



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

Book 6

Lord Efran and
Krems

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Efran and Estes rode silently into the ruins of Nicarber. After the devastating hurricane of two years ago, the little coastal fishing village had not yet been rebuilt: the wounds were too raw. Of a population of 600, almost half were dead or missing when the rain and wind had finally ceased. Even the fish had abandoned the coast because the storm completely demolished the coral reefs.

Incredible as the damage was here, it had been worse at Prie Mer: two thousand people disappeared into the fierce water; every building had been flattened within a mile of the coast. Yet rebuilding had begun in that important city, which made it unsuitable as a hiding place for Awfyn.

The one-eyed Polonti giant had made himself the object of a massive manhunt by the nobles of Westford for his use of the Graetrix, huge man-eating birds, in his attempt to take Lord Bowring's estate about a week ago (today was May 14th). Efran's alliance with Awfyn also brought him under scrutiny, but as the Lord of the Abbey Lands' battles with the Graetrix were well known, Efran was not suspected as an accomplice in this horrific strategy.

Efran was, however, enlisted as intermediary between the nobles and Awfyn. It was a task Efran felt duty-bound to accept as a fellow Polonti—the sturdy, black-haired, brown-skinned race originating in Polontis. (Efran's top administrator, the Steward Estes, was also Polonti.) The opprobrium for Awfyn's ghastly tactic was reflected in an outpouring of public censure and hatred on innocent Polonti throughout the area, who were crying out for relief. Thus was arranged this meeting with Awfyn today.

"There. The ruins of the inn," Estes said, nodding to the left.

Efran turned aside to scan the rubble. "Do you see an entry?"

Estes dismounted. "Chior said it would be under the sign."

Also dismounting, Efran looked at the faded, chipped portion of signage that read, "Welcome to Nicol—" "Let's see if we can raise this," he suggested, standing at one end of the eight-by-four-foot fragment. Estes went to the other end, and they lifted it to reveal a walkway.

Setting the fragment aside, they loosely draped the horses' reins over standing rubble and entered the walkway. Twenty feet into the wreckage of the inn, they walked through a doorway into a cleared room. Sitting on the floor were Awfyn and four of his associates. "Greetings, friends," Awfyn rumbled.

"Awfyn," Efran acknowledged, while Estes nodded. Glancing dubiously at the cracked ceiling, Efran sat against the wall while Estes sat in the doorway—the portion of the wall most likely to remain standing if the ceiling collapsed.

"So what do the moneyed class of Westford demand?" Awfyn muttered.

Efran replied, "As I already told you, for the loss of Bowring's estate and the deaths of eighty-two men, he wants either the tray or the ewer." These objects, both solid gold, were given to Awfyn by Minka in return for his rescuing Efran from capture and torture by Lord Monsell.

The men with Awfyn, not knowing what their lord knew, looked quickly at Efran, then at Awfyn, who growled

deep in his throat, “Why did my friend Efran tell them about these things?”

Efran laughed, “I didn’t say a word to anyone about them. [Which was true.] Your own men talked about them so widely, I’d be surprised if there was anyone left who didn’t know.” This was also true, but irrelevant: the nobles had demanded a payment of one thousand royals, which Efran knew that Awfyn wouldn’t have on hand, not now. However, he had these two items which were each worth far more, so that is what Efran demanded.

Awfyn stirred in dissatisfaction, and his associates sank down a little. “I don’t wish to give them up,” he objected.

Efran stood. “As you say, friend Awfyn. But they have gathered about a hundred men to hunt for you, many of them professional bounty hunters. You will have to go north of the Fastnesses or across the Sea to escape them.” That number may have been an exaggeration, but there were still many.

Awfyn uttered, “I will think on it.”

“You will decide now, friend, because meeting with you puts me and my Steward at risk, not only of being mistaken for your associates, but in carrying your appeasement to them,” Efran said.

When Awfyn did not reply, Efran jerked his head. “We’re done here, Estes.”

Estes got to his feet and Awfyn grunted, “They can have the ewer.”

“Then bring it to me now,” Efran said.

Awfyn glanced at one of his men, who got up to slip through a crooked doorway in the back wall. There was a period of tense waiting, then the man returned with a tall, slender object wrapped in burlap which he set on the floor. Without moving, Efran looked at him stonily, so the man unwrapped the object. It was certainly a tall golden ewer.

Efran glanced at Estes, who was familiar with the ewer, having transported it to Awfyn with Minka. Estes went over to pick it up and examine it inside and out. Then he nodded to Efran, taking the burlap to rewrap it.

“All right. Goodbye,” Efran said, turning.

“We will send a bodyguard with you,” Awfyn said.

“No,” Efran replied. He led out through the doorway, then they retraced their steps through the walkway to the horses. Here, they turned their horses’ heads and slapped their hindquarters to start them loping back up the road without their riders.

With Estes carrying the wrapped ewer, the two men embarked on another course through the debris, frequently stopping to listen and check the sun for direction. While they hated the possibility of losing two good horses, they could not ride back from a meeting with Awfyn carrying anything, especially since Efran was fairly sure that they had been followed to the meeting place.

It was hard going. Without a clear path through the old wreckage, they never knew whether any place they stepped would support their weight, especially carrying something heavy. Wood was rotted through; sea detritus was soft and stinking, and rodents skittered from underneath their steps. Often they had to stop to make sure they were not being pursued while trying to maintain a somewhat straight course east.

At one point Efran paused, looking north. "Look at the smoke."

Estes paused to look. "It's white. Where is it coming from?"

"Looks like the woods north of here," Efran murmured.

"Nothing we can do about it now, whatever it is," Estes grunted.

At last they worked their way through the ruins of Nicarber to turn north and begin walking cautiously through the woods east of the ruins, taking turns carrying the ewer. As they crossed the dirt road leading to Nicarber, Efran paused with the ewer. "Coming out here, we didn't run across the wire fence enclosing the additional acreage we bought from Ryal."

Looking for the path north of the road, Estes said, "No, DeWitt told the foreman of the crew installing the fence, ah, Kaas, not to block this road with it."

"We still should have run across it—" Efran began, then broke off to peer west down the road. Abruptly, he set the ewer down in the middle of the road to begin trotting west. So Estes picked up the ewer to drop it into the brush alongside the road and chase him down.

Efran had run about 100 yards past Nicarber before stopping to put his hands on his hips, looking. When Estes drew up to him, Efran nodded toward the end post of that wire fence just north of the road, with the sign indicating that the land to the east belonged to the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea. Studying all that, Estes realized: "Nicarber is inside the fence. It's part of the acreage you bought. Why didn't you tell us?"

"I didn't know," Efran murmured. So they doubled back to pick up the ewer and proceed home.

By the time they arrived at the Abbey plots, the sun was setting. But the guards at the wall gates were on duty, so Efran sent up word to the courtyard gates to bring down horses.

"Did our horses come back, by the way?" Efran asked one wall sentry, Routh.

He answered, "Yes! Hours ago. DeWitt thought it was deliberate, but it worried the Lady Minka."

Efran scowled, "Who told her?"

"I believe she noticed the horse you left on, Captain," Routh replied.

"Oh," Efran winced.

A contingent of mounted guards rode down the switchback to escort Efran and Estes up to the fortress with Awfyn's appeasement to the nobles. As they entered the foyer, Efran spotted Minka looking anxiously around at all the men who were taller than she. The ewer was set down practically in front of her, but she didn't glance at it, and the anxiety remained on her face until Efran pushed forward so that she could see him.

Exhaling in relief, she reached up to him, and he took her in his arms. "Why were you worried?" he laughed in her hair.

"About your making it back with something very valuable of Awfyn's? No reason," she retorted.

“Well, here we are, and here it is, so come have dinner with me,” he said, brushing her disordered hair from her face. She and Joshua—Efran’s four-month-old son by Adele—spent so much time outside with Garrett, the head gardener, she was looking like a garden sprite.

She stepped back, almost falling over the ewer. “Oh, yes,” he said. Picking it up with one hand, he took it with them to the dining hall.

That evening in bed, with Joshua asleep in his crib beside them, Minka nestled down on Efran’s shoulder. He kissed the top of her head, and she pressed closer into his side. He shifted to accommodate her. “What of Adele?” she asked.

“Hmm?” he murmured, half asleep. The ewer was in this room, shoved up against the wall.

“Did you see Adele?” She raised up to look in his face.

He blinked. “No. I forgot all about her, which is good, because we couldn’t have brought her back with us, even if she wanted to come.”

“Oh.” She was very tired, but too disturbed to sleep. He rolled to encompass her with his right arm as she lay on his left shoulder, so she closed her eyes and didn’t worry about Adele or anything else that night.

Early the following morning (May 15th) while Minka and Joshua were outside with Garrett deciding on an additional bed of annuals, Efran sent a message to Lord Bowring that his appeasement from Awfyn was waiting in the Abbey fortress. Efran declined to take on the responsibility of its transport to the lord, so he needed to send his own people to get it.

About an hour later, Efran was notified of a group of nobles coming down the Abbey road. So Efran alerted Estes and DeWitt, and gave instructions for refreshments to be brought to the small dining room off the foyer. Gate sentries were alerted, and the door sentries instructed on protocol. Efran brought the ewer to the small dining room, placing it on a marble stand designed to support heavy decorative objects. Then he waited.

Shortly, the lords and their bodyguard arrived. The majority of the thirty-man bodyguard were asked to wait in the courtyard; two were allowed to conduct the lords Bowring, Reinagle, and Webbe into the fortress. Accompanying Bowring was his oldest daughter Trina, who contrived to come along because she wanted to see Efran again.

Abbey guards directed the visitors into the dining room where Efran, Estes, and DeWitt stood waiting. A maid was also present to offer refreshments.

As the lords entered, they immediately spotted the ewer, and Efran immediately spotted Trina. She lowered her chin to smile at him, and he thanked God that he hadn’t slept with her. After he and his regiment had spent the night protecting Bowring’s house during the bread riots of four years ago, she had come to Efran while the men were preparing to leave and kissed him in gratitude, repeatedly. It required great tact to put her off with his men watching, but he had succeeded by promising a visit later, which he never fulfilled.

Estes, who had been part of that contingent, recognized her as well. And not for the first time, he was grateful to not be quite such an attractive man.

Efran said, "Welcome, gentleman. You see Awfyn's appeasement there; feel free to examine it, then have a seat and accept refreshment." Besides ale, nut bread, and ham rolls, Madea had produced her famous lemon/lime custards, which even the genteel fought over. Reinagle went right over to look at the ewer without attempting to pick it up.

Bowring paused to introduce his daughter. "Trina, this is Lord Efran. You might remember him as the Captain of the regiment that defended our house during the bread riots."

"Indeed I do," she said, extending her hand.

Efran took it lightly. "Hello, Trina. I hear that you are married."

"Divorced," she corrected, looking at his lips. As Bowring was watching, Efran barely sighed at the additional complication in today's proceedings. Estes regarded him with a slight smile that equated a belly laugh, for him.

Trembling in outrage, Reinagle sputtered, "We demanded a thousand royals, and you give us a water pitcher!"

DeWitt, sitting, said, "Lord Reinagle, if you will inspect the markings on the bottom of the ewer, you will find that it was crafted almost two hundred years ago in Westford during the reign of Surchatain Roman. It is gold with a purity of ninety-nine percent. The royals minted today have a purity ranging from forty to fifty-five percent. Given the weight of the ewer, and the weight of a standard royal, we have calculated that the monetary value of the ewer is approximately one hundred forty-eight thousand royals. That is apart from its value as an historical relic and of its craftsmanship."

He pushed the sheet bearing detailed calculations toward Lord Bowring, who sat weakly to take it. His daughter sat on one side of him and Webbe on the other, gesturing to the maid. DeWitt added, "You may have the figures verified at any reputable goldsmith."

Efran sat at the far end of the table, and Estes sat at his right. After wavering a moment, Reinagle sat. Webbe said, "Goodness, this custard is wonderful!" Efran smiled slightly, elbow on the arm of his chair, an ankle on the opposite knee, fingers idly covering his lips.

At this time Minka, having left Joshua in the nursery to sleep, was skipping down the corridor toward the foyer. Garrett had told her that Doane had a list of annuals available at the new plant nursery on an Abbey plot, which she was eager to examine. But dressed as she always was, in a linen work dress, with unstyled hair falling around her shoulders, she looked like any maid, pretty in a lower class, slightly unkempt way. She had just turned 17, and she skipped when she was particularly happy.

Outside the closed door of the small dining room, two of Bowring's guards were looking around the corridor in boredom, commenting on the looks of any maid who passed under their eyes. Lyte, a favorite of Efran's, was watching them in contempt as he stood guard. But he turned to smile at Minka as she came skipping toward them. Knowing him, and his service to Efran, she smiled glowingly in return.

One of Bowring's guards, misinterpreting everything he saw, grabbed Minka by the waist to kiss her firmly on the lips.

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Chapter 2

Lyte seized the guard around his neck, breaking his hold on Minka, and began banging his head against the door of the small dining room. He paused briefly to punch the other guard in the face, who was trying to intervene, then resumed pounding the first guard's head.

The door was thrown open for the guard to fall at Efran's feet. Efran looked down at him, then up at Minka, wide-eyed and disheveled. Lyte was breathing hard in fury as the second guard picked himself up from the floor, holding his bloody nose.

"Are you all right?" Efran asked Minka. DeWitt turned in his chair to watch, but Estes was out of view of the corridor. Reinagle's view was completely blocked by Efran's back.

"Yes," she expelled in a quick breath, still wide-eyed. "It was an accident," she said just as rapidly.

He evaluated that, then took in Lyte again, who had composed himself to salute. While the first guard crawled out of the doorway, Efran reached out to take Minka's hand, pull her into the room, and close the door again with a lightning glance of appreciation to Lyte, who smiled.

Efran seated Minka on his left. "My wife, the Lady Minka," he said generally. She glanced around self-consciously, smoothing her hair. The visitors regarded her with uniformly open mouths.

Estes looked at DeWitt, mouthing, *Who is at the door?*

"Lyte," DeWitt murmured, and Estes almost smiled for the second time this morning.

Efran sat again, glancing at his wife as she straightened her dress. Then he looked up to ask, "Are there any more questions?" He was done with this meeting, and it showed.

Looking at Minka, Bowring said, "I understand that your sister has taken up with Awfyn."

Efran turned eyes toward him that threatened to harden into glass at any moment. In answer to Bowring, Minka nodded. "At one time, yes."

"How do you feel about that?" Bowring asked. His tone was not threatening, and Efran looked at Minka, as everyone did.

She swallowed. "I am scared for her. She plays with people, and doesn't understand. . . ." She took a moment to order her thoughts, and no one interrupted. She continued, "The Polonti are an old race, and have deep roots in streams of power, like, the *aina*—the Polonti who have a special connection to animals. And the singers, who compel with their songs." She paused to look at Efran, who nodded slightly.

Minka continued, "Awfyn has sunk his roots into a dark stream that—I don't want to look at closely, but it's something like bloodlust. It scares me, because he has a good heart. He helped me when I came to him; he saved Efran from being tortured. So it hurts and scares me to see him descend to—what he did."

Reinagle interrupted to tell her, "My men killed fourteen Polonti when they were trying to flee Bowring's house because the birds were destroying it."

She had nothing to say to that. After a moment, Bowring asked her, “Does your husband have roots in a stream of power?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Yes,” she repeated, looking at Efran, whose eyes had grown cautious. “He does, and so does Estes.” She looked down the table at him. “DeWitt, too, even though you’re not Polonti!” she laughed, eyes misting. “Many of the men who come here have roots in that stream.”

“What stream is that?” Bowring asked, eyes narrowing.

“Sacrifice,” she said, tears coming to her eyes. “Efran sees a need before him, and lays himself down to pour himself out for it. He will empty himself out, unless he is pulled up again to be refilled.” There was utter silence while Minka sat pressing her lips together, self-consciously wiping her face.

After a moment, Bowring stood. “I will accept Awfyn’s appeasement, on the condition that you will not associate with him or welcome him or his underlings here.”

“That is a reasonable condition. I will abide by it,” Efran said heavily.

Bowring gestured to the door. DeWitt stood to open it, motioning the guards in. Then he spoke to Lyte.

Bowring’s men shuffled in to stand uncertainly over the ewer until Lyte entered with the wrappings. Estes got up to spread them on the table, then he and DeWitt laid the ewer on them to begin covering it and tying it up. Minka started to slip out, but Efran laid a hand on her arm.

When the guards had taken the ewer out, Bowring paused at the door, then offered his hand to Efran, who shook it. Trina leaned forward to kiss his cheek in disappointment before leaving with her father. Reinagle left without a word, but Webbe shook Efran’s hand enthusiastically. “Wonderful dining you have here.”

“Yes, we do, thank you,” Efran said. Seeing their visitors being escorted out by Abbey guards, Efran closed the door with himself, Minka, Estes and DeWitt inside. He reseated himself at the table, so the others sat as well.

Efran looked at Minka, then inhaled, looking around. He studied trivial features around the room before asking, “How can we help Adele?”

“You can’t, Efran,” she sighed. “You were right the first time. She’s chosen her course, and no one can make her choose differently.”

“How can you know so much when you’re just a child?” he whispered.

“I am fully of age, and then some,” she said, drawing herself up. Estes and DeWitt smiled.

Estes asked, “But how do you know about Polonti, Minka? As far as I know, you are right in what you say. But how do you know about us?”

Mildly baffled by the question, she said, “Watching you”—as though it were obvious.

“And that, gentlemen, is my wife,” Efran exhaled. “At any rate, thank you for your great assistance with the nobles, who I will certainly enrage again tomorrow.” Then he turned back to Minka. “What did Bowring’s men do to you in the corridor?”

She stood to move out of his reach. "I'm very sorry, my lord, I don't remember. But if you will excuse me, Doane has a list of annuals that I promised to Garrett, who is probably wondering where it is." She opened the door and walked out.

After a pensive moment, Efran said, "I'll ask Lyte." Estes and DeWitt nodded, then rose to go back to work.

A few hours later, Ellor came to the open door of Estes' second-floor workroom where he and Efran were studying a map showing prospective extensions of Abbey plots. As both men looked up, Ellor saluted and said, "Pardon, Captain; the baker was just up to say that Ryal had asked you to step to his shop, sir."

"All right; wait a moment," Efran said, then asked Estes, "Why don't we take the maps and the surveyor down there while I check in with Ryal?"

"Yes, I think we're ready to add another row of plots. Minka being down at the new plant nursery just increased their business by a thousand percent," Estes said, not exaggerating.

"No doubt," Efran smiled. To Ellor, he said, "Estes and I need horses, then see if you can find Keble or one of the other surveyors."

"Captain," he saluted, and disappeared.

"This is quite exciting," Estes said, rolling up his maps. "But I'm concerned about the caverns, especially the one so near the surface that you climbed out of."

Efran said, "Let's map them."

"What?" Estes paused.

"The hole I made is stable on the western edge. Let's stake a rope there and let a man, or men, down with lanterns to map out stable ground above the caverns. We should do the same to the opening with the trap door in back of the empty house. Let's open up the caverns where the ground is unstable, then fence them. We might even find a use for them," Efran thought out.

"Interesting," Estes murmured. "Very well, let's do that, at least with the cavern you climbed out of. The house with the trap door—twenty-one—isn't empty. Cary and his family live there, and I haven't heard any complaints from them."

"Ah," Efran said. They went out to the courtyard where horses were waiting for them. A gate sentry told them that Keble was gathering his equipment, so Efran told him to have the surveyor meet them at the notary's shop, which was right on the corner of the road they needed to take anyway.

Preoccupied with exploring options for working around the caverns, Efran and Estes walked their horses down the switchback to Ryal's shop, which they entered still talking. The tinkling of Ryal's doorbell finally turned their attention to the matter at hand, and they looked over to see Adele sitting on the front counter. Giardi was behind it, and Ryal emerged from the back.

Efran told Estes, "Grab someone to find Minka and bring her here. If she's not on the back grounds, she's probably at the new plant nursery." Estes nodded, turning out again. Then Efran said pleasantly, "Hello, Ryal, Giardini. I see that you have a visitor."

Adele exhaled impatiently. “Ryal gave this woman my room.”

Efran said, “It wasn’t yours. You left.”

She said languidly, “Well, I’m not staying with Awfyn any more, and I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Loizeaux wants you,” Efran said.

“I’m not going to be part of his ‘stables,’” she said derisively.

“You may get a warmer welcome than that,” Efran said thoughtfully, debating how much he should tell her about her impersonator. “But we’ll get Minka’s opinion.”

“Give me my old suite in the fortress,” Adele said.

Efran looked doubtful. “Those rooms are Justinian’s now, and I don’t think he’s willing to share them.”

She laughed, “So? Boot him out.”

“No,” Efran said, still pleasant. Adele rolled her eyes, crossed her arms, and said nothing else.

So the four of them stood (or sat) silently in Ryal’s shop for several minutes, until the bell tinkled again upon Minka’s entrance. Following her, Estes stuck his head in the door to tell Efran, “Keble’s here, so we’re going out to look at the eastern plots.” Efran nodded and Estes withdrew, but a sentry, Caswall, remained outside the shop’s door.

Meanwhile, Minka was getting an accurate idea of the problem. She looked at Efran, who said, “We’re at an impasse here, and have agreed to do whatever you say.”

“No we haven’t,” Adele objected.

“And that is our impasse,” Efran told Minka, half smiling.

Minka looked at them all for a moment, then opened the front door to speak to Caswall on the step. He darted off; she came back inside to loll on the wall. Seeing that they were all looking at her, she said, “I’ve been at the new plant shop. It’s wonderful. I may spend my entire month’s allowance there.” This last comment was directed to her husband.

“You don’t have an allowance. You may spend whatever you want,” he said, eyes crinkling.

“Oh, well, that simplifies things,” she said, digging dirt out from under her fingernails. “Garrett is giving me my own flower bed against the back wall of the fortress. It will be a challenge because it doesn’t get full sunlight. So we’re starting off with Jacob’s Ladder, Lily of the Valley, Forget-Me-Not, and Primrose. Depending on how those do, I’ll get further suggestions from the owner of the shop. His name is Mouris.”

At the mention of a man whose name she knew and had been talking to, Efran’s smile faded. Head down, she eyed him briefly, and he read the clear challenge: *Do you trust me?*

He looked off in a pretense of casual unconcern. *Of course I do.*

After glancing out the window at Caswall approaching the shop with someone, she quickly went out to meet them. Efran looked to see her speaking to a man who listened without getting too close to her. Then they both turned to climb the stairs to the door, and Efran looked away as though he hadn't been watching all along.

As Ryal's bell tinkled again, a tall man, about Efran's height, walked in with Minka. He was in his early thirties, muscular, clean-shaven, with dark curly hair. Minka said, "Mouris, that is my husband, Lord Efran, with Ryal, Giardi, and Adele." He glanced around in acknowledgment of the names, then settled his deep brown eyes contemplatively on Adele. She looked at him dubiously from under heavy lids.

"That's her, huh?" he murmured to Minka, who nodded.

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Chapter 3

Adele looked darkly at her sister, but Efran was smiling tightly. Mouris folded thick arms across his chest to appraise Adele like a prospective buyer. "Healthy eater, I see," he noted, and Adele sat up in umbrage.

"It's only been four and a half months since she gave birth," Minka said as if reminding him.

"Oh, yes," he said, nodding. He continued to study Adele while the shop remained silent around him. Her face went from sullen to wary to apprehensive. "Can she do *anything*?" he finally asked Minka plaintively.

"Don't count on it," Minka said crisply, still cleaning her fingernails.

"That's just wrong! I helped Ryal! Didn't I, Ryal?" Adele cried.

"You brought down that whole wall of shelves," Ryal observed, nodding at them behind her.

"Oooh," Mouris winced. "Did you make her put them back up?" he asked Ryal.

"Oh, she was gone after that. But she cleaned out my strongbox before leaving," Ryal said.

Mouris tsked, shaking his head. "I don't know," he said in reluctance. "I need someone who's going to be willing to help me and not just lie around."

"I don't just lie around," Adele said angrily. "And I have plenty of other places to stay!"

"Did I mention that she lies?" Minka asked Mouris.

"Yes, but that's obvious," he said, clicking his teeth in thought. Adele sat open-mouthed on the counter. "Oh, all right," he groaned reluctantly. "Only because you're my best customer."

"Oh, thank you, Mouris!" Minka said. At this cue that a hug or a kiss could be forthcoming, Efran came right off the wall, but Minka folded her hands primly and told her sister, "Mouris is going to let you help him in his plant shop. If you won't, you're out on the street. We're all done with you."

As Adele didn't move, Mouris said, "If you're coming with me, get down off that counter. I'm not carrying you."

Exhaling in exasperation, Adele slid down off the counter. Mouris said, "I understand that you're not used to working, so I'll go easy on you. But I've just opened that shop and I don't have the money or the room to support someone who won't help. I'm not sleeping with you unless we're married, and I won't even think about getting married for at least three months. I've poured everything I have into my shop, and that's all I can worry about right now."

He paused, still looking vexed, then turned back to Minka. "Now, if she steals, or destroys stuff, or disappears for days at a time, I can drop her in the street. Is that right?" Adele looked almost mortified at this accurate summation of her behavior while with Ryal.

"Yes," Minka said firmly.

"All right," Mouris said grimly. Turning to the door, he glanced back at Adele and said, "If you're coming, then come." And he walked out. After a stricken moment, Adele left after him.

Watching them through the window, Minka waved in hope, then went over to snuggle Efran. "Do you want to see what I bought?"

"Yes," he said, smiling.

"I'll need a cart," she added, and he nodded.

As Efran and Minka left the notary's shop, Ryal and Giardi smiled at each other, and he went to the back room to retrieve the next ledger that needed updating.

The sight of the Lord of the Abbey Lands bringing down a one-horse cart to help his young wife load her plant selections created quite a stir among residents and visitors to the plots. They knew that the tall, personable Polonti in workman's clothes was Lord Efran because Mouris kept calling him that: "Oh, no, Lord Efran, don't worry about the stakes; they're quite safe"; "Yes, Lord Efran, we have many more annuals in stock, and if Lady Minka is not satisfied with those, we can get almost anything she'd care to order."

Efran also saw an advantage to this personal visit, because then a great many people discovered that the pretty but slightly unkempt girl was Lady Minka, and anyone tempted to get overly familiar with her received fair warning to not. (Yes, Efran had talked to Lyte about what happened with Bowring's men.) Besides, Efran appreciated the opportunity to get away from parchments to just enjoy time with her, who was in heaven ordering him around in her favorite shop.

He did pause over a case of tree stakes at the front of the shop. They were stored point down, with harmless, slender wooden handles exposed, but when Efran withdrew one, he found a wickedly sharp steel point at the other end, for penetrating hard ground. He tested its balance as if it were a throwing knife, finding it handle-heavy. His examining this is what elicited Mouris' reassurance about the stakes.

Finally, Efran sat Minka beside Arne in the driver's seat of a full cart and swung up on a horse to walk beside them up the switchback. But even after they had left, Mouris and his new helper were very busy loading purchases for other customers and especially tabulating them. Mouris was pleasantly surprised to discover that Adele could keep accurate records on what was owed, what was paid, and what was delivered. And Adele liked his hair.

Garrett, the head gardener, laughed in disbelief at the cartload of plants that Efran, Arne and Minka brought around back. After helping unload the cart, Efran bowed out, disinclined to get himself ensnared in garden duty. Instead, he took Joshua up to Estes' workroom to get the surveyor's opinion on mapping the caverns.

Minka, assigned several helpers, began such energetic planting that Efran had to come out again at twilight and haul her back inside, where he had a tub already filled in their quarters. Then he locked the door so that he and she could clean up for dinner. As it happened, they bathed so thoroughly as to miss dinner, and required trays brought to their quarters afterward. It was a good day all the way around.

Efran was still smiling the next morning, May 16th. He spent some time in Estes' workroom hearing the plans for beginning cavern explorations that day, then he and Estes progressed downstairs, where they met Minka heading out to her gardens with Joshua in the sling on her chest. "Are you going to help me plant today?" she asked, leaning up to Efran for a kiss.

Complying to deliver one, he laughed, "I can't, my precious tyrant. Estes has assigned me other chores today."

Minka turned to the Steward. "How is Kelsey? Can she come down to walk around the gardens a little?"

"I hope so, Minka. She's not nearly as sick as she was earlier." His wife was about seven months' pregnant.

"Good," she breathed. As the men resumed their walk toward the front of the fortress, she went with them. "You're not going down in the caverns, are you?" she asked him warily, a hand on Joshua's head.

He glanced at Estes, as they'd had a discussion about this, then he replied formally, "No, Lady Minka, the supervisor won't allow it. I will have to watch with the other observers."

"Good," she said again, satisfied. But she went out of the foyer into the front courtyard with them. "I was hoping that—"

She was interrupted by the gate sentry's shout: "Captain!"

Efran and Estes went quickly to the courtyard gates with Minka right behind them. The wall sentries below were whistling and shouting at the interlopers who had pushed past them. "Awfyn," breathed Efran. Even at this distance, the Polonti giant was unmistakable. And he was accompanied by four of his associates.

Estes said, "We informed all the men that he must not be here. You gave your word that he would not be permitted on the Lands."

"I know," Efran said, turning to shout, "Horse!" Then he told Estes, "Get me a unit of archers, but they're to wait up here unless I signal for them."

"Yes, Captain." Estes turned to give orders to Tourse as they watched Awfyn and his men progress up the plots, then turn down a side road.

"Efran, he's going to Mouris' shop!" Minka cried. The obvious inference was that he somehow knew Adele was there.

Looking down the road, Efran froze in the process of taking the reins of the horse that was just brought to him.

“You’re right. You must stay here, Minka.”

“Yes, Efran,” she breathed, clutching Joshua.

Leaping onto the saddle and taking the reins, Efran turned the horse out of the gates and began loping down the switchback with an eye on Awfyn. Efran wondered, *How did he know she was there?* But so many people had been visiting the Abbey Lands, and Adele had been so visible at the shop yesterday when he and Minka were there, one of Awfyn’s associates could easily have slipped in and seen her.

Awfyn had stopped before the plant nursery, which was about in the middle of the block. Customers and residents scattered, but Mouris came out to stand in front of his shop. Awfyn roared at him, and Mouris crossed his arms in defiance.

Efran came off the switchback as Awfyn’s men encircled Mouris. Loping up the road toward them, Efran shouted, “Awfyn! *MAKA!*” It was a reminder of the oath of friendship Awfyn had sworn to him. Awfyn’s men looked at him advancing, then fell away from Mouris.

Efran rode in between the men and the shop owner, falling from the horse to let it run off. Efran uttered to Mouris, “Go back in your shop.”

He began to argue, “I can—”

“Do it!” Efran ordered. Mouris complied as Efran faced Awfyn. “Brother Awfyn, you would not violate your oath to me.”

Awfyn grunted, “This has nothing to do with you, Brother Efran. I have come for Adele.”

“She has come to me for shelter. You cannot take her,” Efran told the man who towered over him by a foot.

“I will not leave without her,” Awfyn rumbled.

“You have to,” Efran said.

Exasperated, Awfyn said, “Don’t make me break oath over a woman. You have one already.”

“My oath is to shelter anyone who comes to me for protection. See to your own oath; you cannot make me break mine,” Efran said.

Awfyn swayed, rumbling, “Come, what is this between brothers? Let us go in for ale.”

Efran clenched his teeth. “No, Awfyn. The nobles accepted your appeasement only on the condition that I not have you here again.”

“You betray me!” Awfyn roared. (When the shouting started, observers at the top of the switchback could hear Awfyn, but not always Efran. However, they had a clear view throughout.)

“You called down the Graetrix against men in battle!” Efran shouted back.

“There were no Polonti among the enemy,” Awfyn shrugged.

“We are ALL MEN!” Efran shouted.

“If you side with them, then we are no longer brothers,” Awfyn uttered.

“Leave my lands!” Efran ordered.

Awfyn threw back his head to laugh, then shouted up at the sky, “*Pua! Paina!*”

Without exactly understanding the Polonti words, Efran knew that Awfyn had just summoned the Graetrix again.

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Chapter 4

Heart in his throat, Efran waited to find out whether his attempt to kill the Graetrix with mad sheep disease had worked or not. As he scanned the sky, he saw archers in the courtyard. While Awfyn and his men were looking skyward, Efran signaled the archers to advance. So they began leaving the courtyard gates to descend the switchback.

There was quiet all around them as the combatants waited for the birds—but the archers continued to descend. Residents on the western plots were hiding in their homes or shops. A few minutes later, Awfyn raised both arms to repeat his summons, along with words of dark power. He and his men watched the sky intently.

Efran watched the archers leave the switchback for the main east-west road, just south of Mouris’ shop and behind Awfyn and his men. Efran signaled subtly left and right, so that the archers split up, walking down the side roads to station themselves at both ends of the road of conflict. Awfyn and his men could have seen them simply by turning their heads to the left or right, but they didn’t.

When the birds still didn’t appear, Efran said, “Take your men and go, Awfyn. Or I will kill you.” And he wet his lips in preparation for whistling.

Awfyn laughed, then shouted, “*Hele!*”—“attack.” Even before Awfyn’s men drew their knives, Efran whistled sharply for his archers to fire—the signal he had used ever since his days as a Captain. And a volley of arrows from the left and the right brought down Awfyn’s men. (The midpoint targets on the road were within the range of the archers on either end, while their fellow archers on the opposite end were not. Efran just had to trust that they wouldn’t hit him.)

Awfyn was hit as well, which just annoyed him. Brushing off the arrows that had stuck in his leather coat, he drew his 12-inch hunting knife. “For that, you die, brother,” he said, stalking through his men sprawled on the ground.

Efran reached back to grab one of the tree stakes out of the crate behind him. As it was handle-heavy, he gripped it by the spike to throw it like a knife. It spun, then struck Awfyn in the face—specifically, in the one eye he had left. He roared in pain, wrenching the steel tip from his eye socket. Then he fell on his back, blood pouring from the socket, and cried, “Kill me! I cannot live blind!” Writhing, he opened his coat to expose his chest.

Turning his head in grief and revulsion, Efran walked over to pick up Awfyn's knife. Kneeling, he plunged it into his heart with both hands. Awfyn stilled to whisper, "Thank you, brother." And he died.

Efran stood, exhaling, and his archers came running from either side to shake him or pummel his back, then they checked to see that all four of Awfyn's men were dead. More people came pouring from the courtyard gates and out of the houses and shops around him. The word was passed in a wave: the Lord of the Abbey Lands had killed the giant Polonti criminal.

Mouris stepped out of his shop to gape at the bodies. But in all the tumult around Efran, he discerned the sobbing gasps and light running footsteps, so turned as Minka landed on him, gripping him around the neck. He laughed and groaned, lifting her off her feet as she cried into his shirt.

"I'm sorry I had to do that," he whispered in her hair.

"What do I care about him? Only that God spared you again," she sobbed out, and he understood that his lucky throw of the tree stake wasn't accidental at all.

"Yes," he said, pushing through the crowd with her. "Where is Joshua?"

"I took him inside when Awfyn called for the Graetrix," she sniffled. "Efran, they never came. Your sheep brains worked."

"I hope so," he murmured, someone else slapping his back.

One of his men, Conte, pushed forward to ask, "Captain, what about the bodies?"

"Search them and toss them into the Sea," Efran said. He was thinking, *Four here. Fourteen that Reinagle's men killed.* Was that all of them?

All this while, the surveyors had been undisturbed in beginning their efforts to map out the caverns in the eastern Abbey Lands. First, they had to widen the hole to about six feet in diameter, then let one or two men down on ropes anchored to the western edge. Estes left them to their work and reentered the fortress with Efran and Minka (as she wouldn't let go of him yet).

Efran told Estes, "Send a message to Bowring to let him know that Awfyn is dead. And ask him . . . how many of Awfyn's associates got away that night. Reinagle said his men killed fourteen of them. I want to know how many of them, besides Awfyn, escaped."

"Yes, I'll do that now," Estes said, turning to Doane's cubicle.

As Minka, trembling periodically, was still clutching Efran's shirt, he bent his head to her and said, "Show me what you've planted so far."

She gradually stopped trembling and took his fingers. "All right."

Sniffing, she led him by the hand out to her own special flower bed to point out what she had where, and the fact that Garrett had to give her another bed to accommodate all (or most of) the plants she had bought. While she was conducting him on this personal tour, he shook his head slightly at anyone else who tried to approach him about anything.

When she had finished showing him everything, and listing out what all needed to be done next, she was ready to go back inside to get Joshua. Efran let her go with a kiss, then turned to hear what others needed to tell him.

Only hours later, Estes received a reply from Bowring congratulating Efran on fulfilling his obligations to the nobles, and informing him that only a handful of Awfyn's associates escaped while the house was being battered by the Graetrix that night—he didn't know precisely how many. In sharing that with Efran, Estes asked, "Why is that important?"

Efran studied him. "I believe Awfyn may have hidden some or all of his treasure near where we met. If they are all dead, then his treasure is where he last left it."

"But Adele was not with him," Estes said. "Should you ask her where she was?"

Efran snorted, "I'm not asking Adele anything—she either doesn't know or lies about what she does know. But tomorrow, you and I will go look around." Estes nodded.

That evening, Efran and Minka had a quiet dinner in their quarters. He was tired of being congratulated for the bloody death of a man whom he once considered a friend, and she just wanted to hold him.

The next morning, May 17th, Efran explained to Minka that he and Estes were going to ride out west of the Passage just to look around, and there was nothing dangerous in what they were going to do. She accepted that without question because she had a lot of work to do in her flower beds today; also, Joshua was starting to crawl, which she was excited to see.

Efran and Estes planned out their search mission to the details. They were going as scavengers with two other Polonti, Barr and Goss, wearing old clothes, taking an old one-horse cart, and not the Abbey fortress' best horses. Scavengers commonly worked areas of natural disasters, and it was not strange for scavengers to appear years after a disaster, to avoid contact with the recently deceased.

So, wearing weapons under their loose, tattered clothing, Efran and Estes drove the cart while Barr and Goss rode alongside. As they had done for the meeting three days ago, they followed dirt roads that wound west from the Passage, then south to the coast. There was no other traffic on the road, and no indication of recent traffic.

As they pulled into the rubble that once was Nicarber, Efran and Estes looked for the sign that had marked the entrance to their meeting place. "It was a large sign fragment over the rubble of the inn," Estes mused. "There! To the left. Isn't that it?"

"Looks like it," Efran agreed, drawing the reins to turn the horse aside. Leaving the cart and the horses at the edge of the piles of storm debris, Barr and Estes moved the sign to reveal the walkway, then all four progressed to the half-demolished meeting room.

Efran pointed to the listing back door. "Awfyn's man went through that door and was gone only a few minutes before returning with the ewer. So we'll just start there and look." They exited to find several vague walkways meandering around various piles of broken timbers, chunks of plaster, pieces of furniture, and rotted seaweed. So they began tossing away large pieces, looking.

After a solid hour of fruitless searching, Efran paused to think. They had not only found nothing, but nothing to indicate where something had been before being removed.

“This is too obvious,” he murmured. Awfyn was subtle about hiding places, having been so dependent on them. So where was the subtlety in a pile of debris? He stepped back, looking.

He noticed that the first places he and the others had started looking were manageable piles—those lower than their chests, preferably their waists. But one or two piles nearby were ten or twelve feet high, which required a hazardous climb over shifting, sometimes sharp wreckage. And one mountainous pile had a tattered flag flying crookedly at the top.

Cautiously, Efran lifted a foot to begin scaling this hill. At first, loose pieces merely slid out from under his hands or feet, until he learned to dig for handholds or kick for footholds. Gradually, he got to the top, where he began flinging aside broken boards and pieces of slate. The others stood beneath him to watch.

“Here,” he said, pulling loose something wrapped in canvas. Bracing his knees on the pile, he unwrapped the canvas from around two gold cups (without stems). “Aha. These were from our Treasury; part of what we sold to Awfyn to raise the thousand royals to pay off Adele’s betrothal to Monsell.” He tossed those down to Barr and continued hurling aside surface fragments.

The more trash he dislodged, however, the more unstable the mountain became, so that he slipped down a partial landslide. Barr and Goss hovered beneath him as he climbed back to the top. Soon, he uncovered other wrapped pieces: four gold plates and a large gold bowl, all of which he tossed down from the mountain for the men to catch. Continuing to dig, he brought out a canvas bag which he lowered without even opening. Barr unwound the cord at the top to feel a random collection of wrapped items (later determined to be dinnerware, candlesticks, and decorative articles, all gold).

Then, Efran found something that he had to dig around for a long time, but the more he dug, the more the pile below him shifted. “I think this is the tray,” he said—a massive gold tray, the weight of which had required both Estes and DeWitt to carry it down from the Treasury and out to Awfyn. It had been the final payment Minka offered him for rescuing Efran from torture.

He continued to dig and pull, finally dislodging enough rubbish around the large wrapped rectangle so that it emerged precariously on the side of the mound. The weight of it caused the whole mound to totter; Efran fell with the mountain and the tray crashing down on him.

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Chapter 5

The men rushed the mound with a shout; Goss and Barr lifted the tray while Estes pulled Efran out from the avalanche. “He’s conscious,” Estes said in relief.

Efran stood up beside the collapsed mountain, stepping gingerly away from sharp broken edges. “Don’t tell Minka,” he groaned, touching a tender spot on his back.

“It’s the tray,” Barr confirmed, running his hands over it without unwrapping it.

“All right, let’s get it all out to the cart.” Efran winced as he gestured.

Goss was shaking his head. "The tray will just fall through the bottom, Captain."

So the men had to use broken planks to reinforce the bottom of the rickety cart before placing the tray inside it. This they covered with lightweight rubbish. Efran sat in the driver's seat while Goss and Estes carried the plates and the collection of gold pieces on their horses. Since Barr had to walk, he carried only the gold cups.

They retraced the deserted route to the Abbey Lands while discussing what to do with the gold. Efran said, "We can put the smaller pieces in the Treasury, but I want to melt down that tray for royals. It's useless otherwise."

Goss nodded in agreement; Estes said, "There's no moneyer in Westford; the closest one is in Eurus."

"Well, hack off a chunk of it and take it to him," Efran said. "But eventually, I want our people trained to mint coinage so that we can do it ourselves."

Estes thought about that, then agreed. "Yes, I think that's prudent."

While the men had been engaged in their scavenging, Ryal sent up a message asking Efran and Minka to pay him a visit. Since Efran was out, Minka took a horse down by herself. But she made sure that the sentry knew where she was going.

Entering the shop to the bell's tinkling, she said, "Good morning, Giardi! Ryal. Efran's gone right now, but I'm here. I hope it's not about Adele," she said, suddenly wary.

"No, dear Minka," Ryal said, while Giardi smiled at her. "And I can certainly talk to you. Come to the back room, please."

"Of course." Somewhat bemused, she followed Ryal to the back, where he pointed her to sit at the small table on which a ledger with loose pages lay open.

She sat, and he sat across from her. He paused, inhaling. "Minka, this is difficult, but you must know. Lord Reinagle sent a man to Lady Marguerite to inquire about your birth records, and, he dug up some information."

A cold wash engulfed her. "My birth record was registered by a notary in Eurus. I was confirmed to be of age when I married Efran," she said, shaking.

"Yes, yes, that's not in doubt," Ryal said hastily. "But Reinagle's man found other information which the lord brought to me, insisting that I enter it in the public records. As it is all in order, I . . . had no choice but to do so."

"What . . . ?" Her brow wrinkled in confusion.

He sighed, looking at her with a mixture of compassion and sorrow. "Here are the records he asked me to enter." And he extended a loose bunch of eight or ten sheets toward her.

She began reading, but found it dry legalese. Shaking her head, she asked, "Can you just tell me what it's about?"

"Yes," he exhaled, and she looked at him, waiting. "Your mother was not the wife of Counselor Lightfoot; she was a young maid that he . . . made with child. He tried to hide it by shipping her off to service with Marguerite, who . . . took care of her, but recorded the fact of her service under him and her condition when she arrived. The young woman was a . . . half wit, who, after your birth, was found drowned in a pond on the grounds."

Minka stared at him and he went on, “This was obviously information that both Lightfoot and Marguerite wished to—keep hidden, but Marguerite did not destroy the records. I have no idea how Reinagle’s man pried them out of her, or her staff. Your mother’s name was Kewe. She was fifteen when you were born.”

She looked fixedly at him, still without speaking. Ryal added, “Reinagle is obviously using this in an attempt to embarrass Efran for revoking his petitions. Efran will not care about these facts, of course, but, they are public records, and Reinagle has already sent several people here to view them.”

Minka still sat without speaking. Giardi opened the door to say quietly, “Several others are here to see the Lady’s records.” With a groan, Ryal rose with the ledger.

Eyes glazed, Minka got up to leave. In the front room, someone said, “Oh, that’s her! She was in the meeting my father had with Lord Efran, and he asked her questions. She could hardly form a sentence in reply.”

Minka raised her eyes to the speaker—a young woman with two others who were looking at her in malicious delight. As Ryal presented the ledger, she leaned over it eagerly. “Oh, here it all is. How *interesting*.”

Minka quietly left the shop, remounted, and rode back up to the fortress. She went in to check on Joshua, but found him asleep. So she went out to sit on the bench under the walnut tree.

Some time later, Efran came out back looking around. Seeing her, he walked over to sit beside her. “We found the tray and some other gold pieces,” he said quietly. “I’m going to have the tray melted down for coin. There’s no point in it sitting in the Treasury.”

Stirring, she said, “Yes, that’s best. Especially after watching Estes and DeWitt get it down. I was afraid they’d get killed falling with it.”

He snorted. “You do wonder why people put that much gold into something so useless.”

“That’s why,” she murmured. “The more useless it is, the more it shows how wealthy they are to waste that much gold on it.”

He glanced at her with a wry smile. “My wise child.” He leaned over to kiss her lightly.

“I am fully of age, and then some,” she repeated.

Looking around her, he asked, “Where is Joshua?”

“Sleeping. I’ll go check again in a little while,” she said.

“Good. I’m going to change before Greves orders me to muck the stables.” He lifted the tail of the ragged shirt that showed a few new tears. She smiled, and he leaned over for a longer kiss before getting up and striding away. He almost always walked fast.

Shortly thereafter, she went to the nursery to find Joshua awake. So she fed him his bottle and changed his wraps, then took him out to the garden with a blanket and a book.

After Efran had changed and was emerging from his quarters, a sentry, Eustace, said, “The Steward would like you in Doane’s cubicle, sir. They’ve got a bit of gold for the moneyer to show you.”

“Ah. Thank you.” Efran began crossing the foyer to Doane’s cubicle.

“Hello, Efran,” a sultry voice said.

He looked up, instantly on guard at the tone. “Hello, Trina. Excuse me.” He glanced at her and her two friends without seeing any of them.

“I just wanted to tell you,” she said, stepping in front of him, “that I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” he said, stepping to the side.

She blocked him there, too, while her friends watched in suspense. “You’re so brave about it.” While he returned a blank look, she continued, “I would be in pieces, but you’ve always been so stoic.”

He stepped again to the side, and she kept pace with him neatly. “Did it not bother you the tiniest little bit?” Despite the irritation, he remained impassive. “I mean, the fact that your wife’s mother was a half-wit maid? That would crush just about anyone else.”

She said it loudly enough that everyone in the foyer could hear. Being all Abbey people, they looked at her as if she had spat on him. Efran stood immobile for the next thirty seconds while she waited for a reaction. Her friends were glancing uneasily at the shocked stares around them.

Then again he said, “Excuse me.” And the flatness of his voice finally turned her away. She joined her friends, who were already out the door, and he progressed to Doane’s cubicle where Estes was waiting.

Their faces indicated that they had heard her, but Efran asked, “What are you sending to Eurus?”

Estes held up a corner of the tray that had been sawed off. Efran nodded. “All right, cut off another chunk this size in case he can do both. Who are you sending?”

“Caswall, Younge, Gabriel and Coxe,” Estes said.

“Good. Let me know.” Efran looked off, jaw working. Then he looked down at Doane. “She’s not ever to show her face here again.”

“Understood, Captain,” he said quietly. Then Efran left to go look for Minka.

At that time, Reinagle had returned to Ryal’s shop. At the counter, Giardi said, “How can I help you?” with considerably less warmth than she usually conveyed.

“Get your boss out here,” Reinagle ordered. Lowering her head, she went to the back room.

In moments Ryal emerged. “Yes, Lord Reinagle?”

“Those were *public documents* I handed over to you. They’re required to be *on public display*,” he said, trembling with anger.

“And they are. I show them to anyone who asks,” Ryal said.

“They don’t have to ask to see them. You have to post them *publicly*,” Reinagle said firmly, jabbing the countertop with his forefinger.

“But I also have to preserve them. I am not out front all the time that the shop is open, and neither is Giardi. If I just leave them out on the counter, anyone who comes in could walk out with them,” Ryal pointed out.

“I thought all you Abbey Lands people were honest and upstanding,” Reinagle sneered.

“We get many visitors,” Ryal said with a straight face.

“Well, gum them up in the window! That way no one has to come into your shop to see them,” Reinagle demanded.

“If I do, I can’t be responsible for what happens to them,” Ryal reiterated.

“Do it!” Reinagle demanded.

Conceding with a lift of his hands, Ryal went into the back room for the documents. He selected the two pages with the most damaging testimony. “Giardi, will you get the gum under the counter there?” She leaned down to bring out the bottle of gum. He applied this to the corners of the sheets under Reinagle’s eye, then fixed them on the inside of a window at eye level from the outside.

Closing the bottle with finality, he told Reinagle, “There you are.”

Reinagle went out to see that the script was legible through the window, then climbed in his carriage and left. Ryal shook his head and Giardi sighed.

Efran spotted Minka and Joshua on their usual blanket near the back gardens. He walked over and threw himself down on his back beside Joshua, who began working his legs and slapping his father. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

She sighed, putting down the book. “I had to think about it.”

“What—” He sat up. “Where did this information come from?”

So she told him about Reinagle getting it from Marguerite, somehow. “He probably paid Hartshough, or the local notary, for whatever they could find,” she murmured. “Not Marguerite. And he made sure Ryal had it down as public information.”

Efran glanced off, and she said, “No. Don’t.” At his innocence, she went on, “Whatever you do in retaliation would just keep it alive and talked about that much longer. Just—let him be known as a bitter and hateful man.”

He sighed, picking up Joshua. “It almost makes me wish Lightfoot were still alive so that I could kill him.”

“I know,” she murmured. “And after all the outrage about your kidnapping me.”

“That was fun,” he grinned at her.

She laughed a little. “I still don’t know how you managed to hold out against . . . you know.” She shrugged in embarrassment over her ignorance of how quickly men were aroused.

“I almost lost it after you spread blackberry juice around your mouth and then kissed me,” he said.

“That wasn’t a kiss!” she protested.

“When a girl puts her mouth on a man’s mouth, that is a kiss,” he said definitively.

She laughed, then admitted, “That was fun.”

“See?” he said, somehow vindicated about something. “And then . . . Minka, he’s losing his hair!” he cried, staring at the wisps on his son’s head.

“That’s normal, Efran!” She lay down to laugh at him from the blanket. “It will grow back all black and beautiful.” She reached up to run her fingers through her husband’s hair.

He put Joshua down, who promptly rolled over to push up and look around. Then Efran leaned over her so she could brush his hair out of his eyes and watch it fall back again. “It’s getting long again,” he murmured.

“I know,” she sighed.

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Chapter 6

Still leaning over Minka, Efran explained, “I need my hair out of my eyes so I can see Reinagle to hit him.”

She was smiling at him, brushing his hair back, when Joshua pulled up on her chest to get in between them and turn his head to eye his father. Efran sat up, laughing.

“Excuse me.” They looked up at Mouris standing about six feet away with Adele behind him.

Minka sprang up with Joshua. “I’ll be right back,” she said, whisking him toward the back door.

“Yes?” Efran stood, glancing at Adele to see if she showed any recognition that the baby who just left was her son. Efran did not want her to notice that.

Mouris said, “I came up to see if Lady Minka was happy with the plants she bought. Everything that’s been put in the ground looks good,” he said, surveying her bed nearby. “And, I wanted to thank you for saving my shop and probably my life yesterday.”

“Oh. Yes,” Efran said, trying not to look to see if Minka had made it back into the fortress with Joshua.

“What was that giant hollering about Adele?” Mouris asked. Behind him, she looked tensely at Efran, and he gathered that she did not want Mouris to know this part of her biography.

“He—apparently saw her somewhere and, wanted to—talk to her,” Efran said, somewhat.

Minka came back out at this time. Mouris raised a hand to her while Efran and Adele looked warily at each other. “Your plants look like they’re doing well. Are you happy with them?” Mouris asked Minka.

“Oh, yes. Did you see the second bed over here?” she asked, pointing.

As Mouris walked over with Minka to the second bed, Efran and Adele were left standing awkwardly six feet apart. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye, but he was looking straight ahead at Minka. Adele said quietly, “I heard about Sybil’s mother. I’m sorry; I never knew.”

“Then there’s no reason to say anything to her about it,” he said, still looking ahead. Then he turned to her and said, “Why can’t you call her ‘Minka’?”

“Habit,” she shrugged.

“Break it,” he said. It never occurred to either of them that she might want to thank him for preventing Awfyn’s taking her.

Minka and Mouris walked back over as he said, “Well, I’m very glad Lady Minka is enjoying her annuals. After all we sold yesterday and the day before, I’m having to restock my shop. So we’ll get back. Thank you again, Lord Efran.”

“You’re welcome,” Efran nodded.

While Mouris and Adele departed, Minka muttered, “Did she say anything about Joshua?”

“No,” Efran said, and she exhaled in relief.

They went back inside then, because Efran was feeling the need for some personal time. But as he was taking off his shirt, she gasped, “What happened?”

“What?” He looked down where she was looking: at a large bruise on his side.

She turned him around. “There’s another bruise on your back! What happened?” Thinking fast, he was opening his mouth when she said, “Oh, are those from yesterday?”—when he had killed Awfyn.

“Could be,” he said cautiously.

“Oh, Efran.” She fell into him and he congratulated himself.

The following day, May 18th, the party of four departed for the moneyer in Eurús with the gold and some silver to be melted down for the electrum from which the coins would be made. Meanwhile, Efran and Estes brought the rest of the gold they had recovered from Nicarber to Estes’ workroom. Here, they were studying the markings according to a large register, borrowed from Ryal’s shop, lying open on the table.

Estes remarked, “For being handled so carelessly, they’re not scratched too badly. Anyhow, the plates were made in Crescent Hollow about a hundred years ago.” He was comparing the hallmarks on the back of the plates to those shown in the register.

“Crescent Hollow? That’s as far away as Eurús. Awfyn didn’t go to Crescent Hollow, did he?” Efran asked.

“Not that I know of. The candlesticks were made in Hornbound,” Estes said, again consulting the register.

Efran’s jaw dropped. “He certainly was never in Hornbound.”

“There’s no reason to think the pieces had to remain in their place of origin before Awfyn picked them up. They could have traveled by other hands many times over,” Estes said.

“Who? Who would carry these fabulous pieces over great distances?” Efran asked.

“Thieves and robbers,” Estes said, brows drawn at the necessity of stating the obvious.

“Oh. Who were associates of his and gave them to him as payment,” Efran said heavily.

Estes nodded. “For payment, or because he told them to.”

Efran sat looking despondently at the gold ware. “I wonder if we can find the owners.” Estes raised up in consideration, and Efran went on, “Suppose we sent notices to Eurus and Crescent Hollow saying that we had recovered some stolen gold items, and anyone who could identify them by their appearance and markings would get them back.”

Estes thought about that. “We should try.”

So they composed a notice to that effect, stipulating that prospective claimants had to come to the fortress of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea south of Westford to answer questions about the items. These notices were to be taken to the notary offices in those cities, plus Notary Shaffer in Westford and Ryal’s shop, and posted in the window.

While Estes was writing out these notices, Efran murmured, “Have the men going to Eurus take another letter.” Estes looked up. Efran said, “I want to ask Marguerite about Minka’s mother—what happened to her, and whether she was really a half-wit. The girl was in service to Marguerite, and she would know. But . . . Minka is not the child of an imbecile.” Estes nodded and Efran sat to appropriate a quill set with which to scrawl out a hasty letter.

As Efran handed the unblotted letter to him, Estes promised, “That will go out today, with the others.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Efran acknowledged.

There was a knock on the door, and Doudney entered, saluting. “Walch asking to speak to you, Captain.”

Efran blinked, not recognizing the name. But because he made a point to hear everyone, he said, “Send him in.”

Doudney withdrew, and a young soldier stepped in who presented a mildly comical appearance, sweating in a dress uniform. Lips tight, he saluted Efran, who nodded. When Walch opened, “Captain,” his voice cracked. Estes glanced up in mild amusement and curiosity.

Walch cleared his throat and began in a slightly quavering voice: “Captain, my parents own a plant shop on a plot here, and, they were one of the first to get a plot. They heard about the Lady Minka visiting the—other shop here, and all she bought, and, she’s never even seen what my parents have to offer in their shop. And so, I was hoping, Captain, that maybe you could ask the Lady to come pay a visit to The Greenery on plot seven.”

Efran leaned forward. “Thank you for alerting me to this oversight, Walch. Please tell your parents that my wife will be down to see them today.”

Expelling a relieved breath, Walch smiled and saluted again. “Thank you, Captain.” In turning to leave, he accidentally hit the door frame, but otherwise made it to the corridor to hurry down the stairs.

Efran turned his head to think, then asked Estes, “Can you show me a list of the shops we have here? Ones that my wife could be expected to visit.”

Estes put down his quill to stand at a shelf and remove a ledger that looked much like one of Ryal’s. He opened it to a section that he and Efran both perused. When they were done, they had compiled a list of thirteen shops and their locations.

Taking up this list, Efran paused to ask, “Does Doane have much money in his cubicle?”

“Not enough for what you’re going to need,” Estes said. He went to a lockable cabinet to empty a drawer of royals and another drawer of silver pieces into two satchels.

“Thank you,” Efran said, taking up the satchels.

Sitting again, Estes said, “She will enjoy it very much.”

“No doubt,” Efran laughed.

Downstairs, he asked Stephanos to find his wife and send her to their quarters, then he went to his wardrobe.

When Minka appeared, breathless and curious, he told her, “You’ll want to put on a nice dress—not formal, but something that Elvey made. We’re going shopping.” And he told her about young Walch’s visit.

Not long afterwards, the courtyard gates opened for a procession to exit. First, Lord Efran and Lady Minka, on liveried horses, were riding side by side, he in his blue serge suit and she in a lovely riding dress. Her hair was brushed, neatly held back with a tortoiseshell comb. Behind them rode Connor and Lyte in dress uniforms, carrying money pouches, and behind them came Arne driving a cart. All of the horses wore Abbey livery of red and gold, so there was no doubt about the identity of the party.

One thing Efran made clear to Minka: “Spend lavishly. If we run out of money, I’ll send Connor back up for more. And this goes for future trips. Feel free to take a man down to any shop and buy whatever you want.”

“All right,” she said, dazed. This was a totally unfamiliar concept to her. Even when she was a Chataine, she was never given permission to buy anything. That privilege was for Adele only.

A crowd gathered to watch when the procession stopped in front of The Greenery on plot number seven. Efran lifted Minka down for her to enter the shop with a look of glazed delight. “Oh, this is lovely. Why have I never been here?” she breathed.

At the same time, the shop owners had come up to welcome them. “Lord Efran! Lady Minka, welcome to our little shop!” the wife said. Minka never heard her, but Efran nodded, smiling.

Minka discovered that this shop specialized in indoor displays, potted plants and arrangements. While Minka,

accompanied by both Connor and Lyte, began stalking the counters like a predator, Efran made small talk with the husband and wife. (Efran didn't mention Walch's asking him to visit, as he preferred they think it a spontaneous shopping trip.)

After ascertaining what the shop had and what could be used in the fortress, Minka began handing items to Lyte. He showed each one to the wife, who noted the price, then handed it to Connor to take out to the cart. More onlookers gathered at the shop windows, and some entered to watch up close.

Minka bought ten items from this shop, then thanked them and ran out to the next shop on foot. (Arne, driving the cart, had the list of essential shops to hit, which were mostly in the southwestern area of the Lands.) Efran said a hasty goodbye to Walch's parents and followed her to the pottery shop. Minka smiled at the surprised owners, but left it to Efran to greet them while she went hunting.

Several observers pushed forward to make comments or suggestions to her. One young woman said, "The mugs keep hot drinks warm without burning your hands. And isn't the glaze pretty?"

"Yes, it is," Minka said, picking up a mug. "Why are we using ugly mugs?" she demanded of Efran. He could only lift his hands in ignorance, laughing. So Minka cleared the shelves of the mugs they had in this design. The shop owner ran to the back for another crate, which Minka also sent out to the cart. And she appropriated a dozen nice flower vases as well.

By this time Minka had an entourage, which Efran allowed, to a point. Girls her age and younger, and especially anyone she seemed to respond to favorably, were allowed up close to her. Older women who appeared pushy or domineering were gently nudged back by Lyte or Connor. Men and older boys were stopped cold before getting within six feet of her.

Knowing the number of shops they needed to hit today, Minka began picking up the pace to scan a shop's contents and zero in on what she thought might be useful at the fortress. A number of onlookers offered opinions, some which she regarded and much that she didn't. But she responded cordially to almost everyone whom Lyte let close enough to speak to her. Six shop visits were dispatched in this manner, including the spice merchant, the Chandler, and the weaver.

At the next stop, a woolens shop, Minka entered with her entourage to come face to face with one of the young women who had mocked her about her half-wit mother. The woman looked at her, at her large following, at Efran and the soldiers entering behind her, and her face drained.

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Chapter 7

Minka turned deliberately, intending to walk out, then saw the offerings near the counter. "Baby clothes!" she gasped. "Efran, when is Kelsey due?" She turned to look for him in the crowd.

"In about two months, I think," he said over the heads of the girls around her.

She turned to touch the soft wool. "What will fit a newborn?" she asked.

The woman who had mocked her came up to lay a hand on a pile. “Here. These sacks are adjustable from birth up to four or five months old.”

“Oh, they’re lovely.” Minka put one to her face, then handed it and several others in different colors to Connor. He conferred with the woman about price, then handed them on to Lyte to take out.

Meanwhile, Minka drifted over to feel the baby blankets. She took three or four of these, then saw the large woolen blankets, woven in brilliant colors. “Oh!” She buried her face in one, then turned to Efran to demand, “Take what’s on our bed out to the stables!”

He reddened a little at the laughter, but nodded as she cleared the shelves of all those, so that he had to help Connor and Lyte count them out to the shop owner. Efran then had to send Arne up to the fortress to unload the cart and come back down again.

Leaving that shop practically empty, Minka went on, finding that the next shop contained hunting gear. So she told the owner, “Efran has to babysit me today, but I’ll send him back to you another day.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he laughed, and she went to the next shop.

Unfortunately, she had completely outstripped Efran, Lyte and Connor, so that when she attempted to enter the shop of fine porcelain, the owner met her with outstretched hand to shove her back out of the doorway. “I don’t allow mobs in my store!” he said angrily.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” she said, looking around. With the crowd around her, it did look like a mob. So she drew back to wait with people pressing all around her.

At a piercing whistle, they fell back. Efran, smiling tightly, came to her side. Minka said anxiously, “I’m so sorry; that was my fault.”

“Not at all, Lady,” he said. “But we may need to come back another time.”

“All right,” she exhaled, and the crowd began dispersing in disappointment. But the owner of the shop next door came running up. “Oh, please don’t leave yet! I have wonderful scented soaps.”

“Yes, we’ll come look,” Minka said, with Efran beside her. And the porcelain shop owner looked out with dismay to see that he had shoved away Lord Efran’s wife.

Connor and Lyte kept everyone else out of the soapmaker’s shop while Minka picked out a nice selection, then they were done.

Riding up the switchback, she sighed, “I’m exhausted! But that was fun. I hope everything I bought will be useful. Did we go to all the shops on our list?”

“Almost all,” he said. “But that was my mistake, thinking that we could stop at so many places in one day. You drew a lot of admirers,” he added with a glance.

“I think they were just curious—” She broke off before adding, *to see the half-wit’s child*.

“Maybe,” he murmured, understanding. But he also noticed that she had bought almost nothing for herself personally, but for the fortress.

When they walked into the foyer, Minka discovered that her work was only half done, as she had to decide what to do with the great piles of merchandise that filled half the foyer. But with Doane to tell her where common items were stored, and soldiers to take her purchases there, she got everything routed to linen closets, the laundry/wash room, the women's bathing room, the men's bath house, the barracks, the kitchen, the dining hall, Doane's cubicle, Estes' workroom, and her and Efran's quarters.

Efran stopped by Estes' workroom to return a few unspent coins. As he brought in the flat pouches, Estes said, "The warrior returns. How was the shopping?"

"Exhausting," Efran said, plopping the pouches on the table. "I may add it as training for new recruits."

They both looked up at a soldier, Corwyn, bringing in a pile of blankets and boxes containing baby clothes, candles, vases, soaps and plants. "Pardon, Captain," he said. "Steward, the Lady Minka wants to know whether these items should go to your rooms here or to your house." He placed them on the spacious work table. As part of Estes' promotion, he was given a house on an Abbey plot that was almost completed.

"I have no idea," Estes said as Efran laughed. "Please take them to Lady Kelsey and let her tell you."

"Yes, sir," Corwyn said, taking up his burdens again.

Estes shook his head, then said, "The letter to Lady Marguerite and notices about the gold have been dispatched."

"Excellent," Efran said, turning out. "Carry on."

Mindful that he was wearing a suit which Minka would disapprove of his destroying, Efran went downstairs to his quarters to change. But he opened the bedroom door to see her riding dress on the floor and she herself lolling luxuriously on the soft woolens. "I'm sorry you can't get back to work right away," she murmured.

"Don't apologize," he said, undressing.

Several results of that day's shop visits were apparent right away, such as sudden demands on related Abbey businesses: the chandler needed more wax from the beekeeper; the wool shop needed more yarn from the carders and spinners, who needed fleece from the shepherd; the potter needed laborers to dig the specific clay he used. Also, two leaseholders requested licenses to open taverns—one that would be housed within an inn, whenever the leaseholder Croft could get financing. Estes approved both with the stipulation that they serve food during all hours of operation.

Efran, belatedly seeing the need for an inn, persuaded Estes to finance Croft in this endeavor, which resulted in an early Abbey Lands landmark. While the other tavern fell through, a greengrocer desired that prominent plot on the main road, so Firmin's Fruits and Vegetables came to be. Also, with the abundance of fish from the Passage, a fishmonger named Shurtleff snagged a prime location right at the new gates on the west side of the main road.

Amid the construction, Ryal came out from the back room of his shop to find the documents about Minka's mother ripped off the front window. Giardi had no idea who did it or when; she and he had both been very busy that day. Ryal was disturbed in that they were official documents for which he was responsible, but otherwise, he was glad. And he left the gum and ripped corners in place as justification for his warning.

Other ripples from the day's shopping were more distant, but Lord Efran's wife was closely observed for the first time by many visitors. They noted her youth, her expressive (if not beautiful) face, her large blue eyes, her slender build, her healthy glow, and her quickness of mind. She knew that strangers were staring at her, but she was not afraid. Still, she was reticent to look anyone in the eye except shop owners to whom she spoke.

One man in particular noticed all this as he followed her from shop to shop. But he kept himself surrounded by the crowd and never attempted to get close to her. Today.

The following day, May 19th, Minka went to the cold storage room where Bethune kept the breast milk she expressed for Joshua. (Several rooms on the first floor of the fortress were inexplicably cold year round regardless of the weather, so were used to store perishables. Early on, this cold storage room had been used for several purposes, including as a bedroom.) Since the room had no windows, Minka took a lantern. Once she had found a milk bottle, she looked in the closets to see where the extra bottles and nipples she had bought yesterday were stored.

She found them in one closet, then looked in the other closet, which was empty. Then she paused, feeling a cold draft. She looked down at her feet: yes, there was a gentle seeping of cold air from below the slate floor in this closet somewhere. Minka hesitated over this, but Joshua needed attention, so she left. But she didn't forget.

Several hours later, when Minka had put Joshua down to sleep, she returned to the empty closet in the cold storage room. Kneeling outside the closet with her lantern, she felt all around the floor to find that the cold air was coming from cracks around the slate tiles. She tried to pry up the tiles along the edge closest to her, but didn't have the strength in her fingers.

So she went searching around the various utility rooms of the fortress until she found a slender metal measuring stick. This she took back to the cold storage room with her lantern. Kneeling again before the crack in the tiles, she inserted the rod and pushed down. This opened up a square of slate tiles about a yard in length and width. Leaning the square against the back of the closet, she looked down at an opening to a stairway with iron railings on either side.

The temptation to descend it was strong, but she knew better than to explore on her own. Rising, she left the stick in the closet and shut the door. Leaving the lantern in the room as well, she went upstairs to Estes' workroom, where Efran could be reliably found when he wasn't shopping or killing giants.

The sentry at Estes' door opened it as she approached, and she walked in. Efran and Estes were bending over the preliminary map the surveyors had produced after their first look into the cavern that Efran had climbed out of. Both men looked up as she entered. She wore a blank Efranesque face to say, "Will my lord come with me for a moment, please?"

Estes looked quickly at Efran, who paled. He stepped out from around the table to draw close to her and hold her shoulders, whispering, "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I have something to show you," she said, taking his fingers to lead him out into the corridor.

He stopped her. His face had regained its color, but he still held her with one arm. "Tell me what it is."

"No, that will ruin the surprise," she said, pulling him along.

"I don't like surprises," he muttered, following her.

“That’s a shame,” she said.

He allowed her to lead him down to the cold storage room, where she shut the door after their entry. As he watched, she picked up the lantern and opened the closet door.

He stared at the hole under the trap door, then fell to his knees to look down the steps. “How did you find this?”

“I felt the cold air coming up around the edges,” she said.

He sat back on his heels, looking up at her. “Thank you for not going down it. Or did you?”

She looked offended. “I came right up and got you!”

He smiled in relief, standing. “Thank you.” He kissed her lightly, then went to the door to open it and whistle at a sentry, Fellowes. “Bring Estes down here, with a lantern. Yes.” Then he looked back at her, shaking his head.

When Estes appeared with the required light, Efran shut the door after him, saying, “My wife finds things.” And he led Estes to the closet.

“What in the—?” Estes breathed. Then he immediately turned to begin down the steep steps with his lantern.

Efran followed him with the other lantern, and Minka followed Efran. He quickly looked up at her, but she said, “Don’t you dare tell me not to come, or next time I’ll look for myself before telling you about it.” He closed his mouth.

When the three of them got to the limestone floor at the bottom of the ten-foot stairway, they immediately felt the coolness of the cavern. While Efran held his lantern to look behind them, Estes closed the side and back panels on his lantern to direct a beam of light above and around them. And they looked at stone pilings descending from the floor of the fortress above them to various levels of the stone on which they stood.

“They sank the foundation footings clear down to the stone!” Estes said in an echoing murmur.

“Everywhere,” Efran said, looking all around. “And I cannot imagine how.”

“When was this built?” Estes asked.

“Hundreds of years ago. I will have to ask Ryal,” Efran replied. He directed his light toward a large opening in the cavern wall opposite them that ended in blackness. And black water filled the cavern beneath them, stopping at the edge of the rock on which they stood. “I wonder if this connects somehow to the cavern I fell into.”

“It may, but if the foundation is supported on all sides as it is here, the fortress will stand until the hill itself crumbles,” Estes said.

“All right, we’ll think on all this. Back up,” Efran directed specifically to Minka. Holding her skirts, she began ascending the steps with one hand on the railing.

Estes followed her. “I’m going to brief DeWitt about this, but he’s the only one who needs to know.”

Nodding, Efran put a hand on the railing. With his other hand holding the lantern at his thigh, his eyes were

drawn to movement below. And he looked down at ripples in the water. There was something moving in the water around them.

Efran watched the ripples fade, then he turned to begin climbing the stairway.

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Chapter 8

Two days later, on May 21st, the men who had taken Abbey gold and silver to the moneyer in Eurus returned bearing 420 royals from the minting of just that corner of the massive tray. Caswall, the leader of the group, presented Efran and Estes with the moneyer's receipt along with the royals. "Meineke could have done more, but ran out of the silver we sent. He included a note on the proportions of gold and silver required by weight. Also, he kept twelve royals as payment."

"That's reasonable, don't you think?" Efran said, handing the receipt to Estes.

"Oh yes," Estes said. "Did he indicate he's willing to do more?" he asked Caswall.

"Yes, in fact, he's anxious for the business to offset the counterfeits floating around," Caswall said.

"All right, let's send him another chunk, with more silver," Efran directed. "Who went with you?" He looked up at Caswall.

"Younge, Gabriel, and Coxe," Caswall said.

"Ask one of them to rest up and take the men of his choosing for another run," Efran said.

"But not Coxe," Estes said. "DeWitt complained about my appropriating him for this errand."

"Yes, Steward," Caswall said.

Estes added to Efran, "We don't have enough spare silver for the gold we're sending; we'll need to get some from the Treasury. There are a number of bars."

Efran glanced up. "Have Minka take you."

"Again," Estes murmured, and Efran nodded, brows raised.

Estes sent a man to find Minka and request that she meet him at the door of the library. As he began to turn out of the workroom, he told Caswall, "We had better mint silver coins as well. The fortress spends royals for our needs, but most people use only silver or copper."

"So Meineke suggested," Caswall said. "I'll ask Younge if he wants to take a group in a few days. He seemed the most familiar with Eurus."

"Yes, go ahead. I'll have the gold and silver weighed before he's ready to leave," Estes said.

“Thank you, sir,” Caswall replied, moving off.

When Minka arrived at the door of the library with a questioning face, Estes motioned her inside and closed the door after her. “Thank you for coming, Minka. Please go get the key to the Treasury. We need silver bars for another run to the moneyer.”

“Ah,” she said, going to the left side wall of the library to press the scallops and access the hidden library. At Estes’ bemused expression, she said, “It’s in here.” She closed the door behind herself and him as he held up the lantern in the windowless room. Distracted, Minka looked up. “Raise your lantern,” she said.

He did, and they both studied the gold geometric design on the upper reaches of the domed ceiling. “Something’s up there,” she whispered.

“Another surprise,” Estes murmured, lowering his lantern to the second hidden door.

On her way to open the swivel bookcase door to the winding staircase, she picked up the signet from atop a large book on the shelf next to the door. “Here’s its hiding place,” she informed him.

He raised a hand in mild exasperation. “Efran and I dismantled your quarters looking for it when you were in Awfyn’s hut.”

She looked down at him in humorous disdain as they mounted the winding stair. “You could have just asked me for it. I don’t care what you take out of the Treasury.”

He paused at her misunderstanding, then decided that was preferable to telling her they feared she was trapped in the small, windowless room (which was not possible, but Efran had forgotten Ryal’s telling him that the Treasury door would not close when the signet was inside).

She opened the door at the top of the winding staircase, and Estes took out three silver ingots while she held the lantern. When they returned to the hidden library, she replaced the signet atop the book. “Now you know where it is. Don’t tell Efran.”

“Yes, thank you, Minka,” he smiled.

Another rider returned from Eurus that day. Cutch apologized as he presented Efran with Marguerite’s reply to his query about Minka’s mother. “I should have returned yesterday, Captain, but Lady Marguerite insisted on feeding me and making me stay overnight. I couldn’t tell her no, sir.”

Efran laughed, “I know; that’s the hazard with any visit to Marguerite, but we must endure it.” Chuckling, Cutch saluted and left.

As Efran was alone in Estes’ workroom at the time, he sat at the table and spread open the letter to read:

“My dearest Efran, please tell my darling Sybil how distraught I was to find that this information about poor dear Kewe was sold without my knowledge or permission. I have fired the man who profited from this, but now that such misinformation is abroad, I can only counter it with the truth.

“Kewe was indeed made pregnant by Lightfoot when he was Counselor to Surchatain Loizeaux here in Eurus. She was fourteen years old. When Lightfoot discovered her condition, he feared public disapproval, so shipped

her off to me. I found her a sweet, simple child, very willing to work, though frightened. She was by no means a half-wit, only unlearned, because no one bothered to teach her anything but menial work.

“She had a very difficult labor with Sybil, and never really regained her health. Unfortunately, Sybil inherited her delicate constitution, and required great care in her early years. When Sybil was about three, a man employed in my stables attempted to take Kewe by force, but she fought him so violently that he drowned her in the pond. When the farmhands learned of it, they beat him to death. It was all so very sad and disturbing.

“Sybil remained in my care until she was about five years old, at which time Lightfoot decided to bring her to his house as a companion to his daughter Adele, who was birthed to him by his mistress at the time. I’m afraid I don’t remember her name, but his wife Aurelia died childless the following year.

“I allowed Sybil to go live with him as I felt that Adele’s company would be good for her. But I demanded that Sybil be given all opportunities that her sister enjoyed, or I would take her back to myself. I checked from time to time to see that she was being educated, but I was alarmed at the betrothals her father was arranging for her. That from this Barnby person made my skin crawl. So I kept a rather close eye on her after that, and when I heard of her kidnapping by this daring Polonti Captain, I knew that she had found the right man for her.

“There is the truth of the matter, dearest Efran, which I am glad to get in writing to you. Please come visit me again soon, you and my darling Sybil.

“With love, Marguerite”

He exhaled, rereading the letter. Then he got up and went to the door to tell the man on duty, Tourle, “Please bring my wife up here.” Tourle saluted, setting off, and Efran returned to sit at the table with the door open.

When Minka arrived, curious but unalarmed, Efran looked up from where he was working on calculations. “Sit beside me, please.”

She did, and he paused to put the letter in front of her. “I wrote to Marguerite asking about your mother, and she replied,” he said.

Minka hesitated in surprise, then picked up the letter to read it. Efran was still trying to arrive at the necessary weight for silver to accompany the new gold chunk, taking into account the gold that remained with the moneyer. But he found that he could only watch her read.

Her eyebrows contracted as she concentrated on the letter for several long minutes, then she laid it down in front of her. He watched, feeling for her. She blinked and said, “May I have parchment and ink, please?”

“Yes, of course.” He got up to rummage in Estes’ shelves, then brought her letter parchment, an inkstand and quill.

“Thank you.” She pulled the parchment toward her, dipped the quill, and began writing rapidly. Efran watched while she covered the page with words without hesitating once. Then she threw down the quill, pushed the parchment toward him, and rose all in one breathless motion. “Please seal it and have it sent to Marguerite.”

“Of course,” he said, but she had run out the door by then. He was disturbed—he wanted her to talk to him—but he knew that she had to think it through first. She had to think about things before she could talk about them.

So he picked up the parchment to read: “Dearest Marguerite, Efran showed me your letter, knowing that I needed to see it. I cannot thank you enough for the love that you showed to my mother and me in sheltering us. I felt in my heart that she had not been a half-wit, but it was only due to your love and mercy that I was not likewise left an ignorant child to be used and thrown away by some man.

“Yes, it was a saving act of grace that you kept my birth record so that I could marry Efran—if you knew how hard I made it for him to protect my virginity, you would be all the more pleased with him. I threw myself on him shamelessly, for which I am ashamed now, because had I my way, he would have felt the guilt forever afterward for violating his oath of guardianship. I can be frank with you about this, because I know you understand.

“Please forgive me for being so remiss in writing to you; I have no excuse. But that changes today.

“Our son Joshua is not old enough to travel yet, but as soon as the doctor allows, we will bring him up to see you. He is as handsome as Efran, and very healthy despite coming a month early. I don’t know how I will be able to protect him from wanton girls throwing themselves at him—I suppose Efran will have to teach him what to do.

“Much love, your grateful Sybil.”

Efran put the letter down, wincing. He didn’t like the way she portrayed herself during his guardianship; he felt she was exaggerating her attempts to seduce him. Early on at the henhouse, she tried to flirt, but when they were really in love and most in danger, she controlled herself—and him--admirably.

Sighing, he rose to blot the letter, fold it, seal it, and address it to Marguerite in Eurus. He started to leave it on Estes’ desk, then put it in his pocket instead. And he went out to look for her.

He found her in the first place he looked: on the bench by the gardens under the walnut tree. She had Joshua on a blanket at her feet, busy pushing up and rolling over. Efran went over to sit beside her and clasp his hands, elbows on his knees.

She glanced at him, smiling, then lowered her eyes again. She looked almost ashamed. “Why did you paint yourself so black to Marguerite?” he asked.

She shrugged with a jerk. “It’s how I feel.”

“Why?” he asked, uncomprehending.

“Because I was the product of—abuse,” she said, looking off with tears in her eyes. She couldn’t even get out the word *rape*.

“So was I,” he said, “and you would never let me disparage myself like you did in that letter.”

She looked down at Joshua, then bent to remove a wad of blanket from his mouth. Efran continued, “For that matter, Joshua is also a bastard. Should he hang his head in shame all his life, regardless of what kind of person he is?”

“Oh, Efran.” She leaned into him, and he held her close in his chest. She soaked up his warmth for a while, then said, “I may not ever be able to have babies.”

“Then I have to try harder,” he said. Before even looking, she knew he was smiling.

He pulled away slightly to make her look at him. She did, murmuring, “You are not cute when you crinkle your eyes at me.”

“Good, because Marguerite needs a letter from you, but not that one. I want you to write another,” he said.

“Who made you censor of my letters?” she objected.

“You did, when you gave it to me to read,” he said.

“Oh!” she breathed in vexation, reaching down for Joshua. Efran took him from her arms and let her pick up the chewed blanket.

And when she glanced up, trying to look vexed, he saw the flash of adoration instead, and smiled.

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Chapter 9

With another letter to Marguerite written and sealed, and Joshua asleep in his crib beside their bed, Efran rested his face on Minka’s neck. “Are you feeling better?” he murmured.

“Yes,” she said, stroking his hair back out of his eyes.

“I’m glad. Now you have to either let me cut my hair or wear your tortoiseshell comb,” he said.

She groaned and moved as if to get up, but he held her down. “Just a little off the front, so I can see,” he coaxed, encompassing her whole upper body with one arm.

She sighed to be all wrapped up by him. “Do you promise that Detler will cut *just a little* off the front?”

“Just a little,” he solemnly affirmed, drawing her legs into him with a nudge of his foot.

“Ummm, all right,” she murmured contentedly. Then her eyes sprang open and she pushed off from him. “You’re using *moekolohe* with your whole body to get me to let you cut your hair!”

“Is it wrong if it works?” he asked. As she beat on him, he pressed her to him so that she had no place for her fists but around his neck.

“That’s so not fair,” she breathed into his lips.

He was replying with his mouth on hers when they heard a loud knocking on the outer door. Estes shouted, “Efran, let go of her so I can show you how to calculate percentages of troy ounces!”

Minka laughed, Joshua raised his head, and Efran groaned, “Coming!” As he rolled off the bed to look for his

clothes, he said, "You can play in the garden while I am being tortured. Tutored."

"All right," she conceded with a laugh, looking beyond the bed covers. Efran tossed in her direction what garments he found as he was dressing. Then he kissed her and Joshua on the head as he went out, closing the door behind him.

"Now we take the weight in troy ounces and multiply that by point five. . . . Efran? Are you listening?" Estes asked.

Efran studied him. "Tell me again why I need to know this."

"Because you asked," Estes said.

"What? Why do you listen to me? You go ahead and figure out how much gold and silver we need to send next," Efran said, rising.

"Because you will be . . ." Estes said leadingly.

"Yes, I'll be down in the cold storage room," Efran said.

"If you go down to the cavern, take a man with you," Estes said.

"I understand," Efran said noncommittally as he turned out, and Estes exhaled in aggravation.

But more pressing matters came first, so Efran went to Detler to cut his hair. Detler vented, "I'm happy to do yours, Captain, but everybody coming to me to get their hair cut is making my life a living hell."

Since his complaint was real and valid, Efran set his jaw to not laugh. "I'm sure it is. Cut mine, and then we'll go to Towner and get you some relief. Just a little off the front; leave enough for Minka to play with."

"Right-o, Captain," Detler laughed, going for his shears.

When he had cut enough so that Efran could see, they both went to find Towner, who was in charge of Detler's unit. Efran told him, "Detler needs some of his less critical duties lifted so that he has time to cut hair. He needs two volunteers and extra shears for them to learn how to do it. And from now on, a haircut will cost a silver piece, payable to whoever does it. There will be hair-cutting money for the men in Doane's cubicle."

"Yes, Captain," Towner smiled.

"Thank you, Captain!" Detler cried.

Shaking his head, Efran walked off, looking at everything that was now visible. First he went to check in with Doane in Estes' old cubicle. "Hello, Doane. How are you doing? Any complaints?" he asked, glancing around.

"No, Captain; we have a good setup," Doane said. He was partially crippled from a knife wound but had a brace that enabled him to walk short distances.

Efran nodded at the two soldiers who were stationed here as his assistants. "Good. From now on, the men will be paying Detler a silver piece each for hair cuts. I'll need you to keep extra silver on hand for the men who don't

have any. Oh, and I need a piece to pay Detler for mine today.”

Doane laughed, opening his drawer. “As long as you cleared the haircut with Lady Minka, I’ll give you the fee.”

“Common knowledge, is it?” Efran muttered ruefully, taking the piece handed him. “Thank you.” Doane saluted as Efran walked out.

By that time, he was due for dinner, so Efran went to the large dining hall, looking for Minka. She met him at once, and he held her arms to face him. “How is that?” he asked, shaking his head.

She looked him over suspiciously. “Did you already get it cut?”

“You can’t tell?” he gasped. She was trying to decide whether to admit she couldn’t when he spotted Detler and called him. Detler came right over and Efran handed him the silver piece. “Thank you for the cut, Detler.”

“Right-o, Captain!” He turned to brandish the piece over his head as notice that all future haircuts would require payment. Efran grinned, because that meant that as long as Detler cut sparingly, Efran could keep the length of his hair manageable and Minka happy, both.

Toby and Tarrant ran up to them. “Efran, you and Minka need to come down and see our hut!” Toby said, taking his hand.

“What have you done to it now? Hello, Tarrant,” Efran said.

Tarrant grinned and Toby said, “You just have to come see!”

Efran said, “We will, but it’s too late today; it will have to be tomorrow. Are you both getting your work done?”

“Yes, sir,” Tarrant said; Toby looked suddenly cautious.

“Well, I’m sure that by the time we come tomorrow, everything will have been done,” Efran said. Toby wavered, then ran out.

Early the following morning (May 22nd) before Efran and Minka could get down to see the hut, there was a line out of the front door which he had to deal with. Due to the notice that had been posted in Ryal’s front window about the stolen gold, hopeful claimants were arriving at the fortress by the cartload. The notice plainly stated that anyone attempting to claim any of the gold items must specify what they had lost and the markings on it. The notice emphasized that the claimant must be able to describe his piece in detail, and say when and how it was lost or stolen. Efran and Estes interviewed the first few.

The first man in line was directed to the receiving room off the foyer, where Efran and Estes sat with descriptions of the items to check against the descriptions given by the claimants. As the man, a resident of Westford, stood before them, Efran asked, “What of yours was stolen?”

“Gold cups, sir. They were—”

“Next,” Efran said. The only cups in the cache were those from the Abbey Treasury.

The second man, in response to Efran’s question, replied, “Gold candlesticks, sir.”

“Where were they made?” Efran asked, looking at his sheets.

The claimant hesitated and Efran looked up. The man finally admitted, “I don’t know, sir.”

“Next,” Efran said.

The third claimant said he was missing gold plates. “Describe them,” Efran said.

“They were gold,” the man said, almost derisive at his need to state the obvious.

“Next,” Efran said.

The fourth claimant, smiling, said that he was missing a tall golden ewer, heavily adorned—which sounded obviously like the ewer given to Bowring as appeasement.

Efran eyed him. “Next.”

The fifth claimant said that he was missing a golden statue of— “Next,” Efran said.

The sixth claimant, when asked what of his was stolen, replied, “Well, what was found?”

Efran leaned back and said, “Get out.”

At this point, the surveyors sent a man to whisper in Efran’s ear that they had finished widening the opening to the cavern, and invited him to come look. So Efran got up, leaving the remainder of the claimants to Estes. He, also wanting to see the cavern opening, left the claimants to DeWitt. He, unwilling to sacrifice himself or his assistant on this noble endeavor, called in a soldier, Tourse, who was known for his sardonic wit. Before turning him loose on the line, DeWitt emphasized that there might be a diamond obscured in the mountain of chaff, and any claimant who *might* be legitimate must be heard.

So Tourse, sitting in the receiving room with an assistant, Finn, who took notes just for show, rustled his sheets importantly as he called in the first claimant. “Sir,” Tourse said, “first, let me say just how sympathetic we are to your devastating loss of something so valuable. Tell me, sir, what piece are you missing?”

“It was a gold crock—”

Tourse let out a screeching laugh, waving him away. No crocks were listed in the cache; it is uncertain that any gold crocks existed. Two sentries at the door gently took the man’s arms and assisted him out the front door.

As the next person stepped hesitantly into the room, Tourse leveled a wide-eyed stare at him to ask in a low monotone, “What are you claiming?”

The man stared back at him. Hesitantly, he said, “Well, actually, it was. . . .”

“Out with it!” Tourse barked, with the unrelieved stare.

Sweating, the man said, “A golden . . . pitcher—”

“WRONG!” Tourse shouted, banging the table. No pitchers in the cache. That claimant turned to run out on his own.

At this point, the line began dissolving. But another hopeful came in so confidently as to sit across from the maniacal interrogator. “Well?” Tourse said.

“I had a small gold vase stolen,” the man said.

Tourse riffled through his sheets with a great flurry of noise. “Describe the markings.”

The man hesitated; Tourse looked up with the un pitying eyes of an executioner. Then the man said boldly, “There was no markings.”

All items in the cache had markings. Tourse sprang to his feet to pound the table and roar, “THEN DON’T BOTHER ME ABOUT IT!” The man, hair standing on end, was escorted out.

Much of the line vanished at that point, but a rather attractive young woman entered the room to perch in the chair that Finn had just set upright again. Tourse looked at her and folded his hands on his sheaf of papers. “Yes, madam, what are you missing?”

“A pair of golden candlesticks,” she said, parting her lips at him.

“I see. That would be a devastating loss to any household. And what were the markings on the bottom?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t have a man around to tell me about those things,” she said, lowering her chin.

“Oh, well, there are plenty in your area,” Tourse began, leaning back. “Though, frankly, you might want to get out of Cripple Gate Street and set up shop in Fye Foot—”

She jumped up, screaming, “How dare you, you filthy rat, you sewer scum—!” She was gently escorted out as she continued blasting her interrogator for suggesting that she resided on a well-known street of ill repute in Westford.

“I love this job,” Tourse said. Finn was busy decorating his first page of notes with enhanced sketches of the young woman who had just left. Turning to put his feet up on the chair next to him, The Gatekeeper to the Gold watched another claimant enter. Tourse looked over at him and sighed. “You know, unless you have the evidence to back your claim, I’m going to humiliate you brutally, and there are some very pretty maids that go in and out of here.”

That man narrowed his eyes in thought for a moment, then turned and walked out as Tourse’s gentle mocking laughter followed him.

Meanwhile, Efran and Estes had ridden out to the cavern opening in the eastern area of the Abbey Lands, a little over a mile from the fortress. From a distance, they could see the warning flags arranged in a circle. As they slowed to approach cautiously, the head surveyor Keble waved them forward. He and a group of men were standing around the roped-off area.

So Efran and Estes came over to look down into the gaping hole that had begun has a crack which Efran had climbed out of. The surveyors had widened the opening to a diameter of about twenty feet. Keble walked over to say, “We’re fairly confident that the ground remaining around the opening is stable, but we’re recommending that men not be sent down to explore until we get a good rain or two, to see if any soil along the edge washes away.”

“Excellent,” Efran murmured, kneeling to look down the hole. “All I see from here is water.”

Keble replied, “Yes, the area below looks completely immersed, though there are speleothems—flowstones, columns and the like—ranging all around it.”

“What did I climb up?” Efran leaned over farther to look, which made both Keble and Estes put out a hand.

“The wall, certainly, although by heaven’s name I don’t see how,” Keble said.

Efran stood. “Very interesting. Thank you, Keble—let us know when we can let men down to explore it.”

“Yes, Captain,” Keble said in satisfaction.

Efran and Estes remounted to ride back to the fortress. Efran had another obligation that morning, for which he had to collect Minka.

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Chapter 10

When Efran and Minka entered the foyer minutes later, he was pleased to see that the line for claimants had almost disappeared. He had promised Toby a visit to the hut this morning, so he and Minka were about to make good on that.

While they waited in the courtyard for their horses to be brought around, a small elderly woman came in through the gate. Dusty from having walked all the way up the switchback, she paused before Efran to say, “I hear they’re giving away gold in there. Is that right?”

Minka looked at Efran sympathetically. He lowered his head to the woman to say, “No, it’s not. I’m sorry. But this is for you.” He took a couple of royals out of his pocket to put in her hand and close her fingers over them.

As Lowry the butcher began exiting the gate driving an empty cart, Efran stopped him and lifted the woman in. “Give her a ride down, please, Lowry.”

“Sure thing, Captain.” Lowry nodded back at her and clucked his horse on down the switchback.

Efran glanced at Minka, then turned his eyes away from her adoration. “You emptied your pocket for her, didn’t you?” she asked.

“No,” he said. So she leaned over to stick her hand in his pocket, which was empty.

Their horses were brought, and they began descending the switchback at a walk. “Isn’t that beautiful?” Minka said, and Efran looked. She was scanning the plots. In late May, they presented a patchwork panorama of gardens, fields, houses, and workshops full of activity. There were sheep grazing and children playing and all modes of labor underway—construction, washing, planting, plucking—everyone pursuing their own work for the day.

“A year ago, when we were married, this was all wolf-infested meadowlands,” she noted.

He turned in surprise. “It’s been a year?”

“We signed the book at Ryal’s shop in Westford a year ago today,” she said, eyes misting—May 22nd.

He looked at her, murmuring, “I still don’t believe it.” He gazed over the meadowlands magically changed to feeding and growing families. “I don’t believe any of it.”

Coming off the switchback, Efran turned his horse down one of the side roads, having spotted the green stalks of a barley field. As he looked over the healthy growth, a man came out from among the stalks, wiping his brow with a kerchief. “Lord Efran! Lady Minka. I trust that Bethune and our Erastus are staying out of trouble?”

“Moreso than I am. The field looks good, Howe,” Efran said. Minka looked on smiling, having never met Bethune’s husband, that she remembered.

“We’ve had good rain—enough to water it well, but not drown it, which is a danger at this stage,” Howe said. “I must say this plot’s a sight more fertile than our old half acre in Westford.” Efran slipped off his horse to pick up a little one who had toddled over, so Minka dismounted as well. As they talked, a crowd began gathering around Efran, recognizing him.

Someone desired Efran to come look at something on his plot, so Efran handed Howe the toddler (who belonged to someone else) and he and Minka led their horses on foot to another yard. Here, the leaseholder, Knapp, had dug a shallow pond that almost filled his plot. He told Efran, “The sprouts you see coming up are rice. But living down there in the water with it are crayfish, which eat weeds and pests. Then when we harvest the rice, we can harvest crayfish, as well. They’re becoming very popular here.”

“That’s brilliant,” Efran said appreciatively. “I’ll ask Madea to serve them.” He glanced up at a man walking two boys down the road toward the east plots.

“We already supply some for the fortress tables, Lord Efran. But I’ll need another plot to fill the demand.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, turning. He saw Minka turn her eyes deliberately toward the new bridge. “Ah. Excuse me; my son has something to show us.”

He and Minka led their horses through the crowd to the main road, where they remounted to resume their ride. Past the wall gates, they rode over the old stone bridge and turned west, toward the new bridge over the Passage. Minka still got a little queasy going over the bridge, but sucked in a breath to drive away the residual fears. They followed the dirt path past the wooden gates to the play hut, and Efran tethered their horses to a post the boys had installed by the door.

When they entered the hut, they found it empty. “Ah. The boys probably had chores to do,” Efran said.

“Do you know what they wanted to show you?” Minka asked, looking around. She saw only minor additions to

what she had seen at her surprise birthday party two weeks ago. “They have kept it nice and clean,” she observed.

“No, I don’t know what else they’ve done,” he said. “I’ll try again this afternoon.” He came out the door, then paused, looking at his feet. “Is this new?” He was looking down at a walkway of bricks in a herringbone pattern.

“I’ve never seen it. How nicely done!” she said in admiration.

“They took great pains with it,” he agreed, bending to look at the alignment. “They laid a bed of sand for the bricks.”

“I wish we could leave something to tell them we saw it,” she said, looking around.

In a patch of excess sand beside the bricks, Efran wrote with his finger, *Well done!* Liking that idea, Minka found a stick to write in the sand along the other side of the bricks, *Nice! Love, Minka.* So Efran added his name to his inscription.

They remounted to ride back over the new bridge spanning the Passage, then turn south to pass over the old stone bridge on the road leading to the fortress. Without stopping, Efran waved at those who called to him from the plots, and Minka smiled at everyone.

They gave up their horses in the courtyard, and he put a hand at her back to walk up the steps. As they entered the foyer, she said, “I’m going to get Joshua—”

“YOU GET NOTHING! *NOTHING!*” a mocking voice shouted from the receiving room, and a Westfordian scrambled out of the foyer to the courtyard. The next person in the short line sidled in.

Minka looked at Efran in astonishment. He studied the floor for a few seconds, then deliberately escorted her into the corridor before kissing her. “I have other things to do as well.”

She smiled, brushing his hair back off his forehead as if testing it. “I approve,” she finally decided.

He laughed, “I will tell Detler.”

Then he walked away and she watched him head for the kitchen. So she went to the nursery.

Efran appropriated a lantern from the kitchen and lit it from the fireplace. As he was walking back through the mostly deserted dining hall, he looked up at Gabriel approaching, who saluted. “Captain, I have a request.”

“Certainly,” Efran said, setting the lantern on a table. Gabriel was one of his most reliable men.

“I request that you interview my sister Geneve. She wants in the army,” Gabriel said.

Efran squinted in concern. “Gabriel, I don’t put women out to fight men.”

“I don’t make this request lightly, Captain; she is trained and intelligent. I believe she could be an asset to you.”

Efran regarded his set face, then nodded reluctantly. “I will speak with her.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Gabriel stepped back and waved toward the dining hall doorway.

A young woman with light brown hair, wearing pants, walked up to Efran. He breathed in distress, “You are not much bigger than my Minka.”

“That is an advantage to me, Captain, in that no one takes me seriously. I sent two men to the doctor who attacked me outside Shay’s Tavern last week,” she said levelly.

Efran glanced at Gabriel, who closed his eyes, nodding in confirmation. She went on, “Gabriel has been training me since childhood. I can shoot well; I can ride long and hard; I can scout. And you may find there are times that you need a woman for schemes that require the skills of a man but not his bulk.”

Efran looked at her for a long minute, then exhaled, “Come out back.” He extinguished the lantern on the table. Then he, Geneve, and Gabriel went out to the back grounds where the men drilled. First, Efran took her to the archery range. He asked Gabriel, “Can you find her a bow she can use?”

“Yes, Captain.” He set off with a light hop to begin running toward the weapons storage.

While he was gone, Efran asked her, “Did he say your name is Geneve?”

“Yes, Captain,” she said.

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-two, Captain,” she replied.

“What made you want to be in the army?” he asked.

She replied, “Gabriel. He has been father and brother to me since our father died when I was a baby. He taught me everything he ever learned—swimming, fishing, fighting. When he joined the army of Westford as a Green, I thought I would die, but he came back now and then to show me everything he learned. He was quickly promoted to the Gold, and then to the Red, where he fought under you. And when he came here to serve you, I had hopes for the first time of serving beside him.”

Gabriel ran up, then, with a bow and quiver. She tested out the bow; he tightened the string, adjusted the sight and the arrow rest, then they both looked at Efran. He nodded toward the targets sitting in front of a wall of baled hay. “Set her to her distance, and show me.”

Gabriel put her on the beginners’ firing line and stood back. The man monitoring the range made sure it was clear, then gestured permission for her to fire. A number of people wandered up to watch behind Efran.

She nocked and drew smoothly, then released an arrow that hit the second ring from center. She nocked again, realigning, and hit the first ring from center. She nocked and fired again, hitting the center. The four remaining shots landed in or close to the bull’s-eye.

Murmurs of admiration went up from the group behind her. Minka came out from the fortress to watch.

With her quiver emptied, Geneve and Gabriel looked back at Efran. He jerked his head toward the stables. As he began walking over there himself, Geneve dropped the bow and empty quiver to follow, as did Gabriel and a large crowd of observers, including Minka.

Efran stopped at the training pen, leaning on the top railing to instruct a man, “Bring out Bastard with a bridle. No saddle.”

They waited a few minutes for this order to be carried out. Then as the man was bringing Bastard, Efran stepped away from the railing and looked around generally to say, “Everyone back off from the pen and be quiet, please.” They all did as he asked. When Bastard was released into the pen, snorting, Efran glanced at Geneve and gestured toward the irritable animal.

She climbed over the railing while Bastard watched suspiciously. Then she began talking in a smooth, friendly voice without approaching him. Even though she had no carrots, she was something new, and he looked at her with ears pricked. Still talking, she turned slightly away from him. He turned his head, snorting, then trotted around the pen to kick it here and there. She kept talking, glancing at him once or twice. When Bastard looked over to Efran, expecting carrots, he turned away in clear denial. Bastard kicked a post in irritation.

Geneve moved slightly toward him; when he snorted and spun away, she turned her shoulder to him and walked off a few steps. His interest piqued, he looked back at her.

This flirtation ensued for quite a while until Bastard came over to nudge her shoulder. When she began stroking his nose, his head, and his neck, he was smitten. She walked away a few steps, and he followed her for more petting. She kept it up while taking the reins.

Still, she took her time with him. At his initial resistance to her leading him by the reins, she dropped them and walked off. This induced him to follow her and offer to be led.

Eventually, she had him to the point that she was able to grasp his mane and hop up on his bare back. He bucked slightly; she raised her knees high and leaned forward to scratch between his ears, cooing at him. Then with just light pressure from her knees, she induced him to trot amiably around the pen. At that point, she looked at Efran, who gestured her over.

She dismounted with a pat and climbed back over the pen railing to the outside. Bastard followed her to kick at the railings, so a stablehand induced him back to his stall with a carrot. Efran looked off while Geneve watched him. There was a large crowd around them now, including Minka.

Then he told Geneve, “I’m going to grab you. Don’t be afraid to hurt me.” After a momentary pause, he swiftly grabbed her by the neck with his right hand.

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Chapter 11

While Efran held Geneve’s neck with his right hand, his right leg was pressed against the outside of her right thigh to prevent her kicking him in the groin. Swiftly, she compressed the index finger on his left hand in such a way that he gasped and let go of her. So she released his finger. He stepped back, laughing as he shook his hand for the pain. Exclamations rose from the crowd, some laughing as well. Composed, Geneve waited for more. Minka watched them both.

He looked toward Gabriel to ask, “Who is your unit commander?”

“Neale, Captain,” Gabriel said.

Efran nodded. “Tell him to put her on the duty roster.” While Gabriel grinned and Geneva exhaled in joy, Efran told her, “Neale will find you a place to sleep in the barracks. You can’t use the men’s bath house or latrine; you have to go to the women’s bathing room inside. Well done,” he said, conflicted. He was proud of her, and glad for Gabriel, but disturbed to have a bedrock assumption overthrown.

“Thank you, sir!” she exclaimed.

Minka pushed forward at that point, and both turned to her as she looked from one to the other. “Who are you?” she asked.

“I am Gabriel’s sister Geneve, Lady Minka. The Captain is allowing me to join the army.” There was pride and a touch of disbelief in her voice.

Minka stared at Efran a moment, who was regarding her in misgiving. Then she looked back to Geneve to say without drawing breath, “You are my new best friend. I want you to teach me everything you know. Where did you get those pants?”

There was a burst of laughter around her; Geneve grinned as Efran looked up in an appeal to the heavens.

When the ruckus from that finally died down—and Minka received clearance to go to Elvey’s with a bodyguard to get measured for pants—Efran returned to the kitchen to relight the lantern. This he took with him to the cold storage room, along with a dull knife to open the trap door (which utensil he left in the closet when he had the door up). He had that persistent feeling, again, that there was unfinished business somewhere; there was something lurking that he needed to address. He didn’t know if it involved whatever was in the cavern, but he was going to find out.

Alone, he descended the steep stairs to the ledge of the cavern. It was about 15 feet to the edge where the dark water lapped just below.

For several minutes, he stood looking down at the water. As the lantern seemed to be interfering here, he hung it on a hook in the rock beside the stairs. Then he returned to stand right on the edge, where he scanned the surface of the water and the murky recesses of the cavern.

Hello again, Efran.

He looked down at the ripples gently lapping over the rock. “Who are you?” he asked.

I am a Swimmer.

Efran couldn’t tell whether he was hearing the words with his ears or his mind. “Why do you say, ‘again’?”

We have met before.

“When I fell in?” That was about two months ago, when Doddridge had put him in an underground cell that Efran had kicked a hole in, only to fall into the cavern water below.

Yes. The water rippled again.

“I . . . don’t remember you.”

I pushed you up to the rock.

Then Efran did remember how, after falling in and swimming for a long time, he had been unable to hoist himself up on a ledge, and, there was—suddenly something under him that he could push off of. “I remember now. That was you? Why did you do that?”

You were calling for help from the Great One.

Efran had to process that for a moment. “You heard my prayers to God? How?”

You are aina.

Aina were Polonti, usually children, who could command animals. Efran had occasional experiences with this, but did not consider himself fully *aina*, like Pia. He was a little concerned that this creature, whatever it was, would step in and answer his prayers to God, unless—God sent it to do that. Remembering that incident, he was sure now that he would have drowned without some assistance.

“You saved my life.” There was silence, and Efran looked to see if the ripples were still there. “Come to the surface so I can see you.”

We don’t do that.

“Are there more of you?” Efran asked.

Yes.

“And you live in the cavern waters?”

They join with the Sea.

“Of course!” Efran murmured. “What is your name?”

Swimmer.

“I want to understand more about you. I want to know what you are.”

At that, the water surged over Efran’s boots and he fell back as a large shape thrust itself onto the ledge. Lying on his back, Efran looked past his feet at a huge blob with a mouth at least four feet across and two bulging eyes sitting over the corners of the mouth. The whole thing was a splotchy brown with a dirty white underside.

Just about the time Efran thought he was to be dinner, the creature slid back from the ledge into the water. Efran crawled over to watch the ripples recede, and he almost thought he heard Swimmer laughing.

After Justinian had led Efran and two of his men *on horseback* from Westford to a farmer outside of Eurus to get the sheep brains, Justinian had been feeling the need for rest. So he had taken refuge in his old suite at the fortress for several days.

But when he learned that Adele had shown up at the fortress with her new apparent employer, Justinian fled to Westford.

That was four days ago. Today (still May 22nd), Justinian returned to the fortress with an official report. After circumventing the gold hunters in line at the receiving room off the foyer, he sat with Efran in the small dining room. Here, he poured a large goblet of ale for himself, then another for Efran. "You will need this," Justinian said, and paused to take a long draught.

"Just give it to me straight," Efran said, preparing to wince.

"Loizeaux found out that Adele is here, and is sending men for her. He's under the impression that he slept with her and enjoyed it very much," Justinian said, his face a study of incomprehension and disbelief. "Oh, and, he's going to pick up the gold you have advertised while he's here."

Efran sucked in a breath, closing his eyes. "How many men?"

"Hundreds, from what I hear," Justinian said.

"When?" Efran asked.

"Imminently," Justinian said.

Efran mused, "Even if she were willing to go, it wouldn't be the same. And the gold—" He groaned and laughed, shaking his head.

Justinian was watching as though he had missed some critical information. "Did he actually sleep with Adele?"

"No, he slept with someone pretending to be Adele, who is no longer available," Efran said.

"That's someone I would like to have met," Justinian said thoughtfully.

Efran sighed, "You narrowly escaped doing so, I believe." Then he asked himself, "What to do when explanations are useless?" The first thing he did was send scouts out to tell him when Loizeaux was coming and with how many. And the scouts he decided to send were Gabriel and Geneve.

As Efran was dispatching Justinian back to Westford from the foyer, Tarrant's father Weber the tanner entered. He walked up to Efran with watering eyes and said, "Please come down to the hut, Lord Efran."

"Yes," Efran said, his gut coiling at Weber's face. This kind of man did not cry lightly. Efran turned to motion the two closest men, Rigdon and Shane, to accompany him. As Weber went out to climb back on his old mare Mistletoe, Efran waited for horses with his men.

When the horses were brought around to the courtyard and Efran's group mounted, they easily outpaced Weber on the northbound road to arrive at the hut before him. Efran threw himself from the saddle to run up the walkway and open the door. No one was inside.

He opened the back door to see nothing amiss there, either, then came out front where his men were scanning the area. Abruptly, Rigdon said, "Captain." He was looking at the ground beside the brick walkway.

Efran and Shane came over to look. Written where Efran had left his note in the sand was, “Give me Minka or boys will die.” As Efran absorbed the message, he thought, *If Tarrant is missing, it can only be Toby who’s with him.*

Weber came riding up behind them while Efran and his men were studying the words scrawled in sand. Efran looked over his shoulder. “Don’t worry, Weber. We will get them back.” Weber could only nod.

Efran exhaled, “Shane, Lady Minka should be at Elvey’s. See if she is; if she’s not, find her and see that she’s quietly escorted back to the fortress.”

“Captain.” Shane saluted and rode off at a gallop.

“Weber, when did anyone last see Tarrant?” Efran asked him.

“When he finished his chores this morning, sir. I came down here to get him when he didn’t come back for his afternoon chores,” Weber said.

“Minka and I were down here this morning; they weren’t here then. Neither was this message. We left notes for the boys written in the sand. He—” Efran suddenly stopped, gazing into the distance.

“I saw them,” he whispered. “This morning, I saw them but didn’t recognize them. Both boys on either side of a man, walking toward the east plots.” His eyes went glassy as he calculated. “First thing, we have to keep our kidnapper engaged.”

He bent to the ground to erase the message with a sweep of his hand and write in its place, “HOW?” Then he stood. “We wait to hear back from him; meanwhile, we search the east plots.”

This was likely unprofitable, in that there were fewer houses or shops finished east of the main road. There were piles of lumber, stone and construction materials, but no place to hide boys. What worried Efran, however, was the lure of the eastern hillside.

For one thing, unlike the western hillside, it was long and broad. Beyond the initial dropoff from the east grounds that was perilously steep, about halfway down the elevation, the hillside gradually leveled out for a good half mile past the break Efran made in the cavern roof. But the lower hillside was treacherous in its own way, being a treasure trove of snakes, scorpions, dangerous plants, and probably caverns—though none had yet been discovered. Discounting unexpected holes, the boys could easily have been lured to a hiding place on the hill somewhere. Efran couldn’t imagine how to search such a vast, inhospitable area, but it had to be ruled out.

Shane brought Minka home from Elvey’s, whose dressers promised that the shop would send her pants—three pairs of them—up to the fortress when they were ready. Meanwhile, the plots were searched for missing children; besides Tarrant, only Toby was unaccounted for. And as there was no place near the hut to hide guards to keep watch on it, Efran withdrew them so that the kidnapper could respond to their message. While daylight remained, searchers began looking for hiding places on the eastern hillside.

Efran, Estes, DeWitt and Coxe spent several hours debating how to meet Loizeaux, finally settling on a strategy of ale and bonhomie. Late that evening, Gabriel and Geneve returned to report that Loizeaux and several hundred men were marching through the night, and would be at the Abbey gates in the morning.

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Chapter 12

Early the following morning—May 23rd—scouts found this message in the sand by the hut walkway: “Leave M in hut. I AM WATCHING”

After considerable debate, Efran and his advisors decided that this meant he had a secure viewpoint to watch the hut, probably in one of the surrounding trees. Climbing all the trees to find him and bring him down was impractical, especially if he were armed, which was likely. Efran believed they could catch him without anyone dying, especially the kidnapper—at least not until he told them where the boys were. The searchers on the hillside had found nothing yet.

At the same time, another pair of scouts reported that Loizeaux and his men, mostly on foot, were about an hour north of Westford. Estes observed, “At least it’s a come down from his last two attacks with thousands of men.”

Efran agreed. “Which tells me that he’s blustering. But now we have a lot more people here that he can hurt. All right, we’ll ride out to him with a contingent when he’s south of Westford.” At that time, he sent instructions to Madea to start preparing a feast for their visitors.

Then he turned to the man at the door to instruct, “Bring Gabriel and Geneve in here,” meaning the small dining room. Tourse, meanwhile, had been successful in turning away all further bogus claimants for the gold—regretfully, from his point of view, as he hadn’t had so much fun in a long while.

When Gabriel and Geneve appeared, Efran eyed her ruefully. “I did not imagine that we would need your special qualifications so quickly, Geneve, but—you’re going to pose as Minka for a kidnapper who is holding our son and another boy until he gets her. You. We’re going to dress you and take you to the hut, where you will sit and cry, pretend to sleep, if you like. The kidnapper is going to come look for you in the hut.

“When he does come, you can act however you feel best—I don’t know whether he will realize that you are not her, but you must be prepared for that. We need you to lure him out of the hut as far as possible, especially out of the playground fence. Gabriel, you and your men will hide yourselves wherever you can outside the playground—behind trees, under the new bridge, behind the stone wall, if that’s not too far away. Once you determine that Geneve and her target are clear of the fence, take him. We need him alive, to tell us where he’s put the boys. Oh, and, after you put her in the hut, write a message in the sand that she’s there. Have I covered everything?” Efran asked, looking around.

“Yes, Captain,” Geneve said. Others nodded or responded in the affirmative.

“All right, Gabriel, I leave you in charge. Take what men you need and send reports back to me here.”

“Yes, Captain.” He and Geneve saluted upon leaving, and Efran felt strange seeing a woman salute to him.

The longer Toby and Tarrant remained missing, the more tightly wound Efran became, particularly in that he felt he was overlooking something, ignoring something right in front of him. He needed advice he wasn’t getting.

Distracted, he rose from the table and left the small dining room as Minka approached. She opened her mouth but he took her in his arms to hold her close. “What is it?” she asked, drawing away slightly. “What’s wrong?”

He wet his lips. “Ah, Toby and Tarrant are missing. But we’re looking for them, and expect to find them shortly.”

“Oh no,” she breathed, paling.

“We will find them, Minka. But we also have to entertain Loizeaux for a while as well,” he said.

She stared at him. “Is he going to take Adele?”

“Oh, no,” he assured her. “That won’t even come up.”

Her eyes narrowed at him. “This is the redacted version.”

“It’s incomplete, because I don’t know everything myself yet. Please do pray, but I won’t have you worry,” he said, as though it were entirely his prerogative to demand that she didn’t.

A soldier ran up with a wrapped package to hand to Minka. “From Elvey, Lady Minka.”

“Thank you.” She took the package despondently. “I feel so petty now.”

“Are those your pants?” Efran asked, and she nodded. “I’d like to see them. Please try them on.” She glanced up, suspecting that he was patronizing her, but he was sincere. So she acquiesced, turning back to their quarters.

Estes came up, then. “Efran, what bothers me about our plan is that it’s only fit for a simpleton.”

Efran agreed, but said, “Do you see any subtlety, any particular genius in his actions? How does he expect to abscond with the lady of the fortress?”

Estes was conceding this point when the door sentry, Eustace, approached with a salute. “Captain. Steward. The stonemason Ernst would like a word with you both.”

Efran looked up to wave Ernst over. He walked up with a troubled face. “Yes, sir. I heard about the missing boys. Well, one of my laborers has been missing since yesterday, and I’m afraid he may have something to do with it.”

“Ah. Who is that?” Efran asked.

“His name is Krems—just a laborer with no particular skill, not very bright or diligent. But he took a great interest in the boys’ hut, helping them with heavy materials and such. When I found out yesterday that they were missing, I realized that Krems had not shown up to work either. And he is not at work today,” Ernst said.

“I see. That’s helpful; thank you, Ernst,” Efran said.

“I hope you find them soon, sir,” Ernst said, grieved.

“Oh, we will, no fear,” Efran said. Nodding, Ernst turned away.

“There you have it,” Efran murmured to Estes. “He saw Minka come out to the hut, decided he liked her, and thought he had a way to get her.”

“But it doesn’t tell us where they are,” Estes grunted. Again, the sensation crept up Efran’s spine that he needed to talk to someone, but . . . who was that? By now he had forgotten all about Minka’s pants, so when she came out wearing them, he was gone. She returned to their quarters to change back into a dress.

At this time, Gabriel and Geneve put their plan into motion. She was taken on horseback, weeping, to be deposited in the hut by an apparently heartbroken Efran (in reality Barr, who looked very much like him). Barr held Geneve and kissed her, promising that he would come find her again. Then he sat her in the hut and went to write in the sand, “She is there.” While this event was being staged, three more of Gabriel’s associates—Gaul, Doudney, and Arne—were hiding themselves in various places beyond the wooden fence. Doudney was up a tree; Arne behind one open gate of the playground and Gaul behind the other.

Dejectedly, Efran/Barr left, walking conspicuously over the new bridge spanning the Passage and up the road until he felt it safe to double back through the meadowgrass and obscure himself behind the pylons of the bridge.

Meanwhile, Efran received word that Loizeaux was now south of Westford. “Time to ride out,” he told Estes. Wearing dress uniforms, they took five unarmed men, as they themselves were unarmed. When they left the switchback to begin pounding up the road north, Efran looked back to remind his honor guard, “HAPPY FACES.” So they all bared their teeth in scary grins.

Coming upon Loizeaux (mounted) and his men (on foot, except for an honor guard of ten), Efran waved, calling, “My friend and ally! What a privilege to see you again!”

Loizeaux paused with a mildly suspicious look. Hands on their swords, his honor guard halted behind him, looking to him for directions. Efran careened to a stop beside the Surchatain and clasped his shoulder in warm greeting. “We will feast today, my friend! Madea is preparing pork and venison and beef and—I don’t know what all! But we just got in crates of ale that we must dispatch at once! Come!”

Open-mouthed, Loizeaux decided that this was probably the best thing to do. So as Estes and the Abbey soldiers slapped and jostled the Eurasian honor guard in greeting, they all rode happily down the southbound road to the fortress.

At this time, Krems, looking around cautiously, descended a pine tree within the play area close to the doorway of the hut. A big, bulky, awkward fellow, he broke branches on the way down. The door stood open, and he heard weeping inside. Still looking warily over his hulking shoulder, Krems stepped into the doorway.

“Oh!” cried Geneve/Minka. “Are you here to rescue me?” And she leapt up to throw her arms around her rescuer’s thick neck, thus preventing his getting a good look at her face.

“Yes, I am,” Krems said, holding her gently.

“Oh, thank you! Please let us leave this nasty hut and go to your house!” the lady cried.

Krems hesitated. “I think there are soldiers watching.”

“Oh, no. They all left,” she said confidently.

“If you’re sure. You don’t want to go home?” he asked.

“I want to see your house,” she said in his big ear.

“Oh. Well then, come on!” He took her hand to lead her out, and she began skipping up the herringbone walkway in a rather good imitation of Minka. Krems lumbered after her. As she emerged from the playground gates, Krems tripped over the last brick in the walkway and rolled out of the gates behind her.

When she looked back quickly, he got a good look at her face in the daylight. “Hey! You’re not little Minka!” he roared.

“Catch me anyway!” she dared him, then turned to run up the path toward the new bridge.

“All right then, I will!” he declared, lowering his head to charge after her.

Gaul and Arne rushed him from either side while Doudney dropped from the tree, but he kept a step ahead of them to pursue Geneve. Arriving at the bridge, she wheeled to face him. Just as he was upon her, she stopped him cold with a solid kick to the groin. He collapsed and rolled right into the Passage. The soldiers watched, dumbfounded, as the rapid river carried him off past the mill toward the Sea. Gabriel dropped to his knees to pound the ground with his fist.

At this moment, Efran was bringing Loizeaux and his honor guard past the gates in the stone wall. “We’ll send food out to your troops,” Efran waved dismissively. “We’ve got to feed you and your top men first.”

His top men nodded at each other in agreement, and the Surchatain cheerily acquiesced. “Is Adele here, then?” he asked.

“Women come after food, my friend,” Efran said in a low voice. Loizeaux laughed in a like voice.

So the EurAsian Surchatain and his top men were brought into the great dining hall, and the ale brought out. The honor guard, being thirsty after such a long, hot ride, drank bottle after bottle before the heavy meat and potatoes were served. After three bottles, Loizeaux and Efran (still on his first) began sharing confidences about their conquests. Loizeaux sighed, “But, Adele!—(*hic*) I didn’t remember her being so . . . accommodating, you see? (*hic*). She delighted to do whatever I said, even what I didn’t know was physically possible, you see?”

“She . . . pleased you in a new way, did she?” Efran said cautiously. This was not Adele, of course, but the Croly impersonating her—apparently with a twist.

“Oh my,” breathed Loizeaux. “I’ve never had such ’periences before (*hic*). I want more—more, more. But, poor Fannily. Ladily Fanny. She came back, and—I didn’t miss her anymore.” Here Loizeaux twittered. “What a jealous rage, you see? Oh, she wanted to (*hic*) claw Adele’s eyes out, you see? [twittering again] But now Adele has left.” And he was now sobbing.

At that, Efran covered his face with one hand and cried, “Adele is dead!” The honor guard looked at him in dismay.

“Oh no,” Loizeaux said, weaving in his seat. “Here, have more ale.” He poured a bit from his bottle into a cup that held sauce for the venison.

“Thank you.” Efran took the cup and sighed, “It was a tragic accident. She was running down the road to return to you, when—she didn’t see the sheep in the road, and—fell right over it into the Passage. And was swept away to the Sea,” he ended in a whisper.

“Oh, no.” Loizeaux began crying, and Efran put an arm around his shoulders in sympathy.

“I could not bear to tell you such news in a letter,” Efran said, wiping his dry eyes. “But there it is. I hope to assuage your grief with Madea’s excellent suckling pig.” He waved to her, and a huge platter was brought over to his table.

“You are a compassionate friend,” Loizeaux sighed, looking at the pig in interest. “But my real darlings, the darlings of my life, are my Cady and my Kethe, you see.”

“Yes, I see.” Seeing Gabriel at the doorway, who had ridden ahead of his companions to make his report, Efran stood. “Let me get you more ale.”

“Thank you, my friend,” Loizeaux said, with a full bottle in front of him.

Efran casually went to the door and bent his head for Gabriel to whisper to him. Hearing his report, Efran patted his shoulder in consolation at the death of the man they needed, and said words of reassurance. Then Gabriel went out to collect his team, and Efran raised his face in anguish to the God of heaven.

And then he remembered who he needed to talk to.

However, Krems was not as doomed as everyone had assumed when he fell into the Passage. He rode the river downstream on his back, face up, until it poured into the Sea. But it was nearing low tide, so Krems was deposited on a narrow strip of sandy beach. He looked back over his shoulder at the tannery. Wrinkling his nose at the smell, he got up to begin walking away from it to the east.

This brought him closer to the base of the fortress hill. Where the limestone rock of the hill met the sand, he saw a dark opening. Going over to look, he found the opening big enough to enter, if he got down on his hands and knees. So he did that.

Krems had to creep along on hands and knees through a few inches of water for about twenty yards, but it was not scary because there was a faint light ahead. Emerging from the tunnel into the light, he found himself in a small cavern. Even Krems knew about tides, and knew that when the tide rose again, the tunnel would be flooded. But for now he looked around.

In the rock to the right of him, there was an opening into a circular shaft with steps cut in the stone. Sloshing through wet sand to the arched doorway of the shaft, he looked up at holes bored through the west-facing rock all along the stairway. (The depth of the rock through which these holes were bored varied from eight inches to over a foot.)

The shaft was illumined during low tide by the light from these small window holes. Also, the shaft itself was fairly narrow—no more than four feet in diameter. So at high tide, it would be submerged all the way to the top, as the small holes did not drain enough water to offset the flood current.

But Krems could not know all that at this point. What it amounted to was a stairway accessible to air breathers only for short periods of time, and to water dwellers all the rest of the time.

Knowing that the fortress was high above somewhere, Krems decided to see where this shaft led. So he ascended the stairway a long way to another level. There was no break in the shaft at the new level, only numbers carved in the stone opposite one hole. Also, the shaft at this level was a little wider. So he kept climbing.

The next level he reached was again marked by numbers, but the window holes were fewer and farther apart, so

the light was faint. Still, with his eyes accustomed to the dimness, he could see that the shaft ended at an opening above. So Krems climbed the rest of the way easily until emerging onto a shelf. There was a pile of rocks blocking part of the shelf, which Krems climbed over.

From there, he entered a cavern. Because there were no windows in the rock here, it was dark but for the faint light from the holes in the shaft. There was a pool to his left, and at the far end of the cavern—perhaps thirty feet away—were short, steep stairs with a handrail.

In great excitement, Krems climbed these stairs to encounter a panel above his head. He pushed it up to find himself in an enclosed space. But there was light from under a door in front of him—with a handle. He cautiously climbed off the stairs to open the door. And he looked around at a large storage room, obviously in the fortress. There were blankets, bottles, canisters and other such things arranged on shelves, visible due to the light from the corridor running past the open door.

Krems grinned broadly, seeing all kinds of opportunities for mischief here. Craftily, he closed the closet door and descended the stairs far enough to set the cover back in place over the opening. From there, he climbed over the rocks to reenter the shaft and descend to the very bottom of the hill again. The tide was out, which enabled him to scabble back through the tunnel and exit onto the narrow sandy beach.

When he had emerged and set off at a run, he did not notice the two men crouched near the banks of the Passage, watching him.

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Chapter 13

Minutes after Krems began climbing down from the top level, Efran was hastening to it. Not bothering with a lantern, Efran ran to the cold storage room, shutting the door behind him. He entered the first closet on the right, closing himself in there as well. After feeling around on the floor for the knife, he flung up the trap door. He hurried down the stairs, barely stopping at the edge of the rock before he could fall into the water. Instead, he fell on his knees. “Swimmer. Swimmer. I need you. I need to talk to you. Swimmer!”

He waited, listening, for what seemed like hours until he caught a glimmer from a ripple.

Hello again, Efran.

“Swimmer, have you heard two boys, two ch-children, in the w-water?” he stammered in fear. For he had finally realized that the dim-witted Krems may have been walking the boys east to the newly opened cavern to simply toss them into the black waters far below.

They are not in the water. But they are in darkness. They are out of my reach, crying to the Great One, and crying for you.

Efran held his breath, thinking. If they were alive, in darkness, out of Swimmer’s reach but not his perception, it may still be the cavern. Since Efran had found ledges by climbing, then they could have, as well.

He bent double to the rock, his heart hammering. "Thank you, Swimmer," he said, trembling. "I know where to look now. I will return."

He slipped up the stairs and paused to lower the trap door. Closing the closet door and leaving the room, he went with deliberate haste down the corridor.

Efran stopped at the door of the dining hall to gesture to a soldier, Loseby, who came over to hear him instruct, "Tell Estes to keep them soused and fed. I'm going to get the boys. I hope."

Loseby saluted and Efran turned toward the outside doors. As he trotted down the steps into the courtyard, he saw Gabriel's group coming in through the gates, faces lowered in broken-hearted failure.

Efran appropriated Arne's horse, telling him, "Go get long ropes, harnesses and stakes. Bring them to the cavern on the east Lands that the surveyors just opened."

The big man hesitated. "I don't rightly know where the gear is, Captain."

Gaul, listening, said, "I know. Doudney does, too."

"You three go look," Efran directed, leaping up to the saddle. Taking in Gabriel, Geneve, and Barr at a glance, he said, "I believe I know where they are. Come with me."

They turned their horses to descend the switchback and turn right at the main east-west road. As they loped east, he shouted across to the others, "I think he took them to the cavern!"

"Ohhh," Gabriel groaned. It was easy to guess how Krems lured the boys there. After gaining their trust by helping them with the hut, he'd propose they go explore the new cavern. Adventurous boys would certainly agree. Then once he had tossed them in, he'd simply walk off.

Efran's group loped in a line so as to stay to the path, clear of gopher holes or other obstructions that would cause the horses to stumble. As they approached the ring of rope with its red warning flags, Efran swung down from the saddle and stepped over the rope ring. He dropped at the edge of the hole, head hanging down. Unable to see anything but the water far below, he called, "Tarrant? Toby! Are you down there?"

Their voices came back clearly. "Efran!" "Yes, we're here!" "We can't climb out!" "Help us!"

"We will. Stay still; rope is coming," he said. He was weak in gratitude to the God of heaven, who had given him a glimpse of what he needed to see: the man and boys walking east.

Efran talked with them while they waited for gear. Gabriel, Geneve, and Barr came over to listen, kneeling at the edge. When Efran asked how they had gotten down there, Tarrant told him that Krems had let them down on a rope to a broad ledge, telling them he was going for snacks and lanterns. "Then he never came back!" Tarrant said angrily. "We got so tired waiting that we had to lie down on the rock during the night."

"But we knew you'd come, Efran," Toby said.

"You were right," he said, looking back over his shoulder as Arne loped up.

"Here's rope and a harness. Gaul and Doudney are looking for the stakes," Arne said.

“The surveyors will have those,” Efran muttered, standing to take the rope. He paused. “Without stakes, I’m too heavy to go down for them.”

He looked back at Geneve buckling the harness around her chest. “I am the lightest one here,” she said with defiant red eyes.

Efran nodded. “Take one boy at a time. Shout when you’re ready.” He knotted the rope onto her harness, then uncoiled the rest of it. Gabriel and Barr each passed the rope around their waists once before Efran knotted the end around himself as anchor.

However, after lowering Geneve in her harness, they found that she could not reach the boys. Judging from their voices, she thought they’d need the entire length of rope. So they brought her back up; Gabriel and Barr unwound the rope from themselves, and Efran walked back from the cavern edge the entire length of the rope before retying it around his waist. “Do you think that’s enough?” he asked Geneve.

“Yes, let’s try it,” she said. So he lowered her by slowly walking forward. When he was within three feet of the edge, she shouted, “Stop!” From there, she was able to take Tarrant into her arms. He held on tightly to her.

“Up!” she shouted. Toby moved aside, clutching the rock before him.

Efran backed up, attended by Arne, while Gabriel and Barr knelt beside the rope scraping over the edge, cutting a channel in the dirt. Fortunately, Geneve knew how to walk up the wall, kicking the skirt of her dress out of the way, so that Efran did not have to pull as hard.

When she and Tarrant were within reach, Gabriel lifted him from her arms over the edge. Tarrant came out venting indignantly about the treachery of their friend Krems. Arne drew him away from the opening as Efran walked slowly forward, keeping his back vertical, to lower Geneve again.

She came up with Toby in the same way, except that Gabriel and Barr lifted her out with him. Once on solid ground, he ran straight to Efran. “I knew that we just had to wait for you,” Toby whispered, arms around his waist.

“That helped us find you.” Efran patted his back while untying the knot at his waist with one hand.

As Barr coiled the rope and Geneve took off the harness, Gaul and Doudney came loping up with stakes and additional rope. Efran gave them the coiled rope and harness, instructing, “Go tell Estes and Minka that we have the boys.”

“Captain!” They saluted, turning to ride back with good news.

The rest of them mounted. Efran hoisted Toby up behind his saddle, but Tarrant desired to ride with Geneve. As Arne lifted him to sit behind her, Tarrant clutched her waist and asked, “Will you marry me?”

The men looked back, interested in her answer. She laughed, “We have to wait a few years for that!”

“Yes. You’re probably not of age,” he said heavily. The conversations he had overheard between his older brothers about women usually centered on the question of whether they were of age. Geneve turned to face forward, grimacing to not laugh again.

They walked the horses back with the boys. That way, they could ride abreast, so Gabriel and Geneve rode on

either side of Efran, with Barr and Arne following. Gabriel uttered in disgust, “The first assignment you give me charge of, the man I need alive rolls into the Passage.”

“That was my fault,” Geneve said quickly.

“No, no,” Efran said. “The smallest things that you have no control over will make or break you. A hedgehog in the road. A villager who decides to hang laundry. A wasp nest. All of these things almost brought me to disaster. But God ordains the outcome.”

In fierce embarrassment, Geneve wiped tears from her eyes. Efran glanced at her. “Oh, you’re crying. Tell her how much I cry, Gabriel.”

Gabriel barked out laughter; Arne, behind them, said, “He’s an epic crier, girl, especially when everything comes out all right.” Barr grinned.

She lowered her head to laugh. Efran added, “You’ll have to get used to their calling you ‘girl’; they don’t mean any disrespect and I may do it myself.”

“Understood, Captain,” she said wryly as Tarrant squeezed her waist.

Approaching the switchback, they saw Abbey soldiers waiting in expectation at the top. Before heading up, Efran looked at Loizeaux’s foot soldiers standing and sitting outside the closed gates of the stone wall. They looked angry, tired, hungry and impatient. There were only about 120 of them, but they could affect the festivities above. Efran grimaced, remembering his promise.

So he turned to Arne and Barr behind him. “Go to the food shops, especially Averno’s, Lowry’s, and Firmin’s. Ask them to feed the men outside the gates with whatever they can spare, and bill Estes for it. Anyone who feeds those men can send us the bill. See that they’re given water, too.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said. Arne saluted, and they turned their horses down the main road.

While Efran and Toby rode up the switchback, Gabriel and Geneve bypassed it to take Tarrant home to his family, who saw the riders coming. Tarrant waved from behind Geneve as his father, mother, brothers and sister emerged from their house to look down the road. Their neighbors came out to watch, clapping and laughing in delight. Tarrant, a celebrity once again, waved to them all. Geneve almost successfully kept the tears contained while Tarrant’s family and friends crowded around her horse, reaching up for him.

Tarrant slid off the horse into the arms of his father, who unabashedly kissed his head. His mother turned her wet face up to the riders to cry, “Thank you! Thank you!”

“Just doing our duty, ma’am,” Gabriel said. With a wave, they turned their horses carefully in the crowd to trot to the switchback.

On the way, Geneve said, “He didn’t need me to get the boys out of the cavern. He let me come just to give me part credit for the rescue.”

Gabriel said, “That’s just the way he does things. That’s why his men came here to serve under him. Men and girl,” he added with a glance, and she grinned at him.

At the top of the switchback, Efran saw Minka waiting on the highest fortress step so that she could see over the

heads of the soldiers in the courtyard. He dismounted amid their slaps on the back to carry Toby directly to her. “You found him!” she gasped, clutching Toby to kiss his face. He threw his arms around her. “Is Tarrant all right?” She looked back to Efran anxiously.

“Yes, he was taken straight home,” Efran said, holding her in one arm. “Toby will tell you all about it; I have to take care of matters with our guests.” She nodded, turning inside the fortress with her arm around Toby.

Efran hastened back to the large dining hall. Here, he found Loizeaux and his honor guard being entertained by minstrels and dancers from Westford who had perceptively noted Efran’s embrace of him, followed by their joint ride to the fortress. “Excellent,” Efran breathed. He saw DeWitt at the head table receiving Loizeaux’s confidences, but not Estes.

“Captain,” a voice murmured at his side, and he turned to Younge. “The Steward requests your presence in the small dining room.”

“Thank you,” Efran said, turning down the corridor to the foyer. He entered the small dining room and closed the door behind him. Estes looked up from a ledger and parchments scattered on the table in front of him. Also on the table was a gorgeous golden bowl about 14 inches in diameter—one of the items recovered from Awfyn’s stash at Nicarber.

Estes said, “Loizeaux and his men seemed to be holding their own entertainment well enough for me to slip away a moment. Oh, congratulations on your recovery of the boys.”

“My men’s recovery. And the girl. Who will have to endure being called ‘the girl’ until another one comes along. What is this?” Efran asked.

“You should recognize the bowl,” Estes began as Efran nodded, “but something about it, particularly about the hallmark, struck me as false. So I did a little more digging and discovered that the hallmark is a forgery used by a craftsman to give his gilded pieces more value than they would otherwise merit.”

Efran picked up the bowl to study it. “You mean, this is gilded, but carries a false hallmark that identifies it as solid gold.”

“That’s correct,” Estes said.

Efran caught his breath. “What a wonderful gift for our guest.”

“I thought you might think so,” Estes said.

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Chapter 14

Grinning, Efran took up the bowl and went back down the corridor to the large dining hall. Here, he waited, holding the bowl outside the doorway, until the minstrels and dancers would come to a natural break. While waiting, he instructed a passing sentry to have Towner get their visitors’ horses ready to ride, and also assemble an honor guard of twenty Abbey soldiers at the courtyard gates.

When the entertainers finally finished their set, bowing to sparse applause from the mostly drunken Eurusians, Efran entered, brandishing the bowl. “Surchatain Loizeaux!” he called, and those at the front table looked up. “Before you leave, we must present you with this token of our goodwill.” With a flourish, Efran placed the beautiful bowl before him.

His honor guard looked at their Surchatain and each other smugly while Loizeaux leaned perilously to the side to regard the delicate gold work. “I suppose that will do,” he mumbled.

“I certainly hope so,” Efran said, assisting him up. “Knowing the duties that press upon you, I cannot thank you enough for taking the time to come celebrate the peace we enjoy between us.” When he had Loizeaux successfully on his feet, Efran put the bowl in his hands to begin coaxing him out with an arm around his shoulders. Loizeaux’s top men stood to follow just as unsteadily.

Efran and his top men gently escorted their incapacitated guests to the courtyard gates, where their horses stood groomed, saddled and waiting. Efran’s men assisted the Surchatain and his guard up into their saddles, then while Loizeaux held the gilded bowl in his lap, his honor guard was pushed out of the gates down the switchback by the Abbey guards. It was now late afternoon.

Efran caught Towner to tell him, “When they’re out of the wall gates, send a pair to discreetly follow them at least to Westford. They’ll probably stop there for overnight lodging.”

“Captain.” Towner saluted in acknowledgment. Efran watched both honor guards descend the switchback to the wall gates. Here the Eurusians had to wait a moment for their fed, recumbent foot soldiers to get up and reassemble their ranks to follow. All then departed up the northbound road while the Abbey honor guard watched, two of whom prepared to sidle after them as the sky turned golden in the west.

The entertainers came out of the fortress, then, along with a sentry sent from Estes to tell Efran that they had been paid, so he need not do it again. Efran nodded to them in thanks, and the dancers eyed the handsome Polonti on their way out of the courtyard.

Exhausted, Efran went back inside to the dining hall. There, he found Minka lingering at the door. He gathered her up, sighing, “I’ve drunk but not eaten. Should we go in and see if there’s anything left?”

She agreed, “Yes, but Toby told me about the man who befriended them and dropped them into the cavern. Efran, why would he do such a thing?”

He exhaled, seeing that he needed to tell her—but not in the corridor. So he gestured toward their quarters. “Let me get on clean clothes and I’ll tell you about it.” While he hadn’t destroyed this dress uniform, it had gotten pretty dirty, somehow.

She turned with him to enter their rooms. “Where are your pants? I want to see them on you,” he said, taking her back to the bedroom.

She sat on the bed to glance at the opened package. “They’re not necessary. I’m going to send them back.”

“Why?” he asked, opening his wardrobe for clean clothes.

“Why should I need them? Gabriel’s sister wears pants to help defend the fortress and rescue children, while I—sit in comfort, and, do nothing,” she said, looking away with gritted teeth and watering eyes.

Efran stood frozen by the wardrobe. “You don’t understand, do you?” he whispered. “You don’t understand what you are.” She looked at him in cautious incomprehension.

His eyes were tearing up now. “I tried over and over to kill myself in battle because—I had no purpose. I had no reason to live. When they made me your guardian, I suddenly had a reason to live, and that was to protect the treasure that had been given me.”

She watched as he leaned his fists on the bed, gripping a clean shirt. “The treasure doesn’t go to war to defend itself; it doesn’t have to justify its existence: it is the treasure. It is inherently worth defending just because of what it is.”

He studied her blank face, and his expression grew incredulous. “You still don’t understand? You are my treasure, my gold. All you have to do is be real.”

“How?” she asked in a whisper.

“Love me!” he cried, laughing. “Love me and my son—and Toby, Noah, Ivy, and Pia. And you do this very well. When you wait for me, when you look for me, and create scenes when you find me in the dining hall,” he laughed. “Your love is my reward for safeguarding you, and I need both. I need purpose, and I need your love.”

“Efran.” She reached up to clench him around the neck. He held her, still laughing in disbelief at having to explain all this. “You made me love you,” she whispered. “I have to; I can’t not love you.”

“Well then, what’s the problem?” he laughed.

“I don’t know!” she cried, flopping back down to sit on the bed.

Exhaling, he looked at the badly wrinkled shirt he was holding, then put it on. “I want to see your pants,” he repeated.

“All right,” she sighed, picking up the pants she had tried on, with the blouse. She stood to begin undressing, then said, “Turn around.”

He raised his brows dubiously at her. “Isn’t it a little late in the game for modesty?”

“Not for modesty, for the presentation,” she said stubbornly.

“Oh.” Taking a pair of fresh pants out of the wardrobe, he turned his back to her while he shucked off his boots and dirty pants and shook out the clean pair to put them on. Then he waited with his face to the closed bedroom door, listening to the rustle of clothing and her breathing, and occasional little grunts at getting everything just right.

“You may look now,” she announced, and he turned around to study her in a loose, long-sleeved shirt and dark linen pants that were full and draped, hardly discernible as pants unless she were to climb on a horse.

“I like them,” he said, smiling. “Yes, they look like you. Yes, they look very nice on you.” Then he sat to put on his boots.

She eyed him suspiciously. “You would say that even if you didn’t like them.”

“Why should I not like them?” he asked. “I don’t care to dictate what you wear, except that it be decent. There’s nothing indecent about pants. And for riding, they’re better than dresses, even riding skirts.” He stood to open the bedroom door.

She leaned into him and he kissed the top of her head. “Can I wear them to the dining hall?” she asked, almost testing.

“You can wear them wherever you want. I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed when no one cares,” he said, reaching out to open the door into the corridor.

“Maybe,” she admitted. “Now why did this creature take Tarrant and Toby?”

“Oh.” He stopped to close the door again and sit at the small table. In bewilderment, she sat across from him. He studied her, then said, “He held them for ransom. And the ransom he wanted was you.”

She blinked several times. “He wanted me?”

“Yes,” he said.

“You mean, for. . .” She made a face to indicate the unmentionable.

“Yes,” he said.

“But that’s—” She looked disgusted. “How did you answer him?”

“We had Geneve pose as you, which she did a little too well. He got himself kicked in a tender place and fell into the Passage and got swept away.” The hard part of the explanation done, he got up to open the door again.

“Why wouldn’t you let me do it?” she asked impishly.

He closed the door again, lowering his head. She watched, smiling. “Because,” he said, “my tender place is the only one your feet will ever touch.”

She laughed at him and he grabbed her up. “I don’t have time for this right now. I am very hungry.”

“Then make it quick,” she said, and he took her back to the bedroom.

When they finally made it to the dining hall, she was crushed because hardly anyone was there, and the few who were there did not notice what she was wearing. He was crushed because there was no more ale, nor suckling pig, nor venison, nor even custard. So like any prisoner, he had bread and water, and a few greens.

Afterward, he left her in their quarters, whispering, “I’ll be right back.” And he went to the cold storage room, down the steep staircase to the water’s edge. There, he just waited, feeling it inappropriate to come down here and summon the Swimmer whenever he wanted.

But in a little while, he saw the ripples. As they approached the ledge, he knelt and said, “We found the children. I knew where to look for them because of what you told me. Thank you.” After a little while came the reply:

Know that all in the water are not friendly. There are teeth that have come in from the Sea.

“I see. Thank you for the warning.”

Efran watched the ripples recede, then he turned wearily up the stairs to go sleep with his treasure.

The next day (May 24th), Estes sent off another group of riders, six of them led by Younge, to the moneyer in Eurus with gold and silver. And Efran received a visitor.

While Estes and Efran were in the workroom debating uses for the cavern, Allyr stepped in to salute. “Captain, Mouris requests your ear. He’s waiting in the receiving room off the foyer.”

“Mouris.” Efran drew a blank at first.

“Owner of the plant shop that Lady Minka likes, sir,” Allyr reminded him.

“Oh. *Oh.*” Fearfully, Efran started out, glancing back at Estes, who was looking at him in baffled concern. Efran muttered, “He agreed to take on Adele as shop helper.” Estes winced.

As Efran trotted downstairs after the sentry, he thought out, *That was . . . nine days ago that he took Adele. So she can't be pregnant yet—or know that she's pregnant. He swore up and down that he wouldn't sleep with her before they were married, and that he wouldn't even consider marriage for three months. What else could it be? How much of his shop has she already destroyed?*

Allyr opened the receiving-room door for Efran to enter, and closed it again after him. And there stood Mouris, looking deeply pensive. “Hello, Mouris. Have a seat,” Efran invited, gesturing to a chair at the small table. Efran took another chair across from it. Slightly frowning, Mouris sat.

With both of them sitting, Efran waited a few moments, then said, “Yes?”

Still silent, Mouris looked at him in deep concentration. Efran was silent, waiting. Mouris looked aside, then back at Efran, who was still waiting. By then, however, Efran’s composure was starting to crack. At first he merely smiled, which he repressed. Then he started shaking slightly. Mouris looked around as if trying to detect the location of an annoying buzz.

Finally, the tears came to Efran’s eyes as he laughed silently. Mouris looked at him, deeply thoughtful, while Efran’s whole upper body shook with quiet laughter, tears running down his face. Then Efran took a deep breath to compose himself and said, “You slept with her.”

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Chapter 15

“A lot,” Mouris said with an air of gravity. “And now I don’t know what to do. Nothing is getting done in the shop. Sales are booming, by the way—we’ve had a steady stream of customers ever since you and Lady Minka came by, but especially since you killed the giant in front of the shop. We can’t keep the tree stakes in stock.”

“What is the problem, again?” Efran asked, wiping his eyes.

“I don’t know what to do,” Mouris said. “I’d like to get control of my life back, but I don’t know how.”

“Probably you should marry her,” Efran said.

“You think that will help?” Mouris asked.

“One way or another, yes,” Efran said.

“Well. Then I guess that’s what I’ll do,” Mouris said, with the same air of distracted gravity.

“Good luck,” Efran nodded, getting up.

Mouris blinked, then stood. “Yes. Thank you.” He turned and walked out while Efran let the laughter run down. Then he sighed, shaking his head.

Efran went out to the foyer to watch through the front door as Mouris departed the gates and began descending the switchback on foot. Efran thought he should tell Minka. Should he tell Minka? He was debating the potential hazards of telling Minka when she walked into the foyer with a wary look. “Is Mouris here?”

“He just left,” Efran said. Then he started quietly laughing again. And given that special telepathy between lovers, she knew immediately why he was laughing.

“Oh no,” Minka said, emitting a gasp of laughter. “He’s not—they’re not—”

Wiping his eyes, Efran laughed in confirmation. Without turning their heads, passersby in the foyer watched the two.

“Oh dear! He swore he wouldn’t!” she cried, shaking with laughter. “Why is this so funny?” she demanded, then started laughing again.

“Because he swore he wouldn’t,” Efran sighed. “And that’s all you need to know about us.”

“Oh, you poor men,” she said sympathetically, drawing up to drape her arms on his neck while he put his hands to her waist. And they stood in the middle of the foyer to hold each other, laughing.

Seeing the amused glances around them, she drew him out to the corridor to ask, “What did you tell him?”

“To marry her,” Efran said, fighting the laughter again.

“That would be. . .” Minka held up a hand, so Efran began counting on his fingers.

“Graduliere, Cennick, Justinian, Ryal—Mouris is number five, with a side helping of Awfyn,” he said. Adele was 21 years old.

“Cennick doesn’t count; he was still married,” Minka argued.

“She thought it counted, so it did,” he asserted.

“And Ryal was only for a few days,” she protested.

He leaned forward to whisper, “They slept together. It counts.”

Her eyes grew wide. “He’s—in his eighties!”

“Isn’t that great?” And he started laughing again. He suddenly looked down at her dress. “Why aren’t you wearing your pants?”

“I have to get used to the idea,” she said cautiously. “I’m not as brave as Geneve.”

“That’s a lie,” he said, smiling.

Hawk, who was standing as door sentry, approached. “Pardon, Captain, a claimant for the gold has arrived.”

Efran groaned slightly. “Where is Tourse? Never mind. Just one?”

“Yes, Captain.”

“All right. Put him in the receiving room. I’ll be right there,” Efran said.

“Captain.” Hawk saluted and turned on his heel.

Turning back to Minka, Efran stroked her hair. “How is Toby today? Have you seen him?” he asked.

“Yes. You men!” she exhaled.

“What now?” he asked, grinning.

“He and Tarrant asked permission to go with the surveyors to the cavern! They still want to explore it!” she said in exasperation.

“Good! Only, warn them to stay out of the water. There are things in it that bite,” he said.

“Oh! Yes, I’ll go find him before he leaves,” she said, turning. He caught her arm to lean down and kiss her before letting her go, relishing her smile in return.

Watching her skirts swing as she departed, he suddenly realized why men dictated that women must wear dresses. Smiling, he returned to the foyer to interview the new claimant.

The moment Efran opened the receiving-room door and laid eyes on the prospective claimant, he knew the man was no poser. He was in his early fifties, with iron-gray hair and a serious demeanor. His clothes were good—the attire of a working noble—but showed the wear of travel. He held several parchments as he appraised Efran.

He said, “I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Are you making a claim for the gold we found?”

“Possibly,” the man replied. “I am Lord Bache of Crescent Hollow. I saw this posting at the notary’s. Is this from you?” He handed Efran the creased and slightly soiled notice about the gold.

Efran glanced at it. “Yes.”

Lord Bache then handed him several other sheets. “My house was broken into almost a year ago, in June of last year. A number of items were stolen, including some of gold. Here is a list of descriptions and hallmarks of the goldware we lost in that robbery.”

Scanning the list, Efran recognized a number of items from their cache. He looked up at Bache to say, “Please have a seat and help yourself to the refreshments while I confer with my Steward.”

“Thank you,” Bache said, sitting. He reached for the bottle of ale to look at the label.

Stepping out of the receiving room, Efran instructed Hawk in a murmur, “Please ask Estes to come down with his list of gold from the cache. We have a serious claimant.”

“Captain.” Hawk saluted and took off at a run.

Efran continued to stand just outside the open door of the receiving room, looking at Bache’s list. As far as Efran could tell, everything on it matched something in their cache, including the gilded bowl he had given to Loizeaux—except that Bache had taken the hallmark at face value.

“Excellent ale,” Bache commented, refilling his cup from the bottle.

“We’ll send a case home with you,” Efran murmured, eyes on the list.

Estes appeared with the lists, and Efran drew him into the receiving room. “Lord Bache, this is Steward Estes, who has collated all of the information we have on the items.” Bache nodded to Estes, who appraised him. Efran handed Estes the list. “And here is what he lost in a robbery in June of last year.”

Estes looked over the list, then said, “Lord Bache, will you come upstairs with me, please?”

“Certainly.” Bache stood, then paused to drain his cup.

The three of them went upstairs to Estes’ workroom, which they entered for Estes to close the door with the sentry standing outside. Then Estes laid the lord’s list of missing goldware on the table and opened a cabinet door. “Four gold plates,” he said, bringing them out of the cabinet and placing them on the table. “Please tell me if these are yours, Lord Bache.”

Bache’s air of gravity changed to astonishment as he gazed at the plates, picking up one to look at the hallmark on the underside. “Yes. They were a wedding present to my wife and myself.”

Estes nodded. Having memorized the hallmarks of the items from repeated references to the list, he knew that everything they had that did not belong to the Abbey was Bache’s.

“A pair of candlesticks,” Estes said, putting the ten-inch-tall candle holders onto the table.

Bache gaped. “Yes.”

“Chafing dish,” Estes said, placing a square dish with rounded corners and a wire holder onto the table.

“Good Lord,” said Bache.

“Four goblets [cups with stems]. Four sets of utensils, plus a serving spoon. Four soup bowls. Gravy dish and

ladle. Fruit bowl. Serving platter. Two small twin vases. Ornamental box. Ring holder.” Estes set the items on the table until he had emptied the cabinet of its gold.

Bache sat weakly, staring. “No one in Crescent Hollow has ever heard of the Abbey Lands. Everyone told me it was a fool’s errand, or a trap to rob me. But . . . I felt I had to come see. And now that I’ve seen it, I don’t believe it. How did you come by all this?” he asked in amazement.

Estes looked at Efran. “The criminal Awfyn,” Efran began, unable to add the descriptive, *Polonti*. “He and I had a tentative alliance, but he broke faith with me, and I . . . killed him when he came on my lands and threatened a leaseholder. I then reclaimed some items of mine he had, but these are not mine, and I wanted to return them to their owner.”

“I . . . thank you,” Bache said, stunned.

“Thanks are unnecessary; I am only attempting to right a wrong,” Efran said uneasily.

Estes interposed, “Did you come in a carriage, sir? Do you have a cart or a bodyguard?”

Bache blinked at him. “No, I—came on horseback. I had not the slightest expectation of recovering all this.”

Efran and Estes looked at each other, then Efran said, “Have these securely packed and loaded in a cart. Get him an escort of four to leave tomorrow morning. Oh, and, I promised him a case of Goadby’s Best Ale.”

“Will do, Captain.” He went to the door to summon DeWitt, who came in to look at the table full of gold, listen to instructions, and nod.

Efran turned to the Crescent Hollow lord. “Come have a bite from the best kitchen on the Southern Continent, Bache. Then you’re welcome to rest, but before you leave, I want to show you around the Abbey Lands.”

“Yes. Thank you,” Bache said, standing.

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Chapter 16

While Efran was sitting Bache down to Madea’s beef stew in the small dining room, Minka came in from her garden beds with vases full of flowers that she was distributing everywhere, so Bache had to be introduced to her. Efran brought her to the table. “Lord Bache, meet my wife, the Lady Minka. Minka, the lord has come to us from Crescent Hollow.”

Bache stood to bow to her. “I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Minka. This place is filled with pleasant surprises.”

She turned delighted blue eyes to him. “For me as well, Lord Bache! One of my favorite memories is the trip we took to Crescent Hollow for the autumn faire. It was glorious! I hope some day to go again.”

“I would be thrilled to personally host you and your husband,” Bache said warmly. Much as Geneve had done

with Bastard, Minka captivated the lord so that when Efran suggested a tour, Bache asked if she might accompany them. This she was delighted to do, especially as she was wearing her new pants.

Efran wanted to take care to not exhaust the already overwhelmed lord, so he and Minka took him around to only the most essential sites: Elvey's textile empire, the new mill, the new inn going up (Croft's), the cluster of shops that Minka had patronized, and Knapp's rice/crayfish farm. Despite the brevity of the tour, Bache got a good overview of the plots in general, and Efran made sure to get parchments advertising those and other Abbey enterprises for the lord to take home with him.

While they rode at a leisurely pace, Efran asked about Crescent Hollow, especially: "Who is ruling?"

"Oh, Surchatain Auber, a fine man," Bache said. "He's dedicated to re-establishing the spring and autumn faires that have been the fame of Crescent Hollow in years past—now they are only occasional. His army's standing priority is to protect the business establishment. In fact, after the robbery of my house, they caught and executed several Pol—er, thieves that had taken part in it. But by then, my goods had changed hands."

Efran said, "I see. Then I hope to establish relations between us; I would very much enjoy taking Minka to your faires." What he would enjoy most was distancing himself from his past association with Polonti criminals.

Following a short but profitable tour, Efran released Lord Bache to a nice second-floor suite to rest before dinner.

Not surprisingly, Bache slept through dinner. So the following morning, May 25th, Efran made sure he had an abundant breakfast of ham, eggs, hash browns, pancakes, and blackberries before leaving for Crescent Hollow with his recovered gold. The kitchen prepared baskets of trip provisions for himself and the mounted, liveried Abbey bodyguard of four armed soldiers. Another liveried soldier would drive the cart. Efran told DeWitt, "In the bodyguard, be sure to include Barr and . . . Geneve." A Polonti and a woman. The Abbey Lands embraced a broad body of competence.

"Yes, Captain," DeWitt smiled.

A number of enterprising Abbey businesses also sent up gift baskets for Bache's Crescent Hollow friends, so besides his gold and the trip provisions, his loaned cart carried decorated baskets of fruit, ham, candies, candles, soaps, socks, and, of course, a case of Goadby's Best Ale.

As Efran, Minka, Estes and DeWitt were seeing off the happy lord with his laden cart and bodyguard, Bache paused to ask Efran, "You wouldn't happen to have seen a large gold bowl among the plunder, would you?"

"We don't have that. I'm sorry," Efran said.

"No matter. What I've received back is far more than I ever expected," Bache said.

Efran glanced wincing to Estes, who leaned over to mutter, "The case of Goadby's alone is worth as much as the bowl." That made Efran feel better.

So with many waves and good wishes, Lord Bache and his train departed the gates for the switchback, and beyond that, the road to Crescent Hollow.

Watching them go, DeWitt observed, "I had not foreseen how profitable it would be for you to advertise that

gold, Captain. But gaining recognition from a lord of Crescent Hollow is no small matter. The city's no farther away than Eurus, but larger and more prosperous. The roads are better; the area more stable, and Auber far more protective of his merchant class than Loizeaux. We couldn't have hoped for a better introduction."

"True," Efran murmured. *And the God of heaven opens doors that I never knew were there.*

As they turned to reenter the fortress, Efran stopped dead at the line forming at the door. "Don't cut; wait your turn," said the man behind him, and Efran looked at him blankly. "They're giving away found gold. That there lord just left with a cartful," the man said, pushing ahead of him.

With his thinking processes hijacked by the absurdity, Efran looked at Estes, DeWitt and Minka, who were variously smiling at him. "Shall I summon Tourse back to the small dining room, Captain?" DeWitt asked.

"Oh. Yes," Efran said, but they had to go around to enter the fortress by the western side door.

Three days later, on May 28th, the bodyguard and driver of a surprisingly laden cart returned to report a highly satisfactory reception in Crescent Hollow. Lord Bache was the master of a sprawling estate that bred draft horses, show horses and hunting horses that were in demand across the Southern Continent. His neighbors, friends and business associates were astonished at the results of his blind venture, and engrossed by his description of the sophisticated Polonti lord who had killed the Polonti criminal mastermind.

The Lands' gift baskets were apportioned out to only the most favored of Bache's associates. In return, the bodyguard carried a number of gifts from Crescent Hollow to the Abbey Fortress, as well as messages and orders to Abbey businesses. The bodyguard themselves had barely escaped numerous social invitations; Geneve received two serious proposals and several more requests for personal visits.

Cutch, leader of the bodyguard, told Efran, Estes and DeWitt, "It was amazing—as if we were exotics from a foreign land put on display as being able to speak the language. They were all afraid of Barr until they saw how courteous and refined he was—he even knew how to use a fork!" Cutch laughed. "I thought at first that Geneve would need her own bodyguard for the attention she drew, but she handled herself very well. She just wouldn't let anyone get close to her. It drove them mad.

"Everyone inspected the returned items, and agreed they were all Bache's that had been stolen on one night. Some of the pieces were a little scratched and dented, being gold, but almost everyone thought that they were in good condition for having been taken from a thief. Oh—one person mentioned a missing bowl, and another man said it was worthless anyway, so there was no problem over that."

Cutch paused, thinking. "Lord Bache did you justice, Captain. He talked up the forward-thinking Polonti in the cathedral-like fortress with a young, beautiful wife," Cutch grinned, and Efran smiled. "He said that she was such a dedicated horsewoman, she wore pants to ride. What a sensation that caused!"

Efran smiled hazily. "I will have to tell Minka."

"At any rate, I have messages to deliver to the plots below. Requesting permission to be dismissed, Captain," Cutch said.

"Granted. Thank you," Efran said, leaning back.

The day before, Younge and his group of six had returned from the moneyer in Eurus with 670 freshly minted

royals and 450 silver pieces. (They took a wagon for the transport, the load of which they covered with sparsely filled sacks of buckwheat seed.) A little leftover gold and silver remained with Meineke, the moneyer, for the next batch. He warned them to release the new coins slowly into circulation, to not depress the valuation of coins currently in use. So Estes put them in safekeeping and began preparation of another batch of gold and silver to go to the moneyer.

Even better, it had been five days since they had entertained Loizeaux and his men, and had heard nothing threatening in the meanwhile. The good news followed by more good news gave Efran some sleepless nights. They were due for some bad news, and he had no idea from what direction it would come.

So after Bache's bodyguard had returned victorious from Crescent Hollow, Efran got out of bed in the middle of the night, carefully disentangling from Minka and sliding around Joshua's crib to go to the keep. As he had so many times, he stood before the crucifix. Then he turned to regard the engraving illumined by moonlight: *For God alone my soul waits in silence.*

Turning back, he fell to his knees, pressing his forehead into the wooden platform at the base of the ten-foot-tall crucifix. "God of heaven, something is coming, and my soul won't wait in silence. I need You; I need Your guidance, Your wisdom, Your enabling to defend this place when there are so many weak points—so many avenues of attack on us. I don't know, I don't know what's coming or how to prepare for it. God of heaven, defend us when I am so blind and ignorant."

He remained on his knees when all the words that he could produce had been said. At the doorway of the keep, Minka leaned in to watch him. But she saw that he was not there to sleep but to pray, and when he finally rose, she withdrew to go back to their quarters. She climbed back into bed, closing her eyes as though still asleep.

A few minutes later, Efran returned to the bedroom. Seeing the shadow of the stained-glass window on the wall, he cocked his head at an unfamiliar line, then looked at the window in the moonlight. And he wondered how in the world the glass got cracked. Nonetheless, it must be repaired. Shoving that far down on his list of concerns, he climbed into bed to reinsert Minka in his side, and she snuggled down into him.

The next day, May 29th, Ernst came to Efran with another report. "Captain," he said, baffled, "one of my workmen, Ruttle, who had been sharing a room with Krems at the new Laborers' Hall, came complaining that Krems stole his bedroll and some other of his camping gear."

"What? When?" Efran asked.

"Yesterday or day before," Ernst said. "Ruttle tried to stop him and just got shoved aside."

"Camping gear," Efran breathed. "So Krems is still alive."

"Yes, Captain," Ernst said.

That day, six days after Krems had been washed down the Passage, he was ready to enact his plan. He hadn't gone back to work, as crafting his plan was more important. Much of that involved studying the tides, and watching it rise over the tunnel entrance and then recede from it. In fact, he had camped as close as he could to the tunnel entrance for most of that week, leaving only to steal pies from the window of the tanner's house.

That was fun, because then he got to eavesdrop on the woman scolding her sons for stealing pies, and their cries of innocence. But when they found the pie pans he had discarded along with his kerchief and showed them to

her, proving an outside thief, he had to find another way to get food. So he stole from another house for a few days, until his plan was ready.

It had been critical to his plan to time the tides, to know when they covered the tunnel and for how long, so that he would know how much time he had to work mischief in the fortress and when he needed to get back down. If he missed the opening to get out for that day, that was all right; he would just need to wait for the tide to go out the next day. But he would rather not wait.

The crux of his plan, his revenge, was getting his hands on little Minka. It would be so easy to snatch her in the corridor and bring her down to the cavern. He had been in the fortress once or twice for celebrations when the lord opened the dining hall to everyone. Krems hated him, that lord, that filthy Polonti who enjoyed someone so sweet as little Minka. Krems would enjoy her, too.

So today he was ready. At just the right moment, when the water had gone out of the tunnel just enough for him to get through it, Krems got on his hands and knees to enter the partially submerged opening. He crept the twenty yards confidently, then emerged into the lower cavern he had seen before. Then it was on to the stairways in the shaft: the first, the second, and the third. He was a little disturbed that, due to the cloud cover today, the light was very dim, barely enough for him to see by. But that didn't matter, he told himself—he had been here before and knew where the steps were.

Emerging onto the uppermost level, with the short stairs leading to the closet, Krems paused at the first kink in his plan: it was very dark. Without good light streaming into the little windows below, there wasn't enough to see anything here, and he needed to be able to see Minka to enjoy her. He might have to bring down a light, first.

He climbed out of the shaft and over the rocks to stand on the last level. Stepping forward, his left foot almost slipped off the edge of the shelf into the water, and he swung his arms wildly for a moment to regain his balance. Then he knelt on the ledge to feel for its edge, so he would know where to step.

He had to feel around a long time for the short stairs with the handrails, and that disturbed him, too. He wished he had known there wouldn't be any light on this level. But he would make do. He was a smart man. So he set to feeling all over the floor on his hands and knees, so that he would know where everything was, even if he couldn't see it.

At this time, Efran was above him, pacing the corridors, disturbed. His prayers of last night seemed only to have heightened his forebodings, his sense of danger. And now that they knew Krems had survived his ride down the Passage, he'd probably try for Minka again.

Then Efran paused. The Swimmer had warned him about dangerous fish that had invaded the cavern waters; perhaps he had knowledge of other dangers. So Efran decided to go below to talk to him.

After closing himself in the cold storage room, Efran went into the closet and lifted the trap door to descend the stairs. Then he stood at the edge of the water, waiting. He looked into the darkness as far as he could see, searching for the ripples.

And then a jolt between his shoulder blades sent him face first into the cavern pool.

Chapter 17

Efran broke the surface, blowing water, and swam one stroke to reach for the ledge. But other hands intercepted his to push him away. Discerning a live human being, Efran seized the wrist attached to one hand and pulled the body into the water with himself, kicking off from the underwater wall for good measure. As his attacker floundered in the water, Efran reached back to grip the ledge and thrust him farther under with his booted feet. Then Efran was free to hoist himself up to the rock.

From there, he quickly went up the short stairs and out the trap door, which he closed. Looking around, he spotted a small, sturdy chest which he picked up to place on top of the trap door. Then he shut the closet door and went to his quarters to change into dry clothes.

While Efran went upstairs to talk to Estes, other consequences of Krems' impulsiveness came into play. The disturbance created by the two men alerted others that there was a foreign presence in the cavern waters, and those others came to investigate. And they had teeth—sharp teeth.

Upon arriving in Estes' workroom, Efran told him, "I was just attacked in the cavern below the cold storage room." As Estes stared at his dripping hair, he elaborated, "Someone, an unarmed man, pushed me into the water. I dragged him in with me and got out before he did to block the trap door. Who all knows about it?"

"DeWitt," Estes said.

"Would he tell anyone else?" Efran asked tentatively.

"DeWitt?" Estes asked, scowling. "Who also knows about the Treasury?"

Efran looked off, thinking. "Minka's the one who found the cavern, but she wouldn't gab about it, either. So it must have been an outsider, which can only mean . . . there is an exterior entrance to it." *And Krems survived his ride down the Passage*, Efran thought.

"An exterior entrance into the hill?" Estes asked.

"There must be. We have to check for cavern openings somewhere along the hill. The Swimmer told me that the cavern waters connect with the Sea," Efran said.

"The who told you?" Estes squinted.

Efran waved. "A big fish. We must check for entrances."

Estes looked aside, lowering his quill. "We'll have to wait for low tide. Let me check."

As Estes got up to talk to the sentry, Efran left to go downstairs. Once there, he paused in reluctance, but knowing no good alternative, he went to look for Minka.

He found her coming out of the nursery, where she smiled a little listlessly upon seeing him. "I wanted to play with Joshua, but he's still sleeping," she said.

"Good. I need your help," he said, drawing her away from the doorway.

“You need my help?” she asked, her face coming alive.

“Yes,” he admitted. “There is someone in the cavern under the cold storage room. You found that trap door; I’d like for you to look in all the other downstairs rooms to see if there is another. I’m sorry that—”

“You need me to do that?” she asked in wonder and delight.

“If you don’t mind, only because you found the first one. There are a lot of rooms,” he said, studying her reaction to what he considered an onerous task.

“I’d love to!” she said, then turned her attention to logistics. “All right. I’ll start at the front of the fortress and work my way to the back. Some rooms can be ruled out because of constant use or the placement of furniture. . . .”

Efran, watching her walk off, observed that the swing of her hips as she walked was as discernible in the pants as in the dresses. So there was really no legitimate objection to her wearing pants at all.

“Captain?” Finn said.

“Yes,” he said without looking until Minka turned a corner. Then he gave his attention to the speaker. “Yes?”

“Yes, sir, the Steward says that low tide isn’t for another six hours, so he’ll send men around then.”

“All right, thank you,” Efran said, looking to see if Minka might come back around the corner. Finn turned away, smiling.

Below them in the cavern, Krems was rethinking his strategy of pushing that man into the water. The man had a very mean reaction to a friendly prank, to pull Krems into the water and then block up the trap door like that. For all his pushing, Krems could only raise it a little bit. So now he had to rethink his whole plan of getting Minka. So he might as well go on out and get something to eat. The first lady who made the pies put lots of nice meat in them, but the lady in the second house he had to steal from put out only twisty bread and rolls. That was very mean of her.

So Krems started descending the shaft to see how far down the water was. He had gone all the way down the uppermost stairway and halfway down the second when he came to what looked like water. Except, the light was dim here and he wasn’t sure if that was water or a shadow. So he had reached out to feel if it was wet when there was a sudden thrashing right under his fingers.

Krems jerked his hand up to peer at the water in aggravation. Whatever that was, it hadn’t there before. Krems felt displeased at its encroaching on his territory. Well, regardless, it was water, so he’d just have to wait anyway. So he sat on the steps, moving down one step at a time as the water gradually lowered on its way to low tide.

“Why do you want to get married?” Adele asked lazily, luxuriating in the silk sheets which she had coaxed Mouris into buying, although they were very expensive.

“Well, I just thought it would be a nice change of pace,” Mouris said, sweating.

“But I like the way things are now,” she said, with drooping eyelids and parted lips.

He groaned, “But there are other things I need to do.”

“Then go do them, darling,” she said, raising her arms over her head and arching her back in a comfortable stretch. He whimpered, falling on her, and she sighed in mild exasperation.

In Eurus, Lady Fanny sat at Loizeaux’s midday table with ten of his top courtesans, listening in boredom as he bewailed the death of his beloved Adele, who could do so many amazing things that no other woman could do. Upon first hearing that Adele was dead, Fanny rejoiced, expecting that Loizeaux would come back to Fanny’s own waiting arms. But here it was almost a week later, and he was still bemoaning her.

Some of the other ladies were strongly of the opinion that Adele had seduced him through witchery, and said counter spells against her. They were certain that if she were brought back at this point, she could do nothing beyond what any woman could do. But now, alas, that was not to be.

Sighing, Fanny broke open the seal of another letter from the Abbey Lands. She had a coterie of admirers there with whom she kept up a correspondence, just in case. As usual, this letter began with how wonderful and beautiful and amazing she was. Mildly bored, she wished this dullard could come up with something a little more original. Then she sat up straight at the beginning of the next paragraph:

“You will laugh to hear that Adele has taken up with the plant seller Mouris—what a prize catch. I don’t know what all they’re doing because I never see them in the shop anymore ha ha.” Looking quickly at the date, Fanny saw that it had been written only two days ago, on May 27th. So Adele lived! And if she lived, she could be brought back to Eurus and exposed as a fraud.

When Loizeaux looked vaguely around the table, Fanny quickly hid that and the other letters to smile at him sweetly. But as soon as the courtesans were dismissed, she went to order her carriage to be made ready to leave for the Abbey Lands tomorrow morning.

Although Minka searched diligently, and tried very hard to drag out the task, it took her less than two hours to report back to her husband that there were no more trap doors in the first floor. She looked so disappointed that Efran had to console her, which took more time than either of them had counted on, so that by the time they had gotten dressed again, Estes had a report for him about outside entrances.

Efran met Estes and a group of soldiers at the west side of the hill. The tide was still ebbing, and they had to splash through water, but the men had found the top of a tunnel in the side of the hill. (Had they extended their search 20 feet to the west, they would have discovered a wrinkled bedroll and discarded pie pans in the beach grass. The remains of another camp closer to the hill had been carefully obliterated.) Efran stood knee-deep in foam to eye the archway rising from the water. “Is this a natural feature, or dug out?” he asked.

Estes hesitated, but Teschner said, “I don’t see any tool marks, Captain, and if we were able to look under the waterline around the cliffs, I bet we’d see more openings like this.” Other men agreed.

Efran said, “All right. At low tide, we need to block it up.”

“Brick and mortar?” Fellowes asked dubiously.

Cudmore objected, “I don’t see mortar setting with the pounding of the surf.”

“Just—fill it with large rocks,” Efran said. “We’ll check in a few days to see if the tide dislodges them.”

“Yes, Captain.” So while waiting for low tide, the men gathered rocks from the hillside.

Finally, when Krems made it down the shaft step by step to the tunnel, he was unpleasantly surprised to see men working at its mouth. He crouched down, unwilling to be seen, and watched as the light from the tunnel opening was diminished rock by rock. While this was going on, he thought hard about how to stop them. Perhaps he could call out. But if he did, they would find him, and he didn’t want to be found.

So he waited for them to finish so that he could remove the rocks. But they took so long to do it that by the time they left, Krems was in total darkness. He scrambled forward to begin removing rocks to line them up on the inside of the tunnel. But then he heard voices! There were two men at the mouth of the tunnel! There was no use sitting here while the tide came back in again. So Krems had to back out and climb the three lengths of the shaft to get to the uppermost level before everything below it flooded.

There, he spent an uncomfortable night waiting for the tide to go out again.

Early the following morning, May 30th, Fanny loaded up refreshments in her luxurious covered carriage with a liveried driver and footman to travel down to the Abbey Lands. She took a large basket of delicacies and wine, and the interior of the carriage was outfitted with silk pillows and lambswool blankets for napping on the road (which was possible thanks to the heavy-duty springs on both axles).

On the way, she debated how best to lure Adele up to Eurus when she evidently wasn’t interested in Loizeaux anymore. Remembering what Connor had told her—that her invitation to the Abbey Lands was a ploy to unmask Loizeaux that never came off—she decided to use that, and tell Adele that a group of rich nobles was gathering in Eurus to meet only the most desirable women.

That decided, Fanny settled down on the deep cushioned seat with two pillows under her head to nap on the long ride to the wilderness south of Westford.

All that day, Efran had been wondering about the man, evidently Krems, who now appeared to be trapped in the cavern under the cold storage room. So in the late afternoon, he decided to take two men with lanterns down there to check.

Before Efran got there, Krems was rethinking his strategy of keeping quiet while the men had been blocking up the tunnel entrance. He was getting very hungry, tired and bored with sitting here in the cold, dark cavern. He wasn’t interested in Minka anymore, either. Right now, he’d rather have a good, hot stew and a cold ale. Not the cheap ale that his friends served him, but the good ale: Goadby’s. Yes, he wanted two Goadby’s ales and—a steak. Not stew, but a steak. Yes, and when he got out, that’s what he would have.

At that moment, he heard a scraping sound, and then the sound of the trap door opening. An oblong rectangle of light streamed through the cavern. Krems jumped up. As men began coming down the short stairs with lanterns, Krems ran to hide in the darkest corner of the top level that he could find, behind the rocks. He couldn’t go down the shaft, as it was flooded. He peeked around the edge of the rocks to see Lord Efran himself come off the stairs with a lantern.

Krems watched him walk to the farthest edge, looking and calling, “Hello! Is anyone in here? Hello!” There

were two other men with him, who also looked with lanterns. One came perilously close to Krems' hiding place, so he drew back even farther, almost to the point of falling into the water.

He didn't want them to find him. If they found him, they might ask him questions, and he didn't want to answer any questions. They might ask him why he was here, and he didn't want to talk about that. There was something else they might want to ask him about, but he couldn't remember what that was. So he didn't want to talk about that, either.

Then Lord Efran called, "Krems?" It startled him so that he tripped on a loose rock, which clattered down to splash in the water. The three of them quickly looked over, and one began coming toward him with a lantern again. So Krems had to jump into the shaft to hide, where there was barely enough room to crouch down without getting wet. He watched the lantern light sweep the area, then withdraw for the three of them to talk. Finally, they retreated to the stairs. And with the closing of the trap door, the light disappeared.

Krems ran out from his hiding place to climb the steps and push up against the trap door. He was outraged to discover that they had put a weight on it again! How could they expect him to get out when they weighted the door against him? Even Lord Efran wasn't strong enough to push up against that!

Krems sat in disgust, rethinking his strategy of keeping quiet while they were searching. But if they'd just leave the trap door unblocked, he could get out. How could he make them leave the trap door open? He sat down to think about this, still cold and hungry.

In the corridor outside the cold storage room, Mohr said, "That's him, all right. We should have searched for him, Captain."

Efran shook his head. "I'm not willing for either you or Cudmore to get pushed into the water. There are teeth waiting."

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Chapter 18

Late that afternoon, Fanny's carriage arrived at the Abbey Lands. Looking out the window as she passed the gates of the stone wall, she tapped on the ceiling to have the driver stop at the notary and send the footman in to ask directions to Mouris' plant shop. When the footman returned with the information, the driver turned the carriage to go a few blocks before pulling up to the desired stop. While gawkers came out of shops on either side of Mouris' to look, Fanny sent the footman inside to ask for Adele.

As it happened, Mouris had dictated that work would be done today, so Adele was listlessly manning the counter for people who insisted on buying things here. Mouris had taken his cart to a supplier to restock seedlings and tree stakes. So the footman, stiffly correct, approached the counter to bow and say, "Lady Fanny desires the company of Lady Adele for a pleasure trip, if it please my lady."

Adele's eyes widened at him, then she looked beyond the awning at the waiting carriage. Turning back to the footman, she purred, "The lady accepts." He offered his arm, which she took. Enjoying the attention from passersby, she walked out to be ushered into the carriage. The footman climbed back up to his seat for the driver to turn the carriage in the broad road and take the northbound road out of the Abbey Lands.

One of those watching this brief interaction was Connor, whom Fanny had married and then tossed aside. He chewed on the sight of her watching out the carriage window for Adele's appearance. When she climbed in and the carriage rolled away, turning north on the main road, he thought he'd better go make it known.

Patting the hand of the girl on his arm, he said, "Lyra, the Captain will have my head if he found out I saw that and didn't tell him. I'll meet you directly at Croft's"—the Abbey Lands' new tavern and inn that served meals during all operating hours. And he kissed her lightly.

"Sure," she smiled. She was a pleasant girl, not a stunning beauty, who was deeply in love with him—thus unlikely to cat around on him.

So Connor trotted up the switchback to look around the foyer. Seeing no one who would appreciate the import of the news right away, Connor stuck his head in Doane's cubicle to tell him, "I just saw Fanny in a gilded carriage pick up Adele from Mouris' and take her north." Doane groaned.

As Adele got settled, looking around the interior of the carriage in approval, Fanny offered her wine in a crystal glass. "Thank you, darling. What is this all about?" Adele asked, sipping. It was a superior sweet wine, the kind that women liked.

"Oh, I was bored," Fanny said, "and I never got the chance to really know you, which is a shame, since we share so many of the same tastes."

"I agree there," Adele said, glancing at the basket.

Fanny reached down to untie the silk bow enclosing the contents. "Help yourself. Tomorrow a group of very rich nobles will be coming to the palace to meet beautiful women. But besides myself, there's no one I consider really beautiful, and I hate to be seen with ugly women. It's so degrading. So I thought the obvious answer to that was to fetch you up."

"Oh, that's lovely," Adele said pensively. Toying with the skirt of her dress from Elvey's, she broached, "But, darling, I didn't bring any of my good dresses"—all of which she left at Awfyn's last hiding place, which had become inaccessible to her weeks ago.

Fanny laughed lightly. "Oh, darling, I'll dress you! The styles are somewhat different in Eurus than in Westford—or your little Abbey Lands—so you mustn't worry a bit about that."

"That's good to know," Adele said, popping a strawberry-topped biscuit into her mouth. She also agreed with Fanny's assessment of provincial Westford fashions as opposed to those of Eurus. And that of the Abbey Lands? Ha! Minka had taken to wearing *pants*.

"But what nobles will be there?" Adele asked, who had a working knowledge of many of them.

"I don't know; but I've heard that only the richest and most powerful will be coming," Fanny said aloofly. Unknowingly, she was fairly correct: Cennick, who had once married Adele (when he was already married) was planning a coup with the support of a few powerful Eurussian nobles against Loizeaux. And that would be taking place tomorrow. (Although almost no one noticed, Webbe had declared himself Surchatain of Westford.)

So Fanny and Adele ate and drank, laughed and gossiped half the way to Eurus. Adele told her every detail of her one night making love with Efran, which was a stern test of Fanny's resolve and self-control. For she had

gone to Efran's quarters to find him just stepping out of the bath, and he had been very rude to her. Ever since then, she hated him utterly, and hated Connor for being one of his best friends.

Meanwhile, in the Abbey Lands, Mouris returned from his restocking trip to find his money counter abandoned and numerous items missing from shelves without payment. Doane sent a soldier up to Estes' workroom to tell him and Efran that Connor had seen Fanny whisk Adele up the northbound road in a gilded carriage. Estes and Efran looked at each other, then Efran said, "Mouris was forewarned; she went willingly; I will do nothing."

"That's good to hear, Efran," Estes said, then they returned to their collaboration over maps.

And below them, in the cavern underneath the cold storage room, Krems lay down, exhausted from thinking. He was still cold and even hungrier. But he had to sleep before he could do any more thinking, so he slept deeply, dreaming of steak and Goadby's Best Ale. In the deep darkness of the water beside him, things stirred. Their senses told them that live meat lay just a few feet away. And something dark and slippery edged up onto the rock where Krems lay.

The thing nosed up to Krems' feet—the part of him closest to the water—then gently took hold of his boot in its teeth to pull. Krems' foot, attached to Krems, swept toward the water while the thing batted its fins vigorously. When Krems' lower leg fell into the cold water, he was so tired that he did not wake, though a displeased expression crossed his face. Then Krems himself fell into the water, and his dreams of Goadby's ended.

Adele and Fanny fell asleep in the carriage halfway to Eurus. The driver, fuming over the lady's unreasonable demands, drew off the road to rest himself, the footman, and the horses. But after only a few hours, the horses roused, snorting in fear: there was something in the woods with them.

So the driver guided the carriage back onto the road northward. And when the gates of the palace in Eurus opened to them some time after midnight, the driver pulled aside for the footman to wake Lady Fanny and ask for instructions. She, in turn, directed the driver to the back entrance. There, Fanny woke Adele: "We're here, darling! Come and get tucked in, then we'll have such a glorious time tomorrow!"

Groggy, Adele raised up, looking at the torchlit back courtyard. "Is this the servants' entrance?" she muttered.

"No, silly, just the quickest way to your quarters," Fanny said, descending the carriage steps on the footman's hand. He helped Adele down as well, then sat to wait for Fanny to return so that they could drive her to her house in the nobles' district.

Fanny took Adele to the back door, and from there down a dimly lit corridor. Adele looked around in mild disgust, eyeing her new friend suspiciously. Unheeding, Fanny opened a door into a large room lit with eight or ten candles. She nudged Adele inside with a cheery, "We'll see you in the morning, darling! Sleep tight!" Laughing, Fanny went back out to her carriage.

Twenty faces turned to scrutinize the newcomer. "Oh, here's another one," someone grouched. Looking at the young women in various stages of undress around the metal beds shoved up close to each other, Adele perceived that she had been dropped into Loizeaux's stable of courtesans.

"Is there even an empty bed?" someone asked.

"No, she'll have to sleep on the floor!" someone else said.

But another girl with a high, squeaky voice came up to take Adele's arm protectively. "No, there's a fresh bed next to me," she said, smiling in reassurance. "It's kind of overwhelming your first few days, but you'll get into the swing of things."

"How kind of you," Adele said mechanically, studying her.

"Here you are!" The girl proudly indicated a metal frame with a thin, old mattress and heavily soiled pillow. "The chamber pot is right underneath," the girl pointed, "but as the newest courtesan, you have to empty all the chamber pots for the first week. And I'm so glad you're here so I don't have to do it anymore," she tittered.

Adele laughed with her. "I don't mind at all! But if it's all right, I'll do that in the morning."

"I guess so," the girl shrugged. "But the longer you wait, the fuller they get, and then it's really nasty." She winced. "My name's Dix! What's yours?"

"Minka!" Adele said with a broad smile.

"Oh, that's cute," Dix said, cocking her head.

Candles were snuffed across the room. Adele removed the pillow with two fingers to toss it away. "Hey!" someone shouted, and there was a minor commotion until the obstruction was removed elsewhere. Then Adele lay warily on the skimpy mattress to wait for morning.

At that time, Justinian was about to depart Euris in a hired carriage. As he swung up onto the step, he told the driver, "Make the Abbey Fortress by daybreak and your fare will be doubled."

The man's thick eyebrows shot up. "Must be something important brewing."

"You said it," Justinian muttered, landing on the seat and slamming the door after him.

Adele slept only briefly that night, waking at first light of May 31st. She sat up on the skimpy mattress, a hand on her aching back, to look around in the light from inadequately shuttered windows. Everyone else was still asleep. So Adele squatted over Dix's chamber pot, then shoved it back under her bed and washed her hands at Dix's washstand.

After quietly working her way around the metal beds, Adele slipped out of the room, heading for the back door by which she had entered. Opening it, she saw a great many armed men enter the rear courtyard as a shout went up elsewhere. Adele quickly shut the door again, locking it.

She backtracked down the corridor to discover the kitchen. She paused at this door while panicky cooks and servants ran out. Then she went in to help herself to breakfast, listening to shouts resound and weapons clash in the dining hall nearby.

Wrapping up some nice rolls in a napkin and putting them in her pocket for later, she emerged into the corridor again. Men with weapons were now pounding on the locked back door from the outside. So she turned to look for another exit.

She went back up the corridor to the dining hall to watch the skirmish a moment. The palace guards seemed to

be badly outnumbered. Seeing another door to the back courtyard across the hall, she began sliding toward it along the wall. She froze briefly as Cennick came into view, shouting, "Find him!" There was a tremendous commotion in response. Adele slipped behind a fat porter.

"What treachery is this?" Loizeaux demanded, entering the dining hall in his nightshirt. The porter ran toward him, but got stabbed in the side. Adele nudged her way behind a quivering kitchen assistant holding a tray for a shield.

"Your rule has devolved into nothing but debauchery and costly quests for imaginary gold!" Cennick shouted. Adele slid out from behind the kitchen assistant to take cover under a battle standard. "It's time the people of Eurus had a Surchatain who thought of something else besides enlarging his stable of courtesans!"

"Traitor!" Loizeaux roared. Cennick leapt forward to run him through while his men held off the Surchatain's guards.

With their Surchatain fallen, his honor guard held up their hands in surrender. "Kill them all!" Cennick shouted. Adele opened the back door and slipped out.

At this moment, Justinian was making his report to Efran, who was sitting in the receiving room off the foyer. Estes, DeWitt and Coxe stood by as Justinian said, "Cennick has probably two hundred armed men in Eurus, which is enough to overwhelm Loizeaux's honor guard. It's unlikely he suspects anything like this from Cennick, who put up a good front of solidarity with Loizeaux while fomenting dissent behind his back."

"When will he strike?" Efran asked.

"Probably already has," Justinian said.

Efran looked off, then glanced up at Estes before telling Justinian, "Fanny came down yesterday afternoon and took Adele back up to Eurus with her."

"What?" Justinian exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"She's probably right in the middle of it," Efran said contemplatively.

Justinian raised his hands in surrender. "Leave her. Stupid woman."

"And Minka's sister," Efran whispered. Sitting up, he said, "Thank you, Justinian. Again, you've proved your worth."

"I'm glad to, Efran. I'll be heading back up to the Porterhouse in Westford now," Justinian said, standing.

Efran nodded, then got up to leave the receiving room and walk into the keep nearby. There he stood before the crucifix, head bowed.

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Chapter 19

Efran didn't see Minka at the door of the receiving room when he walked out because of the taller men standing around. But she heard everything.

Along with his advisors, she waited close to the keep while Efran took counsel with his Lord. Some minutes later, he walked out and told Coxe, "Get me two volunteers to ride with me to Eurus."

"Yes, Captain," Coxe said, turning to trot out the front doors.

Only then did Efran see Minka standing off, her hands clenched. He crinkled his eyes at her, coming forward to hold her hands in both of his. "No," she whispered.

He glanced away in dismay, then looked at her again. "No," she repeated. "I don't want you laying yourself down in sacrifice for someone so faithless and heedless." The tears were standing in her eyes, but not pouring yet.

He exhaled, searching for words. "Minka, it will be all right."

"Efran," she pleaded, "Joshua and I need you more than Adele does."

He lowered his chin at her. "You will have me."

"Do you promise?" she cried.

"Yes," he said, smiling. "I guaranty it."

"Oh!" She grasped his shirt to cry on it, and he covered her with his arms.

Coxe came back in through the front doors. "Captain," he said, saluting. "You have one hundred eighty-four volunteers to ride with you to Eurus." That was almost the entire Abbey army. The two barracks they had built on the southern face of the hillside had been filled to capacity as soon as they were completed, so more barracks were being built on the hilltop outside the fence and on the plots below.

Efran laughed, "No. I'm not challenging Cennick; I'm just going for a runaway sister." He lifted Minka off his chest to ask her, "Which two do you want me to take?"

Sniffling, she looked at him. "Four."

He conceded that. "Which four do you want me to take?"

Her eyes went hazy as she thought. "Barr . . . Rigdon . . . Lyte . . . Gabriel and Geneve."

"That's five," he observed.

"Brother and sister are a two-for-one team," she said.

He laughed, looking at the men smiling behind him. "There you have it, Coxe. Please summon Barr, Rigdon,

Lyte, Gabriel, and Geneve. All the men will carry swords; Geneve and Lyte will carry bow and quiver. All will dress in work clothes, not uniforms. Except—for today, I’m asking Geneve to wear a riding skirt. We’ll set out as soon as they’re ready. All right?” He bent to look in her face, and she nodded.

While those five and Efran prepared themselves in the foyer, Minka and kitchen assistants brought out packs of provisions for them. Gabriel asked Efran, “Should we bring an extra horse along for her, Captain?”

Efran shook his head. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she commandeered a carriage.” One of Doane’s assistants came up to give Efran the fifty royals he had requested.

As Minka handed Lyte a satchel of food, he said, “Thank you, Lady Minka.”

Efran glanced up. “I wish you all to know that the lady selected you personally for this effort.”

They all looked quickly at her. “We’re honored by your confidence, Lady Minka,” Rigdon said. She glanced down, embarrassed.

Hoisting his satchel, Efran leaned over to take her up on one arm and kiss her. Then he turned toward the door. “We ride.”

As they strapped the satchels to their saddles and mounted, Gabriel said leadingly, “Some of the men are not happy with your favoritism of my sister, Captain.”

Geneve looked daggers at her brother and Efran glanced at her, smiling. “No fear. My wife’s sister will provide many opportunities for rescue missions on a rotating basis.”

When the courtyard gates were opened, the party turned to trot down the switchback and advance up the northbound road at a lope. Upon reaching Westford, they stopped at the Porterhouse Inn, where Efran sent Rigdon in to leave a message for Justinian of their foray. It was too soon for him to have received word of anything happening in Eurus this morning, and he was probably asleep.

They continued up the road for the next five hours, with periodic stops to rest, eat, and water the horses. The closer they got to Eurus, the more refugees they saw coming southward—obviously, friends of Loizeaux’s who did not wish to be punished. Efran instructed Geneve to dismount and approach one or two to ask what happened; she came back to report that Loizeaux and his entire honor guard had been executed.

Lyte choked back a gasp of outrage. Efran glanced at him, knowing that he had probably served with some of the men who had died.

The five were tense and watchful as they rode on; Efran knew that Cennick would not be friendly to him or his associates, and probably not toward Adele. Where would she be? He had no idea; certainly not wherever Fanny had brought her last night, unless she were confined. Should he stop by Marguerite’s? He almost smiled at the idea—she would turn their rescue mission into an excuse to entertain them.

As they approached the inn in Eurus off the main road, Efran directed them into the courtyard, where they dismounted. It was not quite midafternoon. He took Lyte’s weapons off him and directed him to go rent them a room. “Use your Eurusian accent,” Efran told him, and Lyte smiled grimly. Studying him, Efran thought he still looked shaken at the news of the coup.

As Lyte went off, Efran took Geneve’s bow and quiver and Gabriel’s sword, leaving him only his hunting knife.

Efran instructed them, “You are brother and sister. Your cousin has been taken for Loizeaux’s courtesan stables by mistake, and you want her back. You’ve seen Adele, haven’t you, Gabriel?”

“Oh, yes, and I pointed her out to Geneve,” he replied.

“Good. Agree on a name for her other than ‘Adele,’ and try to avoid Cennick. He may recognize you,” Efran said pensively to Gabriel.

But Gabriel shook his head. “I doubt it, Captain; he never saw me, to my knowledge, and I only saw him from a distance.”

“That’s good,” Efran murmured. “But he will certainly know Adele if he sees her.”

Lyte returned with their room key. “We’re in room four on the second floor,” he reported, handing the key to Efran. “The innkeeper’s name is Gruber.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, pocketing the key. He nodded to Gabriel and Geneve, “I’m afraid you’ll have to walk to the palace; your horses will stay here for the time being. Come to room four when you know anything, but be back by nightfall. Don’t take risks.”

“Captain.” Gabriel barely refrained from saluting in the inn courtyard and Efran grinned briefly at him. Brother and sister went off.

Efran then turned to Rigdon and Lyte. “You also will go on foot; stay together and wander anywhere that looks interesting. Do you know Adele by sight?”

Lyte nodded and Rigdon said, “Oh, yes.” When Efran paused for an explanation of his certainty, Rigdon cleared his throat. “She rather displayed herself at the notary’s, sir.”

Efran looked up to the heavens, then nodded in acknowledgment. “At any rate, you also be back by nightfall. I’ll keep your bow and quiver, Lyte, but you carry your other weapons.”

“Yes, Captain.” And they two left.

Then Efran turned to his fellow Polonti, Barr. “As trash rats, you and I will stable the horses and wait for the others in idleness.” Efran did not particularly trust the hostlers here.

“Yes, Captain,” Barr acknowledged.

After they had the horses groomed, fed, watered, and stabled, however, Efran changed his mind. He gave Barr a couple of royals and told him, “Ask the innkeeper—Gruber?—for meals sent up to our room, and comment on the hubbub you’re seeing. What is happening? You can explain yourself as a traveling book-buyer for the library in Eledith.”

“You could play the rôle more convincingly, Captain, but I do not refuse orders,” Barr said, half-smiling.

“Yes, well, go on,” Efran muttered with a like smile. He went on up to the second-floor room while Barr turned to the front office.

Entering the office, Barr leaned on the front counter. As Gruber came up hesitantly, Barr laid a royal on the

counter and said, "I'd like a meal for two sent up to room four, please."

"Certainly," Gruber said. After studying the coin, he added, "Only—I'm afraid I don't have enough silver pieces to give you change for this."

Barr shrugged, "Keep it to cover our bill, then. I'm on a book-buying tour for the library in Eledith, so may be here for a few days."

"Oh? Very good," Gruber said, pocketing the royal.

"What is all the excitement about out there?" Barr asked, nodding to the street.

"I'm not exactly certain," Gruber began cautiously. Violence was bad for business. "I think we have a change in rulers. Things are much calmer than they were an hour ago. Let me go see to your dinners, sir."

"Yes, thank you," Barr said. He went up to their room; Efran let him in and he sat with a shake of his head. "Dinner is on the way, but Gruber isn't willing to talk about anything. Perhaps the others are having better luck." Efran nodded.

Gabriel and Geneve had approached the palace to see it surrounded by Cennick's men. So he and she decided on a strategy which she put into play by walking right up to one of the men. Because she was attractive when she wanted to be, he looked at her. She said, "My brother and I are looking for our cousin who was one of the Surchatain's courtesans. We want to bring her home."

He jerked his head. "Go around to the back entrance; you want the big room off the corridor before you get to the kitchen."

"Thank you, sir," she said humbly, and he nodded.

In accordance with his instructions, and in sight of all the guards, Geneve and Gabriel went around to the back courtyard. There, she repeated her request to the guard standing at the back door, and he let them in.

They went down the corridor until they stopped at an open door to look into a large room. It was full of iron beds. The mattresses had been piled into one corner and the bed clothes in another. It looked to be in the process of being cleaned out. But no one was here right now.

So the pair went on down the corridor until they heard plaintive female voices. Gabriel and Geneve stopped at another door, this opening into a dining room. Here a bunch of young women were wailing and complaining to some kind of authority figure who stood before them. "Those are Surchatain Cennick's orders," he was saying. "He'll make some compensation to get you all back where you belong, but there's no more place for you here. Go gather your possessions."

Still whining, the young women began filing out. One girl paused to tell Geneve in a high-pitched squeak, "You're too late."

Geneve replied, "I'm only here looking for someone who might have come yesterday—"

"Oh, your Minka used my chamber pot and didn't empty it!" the girl cried.

Geneve and Gabriel glanced at each other, startled, then she asked, "Where is she?"

“I don’t know, but if I did, I’d scratch her eyes out!” the girl fumed, bottom lip protruding in childlike anger.

Brother and sister went out to the back courtyard. “Well, she was here, but then left—somewhere,” Gabriel muttered. They stood looking around.

Finally, they went around to the front of the palace again, where Geneve returned to the man she had spoken to. He watched as she drew up and said, “She was here, but left. Did you see a blond woman leaving, possibly in a hurry . . . ?”

He shook his head, shrugging.

Rigdon and Lyte walked along the shops in the business district, discussing strategies. They noted that this area was directly in between the palace and the main road branching off to the north, south, and west. Therefore, it was the main escape route for a number of Eurusians who were friends of Loizeaux—and it probably was for Adele, too. The difference was, she would have been running alone.

So Rigdon and Lyte split up, one on the north side and one on the south side of the street. They stuck their heads in the shops along the way to ask, “Did you see a beautiful blond woman running by?” For the most part, they got blank looks, raised eyebrows, and open mouths.

But when Lyte asked the question of the tobacconist, he said, “Yes, but that was hours ago. I stepped out after her, and one of the new Surchatain’s guards was chasing her.”

“Did he catch her?” Lyte asked.

“Not that I saw,” the man said.

“Ah. Thank you,” Lyte said. He immediately found Rigdon to tell him, and they jointly decided to continue their search of the businesses in case someone saw the end of the chase.

When dinner came to room four, Barr ate quickly, then said, “It’s not in my makeup to sit around and wait, Captain. If it’s all right with you, I’d like to just walk around the area and look.”

“Certainly. Come back by nightfall,” Efran said. He was sitting back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, eyes roving the stained ceiling.

So Barr went out, but Efran continued to study the ceiling while his dinner cooled in front of him. He was thinking about Adele, trying to put himself in her place. What would Adele do if she needed to quickly get out of a sticky situation where she had no money and no friends? “She would find some place to stay,” Efran mused, looking around the room.

Then he got up, making sure he had money in his pocket, and went downstairs to the front counter where the innkeeper stood over his books. Gruber had not seen Efran before now. As he paused at the counter, Gruber looked up, and Efran took his time to phrase his thoughts quietly and succinctly.

“My wife ran away. She cheated on me, but her lover won’t marry her, so she’s all alone now. I . . . want her back. I forgive her, and her child needs her. She is a beautiful blond.” And Efran put three royals on the counter.

Gruber looked at him, then looked at the royals. He turned his back to Efran to take a key from a cubbyhole.

This he placed on the counter, taking the royals in the same motion, and grunted, “She can’t pay.”

“No, she can’t,” Efran said, taking the key. “Thank you.”

He looked down at the number on the key, which read, “3.” So he took it upstairs, to the door of the room next to his party’s room. He placed the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door.

There, in the darkened room, Adele sat at the window, curtains mostly closed. She looked back at him, lifting her chin. Efran jerked his head. “Come over to my room.”

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Chapter 20

Adele rose with swishing skirts and parted lips to follow Efran to the room next door. As they entered, he gestured to the untouched dinner on the small table. “Are you hungry?” Glancing at him, she sat to eat.

Shortly thereafter, there was a knock on the door. Adele got up to run into the attached bedroom while Efran opened the door. Gabriel and Geneve came in. He said, “Well, she was at the courtesans’ stable for while, using the name—” Adele came out of the bedroom, then, to sit and continue eating. While Geneve and Gabriel stared at her, he finished, “Minka.”

Efran directed a look to Adele, then pulled out another royal to hand to Gabriel. “Go ask for three more dinners. You and Geneve wait for them and bring them up yourselves.”

“Yes, Captain,” Gabriel said, then he and she turned out.

Adele finished eating and pushed the plate aside. “Inn fare is disgusting.”

Efran smiled, waiting.

Shortly, there was another knock. Adele looked up quickly, but did not bolt. Efran let in Rigdon and Lyte; the latter began, “We found out that she had been seen running from—” then broke off to stare at her, as Rigdon was. Then Lyte finished, “I guess this means that Cennick’s guard didn’t catch her.”

“Of course not,” she murmured in derision.

Efran looked out at the waning daylight; Gabriel and Geneve came in with three dinners, then Lyte went down to get two more. As he came back with the food, Barr followed him in.

Barr took note of Adele at once, then told Efran, “They are searching houses.”

“The inn?” Efran asked.

“Not yet,” Barr replied.

“We need a conveyance,” Efran muttered, looking out again. Then his face cleared. “Spitta’s.”

He got up. “Barr, come with me.”

As they went out, Geneve looked questioningly at her brother. “Spitta’s? What is that?”

The name was somehow familiar to him, but when he couldn’t recall it, Lyte said, “Spitta’s Carriages for Hire.”

“Good,” Adele huffed. “I will *not* ride back on a horse.”

Since Spitta’s was close to the inn, Efran and Barr reached it just as the counterman was locking the front door. Efran said, “Stay, please—we need a carriage.”

The man turned in exasperation, then paused in alarm at two Polonti advancing on him. “I am Lord Efran. You helped me at Marguerite’s direction.”

“Oh, yes.” The man relaxed somewhat, but still eyed Barr warily. “I’m sorry, Lord Efran, but we’re all out. We have nothing left on the grounds except a funeral carriage.”

“Excellent. We’ll take it,” Efran said, jingling the royals in his pocket, which made a very different sound than silver.

The man unlocked the door again to let them in. Pausing at the counter, Efran asked, “How much is it for a trip to Westford?”

With a flick of his eyes, the counterman doubled the price. “Two royals.” These Efran placed on the counter. The man took them up before adding, “It’s a four-horse carriage, but we’ve got no horses left at all.”

“We’ll haul it,” Efran said, smiling. Barr smiled. Eyes slightly widened, the man took them around back where the black conveyance sat waiting. This was a fortunate selection, being a luxury model with heavy curtains and room for multiple caskets in a pandemic. And for the comfort of the deceased, it even had springs. Barr removed the complimentary casket, leaving it sitting ominously in the yard.

Then Efran took up one breeching strap from the center pole and Barr another while the man opened the back gate. They two hauled the hearse up the street and into the stableyard of the inn, carrying the tack between them. Barr brought out the first of their horses as Efran ran up to their room.

He opened the door to glance around, seeing everyone who should be there and no one who shouldn’t be. “Gather your gear and come down to the stableyard quickly. Geneve, find something to cover Adele’s head.” Her blond hair was like a beacon.

As daylight waned, the men worked cooperatively under Barr’s direction to harness four of their horses to the hearse. (Most of the Abbey’s saddle horses were trained to carts and carriages as well.) The other two horses were saddled, and the rest of the tack piled into a corner of the hearse.

Then Gabriel, Geneve and Adele sat inside while Rigdon and Lyte sat in the driver’s seat, Lyte taking up the reins. Barr and Efran rode alongside as the death carriage rolled out of the inn yard. After some initial biting and head shaking, the horses acclimated to the carriage tack.

When they turned onto the main road south, Efran looked over his shoulder at a group of Cennick’s guards coming to search the inn. Spotting the departing carriage, one officer on horseback rode over. “Stop! Open this vehicle.” He reached toward the curtains.

“Fever death!” Rigdon shouted down in warning. The officer promptly withdrew his hand and turned his horse back to the inn. So the party continued down the road in the twilight. Most other refugees had fled by now; Efran and Barr scanned all around as the carriage smoothly rolled on. Before the inn faded from view, Efran watched someone being pulled out to explain himself.

Efran’s head then snapped around at movement in the darkness ahead. After a moment searching, he discerned two small children on the side of the road, clutching each other in fear. There was no one else nearby.

Exultation filled him as he realized that this was the reason he had been sent to Eurus—not to recover Adele, particularly, but to rescue two abandoned children. He looked up to the gloaming in gratitude, then back to the inn. The funeral carriage was still in view of the growing body of soldiers gathered to search.

“Stop,” Efran called up to Lyte, who drew up the reins. As the carriage lurched to a halt, Efran rode over to lift a curtain. “Geneve. Go tell those two children that you have something for them to eat.” A big Polonti man riding up in the night would be too scary to the little ones.

She hopped down, looking around. “What children? Where?” Gabriel climbed out after her.

Efran turned to barely see the two obscured in darkness. “There, on the left-hand side of the road, about ten yards ahead.”

“I see them.” She skipped forward as a child would, and bent to greet the two. They went to her readily; she lifted the smaller on her arm, holding the hand of the other. But when they saw the conveyance of death, they shrank in fear. The littlest one started crying, and Efran looked warily back at the cluster of searchers around the inn.

But Geneve quickly put the little one into the hearse to climb in after and cuddle him, and Gabriel lifted the older child in with them. Then he gestured to his sister, “My bow and quiver. Quickly.”

Geneve leaned around Adele to gather his weapons and hand them out to him. With these slung over his shoulder, Gabriel climbed up to lie on the flat top of the carriage. Efran pulled the curtains back in place and told Lyte, “Go.”

The horses started up again; Efran looked back to see that Cennick’s guards were concentrating their search on the inn instead of the road, which was entirely logical. So the laden hearse rolled on.

Halfway through their return trip, Efran stopped the carriage to wake Gabriel on the roof and put him in the driver’s seat to relieve Lyte. Although sleeping upright in snatches, Rigdon insisted he was fine. Efran stuck his head through the curtains to determine that everyone inside was asleep. Before remounting, he dug a handful of Madea’s dried venison out of his satchel, having missed the inn’s dinner. Then they resumed travel.

They made the Abbey Lands before daylight, the conveyance causing something of a stir among the sentries on watch. But Efran, riding ahead, waved to them. Barr followed, and the carriage lumbered behind on the switchback. Dismounting in the courtyard, Efran gave orders for Adele to be put in a guest room on the second or third floor with a guard at her door, and the children to be taken to the matron of the children’s ward. He clapped his team on the shoulders, sending them off to their quarters, then entered the fortress and threw himself down at the foot of the crucifix in the keep.

Hours later, which made it June 1st, Efran woke to feel something tucked into his side. Without opening his eyes, he brought his hand around to feel the soft hair, the curved shoulder, and the folds of fabric on her hip. “Are you enjoying your pants?” he murmured.

“Um hmm,” she confirmed.

“Good. We got Adele,” he said.

“Yay.” It was not an exuberant response, but at least she wasn’t crying.

“And two children that we found along the side of the road,” he added.

She lifted up. “Now that would make it worthwhile.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said, smiling. Then he sat up to grunt, “I want to go see them.”

“I’ll go with you,” she said.

“Now you look excited,” he observed, and she grinned at him. He stood, groaning, “I need to clean up, but I’m going to see them first.” It was fully light, but not midmorning yet.

She walked with him down the corridor to the nursery, where they looked in on the infants, some sleeping, some awake, one crying. Efran looked around, seeing no one to check on the crying infant.

Then he looked over at two small children huddled together. They were the two he had picked up last night, and brought in early this morning, but, they were as yet unwashed. He knelt before them, and they looked at him warily. “Have you eaten?” They just stared at him, so he asked again, “Have you been given anything to eat?” The older one, a girl, shook her head. He looked up, stricken, at Minka’s wide eyes.

He stood. From beyond a closed door, he heard a loud, angry voice. He went over to open the door to see a woman standing before children sitting at tables who were watching her with frozen faces. Three of these were Toby, Noah, and Ivy—Efran and Minka’s adopted children. Toby’s eyes flicked to him, then back at the harridan.

She was shouting, “I expect all this to get done today! No talking! No playing! And if you think you can get away with doing anything behind my back, you’ll—” She broke off, seeing him in the doorway. Exhaling in aggravation, she came over to shut the door in his face so that she could continue to berate the children.

Efran opened the door again to walk in and stand between her and the children. He turned to them with, “You get the day off today. Go play.” Toby, Noah, and Ivy jumped up to rush him with kisses and hugs, then ran out. The other children, not knowing who he was, rose more slowly from their seats. “It’s all right. Really. You can go play,” he said.

When they had sidled out, he turned to regard the woman, who appeared displeased. She said, “I don’t appreciate this interference at all.”

“What is your name?” he asked quietly.

“Avis,” she said almost defiantly.

“Where is everyone?” he asked.

“Who are you looking for?” she replied, as to a simpleton.

He looked up, inhaling, then went around opening doors, looking into side rooms. Minka came out of another room. “No one else is here,” she said in disbelief.

“Where is Joshua?” he asked.

“Asleep in our room,” she said.

Efran turned again to Avis. “Why isn’t anyone here?”

“You weren’t supposed to be back until tomorrow, at the earliest,” she said.

“So—the children don’t need care if I’m not here?” he asked.

She exhaled, rolling her eyes. “They’re just taking a break. They’ll be right back.”

“Where is the matron?” he asked.

“Off for the day,” she replied.

He looked to Minka. “Is there a man at the door?”

“No,” she said.

“Find one, or three,” he said. She turned out.

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Chapter 21

Efran sat on a table near the door to wait. Minka returned with Doudney. “Captain?” he said, saluting.

“Ask Estes to step down here, please,” Efran exhaled.

“Yes, sir.” Doudney left at a trot.

Efran went back to sit with the two still-abandoned children. Avis was standing in the doorway to the school room while Minka was searching closets.

He took the littlest one up to find his pants soaked through and stinking. Looking up to Avis, he whispered, “Get me wash cloths and clean clothes.” Reluctantly, she went out. Efran hung his head in exhaustion and dismay.

Estes appeared at the door, looking around. Efran, tears running down his face, couldn’t collect himself to speak at first, so Minka explained to Estes what they had found upon coming in. “And—I can’t find what the children

need here; all the closets are filled with—women’s things. Rouge? Chalk? What is the loose chalk for?” Minka waved two jars in exasperation.

Avis returned with some wet cloths to thrust at Minka. “I don’t know where the children’s clothes are. That’s not my job.”

Estes said, “That’s fine. Go home. Don’t come back.” She turned on her heel and Estes gave directions to Doudney. Minka caught him to tell him one more thing before he ran off.

Efran looked at Estes. “No one else is here. The children I brought in last night off the road haven’t been touched. How does this happen?”

Estes glanced around the room, shaking his head. Efran went on, “Our charter, the whole reason for our existence, is to take care of unwanted children, and I find—”

Estes said, “I am to blame. I left too much to the matron without checking up on her.”

Efran gazed back at him. “If you are to blame, then I am more to blame. I am the one who signed the charter. I am the one who claimed the bequest on behalf of the children.”

“I’ll find someone,” Estes said, leaving.

One soldier brought in a wash tub, and other men began filling it. Minka sat before the little boy to take off his stinking clothes and put him in the tub. Then she soaped up a sponge and began washing him. He started crying about his bottom. Another tub was brought in for the little girl, but two infants were crying now.

Soldiers began filling the corridor, foraying through multiple rooms for child-sized clothing, baby wraps and bottles. One man dried the little boy and applied tallow to his bottom while Minka bathed the little girl, dried her and dressed her. Another soldier brought plates from the kitchen for them, and soon they were contentedly clean and eating.

Efran stared at them blindly. “If Ryal had come in and seen that, he would have revoked our charter on the spot. And meanwhile I am playing about with gold and caverns and plots—”

Minka sat down beside him. “Stop, Efran. This is not your fault, and it’s not Estes’ fault. You can’t do everything yourself; you can’t change wraps and feed babies; you must have reliable people to help you do those things.”

He nodded. “I know. Can you see if Bethune is free? If she can recommend someone to—”

The children’s matron appeared at the door. “What is all this? Get these men out of here.” Minka slipped out quietly around her.

Efran stood, very close to glassy-eyed rage. “What is your name?” he asked in that quiet, devastating voice.

She turned to him. “I am Loes, Lord Efran.”

“Oh, you recognize me. Excellent. Then I won’t have to waste time convincing you that I have the authority to tell you what to do,” he said. She looked at him dubiously. He went on, “I understood that your responsibility was to see that all the children here receive the care and attention they need. Is that right?”

“Well, now, I do have most of the responsibility for the children, but I share that with my staff, because I can’t be here all day every day,” she said.

“Your staff,” he said. “And who was to be in charge here today?”

“I will have to check the schedule,” she said.

“Find the schedule,” he said.

She turned out, and Mohr came up to Efran with a crying infant. “I gave him the bottle, sir, but he’s still crying and I don’t know why.”

Efran blinked, then said, “Put him on your shoulder and pat his back.” He knew that this is what Minka did after feeding Joshua.

Mohr did that, and the child issued an authoritative burp. “Ho, that’s a good one, lad!”

He put the baby back down in the crib, and Efran automatically said, “Lay him on his front—” because this is what Minka told him to do.

“Oh.” Mohr turned the baby over, then looked very proud of himself.

Bethune came to the door with Estes and Minka behind her. “Bethune!” Efran gasped as a sane person locked in an insane asylum might react upon seeing the doorkeeper. “We need—a children’s matron who c-can see that they are taken care of—with kindness and c-constancy—”

She sighed, regarding his tears in pity. “For a short time, Efran. I’ll get you on your feet and then find you a good matron for the long term.”

“Thank you, Bethune,” he said, wiping his face. “Your first job will be to get rid of everyone here now.”

“I understand,” she said in sympathetic kindness, patting his shoulder, and he nodded.

“Oh,” he said. “These two need special attention. I brought them off the side of the road in Eurus last night.”

“Oh?” she said, looking. Then she knelt before the little girl. “Hello! My name is Bethune. What is your name?”

“Cady,” the child replied, mouth coated with strawberry juice.

“Hello, Cady! Is this your little brother?” Bethune asked brightly, and she nodded. “What is his name?”

“Kethe,” Cady said. Efran paused. Something here was reverberating in his memory.

“Oh, that’s nice. Are you feeling better?” Bethune asked, and the girl nodded. Rising, Bethune told Efran, “Please send a man down to my house to get my older children up here to help me, and, we’ll find better people for the little ones.”

“Thank you, Bethune,” Efran sighed, gesturing at Willis, who took off at a trot. “Get rid of everyone here now,” Efran told her. *Cady. Kethe.*

“I understand. I think you need to go rest, Efran,” she said, nudging him out.

“Yes, probably,” he admitted.

But before he could get far, Estes cornered him in the corridor. “Efran, tell me again where you picked up those children.”

“Ah, in Eurus, just south of the inn, on the main road. They were standing alone at the side of the road, so I—had Geneve go get them,” Efran said. “Their names are Cady and Kethe, and I’m sure I’ve heard those names before.”

“If you remember their names, then you might know one or both parents,” Estes said.

“Yes. That makes sense. But I haven’t talked to anyone about their children lately,” Efran mused, thinking.

At that time, the matron came up with a list in her hand. “Here is our duty roster for the little darlings, Lord Efran,” she said sardonically.

He blinked down at the parchment, then told her, “Give it to Bethune. She is the new matron. Goodbye.”

Then he turned to squint at Estes. “Little darlings. Darlings. Someone said—Cady and Kethe were the darlings of his life—Loizeaux,” he gasped. “When he and his men came here a week ago, he told me that Cady and Kethe were the darlings of his life. I thought he meant courtesans—but he was talking about his *children*.”

Estes stared at him. “That is significant. I never knew that he had young children, but it makes sense that he would keep them a secret. I’ll message Justinian in Westford, see what he’s heard.” Then he looked distractedly at Efran’s clothes. “Go wash the baby poop off you and come up to interview Adele. She won’t speak to anyone but you.”

Estes went upstairs but Efran continued to stand in the corridor, thinking, until Minka came up to take his fingers and lead him by the hand back to their quarters, where a filled tub sat waiting in the outer room. She locked the door, undressed him, and guided him down into the water, whereupon he began to haul her in with him.

“No! Efran, I’m not—you have to—don’t get me all wet!”

“Then undress,” he suggested.

“Oh! Start bathing,” she said, unbuttoning. He sank down into the water, blowing bubbles, and stayed down for so long that she got anxious, leaning over him. That made it very easy for him to haul her down as he broke the surface.

“Oh, you—” she muttered, but he didn’t fight her soaping him up.

When he was clean, dry, and dressed in his standard work clothes, he told her, “Now you can come with me to talk to Adele.” Minka was coming out of their bedroom with her hands full.

“Efran, look at me,” she said.

Standing at his wardrobe, he turned around. “My Minka. You’re still wet,” he smiled.

“What am I doing, Efran?” she said.

He looked again. “You’re feeding Joshua. . . . Oh.” Neither of them wanted Joshua’s birth mother to see him.

“Take Estes with you, and I’ll come up when I’m done with him,” she conceded.

“All right,” he said, then he paused. “Have we heard from Mouris?”

“Not that I know of,” she said.

He muttered to himself in aggravation, but before leaving, remembered: “Those two children that we picked up in Euris are Loizeaux’s.” She stared at him, and he nodded. “That’s what I said.” Then he left.

First, he went to Estes’ workroom to collect him for this interview. The first thing Estes said was, “Bring Minka.”

“I tried to; she has to take care of Joshua,” Efran said.

“Oh.” Estes remembered something: “Bethune has good help in the nursery, and is working on getting the children a new teacher. They should be back at studies by the day after tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Estes,” Efran breathed. “I also want—assign one man, or woman, to interview all the children we’ve adopted out, to make sure they’re happy and cared for. You’re doing this already, aren’t you? I want to make sure.”

“I will check on that today. We’ll get through this, Efran. We’ve been in worse battles together.” Estes braced him with a shake of the shoulder.

“The West Bank battle was pretty rough,” Efran admitted, turning to walk with him down the corridor.

“You saved my life in that battle,” Estes said.

Efran paused. “I don’t remember that.”

“Because I was only one of a half dozen that you pulled from the bank when we were out cold and the river was rising,” Estes said.

“We lost Byrne,” Efran said heavily. Then he looked up. “But I saved the one person who has done the most for the Abbey Lands.”

“Efran—” Estes began on a denial.

“Shut up and come save me with Adele,” Efran said. Then he paused. “Where is she?”

“On the third floor. I don’t want her in my workroom,” Estes said, gesturing. He added, “I’ve sent a man to Mouris, telling him that we have recovered her. I might have implied, without actually saying so, that she had been abducted.” Estes had more scruples about truthfulness than Efran had, usually.

Efran glanced at him in renewed appreciation. “Well done.”

“We’ll see,” Estes grunted.

Connor approached at a trot. “Captain, Steward—Tourse says that Mouris is on his way up the switchback.”

Efran nodded and Estes said, “Good. Have him wait downstairs.”

“Yes, sir.” Connor saluted and trotted off.

“Connor seems happier,” Efran observed.

“He’s stepping out with another young lady,” Estes said—after Fanny had made him marry her and then cheated on him, finally departing back to Eurus.

“Oh, I’m glad,” Efran said.

On their way up more stairs, Estes said, “It occurred to me that . . . Cennick’s people may not have been searching for Adele last night.”

“You heard about that already?” Efran asked.

“Yes, I got a thorough report from Lyte,” Estes said.

Efran objected, “But—he and Rigdon said that his man had been chasing her. Adele seemed to confirm that.”

“We don’t know why he was chasing her. Cennick’s people in Eurus won’t have known her, or necessarily have recognized her,” Estes said. “But . . . if she looked like someone else. . . .”

Efran paused. “Who are you thinking she might have resembled?”

“The mother of Loizeaux’s children?” Estes suggested.

Efran paused on a step. “Ohh. And if they found her—”

“Then her children might well have been abandoned by the side of the road,” Estes said. “Here is Adele’s room.”

“Oh. Yes,” Efran breathed. Then he reached up a hand to knock.

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Chapter 22

The maid assigned to Adele opened the door to Efran and Estes, then left as she had been told to do. The two men entered to regard Adele, who was sitting at a small table in the outer room of the suite. She looked clean, rested, and refreshed. “Have a seat,” she said, gesturing as if hostess.

Estes sat at the table but Efran remained standing. He began, “Mouris is waiting downstairs to talk to you. He may be under the impression that you were abducted—”

“I certainly was. Fanny lied about my invitation to Eurus,” Adele said, composed.

Efran's teeth came together. "That was—unkind, to be sure, but that's not the kind of abduction we're looking for. We want you to not have been eager to go to Eurus under any condition."

She shrugged. Rocking on his heels, Efran looked at Estes. So Estes asked her, "Are you willing to go back to Mouris?"

She considered that unenthusiastically. "He needs to hire help and not make me do it."

Efran looked away, then back again. "That—was the whole point of your staying with him."

"It was then, but it's not now," she said pointedly.

Efran was back to swaying on his feet. "Will you talk to him?"

She shrugged.

They were all three silent a moment, then there was a quick knock before Minka came in. She glanced around brightly and Efran breathed, "Thank God." He guided her to the chair across from Adele and sat her in it.

"What have you all decided?" Minka asked, looking around. Three blank faces and one set of shrugged shoulders replied. "We need to get Mouris up here, then. I believe he's downstairs."

Getting up again, she spoke to the soldier who had brought her up, then stood by the door to wait. Estes got up in anticipation of relinquishing his chair to Mouris. He went to stand by the door with Minka, leaving Efran the only one actually in the room with Adele right now.

Footsteps sounded. When Mouris appeared at the door, Minka and Estes drew aside on opposite sides like opening curtains. "Adele! Are you all right?" Mouris asked, rushing to sit at the table with her. Efran withdrew to stand by Minka.

"I suppose so," Adele sighed.

"What a terrible experience for you! Was it that pervert Loizeaux who took you?" Mouris asked, outraged.

"No, a friend of his," she said.

Glancing back at the others at the door, he asked her quietly, "Were you molested?"

Efran barely contained a cough. "No. I fought," Adele said, and Minka had to push Efran out of the doorway.

"Well. I'm glad you're back," Mouris said, standing and offering his hand for her to stand.

She looked up at him without moving. "We need to talk," she said, and Efran turned to brace his back against the corridor wall.

"What is it?" Mouris asked, sitting again.

"If you want me to come back, you need to hire help for your shop," she said.

He looked conflicted. “But . . . I thought that’s what you would do.”

“I can’t, anymore,” she said, looking at her fingernails. “I’m too tired.” Efran closed his eyes to contain his thoughts.

“Oh,” Mouris said. “Well, I suppose so. But that means I won’t have money for luxuries like silk sheets.” He glanced back self-consciously as he said this, but Minka was composed and Estes had disappeared into the corridor with Efran.

Adele remained seated, chin down, looking up at Mouris with her large blue eyes. He began rocking in the chair, groaning. Efran, hearing without needing to see anything of this, waited for his inevitable caving.

“Oh, all right,” Mouris said, standing again. “We’ll make it work, together.” He held out his hand again, and she condescended to take it so that he could assist her up. Mouris nodded to Efran and Estes as he walked Adele down the corridor to the stairs.

The three left behind were silent a moment, then Efran observed, “Someone said that I should leave her in Eurus. Who said that? I should have. Except that I got Loizeaux’s children out of it.”

While Joshua was sleeping, Efran and Minka went out to the gardens to locate their older children. Efran collected Noah, Ivy, and Toby to sit on the large blanket Minka had brought for them all. (Other children came over as well: Meena, Caddel, and Marley. But they, being 9 and 10 years old, were adopted out quickly, as were most older children who came to the fortress.) Efran told them, “We have a new tutor coming in a few days. Bethune is picking her, so she should be good. Still, I want you to come to me if you have complaints.”

Toby shrugged. “You’re busy, Efran. You have big things to do.”

Efran exhaled. “Nothing is more important than you, and I’m wrong to let other things come before you. Remember when the Notary Ryal talked to you a year ago? The only reason we got to stay in the Abbey was because you were happy and well cared for. I will lose this place if I forget that you children are my main concern.” As he looked near to tears, Ivy climbed up on his lap to comfort him.

“It’s all right, Efran,” Noah said, patting his shoulder. “Toby found ways to get around her.” Toby stiffened, shaking his head prohibitively at Noah.

Efran laughed, “Good for you, Toby, but I don’t want you to have to do that. I want your tutor to be an ally and not an enemy.”

“But it was fun,” Toby admitted, grinning, and Efran grimaced, remembering when he had found ways to get around Sister Therese, his tutor.

Other children were calling them to come play, so they jumped up to run amok. Efran checked to see that Ivy had found Bethune’s daughter Cleo, which reassured him that Ivy, at least, would stay out of trouble. Then he looked over to the woods beyond the fence.

Standing, he told Minka, “I need to find Pia”—their *aina* child of the woods.

When Minka started to get up as well, he lifted her by her hands. She said, “I’m going to check on Joshua. He’s sleeping less during the day and crawling more.” Today he was five months old. “I want to see how Kelsey is doing, too. She’s due in about a month.” This was Estes’ wife.

“Good.” He leaned down to kiss her, then paused. She turned her eyes up at him, wondering at the expression that had crossed his face. Remembering when he had brought her and Toby here, he also remembered that just the thought of kissing her brought him to his knees—

And he gathered her into him for a deep kiss, so that half of those working on the back grounds stared at them; the other half shrugged, as that was just Lord Efran with his Minka, as usual. Then he let her go.

While Minka staggered into the fortress, Efran climbed over the fence to go look for Pia in the woods (there was a gate, for which key they were still looking). He stopped at the barracks, where he was greeted by a few men who were cleaning, stocking or repairing whatever was needed. He asked after Pia, but no one had seen her today. “Goss and Krall are the ones she prefers with her, Captain,” Ellor told him.

“I see. Thank you,” Efran said, turning out. So he just walked through the woods, muttering, “Pia. Pia? I need to know that you’re all right out here today.”

After a while he saw her peeking at him from behind a tree, and he stopped. “Where is your bodyguard?”

She came over to pull on his hand, so he followed her. When he smelled meat cooking, he stopped in alarm—Pia considered killing and eating animals murder. “Pia, what’s on the fire?” he asked. She continued leading him.

They came into a small clearing where Krall was indeed roasting something on an improvised spit over a small fire. He glanced up. “Hello, Cap’n; care for a bite of squirrel? It’s slow-roasted,” he said proudly. One of the old-timers from the Red Regiment, Krall was entitled lapses from strict protocol.

Efran sat warily for Pia to climb on his knee. “How did you manage that?”

Krall snort-laughed. “Ha! The bugger got too full of himself, killing the babies, and Pia here warned him that she’d let him be roasted if he couldn’t live in peace with his own kind, so here we are.” He cut off a decent chunk to hand Efran, who ate it with the judgmental air of a connoisseur. “Decent, but not up to Madea.” He looked down at Pia, who wrinkled her nose in disgust.

“Got no spices out here,” Krall excused himself.

“True. Krall, can you and Goss teach her letters and numbers out here?” Efran asked.

Krall glanced up. “Sure, Cap’n, if the lady allows.”

Efran looked down at the wild child in his arms. “If you won’t learn with them out here, I will make you come in for tutoring.” She drooped. “It’s a power you must have. I would be a bad guardian to let you neglect that.” She leaned on him to play with his fingers.

Efran looked to Krall again. “If your other duties interfere, I’ll have a word with your unit commander. Who is that?”

“Cutch, Captain,” Krall replied.

“Very well.” He looked meaningfully at Pia, who stood on his legs to take his face in her hands. Looking in her eyes, he could see through her to all of her friends—the deer were her favorites, as their fawns liked to romp with her. But the rabbits, squirrels, chipmunks and wood mice all played with her. The birds were wonderful,

too; through her ears, Efran listened to the songs of the wood thrush, grouse, loon, and chickadee—

A horrible flash of thrashing teeth intruded; Efran started and Pia cried out, covering her eyes. Efran jerked his head to look down toward the cavern under the fortress, where the intrusion originated. Things with teeth were feasting on the remains of—what? What were they eating?

Efran turned away, remembering Krems. Whether that was him or not, as long as things with teeth were infesting the cavern waters, there would be no using the caverns, nor any safe walking above them.

“Swimmer?” Efran whispered. There was no reply; whether Swimmer and his kind were gone, or whether Efran was too far away, he didn’t know.

Efran stood to put Pia on her feet. “All right, Krall; I’ll be expecting the first report on her learning in a week.”

“Will do, Cap’n,” Krall replied, picking out the good meat.

And Efran turned, looking toward the fortress, and to the cavern beneath the cold storage room.

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Chapter 23

Before leaving the woods, however, Efran paused to call up mental images of the creatures again—the long, eel-like bodies, the elongated jaws with sharp teeth. Then he turned to the weapons cache in the woods. Efran stood at the armory door, surveying the weapons inside. He knew immediately that bows and arrows or knives would not serve.

“What d’you need, Cap’n?”

Efran turned to Lwoff, one of the newer men. He had joined the army of Westford just weeks before the implosion of Lightfoot’s brief reign, and had made few friends—he was just too strange. He had grown up virtually alone in the Green Hills, and knew a great deal about wildlife and weaponry, but little about how to carry on a conversation. Unlike Pia, however, he considered most wild animals to be enemies, given his many scars. He also carried a slight limp from his battles in the wild.

Looking at him thoughtfully, Efran said, “I need something to kill large eel-like fish with teeth.”

“Clubs,” Lwoff said. He went to a rack where he withdrew two clubs of different lengths. “How long are they?”

Efran looked off, searching images that were fading. “At least three, four feet.”

“You need the short one, then.” Lwoff handed him a 16-inch club, taking another for himself. “And me.”

“Then come.” Efran turned out with Lwoff behind him.

Hoping to avoid Minka, Efran took Lwoff through the door on the west side of the fortress to the cold storage room. “Wait here. I need to get lanterns.”

“Better not,” Lwoff said.

Efran paused. “It’s pitch black down there.”

“Sink into yer enemy’s territory,” Lwoff said. “Below ground?”

“Yes,” Efran said. He went over to open the closet door and lift out the small chest. Then he bent to lift the trap door, and Lwoff looked down into the opening. Efran told him, “The water comes right up to the rock on which we’ll be standing. They’re probably able to come up on the rock a ways.”

“Yep. They hear you, and come after you,” Lwoff said. “We’ll go on down. Shut the closet door, but keep the trap door open.”

This Efran did. He mildly objected to Lwoff going down the short stairs first, but as he clearly knew what he was talking about, Efran followed.

Lwoff waited for him to descend before walking away from the stairs. “Stay back from the water until yer eyes adjust to the dark,” Lwoff said. “Keep yer eyes on the water. Watch the ripples. You’ll soon recognize the ripples that the eelfish make.”

“Should we talk? Won’t they hear?” Efran asked.

“Yep. We want them to hear. And come,” Lwoff said.

A few minutes later, Efran found that he could see the water, and the ripples in it, presently gentle. Lwoff walked up to within four feet of the edge. “Don’t get any closer. If they latch onto yer boot, yer dead.”

They stood about six feet apart, intently watching the water. Efran, surprised that he could see anything, noted a strange rippling, and then a black shape shot out of the water to catch the toe of his boot. Since the bulge of its head extended past Efran’s toes, he brought the club down solidly to crack open the skull.

“Back!” Lwoff ordered. Efran jumped back with the dead eelfish clinging to his toe. Another followed to clamp its jaws on the clinging eelfish. Lwoff pounded the head of the second one, then he reached down to dislodge the teeth of the first from Efran’s boot. He tossed both back into the water, and a bubbling, frothing frenzy ensued.

“They eat each other?” Efran gasped.

“The dead or wounded,” Lwoff said. “Eyes on water.”

Efran knew what to look for now, and they both watched the strange rippling. While one eelfish lunged for Lwoff’s boot, two came at Efran, who now appeared to be a vulnerable target. Efran crushed the head of the closest and then caught the second on the back swing, knocking it wounded into the water. The first he quickly swept away while Lwoff clubbed the head of another.

The eelfish now began attacking en masse, and Efran had to jump back to avoid teeth in his boots. He clubbed the closest, but the others came slithering up quickly, jaws wide, and Efran wished he had taken two clubs. So he was considerably surprised to see Lwoff run up and stomp them, sometimes two at a time. He dispatched four or five this way, scooping them back into the water.

Panting, Efran peered at him, and Lwoff said, “They don’t see behind ’em. Problem is getting behind ’em.”

They waited while the frothing and bubbling of the eelfish’s feeding subsided, then Efran saw new patterns, and whispered, “Something else is in the water.”

“Something big,” Lwoff said.

At once there was a great burst, and a score of eelfish were washed up on the rock. But because they had been unwillingly tossed, they were flopping around, unable to attack. Efran and Lwoff jumped into their midst to stomp and pound them. The men were doing well until Efran fell on the slippery rock and had to club an oncoming eelfish while lying flat on his back.

When all the eelfish they could find were smashed, they scooped them into the water, and waited. There was no resultant feeding frenzy. “What—are they gone?” Efran whispered.

Lwoff was looking intently at the water. “Yes, but . . .” he began. Efran studied the water, trying to interpret the broad, deep ripple.

Lwoff suddenly grabbed Efran to throw him toward the steps. “Up up up up!”

They had scrambled up a step or two when the massive arm of an octopus swept the entire rock floor, apparently searching for more freshly ground eelfish. Finding nothing, it submerged again, and the two men watched the deep ripple recede.

“We’re done here,” Efran said, turning to climb.

When they were both out, and the trap door in place with the small chest on top of it, Efran and Lwoff eyed each other, mostly wet, covered with eelfish gut slime. Efran said, “That was fun.”

Lwoff responded with a crooked smile. “Yes sir, it was.”

“Let’s go get something to eat,” Efran said.

“Yes sir,” Lwoff agreed.

They made a minimal effort at clean-up in the men’s bath house, leaving the clubs there, then went to the large dining hall to help themselves to whatever they could find, dinner having mostly concluded. But the fact of Efran’s appearance in the dining hall was widely disseminated to people who had been looking for him.

As they two were taking plates of trout and garden vegetables to a table, Eustace approached the Captain. “Justinian is in the receiving room off the foyer, sir,” he reported, eyeing Lwoff sidewise.

“Have him come here, please,” Efran said, looking at dinner.

“Yes, sir,” he said, moving off, then Lwoff found himself eating beside the Captain as if they were old friends. And a kitchen assistant brought him a bottle of Goadby’s just like he did the Captain.

“How did you know about the eelfish?” Efran asked him.

“Saw something like ’em in the mountain rivers,” Lwoff said.

“Ever get bit?” Efran asked around a mouthful.

Lwoff put down his fork to pull up his pants leg. “Let’s see. That one, and . . . that one. No, that was the tigerfish. This one,” he said, indicating various scars on his arm and leg. “Those eelfish tweren’t as big as the ones here. But they had two sets of teeth.”

Efran stopped chewing. “Two sets.”

“Yes, sir. They’d open their mouths wide to clamp down with the first set, and the second set would shoot out to pull the meat on down. Yes, that’s this bit gone.” Under the table, he showed the Captain the faded purple curved row of triangles on his leg and the sunken, scarred skin beneath it.

Looking, Efran muttered, “Good Lord,” which gratified Lwoff. It was easy conversing with the Captain.

Justinian came up and sat across from Efran, nodding at Lwoff, then gestured for an ale. To Efran, Justinian noted, “Several people are mad at you for your theft from Eurus.” Estes sat down next to Justinian to nod at Lwoff and look across the table at Efran as well. Lwoff blinked in wonder at the acknowledgment from both.

“Theft of what?” Efran asked, smiling. “The trout’s very good; have you eaten? Estes?”

Estes nodded and Justinian said, “Yes, while waiting on you. What have you been doing? You smell . . . fishy.”

At that time Minka came up with Joshua. “May we sit?” she asked dubiously.

Efran looked up quickly. “Yes, of course, sit beside me. Minka, Justinian, this is Lwoff. Estes knows him; he’s one of ours. We’ve been . . . cleaning up the cavern.” He took another bite so as to be mute, then gestured with his fork for Justinian to continue.

Leaning around Efran, Minka turned her big blue eyes on Lwoff to say hello, and he thought his life complete now. She deliberately avoided looking at the state of their clothes.

“Theft of whom,” Justinian corrected Efran. “Loizeaux’s wife, of course.”

Efran stared at him, then swallowed. “Do they think that Adele is Loizeaux’s wife? Or is his wife genuinely missing? What is her name?”

Justinian grew wary. “Is Adele here?”

“Not now. Answer my questions,” Efran said impatiently.

“Her name is Fallis, and yes, she is missing,” Justinian said. He took a long swig of ale.

“Does she look anything like Adele? Blonde?” Efran asked.

Estes nodded. Not seeing that, Justinian hesitated, then said, “I haven’t seen her personally, but yes, I understand she’s blonde.”

“Estes? What do you know about her?” Efran asked.

“Tindley, a notary in Eurus, sent a confidential message to Ryal in Westford, which was forwarded to him here. The gist of it was that she had come to Tindley for help to escape with her children. She did not have them with her at the time; she was meeting someone to pick them up whenever she had secured a carriage, then she was coming down to Westford for refuge,” Estes said.

“When did he send that message?” Efran asked.

Estes looked off thinking, then shook his head. “It would have been late last night, as far as I know.”

Efran turned to Justinian. “When did you hear that they were looking for her?”

“Early this morning,” Justinian replied.

“She got away,” Efran whispered. “But without her children.”

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Chapter 24

“It must be asked,” said Estes. “Are you *sure* that no one was near the children when you picked them up?”

“No one standing,” Efran said. “Geneve actually brought them to the carriage because I thought they would be afraid of me. She didn’t indicate seeing anyone either.” He paused, frowning, to ask Justinian, “Why am I suspected of taking her?”

“Spitta’s counter man hastened to the new regime to let them know of your carriage hire,” Justinian replied.

Efran shook his head. “Then why weren’t we stopped? The only man who approached us turned right away when Rigdon told him we were carrying a fever death.”

“He went to them early this morning,” Justinian said.

“Ah,” Efran said.

They all sat thinking, and Lwoff remained very quiet, so far out of his depth. Efran murmured, “She had taken pains to make arrangements for her children to escape with her, yet we find them on the side of the road unattended. Yet she is missing. What would you do?” he turned to ask Minka. “Would you run without your children?”

“Never,” she said, shifting the sleeping baby on her shoulder.

Efran shook his head. “Then I have trouble believing she would, either.”

Again there was quiet, then Minka said, “Unless she knew that you had picked them up.”

“How would she know that?” Efran asked.

She said, “Suppose the person to whom she gave the children agreed to meet her carriage at a certain place—for a fee, of course. Then suppose that person, waiting at the meeting place with the children, saw Cennick’s soldiers searching, and got scared, so drew back far enough to watch, but not get caught. The soldiers wouldn’t even see the children.”

“That’s risky, but under the circumstances, likely,” Estes said.

“It’s the only scenario that explains everything,” Justinian agreed. “But there’s more: Cennick’s spies have discovered the passage in the hill leading to the cavern below the fortress, and he intends to use it.”

Smiling, Efran looked at Lwoff, and Lwoff smiled back. “They’re welcome to it,” Efran said. “Estes, there will be no exploring the caverns for a while yet, and we need a good, high fence around the one in the east Lands.”

Pale, Minka asked, “Why, Efran?”

He explained, “Lwoff and I determined that there are things that bite in the cavern waters.” As her parted lips signaled the imminent emergence of tears, he continued, smiling, “You may carefully examine me for bites if you like.”

The men across from Lwoff laughed, but he missed the joke, so kept his mouth shut. He never noticed the number of men who looked bemusedly into the dining hall to see the weirdo enjoying the congenial company of not only the Captain and his lady, but his highest advisors. One man sadly remarked, “Women soldiers and weirdos. What’s next?” That man was to be apoplectic when he discovered that not only had Geneve received a commendation for her part in the rescue of Toby and Tarrant, but Lwoff was also commended for his assistance to the Captain in the cavern.

Following, Minka took literally Efran’s permission to examine him, and did just that after his bath. She found a scratch on his lower left leg, but since it wasn’t a bite and it wasn’t deep, she gave him a pass on that. Then she turned to undress, but when she came back to bed, he was asleep. So she just crawled in close to his side, knowing that he’d had a very long day.

The next morning, June 2nd, Efran gave orders for the funeral carriage to be carted back up and abandoned just outside of Eurus. Given Spitta’s counterman’s eagerness to hand him over to Cennick, Efran didn’t see the need of bringing the vehicle back to his doorstep.

Later that morning, Efran received an alert from scouts in Westford that a carriage was coming; when he got a description of it, he felt fairly sure he knew who was in it. So he hurried back to his quarters, capturing Minka on the way: “Put on your finest and come to the foyer.”

She did this without slowing either of them with questions, though it took her longer to dress than it did him, so that he was out the door before her. As she took the time to brush her hair before pulling it back in a silk headband, she did not hear him give instructions that the visiting children in the nursery be made presentable.

When she arrived in the foyer, she found him watching a carriage pull into the courtyard. He turned to appraise her: “Excellent.” Then he drew her to his side.

She drank in the dress uniform on that sculpted body, then muttered, “Take it off when we’re done”—lest he ruin it. His smiling eyes flicked to her before returning to the wide-open fortress doors.

Minka turned to look as a footman assisted his passenger, a woman, out of the carriage and up the steps into the marble foyer with its vaulted ceiling. She wore a dark, simple dress with a scarf loosely wrapped around mounds of blonde hair that did resemble Adele's. But when she looked to Efran, Minka saw a face prematurely aged by stress and sorrow.

Bowing to her, he said, "I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands; this is my wife, the Lady Minka. Welcome to the Abbey."

In quivering fear, she said, "I am Fallis, widow of Surchatain Loizeaux. Do you have my children, Lord Efran?"

He smiled, extending his hand. "Yes. Come see."

She covered her mouth, almost staggering as she went to him. He took her arm, directing Minka with a glance to her other side. They walked her down the broad corridor to the nursery, where Efran opened the door. Here, Bethune's oldest daughter Nini stood over a small table at which Cady and Kethe, clean and dressed, were eating little strawberry pies.

"Oh!" Fallis fell to her knees; the children looked up, crying, "Mama!" and rushed to her. She held them tightly, kissing their heads, while all those nearby watched with moist eyes.

Efran alone was dry-eyed. "Lady Fallis, do you have any place to go?"

She stood unsteadily. "My brother, Lord Chorley in Crescent Hollow, has offered us refuge, but my carriage will not take us that far." (In fact, the carriage driver had turned back for Eurus the moment she was taken into the fortress.)

"Ah. We will see to that. Excuse me." And Efran turned back up the corridor.

Minka rushed to embrace Fallis. "Efran will get you there, no fear."

"Why are you helping me?" Fallis asked.

"It is the right thing to do," Minka said, a shadow crossing her face. "You and your children are innocent in this."

While waiting, Minka had Fallis brought refreshments in the nursery. After seeing her children whole and having some breakfast, Fallis was calmer, so Minka asked her, "How did you know that Efran had your children?"

Fallis expelled a breath, hand to her chest. "I had arranged to meet my maid with the children at the inn, but someone there saw her, and them, and sent word to Cennick's men. She saw Lord Efran and his soldiers preparing their carriage in the courtyard, and recognized him—I don't know how. She knew that Lord Efran would take the children, if he made it away before Cennick came. So she ran with them down the road and told them to wait. Then she sat in the grass to watch, and his carriage did come, and he sent a woman to pick them up. So my maid came back to tell me that he had them, and I—made away to Westford."

Minka listened. "Who . . . who is your maid?" Who in Eurus would have recognized Efran?

"Her name is Edie," Fallis replied. "She served under Surchatain Lightfoot, who was an ally of my husband's. I asked her to come with me here, but she went home to her father."

Minka's mouth hung open. Edie had been *her* maid in the palace at Westford, and Efran had tended her as well

as Minka when they both had the fever. Yes, she would recognize him; yes, his fondness for children was widely known there. And because he had been kind to Edie, Fallis' children were saved.

Minka was still reeling from this revelation when Connor appeared at the door of the nursery. "Lady Fallis, are you ready to leave?"

"Where?" she asked in sudden fear.

"To Lord Chorley's in Crescent Hollow. We have a carriage and escort ready for you. Come to the courtyard, please," Connor said.

Minka picked up Kethe. "I told you," she told the widow. Minka carried Kethe up the corridor, and Fallis followed with Cady.

They emerged into the courtyard to see a covered carriage emblazoned with the Abbey standard—a cross atop a hill in red on a background of gold—and four armed men in dress uniforms of red and gold. They bowed to her before mounting liveried horses. The driver, also in livery, opened the carriage door as a kitchen assistant brought out two large baskets of trip provisions.

Geneve was not in this party; neither was congenial Gabriel. These were five big, ugly men—except for Barr, who looked too much like Efran to be considered ugly. But he also was proficient with any weapon, and had been in the first party to travel to Crescent Hollow. Efran turned from the carriage with a half-smile.

"Why are you doing this? I cannot repay you!" Fallis cried.

"The satisfaction is payment enough," Efran said. "Please give my regards to Lord Chorley." And he handed her over to be assisted into the carriage behind her children. Then he, Minka, and those in the courtyard watched the carriage roll down the switchback and north to the turnoff for Crescent Hollow.

Minka turned her eyes to her husband. "She couldn't understand what satisfaction you would get from saving her and her children."

Efran nodded slightly. "Yes, that's certainly satisfying. But the greater satisfaction will be in saving them from Cennick."

"I'm sure," she said, smiling. Then she observed, "We were very close to right as to how the children came to be there. Fallis' maid was waiting with them, watching from the grass behind them. She had recognized you in the courtyard getting the carriage ready."

"Oh?" he said.

Minka began, "Yes. She had been a maid at Westford—"

He grimaced, turning to her apologetically. "Minka, I—there were so many that I—had—"

She was laughing at his guilty reaction. "It was Edie!"

He raised his shoulders, neither recognizing the name nor receiving any reassurance from it. Minka explained, "My maid. The one you tended along with me for the fever."

“Oh.” Then he looked slightly offended. “I never touched Edie.”

“No one accused you of it. She recognized you, and knew you’d pick up stray children on the road,” she said.

“Oh.” He checked her face to make sure his unwary admission about the maids hadn’t damped the adoration. But no, it was still there, although tinged with amusement. He had to think about whether that was detrimental to himself or not. Still, the involvement of a maid who knew him at Westford bothered him. “What a strange coincidence.”

“Not at all. Father had been High Counselor to Loizeaux, remember? Edie came down from Eurus with us, so it would have been natural for her to return to Loizeaux’s court after everything fell apart in Westford,” Minka said.

“Why didn’t she just hand the children to me herself?” he asked.

Minka said, “She couldn’t, with Cennick’s men coming!”

“Oh,” he said. Minka was good for explaining things.

As they turned back to the fortress doors, Lyte came abruptly running down the steps. Not even seeing his Captain, he shouted to the courtyard gate sentries, “Where did she go?”

The sentries said nothing. Efran looked at him curiously. “Who, Lyte?”

His head snapped over to the Captain in an unaccustomed dress uniform. Lyte saluted. “A spy from Eurus, Captain.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about that,” he said easily, moving past him with Minka to go in. She glanced back in concern at Lyte scanning the area.

Efran and Minka changed out of their finery, then he sent two men, Gaul and Ellor, to check the opening in the western face of the hillside. They came back to report that the rocks filling the opening had been removed—not washed out, but placed to the side of the opening.

Efran told them, “That’s fine, as long as it’s Cennick’s men doing it and not boys from the plots. Go make sure the families in that area know that it’s a death trap.” By now, Efran was sure that Krems was dead.

“Captain.” They saluted and turned out.

Efran remained in their quarters while Minka retrieved Joshua from the nursery. She lay down with him on the floor of their receiving room to watch him exercise. Efran looked over, smiling, as the five-month-old pushed up beside her, patted her, and drooled on her.

“He must be watching me with you,” Efran observed. She laughed, looking up from the floor.

“The blood,” he murmured.

“What?” she said.

“I remember the blood, after Adele drank the rue. I thought he was dead. Wallace thought he was dead. But here

he is,” Efran said. “And then Bethune saved him at birth, and even saved Adele. That’s when I really began to believe.”

She just listened, watching Joshua slap her stomach, trying to lift his knees. “Now,” he said, leaning back in the chair to look up at the ceiling. “What will Cennick do? It would be unfortunate for him to get hold of Edie.”

Minka replied, “Fallis said she had gone home to her father.”

“Ah. That’s good,” Efran mused, eyes still on the ceiling. “So, how many men can he muster? He bragged to me that he could call out a thousand. Can he now? . . . No. Not after deposing Loizeaux, not to come after me. So. What will he—”

There was a knock on the door, to which Efran called, “Enter.”

A young sentry, Mathurin, stuck his head in and said, “A string of carriages coming up the road to the switchback, Captain.”

He sat up with a bemused scowl; Minka got up with Joshua and went out to look.

Efran made it out the front doors before her, and they looked down the switchback at four carriages advancing up the switchback. Cutch came to Efran’s side to say, “Those are women’s carriages, Captain.”

Efran turned to him. “Women’s . . . ?”

“Yes, sir, you can tell by the bright colors and the gilding. They’ll have extra cushiony seats and stronger springs,” Cutch said.

The gate sentries looked to Efran for guidance on what they should do, and he nodded at them to open the gates. This was done, and the carriages pulled in, taking up most of the front courtyard as the drivers hollered at each other. When stopped, each carriage disgorged three or four young women, chattering and looking around. The men—including Efran—stared.

Then Fanny, in the lead carriage, swished up to Efran to say, “Hi, Captain. We’re refugees and we need someplace to stay.”

Then the Abbey onlookers realized that this was Loizeaux’s courtesan stable coming for shelter from Cennick.

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Chapter 25

Efran gaped at Fanny’s smirk. Other young women came up. “Oh, he’s cute!” Dix squeaked.

“I’ve seen him naked,” Fanny added, the tip of her tongue on her lips.

After handing Joshua off to a maid, Minka positioned herself in front of Efran to reply to Fanny: “Yes, I was in the room when you walked in on him in the bath. He told you to get out.” Efran raised a hand over his smiling mouth at the zeal of his bodyguard.

Minka then told the group in general, “You’re going to have to wait while we decide what to do with you.”

“But we’re hungry!” “We need to eat!” they cried.

Minka looked back to Efran. He shrugged and nodded, so she told them, “All right. Follow me.” Turning, she took Joshua from the maid, then led the women up the fortress steps and through the foyer to the large dining hall. While the kitchen staff prepared eggs, rolls and blackberries for the newest guests, thirteen of them, they laughed and chattered.

Plates and ales were distributed to the refugees as Efran, Minka and Estes conferred. They seemed to agree on a course of action, so while the women ate, Truro went from one to another with a quill set and parchment, taking down their names and home towns.

When he had the necessary information on all thirteen women, he presented the parchment to Efran, who handed it to Estes. Estes made a negative remark, handing it back to Efran. Minka took it from Efran, but both men attempted to take it from her at the same time, so that it ripped a little. After some more discussion, with a score of soldiers watching from the back wall of the dining hall, Efran took the list to the front of the hall.

With teeth slightly gritted in the semblance of a smile, he stood before the women and said, “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress. I am Lord Efran.”

Some cooing and feminine catcalls interrupted him briefly, and the soldiers along the back wall grinned. Efran swallowed and resumed, “I’m sorry that we don’t have the facilities for your . . . line of work. And, we are not creating those facilities. But we understand that you have been evicted without notice, and need to get back on your feet.”

Laughter followed this observation. Efran exhaled and pressed on: “We will house you in Croft’s Inn for one week. At the end of that time, you must have acquired either work or a husband. Elvey’s is an excellent option; she always has openings for several kinds of work, and her people will train you. Those of you who have neither work nor a husband by the end of a week will be transported to your hometown or to Westford. Any of you attempting to resume your line of work here will be immediately transported to Westford. So, good luck,” he ended.

“We need clothes!” someone sounding like Dix cried.

Efran paused. “We’ll find one or two things for you.”

DeWitt was then located and handed the list, being informed of the promises and threats just now made to the women. He, in turn, handed off the list, the information, and the women to his newest assistant, Pieta, who was Bethune’s sister-in-law, and cut of the same cloth.

Within four days, four of the women were working for Elvey, one for Croft, and seven were newly married to soldiers. That left one unemployed and unmarried: Fanny. Pieta reported to DeWitt, who told Estes and Efran, that Fanny claimed to have brought sufficient funds from Eurus to be self-supporting for some time. Efran and Estes then told DeWitt, who told Pieta to tell Fanny that if she were found to be practicing her former trade, or disrupting the lives of married men, she’d be deported at once. Whether the men in question would also be deported was up to their wives.

Connor, when he first heard that Fanny was back in the Abbey Lands, determined to ignore her. Over the next

few days, he weakened, and contrived to accidentally meet her in passing. He nodded civilly; she curled her lip in a manner that stung him so fiercely, he immediately took Lyra to the notary to get married. This made her happier than Fanny had ever been in her life.

Meanwhile, Efran waited for a move from Cennick.

On June 2nd, Weber, whose tannery was located on the Passage near the fortress hill, reported that his sons had seen a group of five strange men camped near the tunnel opening. So Efran dispatched sentries (in workmen's clothing) to keep an eye on them. On June 3rd, the sentries reported that the group outside the tunnel now numbered three. On June 6th, the sentries reported that the group of three left the tunnel entrance and departed the Abbey Lands on foot by the main road. Mounted Abbey sentries (again in work clothes) followed them to the Porterhouse Inn, where they acquired (or reclaimed) horses to ride north out of Westford, two of the horses without riders.

The carriage and bodyguard that had transported Fallis and her children to her brother Lord Chorley in Crescent Hollow returned to report a very warm welcome for the lady. Chorley was so grateful to the Abbey transport team that he hosted a dinner for them which was attended by numerous notables of Crescent Hollow, including Lord Bache. Surchatain Auber even stopped by. At the same time, several nobles were disappointed that Geneve was not part of this group.

A day later, on June 7th, Efran received a message from Cennick requesting a face-to-face meeting to discuss terms of peace. Efran accepted immediately, proposing the meeting to be held at the Porterhouse Inn in Westford. He also stipulated that the number of armed guards accompanying them be limited to five. Cennick accepted, and the meeting was set for June 13th.

"I am going with you," Minka told Efran.

He looked at her, and said, "Yes."

They did not know that another woman in the Abbey Lands who had gotten wind of the meeting was also going, and arrived at the Porterhouse Inn on the day before.

As Efran and Minka set out on horseback for the inn, he was interested to see that she wore a riding dress—not the pants. "Why are you back to a dress today?" he asked.

She returned to him a look that he couldn't interpret right away, then said, "This is my battle gear."

"Ah. From meetings with Adele and Graduliere?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, face forward.

"Excellent," he laughed.

With them rode Efran's unit commanders Neale, Towner, Cutch, Younge, and Lyte, who had been recently promoted. They were to be observers, and wore regular uniforms, as did Efran.

Upon arriving at the Porterhouse, they gave up their horses to the hostler and went to their reserved meeting room, expecting to wait, as Cennick was coming a far longer distance. They ordered a midday meal, which was not nearly as good as what Madea served them every day. And the ale was so inferior to Goadby's, Cutch went outside to spit out his mouthful. "Maybe the beer is better," Efran suggested. It wasn't.

Justinian was here somewhere, but would come nowhere near this meeting, as Efran wanted them to maintain a public distance. Justinian had established himself as an independent information broker, the Man Who Knows Things, and no longer a representative of the Abbey, which enabled Efran to get much wider and more useful information from him. He also disseminated what information about the Abbey that Efran told him to.

Cennick and his men arrived about two hours after the Abbey group. As a courtesy, they all stood upon his entrance, including Efran and Minka. Cennick reached out to shake hands with Efran, then looked over to Minka. "Good to see you, Lady Minka. How is Adele?"

"Doing well, thank you," Minka said.

"Ah. Good." Cennick gestured to his men to sit behind him, then sat at the center table with Efran and Minka. Likewise, Efran's men sat in a row behind him. "I trust that she was delivered safely?" Cennick continued.

Minka smiled but said nothing. Efran said, "Here is the ale from the dining room, but you may prefer the beer. The ale isn't Goadby's."

"Ah. That's good to know," Cennick said, leaning back. He gestured to one of his men: "Get us dinner and the beer." As that man went out, Cennick said, "I trust there is no ill will for my taking the place of Loizeaux? He had a habit of sending armies after you."

Efran shrugged. "So I will have no ill will if you will not send armies after me."

Cennick laughed, then asked, "Whatever happened to Lady Fallis and her children?"

Efran didn't bother assuming his honest face when he replied, "I have no idea."

"Ah," Cennick said meaningfully. "And you didn't happen to receive a train of courtesans at your Abbey, did you?"

"A train of courtesans," Efran repeated as if it were a wonder. "I don't think so." He turned around to his men. "Did any of you see a train of courtesans?"

The five of them returned uniformly blank, passive expressions, shaking their heads or opening empty hands: "No, Captain." "No, sir." "Not to my knowledge."

Efran turned back to Cennick with raised shoulders. Minka looked off at the middle distance. Efran was going to find out who was communicating Abbey affairs to Cennick and stop it post haste.

"Well," Cennick said, observing them all, "we're starting off well." His man returned with a kitchen worker rolling in a cart of plates and beers. So they set to eating while Efran's group waited. "Do you not have any questions of me?" Cennick asked over his plate.

Efran said, "What are your immediate plans?"

"Oh! Well." Cennick appeared surprised at the question. "I suppose I need a wife. Is Adele available?" he asked, looking at Minka.

"No. I'm sorry," she said with an appearance of genuine regret.

“That’s disappointing,” he said. Minka looked sympathetic.

There was silence while the Eurussians ate, then Cennick said, “So Webbe is Surchatain of Westford after all. Is that right?”

Efran said, “That is what I’ve heard, but I haven’t confirmed it.”

Cennick looked up. “How difficult can it be to confirm?”

Efran barely shook his head. “It’s not a high priority.”

Cennick laughed. “Now there we’re in agreement. So, what other questions do you have for me?”

“What do you want from me?” Efran asked bluntly.

“Your Treasury,” Cennick said. This abrupt assertion in a peace conference startled several people, including Cennick. After catching himself too late, he laughed as though he were joking. Taking the cue, his men behind him laughed.

“How do you propose to take it?” Efran asked, not laughing.

“If I were to attempt such a foolish effort, it would be in a way you would never expect,” Cennick said, smiling. Apparently, he had not received the report concerning the two men who entered the tunnel but never came out.

Efran nodded pensively. “Perhaps I should warn you that it is protected by things that bite, which I have seen up close.” He lifted his foot to prop his boot on the table and display the row of three holes in the toe. Cennick squinted at the bite holes while his men leaned forward to look. Minka gasped, turning to him quickly.

He looked back at her. “You got to examine me for bites. You didn’t examine my boots.”

This obviously unscripted interchange carried weight, and Efran’s men regarded the uneasy faces of the men behind Cennick.

“That’s cute,” Cennick said. “The holes could have been made by an awl, anything.”

“You’re welcome to try it,” Efran laughed, putting his foot back down to the floor.

One of Cennick’s men leaned forward to whisper in his ear. By the expression on his face, Efran thought he might be just now getting the report on the two missing men. Cennick nodded shortly and returned to his dinner, still transparently searching for some satisfaction, something to justify the trip down.

Efran and his men waited in silence. Finally, Cennick pushed away his plate and said, “I must say, I never realized how famous you are until I came to Eurus and heard all about Efran, the Polonti Captain who kidnapped a Chataine. Captain Efran, the lover of many women . . . married or . . . very young.” Cennick’s gaze settled on Minka as he said this.

Efran leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table, but Minka breathed in steely contempt, “Are you impugning my honor, sir?”—in implying that she had been underage when Efran had made her his wife.

Efran slowly straightened, gazing at Cennick. Efran's men went rigid. Cennick's men began sweating: an insult like that directed at a man's wife required that he avenge her by whatever means he chose. Cennick had brought his best negotiators to this meeting, not his best fighters.

Cennick gaped at her. "No!" he laughed. "No, no, of course not, and I do apologize for any inference that I was. I only meant to remark on what a fortunate choice of wife he made."

Minka replied stonily, "I don't consider you to be judge of my worth, sir."

Efran looked at her in delight, then at Cennick for his reply. Cennick laughed nervously, "No, no, lady, just—an admirer."

Minka looked away in rejection of his praise, at which Efran stood. His officers did likewise. He said, "I believe we've exhausted all benefit from this meeting. Please message me with your thoughts, Cennick, and I do hope that no more of your men are lost in my cavern waters."

Cennick nodded tightly; Efran and his group left the room. As they were retrieving their horses from the inn's stables, Efran said, "Well, that round goes to the lady, since she left our opponent bleeding from the ears." His men grinned, and had she been a man, they would have clapped her on the shoulder. Minka smoothed her battle skirt in satisfaction.

But after they had left, and Cennick's group was preparing to leave, another carriage was dispatched from the inn's stableyard. Its driver brought it around to the door where Cennick and his men were departing. Fanny leaned out of the carriage window to speak to Cennick, then opened the door for him to ride with her back to Eurus as his men took charge of his horse.

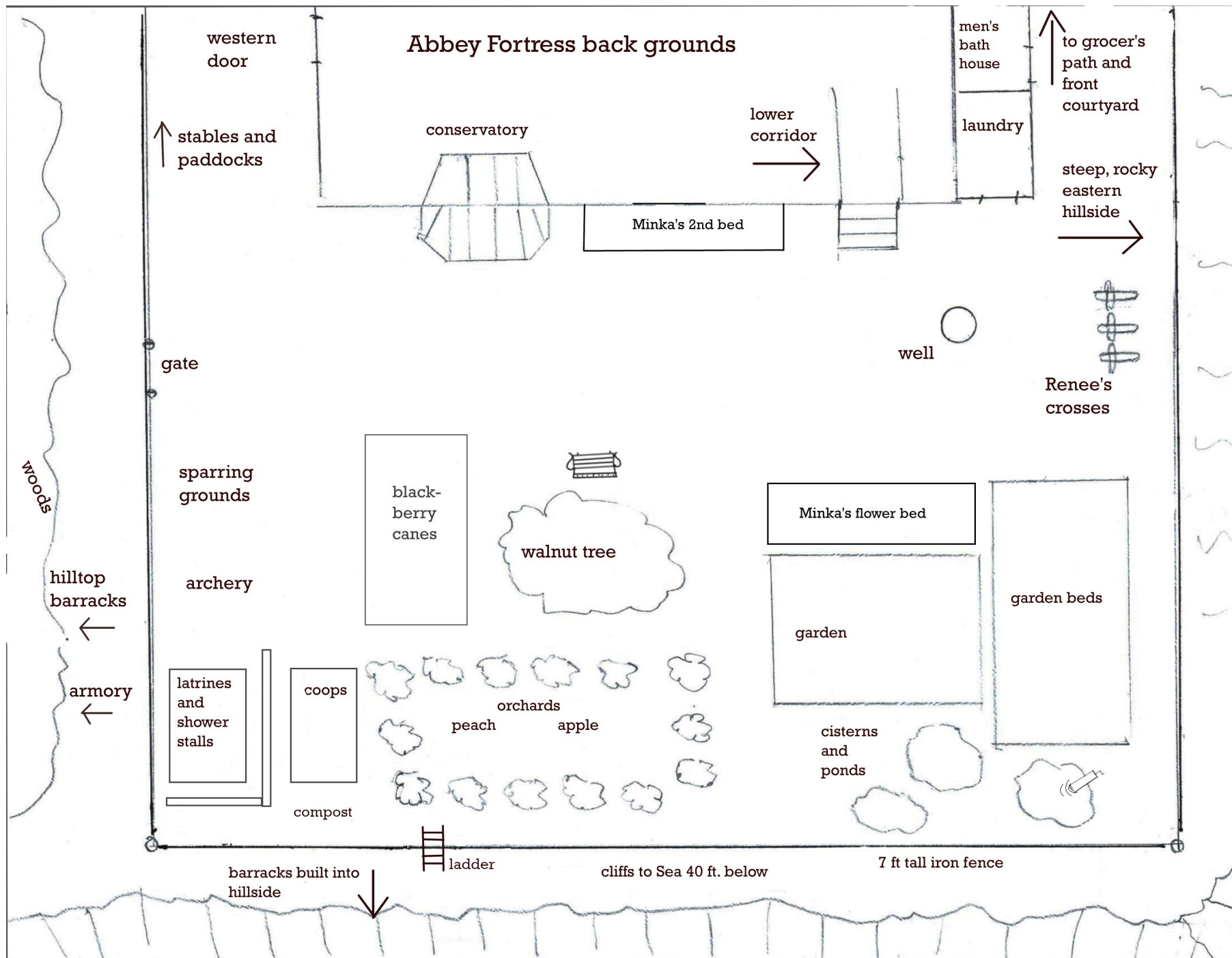
This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on June 13th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and Krems* (Book 6)

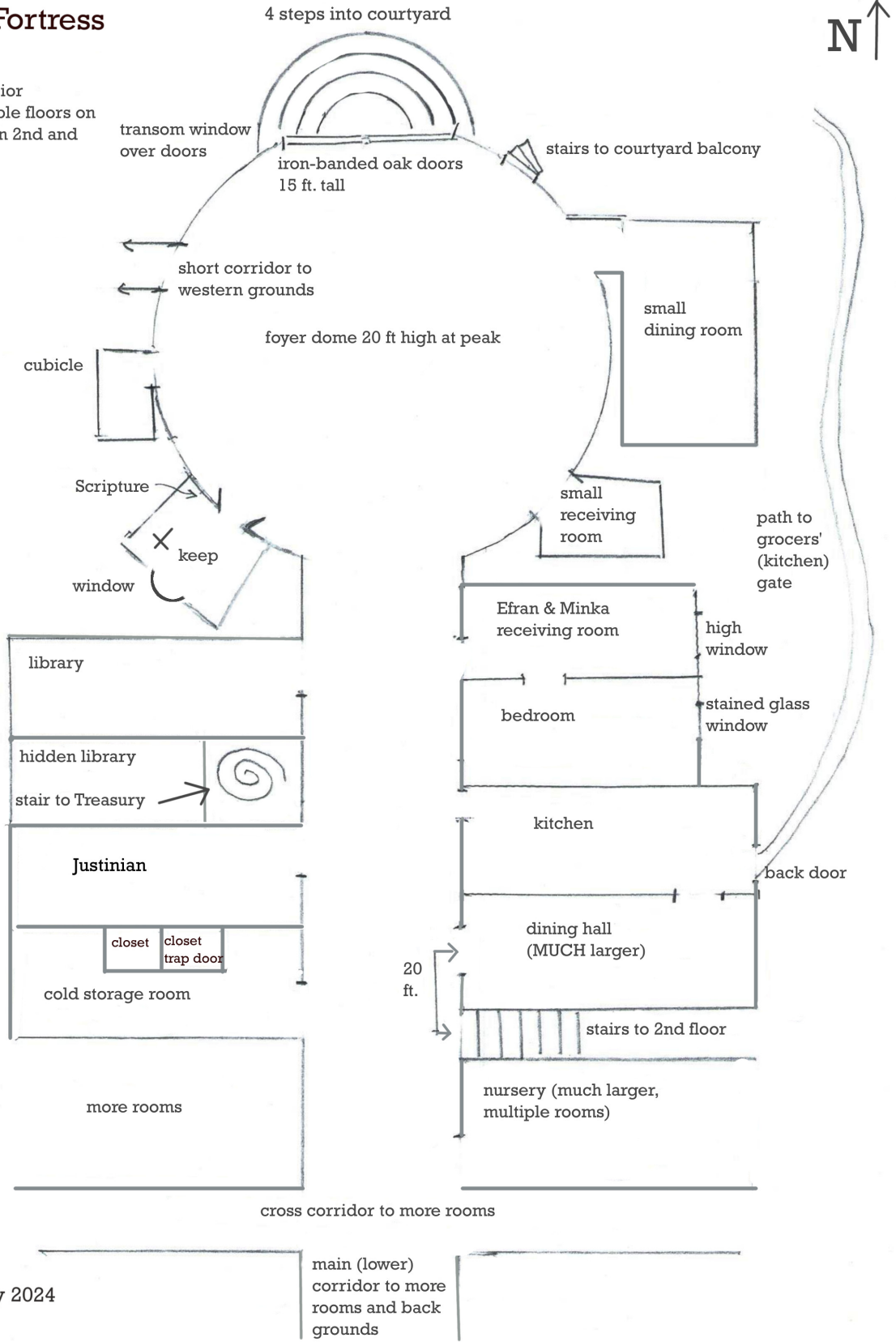
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| | |
|--|--|
| Adele—ah DELL | Kethe—keeth |
| <i>aina</i> —AY nah (child who commands animals) | Kewe—CUE ee |
| Allyr—AL er | Knapp—nap |
| apoplectic—aa puh PLEK tik (extremely indignant) | Loizeaux—lwah ZOH |
| Arne—arn | Loseby—LOWS bee |
| Auber—aw BER | Lowry—LAHW ree |
| Aurelia—ah REE lee ah | Lyra—LEER ah |
| Awfyn—AWE fin | Madea—mah DAY ah |
| Bache—botch | Marguerite—mar ger EET (hard g) |
| Bethune—beh THUNE | Mathurin—mah THUR in |
| bonhomie—BAHN uh mee (easygoing friendship) | Meineke—MINE eh kee |
| Bowring—BOWE ring | Minka—MINK ah |
| cache—kash | <i>moekolohe</i> —moh ee koh LO ee |
| Cady—KAY dee | Monsell—mon SELL |
| Cennick—SIN ick (cynic) | Mouris—MORE iss |
| Chataine—sha TANE | Nicarber—neh CAR bur |
| Chior—KEE or | Nini—NEE nee |
| Chorley—CHORE lee | onerous—AWN er uhs (burdensome) |
| connoisseur—kah neh SUR | opprobrium—uh PROH bree um (censure) |
| Conte—cahnt | <i>paina</i> —pay EE nah (feast) |
| coterie—KOH te ree (inner circle) | Pia—PEE ah |
| coup—koo | Pieta—pie ATE ah |
| courtesan—KOR tuh zahn | pique—peek |
| Doane—rhymes with <i>loan</i> | Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language) |
| Eddie—EE dee | Polontis—puh LON tis (the region) |
| Efran—EFF run | Prie Mer—pre MARE |
| Eledith—ELL eh dith | <i>pua</i> —PYU ah (come) |
| Elvey—ELL vee | regime—reh ZHEEM |
| en masse—ahn mahs (all together, all at once) | Reinagle—REN ah gull |
| Erastus—eh RAS tis | Rinkart—RING kart |
| Estes—ESS tis | Routh—roth (rhymes with <i>moth</i>) |
| Eurus—YOUR us | speleothems—SPIL ee uh thems |
| Eurusian—your uh SEE un | Spitta—SPEH tah |
| Eustace—YOUS tis | Stephanos—steh FAHN os |
| ewer—YOU ehr | Surchatain—SUR cha tan |
| Fallis—FAL iss | Sybil—SEH bull |
| Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g) | Teschner—TESH nur |
| Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g) | Therese (Sister)—ter EESE |
| Goadby—GOAD bee | Tindley—TEND lee |
| Goss—gahs | Trina—TREE nah |
| Graduliere—gra DUE lee air | Webbe—web |
| Graetrix—GRAY trix | Weber—WE bur |
| Greves—greevs | |
| Hartshough—HART soh | |
| <i>hele</i> —HAY lay (attack) | |
| ingot—ENG guht | |
| Justinian—jus TIN ee un | |
| Kaas—kahs | |
| Keble—KEE buhl | |
| Kelsey—KELL see | |



Abbey Fortress Interior

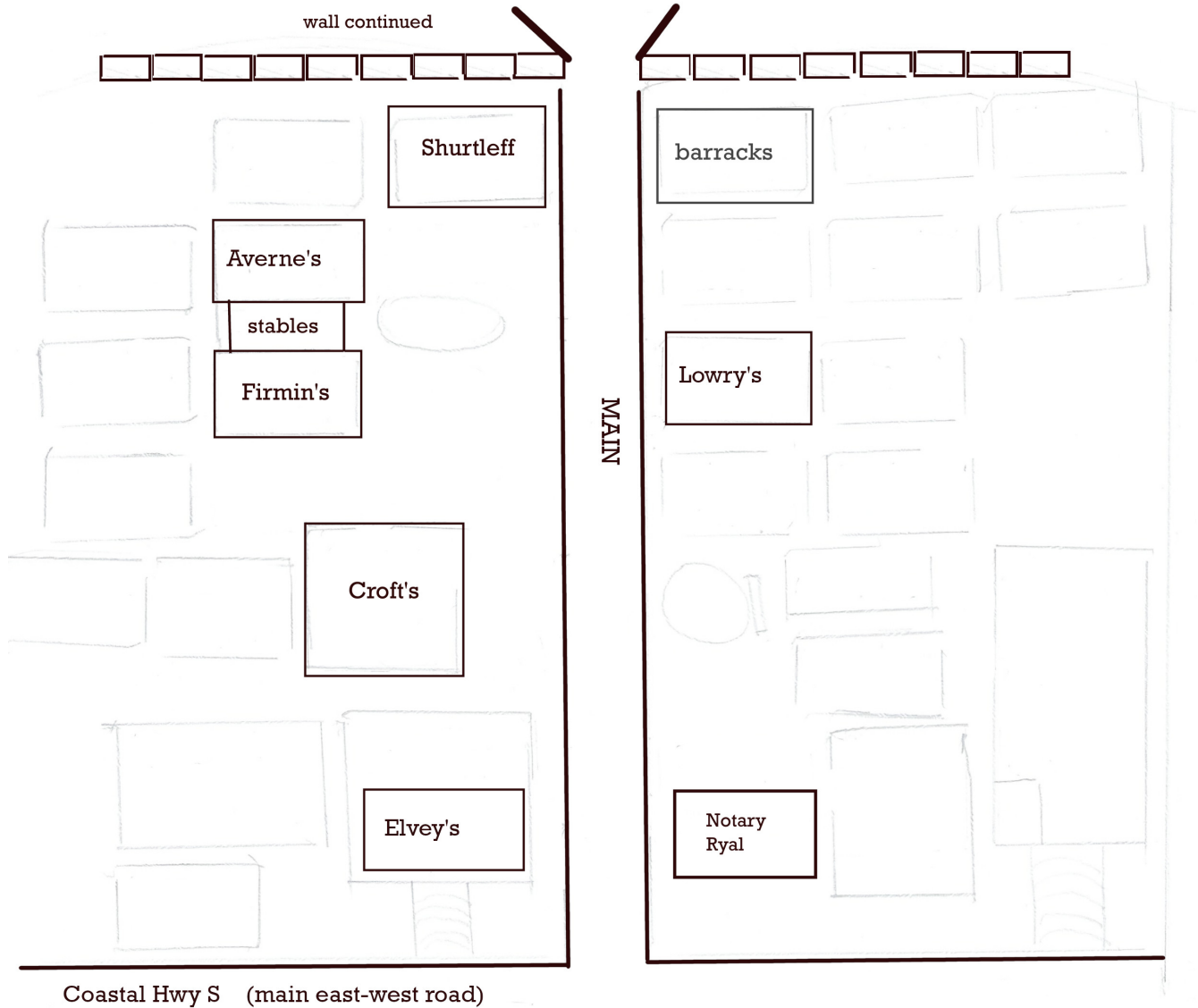
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



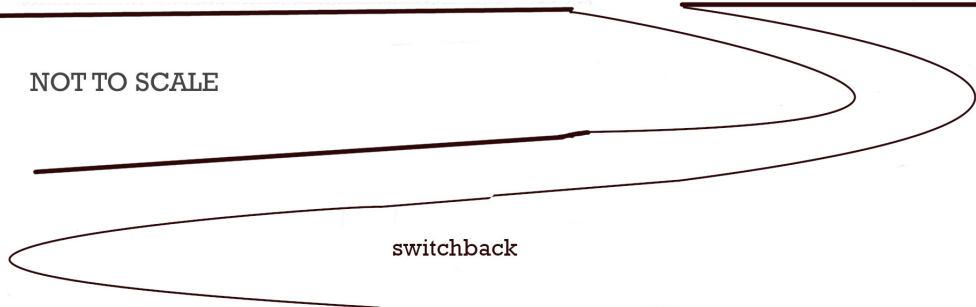
NOT TO SCALE

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Abbey Lands Main Road

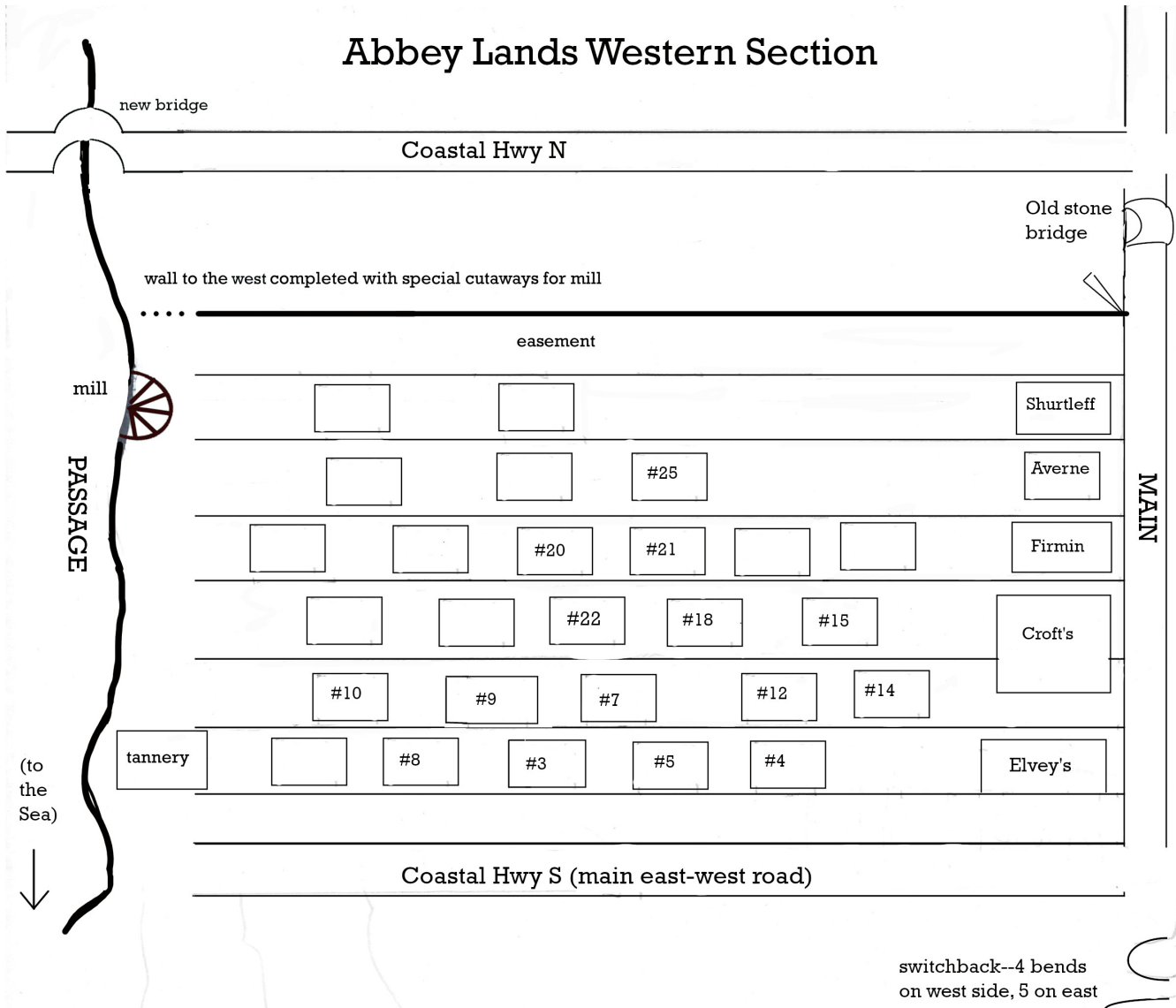


NOT TO SCALE



switchback

Abbey Lands Western Section



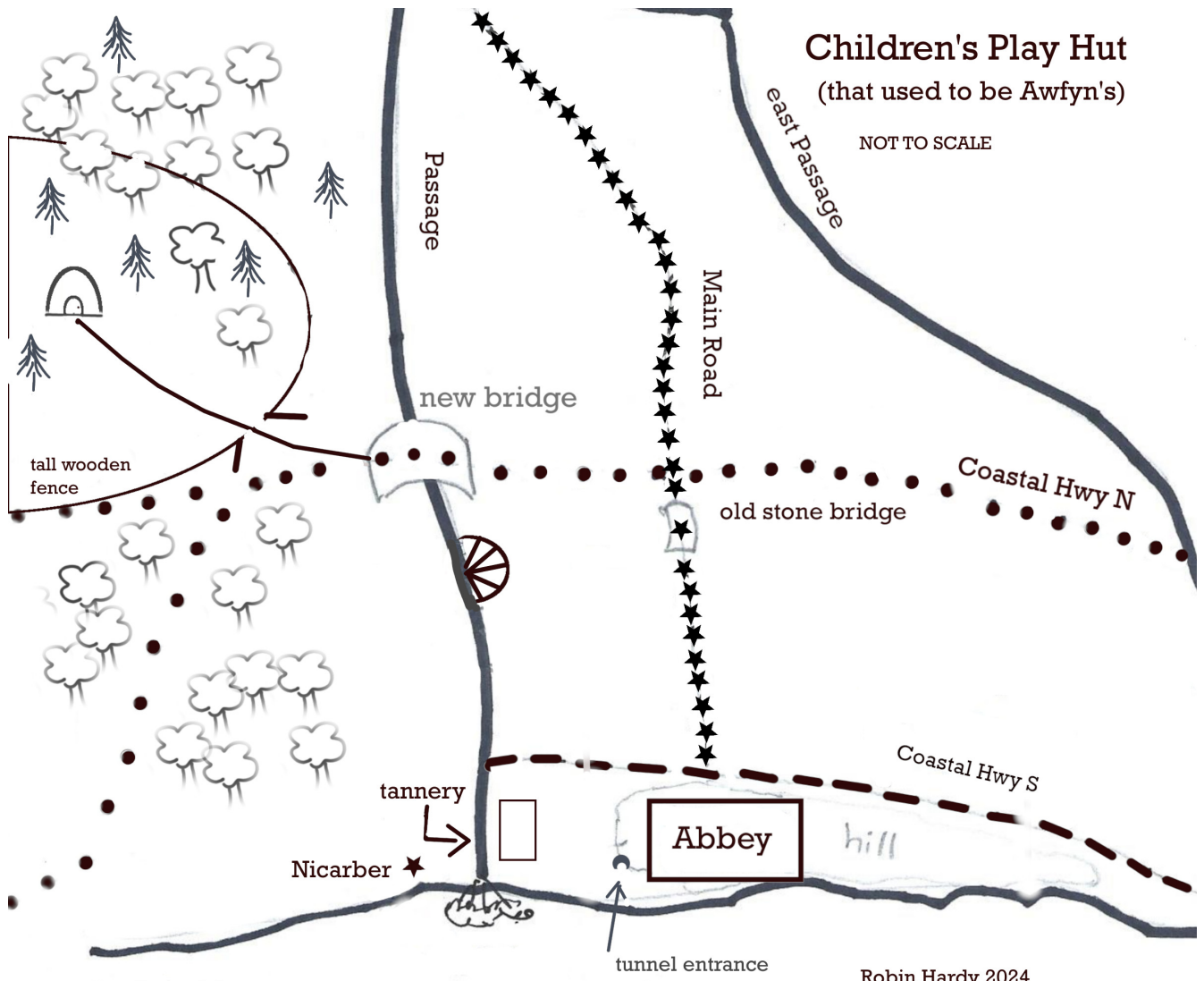
KEY

- 3 - Mouris' Plants
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)

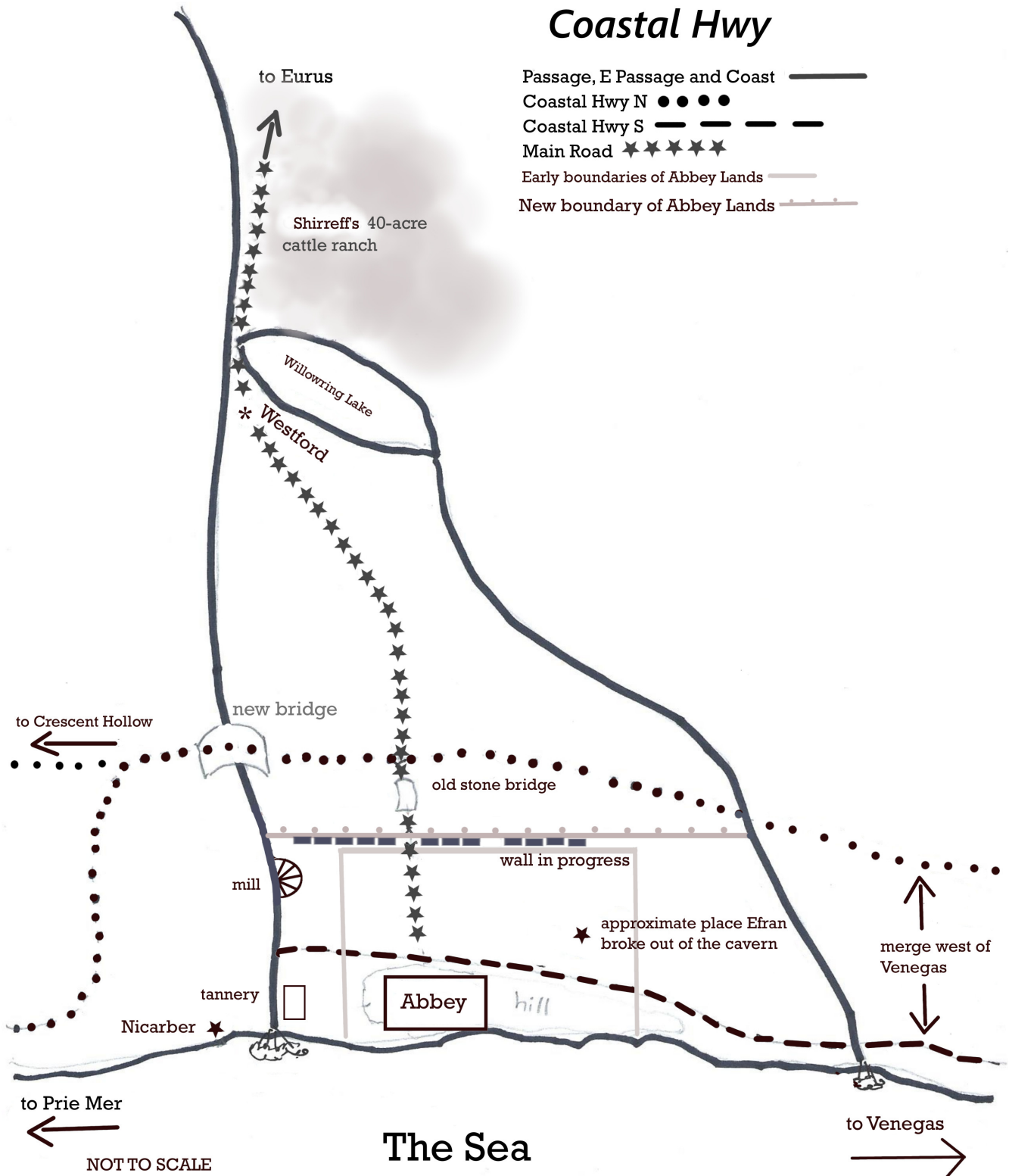
7 ft tall iron fence

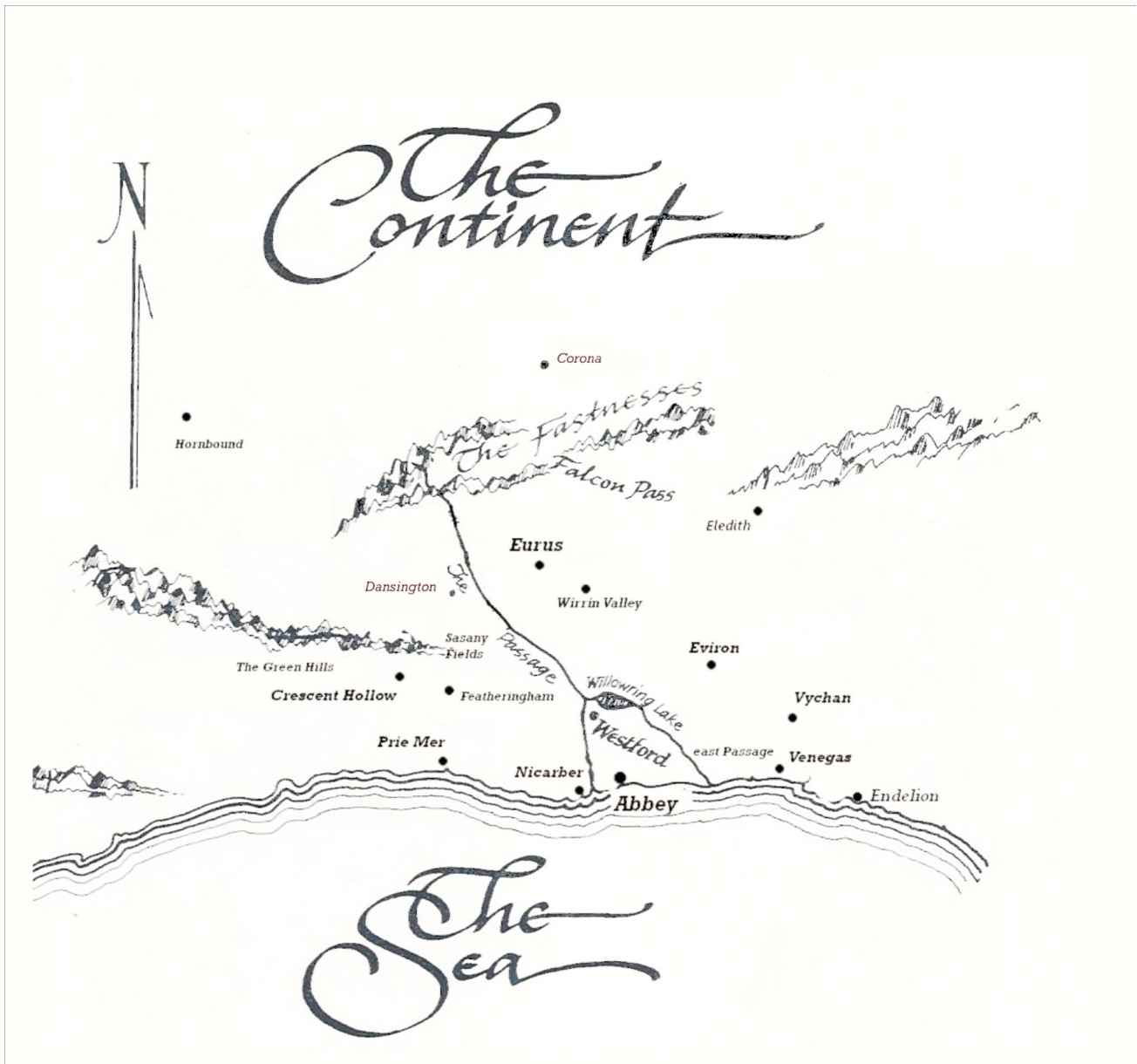
FORTRESS

woods



Coastal Hwy





Krems (Book 6:
Lord Efran and Krems)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



This one was weird and fun. First, there's this great [cavern](#)¹ with a reflective pool and rocks to hide behind. All it needs to fit the story perfectly is a ladder leading up to a trap door in a fortress closet. For Efran, the face I finally chose was that of our old heartthrob, David McCallum (below). When I started writing in my preteen years, I based all my story lines on "[The Man from U.N.C.L.E.](#)" My heroine was a preteen who outsmarted all the grownups around her. I drew illustrations for those, too.



In looking for an image to represent Krems, I ran across an article about the health benefits of scampering (if I'm remembering that correctly). It included a photo of a dedicated scamperer demonstrating his technique. I saw Krems immediately. So I cartoonized the image and stuck it in the cavern. It produced one of the best illustrations I've done yet.²

Robin Hardy
April 18, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by Lisa Dubois ([GTF06](#)) on Pixabay, it is a view of the Lacave Caves in Lot, France.
2. After writing this, I went back to try to find the article again, searching under every term I could think of. Never found it a second time.