On the sparring grounds, Nares was saying, "Come now! Will no one spar? I will be gentle." He suddenly turned his head, a ferocious grin spreading on his face. "AYAH! *Pua!*" His men watched in bewildered concern as he began fiercely fighting the air. He thrashed, spun, hit and leaped high to kick with all his considerable skill. Then he was thrown down, and lay still. The men were still.

Watching from the sidelines, Gabriel went over to kneel beside him and put a hand to his chest, then his neck. Then Gabriel looked up to say, "Nyland, please go get Geneve. She's inventorying the armory."

In Wyeth's house, Adele was sitting at the little table in her room, dully eating the insipid stew that Peri brought her. There was a sudden cold draft, and Adele froze. Then she covered her face, crying, "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'll do better from now on! I promise!"

After a moment of stricken breathlessness, she looked around. It was gone. Still she sat, wary and frightened.

In Mouris' shop, he stood behind the counter, leaning on it to tell Shanko, "We don't need a guard very much, but there's something else I'm willing to pay you for. I need you to find someone for me, to find out where she lives. You know Adele, right?" Young Shanko squinted, then shook his head.

“That’s all right, I’ll point her out to you. Now, this will be—” He broke off suddenly to gaze at the air above Shanko’s head. Shanko, feeling the sudden cold, turned around to look, but saw nothing. Yet when he turned back around, Mouris’ wide-eyed face was as immobile as rock, and he dropped with a thud to the floor behind the counter.

Shanko leaned over to look at him, then said, “Dix? Dix! DIX!”

In Eurus, Cennick’s personal attendant was knocking repeatedly on his locked bedroom door. “Surchatain? Surchatain? Are you in there?” Getting no reply, he finally went to the sentry at the head of the corridor. “Come break down this door. Something’s wrong.”

And in Venegas, the sudden, inexplicable deaths of Surchatain Hemy, the entire Council, and fifty of the city’s fiercest warriors had the remaining administrators in a state of panic. The first thing they did was to take Sewell out of the pig sty where he had been banished and name him Surchatain.

“Efran. . . Efran? Are you all right? Efran?”

He opened his eyes at her voice and the touch of her hands caressing his face and his hair. It was liquid love, a wash of love over him, and he raised his face to her. Estes was squatting beside her, and DeWitt was leaning down behind her. “It left,” Efran murmured.

“We kept telling you that you’d find it,” DeWitt had to point out.

Efran tried to sit up, but he was still too woozy. “I . . . was prevented from remembering the screen until the last minute,” he said slowly, as the words didn’t want to come out yet.

“Who prevented you, Efran?” Minka asked, shifting to cradle his head.

“God? I don’t know. God. I don’t know why,” he mumbled. But he relaxed in her arms. The fortress was not coming down around them, and Garrett wanted to replace that wall of the conservatory anyway.

“We had to know it was real,” Estes said. “If you had found the screen right away, so that none of the warnings happened, we could have discounted it, or explained it away.”

Efran focused on him. “You’re right.” But in his heart he knew there was more to it.

Bracing himself against the wall behind him, Efran pushed himself up to a shaky stand. He looked down to wipe a small pile of black dust from his right hand. Then he turned around to look.

He had fallen against the door, but there was no door here now: the corridor ended at a blank wall. Dim light from the third-floor windows barely illumined the faces around him; the white light was also gone. Two open doors and two short corridors lay before him. “I’m hungry,” he exhaled.

“Let’s go eat,” she said, supporting him under his shoulder. He smiled down at her, nodding.

Minka went to the nursery to get Joshua; Estes got Kelsey and Malan from their second-floor rooms (as their new house was not yet finished), and DeWitt brought Tera to the dining hall where Efran sat. Being early afternoon, most of those at the fortress had already eaten their midday meal, so when Dobell came over inquiring, Efran told him, “Just bring whatever you have ready.”

The administrators and their families sat at the table around Efran to eat and talk. They looked up as Gabriel came in. Efran lowered his fork to turn around to him, and Gabriel said, “Captain . . . Nares just dropped dead on the sparring grounds.”

“What?” Estes gasped, and everyone looked at Gabriel in shock. “What caused it?”

“We don’t know,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “He . . . was at the front, calling for a volunteer to spar, and then he starting fighting . . . nothing. There was nothing in front of him, but he was—fighting for his life. And then . . . something threw him down. He was thrown down, and. . .” That was all he could get out, but for shaking his head.

“Geneve?” Efran asked.

Gabriel nodded. “She knows. It . . . may be a few days before she returns to duty, Captain.”

“Granted,” Efran said heavily. With a salute, Gabriel turned to leave.

There was a deep silence, then Efran said, “Estes, the paper in the box—what it said about the Destroyer. Can you bring that down here?”

“Yes.” Estes got up to leave the dining hall. Kelsey watched, holding a squirming seven-week-old baby.

Shortly, Estes returned with Ryal’s translation of the vellum. He sat to read from it:

“These be the keys to unlock the Destroyer, confined by Barthelemon the First in the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea. As agreed between the Destroyer and Barthelemon, he is to be released by the Lord of the Abbey Fortress no later than noon of August the fourth in the year seventy twenty-five, else the Destroyer will be given power by the God of Heaven and Earth to crumble the Fortress to the ground.

“There will be three warnings given to the Lord of the Abbey Fortress that the time of release of the Destroyer is at hand. The first warning will be a collapse on the grounds of the Abbey Fortress on August the Second. The second warning will be a collapse on the hill of the Abbey Fortress on August the Third. The third warning will be a collapse of a wall of the Abbey Fortress on August the Fourth. On that day, if the Destroyer is not freed by noon, the Fortress itself and in all will collapse, for the Destroyer goes out to enact judgment in his given realm upon those of evil heart, who plot destruction of the innocent upon their beds.”

Those hearing it for the first or second time sat in shock. Then Minka, shaking, asked, “Was Nares after you because you wouldn’t fight him again?”

“Probably,” Efran said. “Polonti are all about vengeance.”

Estes said, “I translated the Polonti message in the box. It was the same as this, except for the additional warning that those who fought the Destroyer would be themselves destroyed.”

Efran looked at him, his face draining white. “That’s why,” he breathed. He lowered his head as tears stood in his eyes, but he fiercely held them back. He looked at Minka while she stared at him.

“That’s why,” he laughed, shaking his head. “We stupid Polonti fight when we should just sit and worship. Oh, God of heaven, You are merciful.”

“Efran, what are you talking about?” Minka asked, trembling.

He looked at her again, then swallowed and said, “I had to be drained completely, so exhausted by the time I found the door that I wouldn’t fight the Destroyer like Nares did. Our impulse is to fight, but, the waiting and the searching made me so weak that, when I finally released it, and it looked at me, I had no impulse to fight—I couldn’t even stand before it. So it passed on.”

Clutching Joshua, she leaned on her husband, and he kissed the top of her head.

Doudney, the door sentry for the day, came to the door. “Captain, we got a report that Mouris just dropped dead in his plant shop.”

There was another shocked silence, then Efran said, “He was after Adele. He couldn’t let the theft of those royals go.”

Minka turned to Doudney to wail, “Oh, check on Adele! She’s in Wyeth’s house!”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, disappearing from the doorway.

“Oh, this is scary,” she murmured, her voice breaking.

“He meant it,” Efran said, then looked up at Estes. “I wish I knew more about Barthelemon.”

“Ask Ryal,” Estes said softly, holding Kelsey beside him.

“Yes,” Efran said.

Over the next half hour, they got a dozen more reports of people dropping dead on the Abbey plots and barracks—all but two were men, and all were known to have quick, implacable tempers.

Doudney reappeared at the dining hall door to tell Minka, “Your sister is fine, Lady, but appears to have been badly scared by something.”

As Minka drooped in relief, Efran said wryly, “At least she was smart enough not to fight.”

Doudney continued, “Captain, Dix at Mouris’ plant shop asks what’s to become of her now that he’s gone.”

Efran looked aside, thinking, then said, “Check to see if Mouris has a will registered with Ryal. If he doesn’t, give the plant shop to her. And the royals,” he smiled.

Doudney grinned, nodding. “Aye, Captain.” And he went off.

Efran rose. “Thank you all. DeWitt, you and Estes can handle anything that comes up in the next hour. I’m going to lie down.”

DeWitt nodded. “I suppose you’ve earned it, Efran.”

Minka rose with Joshua, asleep in her arms, and Efran draped an arm around her to walk with her to their quarters.

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Chapter 22

Late that afternoon, after Efran found that he was too keyed up to sleep, Minka received a letter with an unbroken seal from Justinian, dated that day, August 4th:

“My dearest Minka—

“Just a short note, as I want to get it off quickly. You won’t believe it, but Hartshough and the butler have both been caught sleeping, so they’re out, and Marguerite’s poor staff simply don’t know what they’re going to do, as a replacement for him must be found immediately. The hired help are in an uproar, demanding a voice in the selection of Hartshough’s replacement.

“Will write again when I know more. I miss your sweet face.

“Hugs and many kisses,

“Your Justinian”

Minka had to pull out the code key Justinian had left to interpret this letter. In the key, she found:

This word —> Means this

Hartshough —> Cennick

butler —> Fanny

sleeping —> dead

hired help —> nobles

She quickly took the key and the letter up to the workroom. Entering to find all three men—DeWitt, Estes, and Efran—there, she said, “Letter from Justinian. Cennick and Fanny were both found dead today. The nobles are demanding a say in his replacement.” She handed the letter and key to Efran, seated at the table.

DeWitt murmured, “Oh, my.” Estes leaned back thoughtfully.

Efran glanced at the key, then handed it back to her. “Keep that, please.” After reading the letter, he leaned over to extend it to Estes. “We only had a few men die here on the Lands, and I’m sure it’s because they fought it,” Efran said quietly.

Looking up, Estes asked, “Why now? And what is the Destroyer’s realm?”

Efran turned back to Minka. “Please send a carriage for Ryal and Giardini. Tell them we want to know more about Barthelemon and the Destroyer.”

“Yes,” she said, turning out. Not only did she request a carriage, but she went down in it herself to tell Ryal and Giardi what had been happening.

Shortly, Minka returned to the workroom to tell the men, “Ryal said that the books which would have information on Barthelemon and the Destroyer are in our libraries, so he is here now looking at them. He asked Giardi to remain at the shop to take care of customers. Oh—he also said that Mouris left no will that he could find, nor was he married. So Ryal has deeded ownership of the plant shop and lease of the plot to Dix.”

“Very good. Thank you,” Efran smiled at her. She curtsied to him prettily and went out. He sighed.

Some time later, Ryal entered the workroom with several old books in hand. “Well, that was interesting.”

“Wait,” Efran said. “Let me get Minka up here; she’ll want to hear.” So they all waited a few minutes while the door sentry went off to collect Minka and bring her up. She came eagerly, sitting at the table beside Efran, folding her hands and looking at Ryal attentively.

He smiled and began: “Barthelemon was the ruler of Fenolheda in Occitania somewhere around two hundred fifty years ago. The accounts I have here of his dealings with the Destroyer must be sifted with judgment because, after publicizing his own account of what happened, which has been lost, he was universally derided as a fool or charlatan, deposed from office, and mocked until his death.” Ryal paused while his listeners absorbed that.

“Nonetheless, here is what I can piece together,” Ryal continued. “Barthelemon was having great difficulty maintaining peace and stability in his district because of the sudden, random deaths of so many of his subjects. There seemed to be no reason for many of these deaths, which were then blamed on witches or other persons whom he felt to be innocent.

“So Barthelemon set himself to understand what was happening, and he turned to the Christ to beg wisdom. Because of his great piety and perseverance, the Christ—or whom he believed to be the Christ—gave him to understand that an overzealous destroying angel named Mashhit was responsible for most of these deaths. Christ then allowed Barthelemon to oppose him, and the man was surprisingly effective. I don’t know how, but the number of deaths fell. Even his detractors admitted that.

“So Mashhit appeared to be forced into negotiation. He argued, justifiably, that he had a divine imperative to execute judgment in his realm—which I understand to include the Southern Continent. Therefore, Barthelemon struck a deal with him: that Mashhit would accept confinement to allow Barthelemon’s people time to repent. Barthelemon, in turn, would guaranty him a date and time for release to resume his imperative, presumably among a more righteous populace.

“Why this Abbey was chosen as the site of his imprisonment is unclear, except that its charter as a religious establishment and orphanage was in force at that time. The Lord of the Abbey strenuously objected to the provision of destruction of the fortress should the Destroyer not be released, but Barthelemon claimed to have had a vision of the future lord releasing the Destroyer upon the shattering of glass. That I do not understand,” Ryal admitted, although his hearers looked at each other.

“Regardless,” Ryal continued, “the agreement was made and the Destroyer Mashhit submitted to incarceration until he should be released. At that time, Barthelemon began an earnest campaign of warning his subjects to

repent of their evil, for which he was roundly mocked and, as I said, driven out of office and hounded with taunts until his dying day.”

His listeners were silent a moment, then Estes asked, “Is there anything mentioned of the Polonti?—because of the repetition of the information in the Polonti language.”

“Marginally,” Ryal said. “There were some Polonti in Occitania who were notorious for their womanizing and fighting. Therefore, Mashhit demanded special allowance in dealing with them.”

Minka asked, “Is there any explanation for why the keys were on a barge instead of in the fortress?”

“Yes, actually,” Ryal said. “In an excerpt from Barthelemon’s own account, he describes being tormented by fears that the keys he left in the fortress would be misplaced over the years, and the fortress subsequently destroyed. When he pleaded with the Christ for a secure place to keep them for the appointed lord, he was instructed to place them in a waterproof box on a barge which was then set in the Sea. This seemed to him an even worse place, and although he obeyed, he begged confirmation of the instructions. In response, he was given a vision of a ‘mermaid’—his word—recovering the box for the lord of the fortress at the time of need. Of course, once this became known, it was the final nail in the coffin of his credibility and even sanity.”

His listeners mulled this over, the men smiling at Minka the mermaid. *On God rests my deliverance and my credibility*, Efran heard whispered, and he determined to contribute his own testimony to the truth.

But for now he noted, “The caverns connect to the Sea. Some of the underwater openings may be quite large, so it’s easy to see how a barge could be washed into the caverns during a storm.” Estes nodded, then Efran asked, “Is Mashhit good or evil? What have I released?”

Ryal sighed. “That is a very difficult question, Efran, because we are so limited in our understanding. But I will tell you what I think. I believe that Mashhit is empowered to—remove those whom God sees will never repent, and the population of Fenolheda was terribly corrupt at that time. But Barthelemon’s distress for his people was so real, and his perseverance at the throne of God so unremitting, that God gave him special authorization to stay the hand of the Destroyer for a time. That’s all I can attribute it to—the mercy of God. As to what it means for the Southern Continent now, I have no idea. However, your part in it was ordained.”

“So I had no choice,” Efran said.

“No, you did, but the choice you made was foreseen, and recorded. It just happened that because of your character and the circumstances, you made a wise choice. Do you understand?” Ryal asked.

“Yes. That is, I think so,” Efran said dubiously.

DeWitt then said, “He was called Barthelemon the First. Was there a Second?”

Ryal replied, “He had a son, yes. But after his father’s debasement, the son changed his name and moved away. He never ascended the throne, but the designation of ‘the First’ was never removed from his father’s official title. We don’t know the son’s assumed name. He is lost to history.”

Minka looked disappointed. “Poor Barthelemon,” she sighed. DeWitt nodded agreement.

Efran said, “Ryal, I would like for you to write up his account, along with our experiences these last few days. I will tell you about releasing the Destroyer today, and, ask you to interview one or two of the men who witnessed

Nares' death—please also talk to Dix at Mouris' plant shop. I'd like all that compiled together.”

“That is an excellent idea,” Ryal said. “I will begin taking notes immediately.”

Efran looked over. “Estes, pay him three royals, please.”

As Estes stood to go to the cabinet where they kept the royals, Ryal began an objection, to which Efran shook his head. “Peace, Ryal; it's a large job which I'll want done right away, of course.”

“Of course,” Ryal sighed, accepting the royals from Estes. Then he looked around. “Any other questions?”

After a moment's silence, Efran said, “Will you ask Giardini to pray for mercy on us?”

“Yes,” Ryal smiled.

It took Efran the rest of the day, until evening fell, to recover from his brush with the Destroyer. But something about watching from the second-floor window as the sun set over the Sea, as it had done for millennia, restored Efran's balance. The fortress stood; he was alive; his Minka had been completely untouched by the Destroyer's passing. Life would go on.

The following day, August 5th, Efran received a contingent from Venegas announcing the appointment of Sewell as Surchatain, which Efran had endorsed. So he sent them home with his congratulations to Surchatain Sewell, as well as two hundred royals and a large silver tray from the Treasury. (As of yet, he knew nothing of the mass deaths they had experienced yesterday.)

Commander Wendt also appeared in the workroom for the first time in almost a week, as he had been tutoring the new Commander of the Abbey army Lyte and his Second in Command Cutch, his Aide Coxe, and his Captains Neale, Towner, and Younge on the essential drudgery of organizing a fighting force. (A fourth captain was needed, for which rôle Efran had predestined Barr. When Efran realized that he never told Lyte this, he summoned him to meet privately.)

As Wendt was settling into his chair, Minka entered. “I just got another letter from Justinian! He says—Oh, Commander! You're back!” And she turned to fly out of the room. Efran sat back to laugh quietly.

“Yes, Minka,” Wendt said. “. . . Minka?”

“She saw you and left again, Commander,” DeWitt said.

“Why?” Wendt asked, puzzled.

“I am betting that she determined you needed tea,” Efran said. “No, don't expect her to ask; you will have the tea.”

Wendt laughed, then said, “Where is the letter from Justinian?”

“In her pocket until you receive the tea,” Efran said.

Wendt laughed again. “I adore your Minka, Efran.”

“Everyone does,” he said hopelessly.

Shortly, Minka returned with a pretty mug of a steaming beverage. This she placed on the table and guided Wendt’s closest hand to it. “Here’s your tea, Commander. Be careful; I got it a little too hot. But it will cool quickly.”

As Efran shot a vindicated glance around the room, Wendt said, “Thank you, Minka. It smells wonderful.”

“Doesn’t it?” she said happily. “I think the sweet mint is my favorite tea.”

“I believe it’s mine, now, too,” Wendt said, raising the mug to sip cautiously.

“I’m so glad,” she said, regarding him in satisfaction.

Efran then prompted gently, “Did you have a letter to show us, Minka?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, remembering.

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Chapter 23

“It’s from Justinian,” Minka said. “Do you want me to read it?”

“May I see it first?” he asked with extended hand, diligently repressing the laughter.

“Of course.” She handed him the letter.

“Was the seal broken when you received it?” he asked.

“No, and I don’t see that he used any code words,” she said.

“Ah.” He opened it and scanned it first, then glanced up at her as he read out loud:

“My dearest Minka:

“I know that you will rejoice with me that the great and mighty General Shrubsole has put to death eight conspirators for the murders of Surchatain Cennick and his wife the Lady Fanny, who were found in bed together, alas, dead, early yesterday afternoon. Although it is a deep mystery how the murders were committed, there being no visible wounds on the bodies nor evidence of poison, it is irrefutable that they must have been murdered because the great General found the conspirators worthy of hanging. They, coincidentally, had been contending with him over the throne, so that clears the field considerably.

“Am anxious to see you again, my little pumpkin, but there is so much of deep interest in the General’s shrewd maneuvers that I cannot take time out to come down, regardless of my deep desires.

“Give my sincerest greetings and best wishes to the Gargoyle.

“Your ardent admirer,

“Justinian”

Efran read the letter in a uniformly flat tone, which caused his hearers to snicker when he was done. He put the letter down to look at Minka, who shrugged innocently. “Come here, my little pumpkin,” he said, and she went over to drop into his lap.

Wendt asked, “Aside from the baiting flirtation, what do you make of that, Efran? What do you know about Shrubsole?”

He shook his head. “I don’t remember hearing the name before now.”

“Wait,” DeWitt said in concentration. “Shrubsole. The name is—yes, he had been a kitchen assistant. I’m almost sure of it.”

“Another Brengleigh?” Efran laughed.

Wendt asked, “Brengleigh? From the kitchen? What about him?”

Efran replied, “After you were deposed, he was made Commander in your place. Someone named Thucius was his Second. I didn’t know him.”

Wendt said thoughtfully, “Early on, before I rejected the loyalty oath, Thucius was brought down from Eurus as my aide. His qualification was being one of Lightfoot’s early admirers.”

Minka put her head down on Efran’s neck, and he could tell that they were approaching dangerous territory for her, in reliving Wendt’s blinding. “That’s nothing we have to deal with now,” he murmured to her, and her arms tightened on his chest.

There was a minute of silence as the men returned to the work in front of them. Efran didn’t pretend to do anything but hold Minka. Shortly, she raised up, and he had to make himself loosen his hold on her. “Joshua will be trying to climb out of his nursery crib,” she said.

“Thank you,” he said, dropping his hands so that she could rise.

She went over to stand beside Wendt’s chair, and he raised his face. “Will you go out to the gardens with me, Commander?”

“I’d like that, Minka,” he said, standing, and she took his hand to walk out.

DeWitt muttered, “The way some things work out seems almost . . . impossibly. . . .”

“I know,” Efran whispered.

That morning, Nares’ lieutenant Wyeth was still in a state of dismayed unbelief over his death, as many of the

men were, especially Crowe's former men. Many of them also believed that Efran's attack contributed to his death, although others were grappling with the undeniable fact that he seemed to believe he was fighting someone who then threw him to the ground.

At any rate, the ongoing turmoil from all this contributed to Wyeth's short temper that morning. Before leaving for the practice grounds, he looked around the house and said, "Peri, this will not do. The servant Adele has been here a week and she had done no work at all—no sweeping, nor washing, nor carrying out waste. If she's here to just lie around, I will send her back."

"Not yet, Wyeth; I will see to her. She only wants a little switching," she murmured, pressing up to him to kiss him.

He accepted her kiss, but made no promises. "We'll see." And he left.

Peri hesitated, thinking, then went to Adele's room and opened the door. Adele, sitting at the table, hastily lowered something she had been holding and said with flaming eyes, "You knock and wait for admittance!"

Peri shrugged uneasily. "There are—chores that are waiting to be—"

"I'm paying you a royal a week for that, which is more than your lover is bringing in! Get out!" Adele shouted.

Highly conflicted, Peri withdrew and shut the door again. Then she went to get the broom and dustpan herself.

Dix was overjoyed to find herself the new owner of Mouris' plant shop and the leaseholder of his plot. First thing, she brought the money box to a better hiding place in *her* new bedroom—with silk sheets! And she put the key on a chain around her neck.

When Shanko arrived for his work shift, she showed him the notarized documents attesting to the above facts. He was stunned at first—why would the woman helper to the deceased leaseholder be given ownership of the property before the man?—that is, himself. Nonetheless, there was still a profitable opportunity before him.

So he smiled on her beneficently. "Dix, I'm going to marry you," he announced.

She twittered at him in her high-pitched squeak. "Oh, you're so cute! Here's a list of your chores for the day. First thing, I need you to move the shelves beside the counter to the end of the second row. Then you need to pick up the supplies listed."

"Oh," he said, disappointed. "I suppose I can do that." Flexing his muscles, he looked at the shelves that required moving. Then he looked back at her. "You want to give me a hand here?"

She chirped at him again as she walked over to assess the condition of the plants on the third aisle. Shanko began sullenly removing items from the shelves prior to moving them.

While Minka, Joshua, and Commander Wendt were in the gardens, Bennard, who was on door duty that day, came up and said, "Lady Minka, Hassler at the tool sharpening shop wanted to let you know that he has gardening hand tools in stock now."

"Oh, that's good," she said, then turned to Wendt. "Commander, would you like to go down to the shop with me?"

He said, "Yes, Minka, I would enjoy that. Thank you."

Pleased, she turned back to Bennard to say, "We'll need a cart and driver, please."

"Yes, Lady," Bennard said, then trotted off.

Wendt laughed, "Minka needs a cart for hand tools."

She squeezed his hand. "What happens is, I find myself buying more than I thought I would, and this is a tool shop. What tools do you need?" she asked seriously.

"I will think on that, Minka," he said thoughtfully. "Thank you."

"Good! We have to take Joshua back to the nursery. I don't think Efran wants me to take him to shops yet."

"Probably not," he agreed.

After dropping Joshua off, she took the Commander to the foyer. "Will you please wait here a moment? I'm going to run up to tell Efran where we'll be, and I don't see the need to drag you up and down stairs."

"That's fine, Minka," he said. Although she had not mentioned where they were right now, he could tell by the acoustics and the movement around them that they stood on the west side of the foyer. He felt her leave, then he stood still, perceiving.

After spending a week with the men on the grounds, he found that he was developing a rather reliable sense of proximity; that is, he was able to tell how many people were around him, how far away they were, and sometimes who they were. It was almost like a spatial diagram in his mind. If he "saw" someone in a certain position, he could reliably reach out and find someone there.

When Minka appeared in the second-floor workroom, all three men looked up. "The Commander and I are taking a cart to Hassler's tool sharpening shop, as I promised to buy gardening tools from him."

Efran nodded. "Take a bodyguard."

"Oh, I will. But I need money," she smiled at him.

He glanced over to Estes, who reached into the cabinet behind him for a pouch. Minka skipped over to take it, then paused before Efran to lean down and kiss him. This he accepted with full eyes. She then rushed out to return to the foyer.

The Commander was waiting where she had left him. As she ran to him, he smiled. "Will you need that many royals?"

She stopped in delight. "How did you know what I had?"

"The sound they make in the pouch," he said.

Taking his arm, she said, "I see I shall have to be more careful around you; you're too clever."

“No fear; I won’t tell on you,” he replied, smiling.

Bennard came over. “Your cart’s here, Lady Minka.”

“Thank you.” She took Wendt’s arm. “I have a ready excuse to hug you, and Efran can’t object,” she said victoriously. He smiled again.

Detler helped her and Wendt into the cart, then he climbed up in the driver’s seat. “Where are we going, Lady?”

“Hassler’s Tool Sharpening Shop, number forty-two,” she said.

“Right-o.” He clucked to the horse, and they began descending the switchback. Minka continued holding Wendt’s hand just because she liked him.

When they arrived at the shop, Detler assisted them out of the cart again. Minka immediately noticed the improvement in the appearance of the shop—the new, large sign hung straight and the yard was well-tended, even with a few shrubs in front.

Detler accompanied her and Wendt inside, where Minka looked around at shelves and walls of tools and accessories neatly arranged. Hassler looked up at their entrance, and a beefy laborer who was leaning on the counter turned around. An acquaintance of Hassler’s, he was just there to talk.

“Lady Minka,” Hassler said in pleased surprise. He had doubted she’d really come back to his shop.

“Hello, Hassler. Where are your gardening tools?” she asked.

The laborer straightened to study her as Hassler came out from around the counter. “Over here, Lady,” he said, indicating an area along the wall. As Minka went over to look, she brought along Wendt by the hand. The laborer looked at his white hair and dark glasses in derisive pity.

Going along the wall displays, Minka paused to look down at the bags of mortar lined up on the floor. “Efran said the men on the wall are running out of mortar,” she murmured. Turning to Detler, she asked, “Is this the type of mortar they’re using on the wall?”

“I don’t know, Lady,” Detler replied, regarding the bags.

“Would you go ask? They’re not far,” Minka said.

“Yes,” he said, then paused to assess the laborer, who made a point to look away in disinterest. Detler then looked at the shop owner, who was patiently waiting by the display of garden tools.

“I’ll be right back,” Detler told them all. Then he went out to take a short cut to the work area on the wall. Wendt, quietly standing by, was aware not only of Detler’s leaving, but where the shop owner stood and where the large unknown man stood who had not yet spoken.

“Now, what have you got?” Minka asked Hassler.

“Here, Lady,” he said, gesturing. Minka released Wendt’s hand to go over and pick up a small hand spade. Wendt was aware of where she stood near Hassler, and the fact that the unknown man had shifted toward her, away from the counter. With slow, easy steps, Wendt moved closer to her side.

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Chapter 24

“Oh, this is perfect,” Minka said, holding a hand shovel. I’ll take two of them. And a bucket, so I don’t steal any more of Tourjee’s. Do you have any gloves? Small ones?” she asked.

“I think so. Let me go look.” Hassler darted to the back of his shop. Wendt felt Minka catch her breath as if she were about to say something, but Hassler had left the room.

She was quiet, which indicated that she was uneasy. The unknown man had moved away from the counter toward the wall at which they stood. Wendt could not see that he was pretending to study the tools Hassler had for sale, but Minka moved closer to the door, taking Wendt with her.

From the back, they heard Hassler call, “Rowe, did I buy the old lady’s gloves?”

“Yeah, Hassler, a bundle of ’em,” the laborer called back, which he did not actually know to be true. But it was sufficient to keep Hassler in the back for a while longer.

The laborer then came up to Minka, who managed to keep Wendt between them. Rowe said in a low voice, “How about you step out with me?”

Wendt felt her trembling. “Back up, son,” he said.

Moving in, Rowe laughed, which enabled Wendt to accurately judge the location of his face. As Rowe began raising an arm toward her, Wendt’s fist shot up into his face. “Eyow!” Wendt heard, then the crash of a large body hitting the floor. “Ow! Oh, I’m bleeding!”

At the cries, Hassler ran back out to the front to see the large man rolling in pain on the floor. Hassler then cautiously raised his eyes to Minka. She said, “If you can’t find any gloves, I’ll just take the shovels and the bucket.” She brought Wendt over to the counter, where she produced a couple of silver pieces from her pocket.

“Yes, lady,” Hassler said in confusion, looking between her, the blind man, and Rowe in pain on the floor.

Detler ran back in at that time, winded. Seeing the man rolling on the floor and bleeding from the nose, Detler looked quickly at Minka and Wendt, both calmly standing at the counter. Deciding that the rolling man’s troubles had nothing to do with her, Detler said, “Yes, Lady Minka; Ernst says that’s what they need, and to buy all he has.”

“Here.” Minka gave him three royals from her pouch. “Load the mortar in your cart and take it out to them. The Commander and I will walk back. Do you mind walking back, Commander?” she asked.

“No, Minka, that would be fine,” he said.

Holding his arm with a bucket of shovels swinging in her other hand, she walked him down the steps to progress to Shurtleff’s, then turn down the main road toward the switchback. “My hero. I can’t wait to tell Efran.”

“Let me tell him, Minka. We don’t want to get Detler in trouble,” he said. (But Wendt never said anything to Efran about it.)

“Oh, you’re right. We’ll go back another time for you to pick out tools. I don’t need any other bodyguard besides you.” She squeezed his arm, chatting all the way up the switchback.

Back at the fortress, Minka and Wendt returned to the workroom to report on their success. “Shovels. Bucket,” Minka announced, placing them on the table as evidence. “And innumerable bags of mortar for the wall.” The Commander was able to find his chair by himself and sit.

“Well done,” Efran smiled, glancing up from the scouts’ report from Crescent Hollow. Regarding her air of victory, he said, “I never imagined that mortar would be so important to you.”

“I want to do everything well,” she said, collecting her shovels and bucket. “And now I shall take these out to the garden.” First, she went over to kiss Efran. Then, passing Wendt in his chair, she bent to kiss his cheek. As Efran raised his brows, she said, “I get to kiss him and Martyn.” With that pronouncement, she swept out.

“Him and Martyn,” DeWitt said, studying the Commander.

“He’s smiling,” Estes said, whereupon Wendt’s smile melted into a merely satisfied set of lips.

“What happened, Commander?” DeWitt asked.

“Nothing important,” Wendt said, the smile resurfacing.

“That’s it. We’ll never hear it now,” DeWitt said in resignation.

Efran smiled, having his own way of getting what he wanted out of Minka. But Wendt said, “Forget it, Efran.” Efran’s smile faded to a suspicious squint.

Nonetheless, he returned to the scouts’ report. But he found himself reading the same line over and over. There was something left hanging, something undone. What was it?

After a few minutes’ thought, Efran knew what he needed to do. He got up to hand the report to Estes. “You’ll want to see this. Nothing earth-shattering, but Auber seems committed to resuming the faires in Crescent Hollow beginning this fall.”

“Which means you’ll be taking Minka,” Estes predicted.

“That’s likely,” Efran agreed. “When you’re done, please log it.” Estes nodded and DeWitt glanced up. So Estes began reading the report out loud.

Efran left, then, and went down to the kitchen to get not one, but two lanterns, both lit. He didn’t want to be caught in the dark again if one got extinguished.

He took both lanterns to the cold storage room closet, where he moved aside the small chest that blocked the trap door. Closing the closet door, he lifted the trap door and descended the steep stairway with both lanterns. He hung one on a hook beside the stairway before turning with the other toward the dark water.

Where he stood, he could see things piled on the edge of the ledge. He brought the lantern over to look at boxes

and parcels, some dried, some on the very edge of the ledge still wet. Wondering, he set the lantern down in order to begin moving the boxes to the stairway. Some were heavily patinaed copper, some waterlogged wood, and he began to get a glimmer of an idea as to what they were.

When he had all of them moved, he went back to the edge, leaving both lanterns behind him. “Swimmer? Heye?” He waited quietly, watching.

It took some time, but he finally saw the broad, slow swell that indicated Heye’s approach. He stood slightly back from the edge to not get completely soaked as she emerged with a cascade of water over the ledge. Then he came forward to kneel. “I am very glad to see you. I was afraid you might have gotten crushed when the cavern went down.”

She curled an arm around him without trying to pull him in. “Thank you, Heye. You enabled us to save the fortress. Without your taking Minka down for the box, we would never have known what was happening or how to stop it.” He stroked her arm, watching it change to the dark gray color and linen texture of his work pants.

“I wish I could communicate with you better. I might have to get Minka down here again,” he murmured. She waved an arm, which he took to be a conciliatory gesture. “Now what is all this? More from the barge?”

She didn’t exactly nod, but she did wave again. It stood to reason that the barge had been loaded with stock other than just that one essential box. He realized that Heye must have separated it out from the rest of the cargo to make it accessible whenever someone came down who could retrieve it. This made him wonder, again, why Heye couldn’t bring it up herself as she had brought all this here.

As he mulled this over, she spread her arms wide, one toward the steep stairway behind him and the other toward the cavern that had collapsed. After a moment of intense thought, Efran apprehended the blindingly simple reason: No one had been coming to this cavern anymore; all of the attention was centered on the cavern to the east. But it was no use bringing up the box in that cavern without someone like Minka there who would understand its importance.

He knelt again, close to the water. “How did you know all this? How can you be so—aware? Moreso than we were,” he whispered. Was she that old? Impossible, he thought.

Heye squirted enough water through her siphon to soak his front, then submerged again in a mighty wave that soaked the rest of him. And she was definitely laughing.

So Efran, dripping wet again, carried the rest of the boxes and parcels above so they could see what was there.

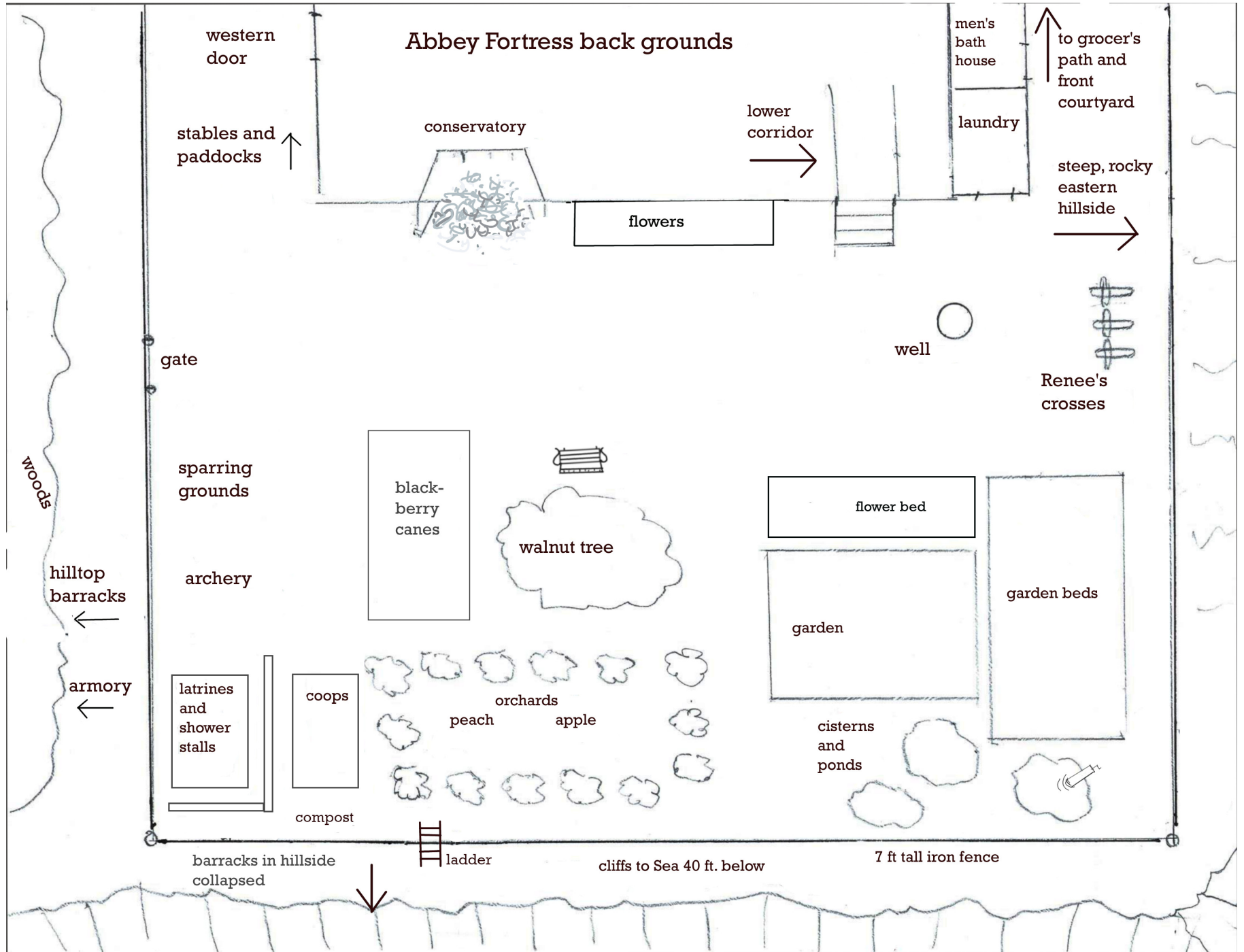
This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on August 5th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Destroyer* (Book 8)

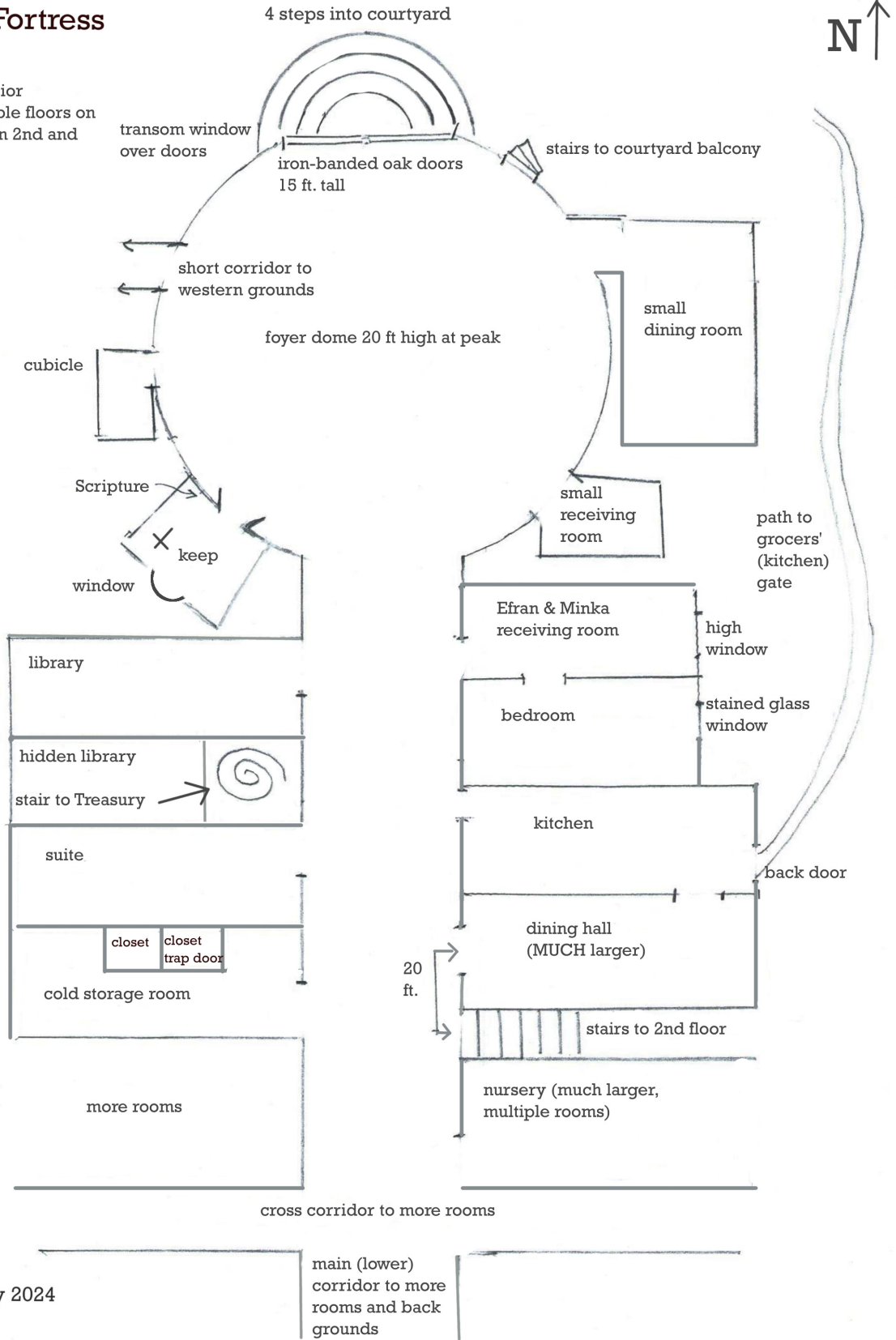
© Robin Hardy 2024

Adele—ah DELL	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Arenado—air en AH doh	Melchior—MEL key or
Arne—arn	Minka—MINK ah
Auber—aw BER	Monsell—mon SELL
Awfyn—AWE fin	Mouris—MORE iss
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon	Nares—NAIR es
Bennard—beh NARD	Nesse—ness
Bethune—beh THUNE	Nyland—NIGH lund
Blature—blah TURE	Occitan—AWK si tan
Brengleigh—BRING lee	Occitania—awk si TAIN yah
cacophony—kuh KAH fuh nee	Peri—PARE ee
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	Pia—PEE ah
chagrin—shuh GRIN	Pieta—pie ATE ah
Clairvaux—kler VOH	Pindar—PIN dhur
Clonmel—KLON mell	Pleyel—PLAY el
Clough—chloh	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
courtesan—KOR tuh zahn	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Doane—rhymes with <i>loan</i>	Prie Mer—pre MARE
Dobell—DOH bull	<i>pua</i> —PYU ah (come)
Efran—EFF run	reliquary—REH luh kweh ree
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Rowe—rhymes with <i>how</i>
Elvey—ELL vee	Sasany—SASS an ee
Endelion—en DELL ee un	Scriven—SCREH ven
Eola—ee OH la	Serrano—suh RAHN oh
Erastus—eh RAS tis	soirée—SWAH ray
Estes—ESS tis	Stites—stights
Eurus—YOUR us	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Fenolheda—fen ol EE dah	Sybil—SEH bull
garderobe—GAR de robe (indoor privy)	Theodulph—THE oh dulf
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	Thucius—THU see us
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	Tourjee—TUR jee
Goadby—GOAD bee	Venegas—VEN eh gus
Goss—gahs	Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Graduliere—gra DUE lee air	Vories—VORE eez
Graeme—GRAY em	Webbe—web
Greves—greevs	
Haight—hate	
Hemy—HE me	
Heye—HAY yuh	
Imelda—eh MEL dah	
Justinian—jus TIN ee un	
Kelsey—KELL see	
Kiika Mea Luku—KEE kah MAY ah LOO koo	
Koschat—KOS chat	
Lietes—lie EE tee	
Loizeaux—lwah ZOH	
<i>manao</i> —mah NAY oh (situational awareness)	
Marguerite—mar ger EET	
Mathurin—mah THUR in	



Abbey Fortress Interior

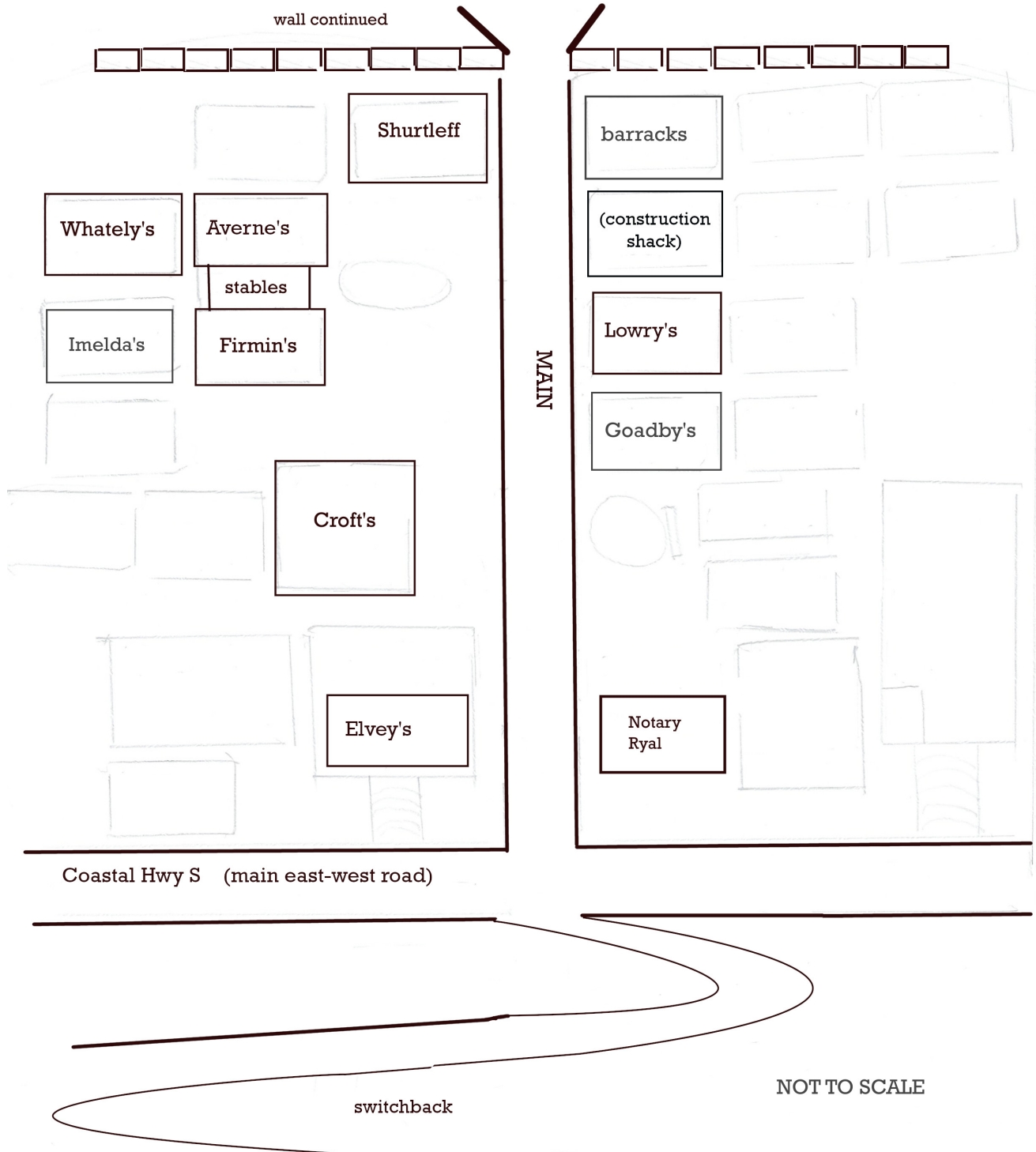
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



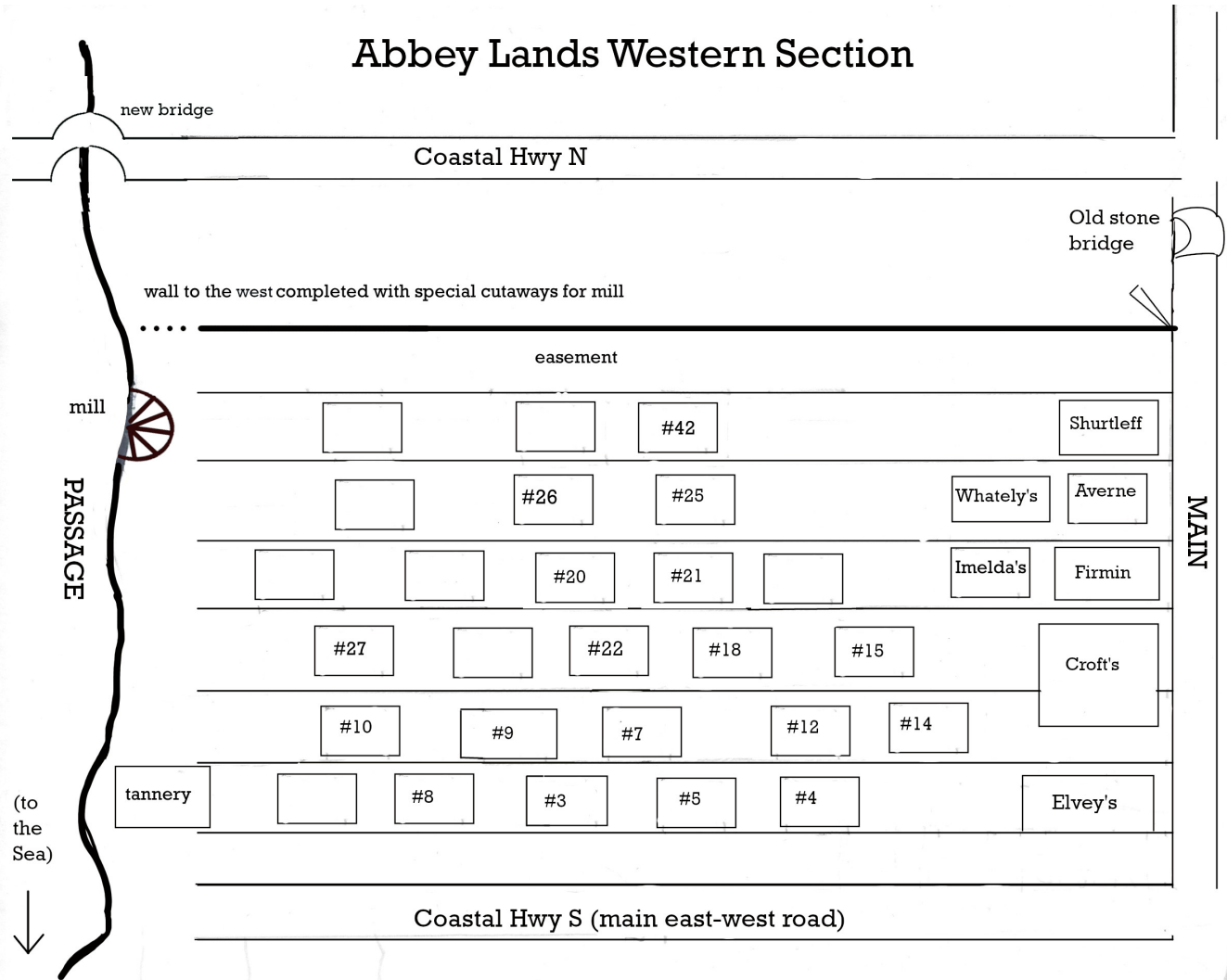
NOT TO SCALE

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Abbey Lands Main Road



Abbey Lands Western Section



rocky NW hillside

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

KEY

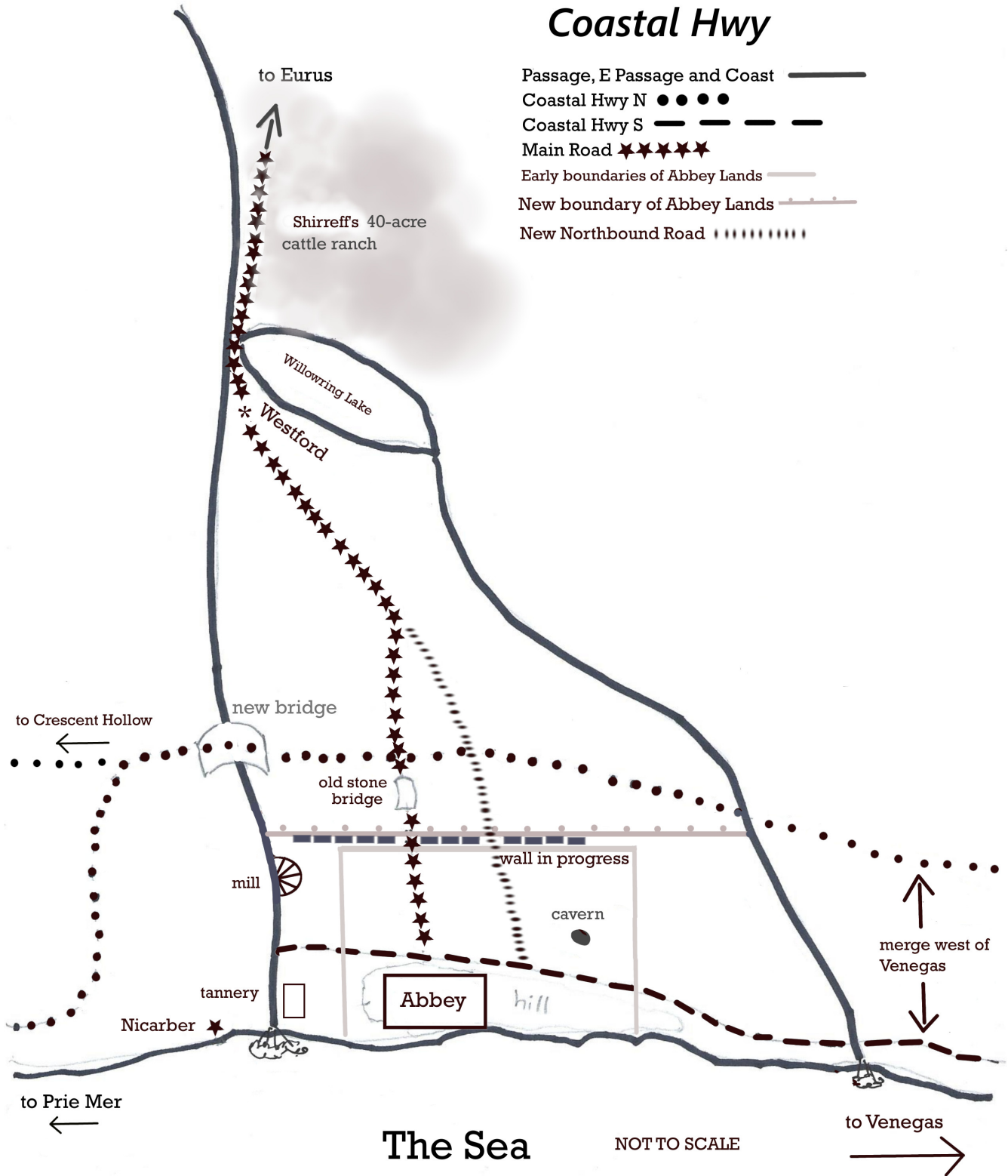
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Wyeth & Peri
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening

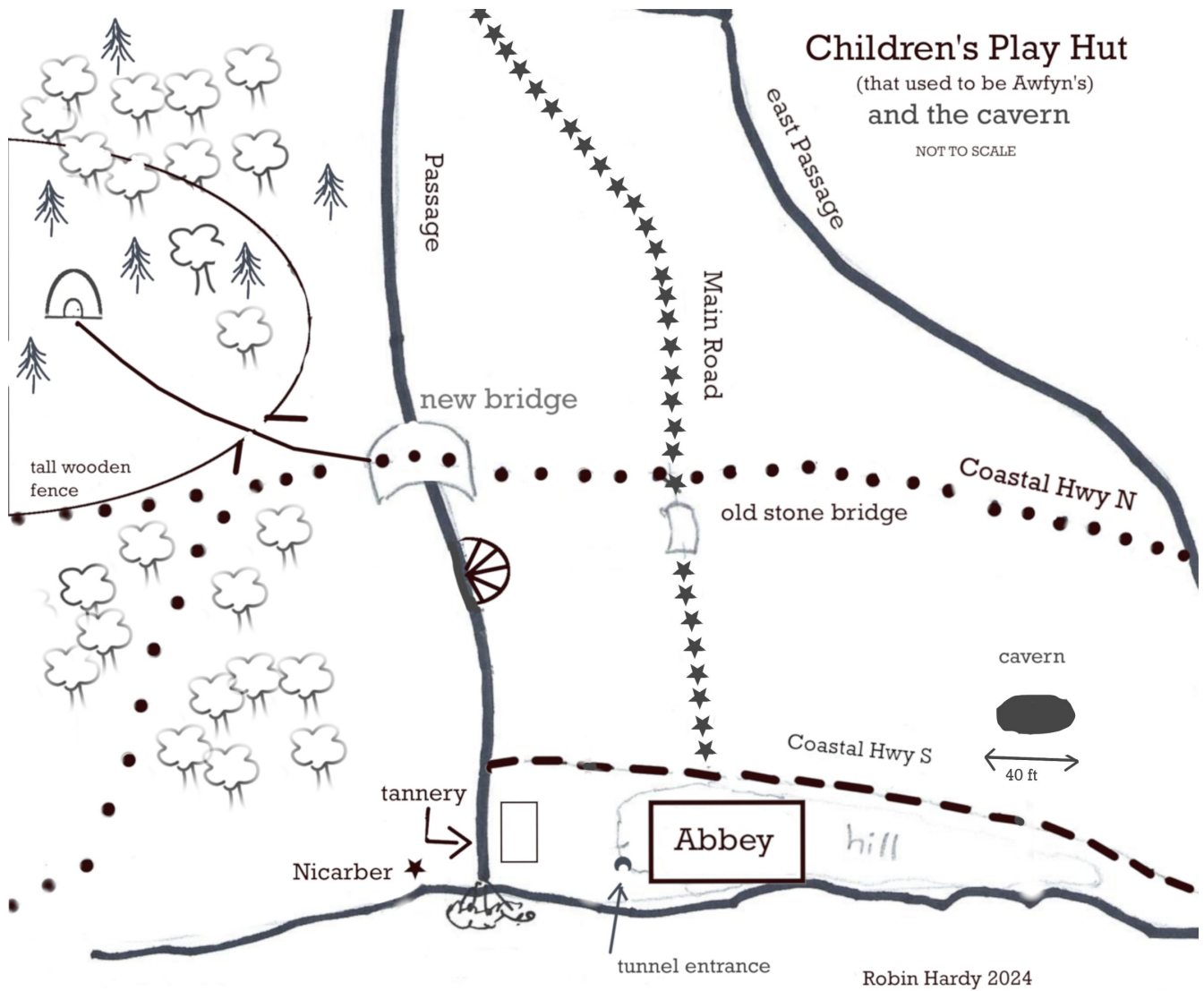
woods

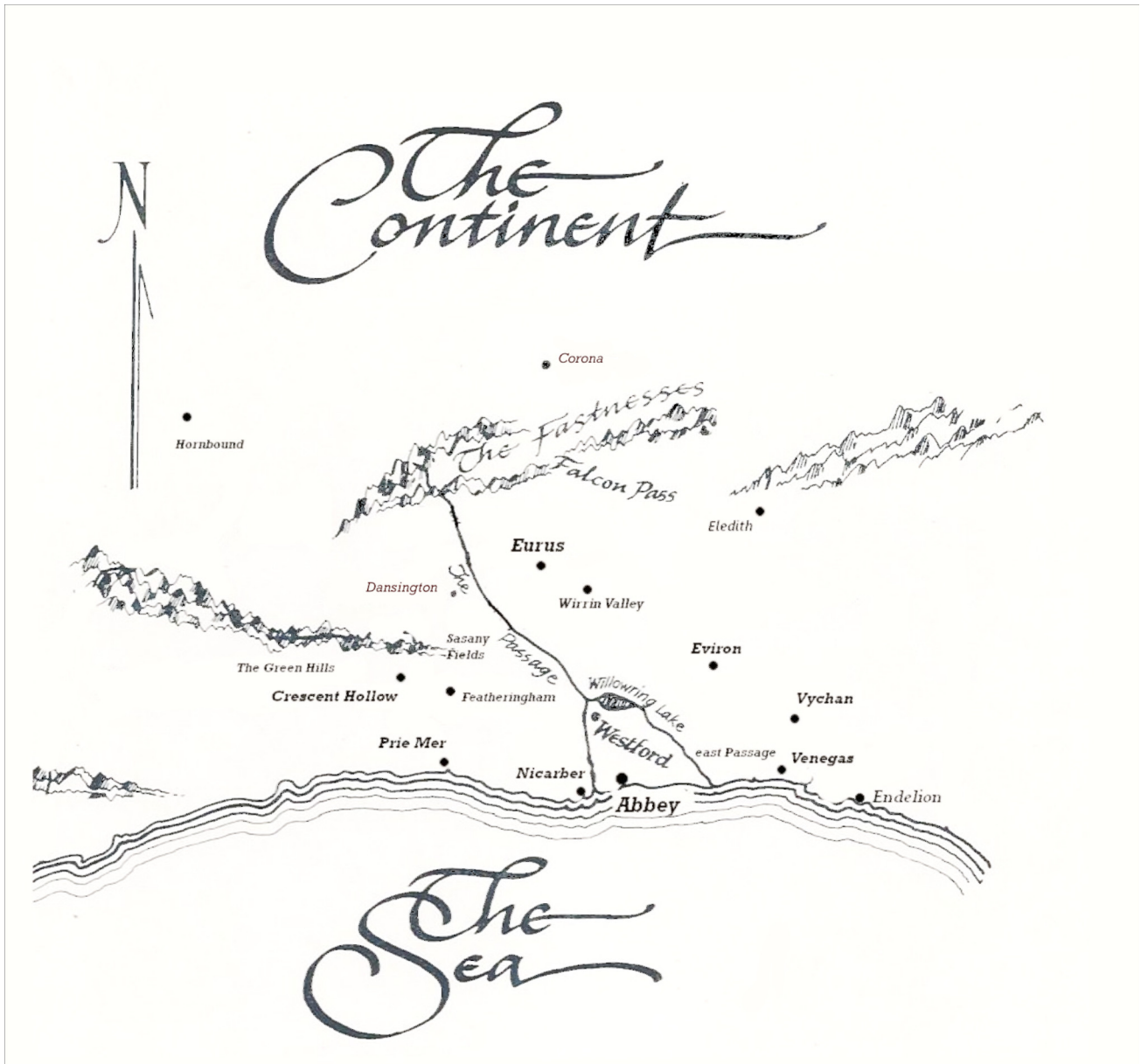
7 ft tall iron fence

FORTRESS

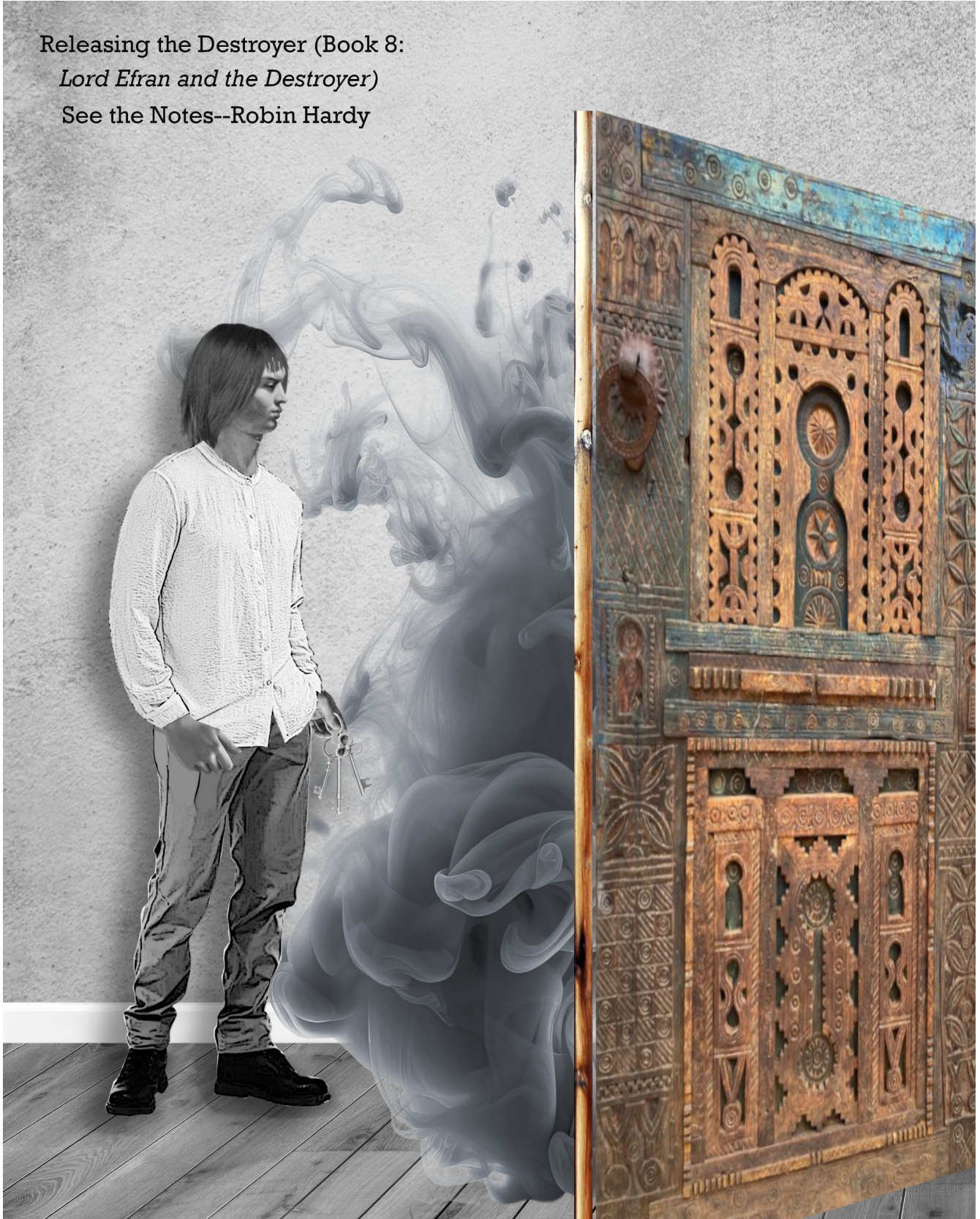
Coastal Hwy







Releasing the Destroyer (Book 8:
Lord Efran and the Destroyer)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Pulling this illustration together was wild. Efran went through so many wardrobe changes that he almost quit on the spot. But when I saw [Orazio Gentileschi's *David Contemplating the Head of Goliath*](#), I knew I'd found Efran's face (modified only a little. See detail below.)

The door of the Destroyer's prison is an [ancient Berber door](#)¹ from the Caliph's house outside of Casablanca. And with the wonderful [smoke plume](#)², I had no need of any other special effects to portray the Destroyer.



Robin Hardy
April 24, 2024

PS. I am not claiming a copyright on this illustration.

1. Photograph on Wikimedia Commons by Secretum Mundi
2. Created by [Vectonauta](#) on Freepik