The background of the cover is an aerial photograph of ocean waves. The top half of the image shows a golden, hazy sky, likely from a sunset or sunrise, with light rays filtering through. Below the sky, the ocean waves are seen from above, with white foam and varying shades of blue and green. The text is overlaid on this background.

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

Book 3

Lord Efran at
the Flood

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

In the early fall, Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, rode out with his wife Minka to visit the estate and Gascon cattle farm of his ally Lord Cennick north of Willowring Lake. With Efran's backing, Cennick had lately declared himself Surchatain of Westford to surprisingly little opposition. Also, he had married Minka's sister Adele, now five months pregnant. Adele, five years older than Minka, was a celebrated beauty.

As Efran and Cennick departed his manor house on horseback at a walk, Efran looked ahead at a fenced pen which contained cows with their calves and weaners. "How much of your forty acres do you have fenced? Or do you let them roam free?" Efran asked.

"Oh, I couldn't let them roam over it all; I'd never find them again," Cennick laughed. "We have movable fencing that can be relocated to fresh pasture when needed. The bulls are kept separate from all the rest until breeding, of course; we have springers and the newly calved also isolated. But we have much of the land planted for winter feed. Sorghum is being harvested now. Come ride out and have a look." Cennick turned his horse, nodding for Efran to follow.

But Efran looked back to the side of the house where Minka's horse was tethered. "Let's wait a moment; I'm sure Minka will want to ride out with us."

"Would she not rather stay and talk with her sister?" Cennick asked in mild surprise.

"Let us see," Efran said guardedly.

Inside the manor house, Minka was sitting with Adele in what she called her resting room: a large, lavishly appointed room with windows, a fireplace, lush textiles and heavy furniture. Adele, lying on her daybed, groaned, "Oh, I'm going to be so fat before this is all over. This baby is going to be huge, I can tell. Efran is big." There was a good chance that Efran was the father: before he and Minka were married, the night before his scheduled hanging, Adele had come to him with the implicit offer of saving his life. He had accepted.

Minka opened her mouth and closed it again, finding nothing to say. Adele went on, "Aren't most men covered with hair? Efran's body is so smooth. Why is that?" Minka, swaying slightly, raised her shoulders in professed ignorance.

"He should cut his hair," Adele said judgmentally. "He wouldn't have to tie it back like that if he'd cut it. But he's so vain about it being so thick and black, he has to show it off. Cennick would look stupid with his hair grown out like that."

Minka was not about to say a word to that. Referring back to Adele's earlier comment, Minka said, "I think that you look very slender still for five months along. I don't think you have to worry at all about getting fat."

"Graduliere was fat," Adele said contemptuously, referring to her previous husband. "But in some ways, that was more comfortable for me. Efran is all over hard; I couldn't find a soft spot on him anywhere. Are all Polonti like that?" she turned to ask seriously.

Minka lurched up. "Can I get you something to drink, Adele?"

“The maids will do that. Sit down,” Adele said irritably.

Minka slowly sank down. “The room is lovely. It was so nice of Cennick to give you a private resting room.”

“Well, of course,” Adele said. “Don’t tell me that you have to share chambers with Efran. Men are so loud and messy. Does Efran snore? I wasn’t there long enough to hear.”

Minka stood with resolve. “Excuse me, dear sister. I have to—go do something.” She walked composedly from the room, but ran out the door to the side yard about three minutes after Efran had asked Cennick to wait.

Outside, Cennick said, “Oh, here she comes.” Efran turned to watch Minka lift her foot high to jam it into the stirrup and throw a leg over the saddle, her riding skirt flying up in an arc. He sighed in distress for her, having to listen to Adele.

She approached them at a trot with a bright, false smile on her face. “Thank you for waiting for me. Poor Adele is exhausted. She just needed to rest.”

Cennick said, “Yes, it’s been a very hard pregnancy for her, the poor dear. But since you’re here, we’ll go look at the sorghum fields. I’m very pleased with the crop this year.”

“Excellent idea,” Efran said, looking at Minka. She smiled serenely at him.

They three enjoyed a lovely October morning ride to the fields. The late summer rains had been generous for a change, so the pearl millet and napier grass were tall and healthy. As the riders drew up to the edge of the nearest sorghum field, Cennick raised a hand to his harvesters, who waved in return.

Looking over the tall stalks topped with heads of reddish-brown grain, Minka breathed, “That is so beautiful.”

“Yes, it is,” Cennick smiled. “I am appreciative of the bounty, the means to feed my cattle which feed so many people.”

“Well said,” Efran murmured.

As they turned back toward the house, Cennick said, “Now you will enjoy the best roasted beef on the Continent.”

“I wish we could,” Efran groaned sincerely. “But—”

He was in the process of making up some excuse for leaving when Minka interrupted, “Of course we will. Thank you, dear Cennick.”

“You are most welcome, Lady Minka,” he said happily, and Efran shot her a look of gratitude.

Cennick’s guests were given the opportunity to wash up, during which time Efran kissed Minka solidly, then they were escorted by Cennick’s household steward to a covered verandah overlooking fields bordered by old trees on one side and the Passage on the other.

“What a wonderful view,” Minka breathed.

“Thank you, Lady; we do enjoy it very much,” the steward replied.

Efran looked out to the river. “How close does the Passage run to Cennick’s cattle pens? I hear it’s due to overflow.”

“Pshaw!” The steward waved dismissively. “It overflows seldom, and then only mildly.”

“Really,” Efran said, knowing differently.

Cennick then appeared. “Ah! You’re here. And I’m so glad that my dear wife—” He stopped abruptly when he noticed that his dear wife was nowhere around. He resumed, “Please be seated.”

As Efran sat Minka before taking a chair himself, Cennick told a servant, “See if the Lady Adele is feeling well enough to join us.” The servant bowed and exited while others entered with platters of croissants, creamed parsnips, seasoned greens, and delicately browned slices of beef with pink centers. Another servant began pouring the wine.

While Efran and Minka sat with hands in their laps, Cennick began serving his own plate. He looked up in surprise to see them unmoving. “I hope you are not offended that servants don’t fill your plate. I find that intrusive.”

“No, Cennick. We are waiting on Lady Adele,” Efran said.

“Oh, don’t bother. Please begin,” Cennick said.

So his guests began hesitantly to do so. Efran took a platter from the center of the table and held it for Minka to serve herself, then balanced it on one hand to get what he wanted. They filled their plates satisfactorily this way and began eating. “The parsnips are wonderful. What is that seasoning?” Minka turned to ask Efran.

Efran hazarded, “Nutmeg?” as he looked at Cennick.

“I have no idea. Cooking is for women,” their host said. Fortunately, he didn’t notice Efran smiling at the wall or Minka laughing at her plate.

At this time, Adele came to the verandah. Efran put his napkin aside and stood to bow to her. She barely glanced at him. Cennick said, “Thank you for joining us, my dear.” A servant came up to seat her; another servant held a plate, waiting for her to tell him what she wanted. Efran sat to resume eating.

Minka watched surreptitiously as Adele looked over the serving platters without enthusiasm. “I’m so tired of beef,” she uttered. Cennick did not seem to hear her, so neither Efran nor Minka responded.

“Oh—” Efran looked up at him. “Did Graduliere respond to your offer?”

Adele looked at him sharply but Cennick shook his head. “Not yet. Should I—”

Adele interrupted, “What are you offering him, darling?”

Cennick looked at her kindly. “Political conciliation, dearest.” To Efran, he said, “Should I wait?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Is he blustering, then?” Cennick asked, lifting his goblet.

“Yes,” Efran said. As he speared another slice of beef, his eyes met Cennick’s, who nodded.

Adele shifted in annoyance at being shut out of something involving her ex-husband. The servant with the plate continued to wait for her to make selections. Cennick looked up, then, to say, “Lady Adele will have the bread and parsnips. Boiled water, no wine.”

Adele said nothing; the servant filled her plate accordingly, and Efran and Minka barely avoided glancing at each other.

Finishing off her slice of beef with difficulty, Minka said, “This is truly wonderful. Madea gets beef from here, doesn’t she?” she asked Efran. Adele looked down her nose at her little sister.

“I thought so, but I don’t know if it’s enough. Do you know how much we order?” Efran asked Cennick.

“We will find out,” Cennick said. Lifting a finger to a servant, he said, “Ask Steward Shirreff to step out here with his order book.” The servant bowed and departed.

Efran raised his face, thinking. “Madea brought down the butcher from Westford, as well. His name is Lowry. He must be on your order list, with the number of leaseholders we have now.”

A nicely dressed man entered the verandah with a thick book. Cennick said, “Ah. Lord Efran, Lady Minka, please meet my Beef Steward Shirreff.” Adele rolled her eyes.

The steward bowed. “Such a great honor. How may I assist your guests, sir?”

Cennick said, “They want to know what the Abbey Fortress orders, Steward.”

“Ah. Let me look.” The Steward flipped open his book, turned pages, and ran his finger down a column. “Fifty pounds a week, my lord.”

“Oh, that’s ridiculous,” Minka huffed. Adele snorted.

“Not enough,” Efran agreed. “Triple that. What does Lowry the butcher order? He has recently relocated to the Abbey lands.”

The steward searched his book for a moment. “I’m afraid I don’t have him down here, my lord.”

Efran said, “Then give me a price list to take back to him, with an invitation to order.”

“I will draw that up immediately. Is there anything else, my lord?” he asked Cennick.

“No, Steward, I think that will do,” Cennick said, pleased.

“Very good, my lord.” Swathed in importance, the Steward left the verandah.

Efran lifted his goblet to Cennick. “I shall be highly celebrated in the Abbey Fortress when word gets out.”

Cennick was opening his mouth to reply when Adele said, “Oh, but you already are, darling Efran.”

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Chapter 2

Three heads swiveled to Adele. Efran, smiling, leaned back. “For what am I celebrated?”

Adele was poised to reply when she caught the veiled look on her husband’s face and paused. Efran was looking at her, so didn’t see it, but Minka saw Cennick’s expression and interpreted it at once. She said to Efran, “Why, for your interview of Lord Cennick, of course.”

Efran turned to look at her. Minka continued, “And how you cut Graduliere off at the knees with the decree of divorce. Adele was just telling me this morning how grateful she was for that.”

He continued to look at Minka, but Cennick immediately relaxed. He said, “I as well, Efran.” Then he laughed, “Though I most enjoyed your drilling me on the Law. I never thought to be so glad for the many hours of study.”

Efran admitted, “You forced me to reread *Ares of Westford* to find out what his contention was with the Law’s provision for Commander. And lo, I found that you were right.” Shaking his head, Efran drained his goblet.

Cennick grinned and Efran stood, done with Adele’s company. Minka stood as he said, “Thank you for the tour and the hospitality, Cennick. I look forward to hearing—further developments.”

“Of course,” Cennick replied, standing. Then he nodded to a servant, who hurried out.

In leaving the table, Efran stopped before Adele, still seated, and bowed to her, which is all he trusted himself to do. She turned her eyes away.

Minka extended her hand to Cennick. “Thank you sir; it was most enjoyable.”

“You gratify me, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing over her hand.

She went over to lean down and kiss Adele’s cheek, whereupon Adele whispered something. There was no change in Minka’s expression as she straightened.

When Efran exited the verandah, hand at Minka’s back, the steward appeared. “Ah! I’m glad I caught you, Lord Efran. Here is your price list for the Abbey butcher.”

“Thank you, Steward.” Efran took it, folding it to put in his pocket. He raised a hand to Cennick and walked Minka out.

As they exited the manor, a stablehand was bringing their horses. Efran assisted her to mount just because he wanted to and not because she needed help (although the stirrups were always too high for her). He jumped up into his saddle, then they loped away.

When they were out of sight of the manor, he slowed his horse to a walk; looking back to him, she stopped. He came abreast of her and said, “I don’t believe that Adele thanked you for anything I did. What did she really say?”

She laughed weakly, turning her horse to walk. Efran walked beside her. Minka sighed, “I have no idea what she was about to say at the table, but she spent the whole time with me describing your body in detail. She’s in love with you, Efran.”

He looked off to say, “No, she’s not. She’s in love with whatever she doesn’t have at the moment. Were I to divorce you and marry her, I’d be hearing that I’m a filthy Polonti for the rest of my life. Still, that was quite decent of you to cover for her, but—why? Did you think she was about to hurt my feelings?”

“No,” she said. “I . . . saw Cennick’s face when she said that, and it was . . . disturbing.”

“Do you think he would hurt her?” Efran asked.

“No,” she said hesitantly, “but if she makes herself so disagreeable that he divorces her, she’ll have to come live with us, and I don’t think I could endure that.”

“Ah. So you acted in self-preservation,” he said, smiling.

“Oh, yes,” she said quickly.

“All right. What did she say when you kissed her goodbye?” he continued.

“You notice too much,” she objected.

“But what did she say?” he pressed.

“I don’t know that I will tell you,” she said dubiously.

“But you will,” he said, turning his horse into hers so that both stopped. “I will win on this,” he smiled, leaning over to brush his lips to hers.

“You are not cute when you crinkle your eyes at me,” she whispered.

“So you told me,” he said. Then he sat back and waited.

She turned her head, looking for a way past him, but he was effectively blocking her. Then she looked around the meadows, just enjoying the view while he waited.

She held out against his patient eyes for as long as she could, then she groaned, lowering her shoulders in defeat. “She said she was going to have you again.”

He backed up doubtfully, assessing her face. Then he apparently decided she was telling the truth. “Tell her I said, ‘No.’”

Minka smiled and they rode toward home.

Upon arriving at the Abbey Lands, Efran delivered Shirreff’s price list to Lowry the butcher, who was pleased to have it. Then they stopped by Ryal’s new notary shop to look around.

When they entered, they found him occupied with a customer, a man. Ryal looked up to say, “Good afternoon,

Lord Efran, Lady Minka. I will be with you momentarily.”

“No rush, Ryal,” Efran said, looking around in satisfaction at the nice new shop. It was well constructed, well laid out and larger than the old shop. It had windows and a door in the back as well as the front—a much better grade of glass that was neither warped nor green—and a deeper counter. Efran was pleased. “May I look in back?” he asked.

Ryal glanced up. “Certainly.” So Efran went into the back rooms to look around. The interview room was nice and big, with shelves, and there was even an extra bedroom which also held bookshelves. Some books remained, but the shelves were mostly stocked with large ledgers, plats, maps and old record books.

Ryal entered this back room and Efran turned to see him wave a parchment. “Another record I need to file,” Ryal said, and paused. “I think you should know about this, Efran.”

“Yes?” Efran said.

Ryal showed him the document. “It is a request for an exhumation that I have granted, to take place immediately. I think you should attend.”

“Who is to be exhumed?” Efran asked.

“Lady Kelsey,” Ryal said. Efran shook his head in ignorance. “Lord Cennick’s wife who died of the fever. Supposedly.”

Efran blinked. “For what cause is she to be exhumed?”

“An eyewitness statement that the lady did not die at all, but was taken away in the middle of the night,” Ryal said.

“Ah, no,” Efran said decisively. “Do you know who the witness is? Have you interviewed him?”

“Yes, and yes,” Ryal said. “I have agreed to protect his identity, as he fears retaliation. But I talked to him when he was in Westford, and his statement merits this step.”

“Then let us go,” Efran said, leading out to the front of the shop. When he found it empty, he froze. Then he looked out the front window to see Minka outside talking to a man whose back was to the shop. The suit struck Efran as familiar, but he couldn’t place it right away.

Efran opened the front door and descended the steps, eyes on the man’s back. When Minka lifted her face, the man turned around. It was Graduliere’s son Justinian, wearing the same suit that his kidnappers, including Efran, had gathered up from his room.

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Chapter 3

Efran greeted Justinian, “I see you got a new feather. And had the hat reblocked. It looks much improved.”

Justinian cracked a smile. “Hullo, Efran. Are you coming to the event?”

“The exhumation? Yes. Are you the eyewitness?” Efran asked.

“No, no—just an interested party,” Justinian said.

Ryal, behind Efran, said, “Justinian and I are going in my carriage. You and Minka may follow us.”

“Yes,” Efran said.

While Ryal and Justinian went around back, Efran drew up to Minka to murmur, “Cennick told me about this, and there’s nothing to it. Graduliere is trying to blackmail him with an empty rumor. This is what we were talking about at the table.”

Minka raised skeptical eyebrows. “According to Justinian, there *is* something to it. The witness is apparently a friend of his, a driver at a carriage company in Eurus. The man swears that in early July, he was hired to pick up a woman from the Porterhouse Inn in Westford at night and take her to a house in Eurus. She was seen off from Westford by a man that the driver did not know, until he proclaimed himself Surchatain,” Minka said.

Efran objected, “That woman could have been a sister, an aunt—”

“He kissed her and told her he would come for her when it was safe,” Minka said.

Efran shook his head. “There are too many gaps. There could be too many explanations.”

“True. But Ryal has to start with the obvious: the exhumation. And then, if necessary, Justinian’s friend,” Minka said.

Efran looked down at her, raising his chin slightly. Recognizing his proprietary look, she smiled. “I like Justinian,” she admitted. “True, he is a wastrel—and Graduliere’s son—but he stands by his friends. He helped you of his own accord with the wolf hunters,” she reminded him.

As he looked off in grudging acknowledgment, she whispered, “I have no romantic interest in him, not when I have you.”

He glanced at her, smiling, and said, “Then I will have to abide.”

Ryal and Justinian came around the corner in an open-topped carriage with its driver, and Efran turned to lift Minka onto her horse, pressing unnecessarily close to her in the process. He mounted and gestured for the carriage to precede them.

They traveled up the northbound road for about half an hour. On the southern outskirts of Westford, they stopped in front of a workers’ lodge. Momentarily, two men with shovels emerged to climb into the carriage as well. Efran looked critically at five in one vehicle, but the draft horse was not strained in pulling it. Besides, Efran knew that Ryal would not abuse his animals.

They set out again, turning left on a major thoroughfare and continuing down this road past shops and houses to shacks housing the poor. Riding on, they arrived at the city cemetery. The new area appeared on the southeastern fringes of the cemetery, with the older, broken stones abandoned to the ravages of the Passage to the west. Because of the fever, the new area was dominated by a large lime-filled pit to accommodate all the recent corpses.

But Cennick had not dumped his wife here; he had a private plot with a stone marker erected. Approaching this, they pulled up beside it. Ryal, Justinian, Efran and Minka stood before the stone to read, "Here lies Lady Kelsey, beloved wife of Lord Cennick, felled by the fever July the 3rd in the year 8153 from the creation of the world."

Ryal said, "I will ask the witnesses to ascertain whether this ground has been recently disturbed."

They looked down. "No, obviously not," Efran said. "The grass is the same height as that all around it. There are no marks whatever."

"Agreed," Justinian said amiably. Minka felt it unnecessary to validate anything Efran said.

So Ryal brought out his portable quill set to record the inscription and the state of the grave. Then the diggers got to work.

As Ryal returned to the carriage to sit and wait, the others naturally gravitated to him. While Justinian and Minka leaned against the carriage, Efran paced. Minka was sure that if there were another shovel, he would be digging; as it was, if the diggers did not pick up their pace, he was likely to shove one aside and do it himself.

Justinian called, "Efran!" The other turned. "Are you a betting man?"

Efran walked back to them, glancing at Minka's aloof half-smile. "Sometimes," he replied.

Justinian offered, "I will bet you ten royals that whoever is in that grave is not Lady Kelsey."

Efran glanced back dubiously at the diggers. "After three months, I doubt that she can be identified."

"Then I'll wager you ten royals that there is no woman in that grave," Justinian said.

Efran eyed him. "I will accept that wager."

Shortly, the diggers called them over. Surprised, the four of them left the carriage to come look. (The disinterested driver continued to sit.) The diggers had hit wood.

Ryal inserted his measuring rod into the shallow grave. "Eighteen inches. An inadequate depth, according to code," he said, noting the fact on his sheet.

"Perhaps it wasn't necessary to make it any deeper," Justinian offered brightly. Efran's eyes flicked to him.

The diggers cleared away dirt from the opening so they could pry up the lid. At this point, Efran's impatience was visible, since they had to get the lid up in pieces.

"Poor quality coffin, for a beloved wife," Justinian said critically, and Minka hid her smile.

At last, enough of the interior of the coffin was uncovered for them to see what was inside. They all looked down at a large canvas bag, stuffed. Efran got down on his knees to take hold of the canvas, ripping it open. A quantity of sand flowed out.

“Well well well,” Justinian said softly. Efran stood to look at him. Justinian returned the gaze. “I know the witness,” he said. “Unlike me, he’s an honest man.”

Efran turned to Ryal. “I want to interview the witness.”

“That is acceptable, if you are willing to travel to Eurus—you cannot compel him to come south. You will require his permission and a witness to the interview,” Ryal said.

“That’s me,” Justinian said. To Efran, he added, “You’ll never get access to him without me.”

“You may come,” Efran grunted. “But you provide your own horse.”

“He can ride in the carriage with me, Efran,” Minka offered.

“Thank you, dear Lady Minka!” Justinian said brightly.

At the same time, Efran was saying carefully to her, “I don’t see why you should be inconvenienced to go.”

“Who’s going to vouch for you in Eurus?” she asked quietly. “Justinian can get you into the taverns and gambling dens, but who is going to vouch for your rank?”

Efran looked down. At times like this, his race was a real and ugly impediment: Polonti were considered vermin in Eurus. “Fortunately,” Minka added with a half smile, “I know the most wonderful woman who can fling open every door in Eurus for you, and she loves you already.”

Efran looked at her in sudden comprehension. “Your Auntie Marguerite.”

Justinian gasped, “You know Lady Marguerite of Eurus?”

“I am her favorite great-niece,” Minka said smugly. “And I am *not* riding a horse all the way to Eurus. Once coming back was enough. We’ll want a basket with refreshments for the road. Won’t we, Justinian?”

“Indeed, Lady Minka,” he said joyfully. And he reminded Efran, “You owe me ten royals.”

Efran expelled a disgusted breath. “We leave early tomorrow.”

“Excellent!” Justinian said, climbing back into the carriage. “You can pick me up at the notary’s shop. That’s right on your way.”

Efran turned dubiously to Ryal, who nodded. “That’s acceptable to me, Efran.”

He grunted.

That afternoon, Efran apprised Estes of what they were doing and why, and gave him *carte blanche* to take care of whatever arose during Efran’s absence. Then he and Minka took time to talk with Noah, Ivy, and Toby; to see

their favorite play things and hear their complaints about schooling or chores.

Following, Efran went wandering on the hilltop until he located Pia so that he could hold her as long as she let him. A few of her animal friends came out to visit with him as well, which was nice because it kept her from running off for a little while longer.

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Chapter 4

Early the next morning, October 2nd, Efran assembled the party in the front courtyard of the Abbey fortress. The forty men with which they'd begun less than five months ago had tripled by now, and kept increasing as more former Westfordian soldiers and townsmen heard about the Abbey.

Minka was not down to the courtyard yet. While Efran could climb out of bed and be ready, eating on the run, she had to wash, dress, and pack, besides breakfasting. So until such time that she made it out to the courtyard, the men loitered on the steps, waiting. No one was going to hurry Efran's young wife. But she was also packing for Efran: specifically, his new blue serge suit. There was no use his attempting to gain access to the witness while wearing his work clothes. He'd be sent off to dig, instead. And wearing an Abbey uniform was likely to get him killed.

The waiting men sprang up at Minka's sudden appearance, followed by soldiers with her bags. Efran had elected to take reliable favorites Gabriel and DeWitt (his Commander's former aide), as well as Lyte, a Eurussian defector who had performed ably for the Abbey. The padded carriage, equipped with springs, had already been stocked from the kitchen with enough provisions for three trips to Eurus.

Only when Minka arrived were the horses brought around to be harnessed to the open carriage (which had a leather top that could be extended in bad weather). Efran required a two-horse carriage for the comfort and security of his wife . . . and Justinian. Efran wilted every time he thought of that smirking face, but this was a time for trusting her and her wonderful auntie.

Efran brought extra weapons to stash in the carriage, while he, DeWitt and Lyte would ride with bows, quivers, and long swords. The road from Westford to Eurus was historically notorious for bandits, although recent Surchatians of both cities tried to clean it up. All of the men were in uniform, which was an effective deterrent to harassment. Gabriel would take the first turn driving. Before setting out, they all had to wait for Minka to tie back Efran's hair.

They rode out the gates and down the switchback, then pulled up to the corner on which Ryal's notary shop sat. DeWitt dismounted to bang on the notary's door, sounding like a bill collector. The shop was not open yet.

Ryal opened the door; some minutes later Justinian emerged in the same clothes he had been wearing yesterday. Only marginally awake, he staggered to the carriage and flopped full-length on the seat across from Minka. Efran muttered under his breath, but they set out in good form: Efran rode in front; DeWitt and Lyte rode as the rear guard. With someone interesting to talk to behind Efran's back, Justinian woke up enough to sit beside Minka.

Past Westford, they made fairly good time until coming to a strange impasse. On a narrow stretch of road around

a bend, they encountered a chaise coming southbound. Efran, riding in front, avoided colliding with the oncoming chaise horse by veering off into the ditch alongside the road. With not enough room to pass each other, the two carriages stood still.

Neither could easily back up, especially around a bend. And the muddy ditches along both sides of the road prevented either carriage from leaving the road to go around. The other vehicle, a two-wheel chaise drawn by one horse, carried a poultry farmer driving his daughter with her prized Silkie on their way to a showing. The Abbey's larger, heavier carriage could have simply proceeded to force the chaise off the road, which would have stranded the farmer and his daughter for hours.

Efran, in the ditch beside the road on the interior of the curve, turned his horse, a strong bay gelding, to align with the chaise going in the same direction. Then he leaned down to lift the wheel by the hub and kicked his bay forward alongside the road: "Hyuh!"

Seeing what he was doing, Gabriel nudged the carriage horses as far toward the outer bend as possible, to make way for the smaller conveyance. With the movement of the chaise, its horse started forward, finding just enough room to bring the chaise around the inside of the curve, one wheel on the road and the other in Efran's hand. Lyte and DeWitt bounded off the road to make way for the oncoming vehicle.

The occupants of both carriages stared at each other as they passed, though the father collected himself to guide the horse in alignment with Efran. When the chaise and carriage had successfully got past the other, Efran let down the wheel on the road beyond the curve.

As the horse trotted on, Efran watched to make sure the chaise rolled as it should, then he kicked the bay back up onto the road and turned to resume his position ahead of the carriage. Minka looked back at the departing chaise, the father on one side and the girl on the other, both staring back at the man on the horse.

DeWitt and Lyte regained the road as rear guard, and Gabriel clucked at the horses to go on. "I should really try not to irritate him," Justinian remarked to Minka. She laughed, and Efran glanced back.

Minka and Justinian raided the baskets freely, then around noon, she called a halt for everyone to rest and eat. Gabriel, DeWitt and Lyte complied at once; Efran was slower to turn his horse and retrace his steps to the stopped carriage.

Minka got out with a bottle in hand and walked up to him on the bay. Opening the bottle, she said, "Get down."

He swung down to take the bottle in one hand and her waist in the other. "I heard you laughing."

She started chuckling all over again. "Justinian has repented for ever irritating you. I'm telling you, he has become your staunchest friend."

"Or yours," Efran said, taking a swig.

She shook her head. "That's what's so nice about him—neither of us is interested in sleeping with the other. He still wants Adele, and I will ever only want you."

He exhaled, squeezing her with one arm, then took another swig. "This is good. What is it?"

"An ale from Madea's vintner. It's their fall specialty. Do you really like it?" Minka asked in excitement. About some things, like his food and drink, he was hard to please.

“Yes. Is there any food left?” he asked.

“Of course.” She took his fingers to lead him back to the carriage, where the men made way for him to browse the baskets.

“Did Madea pack the sausages?” Efran asked hopefully.

“Yes,” Justinian said. “Oh.” He looked at the last bit of sausage that he held. “Here.”

Efran slowly raised his eyes. Minka said, “I saved you the beef. I thought you’d want that more.”

He looked at her. “You’re right,” he said, taking the meat rolled in crisp browned bread.

“Saved,” Justinian exhaled, leaning his head back on the cushioned seat.

“For now,” Efran murmured, and Justinian blinked.

Refreshed, they started up the road again. Slouching down on the seat, Justinian turned his head toward Minka. He sighed, “You look at him as if he placed the moon and the stars. I want Adele to look at me that way.”

Minka shook her head. “She’s not me, Justinian. She’s incapable of adoring any man. You have to hook her with different bait.”

He sat up in mild interest. “How?”

“Every man goes all gooey over her, and coos, and sighs—they’re all the same, and she’s tired of it. Do something different. You’re so funny—make her laugh! Stop trying to romance her; try entertaining her instead,” Minka urged.

“Do you really think that would work?” he asked.

“Yes. Why not? She really wants someone she can relax with. She’s tired of the intensity and the passion,” Minka said thoughtfully. “When every man melts around her, she wants someone who can be cool for a change.”

He squinted. “I see,” he said thoughtfully. “Yes. Thank you, Minka.” He made as if to kiss her cheek, but she waved him off, wide-eyed.

“Oh. The gargoyle. Of course.” Slightly peeved, he glanced at Efran’s back, but then shifted to think about what she had told him.

“Oh, I forgot,” she said, digging into the purse hanging from her waist. “Here are the ten royals Efran owes you.”

“Thank you, dearest Minka.” Justinian eagerly pocketed them, then said, “But Efran owes them. Not you.”

She snorted lightly. “He’ll probably forget.”

Justinian studied her. “If I collect them from him, can I keep them all?”

“Why not?” she laughed. “Good luck.”

Only a few hours later, they were rolling into Eurus. The palace here had not collapsed into a sinkhole (as had the one in Westford) but it did not look well maintained. When they approached a maze of streets, Minka climbed over the carriage seat to sit beside DeWitt, who was now driving and had no idea how to get to Marguerite’s estate, Featherstone. Efran, dropping back beside the carriage, almost came to a full stop when he saw Minka up front.

“Here. Down this street to the left,” she said, pointing, so DeWitt directed the horses that way. They climbed a long, gentle incline, then she said, “The drive to the right there.” DeWitt passed two great stone pillars with the elaborate gates standing open, and proceeded up a paved drive lined with cypresses on either side.

At last they came to a gorgeous mansion of gray stone with a fountain and pond in front. “Pull up to the steps!” Minka commanded, bouncing and pointing. As DeWitt brought the carriage to a stop, she clambered down to run up the steps directly into the open doors.

Efran ordered curtly, “DeWitt, stay with the animals. Gabriel, Lyte, follow me.” He threw himself down from the saddle and ran in behind her.

At the far end of a deep, wide, bright and opulent foyer, he saw Minka clutching a white-haired woman in a flowing silk dress. He stopped where he was; Minka said something and the woman turned around. “Come here, you!” she cried.

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Chapter 5

Efran was almost paralyzed by the command. But since Minka was with the woman, and appeared to be smiling, he forced himself to walk forward. Gabriel and Lyte followed, but not very closely. Justinian came behind them in awe. At a safe range, Efran stopped and bowed. She was scrutinizing him through jeweled spectacles. He felt his mouth go dry.

He watched Minka, fingers at her grinning lips, say, “Well?”

The woman cried, “Oh, you’re right! He’s beautiful! Come here, you! Let me hug you!” Obediently, Efran advanced and bent so that she might throw her arms around his neck and pat his back. “Oh, my!” she cried again. “Do you love my Sybil?” she demanded in a throaty voice.

“With all my soul. With everything I am,” he whispered. Minka was somewhere beside the woman, but he was transfixed by her expressive face, and could not presently look away.

“Oh, he’s adorable,” she said. “Oh my darling, I’m so glad for you!”

“I know! Me too!” Minka cried as they embraced again. Efran was not sure what was going on with all the tears and cries, but it appeared to be positive toward himself. He had not yet heard the words *filthy* or *Polonti*.

“Oh! Who are these with you?” the woman cried.

“Lady, these are my men,” Efran said, turning. They trotted up to bow formally to her. “This is Lyte and Gabriel. My man DeWitt is with the horses out front. Justinian is not mine,” he disclaimed.

“Oh, I know Justinian! He is such a rogue!” she said in a voice apparently meant to be harsh, but which came out hilarious.

Justinian rushed up to bow extravagantly. “Do you know me? I am unspeakably honored to be considered at all by your ladyship!” he cried.

Minka and the woman laughed uproariously at this, which made all the men smile in wonderment and confusion. “Oh!” she said again. “HARTSHOUGH!” she bellowed. The men looked around for a possible dragon.

But an elegantly dressed man not much younger than the lady appeared out of a nearby doorway and bowed. “Yes, my lady?”

“Minka’s husband—what is your name?” she suddenly turned to demand of Efran.

He opened his mouth but Minka said, “Efran, Marguerite!”—obviously not for the first time.

“Efran,” she repeated firmly. “Hartshough, Efran’s man and the animals. You know. And the table.”

“Yes, my lady,” he said, bowing again. “Excuse me, Chataine Sybil. Lord Efran.” He disappeared through the same door. The men remained frozen with unconsciously smiling faces while Minka and her auntie cuddled and whispered and laughed so happily.

In an impossibly short time, Hartshough reappeared at the same door to bow. “The table is ready, my lady, if you will come now.”

“Yes, yes,” Marguerite said, whisking Minka to the door. At the last minute Minka barely turned to wave them all forward, so they followed.

They found themselves in an elegant dining room, as light and bright as the foyer. One end of a long table was being set with plates and dishes and drink. DeWitt was standing beside the table as if he’d never seen such a thing before.

“Everyone sit down and eat!” Marguerite cried. “I am so excited to see you all!”

Taking her at her word, the men began pulling out chairs, but Minka reached forward to grab Efran’s sleeve and sit him in the chair beside her. With much laughter and disjointed commands, the lady had the men eating and drinking and laughing right along with her.

The beer, in particular, was a big hit. “Wirrin Valley Brewery,” DeWitt read off the label. “Where is that, Lady Marguerite?”

“Just a few miles outside Eurus,” she replied. Then: “HARTSHOUGH!” DeWitt almost lost hold of the bottle.

“Yes, my lady?” Hartshough said, right beside her.

“Get them a case of Wirrin’s to take back with them,” she instructed.

“Yes, my lady,” he bowed. Soon every man at the table was trying to think of new superlatives to describe it.

Finally, things settled down as Minka began explaining what they were here for. Efran paid no attention, because he was experiencing the most excellent roast pig he had ever tasted in his life.

“Efran. Efran!” It was Minka’s voice.

He looked up. “Yes?”

“Tell Auntie what you needed to do,” Minka said.

He shook his head. “I don’t remember.”

His men laughed, but he wasn’t joking. Justinian, however, took on an aspect of grave intelligence. “Lady Marguerite, thank you for the overwhelming welcome. It has so transported us that we almost forget ourselves. But we have indeed come for a serious purpose.

“Our newly self-proclaimed Surchatain supposedly buried his wife after she died of the fever three months ago. However, a driver with Spitta’s Carriages for Hire here maintains that he saw the man say goodbye to someone who appeared to be his wife at an inn in Westford, and the driver brought her in his carriage to a house here.

“A complaint of duplicity was raised to the Westford Notary, who authorized an exhumation yesterday, in which we found that the woman’s grave contained only sand. Therefore, Lord Efran and I have been authorized to interview this driver to discover what truth may be ascertained.”

Efran and his men gaped at him, but Marguerite asked, “How can I help you?”

Justinian replied, “A letter from you to Spitta encouraging him to allow us to interview this driver would be most helpful.”

“Hartshough!” she summoned, but he was standing almost at her elbow. “Oh, there you are. Give Efran and Justinian a letter to Spitta. Tell him to let them talk to whoever they need to there. And tell him that he and his wife are invited to my house next Thursday. Is that when I have my dinners?”

“Friday, my lady,” he said.

“All right, invite him for Friday. Oh, and send someone by today to tell Spitta that he will be receiving a visit from friends of mine tomorrow.” Justinian clutched his chest in exultation at her describing himself as a friend.

She went on, “Thank you, Hartshough. Efran means so much to my Sybil, we must do what we can to help him.” The men were silent in respect.

Efran said, “Lady Marguerite, you are blest, and a blessing.” He stood to lean over Minka and kiss her auntie on her head—a thing that Minka had never seen him do to anyone but herself.

Marguerite sniffled. “Sit down, you handsome man, or you will make me cry, and I do not like to cry.”

“Forgive me, lady,” he said softly, crinkling his eyes at her as he sat.

“You,” she uttered, patting his hand in affection. “HARTSHOUGH!” she roared, and Efran almost went face down in the suckling pig.

“My lady?” Hartshough said at her elbow.

“We need dessert,” she said.

“Yes, my lady.”

Following that, she had the party escorted to the drawing room for digestifs, which drinks the men stood around holding in a daze. But Minka told her auntie about all the amazing developments in the Lands, and Marguerite went over to each man to ask one or two details about himself. Sipping her drink, Minka was amused to see her pet Gabriel, stroking his hair back lightly.

Finally, when Minka and Efran went upstairs to their room for the night and his men were sent to other quarters, Marguerite happened to find Justinian alone in the foyer with an intense, worried expression. “My dear boy, whatever is the matter?” she exclaimed.

He started out of his reverie. “Dear lady! I was not expecting you. I don’t wish to burden you with my petty problems, but Efran owes me a little money. He is not carrying royals on this trip, however, and I have needs.”

“Oh. That’s nothing.” She turned to a nearby table inlaid with mother of pearl, opened a drawer, and scooped up a handful of royals. “Will that hold you for a time?”

He received them with both hands. “Yes, thank you, lovely lady,” he said, his effusiveness muted by shock.

“Oh, good. Have you been shown your room?” she asked.

“Yes, dearest lady,” he said, still staring at his full hands.

“Good. Make your way there quickly, for Hartshough is about to put out the lights,” she advised.

“Yes, wonderful lady.” He hastily stashed the bounty in his pockets and turned up the stairs. But when the foyer was empty again, he trotted back down the stairs to slip out the front doors.

At this time, Efran was lying on his back in the huge bed of a fabulously furnished bedchamber. His face was fixed in unabated wonder. Minka lay almost fully atop him, kissing his jaw. “Isn’t she amazing?” she laughed from his neck.

“Yes,” he said. “Can you get her to send the recipe for the roasted suckling pig back with us?”

“I’ll ask Hartshough,” she said, muffled.

“Thank you,” he said.

She raised up. “All right. I know she’s overwhelming, but you must get your mind off her onto me now,” she ordered.

“I’m trying,” he said, blinking. She turned his face to hers so as to kiss him softly and press her body to his. He gasped and rolled over to her.

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Chapter 6

At breakfast the next morning, Hartshough presented Efran with the requested letter of introduction, and gave him directions to Spitta's Carriages for Hire. Efran thanked him, then said, "Will you have Justinian wakened, please?" As Minka had ordained, Efran was wearing his new suit. Also, she had tied back his hair again.

Hartshough said, "I have sent two men at separate times to rouse him, Lord Efran, but regret to report their failure."

"Ah. Where is his room?" Efran asked.

"On the second floor, to your right, the last door on the left, Lord Efran."

"Thank you," Efran smiled. "Have two of our horses saddled, please."

"At once, Lord Efran."

Efran trotted up the stairs, located Justinian's room, and opened the door to see him sprawled face down on the great bed, unconscious. Efran walked over to pick him up, shake him vigorously for several minutes, then drop him on the floor.

Justinian sat up, wide-eyed, and Efran leaned over him to say, "I am going down to get our horses. If you do not join me in the front courtyard immediately, I will come up here again. You do not want me to come up again."

Justinian began scrambling for his clothes as Efran walked out.

Very quickly, Justinian appeared in the courtyard, adjusting his necktie. His clothes were slightly disheveled but not unreasonably so. Efran's suit was admirably fitted, though without a hat (which he disliked even more than suits. Also, hats did not well accommodate his hair tied back.)

Already mounted, he looked off in strained patience as Justinian endeavored to get one foot in the stirrup and the other completely onto the other side of the horse.

When he had accomplished this with an expression of satisfaction, he looked around for the reins, which had been left knotted on the pommel for his convenience. Efran waited a minimal length of time before turning his horse onto the drive which led to the gate at the far end. Justinian managed to catch up because his horse knew to follow Efran's.

Past the gates, Efran loped into the street leading to the city proper. When they began passing shops and streetlamps, he slowed to a walk. Even this early, one or another of the faces on the sidewalk turned furtively toward the two riders as they passed—specifically, Justinian. Efran frequently paused his horse to direct a stone-faced gaze at someone nearby, who then moved on.

"Why do you keep stopping?" Justinian muttered.

Efran uttered, “The next time you carry gold, put it somewhere other than your pockets. Its jangle is calling to the thieves.”

Justinian gasped, and barely avoided grabbing his pocket. What Efran didn’t know was that there was much less there than had been there last night.

Efran turned a corner, then they drew up to a building with a large sign that read, “Spitta’s Carriages for Hire.” They dismounted, tying the reins in thief-proof knots. Seeing the knot that Justinian had created, Efran retied it. Then they walked in to the reception room.

A man at the counter looked up with a friendly smile that disappeared when he saw Efran. He, meanwhile, was pulling Marguerite’s letter of introduction from his jacket. “I am Lord Efran. I am to meet with Spitta this morning.” Saying this, he held out the letter.

The man said nothing, did nothing other than to resume shuffling papers on the counter as if no one were standing in front of him holding out a letter. Justinian opened his mouth, but Efran stepped firmly on his foot so that he bent double. To the counter man, Efran said, “You may want to look at this, friend. Spitta is expecting me.”

Without raising his eyes, the man condescended to take the open letter. He stiffened upon reading it, then his eyes flicked up as he murmured, “One moment, please.”

He took the letter through the door behind him. Momentarily, he came back to murmur, “This way, Lord . . . Efran.” Efran and Justinian went as directed, the latter limping.

They followed the counter man down the corridor to an office, the door of which stood open. “Lord Spitta, here’s Lord Efran and—someone,” the counter man muttered before stepping out and closing the door. A round, jovial-faced man holding Marguerite’s letter looked up from behind a large desk.

Spitta waved the letter. “Yes, Lord Efran, Marguerite’s man came ’round yesterday to tell me to expect you. So you’re Lord of the Abbey Lands south of Westford. How do you know our Marguerite? Please sit.”

“Thank you. This is Justinian,” Efran said as he sat. Justinian made a correctly brief bow before sitting as well, then Efran continued, “Marguerite is great-aunt of my wife, the Lady Minka—Marguerite calls her by her birth name, Sybil. We have had a most wonderful, debilitating time since arriving yesterday.”

Spitta laughed richly. “That is her fame, the dear lady. Sybil! Yes, what a darling child—” He paused, his face clouding in doubt.

Efran smiled. “Once she turned sixteen, she hauled me to the notary and demanded I marry her. I am not sure what she saw in me, but, because Marguerite provided proof of her age, I felt it only right to express my gratitude in person. She is a most captivating woman.”

Spitta laughed. “That is our Marguerite in a word! Oh, yes—I remember something of the brouhaha in that Sybil was supposed to marry one Justinian—” He looked with sudden doubt on Efran’s companion.

Justinian’s mouth hung open as he endeavored to find the best spin, but Efran said, “That was an unfortunate misunderstanding. At any rate, that is not why we are here. We’ve had a minor legal question arise, of which one of your drivers has knowledge to help us. His name is—” He looked pointedly at Justinian. Spitta looked at Justinian.

“Yes. His name is Wade,” Justinian said, suddenly looking and sounding credible.

“Wade, Wade. Where is he today?” Spitta muttered, flipping through a schedule book. He lifted a bell to ring it, and an assistant entered. Spitta asked him, “Where is Wade right now?”

“He should be returning shortly from running Carrister, sir,” the man replied.

As Spitta nodded, Efran rose. “If you don’t mind, I will wait in the front room for him.”

Spitta and his underling exchanged wary glances, then Spitta said, “It may be more convenient for you to wait in the drivers’ room, Lord Efran. That is where he will come in, so you will not miss him. My man will direct you.”

“Thank you,” Efran said, subdued. He had not missed the glances; nonetheless, the drivers’ room was clearly the best place to wait.

He and Justinian followed the assistant to a room in the back of the building appointed with secondhand furniture and a table of street-vendor food. Efran sat to watch the outer door, elbow on the arm of the chair and fingers idly at his lips.

Justinian went over to survey the food table, and shuddered weakly. He turned to the assistant before he could leave, pressing a royal in his hand. “If you could find someone to get me a quality breakfast, friend, I’d be most grateful.” The man nodded and left.

Before long, the assistant returned with a sack that he handed to Justinian before turning out. Justinian opened it eagerly, then wilted to find the same limp, greasy offerings that were already on the table. While Efran looked off, inscrutable, Justinian set the bag on the table and turned to sit beside him. Efran had enjoyed an amazing pork omelet for breakfast.

Some minutes later the outer door opened and a man in driver apparel entered. When Efran stood, the driver started in alarm, then saw Justinian also rise. “What ho, old man! What are you doing here?” the driver said, slapping Justinian’s shoulder.

“Looking for you. Wade, this is Lord Efran from the Abbey Lands, and he needs to ask you a few questions about—what you told me,” Justinian said, glancing around.

“Justinian will pay you for your time,” Efran said. “Is there a quiet place we can talk?”

“Pub next door,” Wade said, evaluating him.

“Then let’s go,” Efran nodded. Justinian patted Wade’s shoulder and the three of them turned out.

Efran checked on the horses to see that they were still secure, then the men went over to the pub. Justinian ordered for himself and Wade, but Efran declined anything. They took their plates and mugs to a corner table, well away from anyone else here this time of the morning.

As Wade set into his late breakfast, Efran said quietly, “Tell me about the night you saw Cennick see Lady Kelsey off.”

Wade looked up quickly. “Was she not buried, then?”

Justinian said around a mouthful, “Just answer the man’s question.”

Thinking back, Wade said, “That was July second. I was in Westford, waiting for a customer to get me back up here. There’s always plenty of traffic between Eurus and Westford, though not at night. It was looking like I’d have to sleep at the Westford station, but then Cennick brought the lady in—they were clearly intimate, you know, the way he was holding her and kissing on her face. She was crying, and he was assuring her it was the right thing to do.” He paused to take another bite.

“He called her ‘Kel,’” Wade recalled. “‘It’ll be all right, Kel, just until I get established,’” he quoted. “Then he loaded her trunk and her boxes in my carriage and kissed her good-bye. We set out, and she cried the whole way up, until she fell asleep about three-quarters of the way here.”

“Describe him,” Efran said.

“Upright looking man,” Wade said instantly. “Clean-shaven, short hair, no-nonsense kind of look. Neat and lordly without looking fussy.” Efran glanced down; that described Cennick exactly.

“Where did you take her?” Efran asked.

“Boarding house on Mulberry, three blocks over—The Courtly House. They offer shelter for single ladies.”

Efran looked off, and Justinian saw his jaw muscles working, which was an ominous sign for someone. Looking back to Wade, Efran said, “Describe her.”

Wade shrugged, “Nice enough looking lady, not a great beauty, except for her hair—mounds of lovely brown hair. That’s about all I noticed from the driver’s seat.” On a thought, he added, “She was dressed—not well, for a lord’s wife. Her clothes and such were not extremely fine.”

Efran nodded minutely, wheels spinning behind the eyes. Then he stood. “Thank you for the information, Wade. I won’t need anything more of you. Justinian, you stay here until I come for you. It shouldn’t take long.”

Still eating, Justinian said, “Yo,” gesturing an affirmative with his fork. Then Efran left to pay a visit to The Courtly House.

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Chapter 7

Efran reclaimed his horse from in front of Spitta’s Carriages for Hire, then found his way to The Courtly House easily. It was just on the invisible boundary line between the barely acceptable part of town and that which no woman should be in at all. He dismounted, tying the reins with another difficult knot at the post, then he walked into the foyer.

It was drab but clean. A matron came out from a side office, bristling, “What do you want?”

Efran took a moment to reply. With a complacent gaze, he said, “I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I am here to speak with Lady Kelsey.”

The matron paused, glancing in disfavor at the color of his skin and his long hair pulled back. But the suit was nice. "I will go check," she said, turning away.

He had only moments to wait before a woman emerged into the foyer almost at a run. She stopped dead upon seeing him, her eyes large, her expression of hope mixed with fear. Efran immediately saw that she was thin and pale, wearing washer woman clothing. But she had mounds of beautiful brown hair, barely contained atop her head. "Are you from my husband?" she whispered.

His heart almost broke. "Yes," he said. "My name is Efran."

"Oh," she exhaled in relief. "I'm so glad. I've run out of funds, and my bill must be paid immediately or I'll be turned out."

"Let me take care of that now," he said. Stepping into the matron's office, he pulled out the pouch hanging under his shirt and shook out two royals. Laying those on the desk before the matron, he asked, "Will that cover Lady Kelsey's bill?"

"Yes," she said, shocked—as she should be, for he had vastly overpaid. Satisfied, Efran returned to Lady Kelsey in the foyer.

"That is such a load off me," she said, almost smiling. "But how long must I stay here?"

Glancing aside, he asked, "Where can we talk?"

She looked around distractedly, then said, "My room. Come."

He followed her down the dingy corridor until she opened a door into a small room with an iron-framed bed with skimpy mattress and covers, a wash stand, and a trunk of threadbare clothing. The furnishings at Cennick's estate flashed before his eyes, and he actually saw red. But he composed himself; he did not know yet if the situation were truly as it seemed.

"Here." She opened a folding wooden seat for him, then sat on the bed. "When is he coming for me?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," he said. He would refrain from using Cennick's name until he heard what name she would give for her husband. It was certainly possible that she was another man's discarded wife; most of the women here were probably just that. "I had to leave quickly without understanding all that has happened. Please tell me the whole story of how you came to be here," he added.

"First, is he all right?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," he said. "What are you afraid has happened?"

"Why, an attack by his opposition!" she exclaimed.

"Forgive me," he said, "but—I embarked on this errand with almost no explanation from him, so you will have to start at the beginning and tell me everything, as to a child." His face was wry and his eyes crinkled without his knowledge.

She laughed, and some color came into her face. "What is your name again?"

“Efran,” he said.

“You are very nice,” she exhaled. “Well. The beginning. I don’t know at what point that was, but when Cennick decided to seek the throne, he told me of his fears of attacks by his opponents. So he determined to remove me from danger. I don’t think he intended it to be this place,” she said, looking at the faded and torn wall coverings. “But arrangements had to be made quickly because of threats on his life. So it was on the night of—the second of July, I believe, that he was compelled to put me on a carriage to flee for my life.”

Efran sat looking at his hands. “Have you heard from him since then?”

“No,” she said, “which is why I was so worried, and so glad to see you.”

Efran looked at the wall, trying not to throw up. “Did you have the fever?”

“No, thank God,” she breathed. “I hope he is well?” she asked anxiously.

“So far,” he said absently. He thought for a moment, then said. “There is still much unsettled about his situation, so, with your permission, I am going to take you to my fortress. My wife and I are currently visiting her great-aunt Marguerite here—”

“Do you know Marguerite?” she asked joyfully.

“Yes,” he said, smiling involuntarily.

“Oh, is she not a gem? She was so kind to my father, in finding a purchaser for his cattle farm,” she said.

“Cennick?” Efran asked, confused.

“No,” she laughed. “The sale of the cattle farm provided my dowry to him!”

“Who was the buyer?” Efran asked.

“Lord Shirreff, a great nobleman of Eurus,” she said, smiling.

Efran leaned so far back in the rickety chair that he almost toppled it. “Be careful!” she laughed, reaching a hand to steady it. He looked at her and saw an abandoned child.

He stood. “Will you come with me now to Marguerite’s?”

“Oh.” She stood as well, her face falling. “I would love to, but—” She gestured in embarrassment at her washer woman clothing.

He said, “If she doesn’t mind the color of my skin, she won’t care about your clothes.”

Her lips parted and her eyes filled with tears, then she nodded, smiling. She got up to leave, pausing over her trunk. “I need to take a few things to wear.”

Seeing the threadbare clothing that she was carefully folding to carry with her, he said, “Leave them. Cennick will buy you new things.”

She began, “Oh, but you see, he has to pay for—”

“Nonsense. Your husband will be happy to buy you new clothes,” Efran said tightly, steering her from the room empty-handed.

Outside, he put her on his horse and began walking her away from The Courtly House and All the Lies. She leaned down. “You ride; let me walk!”

“Over my dead body,” he said over his shoulder.

She laughed. “Then let me walk as well.”

He turned in exasperation. “I will not waste the use of a horse. You will ride because I wish it.”

She laughed again, then sighed, “Oh, I feel like a freed bird.” He thought, *I hope I don't have to kill Cennick.*

The walk to Marguerite's mansion Featherstone was good for Efran, in that it enabled him to walk off some anger. In the courtyard, he lifted Kelsey from the horse, which was immediately taken by a stablehand. With a hand at the lady's back, he walked her up the steps into the great house.

Looking around, she paled. “Oh my!” she said, drawing back.

Wondering at her shock, he asked, “When was the last time you were here?”

“Well, I haven't actually been here in the house. My father and Cennick told me all about her,” she said.

Efran digested this. “Who is your father?”

“Lord Elmore. But he died of the fever about six months ago,” she said.

“A lot of people are doing that,” he muttered.

Minka came out from a side room. “Efran! You're—” She stopped upon seeing the woman. “Hello! I'm Efran's wife Minka.” She steadfastly kept her eyes off the washer woman clothing.

Efran said, “Minka, this is Lady Kelsey.”

“Oh! I'm so happy to meet you!” Minka's face was a study: as she was trying not to show shock, but only pleasant welcome, the result was a kind of giddy exuberance. But it made Kelsey smile.

Efran was also struggling with how to impart essential information to his wife without traumatizing the child beside him. His men appeared: DeWitt came in from the front door; Gabriel and Lyte from the dining hall. Behind them appeared the grand lady herself. “Efran! Who have you brought to me now?” she cried in delight.

“Marguerite, this is my friend Lady Kelsey. She has been in difficulties and needs to borrow a dress. Nothing grand, just a dress,” Efran said.

“Oh, you sweet child! Come with me.” As Marguerite enveloped her, Minka and the men closed in on Efran.

“Where is Justinian, Efran?” Minka asked.

He looked surprised, then guilty. “I forgot about him.” Waving at DeWitt, he said, “Go get him, please. He’s at the pub next to Spitta’s.” DeWitt trotted out a side door.

Efran paused while three other faces watched him. Then he said, “Minka, can you find Hartshough for me?”

She immediately turned into the dining room. Shortly, she came back out with Hartshough, who bowed. “Yes, my lord?”

“Yes,” Efran said, distracted by the homage. “Hartshough, do you know a Lord Elmore who died of the fever six months ago?”

“No, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said.

“Do you know a Lord Shirreff?” Efran asked. Minka started.

“Yes, Lord Efran. He owns a large cattle farm, over thirty acres, from what I’m told,” Hartshough said.

“How long has he owned it?” Efran asked.

Hartshough’s brow puckered as he thought. “At least twenty years. He inherited it from his father.”

Efran exhaled, “All right. Thank you, Hartshough. I’m afraid we need to be going, so as soon as Marguerite is done with Kelsey, we’re taking her back with us to the Abbey. Immediately.”

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Chapter 8

When Hartshough had bowed and left, Efran told Gabriel, Lyte, and Minka everything that he had discovered from the driver Wade and Lady Kelsey herself. They absorbed it silently to the end. Then Minka said, “So Adele isn’t married to him at all.”

“No, she’s not,” Efran said.

“Why did he put on a show of marrying her?” she asked indignantly.

“That’s why. For show. Half of a Surchatain’s power rests on appearances, and a Surchatain must have a beautiful wife,” Efran said.

Gabriel said, “Then this Shirreff, who really owns the cattle farm, makes Cennick the apparent owner for appearances as well. But what does Shirreff get out of it?”

“Sales,” Lyte suggested. “The status of being the Surchatain’s operation could be highly profitable.”

“As was his courting you,” Minka said to Efran. “You tripled the Abbey’s purchase of his beef at a stroke.”

Efran nodded. "That will be corrected."

"We must get Adele out of his house," Minka said.

"Yes," he agreed, looking at her.

"How—" Minka began. "Oh, Efran. How are you going to tell Kelsey all this? As many lies as he's told her, she'll never believe you."

He was still looking at her. "You're right. He must tell her."

"He'll never do that," she scoffed.

"He will if he doesn't know that's what he's doing," he said thoughtfully.

At that moment, the grand front doors opened to admit DeWitt, half carrying, half dragging a very drunken Justinian along with him. "Greetings, friends!" he cried, raising a half empty bottle. "We are all here all together once again!"

Efran regarded him, then asked DeWitt, "Did you find his horse?"

"Yes, Captain, he rode it back here, somewhat," DeWitt said.

Efran waved. "Good. Leave him in the courtyard until the carriage comes around. Lyte, you get to drive so that Gabriel can tell DeWitt what he missed."

"Yes, Captain," Lyte said, with a restrained smile. DeWitt turned around to lug Justinian back out. Minka, remembering something, went quickly to find Hartshough before going up to her and Efran's room to collect their belongings. Efran went up to change back into his uniform.

As the visitors' gear was being piled by the front doors, Marguerite came out with a renovated Kelsey. "Oh, this was so much fun! Isn't she lovely? Bring me another child to play with!" Marguerite cried.

She had done a commendable job. Kelsey wore a nice but not extravagant dress, and her hair was arranged to show off its luster and curl. She glanced around self-consciously as the group admired her.

Minka exclaimed, "Oh, Marguerite, you're right! You've brought out her beauty so well." Kelsey smiled tentatively at her before dropping her eyes. DeWitt, having just approached from the courtyard, looked rather smitten.

Efran went over to take Marguerite's hand and kiss it. "Gracious lady, we can never repay you for your kindness and assistance. But we need to get Lady Kelsey to our fortress at once."

"No!" Marguerite cried in genuine distress.

"Forgive me," Efran said sincerely. "I promise I will bring your Sybil up again soon."

"Oh, you dear man," she said, patting him. "Come here, all of you." While the men smiled and blushed, she insisted on hugging and patting each one.

Kelsey embraced her in gratitude, and Minka hugged her darling auntie tightly. “You have made every happiness possible for me,” she whispered. “I will love you always.”

“My dearest Sybil,” Marguerite sighed, then bellowed, “HARTSHOUGH!” She looked astonished but pleased as the group around her dissolved in laughter.

The unflappable Hartshough materialized among them. “Yes, my lady?”

She waved. “Horses. Baskets. You know.”

“Yes, my lady.” He bowed and moved away.

Shortly, horses, carriage, men and supplies appeared in the courtyard. Efran watched as two large baskets of refreshments were loaded into the carriage. “Don’t let Justinian pilfer all the pork,” he muttered to Minka, eyeing the layabout snoring on the carriage seat. “Oh.” Efran’s eyes widened in sudden alarm. “I forgot! The roasted pig recipe—!”

Minka hugged his arm. “I have it. I told you I’d get it from Hartshough and I did.”

He kissed her head in relief. “You take good care of me.” Kelsey, seated in the carriage, turned her eyes away from this scene, thinking.

When they were all loaded up and ready to leave, Efran raised a hand to Marguerite on the mansion steps. All the men saluted her; Minka blew effusive kisses. Kelsey blew her a kiss, too, feeling like one of the party. Justinian was still asleep on the seat.

With Efran in the lead, Lyte driving the cart containing Minka, Kelsey, Justinian, baskets and weapons, and Gabriel and DeWitt riding as rear guard, the party set out. The early autumn day was mild and breezy, with no hint of rain.

Minka took Kelsey’s hand in excitement. “I’m so glad to have you with us! You will love the Abbey Lands.”

“Thank you. Thank you for your great kindness, and your husband’s. But . . . am I not going home to my husband?” Kelsey asked.

Minka dropped her eyes, holding Kelsey’s hand a little tighter. “You may not want to,” she murmured. Kelsey studied her.

Because Efran had dictated speed, they were riding rather fast when they spotted an oncoming chaise. It was far enough up the road, however, for Efran to slow his party with a gesture, and the road was quite wide enough at this point for both conveyances.

As they drew closer to one another, Minka laughed in recognition. A young girl was waving exultantly to them. Smiling, Efran pulled alongside the chaise which stopped for the girl to show him the fussy blue ribbon she brandished. “I won! My Silkie won! Look!” she commanded.

He leaned down from the saddle to get a look at the prize-winning fowl, but the child grabbed his sleeve to compel him down farther. In this she succeeded: he fell off the horse to land on his back in the road. Minka gasped, standing in the carriage. Kelsey stood also. Efran’s men laughed. Justinian was still asleep.

Chuckling, the father clucked the chaise horse on. As they departed, the girl leaned out to wave good-bye to the man pushing himself up to sit in the road. He waved back to her.

Efran remounted, then trotted back to the carriage just to check on them. Almost as an excuse, he said, “Women are dangerous,” including Kelsey in this appraisal. Laughing, Minka sat, and Kelsey did, too. Then Efran turned his horse to resume leading the party at a fast lope.

Kelsey turned to Minka to exclaim, “He’s so—well-tempered! He didn’t even look annoyed with her.”

Minka said, “He is a good man.” Something about her tone, and the vehemence with which she spoke, made it personal to Kelsey. She looked at her, then away.

Justinian began groggily coming to. “Of course I am,” he muttered. He sat up to begin hazily looking around. “Where are we?” Seeing Kelsey, he suddenly became aware and charming. “Hello! I am Justinian. Minka, introduce me to your lovely friend.”

“Justinian, this is Lady Kelsey,” Minka said in a deliberately even tone.

“I see,” he said with remarkable composure. “I am very glad to meet you, Lady Kelsey.”

“And I you,” she murmured self-consciously.

As his hands slid down his coat to straighten it, he uttered a cry which caused Lyte and Efran to glance back. “My money! I left all my royals on the bedside table!”

“They were all Marguerite’s to start with,” laughed Minka, and he had the decency to blush.

Shortly afterwards, Efran called an overdue stop to rest and eat. The men dismounted to stretch their legs, then wandered over to the carriage. Minka threw open a basket. “What do you want, Kelsey? Oh, these pastries are wonderful. Try this,” she ordered, thrusting one at her. “Oh, and the light cider. It’s tangy sweet and won’t make you drunk.” She deposited a bottle of that on Kelsey as well.

Seeing Efran lazily approach, Kelsey said, “The lord should choose first.”

All of them looked at her, then at Efran. He said, “The lord sees that those in his charge are taken care of first. His lady dresses well, and eats well, and rides even if he has to walk.” His voice was tight.

Kelsey looked at him in complete understanding. After a moment, she said almost as a statement, “There are no opponents, are there?”

“Not until today,” Efran said.

There was a stark silence, then Minka continued rummaging in the baskets. “You must try the pork; it is amazing. Efran gets his choice after you. And . . . oh! Peaches! We’ll take some of those as well.” Having laden Kelsey with food, Minka then relinquished the baskets. “We’re done.”

She motioned them away; Efran lifted both baskets out for him and his men to help themselves. Justinian got the remainder.

After the ladies had stretched their legs among the trees for a little while, the party set off again. But they only rode an hour or so before Efran called another halt. “We are coming up on Cennick’s estate,” he said. “Most of us will pass on, but Lyte will stop the carriage there. Minka and Justinian will fetch Adele to go on an outing. It is simply for fun; you’re having such a good time that you decided she must join you.”

Justinian and Minka grinned at each other. He said, “We can do that convincingly, don’t you think, dear Minka?”

“Yes, dear Justinian, and we won’t need any sleeping powder to get her to come away with us,” she added wickedly.

Justinian turned to Efran to complain, “Women.”

“Yes, aren’t they,” Efran said unsympathetically. Looking at Kelsey, he said, “You will remain in the carriage, but you must not be seen by anyone there. I will make sure that you understand all the reasons before we’re done.”

She said quietly, “I am beginning to understand now.”

“Good,” he said. To Lyte, he said, “We will precede you to the cemetery.”

“Yes, Captain,” Lyte said. Efran nodded him on, so he slapped the reins on the horses’ backs, and the carriage rolled toward the drive leading to Cennick’s estate.

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Chapter 9

As the carriage progressed to Cennick’s manor, Lyte looked back to say, “Please lie down on the seat, Lady Kelsey.” Minka moved to sit beside Justinian, giving Kelsey the whole seat in which to stretch out.

Then Lyte pulled up about twenty feet from the front steps. Minka opened the carriage door and bounded out, closely followed by Justinian. As they ran up to the front doors, Lyte turned to address Kelsey without looking at her: “Please lie on the floor, Lady, and I will cover you with a blanket. You must not be seen.” Taking him at his word, she did as he instructed.

Meanwhile, Minka and Justinian were pounding on the doors, he with his fists and she with the flat of her hands. They were also laughing and calling, “Adele! Sister! Sweet one!” “Goddess! Angel! Cruel tyrant!”

Cennick’s house steward opened the door, glaring. Minka cried, “We’re here to steal away my sister!”

“She needs springing!” Justinian shouted. “She’s BORED.”

“And LONELY,” Minka shouted over the steward’s shoulder. “ADELLLLLLE!”

The steward’s impulse was to slam the door in their faces, but, recognizing the wife of his master’s patron, refrained. At that time, Adele approached with an inquisitive frown.

“Goddess!” Justinian cried, throwing himself to his knees. “Come away with me in my chariot!”

“Idiot!” Minka laughed. “She wouldn’t lift a foot for you, but she’ll come with me!” Seizing her hand, Minka dragged her across the threshold onto the spacious front porch. Justinian lurched up to grab her other hand and spin her adroitly, then he and Minka enacted a spontaneous *pas de trois* around a bewildered center piece.

Then, whooping, they rushed her down the steps to the waiting carriage. Lyte urged Kelsey up just in time as three bodies fell into the carriage. Justinian slammed the door behind them and Lyte slapped the horses into a head-snapping start. “What—” Adele gasped.

“We just kidnapped you!” Minka explained, lifting Kelsey to sit beside her. Adele was in the seat with Justinian across from them.

“And I shall not return you,” Justinian said in the manner of a tyrannical lord. “We shall have FUN!” he crowed, throwing his head back. Adele watched him, open-mouthed. “I proclaim it, and I AM YOUR NEW LORD,” he roared in jubilation.

Adele sat back, laughing as hard as Minka had ever seen her laugh. Jubilant at this reaction, Justinian stood to beat his chest. “I defy you, Efran! I defy you, Cennick! I shall have her!” He raised his arms in majestic defiance, then almost got thrown out of the carriage when a wheel hit a rock. Minka jumped to haul him back down to the seat while Adele sat wiping her eyes for the laughter.

“Wait,” Justinian said in sudden inspiration. He cleared his throat and intoned, “Adele, you’re coming with me.”

Minka and Adele both gasped in admiration. “You sound just like him,” Adele said in wonder.

“How did you learn to mimic Efran so well?” Minka cried.

“Just listen to him,” Justinian said, then in his Efran voice: “You’re not ever going back to that house.” Minka and Adele screeched again. “Seriously,” Justinian said in his normal voice, scrunching down on the seat at her shoulder. “You’re not going back there.”

Adele sighed, “Thank you. I’m so tired of him.”

“Who are you?” Kelsey asked.

“Lord Cennick’s wife,” Adele sneered. “He’s so lordly and boredly.” She paused over what she had just said. Justinian and Minka stared at her and fell back in their seats, laughing. Then Adele laughed, too. “Oh! That feels so good. I feel free,” she said, looking out at the landscape passing by the carriage. It was not going so fast now.

“I know,” Kelsey whispered, almost unheard.

Shortly, they arrived at the road leading to the cemetery in Westford. Minka directed Lyte to the area of gravestones past the lime pit. They soon saw the men standing around their horses, waiting. Efran walked over as Lyte drew the team to a stop. After surveying the occupants’ happy, windblown faces, Efran said, “I see that you succeeded. Hello, Adele. Have you met Lady Kelsey?”

Adele glanced at her. “Hello,” she said almost civilly.

“Do you know who she is?” Efran asked.

“No,” she said tiredly. She laid her head back on the seat to look at Justinian, who was smiling down on her in simple affection.

“This is Lord Cennick’s wife,” Efran said.

Adele blinked, looking at her. Then she sat up. “Lady Kelsey. You were supposed to have died of the fever.”

Kelsey did not reply or react. Efran opened the carriage door, lowered the steps, and extended a hand to Cennick’s first wife. She stood to take it, and he helped her step down from the carriage. She paused to take in the gravestones around them. Then Efran, still holding her hand, walked her to stand before a grave that had been recently opened. The gaping hole stood in contrast to the placidity of the surrounding graves like a wound. All the other travelers, including Adele, followed.

Composed, Kelsey read the inscription on the headstone while the rest of the party watched in silence. And without knowing it, Cennick indeed told her himself what he had done. She said quietly, “I have been a fool.”

“No, you are the only one blameless,” Efran said. “I have been the fool. Because he knew the Law so well, I took it to mean that he lived by it. But he told me himself that he had studied it for hours—as one crams for an examination. All of this—Adele, the cattle farm, his knowledge of the Law—was merely play-acting.”

She absorbed this without tears. Finally she asked listlessly, “What am I to do now?”

Efran said, “I will take you to the Abbey Lands’ notary to get you a divorce. Then you will come with us to the fortress to stay as long as you like and do whatever you like.”

This, finally, brought on the tears. “You are very kind,” she whispered.

“Not really. I am paying a debt for being in the wrong,” he corrected her.

“Thank you,” she said, glancing up with a smile.

Efran turned. “Load up, everyone. We’re almost home.”

As Kelsey, Minka, Adele and Justinian took their seats in the carriage again, Adele said dully, “Then I am married to no one.” For a single woman to bear a child was a terrible stigma, certainly disqualifying her for a good marriage later.

“That’s right,” Minka said softly.

Looking off idly, Justinian, shrugged. “I don’t see why you have to marry someone lordly who bores you to tears. Maybe you could marry someone who would just let you relax and be yourself. Someone who wouldn’t demand adoration from you. Maybe even someone who could make you laugh. I don’t know.” He looked over the passing landscape, making sure that she saw his good side. She looked at him, then turned her eyes away in thought.

In early twilight, they rolled over the old stone bridge into the Abbey Lands, and everyone’s spirits lifted. Even Kelsey, who had never been here, felt encouraged at the vista of houses and shops going up, land being tilled, roads being paved, and beyond the switchback, a white fortress rising up on a hill. *I’ve never seen it before, yet it calls to me as home*, she thought.

In the midst of the plots, Lyte stopped at one of the few finished shops. Here, he lowered the carriage steps again, and Efran came up to escort Kelsey into the shop. Justinian and Adele went in, too. Unwilling to be the only one left sitting in the carriage, Minka followed.

The first order of business was taking care of Kelsey. Efran gave his statement to Ryal, then she gave hers. Ryal recorded the pertinent facts in his ledger, then drew up for her an emergency petition for divorce on the grounds of abandonment. He signed and sealed a notice of the decree addressed to Lord Cennick, and put it in the hands of a messenger to be delivered that day, even this late. Efran paid for this service, of course.

Seeing Efran's pouch, Justinian approached him. "You still owe me ten royals, old man"—Efran being two years his senior. Eyeing him, Efran paid him, and Justinian paid Ryal for a marriage license uniting himself with Adele.

Minka and Efran, one of them happy, the other disbelieving, watched the signings of this union. When Justinian and Adele, both giggling, returned to the carriage, Efran turned to Minka. At his pensive look, she said, "What?"

"You had something to do with that," he said—not quite an accusation but stronger than a question.

"With Justinian and Adele getting married?" she asked derisively, afraid he'd think her a busybody. "When I was dreading the thought of her living with us?—which they have to, because they have nowhere else to go."

He wordlessly conceded that, but—"You still had something to do with it."

"I think I consider that an insult," she said, flouncing to the carriage. He took her hand to assist her up the steps, then stood by the carriage. Although she turned away from him, she felt his patient eyes. She adjusted her skirts, and watched someone go into the notary's shop, all the while feeling those soft eyes.

Kelsey sat in the carriage, holding the roll of her divorce, wondering what was to become of her now. But when she looked up the switchback at the fortress, her apprehensions melted away. It looked so solid, and safe.

Minka glanced at the newlyweds laughing at someone on the road, then she half turned to see Efran waiting for her to talk. As it appeared that no one would get home until she did talk, she relented once again. Putting her mouth to his ear, she whispered, "We have to make sure that Adele is taken care of, at least until the child comes."

As he looked at her, she watched his deep brown eyes grow wet. Gripping the rim of the carriage, she added, "You are mine, so that child is mine, too." He laid his face on her hand.

When Efran finally remounted, Lyte clucked to the horses and the carriage rolled up the switchback to the great iron gates. Beyond them, the carriage occupants emerged to mount the white steps leading up to the arched doors of the fortress. Kelsey entered in some wonder—it was beautiful without being ornate, light and airy as if made of clouds instead of stone. Just being here made her feel happy and secure, and—wanted.

She looked up as Efran took her elbow. "I'm placing you in the hands of my administrator, Estes. He's a good man; he'll see that you get what you need." He was already on to acquiring suckling pigs and divesting of beef.

Efran hauled her to the door of Estes' cubicle, where the overworked administrator and former soldier looked up from the stacks of parchments in front of him. Like Efran, Estes was Polonti.

“Estes, this is Cennick’s wife Kelsey. She’s got her emergency divorce from him, and just needs a place in the fortress. Take care of her; I’ve got to see Madea.”

From there, Efran started to the kitchen. Then he stopped to feel his pockets. Minka had not given him the recipe for roast pig. Would she give it to Madea? He thought not, because Madea wasn’t always in the kitchen. But they were surely preparing dinner now, so Madea should be there. But she might be too busy to take it. And if Minka didn’t want to bother Madea, she’d give the recipe to Estes.

Backtracking to Estes’ cubicle, Efran turned in the door to say, “If Minka gives you. . . Estes, what are you doing? Estes? She just got her divorce.”

Estes lifted his face to say, “Efran, we feel everything deeply, and our blood is very red”—quoting Minka regarding Polonti. Then Kelsey turned his face back down to hers.

Conflicted, Efran backed out of the cubicle and shut the door. Then he went to go find Minka.

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Chapter 10

Before Efran could find Minka and the roasted pig recipe, Madea found him in the corridor outside the kitchen. “Efran, you’re the Lord of the Fortress, and I always want to cook what you like, but—I have to complain about the beef order. This Shirreff of Cennick’s says that we’re committed to one hundred fifty pounds of their beef a week and—it’s just not that good. Even if it were, everyone would be sick of it if we had it—”

“Is Shirreff still here?” he asked.

“No, he left, but—”

“Madea, I’m only lord; you outrank me as kitchen mistress. We’re not getting any more beef from Cennick’s farm. But I got a recipe for the roasted pig we had at Marguerite’s, and if you could fix that—”

“Oh, I know how they do that,” she said. “And I can order the pigs from our local butcher.”

He paused, overcome with emotion. “Why haven’t you fixed it before?”

“I didn’t know you wanted it. But now I do,” she said.

“Madea, may I—kiss you?” he asked awkwardly. He wasn’t trying to be brazen; he was just extrapolating from what pleased Marguerite.

“Well, I don’t think that would be proper, Lord Efran. If you want to show gratitude, please don’t interfere with my ordering,” she said.

“I apologize,” he whispered intently. “It will never happen again.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran.” She patted his cheek, then reached up to give him a peck. “If that’s what you wanted,” she added pertly.

She turned back toward the kitchen while Efran stood in abject humiliation mingled with deep satisfaction: he would get his pig.

Efran went back down to Estes' cubicle. Stopped by the shut door, he called, "Estes, can I open the door?"

"No!" Estes shouted.

"Then will you just—zero out the beef order from Cennick?" Efran asked politely.

"Go away!" Estes shouted.

Efran paused, conflicted. Just checking, he asked, "When are you taking her down to Ryal's?"

"Whenever you leave!" Estes roared. Kelsey's stifled laughter could be heard through the door.

Turning away, Efran muttered, "Whatever I am, it is *not* lord of this place."

Shortly thereafter, Estes and Kelsey went down to the notary shop to apply for a marriage license. Ryal pointed out that the divorce decree had just been issued that day, and remarriage after divorce required a 30-day waiting period. But Estes cogently argued that the lady's three-months' desertion under false pretenses should amply qualify as a waiting period. After consideration, Ryal agreed. The couple received their marriage license, and Estes was not found in his cubicle for the rest of that day, and night. And Kelsey discovered what it was like to be wanted.

Justinian and Adele, with their marriage license in hand, were given a very nice suite on the first floor. Efran promised her a clothing allowance, which would be funded whenever Estes returned to his cubicle. When Justinian requested a clothing allowance as well, and modest funds for entertainment, Efran told him, "You will work, and you will receive pay for it, which you may spend however Adele lets you. Tomorrow morning you will report to Greves, the foreman, who will assign you a job. How much you are paid will be determined by how well you do your job." Justinian, slightly green, agreed without enthusiasm.

Following that, Efran had another fire of his own making to put out: he sent a message to Lowry the butcher to the effect that the price list Efran had handed him from Cennick's was in error, and he should look to Madea's suppliers for beef. Efran then received the disconcerting reply from Lowry that he considered Cennick's beef inferior, and had discarded the price list.

That evening, Efran lay in Minka's consoling arms in near despair. "I have made a fool of myself endorsing Cennick and now I don't know what to do," he muttered.

"The first thing you do is rest, Efran," she whispered, stroking his hair back from his forehead. Wearing it tied back at night was impractical, as it spread all over his face and his pillow anyway and she loved it. "You can't resolve anything when you're exhausted. Sleep, darling."

He turned to encompass her in his arms and dropped off immediately. But he did not rest; he thrashed continually, to the point that she had to lay across his hand to keep it still. In the middle of the night he raised up, gasping, "It's Adele."

Minka held him in the deep blackness. "Efran? Adele?" she murmured.

Awake, he said, "Adele has been attacking ever since I took possession of the fortress. She led the Eurussian army herself. Then she married Graduliere, who almost hanged Toby, then she married, or thought she married Cennick. If she's going to live here, I have to find out what she wants."

"We'll talk to her tomorrow, Efran. Go to sleep," she ordered.

Drawing her close to him, he sighed. And obeyed. And stopped thrashing.

The next morning, October 4th, Efran consulted with Minka on a plan and then requested a meeting with Adele. She admitted them to her receiving room, complaining, "Efran, the furnishings here are simply inadequate. I must have a writing desk with a chair cushioned on the seat and the back."

"Certainly," he said. "Estes will take care of it for you."

"Where is he?" she demanded.

"Newly married, like you," he smiled. "Keep checking his cubicle until he shows up."

She pursed her lips in displeasure, but Efran pulled out chairs for himself and Minka, and they sat facing her.

Efran began, "We're glad to have you here, Adele, but, I need some assurance that you're no longer my enemy. It was just months ago that you led a large army here to remove me. Then you allied yourself with Graduliere and then Cennick, who turned out to be deceiving me. I need to know—what do you want? If I can give it to you, I will, but I can't risk sheltering an enemy under my roof."

Adele looked at him for a long time, then lowered her eyes. "I am ashamed," she whispered.

Minka stood. "I'll see you later, Efran," she said, moving toward the door. He half rose in alarm, but she waved at him to sit down. "It's perfectly understandable if Adele wants to speak to you alone. I would, too. We'll talk later," she promised. Then she walked out and shut the door.

Efran sat, turning warily to Adele. She sighed and shifted, glancing up at him. His eyes were not patient as they were with Minka, but still, he waited. Then she said, "Father and I were running very low on funds. With everyone leaving or dying from the fever, we—had practically nothing left. So Surchatain Loizeaux of Euruss offered us his army to take your fortress, if we would divide with him your Treasury."

"What Treasury?" Efran asked.

She looked at him in mild alarm. "Loizeaux said there was a Treasury of great value hidden somewhere here."

"If he believed that, why didn't he come get it himself all the years that the fortress was empty?" Efran asked.

She said, "He found out about it only recently. There was a very cunning man—Arenado—who told him hidden things."

"Yes, and this Arenado also worked for your husband Graduliere, and provided you and your current husband the poison powder to kidnap Minka," he said, still hardly believing it himself.

"You see why I'm ashamed," she said.

He studied her. “Then why did you marry Graduliere? And Cennick?”

“They had power and wealth,” she said frankly. “And they wanted me. You did not.”

Efran laughed. “Practically the last time I saw you, you called me a filthy Polonti. That was when you were leading an army to kill me for this legendary Treasury.”

She looked away. “I had to cover the fact that I loved you.”

“Killing me was an excellent cover,” he acknowledged.

“Their orders were to take you alive,” she said, eyes still averted. “I would have let Loizeaux have the entire Treasury; I only wanted you.”

He had to compose himself for a moment, then he said quietly, “Adele, I will jump into the Sea before I hurt Minka again, and that’s what you want. You don’t love me; you think you love me only because I’m married to your sister. If you married me, you would realize that all I am, all I ever will be, is a filthy Polonti.” He got up deliberately and walked out of the room.

Outside in the corridor, he took deep breaths to subdue his anger, which was directed toward himself. None of this would be happening right now if he had exercised the self-control to roll over and ignore her when she came to his room the night before his hanging. Yes, he could have refused her, and God could have used another means to save his life. The rickety gallows probably would have collapsed after he dropped on a poorly tied knot. It would have scared him enough to never touch another woman until his wedding night.

True, he hadn’t touched Minka before their wedding night, but he had come very close, and—what was the point of this rambling castigation?

And he realized the point was, he couldn’t believe that God would allow him to receive such a gift as his own child from his one night with Adele. And by fully acknowledging that he was unworthy to receive this gift, he was trying to blunt the crushing disappointment of losing it. But as long as she was here and pregnant, that taunting hope remained.

Exhaling, he went to look for Minka.

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Chapter 11

Efran had to look up and down several corridors to find Minka, mainly because he unknowingly turned right leaving Adele’s room when Minka was waiting in the corridor to his left. Nonetheless, he finally located her, and when he did, he practically picked her up to hold her.

“Was it that bad?” she asked, muffled.

“Worse,” he said, letting her back down to her feet so she could breathe. “Once she has this child, she has to leave. I will support her until she marries again [as he discounted her current marriage] but she can’t stay here.”

“What happened?” Minka asked.

“She was trying to tell me that she’s in love with me.”

“I told you that,” she said, turning to walk with him.

“But it’s not true,” he said, shaking his head vehemently. “Even if both of you think she loves me, she doesn’t, and I’m not going to be husband number”—he stopped to count on his fingers—“four.”

“Cennick doesn’t count,” she reminded him.

“Nonetheless,—” he began, but Krall appeared, who had been standing sentry.

“Captain, Lord Cennick is here, and wishes to speak with you,” he said.

“Excellent. Put him in the receiving room off the foyer and shut the door. Wait there,” Efran said. Finally, here was something to cheer him up.

“Captain.” Krall saluted with the set face that Efran’s men used instead of a grin when entertainment was afoot.

Efran turned to kiss Minka’s hands. “I’m sorry; you can’t come because there will be blood,” he said in dark satisfaction. “But I’ll tell you all about it.” He kissed her forehead for good measure before turning away.

Finding the foyer receiving room door closed and Krall standing before it as ordered, Efran swung into Estes’ cubicle. There, he saw both Estes and Kelsey inside, looking over paperwork. Efran said, “Ho! You’re both here, with the door open and fully clothed. Where’s the marriage license?”

Kelsey laughed while Estes straightened, holding up said document for the Captain to view. Efran said, “That’s good, then,” and told her, “Cennick is here, and I am going to speak to him. Are you willing to make an appearance if I send for you?”

She raised her chin. “Gladly.”

“Excellent,” Efran said. “Oh, and congratulations. Estes, give her a nice wedding present from the funds available.” Turning out, he stopped by Krall at the receiving-room door to whisper, “Give me a moment to get to the meeting room on the second floor, then bring him up.” Krall saluted.

Bounding up to the second-floor room, Efran gestured to Stephanos along the way, who followed. At the door, Efran pointed to the floor. “Stand here. Krall is about to bring up Cennick. Let him in.” Stephanos saluted and Efran went in, shutting the door behind him, and sat in the head seat, that near the window. Then he leaned back to cross his booted feet on the table.

Shortly thereafter, the door opened again for Cennick to stride in. Efran looked up from examining his fingernails. “Hello, Cennick. Have a seat,” he said, nodding.

The agitated lord sat in a chair beside him. “Efran, what’s going on?”

Efran raised his head, thinking that from now on, he would not be so quick to give everyone permission to drop his title. “Regarding what?”

“Where is Adele?”

“Here,” Efran said, returning to his fingernails.

“Why?” Cennick demanded.

Efran glanced up. “Why not?”

Cennick exhaled. “Come, Efran, stop this dithering. Why hasn’t Adele come home?”

“This is her home,” Efran said. “She and Justinian have to stay here because he has no other place to live.”

Cennick squinted in the effort of processing this information. “What does Justinian have to do with it?”

“He’s her husband,” Efran said.

“He’s—what? No! I’m her husband!” Cennick said sharply.

Efran lifted his eyes. “Are you?” he whispered.

Cennick stilled, and they regarded each other. “What do you mean by that?” Cennick asked, probing.

“Are you her husband? It’s a simple question,” Efran said. He got up to whisper to Stephanos outside, “Go get Kelsey from Estes’ cubicle. Let her in when she arrives.” Stephanos saluted and turned with a set face.

Efran returned to his chair while Cennick watched him closely, but there was nothing to read in his face. Cennick, wishing to know more before committing himself one way or another, continued silent where he sat.

Suddenly the door to the room opened, and Kelsey walked in. She looked down on Cennick in humorous vindication. His eyes widened momentarily, then his face cleared and he said, “Who are you?”

At this show of bravado, Efran sat back, laughing. “Good show, Cennick. Useless, but admirable.”

Kelsey stepped toward her ex-husband to slap his face resoundingly. “Who am I? Not the gullible little girl you shipped off, you liar.” Efran watched appreciatively. Reddening in anger, Cennick stood, his hand reflexively drawing back.

Efran stood. “Touch her, and I will kill you where you stand.”

“That is her husband’s prerogative, Captain,” a voice behind them said, and they all looked at Estes standing by the door. Kelsey went to him to put her head on his shoulder, and he held her with one arm, the other hanging free if needed. Efran stepped back with a gesture of deference to him.

Cennick looked a pale green by now. Efran piled on: “I am circulating a notice in Westford today disavowing you.” Nodding to Stephanos, he instructed, “Show him out.”

As Cennick was being nudged out in a haze, Efran added, “Oh. Cennick.” The man turned apprehensively. “I’m canceling our order for Lord Shirreff’s beef. Both the kitchen mistress and the Abbey Lands’ butcher say it’s poor quality.” Cennick then went out on his own with a black face.

As he left, Kelsey turned to Efran. “I know that look,” she said fearfully. “He will avenge himself on you.”

“Will he,” Efran breathed. “Then perhaps I should knock out some teeth.” He stepped into the corridor to whistle and gesture. “Bring him back.”

Stephanos agreeably brought Cennick back in, who made no attempt to disguise the hatred. Efran said, “I decided that one thing remains. You’re to write Lady Kelsey a note of apology for, oh, burying her prematurely. She’s to hang it in her boudoir, only—if you do anything to irritate me, I’ll make it public.” He turned to instruct another man, “Bring quill and parchment.” To Cennick, he added, “You may leave when you get it done to Lady Kelsey’s satisfaction. Not before.”

Efran then stepped out into the corridor, which seemed to have filled with men desiring assignments. He told Mumme, “Ride to Cennick’s estate and ask to speak to Lord Shirreff. Tell him that Lady Kelsey has been found, and Cennick has been found out, and Lord Efran is issuing a public disavowal of him.”

Mumme saluted and ran out. (They did not discover until much later that the notice of divorce sent to Cennick had been intercepted by Shirreff, who, unwilling to jeopardize a good thing for his beef business, burned it.)

Efran turned to regard Kelsey’s glowing face, and he thought how different she looked from the frightened girl he’d found at The Courtly House. She said, “I could kiss you for all you’ve done.”

“That would be very pleasant, but I can’t risk it,” he said gravely. “Estes is too necessary to the Fortress.” Efran passed on her demonstration of gratitude only because Estes was standing right behind her. Then Efran told him, “Write up for me a disavowal of Cennick to post, if you would.” Estes’ smile was scary for such a placid man. Cennick was sitting at the long table, jaw jutting as he scrawled out words.

Efran started to walk off, then turned back around to Estes, who looked up from Kelsey. Efran said, “How did you ever decide on fighting for a living? You’re hardly ever angry.”

Estes replied, “Commander Wendt was desperate for a man with bookkeeping skills. Besides, I’m good with a bow.”

“True and true.” Efran turned away then back again, making a circle. Kelsey laughed as Estes looked up with strained patience. Efran then asked, “How did you learn numbers?”

“An elderly nun in Eledith caught me stealing bread from her pantry. She told me she’d feed me twice a day if I learned my letters and numbers under her. I turned out to be very good with figures,” Estes said. Efran nodded in recognition. Estes looked back down at Kelsey, who was stroking his cheek.

Walking away, Efran thought, *She taught Estes like Therese taught me. I wonder how many of us were saved by old religious ladies.* Then he saw the EurAsian defector Lyte among the men, and gestured to him. When Lyte came over, Efran asked, “When your army set out to attack the fortress, were you ordered to spare my life?”

“Not that I heard, Captain,” Lyte replied. Efran nodded. *Adele can only lie.*

At that moment, Efran saw Minka on the edge of the crowd watching Cennick splotch out an apology. But she couldn’t see anything over all the taller heads. Efran came up behind her to wrap his arms around her. “Did you hear it all?” he whispered.

“Enough,” she said, grinning.

Younge approached, saluting. “Pardon, Captain. Greves says Justinian has been assigned work which he declines to do.”

Minka looked at Efran in alarm, but he squeezed her briefly. “Hush, no fear. We’ll encourage him to work.” She regarded his innocent smile, then turned back to Cennick’s thrusting a note under Kelsey’s nose.

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Chapter 12

Younge took the Captain out back to the stables, where he found Justinian lolling in unconcern on a pile of hay. Looking up at Efran’s approach, he said, “Hullo, brother-in-law. Is it really fitting for your dear pregnant sister-in-law’s husband to be mucking stables?”

He looked weary, aggrieved, and dispirited. Efran regarded Justinian’s soiled suit, the only one he had. And Efran raised his face, thinking. He was remembering Justinian’s deft handling of the wolf hunters, and his lucid explanation to Auntie Marguerite as to what they needed from her, as well as his prompting Wade to spill what he knew. Although a reprobate and a wastrel, he still had talents that could be more profitable to Efran than cleaning stables. Besides—and this he admitted with reluctance—Minka considered him a friend.

So Efran told him, “Come with me.” In Justinian’s hearing, Efran told Younge, “Bring workwear for him to the bath house, and then take him to Elvey. See if she can quickly get him into a few nice suits.” Younge saluted and went to the barracks to fetch Justinian a set of standard army work clothes (like what Efran always wore: dark gray pants and a white shirt). To Justinian, who had bounded up in quickened interest, Efran said, “You have a point. You are to bathe and dress in what Elvey has, then come to me and we will discuss more fitting tasks for you.”

Restored to cockiness, Justinian gave him a semblance of a salute, and Efran pointed him to the men’s bath house in the east yard. Justinian hesitated. “I’d rather bathe inside.”

“As you wish, but this is where your clothes will be coming,” Efran told him. Wincing, Justinian crept to the very open bath house. Efran went to confer with Minka and then Estes, both of whom liked his idea.

When Justinian appeared in the second-floor meeting room clean and nattily dressed, Efran looked him over and found his appearance satisfactory. So he told him, “You’ll be given a horse or a carriage—whichever you prefer—to take into Westford. I have appointed you ambassador, but your specific assignment is strictly confidential. You will be waiting in the bar of the Porterhouse Inn for details of your mission to come.

“While there, you are to talk and to listen. I want to know what you hear about Cennick, your father, or anything new. You may tell anyone that you are married to Adele,” Efran said. “You may give out details of Lady Kelsey’s situation freely, especially that she is now married to a high administrator at the Abbey Fortress.”

“This assignment sounds frankly thrilling, dear brother,” Justinian said, “but—”

Efran handed him a pouch of royals. “If you come back simply drunk, with not much useful gleanings, your

allowance will be cut back. The more reliable information you bring me, the more you'll be given. You will bring no one here without clearance from me," he added, remembering the woman in Justinian's bed.

"I am trusting you—" Efran winced—"to be discreet and convincing, so that others open their mouths freely to you. But don't give out anything about the Abbey district except what I have told you."

After hanging the pouch on his belt in the manner of a nobleman, Justinian grabbed Efran's hand to shake it passionately. "You will find me adequate in this task, dear brother. However, if I become engrossed in my duties, you may not see me until tomorrow."

"I have covered my expectations; as for Adele's, I can't answer," Efran said.

"She'll never know I'm gone," Justinian said in satisfaction, adjusting his hat, and Efran nodded as his new ambassador sauntered out. Efran went to Minka again to see if he had lost his mind in entrusting anything to Justinian. Her opinion was that it was brilliant.

With Adele at the fortress now, Efran realized that they needed a real physician, not just an army medic (Tourle). After casting about for candidates, he extended an offer to a Westfordian medical man named Wallace. Like all physicians in Westford, he was cruelly overworked, but he had two advantages: one was his wife Leese, who was not only medically competent but calm; the other was his own blunt habit of telling the truth without coddling. If there was nothing he could do for a patient, he said so, which left the sufferer free to seek other options and himself free to treat those he could help.

So Wallace and Leese agreed to close up their Westford clinic and come to the fortress. Efran, in congratulating himself on this acquisition, suddenly realized: the fever had not been reported anywhere in the Abbey Lands. Although it was still raging elsewhere, there had been no cases in the fortress or the shops and homes in the plots. Not one, that he knew of.

It was early afternoon of the following day, October 5th, when Justinian returned to the fortress. He was promptly sent up to the second-floor meeting room to report to Efran, who, when he arrived, found his ambassador sitting at the table, badly hung over but smugly satisfied. "You've gotten your money's worth from me, dear brother," Justinian smirked, chugging a large goblet of mixed fruit juice.

"I'll determine that," Efran said, sitting beside him. "How many of those twenty royals have you got left?"

"Not a one," Justinian smiled broadly.

"Then tell me what I've bought," Efran said.

Justinian set down the empty goblet and sat up. "Cennick has gone to Eurus, as has my father [Graduliere]. Talk on the street is all about the riches in the Abbey Treasury."

Efran sat back, clasping his hands behind his head to look at the ceiling. "Is there any indication where the talk is coming from?"

"No, but all the interest is centered in Eurus," Justinian said.

Efran groaned, "Loizeaux still intends to take this phantom Treasury." Justinian was not one of the few people Efran would entrust with the truth.

He sat up. “All right, do this: sober up, get something to eat, change clothes, then return to Westford. You will let slip that the Abbey Treasury was plundered years ago and buried somewhere nearby, since it was too valuable to be transported safely. Then in a few hours, I’ll send a man in livery to you at Shay’s Tavern with word that you’re to depart on your mission immediately. He will escort you back here.”

“Right. Oh.” Justinian stood, weaving slightly. “I’m out of royals, blessed brother.”

“When you’re ready to leave, stop by Estes’ cubicle,” Efran said. “You’ll get—a few. You won’t need as many today.” Justinian was disinclined to argue, so Efran went out to find both Minka and Estes again to midwife the plan that he was incubating. This they did.

What Efran did not know for a long time is that messengers were regularly sent out from the Abbey Lands, and even from the fortress, to an unfriendly party in Eurus.

After Justinian had left on his new assignment, Efran had Minka bring out the signet she had hidden in their quarters, then he escorted her, with a lantern, through the hidden library room and up the spiral staircase to the steel door protecting the authentic and real Abbey Treasury.

She used the signet to unlock the door, then he stood in the doorway to tell her, “Bring out two items, about the size of my hand, and not extremely valuable, for sacrifice to our plan.”

She had some difficulty finding items, in that almost everything here was costly beyond anyone’s estimation. Finally, she settled on two silver pieces: a cup and a butter dish. She also brought out three gold royals that predated those minted by Surchatain Ares. Upon receiving those items, Efran made her hide the signet again and wouldn’t let her tell him where.

After Justinian had dropped his gossip about the Treasury, he was whisked back to the Abbey. Then late that evening, two black-clad soldiers seeded an area of the old cemetery bordering Shirreff’s cattle farm with two gold coins and a silver cup.

The following day, October 6th, two Abbey soldiers dressed as itinerant treasure hunters entered Westford’s best pawn shop. They furtively hung about the shop, waiting until the lone customer ahead of them left. The proprietor eyed them suspiciously, but since he had two large men on duty as security, he was not much alarmed.

When the shop was empty of customers, the treasure hunters finally approached the counter. One of them, the cautious one, drew two items from his shirt as he looked all around: a gold coin and a silver butter dish. “We want to know the value of these.”

The shop proprietor examined the items, careful to mask his interest. “Unusual pieces. Where did you get them?”

The careless one said, “Dug ’em out from—”

He was vigorously silenced by an elbow in the ribs. “Nowhere special. Near the Passage,” said Cautious.

Thoughtlessly, Careless leaned down to brush yellow clay from the knees of his work pants. The proprietor noted this in mounting excitement: that clay was found only in a certain area comprising part of the old cemetery, long rumored to contain buried treasure.

After inspecting the finds, he said in disinterest, “Well, the dish is finely crafted, but there’s no market for a single piece from a set. So I’ll give you, oh, ten royals for that. And the coin, being an unknown mintage, is worth about three, I’d say.”

The extreme undervaluation caused Cautious to blink, but following the script, he said, “Pay it quickly, then.” So the proprietor counted out 12 royals to him. With Careless hanging on Cautious’ sleeve demanding his share, the two treasure hunters went straight to Shay’s Tavern to spend all the royals, get drunk, and talk a little too freely.

The following morning, October 7th, Lord Shirreff’s cattlemen came to him in great agitation that a section of the southern fencing had been destroyed by excavations, and numerous cattle were now roaming the countryside and parts of Westford.

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Chapter 13

“It’s a clever ploy, but it won’t work for long,” Estes observed to Efran, Minka and Kelsey in the second-floor meeting room. “Once they find nothing more than a few pieces, they’ll stop digging and go on to something else. And it won’t fool Loizeaux.”

“He won’t be satisfied till he has another crack at the Treasury,” Efran agreed, leaning back.

“Another?” Kelsey asked. She was invited to this meeting because she was Estes’ wife and he wanted her here. Besides, Efran and Minka both liked her.

Before Efran could answer, Estes squinted at him. “Are you saying that’s why he loaned thousands of soldiers to Lightfoot and Adele? To hammer us for the Treasury?” Efran had told him that there was a Treasury, but not where it was.

“Yes, that’s what Adele told me. Did I not tell you that?” he replied, then turned to Minka. “Why didn’t you make sure I told him that?” She laughed at him.

There was a moment’s silence, then Estes said, “I don’t see how to prepare for that, other than what we’re already doing. We don’t know enough.”

Efran nodded slowly. “Without a spy in Loizeaux’s court, we’re going to have to wait for him to act.”

That came within a week. Six days after the treasure hunters’ distraction, Efran received a sealed message which read:

“To Efran, Lord of the Abbey Lands and Fortress
“From Surchatain Loizeaux of Eurus

“Greetings. This is to make known to you our offer of peace. You may fulfill your part of this agreement with one of two concessions:

“The transferal of the Lady Adele to Surchatain Loizeaux in a state of availability: not married nor pregnant.

“The transferal of the entire contents of the Abbey Treasury to Surchatain Loizeaux in Eurus.

“In consideration of the distance between us, Surchatain Loizeaux will allow one week for a response.”

Efran showed this letter first to Minka, then to Estes. They two agreed that the next person to see it must be Adele. So Efran took the letter to her.

Efran knocked on her receiving room door, which was opened by Adele’s personal maid (paid by Efran and replaced once a week when the previous maid grew tired of the abuse). Efran had to explain to the maid that he needed to see Adele, then he was required to wait in the corridor while Adele decided whether she would see him or not.

Her interest aroused by the unusual fact of this visit, she gave leave for him to enter her opulent (by Abbey standards) receiving room. When she herself entered from the bedchamber, Efran bowed to her and then handed her the letter. He sat while she read it. Then she sat. And they looked at each other.

“Are you willing to go to him?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

He nodded. “You will have to wait about four months.”

“Don’t be absurd,” she said. “I’m not carrying this thing that long.”

“Then I won’t let you go,” he said.

“You’d give him this Treasury that doesn’t exist instead?” she laughed.

“No. He gets neither,” Efran said.

“You were a fool to start with, and you still are,” she said.

“Oh, but you love me,” he smiled.

“Idiot,” she replied.

“About some things,” he agreed. He got up and left.

To consider his response to this, Efran invited not only Minka, Estes and Kelsey, but also any soldiers who had served under Loizeaux. Those who had and were willing to admit it were Lyte, Verrin, and Coxe. So these seven met in the second-floor room.

The first question anyone had was, what did Adele say? “She’s willing to go,” Efran related. “She threatens to abort the child. But I don’t believe she will.”

“Why n-not?” Minka asked fearfully. Her experience was that whatever Adele threatened, she meant it.

“It hurts,” he said, looking at her. “Whatever she tries could kill her. I don’t believe she’s that anxious to hurt herself over four months’ of waiting.”

“Would Loizeaux be willing to wait four months?” Estes asked.

“No,” Efran said.

There was a brief silence. “Can you give him a Treasury?” Lyte asked.

“Even if I had one, I wouldn’t give it over,” Efran said.

“Then how shall we meet him when he marches on us? Which he will,” Verrin added.

“I don’t know,” Efran said. “When he marches, he will first come upon Westford, which is a completely defenseless tableland of fields, houses and shops. Then he’ll trot on down to the Abbey Lands, which are even more defenseless, with half-finished houses and wide-open plots. And after he has torched all of those, he will sit at the foot of our hill and wait for us to starve,” Efran finished placidly.

There were several minutes of stark silence, then Efran said, “We have a week to answer, so we will take it.” Looking at Estes, he said, “I assume his messengers are comfortably housed in a downstairs room?”

“Yes, Captain,” Estes said.

“Excellent. You are all dismissed.”

They all rose and left except Efran and Minka: when he did not get up, neither did she. Rather, she watched him, and he smiled placidly at her. “Should you give him the Treasury?” she asked.

“No,” he said. “First, it’s not mine to give. Second, it would be futile. He would take it, and take Adele, then burn us with fire anyway.”

“He would take it even if you gave him Adele,” she said.

“Yes, of course. I think making his demand in two parts was merely for entertainment. He means to have it all.”

“Is there no hope for us?” she asked.

“No, unless God Himself chose to intervene,” Efran said, toying with the letter in front of him. Without looking up, he said, “I am sending you, Ryal, and the children to Marguerite at once.”

“Yes, the children must go, but I am not going,” she said.

He looked back at her and smiled again. His eyes were dry, and there was no crinkling. Where he sat, he took her firmly in his arms to kiss her, and she held him tightly. Then he drew back to look her in the face. “I can make you go, and I will. I will not watch you die, Minka.”

Her blood froze. “You can’t mean that. You can’t force me from your side.”

With his lips pressed together, he nodded. “It’s my final duty as your guardian. I will not let you remain to die.”

As it was too late in the day for a carriage to leave for Eurus, they made preparations. They gathered Toby, Noah, and Ivy to tell them they were going to visit Minka's wonderful, crazy great-aunt, and had them pack what clothes and special toys they wanted. Efran searched all over the hilltop for Pia, and was greatly disturbed that he couldn't find her.

He went down to Ryal's shop to tell him. In the shop, he found Ryal busy relocating books, ledgers and plats to high shelves. "Ryal, Loizeaux is going to march on us, probably within days. I need you to go with Minka and the children to her great-aunt Marguerite in Eurus."

Ryal looked up. "Efran, the Passage is overdue for flooding. I must get all these records out of harm's way."

Efran's gut coiled. "Ryal, I need you to leave."

Ryal said, "Efran, I need to stay."

Efran looked up at the ceiling in his distress, then lowered his face again. "I can make you leave."

"But you will not," Ryal said, smiling.

Groaning, Efran turned out of the shop and ascended the switchback.

At the top, Estes met him. "Efran, I keep forgetting to show you something. Come."

Efran went with him to a storage room which opened to the western grounds from its own exterior door. Here, Estes showed him a room packed almost to the ceiling with bundles of arrows. "The armorer in Westford was left with a great supply after the army dissolved and the palace collapsed, so gave us a good discount."

Efran smiled, surveying the thousands of useless arrows. "You are an excellent administrator and a good friend, Estes. I have been privileged to serve by your side."

Closing the door, Estes said, "God has delivered you before, Efran, and He will again."

Efran drew a deep breath. "Another animal attack cannot happen, with all the people here now."

Estes scowled at him. "Is he God of animals only? Does He depend on the *aina*'s help?"

"No and no," Efran admitted. "Thank you." He patted Estes' shoulder and turned away.

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Chapter 14

Early the following morning, October 14th, the hired carriage bound for Marguerite's Featherstone was loaded with supplies, children, Kelsey and Minka. (A driver and two bodyguards were also hired from Westford, after being thoroughly vetted. Efran would need every single Abbey man for defense of the fortress.) Efran was anguished that he still couldn't find Pia, but it was too late to continue searching for her. Loizeaux's messengers were kept in their room for now, well supplied with alcohol, so that they would not see or overtake this carriage on their return ride with Efran's reply to their master.

Efran and Estes said goodbye to their wives. Whatever Estes said to Kelsey made her smile and nod, but Efran had no words of encouragement for Minka. He could only kiss her hair and her face.

“Please. Please let me stay. It will be all right if you let me stay,” she whispered.

“Not for the world,” he whispered back. “I couldn’t bear to fail you.” But he smiled at her, fully.

“You are not cute when you crinkle your eyes at me,” she said, crying.

“So you told me. And you will tell me forever,” he promised. Then he turned away, shattered all over again as the women climbed into the open-topped carriage and the driver cracked the whip over the horses.

Efran and Estes watched the carriage and bodyguards descend the switchback and then disappear up the northbound road. “That was a mistake,” Estes observed.

“Yes,” Efran agreed. “But it was one I had to make.”

“Will Loizeaux harass Marguerite?” Estes asked.

“No,” said Efran. “She’s too powerful. Half of Eurus is beholden to her; the other half want to be.” They turned back into the fortress.

In the carriage riding north to Eurus, Minka kept the children entertained with stories about the grand old lady who was about to receive them. They listened in wonder, asking many questions that Minka couldn’t answer about the house and the animals and how many soldiers might be there, but they were satisfied with what she did tell them. They pillaged the food baskets thoroughly, and the carriage had to frequently stop for them to run off excess energy and relieve themselves.

Finally, however, they curled up on the cushioned seats and went to sleep. Minka and Kelsey were left in the quietness of rhythmic hoofbeats, creaking leather, turning wheels, and blowing wind. The bodyguards rode ahead of the carriage to talk to each other. Kelsey took Minka’s arm, sliding closer to her for comfort. “When do you think we will ever get back to them?” she whispered brokenly.

“Day after tomorrow,” Minka said.

Kelsey sat up. “How do you know? Is this what Efran told you?”

“No,” snorted Minka. “It’s what I decided. Darling Marguerite deserves a day of company, since we’re dropping three half-wild children on her. But the day after, I’m coming back to the Abbey. Would you like to go with me?” she asked, smiling wryly.

“Yes!” Kelsey cried, hugging her. “But will our men survive? Will we?”

“Of course. Polonti are so passionate about everything. Efran gets caught up in the moment and can’t remember all the times that God pulled him out of the fire. He needs me to remind him,” she said.

“Estes told me we would be together, but he didn’t seem to think it would be so soon,” she mused.

“Efran weighs him down too much,” Minka said critically. “That’s why they need us.”

Kelsey smiled shyly. “He is very passionate, for such an even-tempered man. Do you know, when Efran just dropped me in his little room and said, ‘Here’s this girl, Estes, take care of her,’ he looked up at me, and stood, and came around the desk. His face was so—calm, and his eyes so gentle. But he took me up and kissed me like no one has ever kissed me before. I went all weak and he—he—” She ducked her head, laughing in embarrassment. The carriage driver was listening as hard as he could without turning around.

Minka laughed, “Polonti men are the most wonderful lovers. They take you as if you were the spoils of war.”

“Yes!” Kelsey laughed. “That’s it exactly! And then he—” Shyly, intuitively, she told intimate secrets to Minka, who whispered her own likewise, which the driver, in intense frustration, could not hear.

When at last they drove down Marguerite’s long drive and pulled up to the grand façade of her house, the children woke, looking around in a daze. And then there were such cries of welcome, and hugging, and tears, and the frequent repetition of names. And when Marguerite turned to bellow, “HARTSHOUGH!” when he was standing right beside her, the children fell down in fits of laughter.

While the residents of the Abbey fortress waited for the inevitable, they began stockpiling food. There was considerable discussion as to what they should tell the plot leaseholders. Half those consulted felt that the residents must be warned of an impending attack; the other half saw such a warning as needlessly inciting panic that would impair the Fortress’ ability to defend them. So for now they said nothing.

However, the almanac predicted heavy rain, and the residents were astute enough to watch the skies, the animals, and the Passage. From the old stone bridge southward to the hill, the land gradually rose in elevation, so any possible flooding was not likely to be as severe as that north toward Westford. But the leaseholders prepared for the possibility, as did Ryal.

Through Adele’s maid, Efran checked on her periodically. The maid reported that she stayed in bed most of the time, sullen and demanding, as usual. Justinian continued his trips into Westford with enthusiasm, though his allowance was cut back to the still generous amount of ten royals a day.

Every trip was worthwhile, however, because he reliably brought back much relevant news. The fever was still ravaging parts of the city. The digging which had allowed the escape of dozens of Shirreff’s cattle had long since ceased, with the gold coins as yet undiscovered. At least a half dozen head of cattle were also missing.

There was not a whisper of concern about Loizeaux’s marching on Westford; Justinian gathered that the general feeling was that if he did march, he would pass through Westford and take out his wrath on the Abbey fortress. No, Justinian had no intention of sheltering in the fortress during an attack, thank you; he’d hole up in Westford if it happened. And as far as Efran knew, he and Adele never even saw each other.

Two days after the carriage had left, Efran released Loizeaux’s messengers from their alcoholic incarceration to take his written reply to the Surchatain of Eurus. In the sealed letter, Efran said:

“To the esteemed Surchatain Loizeaux of Eurus
“From Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands:

“Greetings. I have received your letter of demands, and regret to reply that, first, Lady Adele is still married and confined to bed with great discomfort in her condition at this time. If the Surchatain is willing to wait until she is

delivered of the child in about four months, she is quite willing to obtain a divorce and come to him unhindered.

“Second, we have no Treasury to give you. As this is a certainty, the Surchatain may do as he will.”

Possessed of this letter, the messengers staggered to their horses and set off down the switchback. And the Abbey plot holders watched the gathering clouds.

Late that evening, Efran was roused from sleep by Teschner, standing as sentry. “Captain. Captain!”

He struggled up, blinking at the candlelight. “Yes. I’m awake.”

“Captain, the Lady Adele’s maid has sent for the doctor. He’s with her now,” Teschner said.

Efran froze, then hefted himself out of bed. “Thank you. I’ll come.”

Arriving at her chambers, Efran knocked, but then opened the door and went in. He saw the maid standing fearfully at the door to the bedroom. She turned at his entry, gasping, “Lord Efran! She’s taken something!”

“What? What has she taken?” he asked.

“This.” She picked up a silver cup from the table to extend it to him.

He smelled it, took a tentative taste, and then spat it out. “That’s rue! It’s poison!”

“She’s trying to--” The maid froze, unable to say it.

Efran went to the door of the bedchamber to see the doctor and his wife working over Adele. As Wallace turned, Efran saw the bloody bed covers. The doctor said, “We’re doing what we can to save her. The child—” He gestured to the sheets, then turned back to his patient.

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Chapter 15

The shock of seeing the blood rooted Efran to the floor where he stood. The next moment he turned away, seeing nothing in front of him. He carried the sight of the blood with him as he walked without knowing where he was going. Then he found himself in the keep, standing before the crucifix. Part of it was lit by moonlight through an upper window, but he still saw only blood.

He sank down, his face to the floor. He could form no words, not even in his thoughts. There was nothing but the wrenching sorrow of the blood. After long minutes, he whispered, “I am guilty. This is my doing. Strike me dead, merciful God.”

Efran pushed himself up to his knees on the wooden steps below the Sufferer. “This is due to my guilt. If you won’t kill me for it, take it off me. I can’t bear it.”

He raised his face to the depiction of the One who did bear it. Then, impelled by who knows what, he turned to look at the portion of inscription illuminated by the moonlight: *He only is my rock and my salvation, my Fortress. I shall not be shaken.*

He remembered quite well the last time he had read those words—after Minka had left with Adele—and their meaning that subsequent events had revealed. But he couldn't believe it right now. The loss of what would have been his firstborn, and the absence of the only one who loved him—both wounds self-inflicted—rendered him as numb and unresponsive as the newly dead. He lay down on his rough wooden bed and passed out.

Later that morning, a day later than she had intended, Minka was making ready to leave Featherstone. But when she sent word to the carriage driver and the bodyguards, Hartshough came to bow to her and say, "Pardon, Lady Minka, but the driver says that he and the bodyguards were instructed by Lord Efran to wait for word from him that it was safe to return."

She eyed him darkly a moment, then said, "Have a horse readied for me, please."

Behind her, Kelsey said, "And for me, as well." Minka quickly looked at her, and she said calmly, "I know the way back now." Minka smiled deviously, and Hartshough bowed.

They said their goodbyes to the children and Marguerite, promising to the first that they would be retrieved quickly, and to the second that Minka herself would be back again with that handsome man. Then the women dressed themselves for hard riding and went to the stables. While Kelsey was diverted to the kitchen to receive trip supplies, Minka found one of Marguerite's men saddling a second sturdy horse.

"Lady, I'm begging you to take a bodyguard," he said. "Any of us will ride with you."

She glanced at his upper-class Eurasian equestrian wear and gear. "Thank you. But I am terribly afraid that my hotheaded husband will mistake you for a Eurasian soldier, which you are, and kill you before you are even aware of him," she said.

At his dismayed look, Kelsey entered the stables with two saddlebags. "Do you think this will be enough?"

"Yes," Minka said without looking. "You'll find that a bouncing animal underneath you will pretty well take away your appetite." She had already made this trip via horseback once before. The soldier took one bag to buckle it onto Minka's saddle, while Kelsey took the second bag to her horse, already saddled.

A maid brought a bundle out to them. "Lady Minka, my lady Marguerite says that rain is imminent." She held out two large waterproof cloaks.

Minka's first reaction was to reject them as unnecessary, or too heavy, but Kelsey quickly took one, so Minka had to take the other. "Thank you. Thank her very much for us."

So Minka and Kelsey put on their cloaks under gray early morning skies, then mounted and started off southward to the Abbey Lands. The women were unaware that yesterday, Loizeaux's messengers had ridden up this very road with Efran's infuriating reply to their master.

Also that morning, October 17th, Efran had awakened under the crucifix in the keep, and for a moment did not

know how he came to be there—he always slept with Minka now. Then he remembered that Minka was gone, and why; he also remembered when he came here, and why.

He lay there hollow-chested for some time, but Loizeaux was coming, so Efran must rise. First, he had to know if he would be burying Adele today. So he forced himself to her door, which he opened without knocking. Seeing the doctor, Wallace, beyond the open bedroom door, Efran entered the inner room.

He looked down at Adele, pale but alert, then up at Wallace. “Good morning, doctor. Will she live?” Efran’s inquiry was dull and flat. Also, he noticed the mildly disfiguring effects of the poison in her face.

“Oh, certainly she’ll live,” the doctor said as though disappointed. “Stupid woman, to take risks like that.”

Efran snorted mildly. He had opened his mouth to say something when Wallace added, “She could have lost the child.”

The words sent a shock rolling through Efran. “What?”

“It was a very foolish thing to do,” the doctor said down at her, and she looked away.

“Does the child . . . live?” Efran croaked.

“Yes, thank God,” Wallace said, glancing up.

“How can you be sure?” Efran cried.

The doctor said, “Oh. Easily. Here.”

Wallace began moving aside the clothing covering her abdomen, but Adele firmly covered herself again. “How dare you?”

Efran leaned over her, breathing, “You threw your naked body onto me five and a half months ago, so you don’t get to feign modesty now.” He shoved away all clothing so that she was uncovered from the waist down.

Wallace produced a cone which he placed broad end down on the fullest part of her abdomen. “Put your ear to that.”

As Efran did, Adele started complaining, so he said, “Shut up.” Then he listened, and heard a faint but clear *lu-dub lu-dub lu-dub*.

Efran let go of the cone and rested his face on Adele’s abdomen, sobbing. Wallace paused, his own eyes watering, and Adele stroked Efran’s loose hair, which covered his face and most of her belly. “I won’t do it again,” she whispered.

It was unclear whether he even heard her. A moment later he raised up, taking deep breaths, his face and hair wet. He wiped his face with his bare arm and told her quietly, “From now until you give birth, you will eat and drink only what is given you. You will be confined to this room unless you go where the doctor permits with a companion. Once you have this baby, you are free to do whatever you wish. But not even Loizeaux will take it from me now.”

Standing, he looked at Wallace. “Thank you, doctor. Whatever, *whatever* you need with her—chains, manacles, a

regiment—just ask and I will get it for you.” Wallace chuckled, probably for the first time in years.

Efran looked down at Adele again, who reached for his hand. He bypassed her fingers to pull the covers over her abdomen, then turned to walk out.

He went to the keep again to regard the crucifix, the inscription, and the morning light from the high window. He said, “I don’t know why, but You have given me a great gift that I do not deserve. And I don’t know how, but You are going to deliver us, and . . . bring my Minka back.”

Meanwhile, as the day progressed, the skies grew darker and darker. Efran found the leather thongs in Minka’s chest and tried several times to tie his hair back, but it either came untied or fell down far enough to be useless. This greatly irritated him because he knew how to tie numerous knots, just not on hair.

At a sentry’s alert, Efran and Estes went to the top of the switchback to watch one of the scouts Efran had sent out, Ellor, ride up the winding road in the blustery winds. As he gained the gates, he dismounted with a bound. “Whew! The rain’s blowing in from the north, about to start coming down in sheets in Westford. And the Passage looks like a boiling cauldron,” Ellor reported.

“Very good. Stable your horse and get in,” Efran said, holding his hair back from his forehead. Ellor saluted and led his horse away, then Efran looked over the vista almost in satisfaction. “Loizeaux had better have a backup plan to burning his way to us.”

Estes regarded him in mild surprise. “You sound almost confident.”

“I am. I’ve been given a sign,” Efran said. Then as the wind whipped the hair out of his hand, he muttered, “If I had remembered that I can’t tie my own hair back, I wouldn’t have sent Minka away.”

“Do you want me to cut it?” Estes asked, able to see due to his own neat hair cut.

“No, I’ll wait for Minka,” Efran sighed. “It’s the least punishment possible for making her leave.”

Estes smiled.

By late afternoon, it was as dark as night in the fortress, so candles and lanterns were lit everywhere. The men were having a quiet dinner when Truro burst into the dining hall. “Captain! Two women on horseback just came over the stone bridge!”

After the first moment of shock, the hall resounded with the sound of boots scraping the floor as scores of men jumped to their feet to follow Efran to the courtyard. At the gates, they watched in astonishment as the women pounded down the Abbey road, closely followed by a line of storms. The rain formed a wall directly behind them to the north, and lightning split the sky.

Estes, beside Efran, said, “It’s them! They made it just before the rain!” Efran was trying to see around his whipping hair.

But then the women stopped before a certain shop, dismounted, and disappeared inside it. “What are they doing?” Estes, the calm one, cried.

Efran, unable to see hardly anything, ran out of the gates to the top of the switchback. Holding his hair back with both hands, he roared, “Come up here! Come up to me!”

Although they could not have heard him, the two women appeared again, this time with someone else. “They stopped to get Ryal!” Estes shouted.

This seemed to be the case, as the men watched Minka help Ryal climb into her saddle while Kelsey mounted her own horse. Then Ryal pulled Minka up behind him—and the sheets of rain obscured them from view.

“MINKA!” Efran bellowed down the switchback, furiously gripping his hair. He started down the switchback himself, but the wind almost knocked him over. “Minka,” he gasped.

“Efran, they’re coming. Calm down,” Estes said.

The men waited; Efran gave up trying to hold his hair back until there was something to see. When Estes shouted and ran forward followed by numerous others, Efran gripped the hair along his forehead and temples to look.

The women with Ryal were coming up the last bend of the switchback. Drenched, Minka appeared to be slipping off the back of her horse, so someone other than Efran helped her down and someone else took the reins of the horse to lead it with Ryal through the gates. Estes had already recovered Kelsey and was now rocking her in his arms in the pouring rain.

Efran, pushing back mounds of heavy wet hair, had to wait until someone brought Minka to him. He enfolded her, knowing that it was she without even being able to see her. Then someone suggested they all get out of the rain.

Several men took charge of the horses while everyone else helped Ryal inside. He was quickly given dry clothes and set before a fire in the dining hall with a bowl of stew and a hot cider. Kelsey and Minka took longer to get into dry clothes; for convenience, they changed in the same room—Minka and Efran’s quarters--so that neither husband could get to his wife before both were ready to come out. Everyone gravitated to the dining hall to wait, as it was warm and well lit.

Someone then convinced Efran and Estes to change so that they wouldn’t soak their wives all over again when they did come out. For Estes, this was a simple matter, but Efran came out of the bath/laundry room with his dry shirt already wet from all the wet hair. At this moment he could not grasp the concept of toweling his hair.

Fortunately, the women could, and entered the dining hall mostly dry but for the hair draped across the towels on their shoulders. More than several men stared at Kelsey’s rich brown hair cascading like a dark waterfall down her back. With the number of men who wanted to hear what happened, they all collected near Ryal. Connor had brought in a nice padded armchair for him to sit in with a blanket over his lap and his stew on top of that.

Efran could only hold Minka tightly for several minutes. There were a lot of questions that needed to be asked and answered, but not just yet. The women were obviously exhausted, and both just collapsed onto their husbands until kitchen workers began bringing out bowlfuls of hot stew for the lot of them.

So Efran dragged in a wooden armchair to make Minka sit on his lap while she ate. She grinned at him, and he held her while she finished her whole bowl. When she got up to hand the empty bowl to a kitchen helper, Efran stood to hold his happy, victorious wife at arm’s length and ask, “Can you tie back my hair?”

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Chapter 16

Gasping out a laugh, Minka went to her and Efran's quarters to get a comb and a leather thong. Then she sat in the chair while he sat on the floor at her knees so that she could comb his hair back. Supremely content at being groomed, he half-turned to ask, "Why didn't you come in the carriage?"

"They wouldn't leave without your word that it was safe. Sit still," she said, combing his hair.

He stared blankly in front of him at the unintentional rebuke of sending her off. Collecting himself, he said, "I assume you left the children with Marguerite. How did they react to her?"

"Like everyone else," she chortled, combing the black mass sensuously. She was so drained from the hard ride that her hands trembled, but she was well able to do this for him, and wanted to. "They were stunned and enchanted. You should have seen them fall down laughing whenever she called Hartshough. It was like a comedy routine."

"Good," he exhaled. "How—was your ride back?"

Since Kelsey was ensconced in Estes' arms and occupied with his face, it was up to Minka to share that as well. "It was amazing. From the moment we started out, we had the storm at our back the whole way—the wind, the rain, everything was pushing us along; it was like boating downstream in a rapid river. We only stopped a few times, and then just briefly, to stay ahead of the storm.

"By the time we got completely out of Eurus, the city was deluged—when we looked back, we couldn't see a thing for the downpour. The same for Westford; the lake where the palace used to be must be overflowing the rest of the city right now. Oh, and the Passage—! Ryal said it was overdue to flood, and it's going to be scary when it does. How is that?" she asked Efran as she completed his primping.

He looked around the dining hall at all the grinning men. "Well, look. There are people in the room. Hello, Ryal. I didn't see you at first. Did you get everything put up on high shelves?" Efran asked. His voice was slightly hoarse from ineffective bellowing. But he continued to sit on the floor at Minka's knees, holding her arms at his neck.

"Thank you, Efran, yes," Ryal said, looking comfortable. "The ladies helped me with the last few books, then I was happy to come away. The Abbey Lands will flood only slightly, I believe. If it continues to rain this heavily, there will be deep flooding between here and Westford." Thunder shook the air above them, and they listened to the rain beat hard on windows and shutters.

"It won't stop Loizeaux, but it will slow him down," Efran muttered. "In which case, the arrows you bought will help to hold him off, Estes."

"You think it's possible to stop him, then, Captain?" Verrin asked. He was one of those at the meeting in which Efran predicted that Loizeaux would easily overrun them.

"Not only is it possible, but assured," Efran said.

Everyone was silent at such confidence from a confirmed pessimist like Efran. But Minka tightened her arms

around his neck from behind, pressing her cheek to his. "I told you so," she said, grinning.

He turned his face toward her. "And there you are," he said. "I wasn't sure if there was anyone besides you who would say, 'I told you so.'"

"No," she said, "because no one is right as much as I am, except perhaps Estes." Everyone then looked at Estes, who was oblivious to anything but Kelsey.

Efran said, "Kelsey," and she looked up. He continued, "If you see Estes, would you ask him to find Ryal a nice room? It appears he's done with dinner."

"I see," she said, smiling when she looked at Ryal. To the man whose lap she occupied, she said, "Ryal needs a room for tonight."

He replied, "Efran can show him the fourth room on the right." Everyone then looked at Ryal, who was peacefully dozing in his chair.

Efran got up to put Ryal's empty bowl on a nearby table and gently lift the old man like a child. He nodded at the door, and Minka preceded him down the corridor to open the fourth door on the right.

After putting him to bed, Efran was turning back to the dining hall when he said, "There you are!" and darted down the corridor in the opposite direction. Presently he returned with Pia in his arms.

"Oh, Efran, you found her!" Minka cried.

"It's amazing what I do when I can see," he said, almost peeved. He shook the wild child only a little. "Where have you been? Were you that determined not to—?" Pia whispered something to him, and he said, "Oh." He told Minka, "She wanted to be here to help."

"Me, too, Pia," Minka said. The wild child put her head down on Efran's shoulder, smiling.

Efran exhaled, "Everyone's here who needs to be, and we'll deal with Loizeaux when he comes."

In bed a little later, Efran and Minka listened to the rain hammer the slate roofing on the oriel and the leaded glass. Almost asleep, she asked, "How do you know you're going to turn Loizeaux away?"

He inhaled. "It starts with this: Adele . . . did as she said. She drank rue tea to abort the child."

Minka lunged up. "Oh, Efran! No!" she cried.

He held her. "It didn't work. I can't imagine why—I saw the blood. I thought the child was dead. But Wallace told me it was alive, and had me listen to the heartbeat. I don't know what kind of damage the poison might have done to him, but he—or she—lives." She lay on him to cry in relief.

"And after that," he said shakily, "I went to the keep, just to—acknowledge the gift, and I felt the reassurance that the child's life was a sign, a token of the gift to come, that our lives will be spared as well. I could be mistaken, but . . . I don't think so. And I felt that it was important for me to speak that assurance, as I had said that Loizeaux would destroy us."

She thought about that for a long time, then whispered, "I believe you."

"At the same time, we will have to fight," he said.

"Yes," she said.

She lowered her lips to his chest, pressing her body to his, and he rolled onto her. Neither of them spoke their thoughts, but she did not trust Adele to protect the life growing inside her. Minka wanted her own baby very badly, and Efran wanted her to have one.

It rained continuously for the next two days, October 18th and 19th. The fortress defenders waited, and watched, and argued about whether Loizeaux would march in the rain or hold back until it stopped. Good arguments could be made for either strategy: the Abbey would not be expecting an attack in the rain, nor could they adequately prepare for it or alert their leaseholders in time. On the other hand, marching and camping in the rain was a nasty business; men were more likely to fall ill, especially with the fever still rampant in areas.

Efran and Estes used the time to inventory all their arms and equipment, and to delegate repairs and maintenance. Estes divided up the thousands of arrows he had bought between all the archers, including himself and Efran: about 80 men. Since Justinian was not braving the rain to come back to the Abbey with his reports, Efran sent pairs of watchmen to Westford on rotation. And every day, Efran had Minka securely tie his hair back. It never fell down when she did it.

One of the preparations involved testing the archers' range from each level of the switchback. Efran took men whom he knew to be solid, mid-range shooters and set them on each level to have them shoot, then had another man mark the position of the arrows' dropping. While uncomfortable, the rain did not hinder this activity; it merely assured that the results were reliable in all conditions.

What Efran quickly learned was that the men must be clustered on the lower three levels; any higher was not only useless, but more dangerous for his men below. So he set large painted rocks on the main road as markers for those levels; when the attackers passed those rocks, the archers would fire. Those rocks were about fifty feet south of the old stone bridge.

Efran numbered the archers randomly, then assigned forty of them to the second-lowest level and forty to the level above. The advantage of this arrangement was that the rough terrain between levels helped camouflage and shield them, especially as they would be shooting down. Their ranks looked sparse, but with almost three thousand arrows among them, they could do some damage before swords ever came into play.

The men who could fight with the sword but not shoot reliably would be stationed on the fourth level, the next-to-last level before the gates, as fallback for when the archers failed. These men numbered about fifty. Foremost in Efran's defensive configuration was the knowledge that his 130 must stop Loizeaux's army on the switchback. If the invaders made it as far as the gates above, the fortress was lost.

Then on the third day, October 20th, the rain stopped. And the men knew that Loizeaux would arrive any moment now.

Late the following morning, Efran's scouts in Westford came galloping back with word that Loizeaux was on the move with at least a thousand, probably more. By far, most were on foot; it appeared that only officers were mounted. So each fortress archer stocked his position with his favored bow, a spare, and his allotment of arrows.

Seeing these piles gave Efran his first uneasiness—when divided up, the arrows that looked so numerous in a storeroom amounted to less than 40 per man. It was simply not enough. In no previous battle had Efran been so reliant on the archers in his regiment—they were always a preliminary assault to clear the field for the swords. So all Efran could hope here was that Loizeaux either did not have the numbers they thought he had, or that they would get bottlenecked in trying to access the switchback.

So, equipped with long swords, shields, helmets and breastplates, the defenders went out, each to his assigned position. The archers stuck their arrows point down in the ground for quick shooting; the swordsmen took their positions on the fourth level, crouching down to watch.

It took about an hour longer for the forefront of Loizeaux's army to appear. From the switchbacks, the fortress defenders could see them coming down the road that cut through meadowland. When the invaders came and came like cicadas, filling the road, spilling out over the meadows, as far as Efran could see, his faith in the sign began to waver.

The oncoming mass came to the old stone bridge; some passed over it but many flowed around it on either side. Nonetheless, when the tide passed the painted rocks, the arrows began flying.

It was a devastating defense. The archers on the east and west ends of the lines instinctively aimed for the invaders who deviated from the road, thus forcing them back toward the center, where they were contained like cattle going to slaughter. The invaders also found that going too far afield of the road prevented access to the switchback. Due to the steep slope, the rocks, the nettles, the scorpions, and the adders, the hill apart from the switchback was very difficult to scale, especially when covered by archers.

Loizeaux's army had archers also, of course, so these were brought forward to answer the assault from the switchback. But here again, they were at a disadvantage shooting up at indistinct, out-of-range targets. If they drew close enough to bring their targets within range, they themselves were shot by Efran's better-placed men. Also, enemy arrows landing anywhere on the switchback were a gift from heaven to the Abbey defenders, augmenting their own small supply.

Line upon line of invaders were cut down as they passed the rocks, and the bodies began piling up. These themselves became a defensive weapon, in that the invaders had to climb over them or go around them, either of which option delayed them. Efran, standing on the highest firing level, aimed carefully to take out the officers on horseback first: not only did a panicky horse impede men on foot around it, but he knew how shattering it was to the ranks to see their Captains fall. Any man in front who blazed the way up the switchback for the men behind him received Efran's special attention.

If his army had possessed 30,000 arrows instead of 3,000, they might have successfully defended the switchback and the fortress. But the supply had to give out, and sooner than Efran expected. After shooting mechanically and effectively for over an hour, he reached down to his field of arrows and found them gone. The men on either side of him were also scrounging for what arrows they could find.

When those were spent, and the men had to draw swords, Efran looked up at the northern meadows to see yet more of Loizeaux's men filling them.

At that moment, he knew the fortress was lost.

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Chapter 17

Watching the invaders pour by the hundreds through the meadows with still no end in sight, Efran understood that his assurance was a delusion. The reality here and now was that he had not men nor weapons enough to defend his bequest. The question of whether his child that Adele carried would live or die had been answered for him by what he was seeing right now.

There was no bitterness in his heart, no anger toward God for the misunderstanding between them; he always knew that he would die fighting. His heart went out to Minka, committing her to God's mercy. She had come back to share his defeat, loving him to the end.

So he tossed down the useless bow and drew his sword, shouting, "*Koa!*"—Polonti for a fight to the death; fighting to die with honor when all hope is gone. His cry reverberated on the rocks, and echoed from the hill up to the fortress. His men understood and responded: they repeated the cry, raising their swords and leaping up from their concealment above him.

With the sound of his blood rushing in his ears, Efran jumped down from his firing line on the switchback to the lowest level so as to meet the invaders head on. He cut down the first man that charged him, kicked another away so that he could dislodge his sword, then swung to face a third before him.

But that man, strangely, dropped his sword and held up his hands to signal: *stop*. And he said, "No *koa!*"

Efran paused, wondering why the roar of his blood in his ears was so loud. But the man before him yanked off his helmet, and Efran saw a Polonti. The man turned to look behind him toward the meadow, and Efran looked. He had to pull off his helmet to see and hear clearly. But he saw the fighting all around them pause as men turned to the roar from the meadow.

It was the mighty Passage overflowing. After accumulating days of heavy rain from hundreds of thousands of acres, the Passage had burst its banks somewhere to the north of them and sent millions of gallons rushing through the lowland meadows. The thousand men that Efran had just seen disappeared in an instant, washed away. There was only water, and so much of it!

The rushing water dislodged some of the bodies from the pile created by the archers, but did not reach the lowest level of the switchback where Efran stood. He looked anxiously to the leaseholders' plots; the northernmost edges of some of them looked to be flooded by a few feet, but the water did not progress farther uphill.

Efran looked back at his men, all of whom were on their feet watching the deadly deluge in wonder. No man was down that he could see. Then he looked at the invading Eurussians before him: those who had made it over the pile of bodies had escaped the flood, and they numbered about 30. The rest, as far as Efran could see, were either dead, wounded, or—by several orders of magnitude the greater number--vanished under the flood waters.

The roar of rushing water faded, then died away as it reached equilibrium. For long minutes all the men, whether defenders or invaders, looked over the shimmering lake that now stretched from the painted rocks to a point beyond the horizon. The old stone bridge was almost entirely submerged. Efran looked again to the Abbey plots; no, they were not flooded more than a few feet. Looking to Ryal's shop on his right, Efran saw shallow water lapping at the threshold. So he was probably wise to get his ledgers off the lower shelves.

Efran sheathed his sword and said, “So, do you want to keep fighting or surrender?” The 30-odd remnant of Loizeaux’s army looked at each other. The Polonti in front of Efran put his hands on his head; his sword was already on the ground. The others dropped their swords and did the same. When Efran saw them all unarmed, he nodded toward the gates above. “Come eat.”

But the man before him turned to point to the pile of bodies hampering the flow of water. “Survivors,” he requested.

Efran gestured in agreement. “Let’s see if any are still alive.” A few of Efran’s swordsmen above ran back into the fortress with the news, but most skidded down the switchback to help with the rescue effort. The antagonists then cooperated to search for men breathing, and found two whose wounds might yet be treated.

At this time, Efran discovered a few Abbey defenders had died fighting, including Cassel. The sight pierced Efran, but there was too much to be done to grieve now. That came later.

They carried the two survivors up the switchback, and the defenders herded the rest of the Eurussians up to the gates. They stood wide open in welcome, with the fortress residents calling, waving, and crying. Many of them stood on the two balconies, the fortress steps and courtyard to look over the flooded meadow—a stunning sight.

Walking beside his fellow Polonti at the rear of the group, Efran asked with a scowl, “Why were you fighting for Loizeaux?”

“Money,” the other said, glancing at him in surprise.

“Well, fight for me. I’ll pay you,” Efran said irritably.

The other grinned at him. “You are Lord Efran.”

“Yes. Who are you?” Efran asked.

“Barr.”

“That’s not a Polonti name,” Efran sniffed. For some long-ago forgotten reason, Polonti disliked the letter “B.”

“I was a slave in Eurus. Promised my freedom if I would fight,” Barr said.

Efran raised his face in comprehension. “Well, you have it.”

They reached the gates to find the courtyard crammed with people who would not go in before the lord of the fortress. But Efran, unwilling to shove his way through, shouted, “Take the wounded to Wallace! The rest to the dining hall!”

The courtyard cleared as residents and combatants obeyed. But one of the smallest people among them stayed, waiting until enough bodies moved out of the way for her to find Efran and leap on him. “It was real,” she breathed, holding his neck. “Your sign proved true.”

Holding her, he exhaled, “I know.” Then he set her on her feet and said, “Minka, meet my kinsman Barr. He was also a slave.”

When she looked to Barr in shock, he fell to his knees as required in the presence of royalty. “Get up!” she cried,

and he scrambled to his feet. “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress, Barr,” she said, reaching up to kiss his cheek with tears in her eyes. He fell to his knees again.

She looked at Efran in consternation, and he explained, “We are just very emotional, and feel everything deeply.”

In the dining hall, Efran made his way through the crowd to the front, raised his hands, and said loudly, “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress. I am Lord Efran. You who will swear allegiance to the Law of Roman may stay and serve me. Otherwise, you may go in peace. But you will do either one or the other when the roads are clear. As soon as our hardy kitchen crew can accommodate the visitors, we will serve you all. I will eat last.”

All of the surviving Eurussians elected to swear allegiance to Roman’s Law and stay.

The rest of the day was wonderful for its normalcy, with a few exceptions. The bodies of the invaders killed by the fortress defenders had to be cleared away despite the flooded meadows, so a pyre was set on a portion of the rugged hill facing east. Teams of men hammered iron stakes into the hillside to hold them, and the smoke was seen as far away as Venegas and Westford.

Abbey leaseholders, for the most part unaware of the aborted invasion, came to Efran with a request for a wall to be built around the Lands. Efran approved this request, with the stipulation that each plotholder was responsible for providing labor to build the portion of wall abutting his own land.

Efran also ordered his men to help leaseholders clean up flood damage to their property, starting with Ryal. Efran went down himself to see what damage the notary shop suffered. As it happened, the high threshold had kept out almost all of the floodwater, so there was nothing much to be cleaned. Ryal elected to leave the books and ledgers on the higher shelves.

Efran quietly asked him, “Did you see it? Did you see a thousand men washed away in the blink of an eye?”

“Yes,” Ryal said.

“Was that a miracle?” Efran whispered.

“No, in that the Passage has flooded regularly in the past, and as I told you, was overdue to flood again. Yes, in the timing. The miracle was in the timing of a natural event. That was no coincidence.”

Efran nodded, raising his eyes to search out the ineffable. “God heard me, Ryal. He heard me regarding the child and Loizeaux. But I don’t know why. I am a sinful man.”

“How are you sinning?” Ryal asked.

Efran groaned, “I slept with Adele.” Miserably, he told Ryal all about that night before he was to be hanged in the morning. He left nothing out of the account, being a kind of confession.

After hearing all that, Ryal asked, “Are you still sleeping with Adele?”

“No!” Efran said, offended.

“Well, all we can do is follow our conscience to the best of our ability and leave the outcome to God. Since you cannot undo your sins of the past, the most you can do is not repeat them,” Ryal said.

Efran nodded, lowering his eyes. And he repeated this entire conversation to Minka.

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Chapter 18

Two days later, on October 23rd, Efran and Minka took five soldiers with them to retrieve Noah, Ivy and Toby from Marguerite's Featherstone in Eurus. The floodwaters had sunk below the level of the road by this time, so travel was possible, though risky. The scouts Efran had sent to Westford heard nothing further regarding Loizeaux.

After watching a large army march south through Westford two days ago, none of the residents had seen any troops fleeing back up the road. Apparently, there were no survivors other than the thirty who had surrendered to Efran. Justinian had not appeared at the Abbey since before the flooding, so Efran was restless to know what the Eurasian Surchatain planned to do now without the greater portion of his army. Marguerite would know someone who knew.

Despite the fact that all of the men Efran brought on this trip—Detler, Goss, Doane, Connor, and Hawk--were unknown to Marguerite, again, she greeted them effusively with cries, hugs, kisses and naturally excellent food and drink. Efran brought different men on this trip because he had many good soldiers who deserved these rare pleasant tasks, and he wanted to spread them around. Marguerite did not care whom he brought; she welcomed them all the same, and demanded they enjoy everything in her house and on her table.

The children, especially Ivy, were relieved to see familiar faces. While Auntie Marguerite had been kind and weirdly wonderful, they missed their animals and their special soldiers. So Efran had made sure to bring along Detler and Connor, two of their favorites.

On the second day of their visit, Efran caught Marguerite at a quiet moment and asked what contacts she might have at the palace to tell him what the Surchatain was preparing to do now. Efran did not attempt to tell her about the invasion; he tried to imply that he wanted just general information as one lord to another.

“Who to talk to,” she murmured with a pensiveness that Efran had not seen before.

She turned, inhaling to bellow for the invaluable Hartshough, but Efran stood to place a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Don't trouble; I'll find him.”

She patted his hand and said, “He should be in the pantry with the maid now.”

“Thank you,” he said, bending to kiss her head. Efran walked toward the general area where he thought the pantry would be, and almost stumbled into the impassive Hartshough engaged in, ah, petting with a maid.

Efran withdrew at once, then stood wondering: “Is . . . that what she told me?” Regardless, he returned to her to say, “I can't seem to find him anywhere.”

So, as desired, she turned to bellow, “HARTSHOUGH!” who appeared without impediments. And Marguerite explained, “Sybil's Efran has a question.”

Hartshough turned to Efran attentively, who placed an arm around his shoulders to casually walk him a discreet distance away and say, "Hartshough, I'd like to talk to a man who knows Loizeaux's mind and won't be troubled by questions from me."

"Ah. I believe that Lord Rawson should be invited for refreshments," Hartshough said.

"Today?" Efran asked hopefully.

"I will direct him to the balcony at the eastern end of the second-floor corridor, Lord Efran," Hartshough said.

"You're a good man," Efran said, patting his waistcoat before departing for the second floor.

Efran had been on the east-facing balcony less than a half hour before Hartshough brought up a decanter and two glass goblets. "Our guest should be arriving momentarily, Lord Efran."

"Thank you," Efran said, looking over the magnificent vista of rolling woodlands.

There was not room on the balcony to pace, or Efran would have. But he had not long to wait for the lord's arrival. Hearing the dual approaching footsteps, he did pause to marvel at Marguerite's ability to make great lords hop on command.

Hartshough appeared at the balcony with a finely dressed gentleman with wavy red hair and a gray beard. Hartshough said, "Lord Efran, may I introduce Lord Rawson of the Lowlands."

Efran bowed. "It's an honor, sir."

"Likewise," the lord said, studying the casually dressed Polonti before him. His inattention to his clothing indicated a man who did not rely on appearances, except for the nicety of his long hair pulled back.

"May I interest either of my lords in my lady's luncheon of roast suckling pig?" Hartshough offered.

Efran looked at him quickly. "Yes."

Rawson laughed quietly. "I will join the young lord, Hartshough."

"Very good, my lords," Hartshough bowed and withdrew.

Efran gestured to the chair across from him as he sat at the tea table. Rawson eased himself down as well. He was a substantial man in his mid-forties with a keen face and habitual smile. Everything interested him, though not for the apparent reasons. And he was interested in Efran.

Rawson broached, "I have heard much of you, Lord Efran, but have not yet discovered how you came by the acquaintance of our highly regarded hostess."

"She is my wife's great-aunt," Efran said, watching him with as much interest.

Rawson's eyes narrowed in thought. "And your wife would be . . . ?"

"The former Chataine Sybil," Efran said.

“Sybil . . .” Rawson mused. Then his face registered recognition. “One of Lightfoot’s daughters. Then you are Captain Efran, our infamous bride stealer.”

“That I am,” Efran smiled. He reached out to pour a cup of sparkling wine for his guest and himself.

“Lightfoot’s younger daughter,” Rawson mused, picking up the goblet.

“Yes,” Efran said, sitting back with his own goblet, still smiling.

A shadow of question crossed the lord’s face. “But they were in Westford at the time you took her. I do not see the connection to Marguerite of Eurus.”

Efran almost laughed. “Do you want the *whole* story?”

“Absolutely,” Rawson said, leaning forward. He put his goblet back down.

Efran looked off into the recent past. “I was Captain of Westford’s Red Regiment before the fever struck. I almost died of it, but crawled out the infirmary window during a thunderstorm and took refuge in a henhouse nearby. The young girl tending it took an interest in me—she called herself Minka. Her father, who I discovered too late to be Surchatain Lightfoot, decided I should be hanged.

“But little Minka objected, so I was made her guardian. And during my tenure, she was taken away for reasons unknown to me. I recovered her and took her to a safe place, for by that time the palace was collapsing on its foundations. Minka wanted to marry me, but I believed her to be underage and refused to touch her. So while the army her father hired was attacking me at the Abbey fortress, she rode to Eurus to secure proof that she was 16—proof that only Marguerite could provide. She brought that back to me and then hauled me to the notary in Westford for us to be married,” Efran ended.

He had carefully skimmed over the fact that the army which had attacked him was Loizeaux’s own. The most recent attack was his second attempt at the Abbey Treasury.

Rawson listened with parted lips, then laughed, “A young girl’s dream story.”

“Ask Marguerite. Or better yet, Hartshough. Either will confirm the basic facts,” Efran said, taking a drink.

“I do not doubt you, Lord Efran. I only think you have been exceptionally, almost . . . supernaturally happy in your endeavors,” Rawson said, studying him.

“I agree. Do you know of the thousand that Loizeaux sent to the Abbey fortress only days ago?” Efran asked.

Rawson regarded him, then said quietly, “They never came back.”

“I watched them get swept away by the Passage flooding,” Efran replied.

“And how did you conjure that?” Rawson asked.

Efran laughed. “I was as surprised as they, and had committed myself to die fighting.” He shut his mouth, but his eyes watered against his will.

The two regarded each other, then Hartshough came in with plates of tender roast pig, bread and fresh greens. Setting them before the men, who both sat up, Hartshough said, “May I refresh your glasses?”

“Mine is adequate, thank you,” Efran said absently, taking up a fork.

“As is mine. Thank you, Hartshough,” Rawson said. The butler bowed and quietly left.

The two ate in silence. Efran was enjoying the food, but glanced up at the lord, apparently encased in deep thought. Finally Rawson said, “What can I do for you, Lord Efran?”

Efran changed objectives without even realizing it. “I want Loizeaux to know that I have no Treasury to give him, so he has nothing to gain in attacking me.”

Rawson lifted his face in a silent laugh. “But the fact of the Abbey Treasury is well established.”

Efran leaned forward in his intensity. “Then kindly tell me where it is.”

There was a rather long silence while Rawson thought about this. “If it is truly gone . . .” he mused.

“The fortress had been abandoned for years. How can anyone imagine something so valuable remains?” Efran asked over his plate.

“And Adele is sick abed,” Rawson murmured.

Efran continued eating, but his senses were suddenly heightened. He had said nothing about Adele to Rawson, and the only time he had spoken of Adele’s being sick was . . . in his reply to Loizeaux.

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Chapter 19

“Oh, Adele is in a pathetic state, confined to bed,” Efran casually affirmed. *Who are you and what do you know?* While Loizeaux could have told Rawson this, or shared the letter with him, Efran couldn’t imagine why he would. He added, “She’s willing to go to Loizeaux, but he’d be wise to wait till she’s past this pregnancy. Then she’ll be more . . . receptive.”

Rawson was silent even longer. Then he broached, “Perhaps you know something about . . . a silver butter dish found in Westford.”

Efran looked up blankly, shaking his head. Rawson went on, “It has markings indicating that it was cast during the reign of Surchatain Ariel of Westford.”

“I’m sorry—I’m . . . not well acquainted with the history of Westford,” Efran stammered—convincingly, he hoped.

“But the Abbey fortress has a long and deep connection with the rulers of Westford,” Rawson said passionately. In this, as in everything he had said about the Abbey, he was correct.

“Then someone in Westford has been extremely negligent. The notary had it listed as an orphanage, and I accepted its bequest as such,” Efran said.

Rawson groaned in disappointment. “Well, then, you can let me know when Adele is ready to come to Eurus,” he sighed.

Efran nodded casually while his hair almost stood on end—would have, had it not been tied back so securely. Rawson blinked, then continued, “So that I can inform the Surchatain.”

“Of course,” Efran said. “She’ll want to come when she’s done bearing.”

“Can’t she get rid of it?” Rawson asked crossly.

“Oh, the doctor won’t let her. He’s afraid it will kill her,” Efran said. “But it’s good you have the Surchatain’s ear. It would be a great kindness if you would speak a word to him for me. That will help me with Marguerite, as well. She thinks Loizeaux is wonderful, and I wish to stay in her good graces.”

Efran displayed his most honest face while Rawson looked at him with deep interest. Then he laughed, “Well, why not? All right,” he said, standing. “I suppose we’ve reached an understanding.”

“Thank you, Lord Rawson,” Efran said, offering his hand. The other looked at it, then decided to shake it in the spirit of the moment.

To make sure he left, Efran walked him to the front door at the far end of the glorious foyer, then he ran to find Minka. She was sitting and talking with her auntie about lady things. Leaning over his wife, Efran kissed Marguerite’s head and said, “Thank you for watching our little savages, dear lady, but we’ve got to leave you now. Quickly.”

While Marguerite protested, Minka slowly stood, studying his face. She said, “Let me pack. Have you got the children?”

“I will,” he said, darting away. But after looking all over the house and not finding them—or his men—he started to get cross. On a thought, he went to check the stables.

There, he found the children sitting in the carriage, ready to go. (On the rare occasions that Efran had to take a carriage, it was almost always an open one with a retractable leather cover. He wanted to have a clear view all around rather than be encased in a rolling box.) The men were harnessing the carriage horses and saddling their own. “Who told you we were leaving?” Efran asked in surprise.

Detler glanced back from a carriage harness. “You did, Captain.”

Efran stood still. “When?”

“When you showed the lord out the door, Captain. You were all but riding,” Connor said wryly.

Disconcerted, Efran murmured, “I must learn to be less obvious.”

When Minka arrived a few minutes later, all that remained for the men to do was sit her down beside Efran, throw her bag into the carriage along with the hastily assembled food baskets, and take off.

As they trotted down the long drive, Ivy climbed onto Efran's lap while Toby hung on one of his arms and Noah the other. They all three immediately fell asleep, so Minka scooted Toby to her lap so she could cuddle under Efran's arm. He said quietly, "If we're all settled—you've seen Loizeaux, haven't you?"

"Yes," Minka said, snuggling into him. "Father was his high Counselor until the Westford Council named him Surchatain earlier this year."

"What does he look like?" Efran asked.

"Oh, tall and stout. About forty-five. He has curly red-gray hair that he likes to wear long, and a gray beard. He has a very placid demeanor, as if he's really listening to you," she murmured.

"All right. Have you ever seen a Lord Rawson?"

She sat up a little to think. "If I'm remembering right, he's a somewhat elderly man on the Grievance Council. They gave him that seat because he really does listen to people, and he always votes for compensation. He always gets voted down by the majority, but many people don't mind because they feel as though someone at least heard their complaints. I think Loizeaux copied Rawson's listening manner."

"Would Hartshough recognize either man by sight?" Efran asked.

She answered hesitantly, "I don't know. Not Rawson, for sure. You'd think that with Marguerite's status, he would recognize the Surchatain, but she hasn't reached out to him that I know of, and I think he's leery of her."

"Well then. It appears I just had an interview with Loizeaux."

She sat straight up. "What?"

While they rode through trees in full fall glory, he told her every word of the conversation that had just transpired. In the early afternoon, it was only a little chilly, so as he talked, he leaned down for wool blankets to spread over her and the children.

When he was finished, she asked, "Do you think you convinced him that we have no Treasury?"

"I don't know. I hope so," he said. "But he seemed inclined to wait for Adele, and he condescended to shake my hand when he left. My fear now is that he will change his mind and reach out to interrogate me further while my whole family is within his reach. I only hope that he does not exercise himself on Marguerite."

She shook her head mildly. "Marguerite has a way of dealing with men like him. Her fluttery manner and forgetfulness are sometimes . . . exaggerated, I think. She is not to be cowed."

"Who was her husband?" Efran asked.

"She has never been married," Minka said, appraising him with a smile.

He looked appropriately shocked. "You mean—she gained all the wealth, and status, and influence—?"

"On her own? Yes. And she was a stunning beauty, like Adele. I saw a portrait of her from many years ago," Minka said.

He looked down at her. “You are so much more beautiful than Adele.”

“Yes, yes,” she said dismissively. “Because I’m so sweet, blah blah blah.”

“No,” he said. “I told you that Adele drank poison—rue—to try to abort the child. It has left its mark on her; she looks years older. Her face may improve as she recovers, but careless damage like that can’t be undone.”

Minka looked shaken. “Oh, no,” she whispered. “I haven’t been to see her since it happened. Oh, Efran. If she loses her beauty—that’s everything to her. That’s all she has.”

He shrugged, insisting, “I married the beauty of the family.”

She smiled up at him, and he pressed his mouth to hers. The men riding behind them smiled.

The farther they got from Eurus, the more Efran relaxed, until he was almost dozing himself. In the late afternoon, when the whole world around them was golden, they stopped the carriage for the children to run amok. The men dismounted, Minka withdrew to the trees, and Efran pulled out the food baskets to see what was there.

When Minka returned to the carriage, he held out a package to her. “Hartshough packed the pork for us.”

She glanced at it. “No, thank you. I’d rather have something lighter. Oh, the peach compote,” she exhaled, taking possession of it.

“Are you sure?” he said. “There really is plenty.”

She smiled, declining it again: “I’m sure.” He couldn’t believe it when she didn’t want something he wanted. He always thought she was just trying to be nice.

But even she was surprised when he handed Connor the whole package of pork to divide up among the men. “You don’t want *any*?” she asked in astonishment.

He glanced up at her. “I had a great deal of it at midday. And . . . I’m getting tired of it.”

“I don’t believe it,” she scoffed. “You raved about it.”

“Yes,” he sighed regretfully. “You have all you want of something, and then find you don’t want it so much anymore. That’s what happened with Adele—after that one long night with her, when she was so demanding and my life hung on pleasing her, I just—didn’t care to ever lie with her again. It was more drudgery than lovemaking. But you—” He shook his head. “I can’t ever get enough of you. You’re wonderful. You make me feel like High Lord,” he breathed.

Minka was frozen solid. He said all this as he continued to rummage in the basket, either forgetting or not caring that his men were standing right behind him. They also were stone still, listening.

Without looking around, he said, “Does anyone know where the children are? They’ll need to eat.” The men scattered to collect them, and Efran raised his eyes to her. And she saw that his speech had been deliberate.

Chapter 20

They continued their ride homeward as the afternoon deepened to twilight, then evening, then black night until the moon rose. Efran did not get sleepy again; he was constantly alert, constantly watching in every direction. He had a long sword on the floor of the carriage with the hilt resting on his foot.

But the children slept soundly, despite the bumps and lurches of carriage travel. Ivy was attached to his neck as usual; Toby was sleeping on his right side while Noah, the tallest of the three, lay stretched out from Efran's lap onto Minka's. She was trying hard to stay awake, but her head finally dropped to Efran's shoulder next to Ivy, and he kissed her hair.

The familiarity of ascending the switchback awakened all of them, and there was much stretching and yawning as the black iron gates opened. Hopping out, Efran handed Detler the food baskets with a pat on the shoulder before the carriage and horses were taken to the stables in back.

With goodnight kisses, Efran and Minka handed over the children to their familiar caretakers, then they took their bags and themselves to their own quarters. Exhausted, they undressed, fell into bed, and Efran snuffed the candle.

But moonlight shone softly through the stained-glass window. Before lying down, Efran yanked out the thong and shook out his hair. Snuggling into his side, she watched him get comfortable, which involved flipping his hair out of his face and off his neck. Its black gloss reflected the moonlight, and she reached up to play with it.

While she caressed it, he shifted toward her so that she could reach more of it. When she combed it back with her fingers, he turned his eyes to her, and she gasped in sudden illumination. "That's *moekolohe!*" she whispered. "You're using it on me!" He looked at her steadfastly through the black strands. "Oh! You—!" She fell on him and he gathered her up, smiling.

Efran hit the ground running in the morning, October 25th. While the Fortress had been preparing to meet Loizeaux's attack, a great deal of work was postponed, all of which now came due. There was the second barracks under construction on the south face of the hill, the grading and paving of new Abbey roads, and now preparations for the stone wall encompassing the plots.

Fortunately, most of Efran's contributions to these projects were supervisory. But he was a hands-on type of supervisor, and Minka looked down the switchback to see him harvesting rocks from the hillside, hefting one in each hand while discussing with the construction foreman what type of rocks they were looking for and how large they needed to be.

Necessary as that project was, however, the receding flood waters exposed many, many bodies littering the meadow that had to be disposed of at once. Fortunately, the majority of the thousand dead had been carried through the lowlands clear to the east branch of the Passage. Still, many had been snagged too close to the Abbey Lands to safely remain. While carrion birds congregated in the hundreds, volunteers wearing heavy gloves piled up the decomposing bodies to be burned in the meadows. Since some were still wet, a great deal of oil was required to get them thoroughly burning. And the sickening odor of burning human flesh filled the air for days afterward.

Today, Minka had her own necessary duty. So she braced herself to go to Adele's suite and knock on the door. Another new maid answered. With a tired smile, she led Minka back to the bedroom.

There, she looked in on her sister. Adele lay on her side, looking hollowly at the diamond-paned window. Slipping into the room, Minka whispered, "How are you feeling, dear?"

"Ohh," Adele moaned, rolling onto her back. "I will hate Efran forever for getting me pregnant." Minka hardly heard her for the shock of seeing her. Efran was right: her face was bloated and splotched, with dark circles under her eyes. Her greasy, stringy hair lay in disordered clumps around her head. Even her once-lovely hands were swollen.

Minka felt deep, genuine pity for her. "Here, now; we can make you feel better. First thing we must do is wash your hair. I'm certain you'll feel like a new woman just to have that done." Adele protested only slightly, so Minka went to the door to ask that someone bring a tub to Adele's receiving room.

When it was brought, Minka stood over it, looking at the necessity of filling it. Whoever brought it had disappeared. Inhaling deeply, Minka went out to the well near the garden, filled one of the standing buckets, and carried it with both hands to Adele's room. She dumped the water into the tub, watching as it barely wet the bottom. She swallowed, then went out to refill her bucket.

On her third trip with a bucket, she was startled when a soldier she didn't know stepped into the receiving room behind her. He observed what she was doing, then took her bucket, bowing to her. Minka hardly knew what to do, now that her bucket had been appropriated.

But moments later another soldier appeared with a bucket to dump it into the tub. Another and another followed until the tub was quite full enough, to the point that Minka hoped Adele's sitting in it would not cause it to overflow.

She stopped the soldier who was leaving. "Thank you so much; that's quite enough."

He bowed. "Lady Minka, whatever you need done, please tap the nearest man and it will be done for you."

"Oh," she said, genuinely surprised. "Yes, I will. Thank you."

She went back to the bedroom to urge Adele up and undress her. Taking up a robe from the floor, Minka guided her into the receiving room and helped her sit. "Oh, that feels good," Adele breathed.

Minka looked at the long, greasy strands of hair hanging outside the rim, and said brightly, "You know what will help? Getting some of that weight off your head. Why don't I cut some of it for you? I'm very good with shears."

"I don't care," Adele said dully.

"All right. Don't move," Minka said. She left the room and went to the back door again. Seeing one of the men paused by the well, she approached tremulously to say, "Excuse me." He swung to her, startling her, but she said, "Could you find a pair of sharp hair shears and bring them to Adele's room? Don't come in."

He bowed and ran off, which she found very disconcerting, but she nonetheless returned to her sister's room. As she was standing by the door, another man ran up to bow to her and place the shears carefully in her hands. "Thank you," she said in shock, then ordered, "Don't bow," which restrained him at the last moment.

She reentered the outer room to see Adele looking a little more alert. "Here. This will be so cute." She found a comb on the dresser and gently worked it through her hair to a point just below her shoulders, then began cutting the impossible tangles below that.

Minka washed Adele's hair and helped her bathe. Seeing her rounded abdomen, Minka firmly smothered the sharp pangs of envy. Then she searched Adele's wardrobe for something nice to wear. On a thought, Minka left her room again, to be startled by the man outside who turned to her attentively. When she realized he was waiting for her to say something, she said, "Will you ask the doctor if Adele can go for a short walk? Don't bow."

Since the negative command caught him halfway down, he aborted the bow and ran off. Minka, not usually so obtuse, was beginning to understand that they were supposed to do whatever she said. It was disconcerting because ever since the beginning of life at the fortress, the rule had been: no servants. Everyone worked. Today's special dispensation was nice, but she resolved not to get used to it.

As she was about to reenter Adele's receiving room, the man came running back to report, "The doctor says yes, she may walk about the grounds as long as she does not carry anything or strain herself, and for no more than an hour."

"Thank you don't bow," she said, and opened the door just enough to squeeze inside.

She dried Adele off and got her dressed in a loose, pretty, long-sleeved gown, since it was slightly cool but sunny outside. Then Minka arranged her new hair around a jeweled headband. "There! Now the doctor says we can walk a bit, which will help you feel so much better. I promise. Come," Minka said. When Adele balked slightly, Minka insisted, "Come! You look lovely."

Adele took her word for it, so lifted her splotchy face to walk outside with her little sister. They went out to the garden, where the aroma of fall herbs enveloped them. The rosemary predominated for the size of the decades-old bush, but the anise hyssop, with its blooms just now fading, needed only a brush of the hand to spread their fragrance all around them.

The rows beyond contained tarragon, basil, and lavender which Minka and Adele plucked just to smell. At that point, a man ran up with a basket and flower snips, which he presented to them with a bow. Minka cried, "Thank you!" in delight while Adele pointed out what she wanted for her boudoir, especially from the rows of chrysanthemums.

From there, they went over to admire the apple harvest in progress, and another man handed them golden delicious apples with a bow. Adele inclined her head graciously and Minka grinned. Eating their apples, with a basket of herbs and fall flowers on Minka's arm, the young women happily walked on.

What made it pleasant for Adele and strange for Minka was the number of men who stopped what they were doing to bow to them as they passed. This was the kind of behavior from men that Adele sorely missed; Minka would honestly rather be ignored as usual. The attention made her self-conscious.

As they were about to turn into the fortress, another man walked into the rear grounds, and the men stood at attention until he waved them back to work. He looked around until he saw the women, who had their backs to him. They did not notice him until he was almost upon them, at which point they turned.

Efran was dirty and sweaty, covered in rock dust. He bowed to Adele, but turned to Minka to hoist her in

exuberance, scattering the cuttings from her basket. Then he lowered her to her feet to kiss her solidly and whisper, “Thank you for tending my child’s carrier.”

Having done what he came to do, he turned around and walked off, leaving Minka weaving on her feet while Adele looked sullen and a man picked up the cuttings that had fallen from the basket.

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Chapter 21

As the women reentered the fortress, Minka murmured, “I’ll get a vase for your mums.” Adele nodded. She was not speaking to Minka right now because Adele was the one who was supposed to get assaulted by men kissing her unexpectedly.

Speaking of the unexpected, in the corridor they happened upon Justinian straightening the cuffs of another new suit. He glanced at them before returning his attention to the fit of his sleeves. “Hullo, Minka. I’m to attend a small soiree tonight, so if you happen to see that gargoyle of yours--”

“Don’t you love Adele’s new hair?” Minka interrupted desperately.

Justinian looked up, then, and his eyes went cautiously to the woman at Minka’s side, whom he hadn’t recognized at first. Without changing expression, he said, “Hullo, my dove, my sweet! You do look adorable in—” he glanced down—“magenta. I hope you’re pleased that I’m earning my keep with that atrocious brother-in-law of ours. No offense, Minka. Anyhow, I must be off.” He bowed, tipping his hat to the two of them, then sauntered down the corridor toward the front foyer.

Adele stood rigidly in place. Gently, Minka nudged her on down the corridor to her room. “Are you hungry? I’ll bring a plate back with the water. Go sit down; the doctor didn’t want you on your feet for long.” She scooted her sister, still mute, into the room and closed the door.

As she turned around, another man was standing there and she jumped. “Oh! Hello. Please go to the kitchen and get a trencher for my sister. Nothing spicy and don’t bow.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said without bowing, and ran off.

“I have to get used to that,” she breathed. “Vase.” She went to the laundry room and found a clay vase which she filled with wash water. Taking it back to Adele’s room, she entered to find her sitting at her desk. Minka placed the vase by her arm and knelt to pick out the best of the slightly wilted chrysanthemums from the basket.

At the knock on the door, Minka jumped up to answer it, then took the trencher from the man’s hands and brought it to the desk. “Oh, that looks good. The pork is wonderful; we had some like it in Eurus. When you’re through eating, you should probably lie back down—” Looking toward the bedroom, she went in to regard the sweat-stained bed clothes.

“Oh!” She bent to strip everything off the bed, catching up Adele’s soiled night clothes in with the bundle. This she carried to the door, feeling for the latch with one hand under her burden. She got the door open and struggled out to transfer the mountain of fabric to the man standing there. “These need to go to the laundresses. And—can you find clean bed clothes?”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” said the man on the other side of the mountain.

“Thank you,” she sighed, leaning back against the door.

She stayed there until another man appeared with the requisite bed clothes, neatly folded. “Thank you,” she repeated, then took them into Adele’s bedroom to remake the bed.

When done with that, she came back out into the receiving room, where Adele was indifferently picking at her food. Minka paused beside her, wanting to say something encouraging, but unable to find the words. “You probably should go lie down. I’ll . . . come by a little later, just to see how you’re feeling.” Adele said nothing, so Minka left.

Weary and discouraged, she went to her and Efran’s quarters. When she opened the door, she saw the dusky sculpture of a man standing beside a wash tub vigorously rubbing his head with a towel. Hearing the door, he lowered the towel, and she watched him shake his shoulder-length hair. He lifted his head to look at her through the wet strands.

“Oh, that’s so not fair,” she breathed, and ran to jump on him. He dropped the towel to catch her. Holding her, he turned into the bedroom and slammed the door shut with his foot.

An hour later, Minka, lying on his chest, murmured, “They’re knocking on the door again.”

Efran was smiling. “I don’t care.”

She raised up to brush his hair out of his eyes, again. “Oh, stop gloating.”

“No, no,” he said. “Just . . . really . . . happy.”

“What did you say to the men?” she demanded.

“What? About what?” he asked hazily.

“About me, to make them bow and wait on me and everything,” she said, leaning over him.

He sighed because she was still playing with his hair. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She lay back down on his chest to ponder that. Apparently, then, this was something they were doing of their own accord. It was very nice of them.

This time, the knocking came on the bedroom door, and Estes said from outside, “Efran, I know your blood is very red, but you’re going to want to see this message from Loizeaux.”

“Bring it here,” Efran said, and Minka threw the covers over her head as Estes came in.

Efran stretched a hand lazily to take the letter, and Estes added, “I apologize, Lady Minka.”

“That’s all right, Estes,” she said from under the covers.

“No, he doesn’t, he’s smiling,” Efran said, breaking the seal and opening the letter.

Minka was unable to remain under the covers when a letter from Loizeaux was being opened beyond. She peeked out. “Read it.”

Efran cleared his throat and read to her and Estes: “To Lord Efran, blah blah blah, from Loizeaux, blah blah. My good friend and advisor Lord Rawson related to me the very interesting discussion he had with you today. There are points which I am desirous of discussing further with you, face to face. Perhaps you would be willing to make another trip to Eurus for your wife to see her great aunt again? Or if not, perhaps I might be permitted to visit the legendary Abbey Fortress?”

“I eagerly look forward to most profitable discussions for both of us.”

Efran looked up at Estes for his opinion. After a pause, Estes said, “You told me you were sure that Loizeaux was pretending to be Rawson.”

“Yes. I still am,” Efran said.

“I do not think you should go to Eurus again,” Estes said.

“I agree,” Efran said.

“If he is to come here, we will need assurances of good will,” Estes said dubiously.

“Let’s write that up.” Efran began to rise from the bed, dislodging the covers, and Minka shrieked. Efran leaned down to her. “He’s already out the door, Minka. You’re safe.”

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Chapter 22

Minutes later, Efran, Estes, and Kelsey had gathered in Estes’ cubicle. Estes had a quill and scratch parchment in front of him, writing as Efran dictated sentence fragments which Estes strung together. Minka then entered in a rose-colored dress with a red face. Efran, still talking, pulled up a chair for her while she and Kelsey smiled privately at each other.

“All right, here is what we have so far. Welcome, Lady Minka,” Estes said as he sat back with his scratch parchment. Minka kept quiet, still blushing.

Estes read: “‘To Surchatain Blah Blah: We would be privileged to host you and a small retinue at the Abbey Fortress at a time of your choosing. Since this is an opportunity for peace, Lord Efran guaranties you and your retinue of no more than ten safe passage through the Abbey Lands and safe lodging at the fortress. We will be pleased to hear the date convenient for your visit.’” He looked around. “How is that?”

There was a moment of silence, then Efran exhaled, shaking his hair out of his face. “Good enough, as to what we say. But we need something more—solid to ensure our safety. He’s been most persistent in his attacks. Also, cut the number of that retinue down to five.”

Estes' quill scratched. There was a further silence. Then Kelsey said shyly, "I don't know if this is helpful, but . . . Loizeaux has a favorite courtesan who lives on Palladian Court in Eurus."

Efran and Estes stared at her, thunderstruck. "How do you know this, Kelsey?" Estes asked gently.

She glanced down in humiliation, then admitted, "I did her washing, and, found notes from him that she had accidentally left in her . . . underwear."

"Do you have them?" Efran asked eagerly.

"Oh, no, Lord Efran! I destroyed them!" she said, horrified.

Efran and Estes looked at each other with strangely gleeful faces. Estes murmured, "Are we so evil as to use this woman for—"

"Our own protection? Yes. Kiss her for me, Estes," Efran ordered, and Estes complied.

When he had let go of her, Efran asked, "What is her name?"

Kelsey had to pause to regather her thoughts. "Lady Fanny, Lord Efran."

The two men had an intense moment of restrained jubilation at the opportunity presented them, and Efran said tightly, still laughing in his throat, "Just Efran, Kelsey."

He began pacing in the small cubicle, throwing his hair back. "All right. Dress our best-looking men in livery and outfit a covered carriage. Pack them with gold. Send a decorated invitation to her to visit the Abbey Fortress for a special fest honoring the most prominent men on the Southern Continent. And bring her down here immediately."

"Admirable pack of lies," Estes said, scratching notes.

"And then clean up the letter to Loizeaux and get that sent. I assume his messengers are still here?" Efran asked.

"Eating and drinking. Mostly drinking. Madea's vintner's ale is winning hearts and minds everywhere," Estes said as an admirer, still writing.

"Excellent. Make sure the messengers leave before the carriage," Efran said, leaning back on the wall, eyes surveying the ceiling. Then he looked to his wife, who had been unusually quiet during this conference. Tossing the hair out of his face, he asked, "What do you think, Minka?"

Startled, she nodded, then blushed deeply. Obviously she'd not yet tied Efran's hair back for him this morning. Smiling vaguely, he watched her lower her eyes. Estes looked at Kelsey, who was also studying the floor, and he decided to start growing his hair out.

Rising, Efran murmured, "I need you to tie my hair back now." Minka nodded, almost knocking over the chair as she rose before hurrying out. Efran followed with his smiling face discreetly lowered.

As he sat in their quarters for Minka to comb back his hair, he broached, "Are you . . . going to check on Adele again today?"

“Yes. She needs the attention so badly. But I don’t know what to do for her. She needs something to give her hope for after the child’s born,” Minka said in discouragement. Efran looked at his hands, having nothing to offer.

“You gave me an herbal drink when I was so sick with the fever. Aren’t there any herbs that will help her now?” Minka asked.

His head came up so quickly that she almost lost hold of his hair. “Yes! Ask the kitchen to prepare raspberry leaf tea for her, as much as she’ll drink. And raspberries. Cranberries are ripening now; they’ll make her look better and feel better. Chamomile tea is good, but give her a little at first to make she takes it well.”

She repeated all that, then tightened the knot of the thong holding his hair. “All right, I’ll go ask them now.”

He stood, whispering, “Thank you,” and she lifted her arms to his neck.

Minka arrived at Adele’s room an hour later with a luncheon tray of eggs and cranberries that included a warm cup of raspberry tea. Also, there were fresh bronze chrysanthemums in a bowl. As she began juggling the bed tray to open the door, a man appeared beside her to do that. “Thank you, don’t bow,” she murmured, so he just inclined his head.

Minka took the tray to the bedroom to see that Adele was in bed, but awake. Setting the tray on the bedside table, Minka said, “Here you are! The kitchen fixed you a lovely midday meal.” Adele blinked, but didn’t even look at it.

Determinedly cheerful, Minka added, “Do you remember when I was so sick with the fever? . . . Well, Efran gave me some herbal teas that made me so much better, so I asked him what would help you, and he said—”

“Will it give me back my beauty?” Adele asked, tentatively pushing herself up.

“It will help,” Minka said, and watched as Adele swung to the tray to eat and drink everything on it (save the chrysanthemums).

Then Adele asked, “What else should I have?”

“Let me go ask him,” Minka said excitedly, and ran out.

At the door, she asked the man, “Where is Efran?”

“On the plots, planning the wall,” he said. As she started off, he followed her. “I will take your message, Lady.”

“Thank you, but I’d best ask him myself,” she replied.

So she ran out the fortress doors to start running down the switchback. She glanced up once or twice to see that it was a very long way to where he stood beside the road at a plot, but since she had started out on foot, she decided it would take less time to just go on.

One length later, someone had caught sight of her and pointed her out to Efran. He lifted his face, freezing to see her rapid descent, then he ran down the road and leapt onto the switchback to start running up to her. Since he ran so much faster than she, he caught her at the bottom of the second level from the top. “What is it?” he gasped. “What’s wrong?” His face was ashen and his chest heaving.

“Nothing,” she panted. “She’s fine. But I told her what you said about the herbs, and she asked if it would give her back her beauty, and I told her it would help, so she just—devoured everything on her tray. And she asked what else she should eat. Efran, this is what she needed. What do I tell her?”

Breathing hard, he leaned his hands on his knees, closing his eyes in relief. Then he looked up to say between breaths: “Tell her that—beauty rests on good health. She needs to eat—fresh fruit and vegetables from the garden—and drink the teas I told you. Don’t give her any other herbs, though—without checking with me. Some of them are bad for the child.”

“Wonderful! I’ll tell her.”

Minka started to turn up the switchback, but he caught her up. At the last minute he managed to refrain from shaking her, so just kissed her instead, and leaned his forehead to hers. “*Thank you.*”

She grinned up at him, then turned to run full-heartedly. Yes, this would help.

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Chapter 23

After telling Adele what Efran had said, she and Minka decided to raid the garden themselves. So Adele went to her closet and Minka almost stumbled over the full chamber pot.

Lifting it gingerly, she took it to the man outside the door, wincing in apology. “Please just leave the clean pot at the door.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing, and she sighed.

She and Adele took baskets out to the garden to pillage more cranberries and apples, as well as carrots, broccoli, and cauliflower. And Adele wanted more flowers for her boudoir, so they cut not just chrysanthemums, but also asters and celosia. It turned out to be a gorgeous, mild late afternoon, and everyone around them was working cheerfully.

Minka thought her heart would explode with happiness to actually be having fun with her sister. They talked and laughed, and Adele never even mentioned Efran. And while they were out back, Loizeaux’s messengers were out front leaving with Efran’s invitation to visit.

After a profitable hour, Adele took the flowers to her chambers to arrange them while Minka took the vegetables to the kitchen to wash them and cut them in small pieces. She asked a kitchen assistant to show her how to make the raspberry leaf tea, so that she could fix it herself whenever Adele wanted it.

When she brought back the vegetable tray with a creamy dip the kitchen assistant gave her, she found Adele rearranging her boudoir. So Minka helped her to make sure she didn’t try to move anything heavy. Minka also did all of the necessary cleaning. But it was companionable and fun.

By dinner time, Minka was exhausted but exultant, and chronicled the whole day for Efran in detail. He had been

deeply involved with the stone wall all day, so listened to her lengthy recitation while fighting to stay upright. And they both fell into bed, asleep, before *moekolohe* could be deployed on either side.

The next few days were busy for everyone at the fortress, as fall stores were gathered and preserved for the winter. The elegant coach-and-four with its liveried bodyguard set out to capture Lady Fanny of Eurus. Justinian continued his information gathering for Efran, which proved to be valuable in what he was not hearing: any indication that Loizeaux was attempting to rebuild his army.

Still, the stone wall had become a priority not just as insurance against the Passage's periodic flooding, but for defense. Efran had come to distrust almost anyone outside his own lands, with the exception of captured soldiers who swore to abide by the Law of Roman. These men became valuable to him as a source of information and a hedge against insularity. He was also quietly thrilled to collect Polonti from whatever area.

Minka was thrilled with Adele's progress. She had now decided that life was worth living, and threw herself into early rehabilitation from the effects of pregnancy. So Minka went to find the doctor at a rare idle moment and quiz him about everything Adele needed in her condition. Then Minka put that knowledge to good use. Adele daily scrutinized her face in a polished silver mirror and was satisfied with the progress she saw. Minka encouraged her with frequent observations on her healthy glow and how much the garden exercise helped.

And it had. Adele looked much better even after a few days of her tea-and-vegetables regimen. What she didn't know, and what Minka would not point out, was that she was still gaining weight; her face and hands were still rather bloated. Contrary to her silver mirror, at six months along she did not look the same as she did prior to pregnancy. Moreover, while Adele worked hard on regaining her beauty, Minka did not realize that she was working toward a specific goal.

The first signs of trouble, which Minka resolutely ignored, were trivial but telling. First, Adele would not call her sister "Minka"; she continued to call her "Sybil." This was not apparent at first, because Adele simply didn't use her name. But the first time she called her "Sybil," Minka corrected her with a laugh: "Oh, I've always hated that name. I'm Minka now!"

Adele waved that aside. "No, 'Minka' was the name of that nasty cat you had. It's not a woman's name."

"I don't care about that. It's what Efran calls me," Minka protested. Adele shook her head, saying no more about it at the time. But she still used "Sybil," especially in criticizing her.

And that was the second troubling sign: the better Adele began to feel, the stronger her habit of criticizing her little sister resurfaced. Minka pointed out some nice flowers, and Adele sniffed, "Oh, Sybil, not zinnias. They're so common."

And when Minka put a vase of flowers on her desk, Adele moved it. "Sybil, you never put flowers on a writing desk; they're too easily overturned." But the next day, Adele herself put flowers on her writing desk. All this while, Minka cleaned Adele's quarters, took out her laundry, made her tea, and brought her food. No other maid would do it.

Minka was careful not to complain to Efran, as he was preoccupied with the potential visit of an enemy to the Abbey fortress. But neither did she fill his ear for hours about her days with Adele. Efran checked Minka frequently to see that she was all right, but he did that by looking into her face. As long as she returned to him that look of adoration, he comforted himself that all was well.

On the third day of Adele's health regimen, October 28th, several important developments transpired. First, Loizeaux's messengers arrived with an acceptance of Efran's invitation to visit. He would be coming November 5th. Shortly after the messengers had departed the Abbey fortress with Efran's confirmation and letter of safe passage, a magnificent coach-and-four rolled up to the gates, and an exceptionally beautiful young woman entered the foyer accompanied by four liveried Abbey guards. Efran, having been alerted by scouts on the carriage's progress, was ready to meet her in a dress uniform.

He bowed formally to her with a prepared speech: "Lady Fanny, I am Efran, Lord of the Abby Fortress and Lands. It is my great privilege to welcome you to our humble fortress. I pledge our utmost to see to your comfort while we await the rest of our guests. Please accompany me to your quarters, where maids stand ready for your orders."

She was entralling: men who saw her in the foyer stopped in their tracks. Her hair was almost as black as Efran's, her eyes large and sultry. She had a manner of languid boredom until her target came into view, and then all it took was a heavy-lidded glance for the man to be taken prisoner. She deployed this maneuver on Efran at once; he smiled patiently at her ignorance that she was the one being manipulated. He extended his hand to direct her to her suite on the third floor, where he would keep her comfortable and isolated until she was put to use.

"Here you are, Lady Fanny," Efran said, opening the door to her suite. Then he stood back as her escort brought in her luggage: about a dozen boxes and cases on top of a large trunk.

The men saluted Efran as they left. Glancing after them, Fanny said almost desperately, "I need company."

Efran said, "Here is your attendant, Lady Fanny—this is Mai." He gestured toward the maid, who curtsied nicely to the lady. "She'll get you everything you need" *except one of my men*. He bowed to her and departed, closing the door after him.

When Efran had escorted Lady Fanny out of the foyer, he never saw Adele standing nearby, but she, unfortunately, saw it all. Having no idea who the woman was or why she was here, Adele's envy and competitive spirit were lit with a thousand fires. So Efran had dressed up to welcome an obvious whore to the Abbey? Adele would answer that.

She turned to walk the corridor to the rear of the fortress, placing a hand on her burgeoning abdomen. She was glad now that she didn't abort the child; carrying Efran's baby conferred a certain prestige on her. She could tell this from the lingering glances of the soldiers she passed. And she would use that with him.

She never forgot their one night together; she thought about it often. She knew he hadn't forgotten it, either—whenever she was around, he would look off in distraction, as though he had weighty matters on his mind, when she knew he was simply reliving the delicious hours during which they had enjoyed each other to the brim. And she smiled to herself: oh yes, she would have him again.

Leisurely, she made her way to the gardens in back of the fortress where Minka was waiting. Adele sighed in irritation—she was getting tired of pretending to enjoy Sybil's company, but she did appreciate the housekeeping, as the maids here were simply incompetent. So she resolved to keep it up.

Stepping outside, she glanced around to see if anyone she particularly liked were here. Some of the men were very attractive, and, she could tell, attracted to her. Men always were. Then she spotted one, Connor, who was a favorite of Efran's—he had blond hair and sweet blue eyes. The children loved him because he seemed so much a child himself (in Adele's mind, no one else's).

So as she walked toward the bench where Minka sat waiting and watching, Adele pulled the old twisted ankle routine in front of him—she stopped midstride, crying, “Oh!” and lifted her skirt to show off an ankle that had once been slender and girlish, but was now matronly. This, unfortunately, she could not see.

Connor, oblivious fool that he was, simply walked around her to wherever he was going. Minka, however, sprang up from the bench to run to her. “Oh, Adele, what happened? Are you all right?”

Overcome by anger and frustration, Adele lit into her: “Yes, stupid, I’m fine! What’s wrong with you? Are you an idiot? You have always been so dense, I’m ashamed to be related to you. You can’t even make a bed properly! Do you really not know how to tuck in the corners? How do you ever survive without a maid?”

Adele delivered this rant while everyone in the garden area stared in shock. Minka herself gazed at her, unmoving. Then Adele went for the kill: “How can you think Efran loves someone like you when I’m the one carrying his baby?”

Connor couldn’t endure any more of this. He stepped between the sisters with his back to Adele. “Oh! Idiots!” she shouted, and turned to go back inside. A couple of men went quickly around the fortress to the switchback, and from there, to the beginnings of the stone wall.

Connor offered Minka his arm. Unseeing, she took it, and he walked her back to the bench under the walnut tree. She sat, and he sat down beside her. Neither spoke; they just sat in the shade of the tree. Most everyone else turned back to his work, but kept an eye on her.

Shortly, Efran came onto the back grounds, looking around. Connor stood, and when Efran saw him, Connor moved away from the bench to resume his errand. Efran went over to sit in his place.

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Chapter 24

Efran sat beside Minka for a few minutes, his lips pressed together, tears standing in his eyes. He’d obviously been given a comprehensive synopsis of what had just transpired with Adele.

Minka shifted and he quickly looked at her. “Two things will help, I think,” she said quietly. “First, she’ll need a good maid who doesn’t offend easily—someone who’s deaf would be ideal. You may have to pay them triple the going rate, but Adele must have the raspberry leaf tea and healthy food. And a clean room.” Efran watched her.

Minka went on, “The second thing is, if you will pay a man, or several men, extra to . . . flirt with her, and pay attention to her, that will soothe her enough to avoid tantrums. You want her to stay calm, because the doctor says emotional outbursts can bring on early labor.”

“I love you so much,” Efran breathed. “I am so—sorry—”

“I would like for you to not apologize,” she said firmly. “This was my fault. I was trying to make Adele walk, when she’s crippled.” He blinked at her. She tossed her head in the difficulty of articulating her newfound knowledge. “No one has ever taught her how to love. I wouldn’t know, except for you. You taught me how to

love, but Adele never had anyone to teach her. It's sad that she used you without learning from you."

He sat back while the tears streamed down his face. "I could maybe learn to stop crying, if you'd let me. Come here to me." He reached out and she snuggled into him. A general sense of relief spread over those watching.

"Besides," she said, "it's only for a few more months. Then we will have a baby and Adele will be free to do what she wants."

He blinked. "Loizeaux accepted our invitation. He'll be coming in eight days. Lady Fanny just arrived today—I've put her in a suite on the third floor."

Minka sat up. "His courtesan arrived today?" Efran nodded. "Is she beautiful?" she asked. He nodded again, with raised brows. "Did Adele see her?" Minka asked.

"I . . . don't know," Efran said.

"She did," Minka whispered. "I'm sure that's what set her off. Oh, pay a lot of men to fawn over her or—" Another thought crossed her mind. "Will Loizeaux see her?"

"Possibly," he conceded.

"Then he won't want her," she said.

"Probably not," he agreed.

"What then?" she asked.

"Well, since we weren't going to give him the Treasury, I don't know how much difference it makes if he doesn't take Adele," Efran said, pulling her back into him.

"Except to her, and she's still carrying your child. Efran, we can't subject her to a rejection like that."

He put a hand to his forehead. "You're right." He looked off, thinking. "Perhaps Adele needs to go see your Auntie Marguerite."

"Oh, no. The doctor said no traveling until she delivers. All that bouncing would induce early labor," Minka said.

Musing, he leaned his head back. "Then I will have to think of something. But, yes, I'll see if I can get some volunteers to court her."

The next week passed in a frenzy of activity. Harvesting and preserving stores for winter, including game and fish, were a priority. Also, firewood. A large shed at the edge of the western woods had been designated for nothing but firewood. When it had been filled, Efran came out to look at it, judged it insufficient, and ordered two more large sheds filled.

Next to that was procuring the necessary supplies to make Loizeaux comfortable during his stay, which Efran calculated would not be more than three or four days. Also, cleaning and furnishing suites for him and his retinue of five on the second floor required a team of housekeepers. Efran brought up Elvey for her advice on drapes and rugs for the suites.

Work on the stone wall continued, though it would take months to complete. Also, portions of the switchback required buttressing at the same time, so as not to appear run down.

Lady Fanny was quiet, mostly staying in her suite, though occasionally requesting to walk in the garden or the orchard. This was allowed, as long as Adele wasn't out at the same time. Lady Fanny also requested an interview with the bodyguards to give them gifts for their service in transporting her here safely. Efran thought that a nice gesture—as long as they all left together.

Adele continued her strolls on the back grounds without Minka. A few soldiers had sacrificially volunteered to appease her with flattery and attention, which did indeed help. And a maid was found whom not even Adele could intimidate or injure: her name was Bethune; she was the wife of a tenant, and mother of six children who all helped their father in his barley field.

Bethune was almost six feet tall, nearly eye to eye with Efran, and a woman who laughed at everything. Adele's first screaming fit merely made Bethune chuckle. And whatever Bethune dictated in Adele's chambers was done. Since she also kept the place spotless, Adele decided to tolerate her, which brought great relief to the other fortress residents.

At last November 5th arrived, as did the moment when a luxurious black carriage pulled into the courtyard, attended by five mounted guards. Efran, Estes, Minka and an honor guard of twenty, all in elegant dress (by Abbey standards), stood in front of the fortress steps to greet their guests.

Two opulently attired men disembarked the carriage: one was the red-headed man who had met with Efran at Marguerite's, and the other a thin, bald man who wore a modest crown of gold. The Abbey hosts bowed deeply, and Efran advanced to greet his guests with another bow.

Addressing first the bald man in the crown, Efran said, "It is a great honor to meet you, Surchatain Loizeaux. I am most anxious to hear your thoughts on how we can achieve a durable peace." Turning to the red-headed, gray-bearded man, Efran said, "And it is a great pleasure to see you again, Lord Rawson. I was surprised by your graciousness at our meeting, and grateful that you prevailed upon your Surchatain to visit us." (This was another prepared speech. Since Efran wanted to be very careful in the wording of his welcome, he had Estes help him compose it.)

Gesturing to those behind him, Efran said, "Please allow me to introduce my wife, Lady Minka, and my Administrator Estes." Where they stood, Estes bowed and Minka curtsied deeply. Efran continued, "Now, please come in and refresh yourselves from your travel."

The guests nodded but did not speak; Efran watched the real Surchatain take in all aspects of the fortress entry while the crowned bald man looked placidly before him.

As the royal guests were making their entry with Minka and Efran in their finery as hosts, Adele entered the foyer en route to Estes' cubicle to complain about the slack laundry service. She stopped to stare at the procession, and recognized the EurAsian Surchatain—the real one—at once. Then Adele focused on Minka's beautiful new dress, and saw it as a mark of status that little Sybil had no right to wear.

But there was a greater affront here, in that Surchatain Loizeaux had come to the Abbey and no one had informed her. Well. She would set that to rights herself. And she swept back to her quarters, forgetting about the laundry situation.

While Loizeaux's guards were shown to another room for refreshments, the royal guests were escorted to the small dining room off the foyer with Madea's efforts already gracing the sideboard. Uniformed attendants stood ready to serve dinner on pewter dishes (as Efran wanted to thoroughly stamp out the notion of an Abbey Treasury).

The man in the crown was given the preeminent place at the oval table, with the red-headed man to his left and Efran to his right. Estes and Minka were also seated, then the serving began.

"I hope you encountered no difficulties from the recent flooding on your trip down, Surchatain," Efran said.

The man in the crown smiled and the red-headed man (supposedly Lord Rawson) answered, "No, there was hardly any water to be seen anywhere, which makes the flooding a real puzzlement."

Efran answered him, "The Passage generally floods once every ten years, but this year's flooding, which was overdue, was made much worse by the heavy rains that preceded it."

Efran turned to the crowned man and started to speak, but Rawson said, "Your holdings seem to have suffered no damage, and I see that your wall is only started."

"True, we suffered little because of the rising elevation of the land, and the fact that the breach occurred far north of us. By the time the water reached the plots, its force southward was mostly spent, and it followed the low-lying land eastward instead," replied Efran.

Again he turned to the crowned man, and Rawson said, "Yet the flood which barely touched your plots took out almost a thousand men?"

Efran studied him momentarily, then said, "If you like, I will take you riding through the meadows tomorrow, where the pyres of ten days ago can still be seen. Most of the bodies washed east with the force of the flood, but we were still left with hundreds to burn. Their bones are yet visible in the grass. What you may find if you ride farther east is another question."

Rawson sniffed skeptically as attendants brought in vegetable soup. While this course was dispatched quickly, as was the next, that of salmon from the Passage, the diners were quiet. Then great platters of roast suckling pig were placed before them, whose plates the attendants filled. Efran held up a hand to limit the amount he received, being fairly sick of it by now. He suddenly hoped Minka never got tired of his hair.

Efran attempted light conversation over the main course, but the crowned head didn't speak and the real Loizeaux was fully engaged with the suckling pig. Finally, servers brought in Madea's wonderful custard pies. Efran thought hard as he wiped his mouth with his napkin, then turned to the crowned man and said, "I hope Lord Rawson has convinced you that the Abbey Treasury is a fable."

The bald man displayed no indication of desiring to answer while "Lord Rawson" said peremptorily, "That question is still under consideration."

"Well, then, I have something else to show you. Come, Surchatain, indulge me," Efran said, springing up to take the bald man by the arm and hustle him out of the room before Loizeaux could hardly look up.

Thoroughly exasperated with this charade, Efran had suddenly decided to expose it. So he urged the bald man up to the third floor, intending to spring him on Lady Fanny and watch the façade crumble.

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Chapter 25

As Efran brought the old man to Lady Fanny's door and began to put his hand up to knock, the man said, "I see that you have become impatient with our game of identities, young man. But I implore you, for the sake of yourself and your fortress, that you indulge us to play it out."

Efran stopped with his hand poised to knock while he studied the man. Then he asked, "Are you Lord Rawson?"

"Yes," he said. "Except not today. When you forget, the crown will remind you."

Efran raised his eyes to the door and lowered his hand. Then he escorted the lord a few steps farther to the end of the corridor, and the windowseat there. "I wanted to show you the view of the Sea from this part of the fortress. It almost rivals the view of your forests in Eurus." It was a most spectacular sight, with the sun setting in fiery water on their right.

As he was saying this, the fake Lord Rawson burst from the stairway. Seeing them at the window, he advanced in a somewhat less frenetic fashion. Efran glanced back at him. "I was so taken with the forest view from Marguerite's balcony, I wanted to show your Surchatain our own views."

The red-headed Rawson joined them at the window, glancing at the ever placid crowned head. Then he looked out over the Sea. "Yes, that is an excellent view," he agreed, which surprised Efran.

Turning back down the corridor, Efran added, "I feel foolish for interrupting your dinner. But sometimes I have ideas that I must act upon."

"Rawson" chuckled, "That can be dangerous."

"Very," Efran agreed, glancing back to make sure that Lady Fanny had not emerged to find out what all the ruckus in the corridor was about.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noted the large standing silkscreen in front of the random locked door with no key. The maids never could remember which door had no key, so always wasted a few minutes trying keys that didn't fit in the door. Since it was at the end of the corridor, Efran had suggested they just put a screen over it. Someone had.

As the three of them came down the stairway to the first floor, they turned right into the path of Lyte, who was striding down the corridor. "Rawson" stopped dead upon seeing him. Glancing at him in turn, the soldier bowed. "Good afternoon, gentlemen. My name is Lyte."

"Lyte," the fake Rawson repeated.

"Yes, so you'll know the culprit if anything is amiss," Lyte said humorously. "Captain," he saluted Efran, who nodded vaguely. Then Lyte went on his way as the three men looked after him. Knowing that Lyte had originally been in service to Loizeaux, Efran wondered if the Surchatain had recognized him. It certainly looked that way.

The real Loizeaux glanced at Efran watching him, and resumed walking to the small dining room.

The three of them returned to the table, where Minka and Estes were stiffly waiting. “Forgive my rudeness,” Efran said, bending to kiss Minka’s head. “I just had to show the Surchatain the sun setting over the Sea, and Lord Rawson agreed it was an admirable view. Has everyone tried the custard pie?”

Shortly thereafter, the fake Rawson pleaded exhaustion on behalf of the fake Surchatain, so a servant showed them their quarters and those for his escort. Efran ordered sentries placed at all three doors: that of Loizeaux and Rawson, their escort, and Lady Fanny.

Then Minka and Estes stood looking at Efran. He held up his hands and began, “All right. I—”

“Excuse me,” Estes interrupted. “May I go get Kelsey? She is waiting to hear.”

Efran said, “Yes, but but not here.” Hired servants were waiting to clean the dining room. “Bring her to your cubicle.”

While Estes went after Kelsey, Efran took Minka to Estes’ cubicle and sat her down to wait. Regarding her contentedly spreading her skirt with an expression of trusting patience, he breathed, “You are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said dubiously, and he shook his head. He’d never convince her that she really was beautiful.

When Estes and Kelsey arrived, Efran said, “I need to learn patience. I got impatient with Loizeaux’s pretending, so decided to take Lord Rawson—the real one—up to meet Lady Fanny. But as I was about to knock at her door, he said something like, ‘You’re impatient, but I implore you to let us play this out for your sake and the Fortress.’ I remembered what you said about him—” nodding to Minka, “and realized I was about to jump off a cliff. So I took him over to the window to look at the sunset. Loizeaux burst into the corridor, then came over to look at the sunset with us.

“Apparently, this is a game he plays to gather information. Rawson called it a ‘game of identities.’ I don’t know how successful it is, but Rawson strongly implied it was best to let him finish. I did not challenge Loizeaux at Marguerite’s, either, even though I knew he was the Surchatain by the end of the interview. And then he even shook my hand,” he realized.

They just looked at him. “All I know to do at this point is trust Rawson,” Efran said, and no one argued.

The following day, Efran’s guards told him that Loizeaux’s escort were up at dawn, at which time one of them went to their Surchatain’s quarters and came back out a few minutes later. Following, all five mounted and rode east until they were out of sight. Efran’s men wanted to know whether they should pursue.

“No,” Efran told them. “He’s checking up on my account of the flooding.” (Efran did not discover until weeks later that the flooding was so widespread, it had also swept away over forty head of Shirreff’s cattle.) In a few hours, Abbey guards watched Loizeaux’s escort return from the east to ride in the meadows, going from one blackened hole to another, seven in all, which had been pyres.

While the EurAsian guards were out riding, Rawson and Loizeaux emerged from their quarters about mid-morning. Sentries took them to enjoy a late breakfast with Efran and Minka on the courtyard balcony overlooking the switchback and Abbey Lands. Unfortunately, the moment they arrived on the balcony, a sentry

whispered to Efran that a private request was waiting in the foyer below. So Efran excused himself with a bow and went downstairs.

In the foyer, he was met by Arne, who had been standing sentry at Lady Fanny's door. He whispered, "She requests to walk the grounds, Captain."

Efran winced at the timing, but it was cruel to keep her imprisoned through no fault of her own. So he told Arne, "Make her wear a cloak that covers her hair, and stay right beside her to keep her on the back grounds. Come report to me when she's back in her room." Arne saluted and turned down the corridor.

Then Efran went back up to the balcony to resume his seat at the table with Minka and their guests. "I trust you slept well?" he generally asked the two Rawsons.

As usual, the fake Rawson replied, "Yes, quite. The colored glass windows are quite a relic of its Abbey heritage."

Efran said, "I found many indications of its use as an orphanage. There is a school room with a slate wall and chalk. The sight transported me to my own childhood lessons."

"You went to school?" the fake Rawson asked in surprise. Polonti in Eurus were not educated, unless they were slaves receiving training to enhance their value.

"I received tutoring from a nun who took me off the street," Efran said.

"Amazing that you received such consideration in Eurus," Rawson said, open-mouthed. (Again, this was the fake Rawson, who spoke for the remainder of the meal.)

"This was in Eledith," Efran clarified, glancing up from an excellent breakfast of poached eggs and apple fritters.

"Eledith," Rawson repeated blankly.

"In Polontis," Efran said lightly.

"I did not know they could read and write," Rawson breathed in wonder.

"There is a rather fine library in Eledith," Efran said. Minka glanced in admiration at his light tone. He added, "That is where I first read the Law of Roman."

Rawson regarded him as if trying to determine whether he were prevaricating, and Efran looked steadily back. He almost said something about the copy of the Law that they had here in the Abbey, but clamped his mouth shut. He must not invite Loizeaux on a tour, especially with Lady Fanny wandering loose. Rather, he needed to pursue the topic on which they had agreed to meet.

"So," Efran said, "I hope you have seen that we are no threat to you and do not have the resources to become one. We just want to build lives for our families."

"Perhaps," Rawson said, glancing away. "Is Adele here?"

Efran deliberated. "Yes. But she has not been well. She—"

“I would like to see her,” Rawson said.

Efran looked at him, then said, “I will inquire as to how she’s feeling today.”

“Good. Go do that,” Rawson said, taking a bite of Madea’s wonderful omelet.

“Very well.” Efran placed his napkin on the table, glanced at Minka’s slightly widened eyes, and turned to the staircase.

As he stepped off the stairs, Adele entered the foyer to look around. Seeing him standing there unprotected, she advanced to say, “So Surchatain Loizeaux has come and you’ve said nothing to me about it.”

“I was just coming to ask how you are. He wants to see you,” Efran said, feeling completely disassociated from the words coming out of his mouth.

“Then I expect to be asked to dinner,” she said coldly.

“That will be at seven by the candle in the small dining room here,” he heard himself say.

“I will have my maid check to see whether I am available,” she informed him, and he nodded. As she swept out of the foyer, Efran went to inform Estes of another guest for dinner.

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Chapter 26

Efran reseated himself at the balcony table with Minka and the Rawsons. She watched him wipe sweat from his upper lip as he told them, “Adele will join us for dinner.”

“Excellent,” Rawson said. And they finished eating in near silence.

As they were all coming down from the balcony, Lady Fanny’s sentry Arne approached to furtively gesture to Efran. He said, “Excuse me,” and went to hear Arne’s report.

“Captain, she’s back in her room, but . . . her walk was kind of strange,” he whispered.

“How so?” Efran whispered back.

“First she asked to see the barracks. When I told ’er that was a no-go, as they’re beyond the fence, she asked to see the stables. I couldn’t see any harm in that, so I took ’er around there. She went from stall to stall, looking, then came back out and asked if she could just walk around the grounds a little while. I said sure, so I walked ’er all over the back grounds, from one end to the other. She was sure looking for something. She didn’t find it though, because she finally said she was ready to go back inside. She looked like she was about to cry,” he said, wincing. Women were inexplicable.

Efran thought hard about that, but could make no sense of it. “All right. Go back and watch her door. See if she wants anything to eat or drink. You’ll get a replacement around eight.”

“Yes, Cap’n.” Arne saluted and turned away.

Loizeaux and Rawson did very little to while away the day until dinner. They sat, and ate, and occasionally talked in whispers. Efran was glad he didn’t ask to see anything, but that made the consequences of dinner that much more weighty.

Apparently, Lady Fanny did not request to walk around again, but her maid reported that she cried for hours on her bed. Efran felt like a monster, to yank her away from her life and imprison her here under false pretenses. He resolved to send a nice gift back with her when they sent her home.

As he and Minka were dressing for dinner, she said, “Adele knows what Loizeaux looks like very well. I doubt she’s ever had to play his stupid identity game. I can’t imagine her going along with it tonight.”

He just shook his head, so she asked, “What are you going to do?”

He looked at her hollowly. “When?”

“At dinner,” she said.

“Pray,” he said. She nodded, raising her brows.

At seven of the day candle, Loizeaux, Rawson, Efran, Minka, and Estes were in the dining room, waiting for the last attendee. Loizeaux and Rawson were sitting in their respective seats; the other three were standing. The minutes passed. No one spoke.

Finally, Adele entered in a dignified rush. “Sorry to be late,” she breathed. The Rawsons looked up; Efran and Estes bowed. Then Estes went around the table to seat her. Efran seated Minka, and servants began bringing in the dishes.

Adele looked very nice, especially compared to how she looked two weeks ago. But it was far from what she looked like eight months ago.

There was a strained silence, and Adele’s eyes flicked from one face to another in displeasure. Minka was burning to say something—anything—but knew that nothing she said would help here.

Efran said abruptly, “The doctor has forbidden Adele to travel until the child is born. So you’ll have to wait at least three months.”

“Very well,” Loizeaux said.

“You look lovely, Adele. I love the dress. Is that Elvey’s? She does such beautiful work,” Minka gushed, unable to contain herself.

Loizeaux suddenly looked at her. “Efran’s wife. You’re Sybil?”

She looked at him, startled. “Yes—Lord Rawson.”

He laughed. “Aren’t you sweet, to play my little game. Your husband knew from the beginning who I was.”

“Almost,” Efran said, glancing up. “May I ask, why?”

“Oh, it’s so much fun!” Loizeaux burst out. “It tells me so much about a man to see how he takes it. You, now, young man—you were good. You answered my questions, and told your story, all the while wondering what the devil I was up to! And then you offered to shake my hand, and what could I do then but shake it?”

“And I was astonished that you did,” Efran smiled.

Loizeaux threw back his head to laugh again. “Then I won that point.” He looked at Minka again. “Now where did this name ‘Minka’ come from?”

Efran looked with love at her. “The henhouse. She was afraid to tell me her real name, so she gave me the name of her cat. I could never get used to ‘Sybil’ after ‘Minka.’”

She looked at him adoringly, as usual, and Loizeaux studied her. “It seems like years since I last saw you. What a beautiful young woman you’ve become, Minka.”

“Quite,” Efran said. She was rendered speechless by the compliment, one she’d never heard from anyone but Efran, who now sat vindicated by the man who had sent two armies after him.

“Eh, well, young lovers are the happiest,” Loizeaux murmured. Glancing at Adele, he said, “Then I’ll see you in my stables in three, four months.”

“I don’t care to ride, thank you,” she said coolly.

“Oh? Oh, ha ha ha ha ha!” he sat back, laughing, and everyone stared at him. “Wrong stables. My courtesan stables, of course.”

The others sat stunned at this coarse suggestion, but Adele only said, “Oh, yes. What a silly mistake. Well, it will take at least five or six months to get myself in condition for your stables, so we’ll see. Oh, look at this lovely veal. Madea is a genius in the kitchen, wouldn’t you say, Efran?”

“Yes,” he agreed. She looked fixedly at him, but he had his face down, and when he raised it, he looked at Minka. Adele sat quietly seething that he showed no objection to her going to Loizeaux’s infernal stables. But for pride’s sake, she kept it to herself.

It was a lighthearted dinner, as Loizeaux referenced the gruesome field of remains that his scouts found along the east branch of the Passage, and the fact that there couldn’t be any Treasury since the best the Abbey had was pewter, and who served ale to a Surchatain? Broadly smiling, Efran agreed with every point, and Loizeaux shook his hand again at the end of the evening.

Surchatain Loizeaux and his retinue left the following morning, November 7th, in a spirit of goodwill, and there was much rejoicing at the Abbey as they dared to hope that maybe he would not bother attacking them again.

After such a successful visit with a stubborn antagonist, Efran grimly set himself to trudge up two flights of stairs to apologize to the sad young woman, one of a stable, whom he had imprisoned for 10 days for no reason at all.

After knocking on her door and being admitted by her, he looked down at her in remorse. She had dropped the

heavy-lidded boredom, and now looked like a pathetic, lost child. Efran began, "I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you. The fest is not to be, but I will send you home with compensation—"

"No!" she cried. "Please, no! No!" She fell on him weeping, to his utter bewilderment.

"What—what do you want?" he asked.

"Let me stay! Please let me stay at least until I find him again!" she cried.

"Who?" he asked.

She stopped crying. "I don't know his name. He wouldn't tell me. He was one of the escorts you sent—the blond man with kind eyes."

"Oh. That would be Connor, then," he said. "They are not permitted personal asides while on duty."

"Connor," she breathed. "I love him. I want to marry him."

His mouth hung open, and he saw Minka dragging him to the notary. Stepping out of the doorway, he looked down the corridor and whistled to Neale. "Send Connor up here." Neale saluted to turn crisply to the stairway.

Loizeaux's favorite courtesan looked at Efran with eyes of hope and fear. "Will he refuse me for what I have been?" she asked, heartsick.

"I doubt it." Efran would have lain on hot coals before making her cry again.

Some minutes later there were footfalls in the corridor. Connor approached, saluting. "Captain?"

"Is that him?" Efran asked her.

Connor looked at her in mild alarm, and she threw her arms around his neck to kiss him. He staggered back in surprise, then wrapped his arms around her to respond in kind.

She pulled away to demand, "Marry me."

Connor stood dumbfounded, which Efran also recognized, so he slapped the young man on the back of the head. Connor looked at him, and Efran asked, "Do you want to marry her?"

Connor nodded, so Efran said slowly, "Take her to Estes' cubicle and get your pay. Go to the notary and get a marriage license. I will have Estes give you a house on a plot and we'll get you a raise. All right? Connor, do you understand?"

"Ah . . . um . . . yes . . . Captain," he got out, striving to produce words while Lady Fanny hung on his arm, playing with his hair.

"All right. Go down to Estes first," Efran told him. Nodding, Connor turned down the corridor with Lady Fanny clinging to his hand. She turned back to wiggle her fingers at Efran, then brushed the hair out of Connor's dazed eyes.

Efran looked after them long after they had gone downstairs. "What is it with women and hair?" he mused.

Two weeks later, around the 21st of November, the Abbey residents, all of them new to the area, learned something about living so close to the Sea in late fall. While Westford and surrounding areas hunkered down for a prolonged winter thrashing set off by a fierce snowstorm, the Abbey Lands experienced a moderate temperature drop and gentle rainfall. As there was no freeze, crop harvests were extended clear into December, when winter planting began.

About this time, a huge flock of unidentified birds descended on the hilltop to begin plundering the orchards and gardens. They were solid black with red and white heads and prominent wattles, and the fully grown males weighed upward of 25 pounds. Although no one knew what they were, they were quickly discovered to make excellent eating, regardless how they were cooked. (An old birder who was brought up to the hilltop to look at them said, "Aye, those be Gers," which enlightened no one.) The feathers were also highly decorative, with bronze and green undertones to the black. The poulterer quickly isolated several hens, toms and poult for breeding, finding that these birds especially enjoyed nettles along with insects, mice and small rats.

With the bounty that this bird invasion provided, the abundant fishing in the Passage, and the lack of a hard freeze, the Abbey Lands hardly noticed the advent of winter.

Work on the wall continued, especially as Efran was down there every day, doing the actual physical work of laying mortar and stones. To him, it had become a symbol of credibility for life on the Abbey Lands: this was no fluke, nor haphazard development, this was a serious endeavor to provide safe, productive land for the residents. Prospective tenants who ventured to the wild meadowlands south of Westford saw a stone wall going up, and could visualize themselves living here.

Meanwhile, fortress residents watched the Sea thrash and churn from the safety of the hilltop, which blocked the brunt of the storms from reaching the tenants below. While the flooding from the Passage months ago was minimal, it was still worse than anything they experienced from the Sea because the hill stood in the way.

For former Westfordians, Christmas in the Abbey Lands was also a wonder: it didn't even get cold enough to snow. Nonetheless, the men brought in a large fir tree to set up in the foyer. Their clomping boots and lumber for the tree stand tracked so much mud and dirt into the marble foyer that Minka began going around with a broom and dust pan. When Efran saw it, he paid others to help her. They all agreed that a tree was essential.

Artisans in the plots below made ornaments out of colored glass which Efran bought in bulk. Then with great ladders and other unsafe climbing devices, the men hung these all over the tree. Light streaming in from the transom windows and upper foyer windows caught the pieces of glass to throw their colors all around the foyer.

Elvey contributed a huge tree skirt of deep red velvet trimmed in gold cloth, which then required presents. Anyone who lived in the fortress could put their presents to anyone else under the tree, so residents were daily examining the growing piles in search of their own names.

Minka had great fun with this new Abbey tradition. As she herself had never received Christmas presents from anyone but Marguerite, she was determined that no one at the fortress would be likewise forgotten. Requesting royals from Estes, she went to the baker to buy candies, toffee, and other treats that were not perishable. She went also to Elvey's to buy hair ribbons, kerchiefs, gloves and little pouches. All these she wrapped up and labeled with the names of all the workers and children in the fortress and grounds. Then late at night on Christmas Eve, with Efran's help, she put all these—almost a hundred—under the tree.

Minka slept late the following morning, so missed the reaction of the earliest workers coming into the foyer to

find overflowing piles of presents wrapped in linen paper. As word spread about the bounty under the tree, Efran had to come wake her to watch the children, stupefied, find a package under the tree with their own name on it from someone unknown. These the children carried with them everywhere for the rest of the day, and some of them had to be told to tear away the paper to find out what was inside.

Almost invisible workers, too—the maids, the cleaners, the laundresses, the wood choppers and refuse haulers—came skeptically into the foyer to find at least one package with their name on it. No one who did the menial but necessary work of the fortress was forgotten. When they started asking, “Who did this?” all they had to do was look at Minka’s beaming face for the answer.

Most all at the Abbey fortress were destined to have a wonderful Christmas. Almost. Adele, who was getting larger and more uncomfortable by the day, did not bother trying to find anything for Justinian because they hardly ever saw each other. Ominously, she began bleeding a little at this time.

As for Efran and Minka’s Christmas, he was wrung in coils over what to gift her. She never asked for anything. She loved the dresses Elvey’s seamstresses made, but she could get those any time. She ate what was put in front of her without question, and never requested anything special. She liked fruit, but the Abbey’s larders were heavily laden with a variety that were hers for the taking.

When she saw him struggling mightily over something that he refused to talk about while asking her repeatedly about anything she might want, she finally whispered in Kelsey’s ear, who whispered in Estes’ ear, who told Elvey what was needed, who then delivered a nicely wrapped package to Efran.

And on Christmas morning, Efran presented Minka with a nicely wrapped package. She opened it eagerly. “Efran! They’re beautiful! I love them!” she cried, shaking out a complete set of chickening clothes: pants, shirt and apron painted all over with chickens. These could be kept in the coop and washed as needed, sparing her regular clothes the indignity of poop and feed stains. “How did you know that’s what I wanted?”

He shrugged modestly. “I try to pay attention.”

So she gave him his present: a complete set of the *Latter Annals of Lystra*. He gasped, “Minka! Where did you—how were you able to—?”

She admitted, “Actually, they’re from Ryal. He said you have to read them all before asking him anything.”

He laughed, gathering her up with them.

Justinian spent most of his time in Westford, returning only to make reports to Efran and pick up more royals. Christmas Day he spent in Westford. But two days after Christmas, he returned to the Abbey fortress to give Efran a special report. This Efran kept to himself for the time being.

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Chapter 27

Although it did get cold enough the night of December 31st for snow flurries, the fortress was comfortable because of the sheer number of fireplaces, along with the plastering and wood paneling on many interior walls. Also, the supply of firewood was holding up well, as Efran ordered chopping crews out on most clear days. Elvey's wool merchants had supplied abundant tapestries, rugs, window coverings, and warm clothes for everyone at the fortress, which two of Ares' valuable royals paid for, with change.

On this night, Efran and Minka were sleeping snuggled under warm blankets, with a low fire in the bedchamber, when Efran opened his eyes. He was suddenly awake and alert, listening.

Lowering the covers, he turned his head to hear quiet knocking on the outer door. Carefully, so as not to waken Minka, he eased himself out from under the covers to go to the door and open it.

Outside stood Leese, the doctor's wife. She whispered, "Adele's water has broken, Lord Efran. She must be delivered soon. Wallace is at a tenant's house—the man fell and gashed his head badly yesterday afternoon. Apparently, by the time Wallace had finished with him, it was too dark to ride back up."

"That's all right; I trust you with her," Efran said, stepping out and quietly closing the door.

Still, an icy fear gripped his heart: it was too early. It was at least a month too early for the child to be born. Was that caused by the rue?

He walked the candlelit corridor with Leese to Adele's room. She was lying on a cot beside the bed while Bethune changed her bed coverings. Efran's gut coiled when he saw bloodstains. So it was providential that Bethune had begun staying overnight in Adele's receiving room only two weeks ago, after rain and fog had hindered her getting up the switchback for several days.

"Good evening, Lord Efran," Bethune said, as if it were tea time.

"I'm grateful you're here, Bethune," he said, eyes on Adele. She was moaning on the cot, draped in a cotton sheath. With abundant wood stacked nearby, the fireplace was blazing almost hot enough to make Efran sweat, wearing only breeches. A steaming kettle hung over the fire.

Patting the bed, Bethune said, "If you would lift her back now, sir." She probably could have done that herself, but gave him the opportunity to do something.

As Efran gently picked Adele up, she cracked her eyes. "Oh, Efran. I hate you," she breathed.

"I don't blame you," he said, carefully transferring her to the clean mattress.

Meanwhile, Bethune poured the hot water into a basin and refilled the kettle from a large bucket to set it back over the fire. Leese tested the water several times, finally finding it cool enough to wash her hands. Then she spread Adele's knees to check her progress. "All right; we have a ways to go yet. It will be hours. You should go back to bed, Lord Efran; I will have Bethune come get you when the lady progresses to delivery."

"Thank you, Leese," he said, going to a corner of the room with a view of the foot of the bed. Here he sat, resting his arms on his raised knees.

And they waited. Adele comforted herself by pouring out unceasing invective on all men, especially Efran. None of the three attending her thought it necessary to reply. They simply waited and watched. Bethune sat in a chair beside her to gently rub her hands and her abdomen. Since Adele did not complain about this, it must have helped. And since Bethune had successfully borne six children herself, she evidently knew what helped.

From his corner, Efran said, "It's . . . too early."

"Not at all," said Bethune. "My second was about this early; she was tiny, but now she tosses barley shocks into the wagon right alongside her father."

Efran smiled appreciatively at her. Leese said hesitantly, "We have been assuming that you are the father, Lord Efran. If you are not—if the baby was conceived earlier, it may be right on time."

Efran acknowledged this with a nod, but Adele spat, "How dare you?" She had consistently refused to admit that any other man might be the father, but others knew that the possibility was real. Leese did not apologize.

They waited, and the fire began to die down. Efran said, "When the fire needs building up, let me know."

"I'm freezing!" Adele cried. "You all are dressed, but all I have is this piece of cloth lying on me." Efran, wearing linen breeches, went over to build up the fire.

They waited, making small talk about the sprinkling of snow they just saw (that didn't stick), the wonderful apricot preserves, and Madea's brilliant use of the salted meats, which no one had wanted until she worked her will on them.

Efran glanced occasionally to the outside door. He was a little surprised that Minka had not yet found him—she usually woke when he got out of bed at night. But he wanted her to sleep, mostly because he knew how much it was weighing on her that she had not conceived. They had been married almost eight months now, and Efran knew how badly she wanted a baby.

They waited. Leese spread Adele's knees to check her progress again, and said, "A few more hours."

Adele groaned and then grunted, lifting her knees. At the same time, Bethune and Leese said, "Don't push yet." Bethune fell silent so Leese could say, "It won't do any good, Adele." She groaned again.

They watched the beginnings of sunrise lighten the colored glass windows. The outer door opened, and Minka's sleepy voice said, "Efran?"

"In here." He leaned forward to see Minka, disheveled in her robe, enter the birthing room.

"Oh! How is she?" Minka said, coming awake.

Efran stood to hold her. "The child is on the way."

"Oh." She looked around, then said, "Are you hungry?"

"Yes. Bring a platter for us to share, please, and ale," Efran said instantly.

As Minka turned to the door, Adele said, "I want some. I'm starving."

“No,” Leese said sedately, and Adele uttered a loud, prolonged moan. Minka smiled weakly at Efran as she turned out.

Before too long, Minka returned with a soldier bearing a tray of ham, fried eggs, toast and raspberry jam, along with several bottles of ale. Efran and Bethune immediately moved in to help themselves. He handed her a bottle of ale, which she accepted, and took one himself. He looked over to Leese questioningly, but she shook her head. All Minka ate for now was toast and jam.

“We’ll need a nursemaid,” Efran said, troubled.

“Oh, I can do that,” Bethune said, laughing, “I still let down whenever I hear a baby cry.” Efran nodded without understanding what she meant.

Early morning had lit the room, and sounds of life began to echo from the corridors. There was a knock on the outer door; Minka opened it to Estes. He did not enter the room, but Efran heard him ask to be informed of the birth. Minka assured him he would be, and he left. Adele was crying and groaning constantly now, and Efran saw spots of blood soak into the bedding between her knees.

They waited. Minka brought over large pillows for her and Efran to sit more comfortably on the floor. He accepted both the pillow and her snuggling into his side.

She and he looked up quickly when Adele screamed. Bethune moved to lay a hand on her abdomen and Leese checked her again. “All right, she’s coming along.”

“I hate you for this, Efran!” Adele screamed at another contraction. Minka smiled at him and he shook his head.

After several more contractions, Leese washed her hands again, as did Bethune. Efran got up to watch. There was a prolonged contraction, during which Adele screamed and Leese leaned down to closely examine her. Then she and Bethune had a quiet consultation.

Adele screamed again. “What is it?” Efran asked. “What’s wrong?”

Leese turned to him. “It may take a while yet, Lord Efran. There is an obstruction. The child may be breach; we are looking.” It was some relief to him that she included Bethune in this, whose six successful births were prominent in Efran’s admiration of her.

When Adele continued to scream, Minka got up and left the room. Efran continued to watch.

There was a sudden gush of blood which turned his stomach, but his eyes remained focused on Leese’s bloody hands resting on her patient as she and Bethune continued a quiet consultation.

Finally, Leese turned to him and said, “We are doing all we can, Lord Efran. You may want to step out now.”

“With your permission, I would stay,” he said tightly.

She said, “Then I am required to ask, if it comes to that, whose life shall be given preference? The child or the mother?”

Efran dropped his head, his tears dripping to the floor. “Save Adele.”

She nodded, but Bethune's suddenly rigid shoulders told Efran that she intended to do better than that. Bethune's large body moved between him and the screaming woman. Gradually, Leese stepped aside to watch. Efran's eyes were on Bethune's broad back, which shifted as her hands moved, first one and then the other. He was standing against the wall, unable to see what she was doing or move so that he could.

None of them noticed that Minka had returned to the doorway, her hands folded in silent, intense prayer. Bethune worked, reaching deep, and the blood soaked the bedding. Finally, Efran lowered his eyes to the stone at his feet, helpless in this struggle, waiting on what was ordained to be. Adele's screaming was incessant.

Suddenly Bethune shifted again; Leese moved quickly to her side to assist with something, and murmurs passed between them. Then Bethune looked up at Minka and said, "The string in the basin there, dear—bring it over."

Minka rushed to bring a dripping length of string to her, and Bethune instructed, "Tie it right there." Trembling, Minka did as she said. Leese was holding something with both hands. Frozen in place, Efran could see no more than that. Adele continued to groan, but softer.

Bethune said, "The sharp snips by the basin there." Minka turned for the small scissors, and Bethune said, "Cut there. A little farther down. Yes." Efran watched Minka's shoulders rise as she performed this action, and he saw spots of blood fall on her night dress.

"Yes. Now the small cloth there. Dip it in the basin and wring it out," Bethune instructed. Minka did this, then brought it over and began wiping something according to Bethune's instructions. Leese continued to hold something with very bloody hands.

Then Efran heard a cry, a small, throat-clearing cry, the cry of a newborn, and he fell to his knees. As the cry grew stronger, so did Efran's breathing.

"Wait till you wash your hands to get the blanket there," said Bethune. "He must be kept very warm." She turned around. "Efran, we need clean hot water in that basin."

He lunged up to yank open the window, throw the bloody water out, and shut the window again—not too hard! Then he refilled the basin with water from the kettle and refreshed the kettle to hang over the fire again. Finally he brought a shuddering basin over to the women.

He watched Minka wash blood from her hands, then Bethune said, "Tell the kitchen we need much more clean water, Efran."

He ran to the outside door, colliding with Gaul standing sentry there, and gave him the message. Then when Efran came back to the birthing room, Minka turned to him with a glowing face and a noisy, squirming bundle. This she placed in his arms.

Efran moved aside the folds of blanket to look at the black head of hair and the flat little face emitting angry noises. The father unfolded the blanket further to see a tiny little boy's brown body with the stub of the umbilical cord tied with a string.

"That's a Polonti if I ever saw one," Bethune remarked over her shoulder. She then helped Leese gather the rest of the afterbirth.

Leese whispered, "How did you know to move the placenta like that?"

“Oh, that happened with my last child,” Bethune said. “My midwife explained it to me.” What she did not mention was that her sixth had been her last because she’d had a series of miscarriages after that.

“Oh, dear, look at me,” she laughed. The front of her dress was becoming soaked, and it wasn’t blood. “More water in the basin, please, Minka.”

She jumped up to attempt to empty the basin of its bloody water out the window. Efran, seeing the likely results, gave her the bundle so he could throw out the dirty water himself and refill it from the kettle. She returned his son to his arms and opened the corridor door at the instant of the knocking.

Gaul entered with a large bucket of water. As he set it on the floor, Efran turned to him to choke out, “I have a son.”

Gaul looked on the tiny thing with joy. “Congratulations, Captain!” Then he lit out to spread the word.

“I have a son,” Efran repeated in wonder.

Having washed her hands again, Bethune sat in the chair. “Here, Efran,” she said, extending her arms. He handed over his precious bundle as she loosened the front of her soaked dress. “As I told you, I still let down at the cries.”

She put the baby to a dripping nipple. Though small, he proved mighty, latching on to suck for all his worth. Efran and Minka watched in breathless wonder as he closed his eyes in satisfaction, reaching up tiny fingers to his ear. Minka turned to fling her arms around Efran’s neck. He held her tightly.

Then he raised his head, inhaling, and wiped his face on her sleeve. He turned to Leese at Adele’s bedside to ask, “How is she?” Adele, pale, blinked at him.

Leese glanced up. “She lost a lot of blood, but we’ll keep her still and give her all she can hold to drink.”

Looking down at Adele again, he said, “Thank you.”

“I hate you,” she replied weakly. He smiled, shaking his head.

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Chapter 28

The baby was quickly secured in Efran’s and Minka’s quarters. A crib was located in storage, as an orphanage would certainly have needed them. Until Elvey’s seamstresses could make clothes for such a little body, he would have to be wrapped up in lap blankets and soft cloth wraps—which would then have to be boiled before being used again, as all baby wraps were.

But Bethune told them, “He must be kept warm, but blankets are not enough in January. He needs skin warmth—skin against skin.”

So Efran built up the fire in their bedroom (like many suites in the fortress, the fireplace was open to the

receiving room as well). Then he pushed the baby's blankets away from his front and laid the bare baby against his bare chest. Minka helped him cover the child's backside completely. Efran needed only one arm to hold the child and his wrappings securely in place. Meanwhile, Bethune had left to bathe and change her clothes.

The first visitors permitted in were Estes and Kelsey, because they were the easiest to find. Efran uncovered the tiny black head and squished brown face for their inspection. Estes murmured, "She really was just the carrier. This child looks fully Polonti."

"Yes, he does," Efran smiled, carefully covering him again.

"What will you name him?" Kelsey breathed, looking to Minka.

Minka raised her hands in disavowal. "That is the father's decision."

They looked expectantly at Efran, who lifted his face to the window above them and said, "Joshua."

They blinked at him, then Estes observed, "That's not a Polonti name."

"No," Efran said, eyes on the window. "It's Hebrew. He was the Hebrew commander who God charged with conquering the land that He had given them."

"Oh, Efran," Minka whispered in quiet delight.

"God does as He will, but the child fought to live, and God honored that," Efran said. Estes reached out to grasp him by the back of the neck in a gesture of deep agreement, deep kinship. Efran smiled at him, his eyes watering again.

He leaned down to wipe his face on Minka's robe, then told Estes, "Double whatever you're paying Bethune. She saved him—she knew what to do when Leese didn't, just because she had been through it herself. And, find another maid for Adele; Bethune is ours now. She is also his nursemaid, so, find us a nice bed to put in this room for her."

"Yes," Estes said. "Will . . . Adele live?" Everyone who had passed her room had heard her screaming.

"Leese thinks so," Efran said carefully, "though she lost a lot of blood. She'll be bedridden for a while yet."

"I see." Estes turned to the door, Kelsey with him. "We'll take care of the arrangements for Bethune."

"Thank you, Estes. Kelsey," Efran said.

Following their visit, Efran sent soldiers to locate Toby, Noah, and Ivy—Pia too, if it were possible. The men came back quickly with the first three, so Efran decided not to wait for the hapless man wandering the hilltop looking for the wild child. As the children came into the receiving room, the soldier who had brought them, Koschat, murmured, "The tutor was *not happy* that they were taken out of class, Captain."

Efran nodded with a hazy smile, seeing Sister Therese from years ago. "Stay, and I'll send them back quickly."

He knelt before the three children to lower the blanket from the black head again. "Meet your new little brother. His name is Joshua." They crowded close to study him. Koschat leaned over them, his face filling with satisfaction to see the Captain's son. Polonti blood overrode everything.

In astonishment, Noah exclaimed, "Where did you find him?"

Minka looked at Efran. After a moment, he said, "He was just now born of a woman who didn't want him."

Toby assured him, "We'll take good care of him, Efran. We'll show him how to do everything."

"I know you will," Efran said, ruffling his hair. Ivy continued to peer at the baby.

"Will he get to be as big as you?" Noah asked.

"Possibly," Efran allowed. "Some who start out little get to be very big." Ivy reached over to hug Efran's neck, and Noah patted his back.

"Thank you," Efran said, standing. "I don't want to get you in trouble with your tutor, so back you go now. Come see him again when you're free."

As they reluctantly filed out, Toby said, "Pia!" Before she could escape again, he grabbed her hand.

Efran went to the corridor where she was standing. He knelt to show her the newest Polonti. "You have a brother, Pia."

The little girl, only one of two Polonti children at the fortress right now, looked on the newborn. She watched while he opened his brown eyes to blink at her. Then she told Efran, "He's yours."

He was taken aback because she seldom spoke. "Yes," he said.

She looked at the baby again in a proprietary manner. Then she said, "*Moolelo*."

Efran studied her, searching for a translation in the mists of long-ago learning. If he remembered correctly, it was the old word for history, legends, the Old Tongue. And he believed she had just promised to teach his son these things.

Efran smiled with a full heart. He held her gently with his free arm and said, "*Mahalo*"—"thank you." She hugged his neck while Minka brushed away tears.

Then he stood to turn her in the doorway, where the other children were waiting in ambush. "You're coming back to class with us!" Noah ordered, grabbing her hand. Toby took the other hand, and Ivy blocked any escape from the rear. Minka and Efran watched as Koschat hustled the children with their prisoner back down the corridor.

Minka laughed, "Oh, is there any chance we can keep Pia inside for a while?"

"No," Efran said, and she moaned, still smiling.

Although Efran was exhausted, another essential visitor remained to be brought in, so he asked Gaul to send a carriage for Ryal. There was a live birth that the notary must record in his book. (Yes, Ryal had a carriage, but it was so much trouble to set up without a helper, he usually walked wherever he needed to go.)

While Efran and Minka were waiting for him, someone else appeared in the doorway: Barr, the Polonti slave

who had fought in Loizeaux's army in order to gain his freedom. He was now a dedicated recruit in the Abbey army. Hesitantly, he looked in the open door to salute. "Pardon, Captain. I just heard—"

"That's correct," Efran said, bringing his bundle over to show his kin.

Peering under the blanket, Barr drew in a breath—"He's us!" he whispered. In wonder, he looked at Efran, who raised his eyebrows, smiling. Then Barr returned his gaze to the miniature Polonti sleeping on his father's chest.

Straightening, Barr turned to Minka, bowing. "Well done, and my congratulations, lady." He turned back to Efran to regard the bundle. "So well done," Barr breathed again, then quickly stepped back to salute and leave.

A little awkwardly, Minka said, "He seemed to think that I—and I didn't have a chance to tell him that—"

Efran looked disturbed. "I don't see why we have to tell everyone you are not his mother, when from this day on, you are."

At that time Conte brought Ryal, the old notary, to their door. Minka jumped up to hug him, almost dislodging his quill set and book from under his arm. He shifted them to pat her back. "I hear that the Abbey Lands has its first birth of the new year," he said.

"Yes," she said, glowing, and Efran produced the evidence again, this time for the official records.

Efran watched, smiling, as Ryal looked down on the child. "There appears to be no doubt as to the father," he noted.

"No doubt at all," Efran said with a sigh. It is quite certain that Adele would not have lain with any other Polonti.

"Ah." Ryal sat at the table to open his ledger and his portable quill set. "Was he born past midnight?" he asked.

"Yes, it was just on sunrise," Efran said.

"Then he is indeed the first born this year: January first, eight thousand one hundred fifty-four years from the creation of the world. Born in the Abbey Fortress," Ryal murmured, writing. "And the baby's name?"

"Joshua," Efran answered.

"It is a male child, I assume," Ryal said.

"Yes." Efran smiled broadly.

Ryal was busy writing. "Father: Efran. Mother." He paused, looking up. "I assume that Adele birthed him."

"Yes," Efran said, no longer smiling.

Minka, eyes lowered, said, "I don't think she'll be willing to sign your book."

"It is not necessary for her to sign, if we have witnesses. Were either of you present for the birth?" Ryal asked.

"Both of us," Efran said.

“Then that suffices.” Bringing out his blotter, he changed the entry for “mother” to read, “Birth mother: Adele” and added, “Adoptive mother: Minka.” Seeing that, Minka put her fingers to her lips, smiling and tearful. Efran nodded: the records must show the truth, and that was the complete truth.

“Midwife or attending physician?” Ryal asked, looking up.

“Bethune,” Efran said. This Ryal wrote in his book. Then he turned it toward them to sign as parents and witnesses. Efran shifted baby Joshua to his left hand in order to sign with his right, as it never occurred to him to put the child down.

“Now for the certificate, which you will keep,” Ryal said. They watched as he produced a parchment already adorned with decorations and spaces for the information. With elegant writing, he recorded the date and the baby’s name, then wrote: “Place of birth: The Abbey Fortress. Parents: Efran and Minka.”

He signed and affixed his seal to the document, then placed it before them. They both looked at it, then at him, as he sedately closed his ledger and repacked his portable quill set. Clearing his throat, Efran began, “You’ve . . . left a name off—”

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Chapter 29

“It isn’t necessary,” Ryal said almost brusquely. “This document attests to the most pertinent truth.”

Efran turned to whisper to Minka; she nodded and slipped out. They could hear her running down the corridor.

Ryal stood to leave, but Efran said, “Stay a moment and try the peach wine, Ryal. It is excellent.” Efran went over to a small table to pour a cup with one hand and extend it to him. Ryal took a hesitant sip, then nodded.

Efran said, “I trust that your old customers in Westford have located your new shop?”

“Yes,” Ryal said, taking another sip. “I put up a sign in the doorway of the old shop, and the mild weather has permitted their coming down. But I will say that the bulk of my business now comes from the Abbey Lands, especially marriage licenses for residents of the fortress.”

Ryal looked at Efran so quizzically that he laughed, “Then I dare say you’ll be recording more births in a few months.”

Minka returned to place something in Efran’s hand, who looked at it and nodded. “We don’t want to forget your pay.” As Efran put a coin in Ryal’s pocket, he said, “Summon his carriage driver, Minka.” She promptly turned out again.

Suspicious, Ryal withdrew the coin to see that it was an old NDF royal, minted during the reign of Surchatain Ares, far more valuable than the new, debased coinage. Even so, a new royal was far more than what Ryal charged for a birth certificate.

He opened his mouth but Efran whispered, “Permit me this, Ryal, for what you have done for me and what you

have shown me.” Regarding him, Ryal closed his mouth and reluctantly returned the coin to his pocket. Efran exhaled gently.

The carriage driver appeared at the door. “Ready, sir?”

“Yes.” Ryal moved toward the door, only to be detained by Minka’s earnest hug and kiss on the cheek. Then he was finally permitted to leave.

A few minutes passed quietly while the new parents looked down on their living, breathing child, who had survived such a hazardous gestation and birth. Then Efran observed, “You seem happy to be . . . his mother after the fact.”

“I am,” she exhaled. “After seeing what Adele went through, I decided I’m fine with skipping that part. If I do become pregnant, I’ll be thrilled, of course, but for now, I’m just glad to have this baby without suffering so much for it.”

He nodded, glancing toward the bedroom. “Come lie down with me.”

She said, “Of course. Let’s move Joshua’s bed in with us.” While Minka climbed into bed, Efran hooked two free fingers on the crib to move it between the bed and the fireplace. He placed the baby in it, swaddled in blankets. After that, he lay down in exhaustion beside her to fall directly asleep.

But Minka wasn’t tired—she had slept much longer than Efran had this morning, and was worried about Adele. So she very quietly slipped out of bed.

Seeing the blood splatters on the nightdress and robe she still wore, she took off those clothes to place them in the laundry pile. Then she put on a nice warm velvet dress and fur-lined shoes, and stepped out into the corridor.

She went to Adele’s suite and opened the door without knocking. Seeing no one in the receiving room, she tiptoed to the inner room, where she saw Adele cleaned up, lying on a fresh bed. It looked as though she were asleep, so Minka began to withdraw, but Adele looked over.

Minka came into the room. “How are you?” she whispered.

“Weak. Torn up. I’ve never experienced such pain in all my life,” Adele muttered drowsily. She was pale and breathing rather rapidly.

“I’m so sorry,” Minka said.

“Wallace came in to look at me. He said I will have to stay in bed for at least three weeks,” Adele said in a stronger voice of displeasure.

“Oh, dear. What are they giving you here?” Minka asked, sitting in a chair beside the bed. Next to it was a small table with a pitcher of liquid and a cup.

Adele turned her eyes to the pitcher. “Gallons of raspberry leaf tea and another herb. I can’t remember what.”

“That will help,” Minka said, nodding. “The herbal tea Efran gave me when I had the fever brought me out of it so quickly.”

“Don’t ever speak his name to me again,” Adele sniffed. “He almost killed me.”

Minka let this assertion pass without reply, saying only, “At least you need never go to Loizeaux.”

“His stables,” Adele muttered derisively.

“That was so insulting for a woman of your position and beauty. I could hardly believe it!” Minka vented.

Adele looked at her with pursed lips. “He seemed taken with your beauty,” she said sardonically.

Minka waved. “It was the dress. I tell you, Elvey is gifted.”

“Oh, certainly. I was wearing one of her dresses,” Adele said, again with that ironic tone. She had to lie still and catch her breath for a moment.

“You will get past this, and find that there are worthier men,” Minka finally said.

“Like Efran?” Adele snorted.

After a pause, Minka got up. “I understand that you are still in a great deal of pain. I don’t want to make it worse for you.”

As she turned to leave, Adele said from her pillow, “Did you ever wonder how Father got so feeble-minded so quickly? I know how. Graduliere poisoned him with a potion that Arenado made. Now Graduliere has gone to Eurus to serve Loizeaux, and is using that potion on him. Didn’t you notice how silly Loizeaux was at dinner when he was here months ago? It was taking effect even then.”

Minka stared at her. Adele took a breath to continue, “Graduliere will rule Eurus soon. And if Efran doesn’t want me here, I will simply go to Graduliere and rule with him. He wants me to come.” Exhausted from this exposition, Adele closed her eyes.

Minka quietly turned out. She returned to her quarters, where she saw an elegant day bed on the wall below the window in the receiving room. It must have been brought in just now. When she entered the bedroom, Efran, lying down, looked toward her. “There you are, finally.”

“I thought you were asleep!” she said. She laid a hand on the sleeping baby, then sat on the bed beside his father.

“I woke when you left,” he said, only a little peeved. Then he noted, “Bethune knocked him out cold with her milk.” Pulling her down to lie on his chest, he asked, “So how is Adele?”

“How did you know I was with her?” she asked, sitting up to look in his face.

“It was the likeliest place you would be. So how does she seem?” He slid his arm around her hips.

“Hurting. Angry. Vengeful,” she sighed. “But not on the point of death as we feared. You will not be pleased to hear what she had to say.” And she told him about Graduliere, Arenado, and Loizeaux.

He listened, stroking her velvet dress, then said, “So, she’s been getting letters from him that I knew nothing about. I’ll see that messengers know from now on that anything addressed to her comes to me first.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“About Graduliere? Nothing. Loizeaux may have seemed a fool to her because he insulted her. But he sounded quite rational to me—his game of identities makes perfect sense from his point of view. However, she won’t be ruling with Graduliere because he was murdered the day after Christmas.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on January 1st of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

NOTES: In discussing the parting of the Jordan River so that Joshua could lead the people of Israel into Canaan (Josh. 3:14-17) , commentator Harold Lindsell observes, “This miracle (or special providential act) may have been one of timing in which an earthquake blocked the river. As recently as 1927 a tremor dislodged some of the cliffs overlooking the river, [completely blocking](#) the Jordan for over 21 hours.” (Harper Study Bible, Zondervan Bible Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI, 1980)

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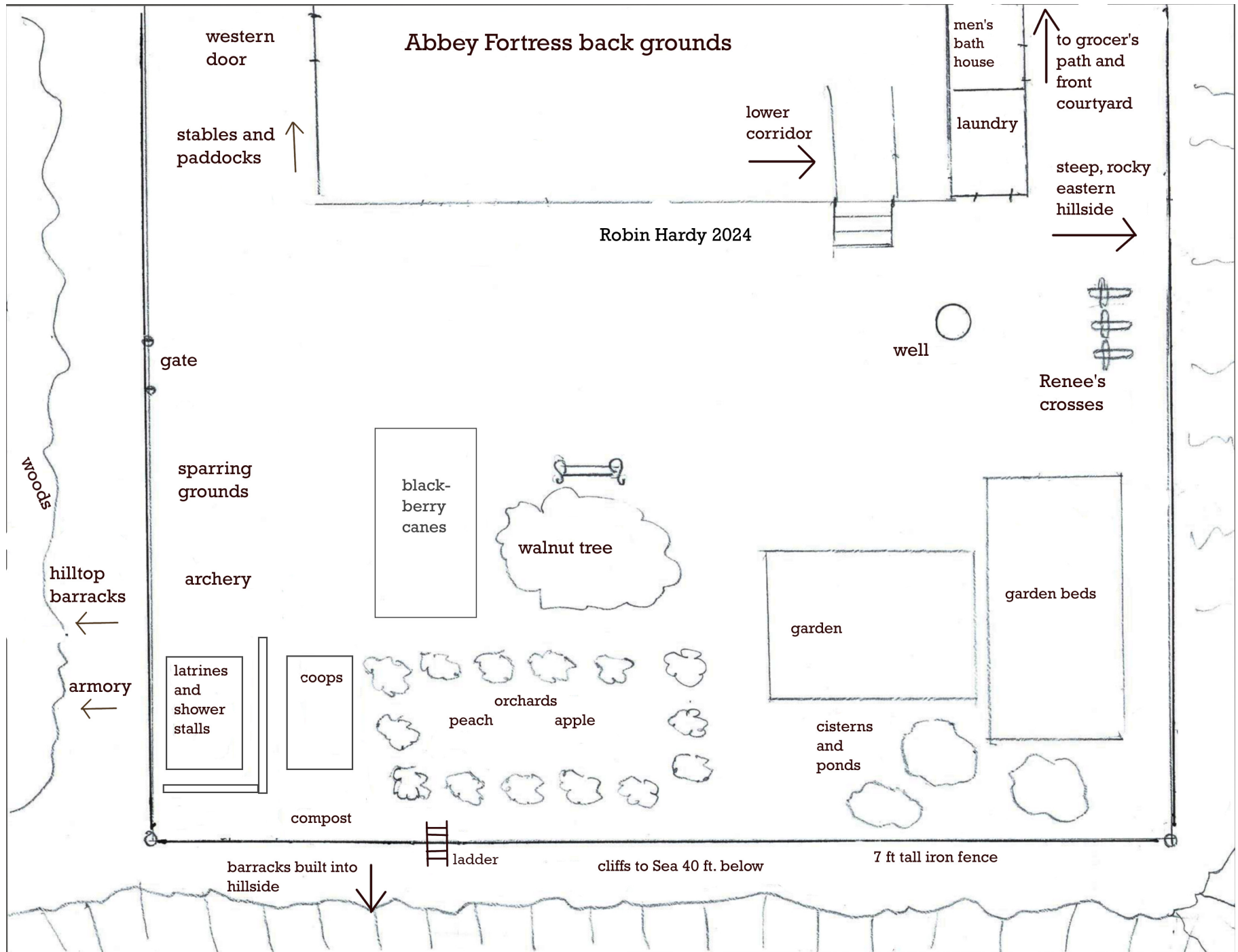
Pronunciations for *Lord Efran at the Flood* (Book 3)

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Adele—ah DELL
aina—AY nah
Arenado—air en AH doh
Ares—AIR eez
Ariel—AIR ee uhl
Arne—arn
Averne—ah VURN
Bethune—beh THUNE
boudoir—boo DWAAR
carte blanche—kart blahnch (a blank check)
celosia—see LOW zhuh
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)
chamomile—KAH muh mile
Chataine—sha TANE
cicadas—suh KAY duhz
Conte—cahnt
courtesan—KOR tuh zahn
digestif—die JES tuhf
Doane—rhymes with *loan*
Efran—EFF run
Eledith—ELL eh dith
Elvey—ELL vee
Estes—ESS tis
Eurus—YOUR us
Eurasian—your uh SEE un
Gascon—GAS kuhn
Gers—gares (hard g)
Goss—gahs
Graduliere—gra DUE lee air
Greves—greevs
Hartshough—HART soh
Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Kelsey—KELL see
koa—KOH ah (fight to the death)
Koschat—KOS chat
Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Lowry—LAHW ree
Lystra—LIS trah
Madea—mah DAY ah
mahalo—mah HAY low (thank you)
Mai—may
Marguerite—mar ger EET (hard g)
Minka—MINK ah
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
moolelo—moo LEE low (Polonti history)
Mumme—mum
napier—NAY pee uhr
Palladian—puh LAY dee uhn
pas de trois—pah deh trwa (a dance of 3 people)
Pia—PEE ah

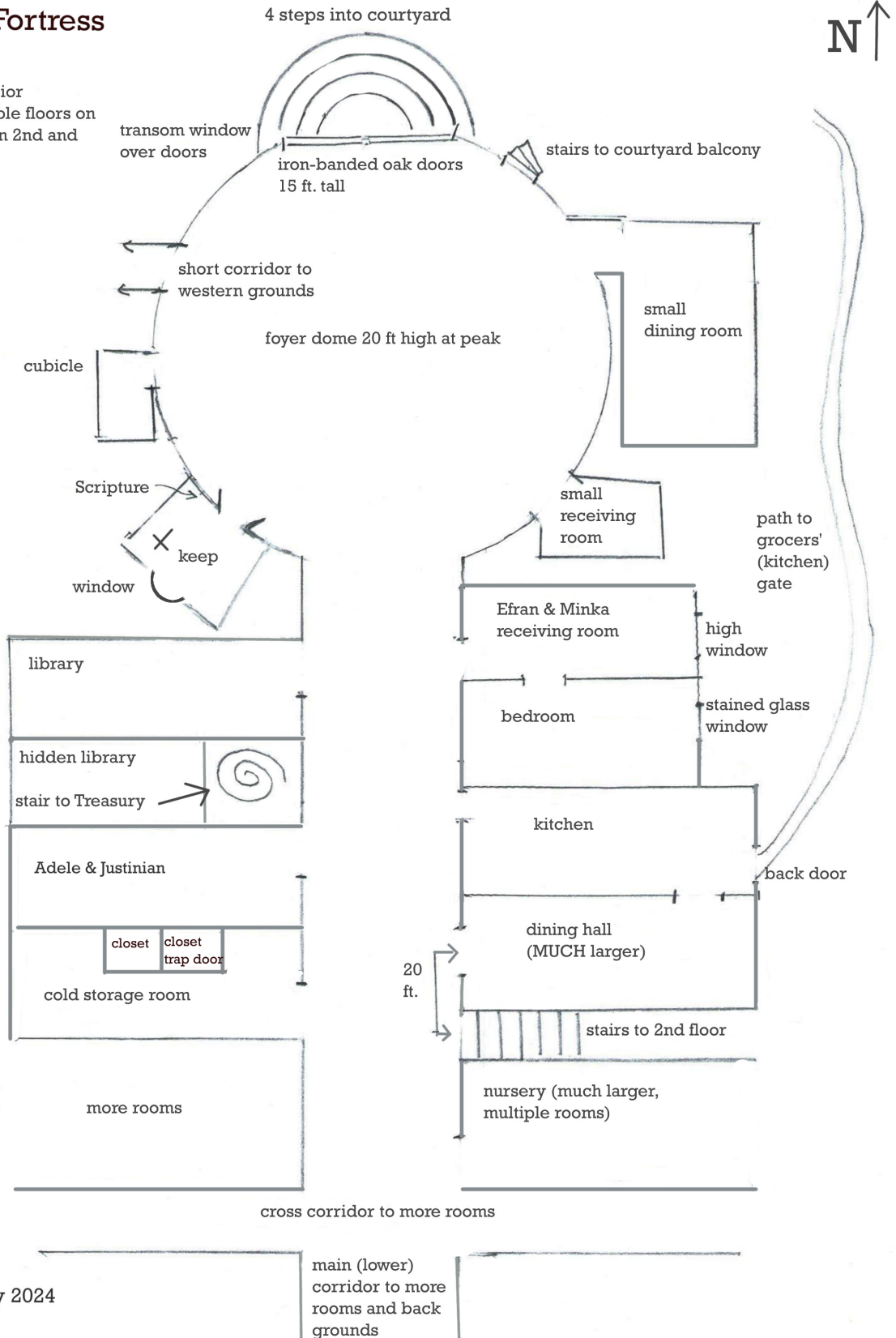
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Shaffer—SHAF er
Shirreff—SURE if
soirée—SWAH ray
Spitta—SPEH tah
Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
verandah—vur AHN duh
Verrin—VAIR en
Webbe—web
Wedderburn—WEH dur burn
Wirrin—WEER en

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Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors

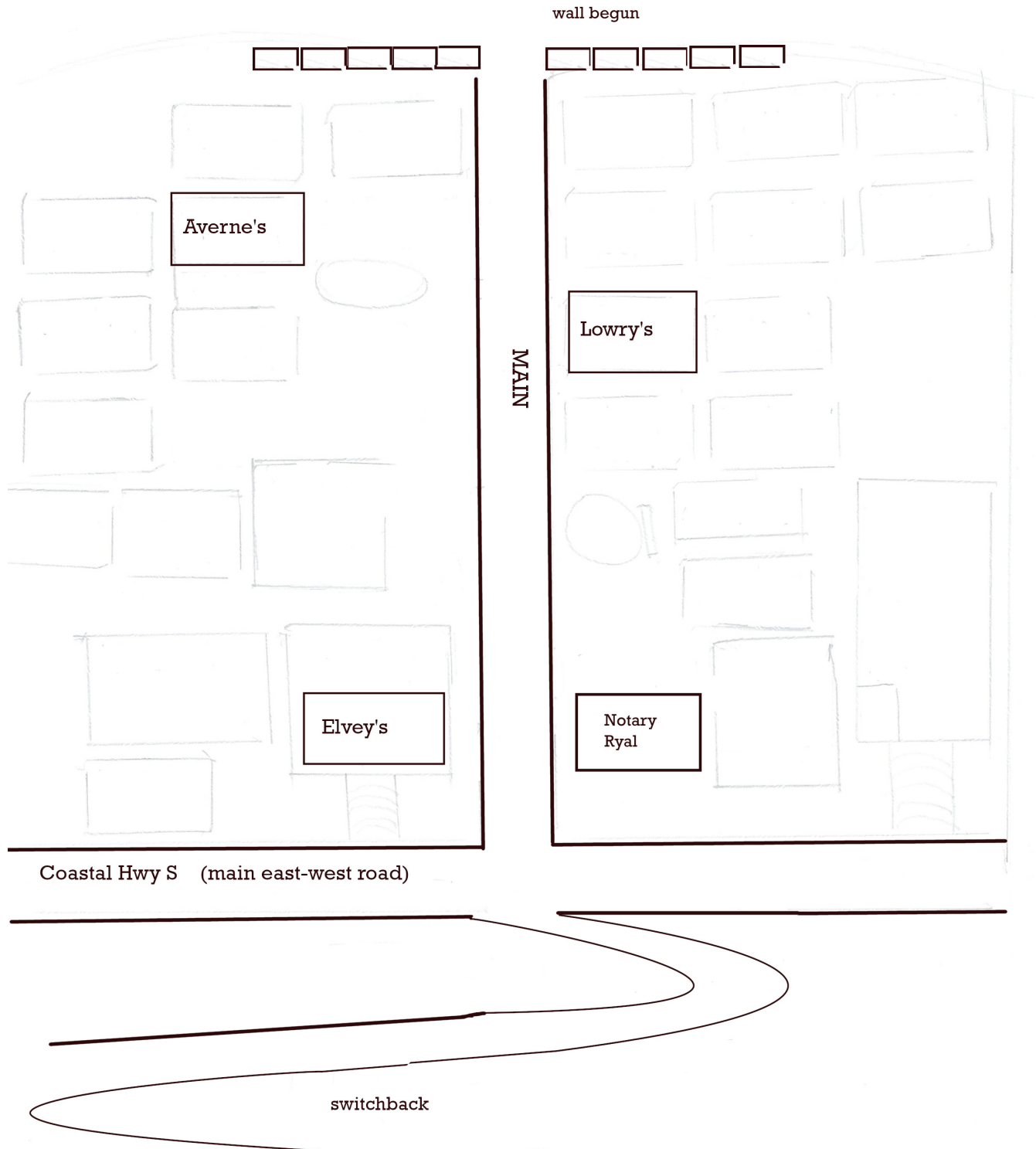


NOT TO SCALE

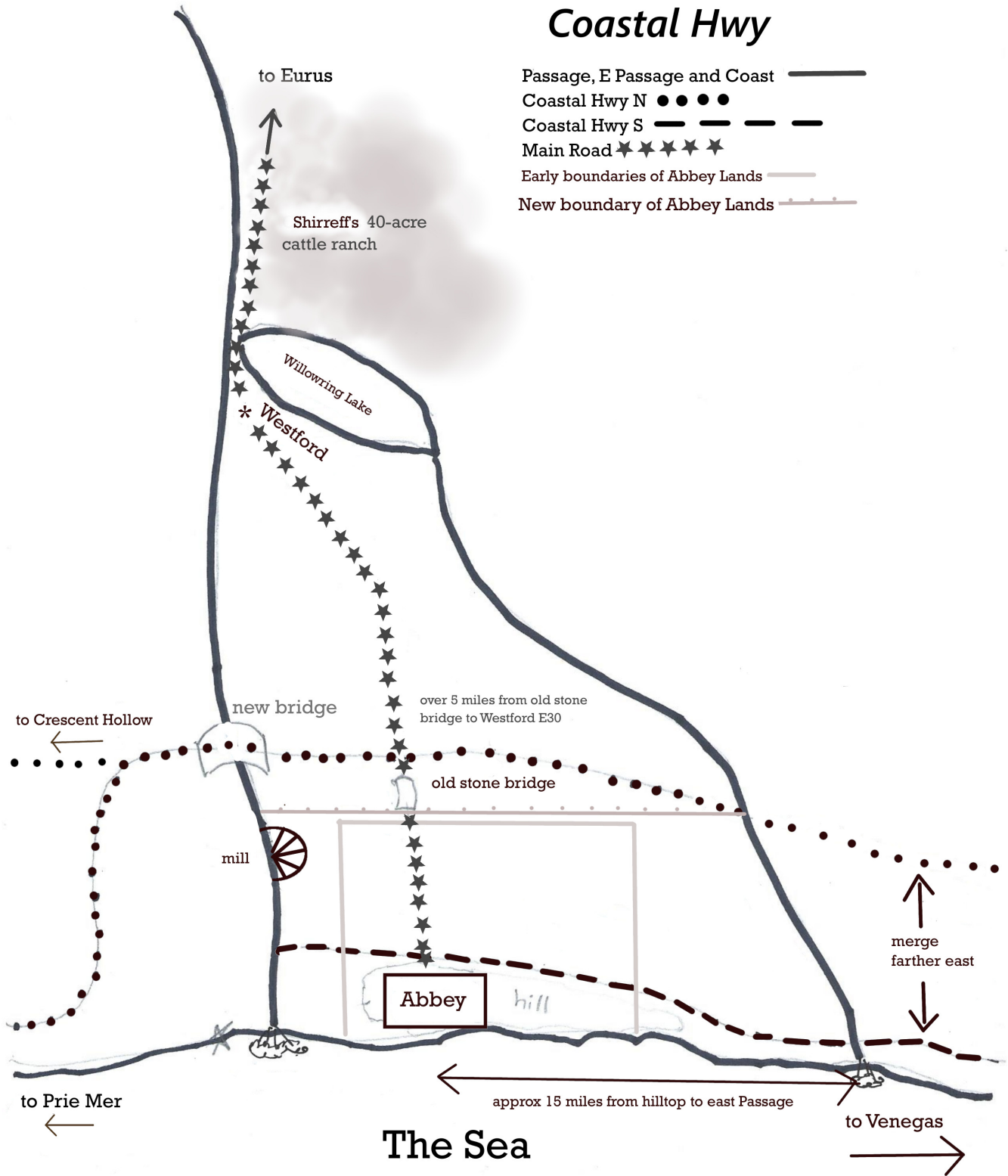
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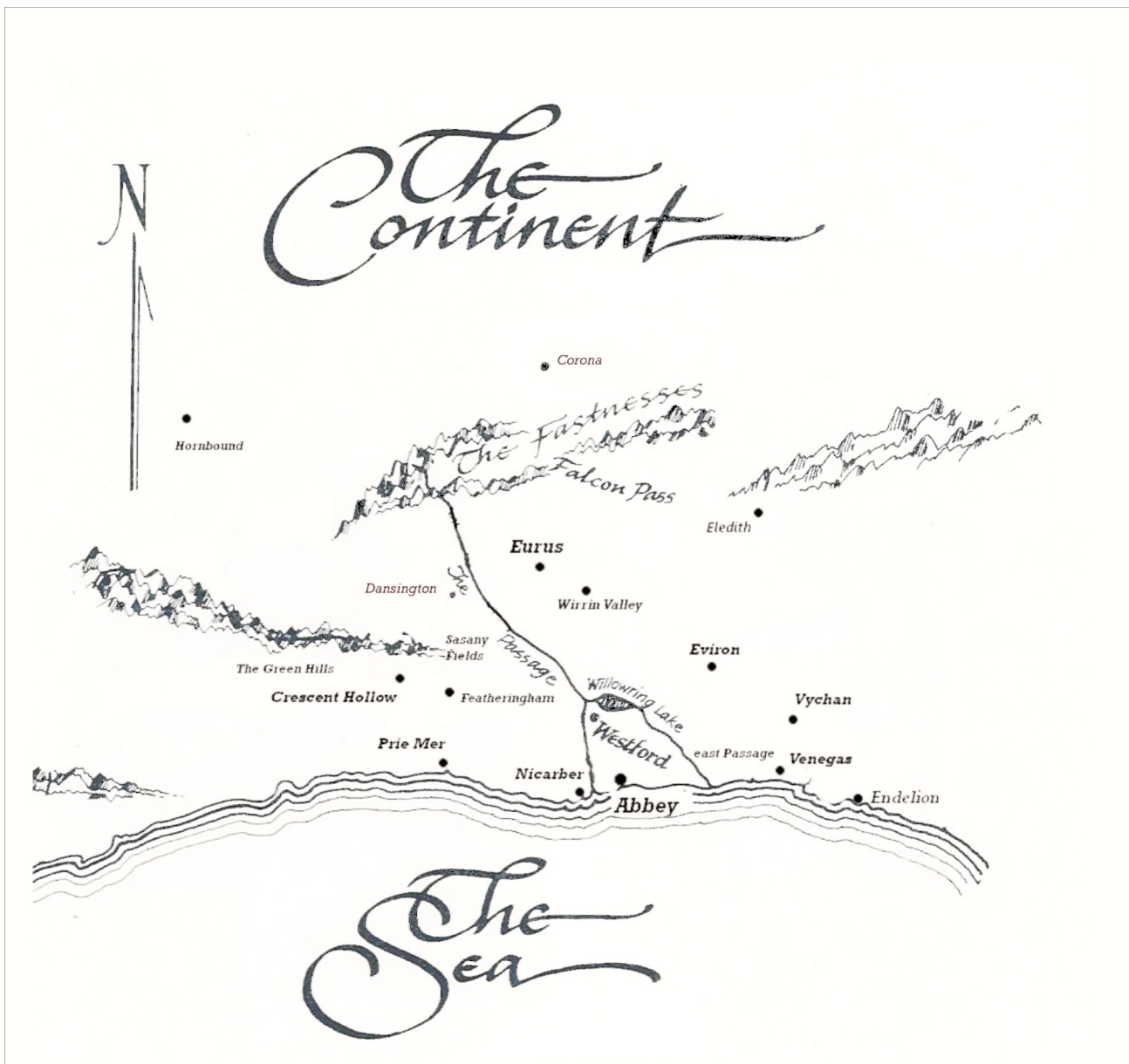
main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Lands Main Road



Coastal Hwy







Watching the Flood (Book 3:
Lord Efran at the Flood)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

For this book, I had to revert back to grayscale because the face I wanted to use was in black and white. That's a shame, because the [painting](#)¹ that inspired this illustration is a beautiful work by Frederic Leighton (1830-1896) titled *A Condottiere* (kawn duh TYAIR ee, a leader of a private force of mercenaries in Italy, especially in the 14th and 15th centuries). In fact, I wanted to use that painting in its entirety to depict Efran, but the man looks so sad, I couldn't (thumbnail below). It didn't fit; Efran was in disbelieving gratitude and wonder to see the troops attacking him get washed away.

So for Efran (on the right in my illustration) I wound up using the face of a handsome Italian actor from the 1950s named [Franco Interlenghi](#)² (en ter LENG ee. One of his movies, *Domenica d'agosto* [*Sunday in August*] in on YouTube, but it's in Italian.) He looks fairly Polonti-ish, but his expression of gratified satisfaction is why I chose him for this part.

That's Barr beside Efran, in a fabulous [suit of armor](#)³ with which Loizeaux would never outfit his slave conscripts (see thumbnail below. I lost the link to Barr's face.)

Efran and Barr are on the switchback, obviously, that's rising up behind them. Efran has tossed his [helmet](#)⁴ on the retaining wall. Their weapons are out of the picture.



Robin Hardy
April 14, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

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