



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

Book 4

Lord Efran and
Awfyn the Giant

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Efran and Minka lay very close together in bed. Although he was exhausted, his eyes were not closed in sleep. They were both looking aside in the same direction. The bundle that drew their attention was now squirming, emitting something that sounded like the squawk of an angry chicken. That bundle was their firstborn, Joshua, only a few hours old.

“Efran, he’s hungry again,” she murmured.

He raised up, reaching for his pants to pull on over his breeches. “I’ll find Bethune”—Joshua’s midwife and nursemaid. While he bounded out of the room, Minka reached over to lift the tiny baby out of his crib.

Efran trotted into the foyer, navigating several confluent streams of thought. He wanted Bethune in their chambers constantly, which was probably unreasonable, and how they were going to keep him warm enough overnight he didn’t know--

As he turned toward Estes’ cubicle, his path was inadvertently blocked by a finely dressed woman whose head swiveled to regard a half-naked Polonti with flowing hair bearing down on her. He drew up in surprise; her eyes widened. After a frozen moment, he bowed to her, then made several side steps to get around her.

Efran swung into the cubicle, then looked flabbergasted to see it empty. Just to be sure, he checked under the desk, but Estes was not there. As this was an emergency—his newborn son was hungry—Efran stepped back and roared, “ESTES!”

Several soldiers converged on him. “Find Bethune. Or Estes. I want Bethune in my quarters,” he instructed, and they scattered.

With a troubled face, he began to retrace his steps, which caused him to encounter the woman again. He began to go around her again, then paused and turned. “Can I . . . help you with something?”

Dubiously, she said, “I am waiting for Doddridge.”

Efran stood still, searching his memory. “I . . . don’t know the name. Who is he?”

“My son,” she said stiffly.

“I see. What business does he have here at the fortress?” Efran asked.

“I have no idea,” she said, looking off. “He told me to meet him here.”

Efran continued in probing thought, then his face cleared. “He probably meant to meet you at a plot. Is he a tenant?”

She opened her mouth, then a voice said, “There you are, Mother.” A man that reminded Efran strongly of Justinian, Minka’s ne’er-do-well friend, entered the front door and came up to kiss her cheek. “Sorry for the delay. Come on up and I’ll show you around.”

He put his hand at her back and started to walk her to the corridor. Behind them, Efran said, “Stop.” His voice,

while not loud, carried an habitual note of command from his days as Captain of the Red Regiment of the army of Westford.

So they did stop, turning to look back at him. Efran walked up to the man; eye to eye with him, he asked, "Who are you?" He wasn't threatening, just intensely curious.

Doddridge brushed a finger to his nose with a disparaging smile and said, "Get some clothes on, friend, and then maybe we'll talk."

He started to turn away, but Efran caught the front of his suit in one hand to turn him back around. Smiling as well, he said, "No, I think we'll talk now. What business do you have in my fortress?"

Struggling slightly against Efran's hand, Doddridge explained, "I heard of the most interesting room on the third floor--"

"The only interesting room on the third floor is the one which has a lock with no key," Efran said, tightening his grip. "Again, what is your business at the Abbey Fortress?"

"The Abbey Fortress?" Doddridge sputtered, then urged, "Take care for the suit, friend." A few soldiers had approached behind Doddridge and his mother, but did not interfere.

Having secured his attention, Efran released him and said, "I don't know that I am your friend, but I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and I want to know why you are conducting tours of my fortress."

Doddridge's eyes swept the arc of the foyer ceiling above their heads. "This . . . isn't the palace of Venegas?"

"No," Efran said, watching him.

There was a moment of silence, then Doddridge took his mother's arm briskly. "Well, I see that I made a wrong turn somewhere--"

Efran nodded to two soldiers, who came up to taken Doddridge by each arm. "Put him in guest quarters until we find out who hired him," Efran said.

As he was led off, protesting, Efran turned to his purported mother. "What is your name, madam?" he asked respectfully.

"Dora," she said resentfully.

"Is Doddridge your son?" Efran asked.

"Yes, of course," she bristled.

"Do you know who put him up to this nonsense?" Efran asked.

"No," she said, doubt crossing her face.

"Well, I am very sorry to inconvenience you, but you will stay as our guest for a while, as well. --There you are," he added as Estes came around the corner with parchments. "I need Bethune in our quarters. Joshua is hungry."

"I believe she's already there, Efran," Estes said. "Good morning, madam," he nodded to Dora. She inclined her head to him, wondering how a band of Polonti managed to acquire this beautiful place.

Estes continued, "Loizeaux has sent a letter of 'suggestions' for our continued peace."

He held up a parchment thickly covered with writing, and Efran groaned. "I'll be right there. Let me check on Joshua." As he turned back toward his quarters, releasing the woman's arm, he couldn't help adding, "I had a son born today."

"Really?" she said in immediate interest. "May I see him?"

His eyes flicked to her. "Yes."

He opened the door to their receiving room as Minka was handing the baby over to Bethune, who was getting settled on the daybed. Minka was wearing a robe which gaped open at her chest, where she had been holding the baby on her bare skin, as Bethune had advised. Bethune was in the process of opening her bodice as the milk dripped from her breasts.

Dora was wondering what objection these people had to covering themselves when she caught sight of the tiny baby, whose flailing arms dislodged the blanket around him. "Oh!" she gasped. "What a beautiful child!"

Efran looked at her quickly; Minka turned smiling, hastily covering her chest. "Yes, thank you, isn't he?" she said. "He was just born this morning, a month early."

Dora came over to look closer as Bethune put him to her breast. He thrashed momentarily, getting settled, then contentedly put a hand to his ear as he sucked. "Oh, but he's perfect," Dora protested, with the universal adoration mature women have for babies, even Polonti ones.

Efran studied her, then stepped out to the corridor to speak to a soldier, Coxe, who moved away. Then he said, "Minka, this is Dora." To the woman he said, "This is my wife, the Lady Minka, and our nursemaid Bethune."

Dora straightened in surprise as Minka said, "Oh, welcome to the Abbey Fortress. Please stay and have a bite with us--poor Efran is starved by now; he's been up since midnight watching Joshua being born. Oh, we're in such disarray; let us get dressed first," she rambled happily.

Coxe returned to the doorway; Efran said, "Dora, please accompany this man to the dining room off the foyer here. My wife and I will be there immediately after we have dressed."

"That's very kind of you," she replied, disconcerted. Coxe bowed to her before escorting her into the foyer.

Once Efran and Minka had closed themselves in their bedroom to dress (him in work clothes and her in a favorite riding dress), he gave her a brief summary of how he had met Dora and her son. Minka stopped dressing to listen in amazement, so he had to wait on her to catch up. Then he made sure she tied back his hair, which was long only because she liked it long. But he couldn't see a thing unless she tied it back for him.

After checking on Joshua and Bethune again, they passed through the foyer to the small dining room in which they had entertained Surchatain Loizeaux of Eurus. As they entered, kitchen helpers were placing dishes on the oval table: eggs, rolls, broiled fish, and Madea's famous apple fritters. Dora started to rise but Efran put up a hand. "Please remain seated."

“This is very kind of you,” Dora said as Efran gestured at the kitchen helper to serve her plate. “I must say, I am rather put out with Doddridge right now. I can’t imagine what he was thinking,” she added.

Efran served his own plate, checking on Minka, but she was taking care of herself as well. Then he glanced up at Dora to ask, “Where are you from?”

“Westford,” she said. “My husband was apothecary for many years before dying of the fever in December.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Minka stopped eating.

Dora smiled on her. “Such is life, I’m afraid. But he left me well provided for. Doddridge did not wish to learn the apothecary business from his father. He chose to go adventuring instead. Today was the first time I’ve seen him in a year—he sent a messenger to me yesterday to meet him here. Goodness, it’s amazing how much milder the weather is here than in Westford. I had a terrible time trying to get a carriage this morning.” Today was January 1st.

Efran said, “We have many leaseholders who have relocated here from Westford due to the climate.” Having discovered that he too quickly trusted people--such as Cennick--based on appearances, he had to restrain himself from offering her a plot then and there.

He mused, “Even though the palace had its own apothecary, I should remember Westford’s, but I don’t. What was your husband’s name?”

“Blevin,” she replied with a sigh. “He was dedicated to his shop, the poor dear.”

“Blevin.” Efran stopped eating to look aside in thought. “Blevin. Wait. A small man with spectacles. A neat dresser with a high-pitched laugh.”

“You did know him!” she cried. “I still hear that silly laugh whenever I step into his shop. I can hardly bear it; I may have to sell.”

Efran said, “Do that. Come get yourself an Abbey plot. Do you know that Elvey and her associates have all relocated to the Abbey Lands?” He had noted her dress, which was something he rarely did.

“So that’s what happened to her!” Dora cried. “I despaired of having any new clothes again ever!”

They all laughed, and Minka said, “Oh, her shop does such beautiful work! Efran looks delicious in the dress uniforms she made for him, but he hardly ever wears them.” She paused to pout at him for this negligence, then said, “When we’re done here, you must come down with me to visit her. She’ll be so pleased that you’re moving down.”

Efran and Dora looked at each other. She raised a matriarchal eyebrow. “Well, it appears that I am.”

Efran smiled. “Before you lose yourselves in Elvey’s shop, I need Dora to talk to her son.” To her, he said, “I need to know why he had you come here and who talked him into it.”

Dora stiffened. “I shall certainly inquire, because these are questions I would like answered myself. What an outrageous imposition on your family, especially today, with the birth of your beautiful son.”

Efran looked softly on her. “I forgive you.”

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Chapter 2

After giving his men time to gently question Doddridge, Efran had Dora escorted to the room housing her son, instructing Verrin to bring her back to the small dining room when she was done. Then Efran went to look over Loizeaux's suggestions.

Standing in Estes' cubicle, Efran read over the list. "Ale!" he laughed, throwing back his head. "After slighting it at dinner, Loizeaux wants us to send him ale!"

Estes said distractedly, "Send him a case as sample and a price list for him to order more from Madea's vintner."

"That's a good plan," Efran acknowledged. "What else? What is this—he wants us to dress his courtesans!" That reminded Efran that he needed to check up on Connor and (the former Lady) Fanny, previously Loizeaux's favorite courtesan. Last Efran had heard, the newlyweds were seldom seen out of their house. When Connor did show up for work, he was hazy and smiling.

Finally, Efran looked down at Estes, who was tapping his fingers distractedly on the desk. "Estes?" Efran lowered the parchment. "What is it?"

Estes looked up at him. "Efran, it appears that Kelsey is pregnant."

Efran smiled broadly. "Well done, friend. We'll lend you Bethune for the delivery. And--" he glanced around the cubicle. "You need a larger space and several assistants. And a raise. I don't even know what you're paying yourself, but you need more."

"Thank you, Efran," Estes said with feeling.

"You have let me take advantage of you," Efran said, downcast, as he looked at the cramped, stuffed cubicle.

"No, Efran, we just—grew so quickly, it overwhelmed us both," Estes said.

Efran nodded. "That excuse is good through today only. Everything here, including Loizeaux's stupid demands, can wait until you have moved to a better space and acquired help." After a pause, he added, "If you would, please consider Doane. He is very capable, and has been—unhappy since his injury prevents him working."

The grown son of a leaseholder had gotten very drunk at Shay's Tavern in Westford and then come down to his father's Abbey plot to threaten him with a knife. Abbey soldiers, including Doane, had responded to his mother's cries for help. Doane had subdued the man, who ripped his leg wide open before giving up the knife, and his life. Even the commendation which Doane had received was not much consolation for a debilitating injury.

"Oh, yes, Doane would do well," Estes said.

"Good. Go claim a nice large room. Just—let me know where you move to, so I won't continue to frighten visitors by bellowing at your empty cubicle," Efran said.

Estes chuckled, nodding, and Efran turned thoughtfully back to his quarters. Was Estes reluctant to tell him that he had impregnated his own wife?--because Joshua was birthed by Minka's sister. Estes was sensitive about things like that. Efran was not the least bit disturbed, however, because strangers said his son was beautiful.

In his chambers, he found Bethune gone and Minka lolling with a heavily sleeping newborn on her chest. Efran bent to kiss her head, then said, "Did you ask her what we are to do to keep him warm at night?"

Minka looked up. "Yes, she said that's nothing to worry about. He must be fed several times a night, so she will sleep on the daybed with him."

He hesitated. "Is it safe?"

"I would trust her, yes," Minka said easily.

He watched while she smoothed the fine black hair away from the tiny face. "You're playing with his hair," he whispered. She laughed.

As he stretched out on the daybed to watch Minka cuddle his son, Verrin appeared in the doorway to tell him that Dora had been returned to the dining room. Both Efran and Minka got up, but he waved her down. "Let me hear what her son had to say for himself, then I'll release her to you to go play at Elvey's." She laughed again, which he liked to hear.

So Efran went to the dining room; entering, he closed the door behind him and sat across the table from Dora. She looked pensive, mildly disturbed. He leaned back in his chair, resting his left ankle on his right knee while draping his right elbow across the chair back. Then he waited. He would not interrogate her.

She folded her hands on the table in front of her and looked at him with a displeased pucker. "The answers which Doddridge gave to my questions do not satisfy me, but I will tell you what he said and let you draw your own conclusions." Efran nodded at this.

So she said, "I asked him where he thought we were, and he said the palace at Venegas. I asked how he derived that, since any map shows Venegas far to the east of where we are directly south of Westford. He had no answer to that.

"I asked him what he intended to show me at the palace of Venegas, and he said it was pointless to discuss, since we weren't there. I asked him what had made him late to meet me here, and he said his driver was late."

Efran turned his head, then. "I don't remember seeing any carriage out front. Neither yours nor his."

"In his message asking me to meet him here, he told me to send my driver back, that I would return with him in his carriage," she replied. At this Efran nodded, so she went on. "I asked where his driver was, and with great indignation he told me that the driver had accepted pay and then left while he was here."

"I will check with the sentries who were on duty this morning," Efran said. "Please continue."

"I asked who had told him that there was anything to see in the palace of Venegas, and he told me that it was talk on the street from several reliable sources," she said dryly, and Efran nodded with a half smile. "I then told him that he had embarrassed me greatly in front of the lord and his family, and I would not continue to support him unless he gave me better answers to my questions," she said indignantly.

“You cut the purse strings,” Efran said, almost wincing.

“Do you blame me?” she said.

“No, only—it makes you vulnerable,” he muttered.

“Well, Doddridge is thirty-two, and should be supporting himself anyway,” she said. “He could step into his father’s business tomorrow if he liked. But he won’t.”

Efran nodded, thinking. “I am going to keep him here a while longer, under guard. Dora, I want you to sell your husband’s shop and come to the fortress as well. Until you have a house built on a plot, I want to keep you in the fortress.”

She hesitated, and he said, “Don’t refuse me, lady. If you cut off funding for your son, his associates have nothing more to gain from him unless you die.”

She looked at him in alarm, then sank down. “I greatly fear you may be right.”

“I am, sometimes.” He stood, rounding the table to assist her to rise. “I’m afraid your visit to Elvey’s will have to wait. I’m going to send an escort home with you to gather your essential possessions and bring them back here. Then my administrator will help you sell your shop and acquire a house on the Abbey Lands.”

She blinked rapidly, then said, “That would be lovely.”

“Excellent. Come with me, please.” He walked her toward Estes’ cubicle. When he saw the soldiers carrying folders and parchments out, he remembered that Estes wasn’t there anymore. Efran stopped in his tracks, groaning. “I forgot.”

A voice from the cubicle called, “Captain?”

Efran looked in to see Doane seated at Estes’ desk. “What do you need, sir? I have legs,” he said, gesturing to the two men who stood upon Efran’s appearing.

“Excellent,” Efran said. “Dora, this is my administrator Doane. Doane, this is the widow of the apothecary Blevin.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, madam,” Doane said.

“Thank you,” she replied.

Efran resumed with a touch of impatience, “So she is coming to us. She needs a carriage, an escort and a cart to transport valuables here, and a room until she can acquire a plot. And help selling her shop. You know,” he said, then paused at how much he sounded like Marguerite. “Anyway, help her.”

“Certainly, Captain. Please have a seat, madam.” Doane gestured to the chair in front of the desk.

Before sitting, Dora said, “Thank you, Lord Efran.”

He nodded. “Just Efran.” He couldn’t help it.

As Doane began issuing instructions to his assistants, Efran collared another soldier, Goss, who was not obligated to Doane or Estes right now. “I want to hear from the sentries who were at the gate this morning about the carriages that brought a man and a woman separately. I want to know how they were sent off.”

“Captain.” Goss saluted and left.

Efran stood in thought a moment, then gestured at another soldier, Hawk. “Send Coxe and Lyte to me here.” Hawk also saluted and ran out.

While Efran was waiting in the foyer for those two, Younge came up, saluting. “Captain, I was on gate duty this morning when the carriage arrived.”

“Tell me how they arrived and how they left,” Efran said.

“Well, sir, the carriage I saw, a very nice one, brought the lady; she paid him and sent him away, then went in. Detler opened the door for her. There was no other carriage. A man in a suit arrived some time later with Lowry the butcher through the grocers’ gate. Lowry went on down the path to the back kitchen door, but the man just walked right through the foyer as if he were expected, and greeted the lady you were talking to,” Younge said.

“Ah. He’s already out of money,” Efran said. “All right, that’s all, Younge.” The man saluted and went his way.

Suddenly Efran remembered that Dora had said she hadn’t seen Doddridge for a year before today—yet she had been supporting him. It was possible, though unlikely, for her to do that strictly by messenger, but, the contradiction was a red flag. Although Efran wavered, he had already decided to give her the benefit of the doubt. She was a refined Southerner who said in anyone’s hearing that his Polonti son was beautiful.

Shortly, Lyte arrived with Coxe following. Efran looked up to the high arched foyer ceiling in thought, then said, “Tomorrow morning, I want you to ride out to Venegas and look for a palace, if there is one. Linger in the city and listen, if you safely can. Drop the name of Doddridge here or there to see what kind of reaction you get. Have Doane give you at least thirty royals, dress subdued but decently; bring me back any information you find interesting.” They saluted and turned as well, plotting between themselves.

Efran paused to mull over why they knew so little about Venegas, so close by. All he remembered about it from his years in Westford was that it was considered unimportant.

Shrugging, he went to interview Dora’s misbehaving son Doddridge.

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Chapter 3

A sentry brought Efran to the door of the room in which Doddridge was residing. It was unlocked for Efran to enter, and a soldier stood against the inside of the door while Efran sat in a chair at a small table to regard their guest.

Having eaten everything on his tray, Doddridge was lying on the bed, watching Efran indifferently. “Oh, you do have clothes.”

Efran asked, "How do you support yourself, Doddridge?"

"By my wits, my good man," he replied.

"Now that your mother is no longer supporting you, how do you propose to supplement your wits?" Efran asked.

Doddridge rose up on an elbow. "I have means."

"What did you think you were going to show your mother here this morning?" Efran asked.

Doddridge lay back again, snorting, "The treasures of Venegas."

Efran thought, *Ah. Someone else after the legendary Treasury.* Standing, he said, "Well, I need to put out some inquiries out about you, so it will be a few days more before I can release you. If then."

Doddridge's jaw tightened, but he kept up an admirable façade of indifference.

Efran walked out. To the guards outside the door, he said, "He may look like a weasel, but he's dangerous. Watch him." This they acknowledged.

When Efran returned to his chambers, he found his older adopted children hovering around Minka holding Joshua. They might have been feeling jealous, or left out, for the moment Efran walked in, he was assailed by the whole horde of them.

So he did the only thing he could do: sit on the floor and let them rampage all over him until they fell down in exhaustion. At that time he sent them back to their tutor, then picked up his son to admire him. He seemed to have filled out even since the early morning hours.

Feeling something heavy and wet, Efran pulled back the cloths to see a greenish-black mass covering the baby's bottom. Efran gasped, looking in alarm to Minka. She calmly took Joshua to put him on a straw-filled pad and begin cleaning the mass away. "This is normal for new babies, Efran; Bethune showed me what to do. Will you ask the sentry to bring in more water?"

He nodded, backing away in apprehension, and she laughed at him. "I'm glad you're here," he breathed, happy to be laughed at.

Efran went into the corridor to request more water from the man there, Ori, who sprang away to go draw it. Another soldier, Kaas, advanced, so Efran paused at the door. Kaas saluted and said, "Justinian is back, Captain. He's waiting in the receiving room."

"Excellent. Thank you," Efran said, exiting the corridor. He'd never been so glad to talk to that reprobate as he was today.

Turning into the receiving room, Efran saw Justinian in relatively good condition, lolling back in a padded chair. Efran asked, "Shall I have them bring you a trencher?"

"That would be kind of you, brother," Justinian said agreeably.

So Efran stepped out to give the order, then came back in to shut the door and sit. "What do you know?"

Justinian shifted. “The snow is terrible in Westford, worse in Eurur. No one’s out starting wars in this mess.” He sat up a little. “It’s much warmer here.”

“Because of the Sea,” Efran murmured. He sat thinking a little while, then said, “Tell me more about your father’s murder, Justinian.” That was Graduliere, whom Adele had said was working to overthrow Loizeaux. Graduliere had died the day after Christmas.

Justinian opened his mouth, but paused at the knock on the door which meant the arrival of food. Efran opened the door; Justinian sat up expectantly as a trencher of ham medallions, potatoes and peach preserves was set before him. Justinian set to, but a glance at Efran told him that his “dear brother” was expecting his report whether his mouth was full or not.

So Justinian swallowed and said, “It was strange, from what I hear. Father had been living in Eurur, trying to convince Loizeaux that he would be an asset to him as advisor. He had several interviews with him, as I understand, but I don’t believe dear Father made much headway—Loizeaux knew too much about him. But Father, being stubborn, persevered.”

Justinian paused to take a swig of ale, then looked at the bottle. “This is very good.”

“Yes, it is. Go on,” Efran said.

“Well. Dear Father had a carriage stored at Westford, so when he was in town, he decided to take it back up to Eurur. He had it made ready and harnessed, then the moment he sat inside, there was an explosion that destroyed the carriage, injured the driver, and caused the horses to bolt. There was not enough left of the carriage to tell anything about what happened except that it had blown up from the inside,” Justinian said.

“An explosive device set in advance,” Efran murmured, having seen that before. “When was the last time he had used this carriage?”

“Not for some time,” Justinian said around a mouthful, wrinkling his brow. “When we were all thrown out of Blature’s estate by Lightfoot’s order, Father didn’t have enough to pay for the driver and the horses. He acquired money somewhere from someone recently—I don’t know who.”

While Justinian continued eating, Efran sat back to review the events of the last few months. Graduliere had used poison powder created by the inventor Arenado in a near-successful effort to kidnap Minka almost six months ago. Then, with Graduliere’s support, Arenado had created a number of explosive devices in an attempt to implode the Abbey hilltop about a month later. But with Efran’s help, Arenado had died in a colossal explosion of his workshop a few days following that.

So before he died five months ago, Arenado apparently laid a death trap for Graduliere. And Efran believed he knew who had sent Graduliere money: Adele, because she expected him to successfully overthrow Loizeaux. What was especially bizarre was that Graduliere had been Adele’s first husband, whom she had divorced in favor of another nobleman whom she had mistakenly perceived to have more power. And in between husbands, Efran was her continual target.

Justinian added, “Oh, I’ve applied for a divorce from Adele. You’ll tell her for me, won’t you?”

Efran blinked at him. “On . . . what grounds?”

“Adultery,” Justinian said. As Efran was shaking his head, Justinian corrected him: “Not hers, mine. I’ve found a

rather nice woman who adores me. Not as much as Minka adores you, but that's almost beyond the realm of possibility."

Efran thought about that for a while, then asked, "Does the name Doddridge sound familiar to you?"

Justinian started to shake his head, then paused, looking up at the wall. "I . . . don't know. I may have heard it, but I can't place it."

"It may help for you to see him," Efran said.

"Possibly," Justinian allowed.

"Then you will. I'm going to bring him down, but he won't see you," Efran said. Since Justinian had cleaned the trencher, Efran took it and opened the door.

He handed it to Doudney. "Return that to the kitchen, and have Doddridge brought down."

As Doudney saluted and moved, off, Efran pointed Justinian to the partition decorated with pierced-relief carvings. "You stand behind that." Justinian got up to do so, and Efran stood before a map on the wall that was at a right angle to the wall where Justinian stood.

Some minutes later, Ori brought in a wary Doddridge. "All right, friend," Efran said in a relaxed tone, "show me where you live, and where you came from this morning."

Doddridge hesitantly came up to stand beside Efran at the large map of the Southern Continent. His back was to Justinian except whenever he turned to speak to Efran, who facilitated this by standing just behind him, so that Doddridge had to turn around to address him directly.

Doddridge looked at the map for a while, then said, "I came from Westford this morning. The weather there is beastly right now."

"So I have heard," Efran said. "Where do you live?"

Doddridge's eyes roamed sightlessly over the map and the wall. "I've been traveling for so long, I don't call any place home any more. I have a talent for negotiations, and have earned my living negotiating between opposing parties."

Efran regarded him, giving Justinian a good, clear view while Doddridge evaluated Efran's acceptance of his explanation. Then Efran said, "Well, that sounds harmless enough. I don't see why we can't release you shortly." He turned to Ori to say, "Return him to his room."

Ori looked at Doddridge. He hesitated before Efran a moment, who returned to him a blank face. Doddridge asked, "Are you holding my mother?"

"Of course not," Efran scowled. So Doddridge made the decision to cooperate, for now, and turned out with the soldier.

Listening to retreating footfalls, Efran stood where he was for ten heartbeats, then said, "Well?"

Justinian emerged from behind the partition. "That was unexpected. I'm very glad he didn't see me. He goes by

a different name in Westford and Eurur: Calkin. And he is reputed to be a killer for hire.”

Efran nodded slowly. Then he opened the door to tell Towner, “Find out from Doane if Dora has returned yet.” It was now mid afternoon. Efran gestured to another man, Ellor, to tell him, “Bring me Coxe or Lyte—whichever you find first.”

Shortly, Towner returned to tell Efran, “Captain, Doane says Dora arrived a few minutes ago—the snow in Westford has let up considerably. Her movables are being put in storage, and she’s been given a very nice suite on the second floor.”

“That’s perfect,” Efran said. He looked at Justinian to ask, “Are you staying in your room tonight?” A very nice first-floor suite was kept reserved for Justinian, whenever he was here.

“I’d rather get back to Westford, but I spent my last royal on carriage hire, the thieves,” Justinian said.

Efran nodded to Towner, “Tell Doane to give Justinian ten . . . make that twenty royals and have someone cart him up to Westford.”

“You are a compassionate brother,” Justinian said in satisfaction, shaking out his sleeves.

“And you are surprisingly productive,” Efran said with a look of mild disbelief. Justinian flashed him a cocky smile as he turned to follow Towner to Doane’s cubicle.

Shortly, both Coxe and Lyte appeared at the receiving room, as they had been in the dining hall. Efran said, “Ah. Are all the men there now?”

“Most of them, Captain,” Coxe said.

Efran told him, “Good. Your trip to Venegas tomorrow is off. Instead, I am bringing a man to the dining hall on the pretext of looking for someone. Spread word in the hall that I want all of you to memorize his face. He will be sent off today, and if he is found in the Abbey Lands again, you are to kill him.”

“Yes, Captain,” Coxe said. Lyte saluted and they turned back to the corridor.

Efran told the next man, Arne, “Bring Doddridge back to me here.” While Arne went to get him, Efran turned to the ever-reliable Truro to prep him on the play-acting they were about to perform for the benefit of their guest.

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Chapter 4

When Doddridge appeared at the receiving-room door again, his face was dark and suspicious. But Efran ignored him at first, as he was giving a soldier a thorough dressing down: “How could you allow this? Why did you not stop it?” Efran was shouting.

The (apparently) hapless Truro said, “I’m sorry, Captain, but it all happened so quickly! And then the crowd got in the way, so that by the time I reached the peddler who was getting thrashed, our man was gone.”

With a roar of frustration, Efran ordered, "Get out of my sight!" Truro saluted and darted away. This enactment was intended to give credibility to the following performance, as well as give Coxe and Lyte time to spread the word in the dining hall.

Seeing Doddridge, Efran held up his hands. "I apologize, but I have just been made aware of a situation in which you can be helpful to me. One of my men was involved in a fight this morning in Westford. I know that it was definitely one of my men, but none will admit to having been there.

"Since this dispute involved a woman, it drew a large crowd, reflecting poorly on me and the Abbey Lands," Efran continued. "Did you see anything like this when you were in Westford?" (How all this could have taken place in the "beastly" weather that Westford was experiencing, Efran didn't explain.)

Doddridge studied him. "Yes, possibly."

"Did you see a man in a gray-green uniform fighting?" Efran asked earnestly.

"Yes," Doddridge decided.

"Do you think you would recognize him if you saw him again?" Efran asked. Then came the bait: "If you are able to point out the guilty party, I will pay you two royals."

Doddridge assumed a concerned face. "I can't guaranty whether I can, but I will certainly try."

"Very good. Most of my men are in the dining hall now, so we will just walk among them and let you look," Efran said.

"If that will help make up for the disturbance I caused today, I will certainly assist you," good citizen Doddridge said.

"Excellent. This way." Efran led him down the corridor, thinking, *It is entirely possible that he came here to kill me this morning, but did not recognize me. And he used his mother to give him cover.*

They entered the dining hall; the men looked up and Efran barked, "Attention!" The whole hall of men leapt to their feet to stand at attention. Efran and Doddridge began to walk down each row of tables so that Doddridge could look closely at each face, and be studied in return.

Doddridge paused in front of Krall, a Polonti. "This man is a possibility," Doddridge said thoughtfully.

"Go stand against the wall there," Efran directed, and he did. Even with no explanation, it was obvious that Doddridge was called in to identify a criminal.

Doddridge continued to walk down rows, looking closely. He chose a second possibility, Stites, also Polonti (and one of the few EurAsian survivors of the flood). Efran directed him against the wall with the first. Krall and Stites exchanged a brief glance of satisfaction to be singled out as possible malefactors, then returned their attention to the Captain and the stooge.

As Doddridge came to the end of the rows, Efran asked, "Do you need to look again?"

"Possibly," he said, and began again, taking care to look deep in the eyes of the suspects.

At that time the infallibly calm Estes came to the dining hall. “Efran, pardon me, but--”

Doddridge turned to stare at him. “That’s him.” At the brazen choice of Estes as a criminal, some of the men behind him went rigid to control their laughter.

Estes looked at the stranger. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, I’m certain,” Doddridge said, peering hard at him. “That’s the man. The peddler he attacked was carried off half dead, and the woman fainted at his feet.”

Seconds of silence passed while Efran fought to muster the expected outrage without laughing. Grimacing to control himself, he looked at the floor and said through gritted teeth, “You must be punished.”

“I refuse to apologize,” Estes said. “We feel everything deeply and our blood is very red.”

Fortunately, the majority of the men who were trembling with silent laughter were behind Doddridge. Efran spun to the wall, crying, “I’ll deal with you later!”

He hustled Doddridge out of the dining hall and down the corridor. Noting the tears in Efran’s eyes, Doddridge said with all apparent sincerity, “I am very sorry to have caused disruptions twice in one day.” If he were surprised by such a convenient confession in response to his accusation, he didn’t show it.

“It had to be done,” Efran said, wiping his face. Then he took Doddridge to Doane to have him paid two royals and arrange for a fast chaise that could ride in snow to take him to Westford.

Before leaving him, Efran paused to study him again. Pocketing his royals in satisfaction, Doddridge said, “I’m sorry to have pointed out that one of your race was the guilty party.”

Efran smiled. “Never forget: Polonti are treacherous.”

As Doddridge was descending the courtyard steps, Efran had one more word for him, this time starkly truthful: “Doddridge.” The man turned. “Don’t come back. Here at the Abbey Lands, we do not imprison for crimes. We banish or execute. If you come back, you take your life in your hands.” Doddridge—Calkin--looked at him for a moment, then climbed into the waiting chaise attended by two soldiers, which set off.

Watching, Efran told Ellor at his side, “Report to me when they return.” Ellor acknowledged this, then Efran returned to the dining hall to congratulate his men and find out what Estes needed. (He was brooding over Loizeaux’s list of suggested appeasements.)

Leaving him to that, Efran went to his own quarters. As he found the receiving room empty, he looked into the bedroom. Minka was sitting on the bed with Joshua cuddled on her bare chest. She was just holding him, caressing him, murmuring and singing to him. “I will not cry,” Efran sighed.

She looked up at him, glowing as if the baby in her arms were fully her own. “Oh, Efran, he’s special. He’s not even a day old and he looked at me. He opened his eyes and looked straight at me.”

“Because you are beautiful,” he whispered, sitting beside her to kiss her shoulder.

“I can’t believe how perfect he is. Look at these tiny, perfect fingers,” she marveled.

Efran regarded the tightly closed eyes in the squished little face. "It seems a miracle that he survived, much less came out whole," he admitted. Then he buried his face in her neck and hair. "Justinian is divorcing Adele," he muttered. "And I have to tell her."

She did not seem terribly surprised. "I'll tell her, Efran."

He groaned and laughed at the same time. "Of course you offer to shield me with your own body. No. Not today, not ever again. I will tell her. And I will remove her from the fortress."

She looked at him quickly. "How, Efran? Where? She can't be moved yet."

He closed his eyes, nodding. I will wait for Wallace's word. But when she is able to be moved, she will be." Minka assented, but looked back to the baby on her chest.

Efran went to the physician's receiving room on the first floor. As he was not there, Efran asked his wife, Leese, to tell any soldier when Wallace came back so that Efran could ask him questions.

Then, after debating with himself about timing, he went to Adele's room (which was actually Justinian's room. Since he did not need it right now, and it was convenient to caregivers, Efran had put her here.) She had a highly paid attendant who had lasted almost a whole day now. The woman admitted him to the receiving room and then went to the bedroom to inquire whether the lady would see him. After thinking it over for several long minutes, making Efran stand idle in the outer room, Adele decided to admit him.

He entered the bedroom. Before even sitting, he appraised her. She was pale, breathing shallowly, and lying quite still. But the eyes that looked back at him were sharp. "How are you feeling?" he asked, drawing a chair up under him.

"Ask me as if you cared," she said.

"Oh, it means a great deal to me," he replied.

She weighed that, then turned her face away. He inhaled and said, "I have news you may want to hear." She looked back to him. "Graduliere is dead. He was apparently killed by a device that Arenado left behind," Efran told her.

"How do you know this?" she whispered.

"Justinian told me. The details were convincing." He was not going to tell her that Justinian had been gathering information for him for months now, and had proved highly reliable.

"Justinian has also admitted . . ." Efran began, looking at his hands, but this was harder to get out.

She laughed weakly. "Oh, don't get so emotional, Efran. I never expected him to be faithful. It's not a crime that he can't wait for me until I'm recovered from this birth."

He leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest. Still not looking at her, he said, "Adele, you can't count on him to be there for you when you do recover."

"Why not?" she demanded.

Now he looked at her. “Because he has applied for a divorce.”

She exhaled, “Men are so stupid. Efran, Justinian has been following me around like a lovesick puppy for years. Now that I finally married him, he’s not going away.”

“He—thinks you don’t love him,” Efran said uncomfortably.

“What has that got to do with anything? When did I ever try to make him think I loved him?” she asked crossly.

“It became important when you married him,” Efran said. “He thinks that means you love him.” He was improvising now, and unhappy about it.

Since this did not sound like the Efran she knew, she studied him. “You’re jealous.”

He slumped in the chair. “Adele, Justinian has fallen in love with another woman. You need to make another man fall in love with you.”

“Not when I have you,” she said smugly.

He got up, muttering to himself. From there, he asked to be shown to Dora’s quarters. A maid answered the door, who told him that her lady was presently indisposed. So Efran just conveyed his desire that she be settled in comfortably, and the maid accepted that, closing the door.

On his way back down to his quarters, Neale stopped him to tell him that Doddridge’s escort had just now returned after dropping him off at the Porterhouse Inn in Westford. Though much colder there than at the Abbey Lands, there was no more snow coming down.

Efran acknowledged that, then dragged himself to his own quarters. There, he found Bethune nursing Joshua and Minka getting ready for bed. “I need you,” he said, falling down on the bed and pulling her down to him.

“Finally,” she said, snuggling down into him. But when he lay there without moving, she looked in his face. He was asleep.

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Chapter 5

During the night, Minka awoke every time she heard Joshua crying. But since he was lying on Bethune on the daybed, she put him to her breast without hardly stirring. Still, Minka got up to check on them repeatedly. While Bethune did not have room on the bed to roll over, if she shifted enough, Joshua could fall off her.

But every time Minka looked in on them, the low fire showed her Bethune lying still with a hand on the baby’s back. So Minka returned to bed reassured, and Efran never woke nor thrashed.

In the morning, however—January 2nd--the light tapping on the outer door woke him and no one else. Sliding off the bed fully dressed except for his sock feet, Efran went quietly to the door and slipped out into the corridor. A gate sentry, Tourle, told him, “Captain, a man has arrived from Justinian with a message for you only.”

This was unusual, first, in that he came so early from Westford, and second, to have a confidential message. Efran said, "Where is he?"

"In the receiving room off the foyer, sir."

"Good. I'm coming." He went back into his quarters to find the boots that Minka had taken off his feet last night. She, Bethune, and Joshua were all still asleep.

Efran carried his boots outside to sit in the corridor and put them on. He went to the receiving room, where the sentry at the door, Verrin, opened it for him. Efran entered to see a man in a driver's uniform enjoying an Abbey fortress breakfast. Given the uniform, Efran recognized him right away. "Wade."

He glanced up. "Good morning, Captain. Your people were kind enough to offer me breakfast for my trouble, but Justinian also promised me a royal to cover the carriage hire. It's against the rules for me to take it out without compensation."

"I understand. What is your message?" Efran asked, sitting.

Wade sat up, wiping his mouth. "The apothecary shop and house above it went up in flames last night—it was a very hot fire, hard to see how it could have started from a fireplace."

"Who was staying there?" Efran asked, brows drawn down. It wasn't Dora.

"No one that I know of," Wade said.

"I see. Is anything salvageable?"

"Oh, no, sir; it's a complete loss. Burned to the ground," Wade said.

"All right, thank you." Efran went to the door to tell Verrin, "Have Doane pay Wade a royal for his carriage hire. And if anyone needs to make a trip into Westford, this is a good time."

"Yes, Captain." Verrin saluted and moved off.

Efran turned to another man, Tourse. "When Dora's up, ask her if she will have breakfast with me this morning in the small dining room. And then come get me in Wallace's quarters." This was the fortress physician, who had been moved to the second floor when it became apparent that he needed more space.

Efran trotted up the stairs to knock on the door of Wallace's receiving room. Leese opened it. "Good morning, Efran. I hope that your son is well?"

"As far as I know, yes. I would like to talk to Wallace about another matter," Efran said.

"Oh, he was up most of the night with a patient. May it wait a few hours?" she asked.

He glanced away in displeasure, but said, "Yes. Please have him send for me."

"Certainly, Efran," she said, and closed the door. Efran turned to go back down the stairs to the small dining room with bad news for Dora.

She wasn't there yet, so Efran decided to see if Minka were ready to come have breakfast with him. He returned to his quarters, letting himself in quietly so as not to waken Bethune or Joshua. Then he slipped into the bed chamber to lean over Minka.

The fire was burning low, but there was faint morning light shining through the colored windows above. Efran shucked off his boots to crawl onto the bed. Here he wrestled with himself: he knew that she was very tired, but she did look lovely lying there.

Studying her, Efran suddenly realized that she looked different from the 15-year-old who had found him in her henhouse nine months ago. Her face was less angular, more—balanced, somehow. She did look much less an adolescent. He couldn't stop himself from leaning over her to kiss her slender neck. And since she hadn't been awake to tie his hair back this morning, it fell across her face.

"Hmmm." In her sleep, she reached up to stroke his hair, and he moved to her lips. Still asleep, she put both hands to his head and he climbed on top of her.

By the time he was done, she was awake, and he congratulated himself that she hadn't tired of his hair yet. But she was disinclined to make a public appearance at breakfast, so he dressed in fresh clothes and stepped out to ask a sentry to bring a tray from the kitchen for her and Bethune.

Then he went to the dining room himself to find Dora just now sitting down to breakfast. He greeted her and dismissed the maids to serve himself. Blessed Madea always had eggs in some form, likewise ham, as well as fruit compotes and rolls.

Efran took his plate to sit opposite Dora. "I hope you slept well," he opened.

"Yes, thank you. The maid you provided is so lovely and helpful. I'd like to retain her, if possible, when I move," Dora said.

"Well, that's up to her. She's free to work wherever she likes," Efran said. "We don't have conscripts here; they're all paid for their labor."

"Oh, of course. I wish I could hire your head cook," Dora said.

"Ah, I'm sorry. Madea is mine and I will fight to the death to keep her," he said, only half joking.

"I don't blame you!" Dora laughed.

Efran smiled, too, then sighed. "Dora, I have news that . . . you will not welcome."

"What is it?" She lowered her fork.

"First, your house and shop burned to the ground last night. If you were counting on the income from the sale of the shop to lease a plot, I will waive that," Efran said.

"Burned!" she said. "How?"

"It seems to have been deliberately set," Efran said.

“Who--?” she began, then stopped. “I don’t think I want to know,” she added in a murmur.

“There is that possibility,” he acknowledged her unspoken fear. “Which leads to the second bit of bad news.”

He paused, and she said, “It’s about Doddridge.”

Efran nodded. “He has been identified as a . . . killer for hire. This is not yet confirmed, but I have reason to believe that he may have been sent here yesterday to kill me. And, he used you as a cover. It was just coincidental that he saw me in such a state so that he did not recognize me.” She considered all this without comment.

He went on, “Despite that, I sent him off by carriage to Westford yesterday afternoon. We . . . abide by Roman’s Law here, which does not permit me to kill him on suspicions alone. But I can, and did, evict him. And I told him that he cannot set foot on the Abbey Lands again. I hope you will make your home with us, because I fear for your life if you don’t. But if you have your home here, Dora, your son may not come visit you.”

She thought about that for a long time, which Efran respected. Then she asked, “May I come and go to Westford?”

“Of course, yes,” he said quickly. “Many Abbey Lands residents have connections in Westford. But, since I am fond of you, I ask that you not meet your son privately.”

She sighed. “It’s so distressing that such a precaution is necessary. But I’m afraid I agree with you.”

“Thank you. That helps ease my mind. If you like, when you’re through with breakfast, I can ask a man to take you down to the plots to see what’s available. There may even be houses finished,” he said.

“Thank you, Lord Efran; I believe I will accept that offer. And . . . if possible. . . .”

“Yes?”

She asked hesitantly, “Might I see your baby again? And possibly hold him?”

“I don’t see why not. Right now they are all asleep, but I will bring him out when my wife permits,” he said, smiling.

She snuggled in her seat like a broody hen, and Efran marveled at the power of babies.

Upon leaving the table, he sent a man to take her around the plots, then a maid came from Wallace to tell him that the doctor was free to hear him now. So Efran bounded up the stairs to Wallace’s new suite on the second floor.

The doctor met him at the door. “I trust the child is well?”

“As far as I know. I have not seen him yet this morning, but yesterday he nursed like a champion and slept as hard,” Efran said cheerfully.

“That is good. Sit,” Wallace said, gesturing to the seat across from his desk.

Efran threw himself down to the chair. “I want to know when Adele can be moved.”

“Ohhh,” Wallace groaned. “She was very badly torn up. Lost so much blood. She must lie still for as long as possible. It will be weeks before she can be safely moved.”

“Two weeks? Four? Six?” Efran asked heartlessly.

Wallace frowned at him. “If I had to guess, I would say four at minimum. And, she will probably be infertile for the rest of her life. Damage like that to the womb causes miscarriage.”

“That is not my concern, and I doubt that she cares either,” Efran said, looking off in thought.

“If I may ask, why the rush?” Wallace asked.

Efran shifted. “Adele has a lust for power. You are probably unaware that barely eight months ago she led a Eurasian army against me to try to take the fortress. And I recently discovered that she had secretly been corresponding from here with an old enemy of mine. Her presence is a very real threat.”

“Oh.” Wallace looked down, shaking his head. “How very unfortunate for the woman. Young people do not understand the fragility of life. She is—how old?”

Efran shook his head. “Twenty or twenty-one. I don’t know when her birthday is.”

Wallace groaned, “So young to be so self-destructive.”

Efran leaned forward. “Yes. And I cannot permit her to take down my wife or me with her. She already tried to kill my son.” He had to stop and pull himself out of the anger.

“She needs a man to take hold of her,” Wallace grunted.

Efran leaned back with a bitter laugh. “Yes, when she was beautiful, she had suitors--” He stopped and rose up. “And betrothals,” he breathed. “Thank you, doctor; you have been a great help--” He bolted up to run out the door and down the stairs.

Collaring the first man he found, Cutch, Efran demanded, “Where is Estes’ new room?”

“I’ll show you, Captain, but let’s walk,” Cutch said, proposing to restrain his careening down the corridor. Efran laughed and complied to walk.

Cutch brought him to the second-floor meeting room with the large oval table. Here, Estes, Kelsey, and two assistants—Towner and Neale--were working among documents, cabinets, cubbyholes and other such furniture. Efran entered, looking around. “Hello, Estes, it looks as though the move is taking shape nicely. Hello, Kelsey, how do you feel? Congratulations, by the way. Estes, you remember Adele’s betrothal to Lord Monsell. *Where did we put that?*”

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Chapter 6

“Adele’s betrothal to Lord Monsell,” Estes mused.

“Yes,” Efran said intently.

“When did we get that?” Estes asked.

Efran raised his face to think. “Last August. Around the first of August.” About five months ago.

“Then it would be. . .” Estes turned to look at the twenty or so stacks of parchments on the table.

Eyes on the stacks, Efran ordered Towner, “Go get me twenty men.”

He started to move off but Estes said, “Wait, Efran.”

Reluctantly, Efran held up a restraining hand to Towner, who had gotten as far as the doorway. Then Estes began to walk thoughtfully around the stacks, looking at the top parchment in each. He stopped at one stack, from which he picked up the top twenty sheets or so. He thumbed through these, then withdrew one which he held out to Efran.

Efran snatched it, looked at it, threw back his head to laugh, then grabbed Estes to kiss his forehead. Efran started to run out, then stopped abruptly in front of Kelsey to say, “I hope you’re feeling well.”

She nodded in bemusement and he blew out the door. Grinning, she looked back at Estes, who muttered, “At least he didn’t kiss you.”

Efran restrained himself to walk rapidly to his quarters. Entering, he found Bethune gone, but Minka sitting on the daybed holding Joshua. As she appeared to be unaware of Efran’s entrance, he stayed where he was to watch her. She was holding Joshua on her bare chest, her face close to his, talking quietly to him. Efran couldn’t see if his eyes were even open or not.

But then a tiny hand came up to flail in the air until it rested on her mouth, and she kissed the baby fingers. “He’s so special, Efran,” she sighed.

“You are making him to be, yes,” Efran said, his eyes clouding with tears again.

She looked up at him with such love that he dropped the parchment and came to kneel in front of her to take her in his arms. Careful of the little burden on her chest, he pressed his lips to hers, then looked down as tiny fingers found his mouth.

Efran let go of her to lift the baby from her and hold him up. His heavy head hung down, so Efran placed him on his shoulder, brushing his lips over the fine black hair. “I don’t understand how he survived it all,” Efran whispered.

“He’s a gift,” she said. “He had to live.”

Efran closed his eyes. “I don’t deserve this.”

“You’re not the judge of that,” she observed. “Now what did you want to show me?”

He had to study her for a moment before he could remember. “Oh. The parchment on the floor,” he nodded.

She got up to retrieve it. “Oh, yes. Adele’s betrothal to Lord Monsell. Barnby said it was still in force.”

“Yes, I just now remembered it. How can we use it?” Efran asked.

She said, “I don’t know. The first thing to do, I think, would be to write Barnby and tell him that Adele is available. Ask him how to contact Lord Monsell.”

“Yes.” Efran said. Standing with Joshua on his shoulder, he held out his hand for the parchment, which she gave him. Then he walked out with both.

Efran took both parchment and baby out to the foyer. Before ever reaching Doane’s cubicle, however, he was set upon by everyone in the vicinity wanting to see the newborn. Even the door sentries abandoned their post, for which Efran forgave them.

He held back the blanket from the tiny face. The black-fringed eyes cracked, then his mouth opened in a great yawn for such a little one. “Ohhhh!” the maids cried, and the men standing around unconsciously grinned.

“Back to work, everyone,” Efran said, smiling. He glanced toward the cubicle where a soldier sat who couldn’t walk over to see the newborn.

Efran entered the cubicle and Doane looked up from the paperwork in front of him. “I know you’re probably working on something urgent for Estes, but it can wait,” Efran said. He plopped the somewhat wrinkled parchment on the desk, then pulled up a chair with one hand to sit beside him.

“Oh, yes. My son Joshua, born yesterday,” he said off-handedly, lowering the baby from his shoulder once more.

Doane smiled, shaking his head. “He’s all Polonti.”

“Apparently so. You should hear him cry; it cracks the glass,” Efran said smugly, and Doane laughed.

“Now what can I help you with?” Doane asked, picking up the betrothal form.

“We want to make contact with this Lord Monsell on behalf of Adele, but don’t know anything about him. My wife suggested writing his friend Barnby, who visited us about five months ago,” Efran explained. So Doane helped him write up a rough draft of an inquiry to Barnby. As they were finishing, Joshua began squirming, working up to a good cry.

Efran got up then, and took Doane’s draft, the betrothal and the baby back to his quarters, where he found that Bethune had just walked in. “Ah. You’re here,” Efran said, handing her Joshua as he let out one of his ear-piercing crow calls.

Bethune laughed, “As needed, I see.” She settled down on the daybed, opening her bodice. Efran smiled, watching Joshua latch on in satisfaction.

He went to the bedroom as Minka was about to come out. “Is Bethune here?” she asked with the anxiety of a new mother.

“Yes, attending the little tyrant,” he said, nodding to the outer room.

Before he could show her the draft of the letter to Barnby, she said, “Efran, your Annals have been sitting here untouched since Christmas.”

With a sigh, he looked at the books lined up proudly on the shelf. “I know. I haven’t read anything since coming to the fortress.”

“Why not?” she asked, pained.

He looked at her. “Because I never had a beautiful woman in my bed every night before I came here.”

“What?” she laughed.

He groaned, “It . . . goes back to soldiering. It’s not the regimented life you’d expect. We’d spend a day and a night marching without a stop until we reached a place where we’d sit idle for three days. So I always took a book with me. If there was a town nearby, most of the men would go whoring and drinking. But the only thing worse than a filthy Polonti is a drunk Polonti, so I wouldn’t go. I wouldn’t let any of the men in my regiment go either, so they learned to take books along with them as well. Even back at Westford, I filled most of my nights reading--”

He stopped abruptly, looking away. Minka said, “Yes, I know your responsibilities have been crushing, so that you don’t have much time to read. And you told me that you didn’t have lady friends,” she laughed.

He continued looking to the side, his jaw muscles working. She watched him in confusion and concern. “Efran?” she whispered.

Turning back to her, he said, “I lied to you. But I won’t any more.”

She began, “Efran, I don’t care--”

“I care. You adore me because you think I have always been--” He stopped, looking away again, and Minka watched in alarm.

Breathing hard, he looked up at the colored glass windows above them. “I won’t have you adore a lie. It’s true that I wouldn’t go to the whores because they were full of disease. But . . . the married women. . . .”

He gulped, then took a breath to continue baldly: “The wives of the rich and noble of Westford would glance at me in the street. All I had to do was follow them to their homes, or an inn, or the house of a friend, where we would . . . lie together. I felt it was a—physical necessity, like eating or drinking. I had superlative self-control in every other area but that,” he laughed in anguish, and she looked broken-hearted at the shame in his face.

“Of course, if I ever saw those women in public, they would make their virtue clear to their husbands by treating me with contempt,” he said, anger mingling with the shame. “There was one woman, though, a woman only a few years older than me. She wanted to divorce her husband and marry me,” he laughed wryly. “She was even brave enough to greet me on the street.”

He paused to wipe tears from his eyes. Glancing up at Minka, he had to quickly look away from her tears, which he didn’t deserve. He wet his lips and continued, “But, she had young children who--needed a mother and a

father. I could not bring myself to break up a family. So I broke her heart instead.” Remembering her courage and her love, he closed his eyes in remorse for the way he had ended it. Her name was Windry.

Efran shook his head. “Don’t adore me, Minka; I’m not who you think I am.”

A few seconds of silence passed, then she came up close to make him look her in the face. He did, though his eyes were red and his lips pressed together. “You would deserve my contempt if you had violated me. You didn’t, even though I threw myself at you,” she whispered. “Why can’t you see how well and truly you broke that habit by being chaste with me?”

“That is my Minka, to adore me for doing the bare minimum,” he laughed in distress. “That was such an iron rule—to not touch an underage girl--that I would kill my best friend for violating it.”

“You achieved the bare minimum? There you are wrong, O Captain,” she said wryly. “Because you were fighting not only your own desires, but Adele and Father’s attempts to use me, and a palace crumbling on its foundations, and wolves plaguing the road to our only safe place—besides my flagrant attempts to seduce you. And along the way, you saved four destitute orphans and acquired a fortress and lands to provide homes and livelihoods for hundreds of people.”

As he listened to her, she could see him evaluating this perspective. She curled her fingers under his collar, whispering, “And I will tell you something else: I am grateful to those women.”

His eyes widened. She went on, “As much as I wanted you, I was scared on our wedding night. You are so strong, I didn’t know whether you would hurt me. I remember Adele coming home from her first time bleeding and crying. But you . . . knew what to do. You were so gentle and patient, so careful, so—attentive to how I was feeling. I am so grateful to those women for tutoring you in lovemaking, I would send them all presents if I could.”

He gazed at her, then wrapped his arms around her, pressing his face in her hair. “I will start on the books tonight,” he gasped, “after I have studied you for a good long while.” She turned his head to kiss him, and he relaxed in her arms.

“Now what did you want to show me?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he groaned.

“What are the papers on the floor?” she asked again.

“I will look,” he said, exhaling.

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Chapter 7

Efran had Minka look over Doane's proposed letter to Barnby about Monsell's betrothal with Adele, which she found satisfactory. So he took it upstairs to have Estes look at it. Since Estes had not recently consoled Efran about his past behavior with women, Estes was freer to find more about the letter that could be corrected.

The final draft read:

"To Lord Barnby of Venegas
"From Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands

"Greetings. I write to inquire whether you know Lord Monsell's present location, and whether he is still interested in marriage to my sister-in-law Adele. She is in the process of divorcing her husband, who has treated her shamefully, and just yesterday delivered a child with extreme difficulty. The Fortress physician has imposed four weeks' rest on her, after which she should be ready to pursue a new life.

"Hoping this finds you and yours well, and anticipating your kind response."

Efran took this draft to Doane to have him draw up a final copy and send it by a pair of soldiers to Barnby in Venegas. Leaving Doane's cubicle, Efran met up with Minka in the foyer, and she broached, "Efran, have you asked Adele about this?"

"Not yet," he said. "My attempt to talk to her yesterday was not . . . productive," he muttered. "And if Monsell is not interested, or wants his thousand royals back, then we have nothing more to talk about."

At that time, Dora entered the foyer from outside along with a sentry and a finely dressed couple. "Oh, here is the lord of the fortress right here," Dora said.

Efran and Minka looked over as the man and the woman turned toward him. Efran's face never changed from an expression of mild interest, but the woman's lips parted in surprise and a hand went to her bodice. This Minka noticed, but she restrained herself from looking at Efran.

He said, "Hello, Dora. Have you found something acceptable on the plots?"

"I think so, Lord Efran. A one-level house is now going up that should be finished very soon, and I can sublease the greater portion of the land to another tenant if I wish. I find it all very reasonable," she said.

"I'm glad," Efran said, still without regarding the man or the woman, whose breathing had become irregular.

"Oh, but I'm being so rude. Lord Efran and Lady—I'm sorry, I don't remember your name," Dora said with the aplomb of the well-heeled.

"This is my wife, the Lady Minka," Efran said smoothly, looking at Dora alone.

"Oh, yes. She's the mother of the most beautiful baby you ever saw. May we see him, Efran?" Dora pleaded.

"He's being fed right now. Perhaps later," Efran said, smiling.

“Oh, dear. Already I’m as demanding as a grandmother,” Dora fretted. “At any rate, Efran and Minka, please meet my dear friends Lord Gladden and Lady Vories, visiting from Westford.”

Efran made a short bow toward them, and Minka nodded. Gladden, a very round man with an elaborate comber, looked intently between Efran and Minka. “Efran. You wouldn’t be Captain Efran, would you?” He studied Efran’s long hair, tied back.

“When there was an army at Westford, yes, I was,” Efran said with a vaguely pleasant expression.

Gladden looked at Minka. “Then you must be Chataine Sybil.”

“A long time ago,” Minka said with a half smile. “Now I am Efran’s wife Minka.”

Dora noted, “Lord Gladden was very close friends with Clerk Graduliere.”

Efran returned a docile gaze to him. “I was sorry to hear of his shocking death.”

“It was incomprehensible,” Gladden said, staring at him. “And his poor wife . . . ah. . . .” He appeared to have forgotten a name, and Efran merely looked on without comment.

Gaul came up to whisper in Efran’s ear, who said, “I will be there straightway.” Then he turned to Minka to say, “Will you accompany me, Lady?”

“As my lord wishes,” she replied, with downcast eyes.

“Thank you.” He turned to bow shortly to the three of them. “Excuse me, please.” Dora kissed her hand to him; Gladden looked on pensively, and Lady Vories stared at the wall in shock.

Efran began to escort Minka out with a hand at her back, then paused to whisper to Gaul, “Dora may go to her room; Lord Gladden and Lady Vories are confined to the foyer.”

“Captain.” Gaul saluted.

As Minka and Efran progressed up the corridor, he murmured, “Before you ask, yes, she was one.”

“Yes, she made that clear,” Minka murmured in reply, and he nodded.

Efran escorted her upstairs to the doctor’s quarters. The door was standing open, so they both looked in. Wallace, at his desk, gestured, “Come, sit. Hello, Lady Minka.”

“Doctor,” she nodded. Efran pulled up a chair for her before sitting himself.

Wallace said, “I’ve just been down to look at Adele. Her color has improved and she’s a little stronger. I would give her a month to be healed enough for moderate activity. But, again, I doubt that she’ll be able to bear another child.”

Efran nodded, then looked at Minka. “Do you have any questions for the doctor?”

She glanced up. “No, thank you.”

“Thank you, then, Doctor,” Efran said, rising. Minka got up with him.

Once they were outside the doctor’s quarters, and out of earshot, Minka said, “I’m going down to ask Adele if she’s interested in Monsell.”

As she turned away, Efran caught her arm. “Should I come with you, or not? I don’t want her abusing you again, especially about something I set in motion.”

“You may come if you like. I don’t think she can abuse me much over this. That is, it won’t hurt me,” Minka said. His face registered doubt, so he went back downstairs with her to Adele’s room.

They gained entrance from the maid, then Minka sat beside her sister’s bed while Efran stood in the doorway to the outer room. “How are you feeling? Oh you do look so much better,” Minka told her.

Adele grunted, looking up at Efran. He turned away to lean his back on the door frame. “We’ve just come from the doctor. He is pleased with your progress,” Minka said. Adele closed her eyes.

Minka went on, “In light of everything, we were wondering if you would consider Lord Monsell again. I remember him as a very nice-looking man.” She had seen him when they lived in Eurus, when he had made the offer for Adele to their father.

“Lord Monsell . . . ?” Adele said blankly. “Oh, the betrothal. So he’s come out of the woods again?”

“We just want to know if you’re interested, or if we should beat him back,” Minka said.

“How much is he offering?” Adele asked.

Efran looked over from the door frame, but allowed Minka to answer, “Didn’t he already pay a thousand royals for a binding betrothal?”

“I don’t know, but I didn’t get any of it,” Adele said.

Efran began weaving on the door frame, but again allowed Minka to reply, “Darling, that went to Father. What you get by accepting the proposal is Lord Monsell and his entire estate. Shouldn’t we at least see what he’s worth before you reject him?”

“You have a point,” Adele admitted.

“I’m glad we agree.” Minka stood to kiss her forehead. “Keep still and heal, and we’ll see what happens.”

As Efran and Minka left, he said in admiration, “That was smooth.”

“I’m learning from you,” Minka said. He glanced down at her suspiciously, but she looked ahead with a vague Efranesque smile.

As it was, Doane informed them that the messengers to Barnby had already been sent. Efran thanked him for his prompt action, but receiving that information required them to pass through the foyer again. Gladden accosted Efran: “Now why the deuce are we being kept down here?”

Efran paused as if confused. "I'm sorry, Lord Gladden, but no visitors are permitted beyond the foyer without a specific reason."

"We're here to help Dora," Gladden said irritably. Lady Vories stood apart from them, studying the wall.

"I'm very sorry, Lord Gladden, but we have all the men she needs to do that," Efran said. Before Gladden could bluster further, Efran said, "Please excuse us," with a bow.

"That's what I mean," Minka whispered as they turned out of the foyer.

So Efran took her in his arms right there to kiss her. She responded, murmuring, "Now that's cruel. She can see us."

He whispered in her hair, "I didn't pleasure her long enough, so she lodged a complaint against me with my Commander. By the grace of God, he only gave me a lecture about staying out of married women's beds." She buried her face in his jacket to laugh.

But after he had left her to attend other matters, she stopped laughing. And began to think.

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Chapter 8

The next few days passed in a rush. Joshua developed an alarming yellow tint which both Wallace and Bethune recognized. He was concerned, but she was not. As the weather was surprisingly mild and sunny for early January, Bethune took Joshua outside frequently to expose him to the sunlight. It was a tricky business, because she also had to take care to keep him warm. When it was too chilly outside to do this, she sat with him in sunny glassed windows. Minka and Efran watched anxiously, but trusted the woman who had successfully nursed six children through childhood.

Unfortunately, having given Joshua almost completely to Bethune for the time being, Minka had too much time to think. Yes, Efran was smooth, and she caught herself imitating him as she once had imitated Adele. But recognizing that, and reflecting on his confession about his lady friends, made her see him in a different light.

Yes, he was Polonti, with the characteristics of the race: brown skin, broad forehead and high cheekbones. At the same time, he was an attractive man, and he knew it. Whether he intended to or not, he charmed practically every woman he met. She recognized now that he had fully charmed her in the henhouse, but she did not know why--he had been very careful to keep his hands off her, and keep her hands off him. Had he charmed Adele in hopes of saving his life? Is that why she came to him the night before his hanging? Minka did not know.

But the real question that plagued her was: how much was he still using his charm on women? How much could she trust him? People were flocking to the Abbey Lands now, both to live and to look around. Efran was almost famed; everyone talked about the Polonti Captain who had kidnapped a Chataine and claimed the Abbey Fortress. Lady Vories' unexpected appearance was likely just the beginning of renewed temptations for him. She struggled with this for days, finding no answers.

Efran was struggling as well, but with entirely different issues. He also regarded the flock of visitors to the Abbey Lands with unease. That many people could not all be friendly. Moreover, he felt the presence of

Doddridge—the killer for hire, Calkin—in the background somewhere. Efran’s having provided a plot for Calkin’s mother Dora increased his cover for trespassing again, but--it was the right thing for Efran to do. He would not remove her even if he could, at this point.

So the construction of the stone wall took on an even greater urgency. Efran had stonemasons and bricklayers at the wall to oversee the construction of it, but he himself was down there working on it, just to make sure it was done well. Connor showed up one day, angry and broken-hearted, to work beside him. After weeks of bliss newly married to the most beautiful woman on the Southern Continent, he discovered that she had tired of him and started looking around. Connor caught her making advances to other men.

So he had moved out of the house (that Efran had given them) and gone back to the barracks. As he and Efran harvested rocks from the Abbey hill and placed them according to the stonemason’s directions, Connor unburdened himself to Efran about the heartache of living with an unfaithful woman.

That pierced Efran twice over: first, Connor was like a brother to him—an intelligent, capable, dedicated soldier--and it hurt to see a good friend and a good man betrayed. But as he poured out his heartache to Efran day after day, Efran also began to understand what he himself had inflicted on many husbands. Some of those men were, indeed, callous and indifferent to their wives, but some were only burdened, as Efran himself was. How much attention was he giving Minka right now?

So that day, after cleaning up in the men’s bath house outside and getting a bite from the kitchen, Efran went to his quarters to pull out the first book of the Latter Annals—the set being Minka’s Christmas present to him—and sat on the bed to begin reading in his empty quarters. A sentry had already told him that Minka was out in the gardens with Bethune and Joshua, and he wanted to surprise her by his renewed interest in her gift to him.

It was hard getting started in the unfamiliar emptiness of his quarters, but he made himself read. Then his attention started wandering because he did not much care for the titular figure, Nicole. She was too sweet and submissive for his liking. Renée (of the crosses on the back grounds) was more interesting, but she reminded him too much of Adele. And, he was tired with hard physical work and worry. His eyes started closing without his permission.

“Efran? Efran! Are you all right?” It was Minka’s voice that brought him to consciousness.

He sat up on the bed, floundering for the dropped book. “I fell asleep,” he said in irritation. “And I was just getting into it.” He looked up at her, and she nodded in concern. “Come read with me,” he said, taking her hand.

She pulled away gently. “I will shortly; I’m running an errand for Bethune. She needs tallow for Joshua,” Minka explained.

As he looked at her, his face drained and his breathing faltered. It was gone. That look of adoration was completely missing from her face. After confessing his libertine past, he had instructed her not to adore him anymore, so she didn’t. He lowered his face, and she merely looked concerned. He licked his lips. “Then I will read, and wait for you,” he whispered.

“All right,” she said, and left. Efran blankly opened the book again. What made it particularly stinging was that his hair was still down and damp from his bath, and she hadn’t even looked at it.

He forced himself to read, and began taking a mild interest in the events, particularly after Nicole had seen the Chataine Renée kiss Ares. That drove Nicole to take refuge in the Abbey—a fact he had not known. And this was—when? About eighty years ago, to his reckoning.

“She could see the Sea from the garden!” he whispered. “I knew it!”

Minka came in, then, and with the excitement of a child, he sat up. “Ares’ wife ran away to the Abbey, here, at one point, and she could see the Sea from the garden!”

“That is interesting,” she said without much interest. “I just came to let you know that I’ll be down at Elvey’s picking fabrics for Joshua’s clothes. Dora will be meeting me there.”

Efran got up. “I’ll come with you.”

“Don’t bother,” she said dismissively. “It’s just women.” She paused, finding something offensive in her own tone, but turned and left. No, she didn’t want Efran around a bunch of women.

He sat back, reeling from the blow. She didn’t want him with her. The girl who insisted on sleeping with him even when he accidentally hit her now didn’t want him around when he was awake. Efran steadied himself against the dark chasm looming at his feet, and opened the book again.

Minka felt guilty the whole rest of the day, and tried to make it up to him at dinner. He was attentive and courteous, quick to respond to anything she asked or said. And she saw the searching in his eyes; every time he looked at her, he was searching for something that he did not find. She didn’t know what it was that was missing.

A few more days passed; one morning he asked her to tie his hair back, as it got in the way when he was working on the wall. But she didn’t want to put Joshua down to do it. Without asking a second time, he went to ask Detler to cut his hair. And Detler did, taking off about ten inches. Minka said nothing about it.

Bethune’s efforts with Joshua paid off: the yellow faded and his healthy brown skin reemerged. Minka began going to bed while Efran was reading; the first time she asked him to snuff the candle, he took his book to the keep, and began sleeping there again. He would not risk hitting her and she seemed less inclined to curl up in his side to hold his hand.

Meanwhile, they were still waiting on a reply from Barnby about Monsell—it had been almost a week since the messengers had gone and come back only to say that Barnby’s man Stebbins had taken the message and told them not to wait. Between Minka’s coldness and Connor’s heartbreak, Efran felt as though he were dying inside. So he kept reading to keep himself alive.

Deep down, he knew that he had earned this suffering because of the suffering he had inflicted on other husbands. He had earned her mistrust. Since he could do nothing about it now but endure the repercussions of his own actions, he put himself at God’s mercy. He was a little comforted by Ares’ humiliation at table over his past indiscretions with a prostitute, and the fact that Nicole had forgiven him. But she was not the firebrand that Minka was.

He skipped the second book in the Latter Annals, as that was the only one he already owned, and went on to the third. Estes was now settled in his new, large room with Kelsey and two assistants. When Estes saw Efran’s hair cut, he was almost aggravated; Estes was growing his hair out.

Minka saw Efran’s suffering and grieved for him; she knew he was sleeping in the keep again, but she felt incapable of comforting him. She had lost trust in him and didn’t know how to get it back—or even if it was possible to.

In mid-January, the warm spell was snapped by a cold rain that sprang up from nowhere. Efran called a halt on the wall and directed everyone in to shelter. As he was one of the last men up from the wall, he found the men's bath house already full, so he went to his own quarters.

There, he saw a tub filled from Minka's last bath, which she had just finished. So he stripped and stepped in, not realizing that she was dressing in the bedroom. Days ago, he had stopped looking for her when he came in to empty quarters.

After Efran had bathed quickly and stepped out of the tub to reach for a towel, the door to the corridor opened for Connor's estranged wife Fanny to walk in. Since she had been Surchatain Loizeaux's favorite courtesan before falling in love with Connor, she had a shaky hold on propriety and proper boundaries. So if she needed a certain man, she went to him. Minka heard the outer door open and close—and roundly chastised herself for forgetting to lock it—but she had to finish dressing before she could go see who had come in.

The moment Fanny came flouncing in, Minka emerged from the bedroom. Having turned when the outer door opened, Efran had his back to the bedroom. Fanny was looking solely at him, so neither of them saw her. Minka stopped in shock to watch.

Fanny, raising her large eyes to him in little-girl winsomeness, said, "Efran, Connor has moved out and I need company."

He shook out the towel with a snap and put it around himself as he vented, "You stupid girl, to cheat on a good man who gave you his heart and soul when *you're* the one who asked *him* to marry you. If you want company, go crawl on your knees to him and beg forgiveness for catting around behind his back. But if you really don't want him anymore, then get off my lands. We don't have whores here and we're not starting with you." He had never in his life spoken so harshly to a woman before.

She left in a huff and Efran turned around to see Minka watching. At first his face went white, then he looked in her face and saw it. She was gazing at him in unconscious, unfeigned adoration because he had just kicked out the most beautiful woman on the Southern Continent when he was naked.

He looked again to make sure he was seeing what he wanted to see more than anything. "Oh, Efran," she said, tearing up, "I'm so sorry." She flung herself on him to cry, but he wouldn't let her bury her face on his chest; he wanted to look for the third time. "I'm sorry," she whispered again.

He dropped the towel to carry her to bed, where he took his time to pleasure her so thoroughly that he had to wake her for dinner an hour later.

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Chapter 9

At dinner in the large hall, Efran asked Minka, "Do you want me to grow out my hair again? I'll do whatever you want."

"I don't know," she said. He anxiously checked her face again, but the adoration was still there, though she looked genuinely torn. "It's beautiful hanging loose, but I can't play with it when you have to pull it back. I like to play with it. So maybe keep it short for a while." She reached over to brush it away from his eyes.

“All right,” he said, smiling. “Whatever you want,” he repeated in a whisper, drinking in the solace from her beautiful eyes.

They both looked up as Connor and Fanny passed by their table, holding hands. Connor looked deliriously happy and Fanny carefully snubbed Efran, which made him and Minka grin at each other. “I’m so sorry for doubting you,” she whispered again.

“After what I told you, I don’t blame you. I really should thank Fanny for breaking in while I was bathing. Remind me to start locking the door,” he whispered back. She laughed, cuddling him.

Then she murmured, “I really thought you were using your charm on me in the henhouse.”

“Oh, I was,” he said. “As hard as I could.”

“Why?” she asked, lifting up.

He looked at her. “I was getting ready to run, but I was still too weak. I couldn’t afford to scare you so much that you’d call in help. I had to get away first.”

“Before Father could hang you,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, emphatic.

She caressed the hair at his temple, and he smiled again. She said, “All you did was make me love you.”

“That wasn’t my intention. I just wanted to not scare you,” he insisted.

“But you didn’t love me then,” she said.

“No. Not then. Remember, I thought you could be as young as twelve.”

“Yes, and it infuriated me. Then when did you start to love me?” she asked.

He looked up, inhaling. “I started looking at you differently when you stopped my hanging. I started having feelings for you when you had the fever, and I took care of you. But I fell hard when they made me your guardian. They made a big mistake doing that; it’s a common pitfall for guardians to become possessive of their charges. The great Roman was his wife’s guardian before they married.”

“Wasn’t he Polonti?” she asked.

“Half,” Efran said. “His mother was a Polonti whore.”

“Oh,” she winced. Then she asked, “Who was your mother, Efran?”

He shook his head. “Just . . . a girl. She was young, though—like, fifteen when she had me.”

“Oh no,” she murmured. “Wasn’t that against their laws?”

“There are no laws in a pauper village,” he muttered. “Just consequences.”

She laid her head on his shoulder in sympathy, twining her little fingers in his. "Sleep with me tonight."

"Of course. Forever," he said.

They both looked up at Estes and Kelsey, who had paused in front of them. Estes asked, "Are you back to short hair now?"

"I don't know. It depends on Minka's moods," Efran said. Kelsey laughed and Estes shook his head, walking her on.

What they did not know was that an assassin had been dispatched to the Abbey Lands to look for the only Polonti there with long hair.

Late the following day, January 16th, a gentleman and his attendant arrived at the Abbey Fortress. He handed a letter to a gate sentry and said, "Please give this to the lord of the fortress. I am the man referenced in the letter."

The sentry, Nyarko, looked over the letter, then directed others to stable the visitors' horses. To the gentleman, he said, "Please follow me, sir." Nyarko showed the pair into the receiving room off the foyer, which had a table stocked with refreshments, and said, "Please make yourselves comfortable while I alert Captain Efran."

The gentleman nodded, then he and his attendant looked with interest at the ale, bread, and dried venison.

Efran was in his quarters with Minka and Toby, who was holding Joshua. Toby had a keen interest in his little brother, and came by almost daily to have a look at him. "He's holding his head up now," Toby observed. Minka smiled at him.

There was a knock on the door, which Efran got up to answer. Nyarko gave him the letter, telling him, "You have a visitor in the receiving room who says that's him you ask about here."

Efran looked startled when he saw it, then said, "Please tell him I'll be right there."

Minka looked up at this. Efran handed her the letter. Seeing it, she gasped, "Your letter to Lord Barnby about Adele! And he added the note: 'Lord Monsell: This arrived for me today; do with it as you will.' Then is this Monsell here now?"

"Apparently. I'm going to see. Would you like to come?" Efran asked.

"Yes. But you go ahead while I find Bethune." She stood to lift Joshua from Toby's arms.

Toby said, "I'll go look for her, Minka."

"Thank you, darling," she said warmly. So Toby left the room headed in one direction and Efran in another.

Efran carried the letter to the receiving room off the foyer. When he opened the door, he regarded the two men who stood at his appearance: both were well dressed, though obviously worn after a day of travel. Efran looked to the obvious lord: a handsome man with black hair and brown eyes. He was not Polonti, though Efran judged he could be a half-breed. "I am Efran. Have I the pleasure of seeing Lord Monsell in my fortress?"

“Yes, Lord Efran, I am Monsell of Eviron. This is my man Larcum,” he said.

Efran, surprised, shook his hand. “Pardon my bewilderment; I had no idea my inquiry would be so effective as to draw the lord in person. Please sit. Or would you rather walk around a bit?” Efran took them out to the foyer.

“Frankly, Lord Efran, I would like to see Adele,” Monsell said.

“Understandable,” Efran agreed, then paused as Minka came up to them. Placing a hand at her back, Efran said, “Minka, this is Lord Monsell of Eviron and his man Larcum. Lord Monsell, my wife the Lady Minka. She is Adele’s sister.”

Monsell and Larcum both bowed to her, the lord offering, “A pleasure, Lady Minka. I see that beauty runs in the family.”

“Very much so,” Efran agreed. He turned to her. “Lord Monsell has traveled quite a distance to see Adele. Would you please—check on her for us?” He was tentative because he had not looked in on Adele or received a report on her since he and Minka had approached her about Monsell two weeks ago.

“Certainly.” Minka nodded to them and half ran out of the foyer. Efran watched her because he liked to.

“Forgive me, Lord Efran,” Monsell began, and Efran looked back at him. “I was told that the Lord of the Abbey Fortress could be identified by his long hair.”

Efran paused minutely, trying to remember if he had been wearing his hair long when Barnby visited the fortress. “That changes according to my wife’s wishes, sir,” he said with a restrained smile.

Monsell uttered a low laugh. “And does her sister exercise the same power over her lord?”

Efran held up his hands in disavowal. “I can answer for no one but my own wife, and not even her.”

Monsell laughed outright at that, then Efran said, “I understand that you have been considerably inconvenienced by the delay regarding your betrothal. Again, I can’t answer for it, but I will tell you that there has been a great deal of tumult over the throne. Adele and Minka’s father, Surchatain Lightfoot, assumed the throne in the midst of the fever about eight months ago, then was assassinated after ruling only three months. I laid claim to Minka, but Adele, as the firstborn, had a more—difficult course to negotiate.”

“I understood from your letter that Adele has just given birth,” Monsell said.

“Yes,” Efran said. “My wife and I are caring for the baby.”

“Who is the father?” Monsell asked.

Efran looked at him. “You must discuss that with her.”

“Of course,” Monsell murmured. “Forgive my presumption, only—it’s been almost three years since the betrothal was signed, and then it—disappeared.”

Efran hesitated, then decided that, given his investment of a thousand royals, Monsell was due an explanation. “Lord Barnby told me that he had signed as witness, then it was required of him to return the form to the notary. But then he became so seriously ill that he was unable to travel for a long time. And that is all I know.”

“Do you know where the betrothal agreement is now?” Monsell asked.

“Yes. I have it.” Efran gestured to a sentry, Cutch. “Ask Estes to have a man bring me Monsell’s betrothal agreement with Adele.”

As Cutch saluted and took off, Monsell almost gaped at Efran. “You have it? How did you come by possession of it?”

“Barnby gave it to me when I asked,” Efran said.

Now Monsell did gape. “Did he never take it to the notary to be registered?”

“I’m sorry; I don’t know,” Efran replied. They waited a few minutes while Monsell and his man looked at each other.

Cutch ran up with the slightly wrinkled parchment to hand to the Captain. He glanced at it, then gave it to Monsell. The lord and his man both studied it. “This is the original; it has been signed by all parties but not registered,” Monsell said, looking at Efran in frustrated disbelief.

“Again, I’m sorry; I know nothing of that,” Efran disclaimed.

Monsell glanced at his man, who returned to him a wry look. “Forgive my incessant questions, Lord Efran, but I am trying to understand how it came about that Lord Barnby was able to visit you with my betrothal agreement but not the notary.”

Efran evaluated him for a moment, feeling that he a right to some answers. So Efran told him the whole story, beginning with the explosion at Arenado’s workshop (but not Efran’s contribution to that). By necessity, he told him about Barnby’s claim on Minka, and Ryal’s decision that the Law of Roman took precedence over the Book of Notary Rules. In the interest of truth, Efran also admitted that he paid Barnby 300 royals for the agreement.

Monsell listened in stupefaction. But before he could utter a sound, Minka entered the foyer. She glanced around at them, then said, “Adele is willing to see you, my lord.”

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Chapter 10

Monsell turned quickly to Minka with, “If you will, please lead us to her, Lady.”

“Follow me, then,” she said, and turned. Monsell walked beside her; Efran and Larcum followed. Efran enjoyed the view of her swinging skirts, then glanced at Larcum to make sure that he was not. Larcum’s eyes were appropriately fixed on his lord’s back when not sweeping the corridor.

Minka stopped at the door of Adele’s receiving room to knock, and the maid opened it to admit them all. At the bedroom door, Minka paused. “Lord Monsell, please have your man wait out here with my husband.”

“Certainly,” Monsell said, gesturing to him. Larcum stepped back; Efran merely stayed where he was. But the

moment she and Monsell entered the bedroom and shut the door, Efran flattened his back on the wall beside the door to listen. After an instant, Larcum did the same on the other side of the doorway.

Minka went to the far side of the bed in which Adele was sitting up on pillows. Monsell drew up to the near side. Minka said, "Adele, I'm sure you remember Lord Monsell of Eviron."

Adele raised languid blue eyes to him. "Yes. How gracious of you to come to me in my present state, Lord Monsell." She actually looked lovely, far better than she looked even weeks ago. Following Wallace's instructions and a healthy diet had restored her greatly.

"My dear Adele, I would have come years ago had I known where to find you," he said with only a shade of petulance.

She sighed deeply. "I was in my father's hands, and had no knowledge of anything regarding our agreement. Then he died, and his clerk Graduliere laid hands on me--"

She turned her face away in pain. Minka, playing along, laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and whispered, "There is no call to relive all that now, dear sister." Meanwhile, Minka flashed a warning look at Monsell. Efran, listening at the door, was careful to keep his face blank for Larcum's benefit.

Regaining control, Adele turned limpid eyes back to Monsell. He pulled a chair up to her bedside and sat. Adele then murmured with red lips, "But now that you find me so—debased, you can hardly want me." This was uttered as a test.

"Yes, I expect to marry you as we both agreed," Monsell said. "When can you travel to Eviron?"

"Whenever the doctor, and my brother-in-law, say," Adele said innocently. This was another test.

"Your brother-in-law? Lord Efran? Why must he give consent?" Monsell asked, which was a reasonable question.

"He has been warding me through these difficulties," Adele said.

Monsell stood abruptly to open the door, whereupon Efran smoothly righted himself off the wall with a vaguely questioning look. "Do you have any objection to my pursuing my right to marry Adele?" Monsell demanded. He unconsciously glanced at Efran's work clothes in making this demand.

Efran looked concerned. "No, certainly not, only—forgive me; she has been pursued by many . . . penniless lords."

Monsell flushed. "Bowthorpe, my logging estate in Eviron, produces thousands a year. She will be well provided for."

Efran nodded in a conciliatory manner. "So we have heard," he admitted. "It just will be difficult for my wife to suffer the loss of her dear sister," he murmured, eyes downcast.

"I understand. We will certainly arrange for visits whenever the ladies desire," Monsell said, calming.

"Then I have little choice but to give you my blessing," Efran sighed.

“Thank you, Lord Efran.” Monsell shook his hand vigorously.

After they had all left Adele’s rooms, she continued to sit as she was, thinking. It was good to know that this Monsell was interested enough to make the trip here, and that he insisted on marrying her after having seen her. This gave her some much-needed confirmation of her desirability after childbirth. But. . . .

She knew that she had almost died after delivery; she had felt the life draining out of her. It was a terrifying feeling—the helplessness, the encroaching coldness, the blackness rising to engulf her. But because of the peace around her, the stability, tranquility, and the attention of the doctor, she had not died. In almost any other place she had lived, especially in the uncertainty at the palace at Westford and with Graduliere, she would not have survived.

She scooted down to lie flat and listen to the quiet around her. The protection of these walls was all that enabled her to look forward to another sunrise. She closed her eyes, but could not sleep for thinking about it.

Following Monsell’s successful interview with Adele, it was decided that Efran would send him weekly reports on her condition, weather permitting, and that upon the doctor’s approval, she would be transferred by Abbey bodyguards to Eviron. Monsell and his man were then given an excellent dinner and a nice room for the night before they were to leave for Eviron the following morning, January 17th.

He asked for, and received, permission to visit Adele again that morning, and kiss her cheek before leaving. Efran and Minka saw Monsell and Larcum to the courtyard and out of the gates, waving as they departed.

For a full minute after watching them ride out of view, he and she stood motionless on the front steps. “Have we done it?” Efran whispered. “Will it really happen?”

“We can pray,” Minka muttered.

They went to their quarters for Efran to change out of his dress uniform into his worn, slightly soiled work clothes. Then he joined Minka to watch Bethune with Joshua. She had him lying on his front on a blanket on the floor, and they watched him shakily lift his head to look around. Minka grasped Efran’s arm. “Oh, Bethune! When did he start doing that?”

“Just now,” she said, gesturing. “It’s early yet, but I thought we’d put him down and see what he could do.”

Efran was looking on with a hazy smile. “When can he handle a small bow?”

The two women laughed at him, and he checked Minka to make sure, again, of what he saw in her face. She smiled warmly, seeing the gratitude in his eyes, and she suddenly wondered if it was just a coincidence that Fanny chose that moment to walk in on him. It was too perfect an opportunity for Minka to see what was in his heart.

Efran exhaled in contentment, then said, “As long as Bethune is here, please go tell Estes what we’ve arranged with Monsell. Since I will certainly forget to send updates to him about her condition, I’m counting on you and Estes to do that.”

“Of course,” Minka murmured.

He leaned down to brush his lips to her hair. “I’ll be down on the wall.”

“If you must,” she said unhappily. They had been having discussions about why he felt the need to do such hard menial work.

“I’m almost finished with book four,” he informed her. “And learning a lot. Did you know that the Green Hills used to be called the Poison Greens because they were haunted by demons? Ares and his men cleared them away.”

She regarded him. “I’m sure you’re related to him, somehow.”

He shook his head regretfully. “He had only a small part of Polonti blood.”

“Spiritually then,” she persisted.

“Perhaps. But you are definitely not Nicole.”

She looked hurt. “His wife? Why not?”

“You are not a nice little girl. You bite,” he said, smiling.

“This is true,” she said in satisfaction, reaching up to kiss him. Then they turned to go their separate ways, leaving Bethune to quietly laugh.

Efran walked down the switchback to the area of wall presently under construction. They had settled into a routine now, with generally the same group of men doing the hard physical labor. Connor was not here today, having found love again with Fanny, but the others were mostly the same. Efran nodded to Barr beside him—he was also Polonti, a survivor from Loizeaux’s army that attacked a little over two months ago.

In fact, many of the men working on the wall were Polonti, who showed up here simply because Efran was working here. They took pride in their common heritage with him, and if the lord of the fortress could humble himself to do this essential but back-breaking work, then they could, too.

Efran and Barr picked up where they had left off. Efran laid the layer of mortar, then he and Barr cooperatively placed the stones. These were taken from piles nearby according to their size and shape for specific placement in the wall. As much as they had been working on it, Barr and Efran knew the requirements by heart. The stonemason checked their work occasionally as he walked along the wall in progress, pointing out deficiencies or making suggestions. Efran accepted his critiques without question.

When Barr momentarily left to replenish a certain size of rock in one pile, another man inserted himself in Barr’s place. Laying mortar, Efran eyed him. The man had not ever worked down here, as far as Efran knew; in fact, Efran did not recognize him at all. He had a scruffy beard, squinty eyes, and an inattentive manner. The first few minutes he stood at the wall, it was only to look around. He took note of Efran, particularly his hair (which Detler had recently cut).

When Efran had the mortar laid, he lifted the rock designated for the corner and settled it in place, whereupon the man picked up a random rock to stick it on the wall. Efran looked at him, then removed the rock to its pile, picking up the correct one to settle it in. Noticing that, the man said, “Heh, you’re a picky one.”

Efran glanced at him. “If it’s not done right, we’ll get in trouble.” Barr, coming up to find his place usurped, merely begin working around the stranger on his other side. But he was watching him as well.

In answer to Efran, the new man said, “Ah. Does the lord of the fortress come down to check on you?”

“Usually not till the end of the work day,” Efran said, instinctively cautious. He eyed the coat the man wore. Even on cool days, the men on the wall seldom wore coats, as the work was hard and sweaty. But today was relatively mild. “Who are you?”

“Just a laborer like you,” the man said, placing another random rock. This one Barr removed. The man glanced at him, then said, “Lots of Polonti, I see. Is the lord the only one to wear his hair long?”

“Why do you ask?” Efran said.

He shrugged. “I’ve heard a lot about him; would just like to get a glimpse, is all.”

Barr stepped behind him to pat his own left side, eyeing Efran. Nodding slightly, Efran understood that the stranger was armed.

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Chapter 11

Efran and Barr continued to work on either side of the lurker while he merely looked around. Efran was conflicted, trying to devise a way to get him to expose his purpose without endangering Efran himself or anyone else. But he couldn’t see how.

The stonemason, Ernst, came down the wall in their direction, checking on placement, leveling, and consistent mortaring. He was a Southerner, not Polonti, so as he approached, the stranger beckoned to him and said, “Have you seen Lord Efran today?”

The stonemason scowled at him, gesturing toward Efran as he said, “Idiot, he’s right beside you.”

The man whipped out his knife, wheeling so quickly that Efran had barely time to leap back, receiving a glancing swipe across his chest. But Barr reached out to grab the man’s head and twist, breaking his neck.

Work on the wall halted as men came running over. Ernst gasped, “Lord Efran, I’m sorry!”

Efran shook his head. “You did exactly what I needed done.” Then they all looked down on the dead man.

Barr took the knife from his hand as Efran knelt to go through his pockets. Standing, he said, “He’s carrying nothing else.”

Efran looked up, gesturing to one man, then another. “Goss, you and Stites get a cart and carry him up to Westford to see if anyone can identify him. Say that he had an accident on the wall.” The men saluted, turning to hustle toward the supply area.

Barr then ran a finger along the rip in Efran’s shirt, and the thin red line beneath it. “I had an accident, as well,” Efran said, glancing around. “Minka is not to know about this. But--” He looked at Barr’s hair, then that of the

men around him. “Spread the word that all Polonti are to cut their hair short. That’s the second time someone has told me that the lord of the fortress can be identified by his long hair.”

The men looked at each other’s hair. Then Efran said, “That’s all the excitement for today. Back to the wall.” He and Barr resumed their work unhindered by know-nothings or assassins, and the rest of the men returned to their places along the wall.

Shortly, Goss and Stites pulled up in a one-horse cart, into which they loaded the body. Efran nodded at them as they rode off. After only a few minutes, they were back again. Efran turned in surprise as Goss unloaded another body from the cart: Justinian. He was alive, fortunately, just deathly hung over.

“Found ’im by the side of the road, Cap’n,” Goss said with a two-fingered salute. As Justinian fell into Efran’s arms, Goss climbed back into the cart which Stites redirected north again.

Justinian hung on Efran’s neck, weeping, “Oh, the treachery of women. She has another lover, Erfan—Ervin. She wants me only as her back-up lover.” Efran was trying to get him to stand upright on his feet when Justinian added, “At least I still have Aledale. Allaladel. Addella. You know the one.”

“What?” Efran’s gut coiled. “Justinian? What about Adele?” Efran shook him so that he rattled loosely. Barr, ever helpful, came up with a ladle full of cold water which he threw in Justinian’s face.

The sotted man sputtered, shaking his hair out (as he’d lost his hat) and looked around to say, “Thank you, friend.” Barr grunted, going back to the wall.

Efran held Justinian tightly to keep him upright. “Justinian, you divorced Adele.”

“No, dear brother, I only filed for divorce. I haven’t sighed—signed the final paper,” Justinian corrected him.

“Come,” Efran ordered, and began dragging him toward the notary shop at the far end of the main road.

Because Justinian couldn’t seem to get his feet underneath him when moving, Barr once again approached. Hoisting Justinian under one armpit as Efran hefted the other, the two of them got him transported to Ryal’s shop. After they had hauled him through the doorway to the bell’s strident tinkling, Barr again went back to work.

Justinian fell face down on the counter while Ryal came up behind it. “Hello, Efran. Justinian,” Ryal said mildly.

The despairing man continued to loll on his face on the counter as Efran breathed, “Ryal, please pull out the paperwork for Justinian’s divorce from Adele. We must complete that now.”

“No,” Justinian said into the wood.

“Yes,” Efran hissed.

Ryal went to his book of pending paperwork to pull out one sheet. “Here it is, Efran. It’s been filled out, but not signed. If it’s to be put into effect, Justinian must sign it. I will record it in the book of divorces and send a notice to Adele.”

“Where’s your quill?” Efran said, looking around.

“No,” Justinian said. “I must have someone to love even if she doesn’t love me,” he added petulantly.

“You’ll sign if you want to continue living at the fortress,” Efran said, still looking for the quill.

“Efran,” Ryal said, then shook his head.

“Ryal.” Efran let go of Justinian, who slid off the counter down to the floor. “Lord Monsell has a binding betrothal with Adele that he bought two, three years ago for a thousand royals. He just came to see her, and is demanding that we honor that betrothal.”

“Oh dear. Where is it?” Ryal asked.

“Monsell has it. But Minka, Estes and I have all seen it. It was signed by Monsell, Lightfoot, and Adele,” Efran said.

“Was it registered by a notary?” Ryal asked.

And there was the fatal flaw. Efran stared at him, but could not bring himself to lie. “No, because of Barnby’s negligence. Despite that, I gave Monsell our word that we would honor it.”

“Well, you cannot force Justinian to file for divorce. However, is Adele willing to marry Monsell?” Ryal asked.

Efran’s face cleared. “Yes.”

“Then she can divorce Justinian and be on her way,” Ryal said. Justinian howled in protest from the floor.

“Shut up,” Efran said down at him. “She cannot leave her bed yet, Ryal. Can you bring your book to her room?”

“Certainly, Efran,” Ryal said. Justinian sat on the floor, sobbing.

Ryal began gathering his materials as Efran said, “I will have them bring down a carriage for you.”

He was moving toward the door when Ryal said, “I have one, Efran. Here.” He stepped into the back room to speak to someone, and Efran glimpsed a young man hurrying out the back door to the carriage shed and small stable.

“Who is that?” Efran asked, watching through the rear door as the young man led the stabled horse into the yard to begin hooking up the carriage tack.

“My replacement,” Ryal said, glancing up.

Efran turned, a cold wave washing over him. “No. No, Ryal.” Justinian was still weeping on the floor.

Ryal looked up with a thin sheaf of papers and his portable quill set under arm. “I am training him for the eventual necessity, Efran. We can’t leave the Abbey Lands without a notary. Come now.”

He led out back as Efran followed. When the horse was harnessed to the open carriage, Justinian sprang out the back door to launch himself into it. Efran was unwilling to make the animal pull all four of them up the switchback, even though it was a draft horse. Although he’d rather expel Justinian, he exhaled, “I will walk beside you.”

And he did. Ryal's assistant Mote drove the carriage at a walk up the switchback. Then they unloaded in the courtyard for Justinian to run up the steps ahead of them.

Minka met Efran, Ryal, and Mote in the foyer. "What is it?" she asked. Seeing the dark red line beneath Efran's torn shirt, she also asked, "What happened?"

Efran said, "Nothing. An accident. But Justinian decided he doesn't want to divorce Adele, so she needs to sign for it."

"Oh," she said. "Well, come to her quarters. You men will need to wait in her receiving room while I tell her."

"We'll do that, then," Efran said.

They went down the corridor to knock on Adele's door and be admitted by the maid. There they found the present husband sullenly waiting in her receiving room, as the maid had refused him entrance to her bedroom. But Minka slipped in to talk with her sister.

Shortly, Minka opened the door to say, "You may come in." Justinian pushed his way past her to rush into the room.

Ryal and Efran entered while Mote watched from the doorway. Adele, wearing a robe over her nightdress, was sitting up on pillows. Justinian had flung himself onto her, crying, "My darling! My love! Don't divorce me, my sweet! Have I not longed for you these many years?"

"Sit, Justinian," Efran said, dragging him by his collar to sit him against the wall.

Ryal began unpacking his portable quill set as Efran told Adele, "Justinian refuses to complete the divorce application, so Ryal has brought the necessary form for you to sign. Shut up, Justinian," Efran added, as he was still wailing from the floor.

"How are you feeling, Adele?" Ryal asked, evaluating her.

"Better, thank you, Ryal," she said.

"I am very glad to hear that." He placed the portable writing table across her lap. "Here is the application for divorce. As the applicant, you sign here." He handed her the quill.

Justinian issued another wracked cry, and Efran said through gritted teeth, "I will remove you from the room unless you quiet down."

Adele said, "That's not necessary, Efran. I'm not signing."

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Chapter 12

There was a sudden stillness in the room, then Justinian launched himself from the floor to fall on his knees by Adele's bed and throw his arms around her. "My darling! My angel! My only love!"

Efran was frozen in place, his lips parted in shock. Glancing at him, Minka asked Adele, "Why don't you want to marry Monsell? He's very wealthy and madly in love with you."

"I don't want to leave. I feel safe here," Adele whispered, not looking at Efran.

Justinian was still blubbering but Efran swallowed and said, "You signed a binding betrothal, Adele. You were two years past your majority."

"I did what Father told me to do. But I don't want to marry him and I don't want to leave," she said. Ryal quietly began packing up his materials.

"Monsell will attack us to enforce his right to have you," Efran murmured.

Ryal paused beside him. "If it was never registered, he has no legal standing to demand enforcement. However, it may fall to you to repay him the thousand royals."

Efran nodded, but said, "Even if I do that, the money may be less of an issue than the insult."

Ryal wryly acknowledged that, then patted his shoulder and turned out of the room. Mote accompanied him.

Efran and Minka remained silent while Justinian continued to cuddle Adele from the floor. Then Efran sighed and wiped his mouth. Starting toward the door, he paused to see if Minka were coming. She went out before him, and he followed.

Walking down the corridor, he glanced into the library to see on display the sword that Commander Ares, at the head of the Green Regiment, had used in the desperate defense of Westford against Qarqarian invaders. At the cost of many young lives, that defense had been successful, and Efran often thought of it in times of stress. He thought of it now.

As they were walking toward their quarters, she said, "I am coming with you to talk to Monsell."

"Not for the world," he said, turning abruptly toward her.

"You must let me," said said, drawing up to him. "You can only offer him his thousand royals back. I can make him understand."

Breathing tightly, he studied her, then lifted his face to the ceiling. "Yes, you could, but I can't risk you."

She asked, "Would I be safer here when he attacks because he doesn't understand?"

Efran groaned, then wrapped his arms around her to press his face in her hair, whispering, "My darling. My angel. My only love." Then he raised his face in bewildered disdain. "Did—did I just repeat Justinian's blathering?"

“Is that wrong?” she asked. “He adores her as I adore you.” And when he looked in her face and saw it, he lifted her to press his mouth to hers. So maids and soldiers had to go around them in the corridor until Efran calmed down.

It took several days for Efran, Estes and Minka to decide how to address the dilemma, and especially how to raise the money to pay back Monsell’s thousand royals. Efran refused to pilfer their available monies and cripple the operation of the fortress. Instead, he wanted to sell something from the Treasury. So he asked Estes, “Do you know anyone—*anyone*—who can afford to pay us for several pieces?”

“Possibly,” Estes hedged. “He is Polonti, a great warlord, and . . . a criminal.”

“Aren’t we all?” Efran asked, and Minka could barely restrain her laughter.

Without laughing, Estes added, “His name is Awfyn. He is a giant.”

Efran stared at him. “This is a real person? I’ve heard of him, but always thought it was a legend.”

“No, he is real, though he keeps himself and his band well-hidden. Their camp is supposedly among the oaks east of Eviron, though no one knows for certain. I would have to find a go-between, and even then, he would probably know where the pieces came from. Still, he is the first and only possibility I can imagine for that much money,” Estes mused. “He won’t bother with silver, only items of pure gold. And he does business only with Polonti.”

“Set up your contact, then. I can give you a small piece as a sample of the quality of our goods. If you can hint that it was found by treasure hunters digging in the old cemetery, that would help. And cut your hair,” Efran said.

“I can do all of that except cut my hair. Kelsey wants to see what it looks like long,” Estes said.

Efran objected, “There is at least one assassin looking for me on the basis of my long hair. I can afford to be wounded; I cannot afford to lose you.” (Several days ago, Goss and Stites had returned from hauling the dead would-be assassin to Westford. No one would claim him, so they dumped his body in the common grave on the way back.)

“I’m sorry, Efran; I can’t cut it yet,” Estes said.

Efran was silent a moment. “Are you telling me that Kelsey’s request takes precedence over my instructions?”

“Just this once,” Estes said.

Efran looked at Minka, who was smiling at him. He said reluctantly, “Then we all have to grow out our hair. Are you all right with that?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said, looking at his lips, and his heart rate shot up. Again. Still.

So Efran took Minka to the Treasury where she selected a diamond and emerald bracelet of gold both for an appraisal and as a token of the wealth they possessed. To expose the fact of the Abbey Treasury to anyone was a severe blow to their security, but Efran could not see how to work it otherwise. He gave the bracelet to Estes to pass along to his contact, and they waited.

On January 21st, Estes told Efran that Awfyn had agreed to buy the bracelet for 350 royals. Efran sagged at the disappointing price. “Is that reasonable?” he asked Estes.

Estes raised his shoulders. “Who knows? The problem with a treasury is finding a buyer when you need to liquidate it. I would take his offer.”

Efran reluctantly agreed. “When we receive payment for that, we will offer something else—something bigger.”

It was arranged for Estes and a Polonti bodyguard to pick up the money for the bracelet at the Porterhouse Inn in Westford two days later. At the same time, he would offer Awfyn a pair of golden cups (without their saucers and spoons). Meanwhile, Efran sent the promised messengers to Monsell, informing him that Adele had suffered a minor setback and was still bedridden.

When Estes and his bodyguard of four Polonti set out for the Porterhouse Inn on January 23rd—a cold and blustery day—Efran put on his old, worn work clothes to go work on the wall, as he must have something to occupy himself. Although it was not nearly as cold on the Lands as it was in Westford, hardly anyone else was willing to work on the wall in this weather; Barr, who would have, had been chosen for the bodyguard. But Krall, another Polonti, came to work beside the Captain.

(During bad weather, if Pia did not come inside on her own, Efran sent Polonti out to the woods to find her and bring her inside. So she asked for a small house to be built for her and her animal friends to use during storms, and this Efran permitted. Regardless, she was to have a Polonti bodyguard constantly.)

When, after a few hours on the wall, Efran saw Estes’ party returning, he hauled Krall up to the fortress. Efran bathed before meeting Estes, and Minka put his work clothes firmly into the laundry basket.

Then Estes presented Efran the leather pouches containing 350 royals, which had been counted in Estes’ presence. “In two days we will receive in the same manner whatever Awfyn will pay for the cups,” Estes told him.

Efran nodded. “So it must be. I expect—hope--that it will be enough for us to make up the difference from the funds we have on hand.”

Estes agreed. Regarding him, Efran was disturbed that Estes’ hair was now so much longer than everyone else’s, as they had all obeyed Efran’s initial order to cut their hair. He wondered if Estes had told Kelsey the reason Efran wanted his hair cut.

Muttering to himself, Efran lay on his back on the receiving-room floor of his quarters and put Joshua on his chest to watch him struggle to lift up. “Again, my machinations have sprung back to hit me in the face.”

Minka, watching them from the daybed, asked, “How so?”

“If I hadn’t attempted to use the betrothal to get rid of Adele, we wouldn’t be faced with paying out a thousand royals,” Efran groused.

“I disagree. That would have come due at some point, since Adele refuses to honor it. And there is no one who could pay but you,” she said.

Efran turned his head toward her. After thinking it over, he said, “You’re right.” She smiled at him, and he sighed in contentment. It was still there.

Two days later, on January 25th, Estes and a bodyguard set out again for the Porterhouse Inn. The weather was mild at the Abbey Lands, but bitter cold in Westford, so they wore heavy coats. Justinian had not returned to Westford since arriving at the Abbey a week ago; he had dedicated himself to nursing Adele back to health. He sat with her and tended her much as Efran had done with Minka when she had the fever (before they were married) nine months ago.

Estes returned with a payment of 600 royals for the cups. Again, they were considerably undervalued, but there was no other buyer for them, period. And with the 350 royals from the purchase of the bracelet, they could easily make up the difference to 1,000 from what they had on hand.

So the following day, Efran sent a messenger to Lord Monsell to tell him to expect a visit from Lord Efran and Lady Minka in two days.

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Chapter 13

The night before Efran and Minka were to leave for Monsell's estate with the thousand royals, Efran climbed out of bed very quietly to go to the keep. He stood before the large crucifix—a freestanding, painted wooden sculpture almost ten feet tall, depicting the rough cross and the Crucified suffering on it. Efran knew there was nothing supernatural in the wood; it was not a totem or object of worship. But it was an effective reminder of what the Sufferer had endured, and when Efran needed to pray, this is what he needed to see.

The crucifix was barely visible in the darkness of the keep, but Efran knew it well enough to see its detail in the dim moonlight from the windows above. "God of heaven," he whispered, "Protector of us all . . . this is a trip I must make to pay a debt, but my Minka goes for no reason but her love of me. I beg You, mighty God, whatever You allow to befall me, let my wife come home to my son. I beg You—spare my Minka as You spared Joshua, for no other reason than Your great goodness. God of heaven . . . help us."

He turned away, feeling his heart constrict: there was evil underfoot.

As it happened, scouts who checked their route to Eviron the following morning reported a blustery, wet snowfall miles east of Westford. This Efran would not allow Minka to travel in, so their trip was delayed for two days. Finally, on January 30th, the weather cleared sufficiently for them to set out. In normal conditions, the trip would take no more than half a day, but riding through snow could double the travel time. Stopping along the way in such conditions was impossible.

Twenty men accompanied them, each bearing a pouch of fifty royals, as well as bow, quiver and sword. Estes was left behind in charge of the Fortress during their absence. So the group set out to ride north to Westford, and then northeast, skirting Willowring Lake, to Eviron. They rode at a steady lope, with Efran glancing repeatedly at Minka. She had become a rather accomplished rider since he had saddled her first horse at the palace stables, but nothing would reassure him as much as her staying home.

They did stop for a break at the southeastern edge of the lake to eat and stretch their legs. Minka especially needed to walk, though she didn't want to eat until Efran practically forced one of Madea's fruit rolls on her. He refitted the hood of her lambswool cloak on her head, and she burrowed her reddened cheeks in his coat. "Winter riding is fun for the first mile or so—after that, not so much," he murmured.

“I just want to get this done,” she said. “Thank you for letting me come. I needed to, you see,” she said.

“Yes, I see. It won’t be too much longer.” He covered her gloved hands with his, then helped her remount. He did not see her pause in alarm at his face. It took her a moment to recognize his expression, but it was one of resignation. He set his face toward Eviron with little hope that a thousand royals would placate Monsell for the slap in the face that was forthcoming.

Soon, the trees came into view—just a few saplings at first, then more and larger, and the road began to cut through tall oaks, spaced by judicious harvesting. Efran appreciated that Monsell took care to preserve his source of wealth. And the road from here to Eviron was paved.

After another hour of riding, they heard the calls of the Eviron sentries to each other, and an honor guard of ten rode out to escort them to Bowthorpe, Monsell’s estate. Efran rode in the lead, firmly gesturing her to drop behind him, which she did. Immediately she was enveloped by their Abbey contingent.

All riders drew into the courtyard of Bowthorpe, a beautiful, whitewashed brick and stone compound amid towering oaks. The Abbey visitors dismounted; after lifting Minka down, Efran looked back to make sure his twenty were accounted for and carrying their pouches. Looking at his rigid face, Minka wondered what he knew. All he knew, however, was how a proud man reacted to an insult.

In the foyer of the house, Efran pointed at his feet, and his riders ran up to place the pouches before him in orderly rows. As they were doing this, Monsell entered the foyer. “Well, Lord Efran, finally! We have been anxiously awaiting your arrival. . . . What is this?” He was looking at the rows of pouches.

Efran bowed, as did all those with him. Minka, slightly behind him to his right, curtsied deeply. Then Efran said, “Forgive our lateness, Lord Monsell; the snow did not permit our riding until today. However, we are here.”

He took a breath while Monsell watched in slight bemusement. He saw her, then saw who was not there. Minka saw the lines of men forming inconspicuously behind the lord of Eviron. Then Efran leapt into the void: “I have returned your thousand royals.”

Monsell blinked, his expression unchanged. “Why?”

“Adele has relapsed. Due to the—difficulties she has experienced since the betrothal, she has become fearful and reluctant to move. Those who know better than I insist that she should not be forced to fulfill the agreement she made three years ago. I myself believe that if she were given the opportunity to know you better, she would be happy to come. But for now . . . the agreement is off,” Efran said.

Monsell’s face had been hardening with each word, and Minka watched his eyes grow cold and his lips tight. Monsell lifted a hand briefly to his forehead, then said, “Well. I am most distressed to hear of her reluctance now, after receiving me so graciously earlier. However, we have a binding agreement.”

“That is my view,” Efran said, “which is why I returned your payment. But a local notary tells me that without registration, the betrothal is void.”

“For which I can thank my friend Barnby,” Monsell said, smiling bitterly. “But your word was that it was good.”

Efran agreed, “In my opinion, it was. But I am not the one betrothed to you. She, irrespective of your great worth, is unreasonably reluctant, and . . . I cannot force her.”

Here Monsell laughed. "Of course you can, being lord of the fortress."

"But being husband of her sister, I won't," Efran said baldly.

Monsell lowered his head, smiling, and glanced up at his man Larcum on his right. Efran tensed at the silent signal. "So this is your choice," Monsell said, without looking at Efran.

"No, not at all," Efran said. "But it is my unhappy decision."

Monsell looked at him, then. "What an articulate man you are, Lord Efran. You would almost have me believe that you had nothing to do with this fiasco."

At this, Efran actually laughed a little. "I would thank you kindly if you did. 'Fiasco' is an excellent description."

Monsell then looked at Minka, and Efran's smile vanished. Monsell murmured, "And have you brought your lovely wife to help persuade me of your innocence in the matter?"

Minka opened her mouth but Efran said, "The lady desired to come because she witnessed her sister's distress, and wished to testify that it was not caused by you."

Monsell's eyes wandered away from her to the Abbey riders lined up behind Efran. "And you've brought so many men."

Efran said, "Only those needed to carry your gold, Lord Monsell."

Monsell straightened, clasping his hands behind his back. "Well. What shall we do, then? Shake hands and say farewell?" Efran's men were glancing at the loggers who were quietly entering the foyer behind them. Efran suddenly noticed that Larcum had disappeared. "*Unhappily*, that does not suit me," Monsell said, mocking Efran with the word.

"So here is my unhappy decision," Monsell said, leveling his gaze on Efran, who returned it. "Your men may return to your fortress to collect Adele and bring her here as we agreed. Because I am not an evil man, I will permit your wife to return, as well. But you yourself will remain my guest."

It required only a flick of his eyes for his men to surround the Abbey riders and begin forcing them out. Two others grabbed Efran's arms as he turned toward Minka.

"Oh! One more point, especially to the Lady Minka," Monsell added, and everyone else stilled. To her, he said, "Your lord will be fed well today. Tomorrow, he will receive bread and water. After that, there will be nothing given him until your sister appears in my house. Now, who do you love the more?"

As Efran was surrounded, he turned back to Gabriel to say, "Don't." Then he was hauled away.

The Abbey riders collected around Minka to ensure that no hands touched her as they were collectively expelled to the courtyard in mid-afternoon, where their horses remained. There was a seconds-long conference among the Landers while Monsell's men opened the gates of Bowthorpe, then Gabriel gestured for Minka to be lifted up to sit in front of him on his saddle.

She twisted to look at him, and he said, "Forgive me, Lady Minka, but we are going to ride hard to the fortress

and cannot afford losing you along the way.” She nodded, bracing, and the horse they were on lurched into violent motion. She gasped, clutching Gabriel’s arms.

But soon she settled into the rhythm as they flew almost directly into the sinking afternoon sun. Gabriel reached forward to yank her hood down over her face, protecting her from the blast of wind. She lowered her head further from the glare. Freed from the necessity of guiding the horse, or even staying on by herself, she focused on what to do. And it required only a moment to apprehend the plan that was presented to her, fully formed. This plan she would implement upon their return to the Abbey.

After having taken off his coat, Efran sat back on the bed, looking around the small room. It was comfortable--comparable, in fact, to the room in which he had housed Justinian after kidnapping him in the middle of the night. And this window was certainly too small for a grown man to squeeze through.

He lay back on the pillow. He was glad that Monsell had the decency to let Minka go, but this farce of holding him hostage for Adele would not play out well. Efran trusted Gabriel to obey his command not to attempt an assault on Bowthorpe to rescue him, as the Abbey had only a fraction of the men that Monsell’s logging estate employed. And even should Efran’s men penetrate Monsell’s defenses, they’d have to search an unfamiliar house to find him. Efran snorted at the likely outcome of *that*.

Instead, he expected something devious in response—Efran almost smiled contemplating what Minka would suggest. The most likely outcome of anyone’s plan would be that after some discomfort on Efran’s part, Monsell would realize that there were better ways to motivate Adele to come. But it would take time and effort on Monsell’s part to convince her to do that. Was he so proud that he couldn’t court a beautiful woman?

The door to his room opened for Monsell to come in while Larcum stood in the doorway. Watching, Efran thought it a sign of weakness that Monsell had a bodyguard in his own estate. Efran sat up to say, “My friend, it’s entirely in your power to get Adele to come. All you have to do is pay attention to her. Court her. Charm her. Then she’ll follow you willingly here.”

“As she followed you to the fortress?” Monsell asked. “With you being the father of her child.”

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Chapter 14

Efran said nothing at first. He only sat back, regarding Monsell with a half-smile. It was enough to cause a shade of doubt to appear on his face. He glanced at his bodyguard, who shifted uneasily—perhaps being the source of that information. So Efran said, “It’s amazing what you’ll hear about me, including that I wear my hair long.”

Several seconds passed in silence, then Efran said, “I’m interested in an alliance with you that would be profitable to both of us, Monsell. We can find a better way to persuade Adele to come to you.”

“I’m not interested in her any more,” he said dismissively.

Efran blinked, then began to get up. “Excellent. You have your thousand royals back. I assume my horse is still here?”

“You’re not leaving yet,” Monsell said.

Efran sat back. “Why not?”

“I have a friend who is interested in you,” Monsell said.

“Fine. Send him to the Abbey fortress. I have the best cook on the Southern Continent,” Efran replied, glancing indifferently to the window.

At Monsell’s silence, Efran looked back at him. “Is your friend the one who has been sending assassins after me? Or are you?”

Monsell paused, then said, “I committed a thousand royals for Adele’s betrothal, but didn’t ever get around to paying it.”

Efran sat back, laughing. “That was an excellent sting, Monsell.” Efran considered him neither lord nor friend at this point.

“But the money will be put to good use,” Monsell said, studying him.

“Why should you pay someone to kill me when you have a decent set of hands right here?” Efran asked, gesturing to Larcum.

“Logging is so expensive, and the price of timber has dropped,” Monsell said. Efran waited to hear more, and Monsell went on, “I can’t afford to pay my men anymore. But now I have the Abbey Treasury right in front of me.”

Efran shook his head. “Legends live on.”

“A diamond and emerald bracelet says it’s real,” Monsell countered.

Efran’s eyes flicked up. One of Estes’ contacts with Awfyn was an enemy. Or—Awfyn himself was.

As the moon was rising in the east, twenty exhausted horses with twenty-one riders loped heavily down the old stone bridge toward the Abbey Lands. The gate sentries high on the hilltop saw them start up the switchback, and sent an urgent message to Estes. So by the time they rode past the open gates into the courtyard, Estes was waiting on the steps.

The first riders to dismount told him immediately of Efran’s detainment. As he was absorbing this, Minka came up to demand, “Estes, come with me. We have much to do tonight.” And she flounced into the foyer.

The riders stared after her; following a brief pause, Estes trailed her to the door of the quarters she shared with Efran. She said, “I need something to eat, then we have some people to see. Can you get me something from the kitchen? I’ll be right back.” She went into her quarters and shut the door. Estes blinked several times, then went to the kitchen.

While he was gone and the men were milling in the foyer, Minka emerged from her quarters to scan them. “DeWitt, come with me,” she said, turning down the corridor. And he followed her into the library. The men glanced questioningly at each other, but waited for Estes to return from the kitchen.

On his way back with a plate of leftovers from dinner, he was stopped by Gabriel before he ever got to Minka's door. "We want to gather men to ride back to Bowthorpe, sir."

Estes paused. "Hold off, Gabriel. Lady Minka has something in mind."

Gabriel began tightly, "Sir, she's a young girl, with no experience in fighting or--"

"I know," Estes said. "But she outranks both of us. Come and listen; we'll see what she wants to do."

With Gabriel at his side, Estes turned to the Captain's quarters, but the men informed him that she was not there. While Estes stood in the corridor holding the plate, more men came up demanding to ride, but Estes would not give them permission and they were not defiant enough to leave without it.

Then they saw her emerge from the library, followed by DeWitt carrying a heavy gold ewer. Gasping, Estes ran up to give her the plate while DeWitt set the ewer before him. Upwards of 30 men gathered around them to listen as Estes said, "Minka, the men want to ride back to Bowthorpe immediately."

Minka started eating. In between forkfuls, she looked at them and said, "Efran told you not to."

Estes swiftly glanced at them, especially Gabriel. They looked down, or around, shaking their heads, even though they knew she was right. Finishing half the plate, she handed it to one of the men and said, "However, that doesn't mean we can't do anything. Estes, I want your contact to take me to Awfyn. Tonight."

"Why?" Estes whispered, afraid that he already knew.

"I am going to pay him a great deal to rob Monsell of my husband. Don't tell me I can't; don't tell me you won't help me, Estes," she said firmly. The men studied her.

He looked at her dubiously. "We can approach him, but I don't know what he'll do, Minka. I don't know if he's even sane."

Quietly intent, she told him, "The idea came to me the moment I opened my heart to pray for him, Estes. I prayed the whole ride back. If I'm mistaken, I will accept the consequences. But I will do everything I know to free him." A few of the men lowered their heads.

"Efran will take me apart," Estes observed. One of the men laughed at the likelihood. Others began insisting that they should be the ones to steal the Captain back.

Almost angrily, she said, "I will remind you *all* that I am Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands."

That silenced them, but Estes cracked a smile. "What is the ewer for?"

"A down payment. Oh, and take royals to pay your contacts," she replied. He raised his eyebrows, nodding, while she went briefly into her quarters to use the garderobe.

The men looked dissatisfied with this plan, but Estes shut them up: "We follow orders or we are nothing more than a band of outlaws. The Captain said no; his Lady has an alternative which we will investigate. That is *my* order. Now bring me wraps for this thing." Subdued, they did.

Estes wrapped the precious ewer in cloths, then put it in a canvas bag. The night was clear and bright, but probably cold where they were going, so Minka kept her wool cloak on. Once Estes was ready, they sent to the stables for fresh horses, and he talked her into taking two bodyguards, both Polonti: Goss and Krall.

Surrounded by watchful men, the four gathered in the front courtyard with fresh horses a few hours before midnight. Krall had the drawstring of the canvas bag draped over his shoulder. "Where do we go, Estes?" Minka asked.

"The two contacts I know are Kane the miller and Gotha the bowyer," he said, fastening his coat. He had a knife under it.

"Which one is closer?" Minka asked.

"Gotha is in Westford but Kane is at the new mill here," Estes said, nodding west to the Passage, just a few minutes away.

"To the mill, then," she said, mounting in a sweep of her riding skirt, and the men smiled to themselves. No one knew that it was good they decided to go to the mill, because Gotha the bowyer was not in Westford at the moment; he had already arrived at Bowthorpe.

Monsell had a feeling he shouldn't have mentioned the jeweled bracelet to Efran. Although it was satisfying to see his reaction, Monsell wasn't sure what he might make of the information. So Monsell locked him in the room and went to wait for Gotha, who had given him that crucial bit of knowledge.

The bowyer arrived not long afterward, and they sat in Bowthorpe's dining hall to eat and talk. "Oh," Monsell told the maid, "take a plate to our visitor, as I promised. But be sure to take a couple of men with you."

"Yes, my lord," she murmured, moving off.

Monsell turned back to Gotha. "Now that we know that the Abbey does have a Treasury, how do we get in?"

"Awfyn will do that; he'll just walk over whatever defense they have," Gotha said, slurping his soup.

"Have you told him about it?" Monsell asked.

"I will, when we find out where it is," Gotha said. "Where's the meat? This is just soup."

"There's plenty of meat in it," Monsell huffed. "You just got a bad ladleful."

Gotha pushed the bowl away. "Then get me a better ladleful."

"Wait till the girl gets back. Now tell me how to get Efran to tell us where it is," Monsell said.

"We hurt him," Gotha said with a disparaging glance at his ignorance. Then he smiled wistfully. "I like to hurt them. It feels so good to hear them scream."

Monsell stood. "Get on with it, then."

Gotha stopped smiling. "I eat first. It's hard work, getting them to scream good and long. I need nourishment."

Monsell sat back down impatiently. “The girl will be back shortly.”

Efran watched as the girl put his bowl of soup on the small table by the bed. She glanced back at the men standing at the door looking bored, then inched a small scrap of paper toward him. On it was scrawled, “Can yu get me oot ov heer?”

He read it, then looked up and nodded minutely. She smiled in fearful hope before turning out of the room. One of the men shut and locked the door behind him.

Efran stuck the scrap in his mouth to chew it good and spit it out. Then he turned his attention to the soup, as he was hungry. It tasted much like the paper scrap, but it did have a lot of nice lean bits of meat.

When he was done with that, he crouched to investigate the lock on the door.

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Chapter 15

Estes had to knock loudly on the mill door for several minutes before Kane finally opened it, muttering, “What. Estes? What is it? Decent people are asleep right now.” He glanced uneasily at the two silent men behind him, not even seeing the girl.

“We need you, Kane,” Estes said, taking his hand to slap a royal in it.

Kane woke up. “Whatever it is, I need two of these.”

Estes gave him another, then said, “Captain Efran is being held prisoner at Bowthorpe, and the Lady Minka wants Awfyn to get him out. She will pay him royally.”

Kane shot a look at the young girl standing beside Estes. “I’ll give him the message.”

Estes opened his mouth but Minka said, “That’s not soon enough. I want to see Awfyn tonight. He will want the down payment I have to give him.”

Kane hedged, “Well, I have--”

Minka stuck her hand in Estes’ pocket to grab a fistful of royals and slap them into Kane’s hand along with the two already there. “Take us now,” she demanded.

He bent to pick up a few dropped royals. “Let me get my coat and shoes,” he said, leaving the door ajar while he stepped away.

He came out immediately thereafter, hopping on one shod foot as he pulled his remaining shoe on the other. “Let me get Gerdie,” he said, motioning, then the four had to wait while he coaxed out his donkey. “She’s coming. She’s good,” he argued to the skeptical faces around him. “She doesn’t spook in the trees like most horses do,” he said defensively.

That was relevant, because once they had crossed the new bridge over the Passage, they were engulfed by large old trees. The horses were indeed skittish at unfamiliar night sounds among the deep shadows. As they rode, Kane periodically gave out the whistles, trills and gurgles of a nightingale which Minka found most impressive. Had she not been right here with him, she would have thought it a real bird.

It was so dark among the trees that the horses brushed against the surrounding foliage or each other, which made them all the louder. Being able to see nothing in front of them, the riders merely followed the sedate donkey.

When they heard a frog croaking, Kane stopped and looked back. "Your men must wait here. Estes, you and the lady dismount and follow me."

As they did so, she said, "The bag, Estes."

"I have it, Minka," he said softly. They couldn't even see each other, so she held his hand, and he gripped hers. Then they followed Kane by sound alone.

Several hours earlier at Bowthorpe, Gotha was finishing a bowl of soup outrageously lacking in meat. But at least he had entertainment to look forward to. "There, you're done," Monsell said. "Now what have you got to make him hurt?"

"Oh, here's my kit." Gotha drew a leather pocketbook from inside his jacket and opened it up. Monsell leaned forward to look at various tools in the padded pockets of the case. "This," he said, drawing one out, "is good for lancing the eyeballs. Does that make them scream deliciously! And then it blinds them as well. So I don't use it on both eyes until the end, so they can see at least with one eye what's coming next."

He put that one back in its particular place in his pocketbook before drawing out another instrument. "Now this one is best for pulling out the fingernails. You see the little ridges on the inside? That grips well enough so that no matter how hard they thrash--"

"Yes, yes, I get the idea," Monsell said, looking a little green. "I'm glad you enjoy hearing them scream, but we must remember that the point is to make him tell us where the Treasury is."

"I know," Gotha said tiredly. Sometimes it was discouraging how little his clients appreciated his work. Carefully reinserting the tool in its place and closing the pocketbook gently, Gotha stood. "Where is the subject?"

"This way." Monsell got up to escort his hired interrogator to an inner corridor. They stopped at a closed door. Monsell looked momentarily confused, murmuring, "Was it this corridor or the next?" Gotha demonstrated signs of impatience, so Monsell knocked on the door.

Gotha looked at him sharply. "Is he not confined?"

Monsell tried the handle, and found it locked. "Yes," he confirmed.

"Well—have you not got a key?" Gotha demanded.

"The guards do," Monsell said, looking around. Not seeing the guards anywhere, he knocked forcefully. "Who's in there?"

There was some shuffling and banging heard, then a moment later one man opened the door with his key. He looked out at them ruefully, holding his sleeve to his bloody nose. Gotha and Monsell looked past him to a second man lying across the bed, out cold. "You lost him," Monsell said critically.

"He can't bake it anywhere," the man said around his broken nose. "House is locked up; horses are locked up, and a hundred ben in the barracks."

"Well, it's a good thing he was in a locked room, then," Gotha said sharply.

"Go find him," Monsell ordered the man. "Get all the men out of the barracks to look for him."

In the kitchen, a lower cabinet door slowly creaked open. A large cabinet nearby said, "Shh! Stay there."

The girl peeked out, whispering, "Can I come in there with you?"

"No. There's not room," he said.

"I can fit," she argued. "I'm afraid I'll go to sleep."

"I'll wake you. We can't do anything until dark," he said.

"You'll wake me? Promise?" she said anxiously.

"If you don't get us caught. Shut the door and be quiet," he said impatiently.

Sighing, the cabinet door closed again.

Kane opened a door in what looked like a stand of trees so that Estes and Minka could enter a furnished room with a small fireplace in the center. They blinked at the faces that turned to them from around the fireplace, then a tree on the far side of the room moved. The visitors looked toward it.

It was not a tree. It was a man, an unbelievably large man at least seven feet tall, around 400 pounds. As the visitors' eyes adjusted to the firelight, they saw a Polonti with a deeply scarred face and missing eye. His hair flowed down past his shoulders, which were the size of boulders. He was regarding them in amusement. Then he said in a deep, rumbling voice, "Estes. I know you. I do not know the little girl."

That awakened Minka from her momentary shock. Stepping toward him, she said, "Awfyn, I am Lady Minka of the Abbey Fortress. Monsell has locked up my husband, Lord Efran, at Bowthorpe. I want you to go get him out, for which I will pay you richly. Here is my down payment. Estes?"

Estes set his bundle on the ground to strip off the sack and the wrappings, then the golden ewer shone out in the dark hut like a beacon. Some of the men sitting around caught their breath. Awfyn looked down at the ewer, then picked it up with one hand. "This is pure gold," he said.

"Yes," Minka said. "And when you bring my husband whole to the Abbey Fortress, I will give you a tray of gold that is as long as the ewer and twice as wide. But you must go tonight. Now."

Awfyn set the ewer down, then stepped forward to bend halfway down and look in her face. She looked him in the eye without a quiver. He straightened, smiling. "You are Captain Efran's Chataine."

"Yes," she said, smiling as well. "And I love him more than anything. I want him back. Tonight."

He gestured to his men. "Come then. The Lady Minka has ordered the return of her Captain, so we must go." They sprang to their feet, gathering gear, and he turned back to her. Leaning down again, he said, "Have the tray ready."

"Bring him back *whole*," she returned.

Efran, not realizing how tired he was, did fall asleep, even when men came tromping through the kitchen to search it. But they did not bother searching any place so obvious as large, low cabinets; they just looked to see that no one was standing around. They were in and out, and Efran slept while the light faded. In fact, he slept a long time.

Finally, he heard something that startled him awake. Not remembering at first where he was, he opened the cabinet door with a bang and crawled out. He looked around in the gloom, seeing torchlight from the foyer beyond. He started out, then remembered the maid in the neighboring cabinet. She was probably safer there, but since he promised to wake her, he opened her cabinet to see if she were still there. She was, and she was also asleep.

"Girl," he whispered. "Girl." He shook her lightly on her shoulder, and she came around. "What is your name?" he whispered.

"Tera," she murmured, struggling awake.

"Tera, you might be safer there, but I'm going out," he said. She immediately scrambled out of the cabinet.

Standing, Efran heard what had awakened him. A rumbling voice shouted, "Captain Efran!" It was so loud and deep, it echoed through the whole house.

Wondering, Efran walked out of the kitchen into the foyer; Tera shrank behind the kitchen door. A score of men holding torches turned toward him; more men were gathered beyond them. And in the midst of them, the giant turned to see his objective enter the foyer and take his stand. "I am Efran." He looked at the huge man before him. "And you are Awfyn." Efran immediately thought that as Awfyn was here, he was probably the source of the leak to Monsell about the bracelet.

"Yes, and I have been sent for you," Awfyn said, advancing.

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Chapter 16

Efran braced himself to fight. Recognizing that, several of Awfyn's men leapt forward to correct the misunderstanding before Minka's Captain could get himself hurt. Seeing only enemies converging, Efran jumped onto a table to calculate his next move.

Then Monsell, with Gotha beside him, appeared on the edge of his men who had been searching for the Captain all night long. By this time, they were convinced that he had slipped out of the house to hide in one of the outbuildings. Now they reentered the foyer, gathering around the dangerous newcomers just to watch. None of the loggers had any intention of challenging the giant or his band.

Not looking carefully at all the men in the unreliable torchlight, Monsell apparently believed they were all his, except the one standing on the table. Monsell said in satisfaction, "There you are! We have work to do on you, friend Efran."

Efran's head snapped toward him, as did many others. Then Efran peered at the man beside Monsell. "You are the bowyer. What are you doing here?" Efran demanded. Gotha was a Southerner. Awfyn's crew looked at him in recognition.

Gotha smiled. "I am here to make you tell us all about your Treasury, my good man. And before that, to hear you scream," he said lustfully.

Before Efran had time to do more than look to God in his heart, the pillar in the foyer moved. All eyes locked on him as he advanced toward the bowyer. Seeing him for the first time, Gotha startled. "Awfyn! It's—good that you're here, my friend. You will have your choice of, oh, half the treasures from the Abbey, which I alone can give you--"

Awfyn reached out with one hand to grasp Gotha's head and crush it like a grape. Numerous men winced and looked away as he shook the gory residue from his hand and turned to Monsell.

Backing away, Monsell cried, "Take him! Take whatever you want! Just leave!"

It dawned on Efran that Awfyn was probably here to rob Monsell. To lay claim to his own property as a fellow Polonti, Efran demanded, "I want my thousand royals back."

Awfyn looked at Efran, then looked down at Monsell to utter, "Where is his money?"

"In my work room! Right there! Go get the pouches!" he shouted to the men around him. In panicked unity, eight or ten of them rushed out, then brought the pouches to the foyer. Efran climbed down from the table to count them.

"Good, they're all here. Get me a wagon. And my horse," Efran instructed without knowing who here would obey him.

Monsell's men looked to their lord, and he earnestly waved them out. So the groups divided: Monsell's men surged to the torchlit stableyard while Awfyn's brigands scattered through the house. Efran, looking around, went to the kitchen to find Tera crouched behind the door. "It's all right. You can come out now. We're going home."

He offered his hand and she scrambled up. By the time they got to the front door, he had let go of her hand. But it was cold outside, so he went back to the foyer to find Monsell and demand, "Get my coat, and another for Tera. She is leaving."

In shock, Monsell gestured to Larcum beside him. Not knowing what else to do, Larcum went to Monsell's room for coats and blankets, which he brought out in an armload.

Meanwhile, directed by Awfyn, the loggers had brought to the courtyard Efran's and Minka's horses and two logging wagons. Efran quickly laid claim to his own horse. The brigands hitched up two of Monsell's logging horses to one of the wagons, then loaded it with Efran's thousand royals. Minka's horse was tethered to the rear of that cart, to trot along behind it.

The second wagon they loaded with whatever they found in the house that took their fancy, as Monsell had offered, and hitched up another two of his horses to pull it. Tera, bundled up, was placed in the second wagon.

One of Awfyn's men sat in the driver's seat of the wagon with the Abbey's gold. Efran paused at that, then decided it was acceptable as long as the wagon accompanied him to the fortress. Instead of bringing Efran his own coat, Larcum had brought his lord's ermine coat, so Efran put it on. It was too small around the chest, but it was better than nothing. Glancing up at the moon, he saw that sunrise was only a few hours away.

Awfyn, his band, Efran and Tera all set out together without Efran's knowing why. Tera, swaddled in a too-large coat, tried to stay awake, but soon nodded off on blankets in the bouncing wagon. Awfyn's men were on their own horses, but Awfyn himself, too large for any horse to carry, began running alongside them. Efran was astonished to see that, big as he was, he could keep up with a moderately loping horse, even through snow. So they went at this pace for most of the return trip.

When Monsell and his loggers had seen them all leave, they stood in dismayed disbelief for a while. Then Monsell, followed by Larcum, turned silently into his pillaged house. Some of his men followed; some went back to bed in their quarters, and some began laying plans to leave for the unknown Abbey Lands themselves.

Hours previously, upon the successful dispatch of Awfyn and his men, Minka and Estes collected Krall and Goss and dropped off Kane at the mill. She was exhausted but full of heart, and there was more to do yet. A handful of men, including Gabriel, were waiting for them at the courtyard gates. As Estes dismounted, he merely nodded at them: "Awfyn and his band are off." They looked astonished, skeptical, and . . . impressed.

Then Minka told Estes, "I have to get the tray, but I can't get that down, either. Go find—there he is. DeWitt, we need you to help Estes."

"Yes, Lady Minka," he said, smiling, and she smiled back at him. On her way into the fortress, she purloined a large lantern from the foyer to take to the library. She wasn't sure whether the one she'd used earlier was still there. The men who had been forced to stay behind watched Estes and DeWitt follow her in.

Minka dropped her cloak to the floor beside the sword of Ares as DeWitt closed the door after his and Estes' entry. "All right, then. Come along," she said, hefting the lantern. The first one was still here, but out of oil.

DeWitt, blinking, said, "Let me carry the light, Lady Minka."

She shook her head. "I've got it. You will have something much heavier to carry in a moment."

Leading with the lantern, Minka took them through one swivel door into the inner library, then through the second door to the winding stair. She led up to the Treasury door. Setting the lantern down, she used the key to open the door and reveal the glittering interior. Then she positioned the lantern beside the door to point to their objective: “The large tray propped up there.”

Estes and DeWitt stepped carefully around the piles of gold, silver, and jewelry boxes stacked three-quarters of the way up the walls. Seeing how the tray was placed, the men had to confer over how to get it down, and wound up relocating several stacks of gold to clear a path.

Finally, with DeWitt taking one end and Estes the other, they were able to carry it out of the treasure room. Minka shut the door behind them, then went before them with the lantern to illumine the steps as they inched their way down the treacherous spiral staircase with their massive burden.

It took some time, as they had to stop periodically to reposition it on the descent. But they finally got it off the staircase. In the inner library room, they paused to look at her. “In the library,” she said. Upon closing the door to the staircase, she added, “When Awfyn comes back with Efran, you will have to bring it out to him.” DeWitt’s eyes widened at this new information, but Estes nodded and they hoisted the great tray again.

They set it down on the floor of the library next to Ares’ sword and Minka spread her cloak over it. Then they exited the library with the lantern and she closed the door. “Now we wait,” she said confidently.

DeWitt said, “Yes, Lady Minka. I’ll be on the floor in Doane’s cubicle.” She nodded, and he turned away.

“I’ll be in the foyer,” Estes said, hoisting the lantern. Then he added, “Well done, Minka.”

“We’re going to get him back, Estes,” she breathed in victory, and he nodded, smiling. However, knowing Awfyn, Estes was much less certain than she—in fact, his insides were coiled up in anxious doubt. But her down payment was compelling, as was Awfyn’s love of gold, so—who knew? It might work.

Now that everything had been done that could be done, Minka paused in the foyer, weaving in exhaustion. This circular entryway was all lit up, as was the courtyard, in the expectation of the Captain’s imminent return. She looked into the keep, at the crucifix in the shadows, and went to Efran’s spot beneath it to lie down.

Efran allowed Awfyn’s scruffy crew to accompany him almost all the way to the fortress. But when they came to the stone bridge at mid-morning on January 31st, he stopped and turned his horse toward them. “This is my home. You may take your plunder to your own place now.”

Awfyn, barely panting, said, “We’re here to collect our pay.”

Efran looked at him. “Your pay. For what?”

“For you. The Lady Minka hired us to get you back,” Awfyn said.

Efran stared at him in disbelief. He then looked around at the men, who were sitting in confidence of receiving what had been promised. Just in case Awfyn might be correct, Efran asked, “How did she find you?”

“Estes,” Awfyn said. “Let us go up, and they will tell you.”

“Estes,” Efran murmured, turning to cross the old stone bridge. “I’ll kill him.”

Above, the doomed Estes was shaking Minka's shoulder. "Lady! They're coming up the switchback!"

Minka opened her eyes. Perceiving what he had said, she leapt up to follow him into the courtyard, accompanied by a large group of men. They considerately made space for her at the front, and she looked down at Efran on his horse leading Awfyn's group up the switchback. Just a glance told her he was well and whole, though tired. "Estes, go get the tray," she said, her heart full. He and DeWitt pushed their way to the rear of the waiting group to enter the fortress.

Efran glanced up periodically at the large group waiting in the courtyard, especially Minka in front. Her satisfied stance further damaged his disbelief of Awfyn's claim. Then they had entered the gates, all of them, with wagons and horses, and Minka stood there still. The Abbey men were silent, watching. Awfyn's band looked amused.

Efran dismounted to walk up to her, regarding the victorious glint in her eyes. "Welcome home, my lord," she said. Awfyn towered over Efran from behind, waiting.

Then the group of men were forced to clear a path for Estes and DeWitt to bring forward something heavy and bright. The crowd gasped as the two men lugged the massive gold tray through their midst to hand it off to Awfyn. He took it in one hand, then had to bring the other hand up to hold it. Efran's face went slack.

With the successful delivery of the tray, DeWitt accidentally backed into Tera, who had just climbed out of the wagon. "Oh!" she said.

He quickly turned. "Very sorry, lady. Have I hurt you?"

"No. I just—got off the cart. Your man brought me. I am Tera," she said, teeth chattering in fear.

"Hello, Tera. I am DeWitt," he said, leaning against the wagon beside her, and she smiled nervously at him.

After taking the tray in both hands, Awfyn looked it over, then nodded to Minka. "You have kept your word, Lady."

"As you have performed the service for which you were engaged," she replied, walking over to him. "Bend down to me," she instructed. He laid the tray at his feet to comply, whereupon she put a hand on his massive shoulder and kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Awfyn."

Efran and Awfyn were both frozen. Then Awfyn fell to his knees. "The lady's servant professes *kupa'a*," he rumbled, and his men looked at each other. It was the old Polonti oath of protection, which they had never heard their leader utter to anyone. Whether it was motivated by the kiss, the gold, or both was later debated by them.

Catching the gist of his profession, Minka replied, "Which I accept with gratitude. Now your men must come in to eat and tell us everything." While he struggled to rise, she walked back over to Efran, who was watching her in a state of utter disconnect. She leapt on him to kiss him.

This woke him. He seized her, holding her head with one hand and her waist with the other, lifting her off the ground. When her feet finally landed again, she took his hand to drag him toward the fortress steps, shouting over her shoulder to everyone, "Come!"

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Chapter 17

There was considerable confusion and jostling in the large dining hall until a particularly competent kitchen assistant took matters in hand, sitting the principals Efran, Minka, Estes, Kelsey and Awfyn at a table facing the rest of the hall, then letting the remainder of the crowd sit wherever they would. Suddenly remembering Tera, Efran looked around for her, then spotted her in DeWitt's possession. Sitting back, Efran smiled.

When no chair could be found to support Awfyn, he simply sat on the floor, which placed his head at about the same height as Minka's. (Efran's royals and Awfyn's tray were brought into the foyer to be attended by volunteer guards who would eat later.)

Madea, competent as always in the face of unreasonable demands, began putting out platters of beef and venison while more were being prepared. Cases of ale were broken open and dried meat unwrapped, unrisen bread flash-baked as flatbread, compotes opened and preserves distributed. Since the fortress hilltop enjoyed such mild weather, there were even fresh greens available for today's feast.

The men who had been denied permission to rescue their Captain hung back resentfully until Gabriel looked at them and said, "You'd rather he stayed locked up? The hell with that." And he went to get himself a plate. Abashed, the rest did the same.

Justinian came into the dining hall to observe the celebratory feasting. He paused at the back of the hall, watching, until Efran saw him and waved him to the front. Justinian came forward, hesitating in mild alarm at the sight of Awfyn. Then he went to stand beside Efran's chair, shifting from foot to foot. "Hullo, brother of mine."

"Have a seat, Justinian. Ask Adele if she feels up to joining us," Efran invited.

"Welllll, I suppose that depends on what we're celebrating. Is Adele going to be shipped off to Monsell or not?" Justinian asked flatly.

Efran and Minka stared at each other, then he said, "I forgot all about that. No, Justinian, the betrothal is off. She's free. You're still married, if you want to be. And you're both welcome to join us."

Justinian came alive. "That's good. That's good to know, dear brother. And I'll stop mimicking you." He began a funny hop-skip kind of step, then ran out.

Efran cocked his head as if listening to something far off, then looked at Minka beside him. "I stopped worrying about the betrothal when Monsell told me he never actually paid the thousand royals."

"He what?" she cried, wide-eyed.

Awfyn made a rumbling sound in his throat and Efran turned to him to snap, "Yes, I suppose you might well laugh."

"My young brother Wigner would enjoy this," Awfyn muttered.

"Well—where is he?" Efran asked, looking around.

"Eh, with his own little band," Awfyn snorted.

Turning back to Minka, Efran said, “Now what is this about your hiring him?” So Minka, flushed with triumph, got to tell her story, which Estes confirmed with frequent nods.

“The ewer, too?” Efran gasped at that point of the story. “You paid him with the ewer AND the tray?”

“I needed you back quickly,” she said, and he could not object for the adoration in her eyes.

After the moment he required to come back to earth, he said, “Well. It was a welcome gesture, but, I’m sure that I could have. . . .” he trailed off, and Awfyn pinned him with his one eye. Efran cleared his throat to admit, “They were going to work on me to find out about the Treasury.”

Looking again to Minka, he said in mild disbelief, “That was a . . . bold plan. And Estes let you do it?” She nodded happily. So he grudgingly promised, “I will kill him another time.”

Estes looked satisfied but Kelsey glanced up quickly. He patted her hand, whispering something that made her eye Efran archly.

A ruckus arose in the back of the hall. The children’s tutor raised her hands in despair as Toby, Noah and Ivy came running to the head table to welcome their adoptive father home. They showed no alarm whatever at the sight of Awfyn, perhaps because his sitting on the floor disguised how very large he was.

Ivy, who had shied away from Efran at first sight of him eight months ago, now crawled over Awfyn to sit on his left shoulder facing Efran, which put her above his head. Having learned in the last eight months that Polonti men were convenient for climbing, transport, and seating, she naturally included Awfyn in that category. He sat very still, eating slowly so as to not disturb her. Toby crawled into Minka’s lap to be kissed by her, but Noah preferred leaping on Efran, who could still catch him.

Again there was a disturbance in the rear of the hall; someone else was making her way to the front. Awfyn’s men spun at her passing, jumping up to bow. Awfyn himself raised his head in acknowledgment of the *aina* approaching—the Polonti child who could command animals. “Pia,” Efran gasped, as she could hardly ever be found indoors. He patted his right leg, which was free.

She evaluated that, but Noah, unaware, stretched himself across Efran’s entire lap, as he was a growing boy who needed room. So Pia turned her gaze to Awfyn, stone still with one child on his shoulder. Pia went around the table to climb up on his right shoulder, where she and Ivy congratulated themselves on having the best seats in the hall.

There was another disturbance in the back when Bethune entered with Joshua, awake and active. As she carried him toward the head table, she was stopped time and again by someone springing up to look at the one-month-old. “My son Joshua with his nursemaid,” Efran said to Awfyn. His men all got up to look at the tiny Polonti.

Then she brought him to the front table to lower him between Awfyn and Efran. Careful not to move and disturb the children on his shoulders, the giant lowered his eye to regard the baby, then looked across at Efran to utter, “He will be skilled with the bow.” Even now Joshua was extending a hand toward the faces around him. Efran chose to accept that statement as prophecy.

There was another ripple in the back of the hall, not enough to be called a disturbance as much as an awareness. Minka started to rise but Estes forestalled her, getting up to add two chairs beside Kelsey. Adele, pale but dressed, was walking to the head table, escorted by Justinian.

Efran set Noah on his feet to stand and bow to her, and Minka rose to kiss her cheek. Adele smiled, content, and Justinian pulled out a chair for her to sit. Efran sat again, feeling greatly conflicted. He was glad she was healing, glad that he didn't have to force a hateful course on her, and especially glad for the return of his thousand royals. But she was still in his fortress and, for all he knew, still his enemy.

They all continued eating, drinking, and talking until twilight descended. Then Awfyn rose, the little girls having run off to play elsewhere. His men jumped up; Efran and Minka stood. "We are *maka*," Awfyn said—friends-- and Efran responded appropriately, "*Maka ae*." Awfyn and his men then left to take the tray and their wagon of spoils to their own camp. Pia sent them off with a murder of crows, which they greatly enjoyed. Efran enveloped Minka and fell into bed.

For the next several days Efran and Minka rested, except that Bethune, having been on constant duty for the past month, requested a brief visit with her family. This Efran reluctantly granted, but then told her to bring her family up to the fortress whenever she wished.

Given that there was nothing to be done in the barley fields right now, and that Bethune's wages amply provided for the family's needs, they accepted this invitation and made broad use of it. Thereafter, Bethune's next-to-youngest and next-to-next-to-youngest children became solidly allied with Efran and Minka's children in the production of mischief. Efran ignored the various pranks until the undergardener complained about damage, which Noah and Bethune's Erastus were required to work off. After that, they gravitated back to the garden time and again because the undergardener explained things.

DeWitt and Tera went to Ryal's notary shop for a marriage license, which meant that Estes had to give him a raise and personal quarters in the fortress. Efran approved; DeWitt was a good man, and had actually outranked him in the army, being Commander Wendt's aide. Also, since he and Estes now knew the location of the Treasury, Efran felt the need to take care of him. Them. Both.

With Adele's improvement, and feeling the need for money in his pockets, Justinian resumed his forays into Westford. And on February 10th, he returned to the fortress to report that Doddridge—also known as Calkin, the killer for hire—had been seen in Westford.

His mother Dora had moved into her finished house on an Abbey plot by then, so Efran made a trip down from the hilltop to see it, and her. Surprised and glad to see him, she let him in to show off her new place. It was a small house, but very nicely decorated. Efran glanced around at the rugs and woven wall hangings and a lovely mirror with silvered glass. Glimpsing his own reflection, Efran paused at how unacceptably long his hair had grown—he was unconsciously tossing it out of his eyes again. Since Monsell now knew that Efran had short hair, there was no more danger to Estes in growing his out. But as long as Minka didn't care. . . .

Efran said goodbye to Dora, telling her again, "Don't let your son browbeat you, Dora; he cannot come on Abbey lands."

"I understand and perfectly agree, Lord Efran," she said firmly.

Taking her at her word, he returned to the fortress to get Detler to cut his hair again. Unfortunately, Detler did a thorough job, and when Minka saw Efran afterward in the corridor, she stopped dead. He winced at her shocked face. "Too much off?" he murmured.

She came up to run her fingers through the spikes. "There's not even enough to play with," she said, grieved.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely. “It grows fast.”

“You cannot cut it again without asking me,” she said, hurt.

“I know,” he said, repentant. She kissed him anyway; holding her, he murmured, “Can we . . . ?”

She looked at his cushy lips, which he couldn’t ruin, and decided not to punish him. She took his fingers to lead him back to their quarters. Since Joshua had just been fed, he was sleeping and Bethune was gone, so Minka locked the door and shoved Efran down to the bed. As he wrenched off his boots, she crawled beside him to experience the new sensation of black spikes.

An hour later, Efran left the bedroom happy, relaxed and invigorated. He paused to check on Joshua, who was still sleeping, then decided to go check on wall progress. Today was almost warm for midwinter, so he dispensed with a coat over his long-sleeved work shirt and walked down the switchback to see how the work was going.

As there was a full contingent working today, Efran’s assistance was not needed. He noted that some of the men glanced at him askance, not recognizing him, but Barr looked up and grinned, running his hand over his own head. Having been one of the first to see Efran’s extreme cut, Barr had admired it enough to ask Detler to do the same for him. So he did.

As Efran was walking along the wall, just looking, Ernst, the stonemason, came up to say impatiently, “We don’t need help here; go to the eastern section if you want to work.”

“Minka won’t let me today,” Efran said regretfully.

Ernst drooped. “Lord Efran, give me a heads up whenever you do something different with your hair.” Efran laughed and the men on the wall looked up, smiling.

Turning away, Efran watched the weaver pull his cart to the side of the road to let a man clamber down. “Thank you, friend,” he said, waving as the weaver started up again toward his own house. The hitchhiker turned, brushing past Efran on his way elsewhere. It was Doddridge, obviously come to see his mother.

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Chapter 18

Efran casually followed Doddridge far enough to see him walk up the road to his mother Dora’s house and bang on her door. It was opened, and he went in. Efran then went to a side wall of her house in which there was a shuttered window. Leaning back against the wall near the window, Efran listened.

“What are you doing here?” Dora was asking indignantly.

“I need money,” Doddridge said.

“Well, you can work for it! Did you burn down the shop?” she demanded.

“Don’t be stupid,” he muttered.

“You have to leave now. I only promised—Oh!” she cried, and there was the concurrent sound of a blow on flesh. With the sounds of another blow, another cry, and another demand for money, Efran left the wall and went to the front door. Respectful of Dora’s property and her need for a functioning door, Efran did not kick it open; he merely turned the latch and walked in.

Doddridge, raising a fist over his mother on the floor, was unaware of Efran’s entrance until he was upon him. From behind, Efran twisted his fist in Doddridge’s collar to create a garrote of cloth and began dragging him out. As Dora raised up, he said, “Stay inside.”

“Oh! No, Lord Efran, please don’t hurt him!” she cried, following. Doddridge was gurgling in Efran’s fist.

Dora came aside Efran to tug on his arm. Breathing heavily in anger, he looked at the tears running down the red spots on her face, then he looked away in exasperation. Nonetheless, he dragged Doddridge out of the house to the road. “Bring me a knife!” Efran shouted. A few men came running toward him.

“Don’t kill him, Lord Efran! I beg you!” Dora cried.

“I won’t,” he said tightly. “Stay back. I don’t want to ruin your dress.”

One of the men ran up to him with a utility knife. Efran took it, hoisted Doddridge, and lightly slashed his cheek. Doddridge fell down in the road with a loud cry, putting a hand over the cut so that blood ran between his fingers. Dora watched in shock.

Efran handed the knife back to its owner and looked around. “The man with a fresh cut on his face was caught striking his mother. If he trespasses again on Abbey Lands, he dies. Make it known. Haul him away.” The two closest laborers took hold of Doddridge’s arms to drag him as far as the stone bridge, where they tossed him off the road into a muddy ditch.

Then everyone went back to work. Efran looked down at Dora, who was still crying. “You must have someone stay with you, Dora. Preferably a man. Is there someone who can come live with you?”

“Yes,” she sighed. “A friend in town.”

“All right, I’ll have a messenger stop here to get the name and make arrangements. Immediately, Dora. Do you understand? Your son is dangerous,” he said.

“I understand,” she said, broken-hearted, and Efran put his arms around her.

The following day, February 11th, Justinian went back to Westford with fresh royals to dig up fresh information. He had been told about Doddridge’s new identifying feature, but was not to express any knowledge of it. However, Justinian’s most urgent assignment was to find out what Doddridge was doing now, if possible.

Minka walked with Adele in the garden for a while that morning, then they returned to her boudoir to talk. Adele was so relieved to be free of the betrothal that she made a genuine effort to be civil. But she still couldn’t help talking about Efran. “I saw his hair, or what’s left of it, yesterday. What was he thinking?” she laughed.

Minka shrugged in purported ignorance. The truth was, she was highly conflicted about Efran’s accidental new

look. She did miss playing with his hair, but the very short cut was aggressively masculine, and made him look threatening, even—or especially--when he smiled, which was often. The men must have thought so, too: a number of them were walking around with spiky hair today, and Detler was loudly complaining that he wasn't able to get his regular work done for being the fortress barber.

So although the spikes did arouse Minka's interest, she was careful to conceal that fact because being able to play with Efran's hair was still the higher priority. But he was not the only man that she and Adele could talk about. "Justinian's devotion to you is so sweet," she said. "I never thought it possible, but he has the makings of a good husband."

"Don't tell me you want him," Adele said with a sidelong glance.

"Not that way," Minka laughed. "But I do like him. Efran can't understand it, but I like to talk to Justinian. He is so entertaining. Isn't it nice to have a man to make you laugh?"

"I can't laugh much. Wallace says I still have to be careful," Adele murmured.

"I know. But I'm so happy you're looking so well," Minka said, laying an affectionate hand on hers.

The next day, Bethune was late for Joshua's regular feeding, so he began thrashing, then grew red and irritable, and finally began hollering very loudly. They had bottles of Bethune's milk in cold storage for just such emergencies, but Minka had not yet been able to get him to accept an artificial nipple. So while he was thrashing and screaming, she was dripping milk on his lips, which made him root frantically for the nipple only to knock it away when it didn't feel right in his mouth.

Finally Bethune arrived breathlessly to sit on the daybed and extend her arms. "I'm so sorry," she said, opening her bodice to an indignant infant.

"We're just glad to see you," Minka said, sitting back down in relief. "I hope your family is well."

Bethune said tightly, "Yes, it's not them. I just heard a silly maid repeat inappropriate gossip and had to correct her very sternly."

"Oh, they do gossip. It's nothing serious," Minka said idly, watching Joshua close his eyes and reach contentedly for his ear as he sucked. He was fleshing out wonderfully on Bethune's milk. Efran had bought a set of butcher's scales to weigh him every few days, so when anyone happened to ask how he was doing, Efran was able to tell them his weight down to the ounce.

Bethune replied, "Yes, but sometimes it's not all fun. Forgive me, but I feel you should know that she was repeating a rumor that you're in love with Justinian."

"What?" Minka repeated in shock. "I—in love with *Justinian*? When I have *Efran*? Oh, that's—absurd!" Bethune nodded in vindication, but Minka stilled, knowing when, if not how, that particular rumor had begun. What made it worse was not knowing whether it had been Adele's maid or Adele herself to start it. But Minka knew how to counter it. "Thank you for telling me," she said.

Bethune smiled at her. "Your love of Efran sometimes wakes me at night."

"Oh!" Minka laughed in shock and embarrassment. "I'm so sorry!" Then she murmured, "Consider yourself free to repeat that bit of gossip." Bethune looked up with a humorously shocked face, and they both laughed.

That day, being mild, was a good day for Minka to put on the chickening clothes that Efran had given her for Christmas and go help the poulterer. (Her chickening clothes were a unique set of pants, shirt and apron painted all over with chickens.)

Since the poulterer had two large coops now, and Minka was willing to do the dirty work, he gladly accepted her help. She had so much fun doing it that she resolved to help him on a regular basis. But she caught herself staring off into space as she remembered the first time she saw the handsome Polonti captain lying in her coop in damp clothing. Then, blushing as if everyone knew what she was thinking, she hastily got to work.

Unfortunately, she didn't see Efran for most of the day, but when she finally happened upon him outside their quarters, the look she gave him was sufficient to make him stop in mid-sentence while talking to someone at his side. Momentarily forgetting everything else, he took her in his arms.

Dinner was delightful, in that the attention she lavished on him made him smile throughout. He would be listening to someone but looking at her, so that he kept losing the thread of what was being said. Finally, he leaned to her and whispered, "Do you like the hair after all? Or is it something else?"

She pressed her lips together, then explained in a like whisper, "I wore the chickening clothes you gave me to help Marlett, and had so much fun. But then I remembered—when I first found you in the coop, and you were still sleeping, damp from the rain--"

"Yes, you told the filthy Polonti to get out of your coop," he said humorously.

She shook her head. "That was later. I had come in before that and saw you. Your clothes were still wet, and were clinging to you--" Her face was getting very red, and he watched in fascination. "So I . . . came up close and . . . studied you." His mouth dropped open in delight.

"I was so embarrassed afterward that I had to come back and cover myself with rudeness, to make sure you didn't suspect that I had been—ogling you while you were helpless," she whispered.

He threw back his head and laughed with such relish, and she was so genuinely blushing, that it was apparent which man had her attention. So as she intended, that particular line of gossip died. But there was another benefit: that evening, as he was enjoying her in bed, he breathed, "So—not only were you *moekolohe* then, but you use it on me just telling me how you were *moekolohe*."

"Oh, my darling Captain, you never had a chance," she whispered, running her hand through his spikes. And she laughed deep in her throat at his immediate physical reaction.

Unfortunately, the day after that dinner performance, Detler was harassed beyond reason by men wanting their hair cut.

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Chapter 19

Efran checked on Dora that day (February 12th). She tried to hide the bruises on her face with chalk makeup, but he just looked at her with red eyes, shaking his head. Fortunately, she did have a friend staying with her; however, it was a fluffy little woman who would be no help if her son decided to come beat on her again.

So upon leaving, Efran alerted her neighbors to watch for a man with a cut on his cheek, and to call for help from the men working on the wall if he were seen. Justinian had heard nothing yet about him. At this point, Efran was more worried about Doddridge's threat to his own mother than to Efran himself.

That evening, Kane sent a message to Efran: Awfyn had asked for a meeting.

The verbal message was delivered by Kane's 12-year-old son, who confirmed that it had come from his father. When Efran had finished dinner, he was asked to come to the mill. Efran gave the boy a royal for his trouble and sent him home. Minka watched with misgiving.

Then Efran got up to go to Estes, who was sitting at a table at the front of the hall with his wife. Pulling up a chair behind him, Efran said, "Hello, Kelsey. How are you feeling?"--that being the only thing he knew to say to a pregnant woman. She was about four months along.

"Not too bad, Efran. Thank you," she said. In fact, Estes was losing sleep over how sick she had been.

Accepting that, Efran relayed Kane's message to Estes, then asked, "From what you know, is this how Awfyn asks for a meeting?"

Estes scowled. "Awfyn doesn't *ask* for meetings. He doesn't ask for anything. He goes and gets what he wants."

"Is Kane false?" Efran asked.

"I can't see that; he has too much to lose. However, he could be tricked," Estes said. Kelsey reached out to stroke his longish hair. She was proud that he hadn't followed the crowd in getting a short cut.

"When you're through eating, come with me to talk to Kane," Efran said. "I'm sorry, Kelsey. I'll have him back quickly."

"That's all right, Efran," she smiled.

In leaving, he leaned to Estes' ear to whisper, "Wear a knife."

Shortly, Efran and Estes were riding down the switchback and past the western plots to the mill on the Passage. It was quite dark by now, but Kane had a lamp burning by the door. So Efran mounted the steps and knocked while Estes tied their horses to the post ring in front. Then he joined Efran on the steps.

Kane opened the door. "Let me get Gerdie--"

"Wait," Efran said. "I need to know more."

Kane paused on the top step, closing the door behind him. Efran asked, "How did Awfyn tell you he wanted a meeting with me?"

Hesitantly, Kane said, “One of his men came and told me that he wanted you to come to his forest camp here tonight.”

“Which man?” Efran asked.

“Oh, I don’t know. I didn’t see him clearly, and, they’re not always the same men,” Kane said.

Efran and Estes glanced at each other, then Estes asked, “Kane, has Awfyn ever asked for a meeting like that before?”

“No,” Kane said.

Estes shook his head and Efran looked off. Awfyn had eaten with them at the fortress; if he wanted a meeting, he would walk up the switchback or at least send a man up. A contact was unnecessary when there was a personal relationship. Awfyn himself had declared a vow of loyalty to Minka (*kupa 'a*) and friendship to Efran (*maka*).

“Tell me about this camp of his,” Efran said.

Kane and Estes described Awfyn’s forest hideout in detail. Kane said, “He’s not always there; he changes locations frequently. And once he leaves a place, he seldom goes back to it.”

“Let’s do this,” Efran suggested. “You go ahead and get Gerdie; we’ll walk behind you.” Then Efran told him what to do and say after that.

So Kane brought out his little donkey by her halter and sat on her to lead the two men (who were on foot) over the new bridge and through the woods. Efran gestured to Estes, and they both drew their knives.

As before, on the way Kane produced his nightingale song to alert Awfyn of their coming. Estes leaned over to whisper, “When we got close last time, Awfyn’s lookout made frog calls.” Efran nodded.

They had heard nothing by the time Kane stopped Gerdie and dismounted. Estes gestured to Efran in the darkness, then they crept ahead to either side of the door hidden among the trees. Kane knocked on the door, which was opened, and he said to someone within, “Efran came with me almost all the way, then saw something he didn’t like and went back. I thought I’d better let Awfyn know.”

There was a muttering in reply; Kane got back on Gerdie, turned her around, and rode out. Efran and Estes waited in absolute silence on either side of the door. Then a group of men—five of them—came out grumbling. The one in front held a lantern down by his side. It did not illumine his face, but Efran recognized Doddridge’s voice when he whispered to those following, “Shut up. We’ll try again another time.”

They departed the hut in single file to leave space between themselves and the brush on either side. Immediately the last man in line fell. Doddridge turned to hiss, “Walk softly,” but the man did not get up again. The next man did not realize that, because there was still someone behind him. Again there was a disturbance at the end of the line. The third man in line wheeled, and there was a definite groan as he went down.

Doddridge and the second man stared at each other in the wavering lantern light, then began running down the narrow path. Doddridge, in the lead with the lantern, pulled farther ahead and made it out of the woods to run over the new bridge without ever looking back.

Two men emerged from the trees to watch Doddridge's flickering shadow disappear over the new bridge. After cleaning his knife on the downed man's jacket to sheathe it, Efran said, "Let's pull them out into the moonlight; see if we can tell who they are."

So he and Estes retraced their steps down the path to drag out four bodies and line them up along the turbulent Passage. The first thing Estes said was, "None of them are Awfyn's because none of them are Polonti."

"Right," said Efran. "Look at this one, now, with the wild hair. He looks familiar."

Estes looked. "Oh, that's Bane, that killed the beggars around the Strand."

Efran said, "Ah. That's right. This one with the crooked nose is Greeg. He knifed and robbed people in the alleys of the rathole."

"Yes," Estes said, looking. "I don't recognize the other two."

"Neither do I. Well, let's dump them in the Passage," Efran said.

"PAST the mill," Estes stipulated.

"Of course," Efran said, hefting a body.

After they had consigned the dead to the Passage running rapidly to the Sea, Estes stopped at the mill to knock again and let Kane know what had happened. This was intensely disturbing to Kane; being a stooge in a plot against Efran under Awfyn's name could mean personal disaster. Estes counseled him to deny everything and take no more messages.

Then Efran borrowed a lamp, which he and Estes took back down the path to the hidden hut. Entering, they examined it closely. Awfyn had clearly abandoned it while Doddridge's band had carelessly left telltale bits: smoldering wood in the fire pit, a few rabbit bones and bread crumbs from dinner, and a broken strap from a sheath.

There was a back door. Opening it, Efran stepped out and froze, smelling the newly trodden detritus. He lowered the lamp to see the fresh hoof prints that had come to the door and then away again. The rider's boot prints indicated that he had opened the back door, gone around to the front, and then retreated to ride off.

Efran went to the front door where Estes was waiting, and extinguished the lamp. While they waited a moment for their eyes to adjust to the darkness, Efran whispered, "Someone has been here just now."

"We need to leave, then," Estes said in his characteristic mode of understatement.

Taking out their knives again, they headed back up the path, concentrating on speed rather than stealth. When they emerged from the woods, they resheathed their knives and trotted over the new bridge. Efran left the lamp on Kane's porch, then he and Estes untied their horses from the porch post and rode back to the fortress.

As it was late, Efran tiptoed back into his quarters. Bethune woke up but pretended not to; Minka had not been asleep at all. A lance of candlelight swept the outer room as he opened the door to the bedroom, then it vanished again as he closed the door, lowering himself to her arms.

Midmorning of the next day, February 13th, a rider appeared at the fortress gates asking for Efran, who went out to him at the head of the switchback. Efran recognized him as one of Awfyn's men, Chior. He said, "You were tricked into going to the old camp last night."

"No," Efran said. "Doddridge, who is also known as Calkin, tried to lure me there with a message supposedly from Awfyn through Kane's son—Kane is not to blame; Doddridge took advantage of his boy. Estes and I knew at once that it was not from Awfyn, but we wanted to see who was behind it, so we persuaded Kane to lead us anyway."

"There were five: Doddridge and four lackeys. We killed the four--two of whom were known murderers--but Doddridge himself got away. I want to find him again. He has a fresh cut on his left cheek," Efran said.

Chior replied, "Awfyn is at a new place now. If you need him, you are to contact the roving singer in Westford. It must be you alone; he will know you by your hair." Chior's eyes flicked up to the spikes.

Efran laughed. "My hair again. This grows amusing." Then he added, "Thank *maka* Awfyn for me. Make him know that I do not want anything to happen to Kane or his family. He is a good miller and we need him."

"I will repeat your words to him," Chior said. Efran reached out his hand, which Chior took. Then he remounted and set off down the switchback.

Heading back into the fortress, Efran murmured, "Awfyn is thorough."

Minka was back at work in her chickening clothes today, as she had enjoyed it so much the last time. With gloves and old sacks, she cleaned out dirty hay from the coops to dump in the gardener's fenced compost pile behind them, but left it to him to turn it—that was too big a job for her. She replenished the hens' feed and water, fondly watching them bicker and scabble.

Of course, the whole time she was remembering what Efran said and did those first days at the old henhouse. How much had happened in the span of a few days! She could see now how deliberately he had been charming her then. He was trying to buy time to recuperate before leaving—when the choice was to either swear loyalty to Lightfoot or die, most of the army was gone by then. She saw again that his falling so sick, so near death, is what actually enabled them to be together in the end.

She remembered the day that Adele and a group of soldiers came to take him from the henhouse to stand before her father Lightfoot, newly declared Surchatain of Westford. No one paid any attention to Minka as she hovered at the door to hear Efran refuse the oath of loyalty, and her father peevishly order him hanged.

She had followed Pindar as he took Efran down the corridor into a cubicle, and then watched Pindar come out again, slamming the door and bolting it. She had continued her miserable vigil at the head of the corridor, seeing Adele pass by to take a plate to him. She had come out again almost immediately, and had returned with a goblet from the table.

Minka had drawn near the cell, then, in time to hear Efran say something to Adele in a taunting voice. Adele struck him—Minka knew the sound of a hard slap—and came out in a fury. Again, she passed her little sister without even knowing she was there. Minka had always been invisible to her.

No longer seeing the chickens scratch in the dirt around her, Minka relived those events of ten months ago with fresh insight. It was obvious now that Efran had rebuffed Adele's advances then. From what he had told Minka

later, she knew that Adele had come to him again in the middle of the night to make it clear that his life hung on how well he serviced her. So Adele had become pregnant, and punished Efran for it.

She was still punishing him. Adele felt safe here because she could punish the lord of the fortress with impunity. Whether it was allying herself with his enemies, turning down betrothals, or spreading gossip about his wife, Adele was in control of his comfort level. “This must not stand,” Minka whispered. But what could an invisible little sister do?

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Chapter 20

“Adele wants power,” Minka mused. “That’s why she married Graduliere and Cennick: because she thought they had power.” Thinking hard about this, she went in to wash up and change into a regular dress—almost all of which were appropriate for riding. She tried to be very quiet doing it, however, because both Bethune and Joshua were sleeping.

She left the room to go stand in front of the crucifix and contemplate it. “I need to know what to do,” she murmured. “I need to go talk to someone. I need counsel from a nobleman.”

She pressed her hands to her forehead, thinking. “Lord Rinkart,” she remembered. He was the one who had given Lord Blature’s family shelter when her father and Graduliere had turned them out after the lord had died of the fever. What she knew of Rinkart was that he was a good man. “He’ll help me. His estate is in Westford.”

Having decided that, she exited into the foyer to see Efran passing through. “Efran!” she said. When he didn’t stop, she followed him into the corridor and caught his arm. “Efran, I--” When he turned, she stopped in shock, because it wasn’t Efran.

“Barr, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing. “Though you honor me greatly, mistaking me for him.”

She laughed. “Barr! Of course. Your hair--”

Running his hand along the top of his head, he said, “I was one of the first to get my hair cut after he did.”

She smiled, then said, “You can help me. Will you go to Westford with me? There’s someone I need to talk to.”

“It would be my honor, Lady Minka. But I must tell my superior. Then shall I meet you in the foyer?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you,” she said. He bowed again before turning away.

Minka paused to think. It would be cold in Westford. So she turned back to her quarters to quietly creep to the bedroom for her lambswool cloak and a purse. She never went anywhere without a few royals.

Realizing that Barr would need a coat, too—something better to wear talking to a lord than an army cloak—she also pulled out Monsell’s ermine coat that Efran had brought back and stuck in her closet, because it didn’t fit him. She crept out again with these. Bethune sighed patiently, checked on Joshua, and tried to go back to sleep.

In the foyer, Minka went to Doane's cubicle. He looked up. "Hello, Lady Minka."

"Hello, Doane. Please tell Efran that I've gone to Westford on an errand. I'm taking a bodyguard," she said.

"Certainly, Lady Minka."

"Thank you, Doane." She turned out again to put on her cloak. Then she waited in the foyer.

Before long, Barr stuck his head in the front doors. Seeing her, he said, "Our horses are out front, Lady Minka." Then he paused in mild consternation. "Did you rather have a carriage?"

"No," she said with mock aggravation, and he paused to assess her tone. When she saw that, she corrected herself. "No thank you," she said genially. It had taken Efran a long time to learn her various voices, so she had to be patient with his Polonti kinsmen who took everything literally. "Here. You'll need this for Westford." She brandished the ermine coat at him.

With a slightly pained expression, he allowed her to dress him in the expensive coat. She laughed at this, noting that it fit him only slightly better than it fit Efran. "That's your penalty for accompanying me," she said, sweeping out.

He paused again, trying to fit the tone with the words. But as she was unquestionably smiling, he went along with her. Just like Efran.

Minka mounted without assistance, then she and Barr rode down the switchback and up the north road to Westford. All along the way, she fretted about, first, how to find Rinkart, and second, what to say to him. Asking, "*How do I stop a power-hungry sister from attacking my husband?*" seemed too . . . direct.

It was cold but clear in Westford. As they rode onto the main street, Barr looked at her questioningly for direction. She slowed, and he did as well. Proceeding at a walk, she looked around. The homes and businesses around the palace had admirably adapted to its sudden implosion into a lake. They just let it be, and carried on around it. There were a few new shops, and food vendors, and entertainers.

Minka dismounted to walk her horse around an obstructing wagon, as did Barr. On the other side, she paused at a minstrel standing on the corner singing. He was Polonti, dressed in a gorgeous velvet outfit, accepting coins in his hat as he sang beside an outdoor fire pit. She stopped to listen because he had a beautiful voice. He turned his eyes to her and her bodyguard, then looked away again, singing.

With Barr continually at her side, Minka dug in her pouch for a royal and put it in the singer's hat, smiling. He made a flourish at her generosity, finishing his song. Then he bowed to her. "Do you need help?" he asked in almost a whisper.

At first she was astonished, then said, "Yes. I am Lady Minka, and this is--"

"Shhh," the minstrel cautioned as several people passed. Then he put the coins in his pocket and the hat on his head, saying, "Follow me."

Startled but willing, Minka lifted her skirts to follow the singer down the main road. Barr clung to her side, leading both horses. The singer turned up one street and down another until they were in the warehouse district.

Barr stopped her at this point. The singer looked back as Barr said, "I do not like this, Lady. Do you know him?"

Do you know where he is leading?"

"Lord, have faith in your *maka*," the singer whispered, eyes roving the windows above. "Come, we must not linger." Minka nodded at Barr, consenting to follow as the singer moved on. Her only reason for trusting him was how his singing made her feel. Unhappy but faithful, Barr stayed close beside her.

The singer stopped at an old, rusted door in a decrepit building. Here he knocked a complicated tattoo on the door, and it was opened to the inside. The singer gestured them in; seeing that Minka was going in regardless, Barr thrust himself in front of her to lead. The singer brought in their horses after them, then left again. When all were in, the door was closed behind them. They were left in a dim, bare room.

With one hand on his sword, Barr thrust Minka back against the wall and reached for the exit door latch. But whoever had opened the door was still there, and said, "Peace, Lord Efran, come in."

"I'm not--" Barr began, but the figure opened the door across from them. Through this door, they moved into a cavernous space of luxury that rivaled anything Minka had ever seen. There were tapestries, furnishings, art and artifacts surrounding a stone fireplace that extended up the far wall over twenty feet to the ceiling above.

Minka and Barr gaped at their new surroundings, then a massive figure in velvet and brocade moved toward them. "Ah. My *makamaka* Efran and Minka. How can Awfyn help you?"

"Awfyn!" Minka cried in delight, rushing to him. Although the temptation to pick her up like a child was undoubtedly strong, he merely bent double for her to kiss his cheek. "Oh, Awfyn, this isn't Efran," she said in sudden embarrassment. "It's my bodyguard Barr. But I mistook him for Efran in the foyer as well, so that's all right."

"Then Barr and Minka, come sit and tell Awfyn your need." He swept his hand toward giant-sized furniture. Minka shed her cloak, which one of the men took up. Barr had dropped the ermine coat in the entryway with the horses.

Minka joyously rushed to a huge padded chair, demanding, "Lift me up!" Accordingly, Awfyn gently lifted her to sit on the high seat. Barr reached up to grasp the gilded frame and hoist himself up beside her. There was plenty of room on the seat for them both. Minka grinned at him and looked around

Awfyn drew up a like chair to a table they couldn't reach, so he simply handed them a platter of ham rolls that looked small in his hand, but required both of their laps to rest on. Minka immediately took a bite of one roll. "Ummm!" she said, nodding at Barr. He, disoriented, picked one up but looked at Awfyn's men lolling on the floor around low tables.

Minka said, "This is amazing, Awfyn. I'm so glad to see you living in a nice place. But you won't stay here, will you?"

"As long as it suits," he rumbled. "Now why have you come with no Efran?"

She sagged. "I need help with my sister. She's living at the fortress, but she's making life a nightmare for Efran. She—she lusts after power. She needs a powerful man to satisfy her and control her at the same time, but, she won't leave the fortress because she enjoys tormenting Efran so much," Minka complained.

"Your sister is Adele," Awfyn observed.

Minka startled, then said, "That's right. She came in during our dinner. I didn't realize that you had noticed her." Barr looked alarmed at the direction this conversation was taking.

"Yes. Awfyn understands, and I will help you," he rumbled.

"You will?" she said, blinking. Barr winced, shaking his head.

"Yes. Now enjoy your food," Awfyn instructed.

Minka did as she was told, because it was very good. Barr ate apprehensively. Then she said, "Your singer is wonderful. I would love to hear him again some time."

Awfyn gestured at one of his men, who got up to run out. Then he said, "What of Efran?"

Minka sighed. "He's so worried about Dora. Her son Doddridge beat her up asking for money, and he's trying to kill Efran. But Efran's not worried so much about himself as he is this poor woman."

"Ah. Efran has many women troubles," Awfyn said.

Minka burst out laughing. "I suppose that's true. You poor Polonti men, with all these Southern women chasing after you," she said, turning pitying eyes to Barr. The look he returned was an indefinable mixture of concern, pleasure and slight horror. While they ate, she continued to chat with Awfyn, who replied briefly, cryptically, but courteously.

The outer door opened and the velvet-clad singer appeared. Awfyn rumbled in his throat, gesturing to Minka. When she looked up (down) and saw the singer, she cried, "You brought him back! What is your name?"

"Just 'Singer,' Lady," he said, with an eye on Awfyn. "You honor me greatly."

Then he spread his hands to serenade her with a stream of love songs, to which she listened raptly, hands clasped. Awfyn nodded and smiled, watching her with his single eye. Barr swayed in uneasy impatience. The men on the floor half listened while they talked among themselves.

When the singer finally finished, Minka sighed, "I wish Efran could hear this." He bowed deeply to her.

Barr took that opportunity to say, "Lady Minka, he will be looking for you. We must return."

"Oh, you're right," she said. "I didn't mean to be gone so long. But it was wonderful, dear Awfyn. Thank you."

Having jumped down from the seat himself, Barr reached up and she allowed him to help her down as well. Awfyn said, "Little Minka, Awfyn will help you. Show them," he directed to the singer, who inclined his head.

The singer took them back to the entryway, where their horses had been fed and watered. Minka put her cloak back on, but Barr ignored the ermine coat on the floor. Then the singer led them out on foot the way they had come. He paused frequently to watch at intersections before taking them across, until finally they were at the main road again. It was late afternoon.

"Thank you, Singer. You are welcome to come sing and eat at the Abbey Fortress," she said.

"You honor me, Lady Minka. I will remember that." Bowing to her, with a nod to her guardian, he walked away.

“Come, Lady,” Barr said urgently, standing beside her horse. Sighing, she let him help her into her saddle, then he leapt onto his own horse, again urging her, “Lady, ride!”

“I’m coming,” she said, kicking her horse, and they began loping south.

They had not gone twenty yards before they heard a shout, and two Abbey soldiers appeared on either side of them. “She is well! We are coming! Go!” Barr shouted at them, and they turned to run their horses south.

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Chapter 21

For the first time, Minka began to feel uneasy. Had they been gone that long? As they rode south, she looked over at Barr’s grim expression, realizing that he had to face an angry lord over the unexplained absence of his wife. She thought about this, and how she could explain herself.

Other Abbey riders appeared alongside them. Minka, alarmed, understood that when she did not return, Efran sent scouts after them. But they were in Awfyn’s secret place, where no one would find them. And they had been gone for hours.

Looking again at Barr, she felt her heart sink at what he must be facing from a man he considered his brother. So she determined not to let him be punished for her thoughtlessness. Looking at the road ahead, she asked God to help her make Efran understand.

By the time they rode over the stone bridge into the Abbey Lands, the sun was setting. Ascending the switchback, Minka saw the courtyard lit and scores of people waiting--with Efran standing in front. Her gut constricted over the anxiety she had caused.

The moment came when they had to enter the courtyard. A soldier ran up to help Minka dismount, then she looked up at her husband with the sunset in his face and the torchlight at his back. His eyes were red, his jaw tense, his face wracked with the tension and uncertainty of the last four hours. He would not even glance at Barr, who stood waiting with hanging head.

“Oh, Efran, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to cause such trouble. I didn’t stop to think—Efran, please forgive me.” She flung herself to him in blind hope that he wouldn’t push her away in anger.

As he had always done, he enveloped her in his arms, crushing her to him so that she could hardly breathe. “They looked everywhere for you,” he gasped. “No one could find you anywhere.”

“I’m so sorry, Efran,” she said with tears, kissing his face. She confessed, “We were with Awfyn.”

He lifted his face. “Awfyn?”

“Yes, in his new hiding place in Westford,” she explained. “I had so much to talk to him about. Barr was very anxious for us to leave, but I put him off. He could not have made me leave without physically dragging me out. If you intend to punish him, then you must punish me as well. I am the one whose orders he had to follow, even if they were wrong. He did the best he could to make me leave.”

Efran nodded in acknowledgment, half glancing at Barr, who had raised his head. “She can be stubborn,” Efran muttered, and some men behind him smiled. “Awfyn?” he repeated. “What help did you ask from Awfyn?”

“With. . . .” She lowered her face, unable to get it out. It sounded so ridiculous in her head that she could hardly imagine how it would sound spoken aloud.

“What? With what, Minka?” He now looked anxious, stroking her hair back from her face.

“Promise me you won’t punish Barr,” she demanded.

He sighed, glancing toward his fellow Polonti. “You are held guiltless, Barr.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Barr said, looking from him to Minka.

Efran turned back to her. “Now. What were you so worried about that you had to go to him? Doddridge?”

“Yes,” she said, raising her face. “I brought him up, too. Didn’t I, Barr?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “You told him that Doddridge was trying to kill the Captain, but that he was more concerned about him hurting his mother.”

Everyone looked back at Minka. Efran said, “All right, you brought up Doddridge, too. But what was your first concern?”

Minka hung her head. “Adele.”

Efran paused. “Adele?”

“Yes,” she said, head down.

“What . . . is Awfyn going to do about Adele?” Efran said uncertainly.

“I don’t know, but he said he would,” she said, still unable to look up.

Efran looked questioningly at Barr, who said, “That is correct, Captain. He said he understood, and would help her with her sister.”

There was a long pause as everyone tried to visualize how the 7-foot-tall, one-eyed Polonti criminal would contain Minka’s troublesome sister. Then Minka cried, “She keeps trying to hurt you! She enjoys the power she has over you, because you can’t respond in kind! I don’t know what she’s going to do next to get back at you!” And she collapsed in tears.

Efran gathered her up, kissing her hair. “All right. It’s all right; you’re back safely; Barr won’t be punished. You went seeking help on my behalf; I can’t be angry about that.”

She stopped crying to sigh in his arms. “I love you. I want to protect you from her, because you can’t protect yourself.”

“It’s all right,” he breathed, rocking her. Then, holding her in one arm, he turned. “What are we doing out here?”

Let's go in. Dinner's waiting; Madea will be angry if we don't come eat what she's prepared."

Everyone turned, but waited for the Captain to bring his errant wife in first, her head on his chest, his arm covering her tightly.

After the anxiety, the uncertainty, and the drama, everyone was ready to enjoy a convivial dinner. Madea had fully restocked their stores after the feast with Awfyn and his men, so there was plenty of beef, pork, and venison that were braised, roasted or fried. Madea knew that her Abbey men preferred plain meats with vegetables or bread on the side, so that's what she and her staff produced in volume.

Efran was starving, of course, after being unable to eat all day, and tonight he was hampered by the necessity of keeping one hand on Minka while he ate. He just had to; he had to feel the reassurance of her presence through his hand on her arm, her leg, or her shoulder. She finally made it easy on him by leaning into him instead of eating. After filling up on Awfyn's ham rolls, she wasn't hungry.

She was, however, very tired—so tired that she almost fell asleep on his shoulder at the table. So when he was finished, he roused her gently to walk her back to their bedroom. He undressed her, placed her under warm covers, then left the room again. He paused over Joshua and Bethune, one sleeping and the other trying to, then he went to the foyer to send a sentry after Barr.

Barr responded to the summons with some apprehension, but Efran raised a conciliatory hand. "I will keep my promise; you're not being punished. But I want to know how Minka knew where to find Awfyn."

"I don't know, Captain," Barr said, shaking his head with widened eyes. "The singer spotted us at once, and started leading us without a word about Awfyn. The lady followed him without question, although—she did seem surprised to find Awfyn himself. In short—I don't know."

"Such is the mystery of my wife," Efran exhaled. "She does things, and it turns out all right. Well, then. Thank you, Barr; good night."

"Good night, Captain."

Minka slept in the following morning (February 14th) but Efran was up early with everything that did not get done while his men were searching for her in Westford. Bethune came to him with a request to return home at night, as Joshua was sleeping through the night now. Also, she had managed to get him to accept the bottle nipples.

"Yes, of course, Bethune," he said. "We have abused you," he added regretfully.

Yes, they had, but she said, "Of course not, Lord Efran. But I think Minka wants more time with the baby herself."

"Yes," he smiled. "But you will still allow your children to come up? Ours are enjoying their company so much"—and corrupting them with new means of mischief. Toby was the only one who stood against pranks, and Pia still spent her days with her animals, but Noah and Ivy were known troublemakers.

"I'm afraid they would come whether I allowed them to or not," she said honestly, and he smiled again.

Minka roused herself mid-morning to play with Joshua, as he was awake and Bethune was gone. He

determinedly held up his head to look at her, and she marveled with fresh gratitude at how healthy he looked.

When Bethune arrived for his feeding, Minka handed him over with a sigh. "I know it's been a burden for you to feed him constantly, Bethune, but it's meant his life. I can't tell you how grateful we are."

"I am very glad to do it, dear Minka," she said, truthfully.

Minka went to the kitchen for a bite, then wandered back to the foyer, debating whether to go chickening again. But the front door to the courtyard opened, and Shane, standing as gate sentry, stuck his head in. "Carriage on the way up," he told her, as she was the only one in the foyer right now. Curious, Minka went out to look.

Coming up the switchback was a gorgeous chaise of sky blue and gold, drawn by two white horses with a driver in livery. A small crowd gathered in the courtyard to watch. Although it was cool this morning, still being mid-February, the foyer doors stood wide open as the carriage drew up. Its door opened to permit the exit of a figure in velvet, and Minka gasped in delight.

Awfyn's singer bowed low to her, so she grabbed his arm to bring him into the foyer. There, he spread his hands to sing. She exulted in the power and the beauty of his voice as his song reverberated through the fortress. Impulsively, she turned to run down the corridor and enter Adele's room without knocking. Finding her dressed and sitting at her desk, Minka grabbed her hand, demanding, "Come!"

Disregarding Adele's protests, Minka dragged her to the foyer, where the singer was joyously engaged in his calling. Noting Adele's arrival, he directed his song to her. With a mixture of irritation and attraction, she walked toward him, and he backed up, still singing. Enveloped in his song, Minka watched with clasped hands.

Efran and Estes were in his new workroom on the second floor, discussing alterations to the western portion of the wall to accommodate the mill. They paused at the same time, listening. "Someone is singing," Efran said.

Estes' brows drew down as he listened. "That's Polonti," he noted. "It's a Polonti love song."

"Singing," Efran muttered. Then he looked at Estes in alarm. "A singer. It's a singer!" They darted to the door to the corridor at the same time. "Check on Kelsey!" Efran shouted.

"I'm there," Estes agreed.

They parted in the corridor, Estes heading to his quarters while Efran lunged to the stairs.

Down in the foyer, he looked at the doors standing open and glimpsed Minka descending the steps into the courtyard. She was watching the singer, his voice low now, open the carriage door for Adele and assist her in.

Efran ran out the doors too quickly to negotiate the steps and fell down them, landing at Minka's feet. "Efran! Are you hurt?" she cried. Instead of wasting time trying to get up, he threw his arms around her legs to prevent her moving. "Efran!" she exclaimed. But she looked up again to watch the carriage door close, and the driver start out of the gates.

The carriage driver looked back to lift his hat and call, "Lord Awfyn is sending an apology in a cart!" Then he turned to direct the horses and carriage down the switchback.

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Chapter 22

As the singer was still singing while the carriage rolled down the switchback, Efran did not let go of Minka's legs. Other women had come out of the doors to listen. Still on the ground, Efran turned his head and ordered, "Madea, get back in the kitchen!"

"You don't have to shout," she said dreamily, then sighed and turned away as the song dissipated.

But in the carriage with Adele, the singer sang on as they passed the Abbey plots and then the workers at the wall. Some of the men glanced over, but Barr stopped to watch the carriage pass, recognizing both the singer and the song.

Someone came to his side, and he turned to look at a blonde girl eyeing him. "I've been watching you work," she admitted with a hazy smile. "What's your name?"

"Barr," he said promptly.

"I'm Lucy and I'm seventeen," she said, toying with her braid.

In the courtyard above, several soldiers stood looking down at Efran, still spread on the gravel. "Can anyone still hear him?"

"No, Captain," Neale said. "The carriage has gone over the stone bridge."

Exhaling, Efran let go of Minka's legs and stood, brushing gravel from his sleeves. "Did he sing leading you to Awfyn in Westford?" he asked her.

"No," she said, studying him.

"But he sang to you while you were there, didn't he?" Efran pressed.

She blinked. "Yes, for quite a while. But then Barr reminded me that you were waiting, so we left."

"That's why you were gone for so long." He grasped her shoulders and pressed his lips to her forehead. "But you came back to me," he said, almost on a sob.

"What . . . ?" she asked.

"He's a singer, a *mele*. It's—it's a gift, like the *aina*, except with song. He sings love songs to attract women. But it doesn't work on Polonti women, only foreigners, Southerners. Women who hear his song are drawn to Polonti men," he said, watching her.

"Yes, I heard that song," she said. "But I wasn't affected like that at Awfyn's. I stayed to listen because it was beautiful. No, I heard that song long before then."

"When?" he asked unsteadily.

"I heard it in the rain, almost a year ago. I heard the rain singing to me the night before I found you lying in my

henhouse. I knew there was something in it; it was so beautiful,” she said, remembering. Then she looked at him, laughing, “Silly boy, I’m already in love with a Polonti. The magic has already been worked on me; I can’t fall in love with anyone else.”

He fell on her to hold her. “I’m not crying,” he insisted, wiping his face on her hair.

“But don’t you see?” she said, pulling away slightly. “Adele heard the singing and left in his carriage. Awfyn took care of it like he said he would.”

Efran’s mouth dropped open. “Did he—draw her for himself or one of his men?”

“For himself!” she said scornfully. “What do you think?”

They all looked down the switchback, but since the carriage had long since departed, what they saw were two people walking up hand in hand. Frowning slightly, Efran watched Barr approach with a girl in hand. “Captain, I’d like to request quarters in the fortress, at least until I can lease a house,” Barr said.

Efran opened his mouth in a half-smile, watching the girl hang on his arm. “You would?”

“Yes,” Barr said. “This is Lucy, and we’ve just married. With her parents’ permission,” he added hastily.

Efran glanced down at Minka—*See?* Then he told Barr, “Go tell Doane I gave you leave, and have him put you on the waiting list for a house.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Barr said as Lucy reached up to play with his spikes.

“Congratulations, Lucy. Barr,” Minka said, kissing first one and the other on the cheek.

“Thank you,” Lucy said, twining her fingers in his. Glancing up at Efran, she murmured, “You could be brothers, you’re so alike.”

“We are brothers,” Efran confirmed. “And I wish you all happiness as well—though I’m not kissing anyone,” he ended on a grumble.

Minka smiled at the newlyweds and murmured back, “I will kiss anyone I wish.” Barr and his new bride went up the steps into the foyer, still holding hands.

Then, peering down the main road, Minka said, “The carriage driver said that Awfyn was sending an apology in a cart.”

Everyone turned to look. Just south of the stone bridge, at the edge of the plots, a driverless one-horse cart had stopped on the road. Something indiscernible lay in the cart. “Bring me a horse,” Efran said.

“One for me as well,” Minka quickly added. He glanced at her without voicing an objection, but she asked, “What are you expecting?”

“From Awfyn, there’s no way to know,” he muttered.

Horses were brought for Efran and Minka, along with Fiacco and Beardall to ride down with them. Descending the switchback, they noted that several workmen had gone over to look in the cart, then resume work. *That tells*

me there's nothing useful in it, Efran thought, then reconsidered. He couldn't imagine Awfyn sending a token.

As they pulled alongside the cart, Fiacco dismounted to hold the horse's cart reins, to keep him still. The first thing they noted was Monsell's ermine coat draped over the horse's back. "Oh, I gave that to Barr to wear," Minka said. "He must have forgotten it." Efran leaned over to take it up and toss it onto her. She laid it across her shoulders because the morning was chilly.

The contents of the cart were covered with a blanket. The others watched as Efran leaned down again, lifting the blanket slightly to look under it. His eyebrows elevated a fraction, then he dropped the blanket to tell Beardall and Fiacco, "Drop him in the Passage past the mill."

"Yes, Captain." Fiacco, holding the cart reins, immediately climbed up to the driver's seat; Beardall was still mounted beside him. They both turned with the cart back over the stone bridge and west down the road leading to the new bridge over the river. Ellor took the spare horse's reins to lead him back up to the hilltop.

"Who was it?" Minka asked as Efran remounted.

"Doddridge, with a broken neck," he said thoughtfully.

"Oh," she breathed. "Are you going to tell Dora?"

"Yes, she must be told," he sighed.

"May I come with you?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

They quietly walked their horses down the main road, then Efran turned, leading the way to Dora's house. They dismounted at the door, and Efran tied both sets of reins together on the post. Then he went to the door to knock, Minka at his side. Dora's frilly friend answered it. "Oh, come in, Lord Efran! And Lady. . . ."

"Minka," she said sweetly, entering behind Efran.

"I need to speak to Dora," Efran said, looking around.

"Certainly. Have a seat; I'll call her," the woman said, indicating the chairs in the front parlor.

Efran nodded as she left the room. Minka sat, but he remained standing, poised to pace if necessary.

Shortly, Dora entered. "Lord Efran! What a nice surprise. And Lady. . . ."

"Minka," she said sweetly.

"Good morning, Dora. Please sit down," he said, indicating the settee. She sat, and he sat beside her. "Dora. . . . Your son has been found dead from a broken neck. I don't know how it happened; it could have been an accident," he said in a low voice.

"Oh," she said in a whisper.

"I am very sorry. However I can help you, I will," he said.

“I want to see him,” she said.

“I’m sorry; he’s already been consigned to a burial at sea,” Efran said.

She was silent a moment, then she asked, “Where did it happen?”

“Probably in Westford, but I will have to make inquiries to know for certain,” he said.

“Oh,” she said again.

He stood, and so did Minka. He said, “I don’t expect any further—trouble, but don’t open your door to any men you don’t know. If you feel threatened by anyone, you must let me know. The men on the wall have already been alerted to respond if you call.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” she sighed, still seated.

He bent to kiss her head. “I’m sorry, Dora.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. Efran gestured to Minka, and they left.

Efran and Minka remounted to regain the road to the switchback. She began, “I feel so sorry--” She was cut short by a call behind them, and they both turned to see Justinian riding in Averno the baker’s cart toward them.

Minka drew in a breath. “Who’s going to tell him?” she whispered to Efran.

“He’s your friend,” he grunted. “But I will.” She gazed in gratitude at him, and his eyes rested on her in contentment.

Drawing up to them, the baker pulled back on his horse’s reins. Justinian said, “Hullo, brother. Minka. The news of the hour is that Doddridge is dead.”

“Do you know who did it?” Efran asked.

“Not yet, dear brother. That will require more inquiries--and more royals,” he replied.

Efran nodded. “Check with Doane. Bear in mind your budget.” Justinian glanced up, curling a lip in displeasure, then Efran casually added, “Adele has gone to visit Awfyn.”

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Chapter 23

Justinian looked at Efran blankly. “Adele has gone to visit Awfyn? The—huge one-eyed man who’s been helping to empty your treasury?”

“That’s the one,” Efran confirmed.

“By herself?” Justinian added in alarm.

“He sent an escort,” Efran said.

“He sent for her?” Justinian repeated in greater alarm.

“Yes,” Efran said, biting his lip.

Justinian stirred in aggravation, and Avere said, “Excuse me, but I have deliveries to make. You may ride on up with me or I’ll let you off here.”

So Efran turned his horse to begin walking up the switchback. Minka kept right with him, and Justinian beckoned the baker to drive. He clucked his horse to begin moving again. Justinian stood in the cart to shout at Efran, “Who went with her from the fortress?”

Efran glanced at Minka, who shook her head. “No one,” he said over his shoulder.

“No one?” Justinian shouted in outrage, and the baker’s horse flattened its ears.

“That’s correct,” Efran replied, looking at Minka, whose face was contorted in a mixture of sympathy and laughter. They were mounting the switchback at a walk, riding beside the cart.

“This is unacceptable! I demand satisfaction!” Justinian bellowed.

The carthorse lurched slightly and Avere said, “Stop shouting or I’ll have to put you down.”

Efran said over his shoulder to Justinian, “Do as you will; it’s none of my concern when she left willingly.”

As they were approaching the gates, Justinian held his reply until Avere pulled the cart to a stop in the courtyard. Justinian scrambled out to accost Minka as she dismounted. “Did you see her leave?”

“Yes, Justinian,” she said sympathetically. “She left of her own will.” Efran dismounted, giving their horses to Greves to take around to the stables. But Efran stayed nearby.

“When will she be back?” Justinian whined.

Minka replied, “I don’t know. You probably have to wait to hear from her.”

His eyes narrowing to slits, Justinian looked over the switchback. “This will not stand,” he said firmly. Turning back to Minka, he said, “Do you know where Awfyn is?”

“For now,” she said cautiously.

“Take me to him,” Justinian commanded.

Minka said, “If my lord permits.” Then she looked at Efran, who looked away, groaning. “He is her husband,” she reminded him.

Efran looked down at her while she waited with frank eyes. He said, “I will go with you.”

She smiled warmly at him, and Justinian said, “Well, then! Horses, man!”

The gate sentry, Tourse, looked to Efran for his word. The Captain said, “Minka and I are eating first. Then we will see to your quest.”

Justinian inhaled in vexation, but Minka smiled, taking Efran’s arm on one side and Justinian’s arm on the other to walk them both inside. Efran would not abide that, of course, but neither would Justinian; the moment Efran reached behind her to remove her hand from Justinian’s arm, Justinian kissed her on the cheek and walked off.

Efran and Minka enjoyed a cozy midday meal together, which did not often happen because of the demands on him. Afterward, he briefed Estes on what they were about to do and where. Minka had said that Awfyn’s new location was in the warehouse district; if Estes wished the precise location, he would have to disturb Barr, which neither Efran nor Estes wanted to do.

Then Efran and Minka checked on Joshua to find him sleeping again and Bethune dozing nearby. So they prepared to go out: Minka put back on Monsell’s ermine coat, which she was beginning to like very much, and Efran wore his uniform jacket.

In the foyer, he was about to send a sentry for Justinian when the wronged husband himself appeared. Efran’s face went rigid in the effort of restraining the laughter; Minka blinked several times and said, “I see you’re ready. Shall we go?” For Justinian was wearing tight riding pants, a white dress shirt open the whole length of the sternum with billowing sleeves, a flamboyant cape and broad-brimmed hat.

“In a moment. I need a sword,” Justinian replied to her.

With effort, Efran said evenly, “I am armed. You don’t wish to mar the shirt.” Minka turned reproving eyes up to him and Efran raised innocent eyebrows back at her, but Justinian took it at face value and strode out to the courtyard.

They mounted to ride down the switchback and up the road to Westford at a gentle lope. On the way, Minka began to have misgivings: she couldn’t see Awfyn bothering to lure Adele to a location so accessible to them. Efran, knowing their mission to be futile, rode simply in enjoyment of an outing with Minka, despite their unwanted accessory.

When they reached Westford, Minka said, “I know we went up this street and then turned on Broad, but I don’t remember how exactly we got to the warehouse district.”

“I will show you. Watch for the singer,” Efran said. She nodded, but felt in her bones he wasn’t around; she wasn’t discerning the tingle of his presence or the warmth of his song.

As promised, Efran led them reliably to the block of warehouses. They rode among them until Minka said, “That one! With the falling bricks. And there is the rusted door! That’s it.”

Efran dismounted to try the handle, which was locked. He knocked, putting his ear to the door, then shook his head. Justinian dismounted to nudge him aside. “Excuse me, brother. Time for the expert to work.” Efran looked to Minka, expecting praise for not laughing, but she was the one who had to cover herself by coughing.

Justinian withdrew a pocket wallet from the sash at his waist and opened it to select a slender tool. While Efran scanned the area, Justinian inserted the tool’s point in the keyhole and popped the lock open. “We should be able to bring our horses in,” Minka said, dismounting.

Sure enough, they entered the same anteroom that she and Barr had found earlier. But when Efran opened the door at the other end, they looked into one vast, empty space. There was not one piece of furniture, textile, or wall ornament remaining. Even the stone fireplace that had stretched to the ceiling was gone.

They walked into the barrenness, looking all around. Efran went to the center of the floor and bent to pick up something small. “What have you found?” Minka asked, and Justinian turned to him.

Taking the item that Efran held out, Justinian said, “It’s the ring I gave her after we were married.”

“Oh,” Minka breathed in pity, and even Efran looked on him sympathetically. With a last glance around the emptiness, Efran returned to the anteroom where their horses waited. Minka followed, and he lifted her to her saddle. A moment later Justinian appeared as well, so Efran relocked the door and they rode away.

The next several days, being cold and rainy on the hilltop, meant that it was especially nasty in Westford, so travel was minimal and work on the wall briefly suspended. Minka, bringing Joshua into the bedroom to play with him, found Efran lying on the bed with one of the books of the *Latter Annals* open on his chest. Glancing at the books lined up on the shelves, Minka saw that it was the last book of the series, the ninth, that lay open but currently unread.

“You’re not reading,” she observed. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like it,” he said.

“Why?” she asked, lifting Joshua to nuzzle him.

He watched her. “It’s . . . discouraging to read what once was, but is no more. During Ares’ and Henry’s time, Lystra was—secure and Westford was a powerhouse. Now, Lystra is no more; the palace of Westford is no more; the army is disbanded; the city itself is just a shadow of what it had been. The spirit is gone. The series has ended.”

“Oh, no, Efran!” she cried. “Here is the spirit of Westford.” She held up the baby. “It’s just moved south. During Ares’ time, all this land was nothing but meadows where the wolves lived. Now, everyone from Westford comes here! The new mill is here; the new businesses and trades are here. The best of the army has relocated here; the last Captain of the Red Regiment is now Lord of the Abbey Lands. The story hasn’t ended; new books are being written right now.”

He sat up to carefully lay her down with the baby on her chest. “What would I do without your ridiculous optimism?” he asked.

“Brood and mope,” she pouted. Joshua turned his head to pin his father with a one-eyed glare that looked disturbingly like Awfyn’s.

Efran lay back and laughed. “I stand convicted.”

The next few weeks of late February and early March passed in a burst of Abbey Lands activity. The wall was now at a height of eight feet in places. Efran and Estes decided that this was sufficient, with spikes embedded in the mortar along the top. At regular points along the inside of the wall, steps were constructed to allow for monitoring the land beyond.

Ryal and Mote were inundated with requests for marriage licenses, and the demand for more housing on Abbey plots became intense. A second builder was brought in, for whom Estes created new plots on the eastern fringes of the current plots. There was plenty of land.

Efran took care to make time for the children in all this activity, especially for Pia, who was at risk of being overlooked because she was always in the woods. Efran had weekly sessions with her, during which she would nurture his capacity as an *aina*—a Polonti who communicated with animals—and his knowledge of *moolelo*—the Old Tongue, with its Polonti history. Despite the difference in their ages, she was intuitively far more advanced in this knowledge than he.

A warm late winter allowed for early planting; livestock births exploded. On March 10th, Efran turned 28. He knew this because of Therese’s meticulous record-keeping, but kept it quiet. The last thing he wanted was an annual celebration of his increasing age. He also knew from Marguerite’s record that Minka would turn 17 on May 7th.

Justinian continued his forays into Westford with renewed purpose. He spent less time socializing in taverns and more time searching. He made inquiries and followed leads. While he still collected news and gossip for Efran, which is how he earned his pay, he never stopped searching for Awfyn and Adele. At any time, he could file for divorce on the basis of abandonment, but he never would.

On March 14th, Efran received a special messenger who requested an audience in private. Recognizing him, Efran received him to hear the message and give his consent. Then he clasped hands with the man in a re-commitment to prior agreements.

Following, Efran went to Minka and Estes to tell them the news. He also gave Madea a heads-up. Then he made a general announcement to the Fortress: Awfyn and Adele would be coming to visit in three days.

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Chapter 24

Justinian received the news of Awfyn and Adele’s visit with quiet stoicism—it had been over a month since her leaving. Efran had a private talk with him about it, both to soften the blow and to assess Justinian’s reaction. Efran offered him the option to absent himself during their visit, which Justinian refused. Efran also made plain that there would be no challenges nor abuses of their guests. Justinian promised full compliance with this. Efran took him at his word, at the same time doubting that he had the self-discipline to follow through with it.

Efran and Minka also discussed what to do if Adele asked to see Joshua, now over three months old. Efran doubted that she would; Minka considered it a possibility if Adele thought it might afflict either of them. So they just decided that whether she asked to see the baby or not, they would contrive it not to happen.

Midmorning on March 17th, scouts rode furiously up the switchback to report that an enormous carriage borne by four draft horses was traveling south on the road to the Abbey Lands. This surprising news set in motion a flurry of preparations that had not been expected to be necessary until later in the day. Then Efran and Minka both changed into appropriate finery to welcome their guests. When the carriage was reported to be at the foot of the switchback, Efran, Minka, Estes and an honor guard of ten collected in the courtyard to receive them.

Watching the closed carriage ascend the switchback was a drama unlike anything that anyone in the courtyard had experienced up till now. The road had not been cut for the width of such a carriage, especially one pulled by a team of four large horses, and Efran sweat profusely watching the edges of the road crumble under the wheels. The bends were especially daunting, as the team and carriage were impossibly long for the acute turns.

So the observers watched the carriage driver simply cut across the bends of the switchback, the horses pulling almost vertically over unpaved ground to get the carriage to the next level. Straightening it on the road required the inside wheels to ride up on the grade, tilting the carriage at a twenty-degree angle. Minka swayed on her feet at several points, clutching Efran's arm for support. He hoped he wouldn't faint himself.

Somehow, miraculously, the carriage arrived at the gates, which were barely wide enough when fully open to admit its width. The Abbey honor guard collected on either side of the carriage door, then looked blankly at their Captain, not knowing where the steps were on such a vehicle, how to lower them, or how to even open the door. The carriage base stood about four feet off the ground.

The driver took care of that himself. Climbing down from the (very) high seat, he reached up with a rod to unlatch the door and draw it fully open. Then Awfyn, dressed in velvet finery, filled the open door and easily stepped down to the ground. He turned to lift out a great quantity of cream silk with gold embellishments and set this bundle on the ground beside him.

As both occupants of the carriage advanced to the waiting hosts, Minka tottered and Efran surreptitiously caught her arm: she saw that the great bundle was Adele. And she was now enormously fat.

Efran held Minka's arm while he bowed and she curtsied to their guests. Efran said, "We are greatly pleased to finally have you both here as our guests. Welcome mighty Awfyn, our friend and ally; welcome dear Adele, our sister. Please come to our dining hall and be seated." He turned swiftly to hurry Minka up the steps so that he could whisper in a soldier's ear. That man received the message and ran to the dining hall ahead of them.

Then Efran and Minka waited while Adele navigated the steps leaning on Awfyn's hand (as his arm was uncomfortably high for her). Her eyes swept the foyer in contempt. "I can't believe you haven't dressed this up any since I was last here. But you probably can't afford to, what with buying chicken clothes."

She smirked at her little sister, but what Minka saw was the elaborate makeup painted on her sister's once beautiful face. She looked like a great fat porcelain doll in silks and gold. Her beautiful blonde hair was likewise intricately curled around a jeweled golden tiara, but Minka remembered not long ago when Adele needed nothing nicer than a summer dress to make the men around her fall on their knees.

"Hello, Adele," Minka whispered in shock.

Adele studied her sister, and her lip curled: "Still the mousy brown hair. You could brush it every now and then." Minka nodded in agreement, senseless.

"You probably remember the way, Awfyn," Efran said, turning down the corridor as he placed Minka's hand on

his arm. She gripped it for dear life. The guests passed lines of soldiers and hired servants who looked straight ahead while Adele sighed in bored disgust. “Same tawdry little uniforms. Sybil, don’t you ever get tired of being shabby?”

“No,” Minka said reflexively, and Efran glanced at her in laughing pity.

They entered the large dining hall where Efran led his guests to the front of the room. The principals would sit at a table facing the rest of the hall. A newly constructed great chair that would accommodate Awfyn’s four hundred pounds sat at the middle of the table, and a lesser but more ornate throne-like chair sat beside it. This was the last-minute substitution that Efran had ordered when he saw that Adele would not fit in the regular-sized but lush chair that had been set out for her.

Awfyn sat in the massive chair built just for him, finding it entirely adequate, although low. Efran waved away the sweating sentry who was waiting to seat Adele. Efran pulled out the throne for her; she flounced down, and then he, strong as he was, struggled to move it toward the table. He finally resorted to crouching behind the great chair and using his whole body to move it up.

He turned to Minka, then, to seat her beside her sister. Minka allowed herself to be moved up to the table without cognizance of it. So those seated at the head table were Kelsey, Estes, Efran, Awfyn, Adele, Minka, DeWitt, and Tera. Justinian, dressed in an inconspicuous brown suit, had entered quietly during the tumult of seating and taken a place on the fringe of the first row, well able to hear and see the head table while remaining out of their line of sight.

Wiping sweat from his lip and his forehead with his napkin, Efran took his place and waved for the servers. “I hope you had no difficulties getting here,” he said absently to Awfyn, who looked at him with his one eye and issued a deep chuckle.

“What is this?” Adele looked in horror at the bowl set before her. Minka looked down at it. “That’s creamed potato soup with parsley. It’s delicious,” she said.

“Are you serious?” Adele said at her. “Do I look like the kind of person who eats potato soup?”

“Yes?” Minka ventured.

“Take it away!” Adele said in disbelieving offense.

Minka picked it up and put it on her own charger. “There. It’s gone.” Then she picked up her soup spoon to begin earnestly enjoying it. The food server, seeing that he need not put another bowl in front of Minka, placed it on DeWitt’s charger beside her.

Efran was watching this exchange around Awfyn, who was contentedly slurping his soup. Then Efran, realizing that a bowl of soup had been placed before himself as well, began eating while casting glances down the table.

A plate of lightly seasoned fried fish was set before Adele, who suspiciously picked up her fish fork. This she studied in disbelief. “Pewter. I have a pewter fork in my hand,” she said as though it were crafted of cow dung.

“We have tin forks too, if you’d rather use that,” Minka offered. Efran quickly looked at her again. She was not wearing her devious face, the one she used when deliberately fomenting mischief. Instead, she looked almost blank, as if she were responding according to an inner script.

Adele put the fork down to stare at her. "Why don't you bring out the gold ware from your Treasury?"

"Oh, we don't have any left. We gave it all to Loizeaux to not attack us," Minka said conversationally. This was a random piece of fiction that just fell from her lips. Efran studied her, then watched the result of the utterance.

Adele sat back, dropping the fork in disgust. "Can you believe that?" she said to Awfyn. Turning back to Minka, she said, "Loizeaux swears you didn't give him anything."

"Maybe," Minka said. "It's hard to remember." She picked up her pewter fork to eat her fish. DeWitt looked at her, then directed a smiling glance down the table to Efran, who was unable to translate it. He ate his fish warily, watching for what Adele would say about the main course of beef.

Servers refilled their goblets of water and ale. Adele carefully put aside the water, which was disastrous when spilled on silk, then looked into her other goblet. "What is this?" she asked in alarm.

"Oh, it's the most wonderful ale you ever tasted," Minka said earnestly.

"Ale," Adele repeated flatly. "You're offering me ale." Minka nodded energetically. Adele turned to Awfyn in wounded righteousness. He, having tasted the ale, drained his goblet and then raised it for a refill. The head server rushed to accommodate him, after which he left the bottle at his place.

Adele raised her hands and sat back. "Awfyn, I'm not touching this garbage."

He nodded genially to her, uttering, "You may eat when we return home."

She exhaled in vexation. "I can't believe this. I'm being starved by my own relations."

Minka changed the subject. "You look lovely, Adele. The dress is beautiful on you."

Adele looked at her in shock. "Do you think I care about compliments from you? You think Elvey is a good dressmaker!" Efran was weaving slightly in his chair, reconsidering his prohibition against abusing their guests.

"Oh, she is," Minka said joyfully. "I love her work. Everyone does."

Adele's fat face scrunched in derision, then she turned pitying. "Oh, yes. I forgot how poor you Abbey people are." If any of the Abbey people had still been listening to her, including DePew, who was seeing a return on his investment of twelve hundred royals in Abbey Lands buildings, they might have felt insulted. But they were all enjoying the food.

"Oh, we were so poor at the beginning that when the abundance came, we could hardly believe it," Minka sighed, looking down the table toward her husband. She could barely see him around Adele and Awfyn.

"You might still be waiting on that," Adele smirked. The tender beef slices, pink in the middle, she rejected out of hand, so Awfyn helped himself to hers as well as his.

There was a period of quiet while she looked around for something else to criticize and everyone else ate heartily. Then as the servers began placing dessert plates on the head table, Minka said, "Oh! The garden crew built a conservatory on the back of the fortress and imported lemon, lime and orange trees! We have an amazing lime custard for dessert." (And in order to conveniently access this conservatory, they cut a second door in the western corridor.)

Adele sniffed, “You make that sound like a miracle.” But she picked up her pewter spoon to eat the custard. All of it.

“Madea works miracles in the kitchen,” Minka said dreamily. “Garrett has made the gardens into a paradise. Gerard and his crew miraculously built barracks into the south cliffs. Estes just waved his hand over the plots and they filled up with families, fields, and businesses. It’s all a miracle, and I am so grateful to be surrounded by the people who did it,” she said, looking at DeWitt beside her. He smiled back at her, his eyes moist.

“Oh, go on,” Adele said in contempt, pushing the empty custard dish away. By this time, her more transparent hearers were mirroring that contempt back to her.

Minka sat looking at her idolized older sister. Adele had once drawn the attention of the most powerful men on the Southern Continent not just for her beauty, but also for her ability to manipulate everything and everyone she met. But with Awfyn clearing the field of challenges around her, that manipulative energy had turned inward. She had distorted herself beyond recognition. The worst part was, she was blind to what had been done to her.

Apprehending all this, Minka blurted, “Oh, Awfyn! You are fierce!”

“You are welcome, Minka,” he rumbled. Few people who heard this interchange understood it, except that Minka had said something nice, as usual. Besides, slices of lemon custard pie were coming around as well.

But Efran was grappling with the understanding that Awfyn had conquered Adele by giving her everything she wanted. His allowing her to be self-indulgent with his wealth rendered her ridiculous. No one would take her seriously now.

Justinian stood, raising his goblet. “Awfyn and Adele: may you live together forever.” Those who heard him raised their goblets, but the entire head table stood to second the toast to their seated guests. Awfyn nodded, smiling, and Adele looked conflicted. The toast was nice, but not coming from her husband.

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Chapter 25

Awfyn and Adele prepared to leave immediately after the dinner, in the early afternoon. Efran was unspeakably relieved to see that the carriage driver had driven it back down the switchback while it was empty, and it now stood waiting at the bottom. There were places along the switchback road that would now require buttressing and repair.

Efran and Minka walked out to the courtyard to tell their guests goodbye. He shook Awfyn’s hand, whose massive paw engulfed his own, and Minka made Awfyn bend down so that she could kiss his cheek. Then they looked at Adele.

Frowning in thought, she asked, “Did the baby survive? Was it a boy or a girl? I don’t remember.”

Efran looked off, and Minka stood there without answering. “Oh,” Adele said, cocking a painted eyebrow. “I’m so sorry.”

“Come,” Awfyn rumbled. He swept Adele up in his great arms, and she tittered. Then Efran and Minka watched him carry her down the entire switchback to the waiting carriage. He loaded her in it, then turned to look up at them in the courtyard. Both Efran and Minka raised their hands to him, and he nodded before climbing into the carriage. And they watched it rumble up the road and across the old stone bridge.

“Will the bridge need repairs now?” Minka murmured.

Efran shook his head. “Ares built it solid.”

She then asked, “Does he love her?”

Efran exhaled, “Ask me something easy, lady, like how the heavens were made.”

She turned to be swallowed up in his arms, and he pressed his face to hers. Justinian’s voice said, “That looks like fun. I believe I’ll try it some time.” Efran and Minka disengaged to watch him shake out his sleeves, which he did whenever he was about to leave. He had changed into an elegant white suit. “We’ll still be brothers after I divorce Adele, won’t we?” he added.

“As long as you do what I say,” Efran said, studying him.

“Of course,” Justinian said. “I’m about to take a carriage into Westford, see what’s happening now,” he added, resetting his hat. “That was brilliant, by the way—inviting her and the Beast to dinner. The more people that see the new Adele, the less they’ll be inclined to help her in her schemes. Ah, my conveyance has arrived. Excuse me.” He walked toward the chaise approaching from the area of the stables, and Minka looked up at Efran, who raised his brows.

After Justinian had rattled away in his chaise, Efran released Minka to go get her chickening clothes on, and he turned down the switchback on foot to check on the wall. Halfway down he paused, realizing that he was still in his dinner finery. But he decided to go on down, because he was not intending to work.

The workers on the wall greeted him respectfully, as he was instantly recognizable. This alone almost made him turn back up to the fortress to change clothes. But he greeted them genially in return, walking and looking. The western part of the wall around the mill was still being debated, as it must be accessible to those coming from outside the Abbey Lands while still affording protection to the plots, the mill and the miller’s home.

So Efran walked, and looked, and thought. Doddridge was dead, as were Gotha and Graduliere; Adele and Monsell were neutralized; Awfyn was an ally. But he did not feel reassured. He was still tensely waiting for an attack, and he did not know why. Was it something he had left undone? Someone he had underestimated? A wild card in the deck? Or just his own fears?

He surveyed the wall as he walked, approving the iron spikes atop the finished eight-foot-tall sections. He looked back at the plots and fields bordering the wall, and saw that many of the leaseholders were erecting fences around their properties, which was to be expected. However, an easement of at least four feet all along the inside of the wall was necessary for patrol, and some tenants were fencing their plots clear to the wall.

Shaking his head, Efran turned back to go look for the foreman, then stopped dead at the back of the plots. Behind a house three rows up, a man lifted what appeared to be a trap door in the ground and then disappeared down into it, as though by a ladder. Then the door was lowered by an arm reaching up.

Efran absorbed this. There was nothing inherently wrong with a leaseholder digging an underground room or

storage area, but it was something that Estes should know about, and have the right to inspect. Such hidden rooms were a temptation to traffic in contraband.

Noting the location of the house, Efran turned back to walk up the main road until reaching the side road on which that house stood. He turned down this road, then advanced up the walk, looking for a signboard. But there was nothing to identify the house or the leaseholder. Efran paused at this; all plots and houses were to have identifying numbers and names. Vaguely troubled, he went up to the front porch and knocked on the door.

It was opened quickly, as if he were expected. Efran looked at Doddridge, very much alive, and with undamaged cheeks.

After helping Marlett set up new feeding stations for the chickens and cleaning out one coop, Minka decided that was enough chickening for one day, and went to the well to wash her hands. As she was shaking them dry, Estes came out, spotted her, and walked over. "I'm glad to see you making good use of the chickening clothes, Minka."

"Yes, I'm having great fun," she smiled. "And working more than I ever did at the first coop!"

"Ah. Well, where is your husband?" Estes asked.

"Probably down at the wall, Estes. I left him at the courtyard, and that's where he looked to be headed," she said.

"Yes, I found several of the men he spoke with. He's not there now," Estes said pensively.

She stilled. "He's not down anywhere on the plots?"

"I will look again," he said, turning.

"I will come with you," she said.

She accompanied him back to his second-floor workroom, where he gathered men to give them instructions: four were sent to the plots to look for the Captain; two were sent to the stables to check for missing horses; four were designated to search the fortress. Minka checked to see that the Treasury signet was still in its hiding place, then she went to look in the hidden library and staircase to the Treasury, but he was not there.

When he was not found after an hour's search, forty men were sent to search every house and building on the Abbey Lands on the pretext of looking for an escaped miscreant. Efran was not found. The search was extended to the Passage and the forest abutting it, but Efran was not found.

By dinnertime, it was apparent to all the searchers that he had been captured or killed. Estes, finding Minka on her knees before the crucifix in the keep, laid a brotherly hand on her shoulder. "Minka, we will find him."

"Estes." Weak with grief, she laughed, "Now I know how he felt when I was gone so long in Westford with Awfyn."

"Yes, I wanted to ask you how we can contact him now," he said.

"He didn't tell us, or me," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know." She dropped to her knees to cry again.

“Come, Minka. Let us get you dinner. You must stay strong,” he urged.

“Yes,” she said, standing shakily, and he led her out.

Efran opened his eyes and turned his head, wincing at the pain. It was dark all around him, and he was lying on a hard floor, which felt like stone. He tried to get up, but his hands and feet were bound. Just shifting his position on the floor enabled him to feel the tender lump on the back of his head. So, whoever Doddridge had been expecting when Efran appeared at the door had come up behind him and knocked him out cold. And how could Doddridge be alive and unmarked when Efran had slashed him and Awfyn had killed him? All Efran could imagine was that he had a doppelgänger.

First thing, Efran must get his hands free. They were tightly bound behind his back, so someone knew what he was doing in tying them. Efran concentrated on untying them. He worked his wrists back and forth, up and down, apart and together, twisting every which way, as hard as he could.

It took a long time, and burned the skin on his wrists, but eventually he felt the rope slacken so that he could pull one hand farther and farther out until it was free. From there, it only took him a few seconds more to dispense with the rope altogether.

Getting the rope off his ankles was only a matter of patience: find the knot; find the end; work it out. The only complication was that he had to do it in the dark. Despite that, in a few more minutes he was unbound. He still had a raging headache from the blow, however. And the room was stuffy; unless the door was opened within hours, he could suffocate.

With his hands and feet free, he turned to feel the wall: it was rock—limestone, probably. And then he remembered that there were supposedly caverns that ran through the Abbey hill. This, obviously, was the room, or hold, or cave that the door in back of the unmarked house led to.

Getting to his feet, Efran walked all around the room with both hands on the wall and toes to the intersection of wall and floor. It was definitely a cave that had been chiseled in the rough shape of a room about ten feet long and six feet wide. Then he walked all around the room with his hands held as high as he could reach, but felt nothing. So he had no idea of the height of the room, or where the trap door might be. And there was no furniture, nothing to climb on.

He sat down against the wall to think and pray. “God of heaven, I cannot let them hold me for ransom. God of heaven, for the sake of the Abbey Lands, help me get out of here. Help me. . . .”

He broke off, aware of fresh air. There was fresh air entering the room from somewhere below him. He peered all around, but there was no light. Only fresh air—of that he was sure.

So he began feeling all along the lower wall and floor, especially where they met. And his fingers found a crack in the lower wall. It was only about eight inches long and an inch wide, but he found he could break off pieces from the edge of the crack just with his fingers.

He continued enlarging the crack by breaking off pieces until the rock got too thick. So he scooted back and brought one booted heel forcefully to the crack. The first blow opened a hole about six inches in diameter. This was encouraging, so Efran brought both feet together to kick again, harder, which enlarged the hole to about a foot in diameter.

Efran reached his hand through the hole as far as he could in every direction without feeling anything, so he stuck his head through. There was still no light to see anything by, but he got the definite sense of a larger space: there were echoes. Sitting back again, he drew back his feet to deliver another shattering blow, and the floor dropped out from under him.

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Chapter 26

Efran fell into darkness, finally landing with a splash in a pool of water. Surfacing, he began swimming with no clue as to whether a landing place was anywhere nearby. He swam determinedly—he didn't know how long—until at last he collided with a rock wall.

Feeling up the wall as far as he could reach, he found no ledge or handhold, so had to keep swimming along it, trying to find a place to land. But he was tiring, and his boots were dragging him down. With a prayer constantly running through his mind, he kept swimming, finding it harder and harder to keep his head up out of the water.

At last his hand found a ledge; he reached across it with both arms as far as he could, and kicked. But he couldn't hoist himself up; his arms were too tired, and the rest of his body waterlogged, especially his boots. As he began slipping back into the water, he thought he felt something underneath him; regardless, he was able to crawl up on the ledge out of the water. He had to lie on his back and rest for a while—he might even have fallen asleep for some time; he didn't know. Finally, he sat up to feel his way around. There was still no hint of light anywhere.

He took off his boots and socks and shucked off his jacket, then walked along this ledge until it came to an end. From there, he searched for handholds to climb. He reasoned that he must go up eventually, so this was as good a time as any.

Climbing was as hard, if not more so, than swimming. Since he couldn't see where he was going, he had to feel for handholds or likely paths upward. And he knew he couldn't hang on the wall forever; if he couldn't find a landing place before his strength gave out, he must drop to water or rock, near or far below.

By the time his muscles were trembling with fatigue, he found another ledge just large enough to lie on. As soon as he landed on it, he fell asleep.

“What is it?” Estes demanded.

At the door of the second-floor workroom, the gate sentry Hawk said, “This rock with the note was thrown over the gates. We ran out to look down the switchback, but couldn't find anyone; it's too dark, even with lanterns.”

Estes took the rock to untie the string and unwrap the paper from around it. Then he spread it out on the table so that DeWitt could see it in the lantern light. The note read: “We have your lord. Put 5000 royals under the west end of the stone bridge before moonrise.”

“Five thousand royals. They're out of their minds,” DeWitt breathed.

“Efran would never let us pay any amount,” Estes agreed. “But we must be prudent about it—first, we must demand proof that he’s still alive.”

“Yes,” DeWitt agreed.

So on the same paper, Estes wrote out, “We need proof that he is alive.” This he wrapped around the rock with fresh string and handed it to Hawk for placement under the stone bridge.

“Should we tell Minka?” DeWitt asked.

“No,” said Estes. “We will wait for better news.” DeWitt nodded.

Efran opened his eyes without knowing where he was. When he lifted up in alarm at his blindness and felt the rock underneath him, he remembered. He was ravenously hungry, but he had no more will to climb, for if he climbed to the top of the cave where there was no exit, what would he gain?

“God of heaven, I am dead unless you bring me out of this grave,” he whispered. “Save me, oh dear God, for my son, for Joshua . . . Minka, Toby, Noah and Ivy . . . Pia . . . for the Abbey Lands. Dear God, have mercy on us.”

Shakily, he stood. Instinctively, he knew he must move on, somehow, as there was no exit here. He had to continue searching. So he began feeling to his left for a further extension of the ledge or handholds. He was able to work his way to the side for a little while, and then up a little bit, but he was reluctant to strand himself on a wall with no exit.

As he leaned his face against the stone, he wondered how long he could hold out. Lifting his eyes in supplication, he saw something. At first he thought his eyes were playing tricks on him, or his imagination had produced something for him to look at, because he didn’t know what it was. It looked like a jagged white line in the darkness above him.

Focusing, he realized that what he was seeing was a jagged white line in the darkness above him. There was light. It was a break in the rock above. It was a possible exit, if he could get to it somehow.

In the morning, Towner brought Estes a package that had been left in place of the rock under the stone bridge. With DeWitt by his side, he opened the package, then dropped it to the table with a groan. DeWitt looked away in dismay. It was a bloody finger on a note which read: “Proof finger cut from a living man. 5000 royals”

“You have found something.” The men started at Minka’s voice at the door of the workroom. She was looking hard at the dismay in their faces. “What have you found?”

Estes began, “Minka--”

“What have you found?” she demanded.

With a sigh, Estes gestured to the table. “We got a ransom note last night for five thousand royals, and we asked for proof that he was alive.”

Shaking, Minka went to the table to look down on the note and its proof. Seeing the blood, the shriveled flesh,

and the bone, she dropped into a chair with a strangled cry, putting her head in her hands to sob as the men stood by in wretched silence.

Still weeping, she uncovered her eyes, forcing herself to look again at the last vestige of her husband--and stopped crying mid-breath. The men watched as she closed her mouth and looked closer at the gory proof that Efran lived.

“That’s not Efran’s finger,” she said.

Both men moved in. Towner watched tensely over their shoulders. “Are you sure?” Estes breathed.

“Yes, of course; I know his fingers. This one’s too short, for one, but it’s also the wrong shape, with the paddle on the end. Efran doesn’t have paddles. Also, the fingernail is bitten down. Efran doesn’t bite his fingernails,” she said in disgust. “This did not come from him.”

Estes, Towner and DeWitt looked at each other. DeWitt said, “They had him, and then lost him, and are still trying to make us pay.”

“Exactly,” Estes said, then turned with a wry smile. “Well done, Minka.”

“What is to be done now?” she asked.

“Wait for him to show up,” Estes said briskly, scooping the note and contents into the fire.

Eyes fixed on the jagged white line, Efran began climbing again, but carefully. He did not want to fall at this point. The problem was, he could not tell how far away it was, or how long he would have to climb to reach it. His strength was ebbing quickly.

But he found one handhold after another, and then dirt. He was scrabbling in soil, which was both encouraging and harrowing, for when he thought he had a handhold, it would crumble under his fingers. Then he was faced with grass roots, which presented another problem: he could not grasp them or dig through them. He had to reach the opening.

He looked in anguish at the break in the soil three feet away. The rock he climbed did not reach that far; there was nothing to grab to get him over there. “God of heaven!” he cried. Scrabbling desperately in the soil above him, he grabbed a handful of roots and pulled. They came down in his hand, which almost made him lose hold on the wall.

Dropping the roots, he tightened his grip on the protruding rock with his right hand before reaching up with his left for another batch. Before pulling this time, he made sure his grip with his other hand was secure. Then he worked those roots free of the surrounding soil and discarded them. Bit by bit, he was able to dislodge enough grass and dirt for daylight to appear directly above him.

He hung on the rock, almost sobbing, blinking with the dirt in his eyes. Hoisting himself up farther, he was able to reach his left hand through the hole and break more away, widening it. Then he held onto the rock wall with his left hand and reached his right arm through the hole almost directly above the rock, so that the ground did not fall away when he rested his weight on it.

By hanging on the solid ground with his right arm, he was able to enlarge the hole with his left hand until he

could push his head and right shoulder above ground. Finding a foothold on the rock below ground, he shoved himself up, breaking through with both shoulders. And from there, he climbed out to lie fully on the ground.

He had to lie there for a minute, thanking the God of heaven and letting his tears wash the dirt out of his eyes. Then he sat up to look around. The fortress was perhaps a mile to the west. South of where he sat, the lower reaches of the hill itself extended past him to the east. He was still on Abbey land.

Standing, he looked down at the hole. He must mark it so that no one would ride into it or fall into it. He had discarded his dress jacket and boots below, so he stripped off his damp, dirty shirt and dropped it beside the hole. Then he turned to begin walking west.

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Chapter 27

The surveyors who were marking new Abbey plots were the first to spot the shirtless, weary figure walking toward them through the meadows east of the fortress. They didn't recognize him at once, but then one said, Hadn't the Lord of the Fortress gone missing? And they started running toward him as he waved, but another jumped on his horse to ride for the switchback. Several others began riding to the Captain, who paused to wait for them.

"We found him! We found him!" the surveyor shouted as his horse bolted up the switchback. A crowd instantly formed in the courtyard, and someone started ringing the bell.

Soldiers began pouring through the gates, but Efran had borrowed a horse from a surveyor and was now loping up the switchback. Minka came running out of the gates on foot, predictably falling on the first level. While she was on the ground sobbing, riders were loping down the switchback behind her. Alarmed, Efran whistled, waving for them to slow down. They did, progressing at a walk instead.

Efran trotted to where Minka was slowly picking herself up, then he dismounted to lift her. Crying, she threw her arms up to his neck to sob on his bare chest. Suddenly she broke away to grab his hands and look at them, then shout at the approaching men, "I TOLD YOU!" Following that, she cried on him some more.

Abruptly noting that she did not have to reach up so far to hold his neck, she looked down at his bare feet. So he was only about nine inches taller than she instead of ten. Laying her head on his chest again, she inhaled shuddering breaths. When he began trying to talk to her, she started crying again at the sound of his voice. So Efran just held her and let her cry.

As the men pulled up behind her, Efran raised his face to say, "First, bring me something to eat and drink. Is Estes--? Yes, I see him coming."

"We'll get you that, Captain," Nyarko said, turning his horse back up.

When Estes and DeWitt arrived on foot, parting the waiting crowd, Efran told them, "I need you to ride out with me to the east meadow—we'll need at least twenty stakes and flags."

Estes said, "The surveyors below will have them. What happened, Efran?"

“The short version is, I fell into an underground cavern and climbed my way out,” he said. Minka raised up to look at him, but he was watching for the arrival of his meal.

“Where?” DeWitt asked tensely.

Receiving the plate of ham and bottle of ale from Nyarko, Efran said between bites, “In the section west of the main road—I’ll take you out there in just a bit.” While he chugged the ale, Estes and DeWitt were brought horses.

Refreshed, Efran remounted to turn the horse, and Minka cried, “Get me up!” He reached down and lifted her to his saddle. She threw a leg over to ride behind him. “That works,” she sniffled, grasping him tightly around the waist. Then he and Minka, Estes, DeWitt, and a dozen soldiers descended to ride east.

They stopped where the surveyors had been working so that Efran’s party could appropriate stakes and flags—also, the surveyor Keble, who would need to know about the cavern. As they progressed beyond the marked plots, Efran turned to say, “Everyone must stay behind me. I’m taking you to where I climbed out, which is thin ground. After we mark that, we’ll head over to where I fell in.” There were obviously a lot of questions that had to wait.

They set out at a slow lope, Efran watching for his shirt. As soon as he saw it, he stopped and dismounted. (He was still barefoot, and remained that way until returning to the fortress a few hours later.) “Minka *you must stay* on the horse right here.”

“Yes, Efran,” she murmured, wiping her nose. Still recovering from the scare, she was agreeable to doing whatever he told her.

To the men gathered around him, he said, “I fell down into a large cavern, and managed to climb up through a hole in the ground here. But anyone who rides or walks out here is in danger of falling down that same hole, or near it. I want to mark it as much as we can.”

“There *are* caverns underneath here, then,” Keble said, craning his neck to look around. Meanwhile, he was handing out stakes to the men closest to him—Efran, Detler, Ellor, and Gaul.

“Yes, step lightly. If you feel the ground give under you, fall back,” Efran said. “The rest of you stay here,” he told Estes, DeWitt, and the remaining soldiers.

Keble and the four soldiers progressed lightly. The ground remained stable as they arrived within ten feet of the soiled white shirt. When the ground sank under his foot, Efran put the first stake a few yards west of his shirt, then leaned forward to pick it up and put it on, uncovering the hole he had crawled out of. Then they fanned out around the area, tentatively testing the ground, placing stakes and flags at least a foot away from wherever it seemed to be soft. While that was good, Efran was afraid it wouldn’t hold up under horses.

When that was done, giving him some peace of mind, Efran said, “Now we go to where I fell in. It’s behind an unmarked house in the western plots”—a couple of miles from his point of escape. So they all returned to their horses.

Minka sat back so he could climb into the saddle. When he did, she eyed his shirt. “You’ve ruined another dress uniform,” she said wetly.

“I am very careless,” he said over his shoulder, and she leaned on him again.

Efran left the surveyor with his group, then he, Minka, Estes and DeWitt, followed by the soldiers, went down the row of houses at a walk until they came to the unmarked house. Efran told Estes, “I want to know who’s leasing this plot. This is where Doddridge answered the door.”

“Doddridge?” said Estes. “But—I thought he was dead.”

“So did we all,” Efran muttered. “But he is alive, and I want a bounty on his head. Someone else took the slash on his cheek, so got his neck broken, being mistaken for him.” Nodding, Estes sent a soldier for his record book of the plots.

As they dismounted to walk to the front door, Minka came right along with them. He turned to her, exhaling, but she pleaded, “I want to see where they kept you.” It had been about 24 hours since his disappearance.

He regarded her, then said, “Stay behind me.”

“Yes, Efran.” She might remain meek for another few hours.

He tried the door; finding it locked, he stepped back and kicked it open. He and those behind him poured in.

As might be expected, the house was vacant, not even furnished. Directing two men to the side rooms, Efran went on through the house to the back grounds. The trap door, newly installed, was right there where he had seen it from the wall. Efran leaned over to lift it and look in. A rope ladder was rolled up on the inside of the door. “Yes, this is where I was kept,” he said, glancing up. Minka had come around the house to the back to stand over the opening with them.

“Don’t go down,” he cautioned Ellor, who had started to unfasten the rope ladder. “It’s a small cavern that had been shaped with tools. But whoever did it weakened the structure. When I kicked at a crack in the wall, half the floor fell out with me on it.” He then told them about his falling in the water, swimming and climbing until he saw the light in the cavern roof. Hearing all this, and realizing how narrow his escape had been, Minka sat weakly on the ground.

He went over to lift her in reassurance. “The God of heaven heard me again—and you as well, I’m sure. It was no accident that I saw the light when I did.”

Those around him studied the hole with the trap door. DeWitt said, “So, someone discovered this cavern, possibly by falling through the ground to it, and decided to make use of it.”

“Probably, yes,” Efran said.

“That worries me,” Estes said. “We don’t know how much of the land, or how many of the plots are compromised by caverns close underneath.”

Efran agreed. “We will have to alert leaseholders of the possibility, and do that now.”

Estes said, “Also, we mustn’t allow this one to be occupied again until a barrier has been built across the top of the underground room.” While waiting for his lessee ledger, he directed several men to start with the closest plotholders and spread out from there with the news. He also stipulated that any who wanted to get out of their lease because of the newly discovered hazard could do so without penalty. (As it turned out, none of the leaseholders cared about the underground cavern, except the ones who were excited about the possibility. No

leaseholders wanted out of their leases because of it, and no future leaseholders were dissuaded from acquiring a plot because of it.)

A soldier ran up with Estes' book of lessees. Checking the location of this particular plot again, Estes looked down the columns and said, "This house was leased by Dora, as well as the other house."

Efran sighed, closing his eyes. "All right; I see that I must talk to her again. Minka will come with me; the rest of you go back up." She took his hand in gratification. He smiled at her, shaking his head.

On the way up, Estes told Neale, "Gather your unit and go search Westford for a man who has recently lost a finger. Let Justinian know as well, if you see him. Also, there is a bounty of one hundred royals on the head of Doddridge. All the men should know him by sight; he does *not* have a cut on his cheek."

"Yes, sir," Neale said, preceding him up the switchback.

While the men dispersed, Efran and Minka walked the horse to the second street over, where Dora's sat primly marked and planted in front with flowers. When Efran knocked, the door was opened by her fluffy friend again. "I need to speak with Dora," he said unhappily.

She looked dubiously at his filthy clothes, then said, "Well, if you must." Unwillingly, she left them in the sitting room before leaving to alert Dora. Neither of them sat.

Efran glanced down at the sad state of the white linen he wore, then smiled wryly at Minka. She gripped his arm, whispering, "You're alive, and whole, and some day you will learn to take off your good clothes before you step out of the fortress." He laughed silently at that.

Dora appeared in the sitting room, looking apprehensively at someone who might need to sit on her upholstered furniture. "Hello, Lord Efran. And—your wife," she faltered. Minka smiled without comment. "Please have a . . . seat," Dora offered weakly.

Efran remained standing. "Dora, does Doddridge have a twin brother?"

"No," she said quickly, clarifying, "Beddridge is his younger brother, by sixteen months."

Efran absorbed that. "And Beddridge was the one beating on you for money?"

"Yes," she sighed.

"You didn't tell me that," he said, mildly accusing.

"I didn't think it necessary," she said, drawing up in resistance. It made Efran remember her initial defensiveness of Doddridge when Efran was questioning her about his proposed tour of the fortress.

"Did you lease the second house for Beddridge?" Efran asked.

"Yes," she admitted.

"But his death left it vacant for Doddridge to occupy," Efran continued.

She protested, "I didn't know about that!" But she had obviously learned about it in the meantime.

“Where is Doddridge now, Dora?” Efran asked patiently.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Dora, he’ll die if he shows his face here again, and I’m sure he knows it. Don’t let him endanger you,” Efran pleaded.

“I appreciate your concern, Lord Efran, but I’m quite all right,” she said stiffly.

“All right, then,” he said in surrender.

Breathing out, Efran took Minka’s hand to leave. They remounted the horse to begin riding at a walk up the road with her clutching his waist from behind. He said, “I’m done. She’s made her choice and I can’t protect her from that.” She laid her head on his back, and he added, “I want to see Joshua now—and Toby, Noah and Ivy. Pia, if we can find her.”

“I’ll have someone go look,” she whispered, smiling.

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Chapter 28

Efran bathed and ate again. After playing with his older children as long as the tutor allowed, he lay in bed with Joshua on his chest and Minka beside him. He glanced up when she leaned over to begin stroking his hair back off his forehead. “It’s about to get in your eyes again,” she murmured.

“I told you it grows fast.” In the five weeks since it had been severely cut, it had grown past the spike stage to about three inches long all over.

“I prefer it long enough to bother you but not long enough to have to tie it back,” she judged. He thought about that, looking at her quizzically.

She laughed, snuggling him. “I’m only teasing. You can wear it however you like, as long as you don’t cut it.” Again, he looked bemused. “I don’t care, as long as I have you,” she breathed. That, he understood, and reached around Joshua to her.

Taking his hand to study his long, strong fingers, she congratulated herself again: “I knew it. Your hands are beautiful.”

“Thank you,” he said dubiously, whereupon Minka had to tell him about the ransom note and proof of life.

Thinking on that, he said, “Estes and DeWitt did the right thing. I’m glad you know me so well.”

“Every inch of you,” she murmured. So he had to put Joshua, now yawning, back in his crib.

Justinian, not even knowing that Efran had been missing, was in Westford today (March 18th). He had secured

his divorce from Adele, and was back as a player in the social scene. An Abbey soldier who located him at the Porterhouse Inn informed that they were looking for Doddridge, who was not dead nor scarred, and that there was a bounty of one hundred royals on his head.

“Ah. Interesting. Thank you,” Justinian said, and the soldier moved off.

Justinian was frankly disinterested. Normally, he would be happy to add 100 royals to his pocket cash, but he knew Doddridge also as the killer for hire, Calkin, whom he didn't care to cross. So he didn't make any effort to locate the man by either name.

But he had a new walking stick with a fancy silver knob which he was enjoying very much. He was still learning to handle it properly, walking with it and twirling it when necessary, for flourish. As he stepped along the street in his new blue suit with his fine stick, he glanced up at a man striding angrily toward him.

When Justinian recognized him as Calkin—Doddridge--his heart constricted, though Calkin was not looking at him, and whatever he was angry about, it was not Justinian. Calkin also didn't know that he was being shadowed by two Abbey soldiers, Coxe and Hawk, who were trying to get close enough to see his face and confirm his identity without arousing his suspicions.

Justinian, watching Calkin closely so as to stay out of his way, stumbled over a rock in the road which caused him to tumble directly into Calkin's path. As the killer's searing eyes turned to him, Justinian screamed, losing control of his cane. Its silver knob came down to land right between Calkin's eyes. He and Justinian fell together on the road, with Justinian landing on top.

While Calkin was groping for his knife, Hawk got to him first, shoving his own knife deep into Calkin's side. As Coxe helped Justinian up, Hawk checked the dead man's face. “Yes, that's him! That's Doddridge. You got him, Justinian!”

“What a takedown! I didn't know you had it in you!” Coxe exclaimed, shaking Justinian by the shoulder so hard that his teeth rattled.

Other Abbey soldiers came running up. “What happened?” “Who got him?”

“Justinian!” Coxe told his incredulous hearers.

Hawk related: “It was awesome. We were trailing Doddridge, but Justinian came at him head on. He [gesturing to Justinian] yelled and fell on him, hitting him in the face with his walking stick. Then he pinned him to the ground. Doddridge was drawing his knife, but with Justinian holding him down, I got him in the side.”

The soldiers gathered around the hero of the hour to congratulate him. “You've got a hundred royals coming!” someone exclaimed.

“No, no,” Justinian gasped. “These two men deserve it more than I do”--which simply solidified Justinian's status as an underrated warrior and man of honor. But his secret terror was that someone who saw what really happened would come forward with the truth.

The body was draped across a hired horse tethered to Justinian's carriage, then he was escorted by an honor guard to the Abbey Lands and up the switchback. Other soldiers had ridden ahead to alert Efran and Estes that the kidnapper of the Lord of the Abbey Lands had been caught by Justinian.

Doddridge's body was laid out in the foyer, where Efran came to look at him. "Yes, that's him. And Justinian got him?" Efran asked in disbelief, whereupon the eyewitnesses gave their account one more time. The hero, pale, stood apart from the excitement, casting about for a means of escape.

Efran listened, then said, "Pay him his hundred royals."

"No, no!" Justinian said, sweating. "The two who came upon him after I did deserve it more."

Efran looked astonished but gratified. "That is generous of you, Justinian. All right, give each of them—Justinian, Hawk and Coxe—thirty-three royals and ten silvers. Doane?" Efran turned toward his cubicle.

Doane came out walking on a brace which Wallace had designed and Abbey carpenters had constructed. "Yes, Captain; I'll send a man up to Estes' new room to get it."

"Thank you," Efran said, with a glance of approval at his new equipment. Turning back to slap Justinian on the shoulder, almost knocking him off his feet, Efran said, "We'll celebrate with a special dinner"--following which Hawk and Coxe would receive commendations for their part in apprehending Calkin. "Oh—did anyone find our man who's missing a finger?" Efran asked.

Younge said, "They found a body in the rathole, Captain—a man missing his left-hand forefinger. But no one claimed to know him."

"Ah. A good day's work, then," Efran said. He paused before Justinian, who was still quaking. Contemplatively, Efran said, "I've misjudged you, Justinian."

"No, no, you haven't," Justinian insisted, dreading what acts of courage might be expected of him now.

Laughing, Efran said, "Come, let's tell Minka. She'll consider herself as much vindicated as you."

Efran hesitated, then, wondering if he should tell Dora, or send her word. Then he shook his head; it was time he took care of his own. And he hauled a reluctant Justinian by the shoulder to the dining hall, where Minka waited.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on March 18th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

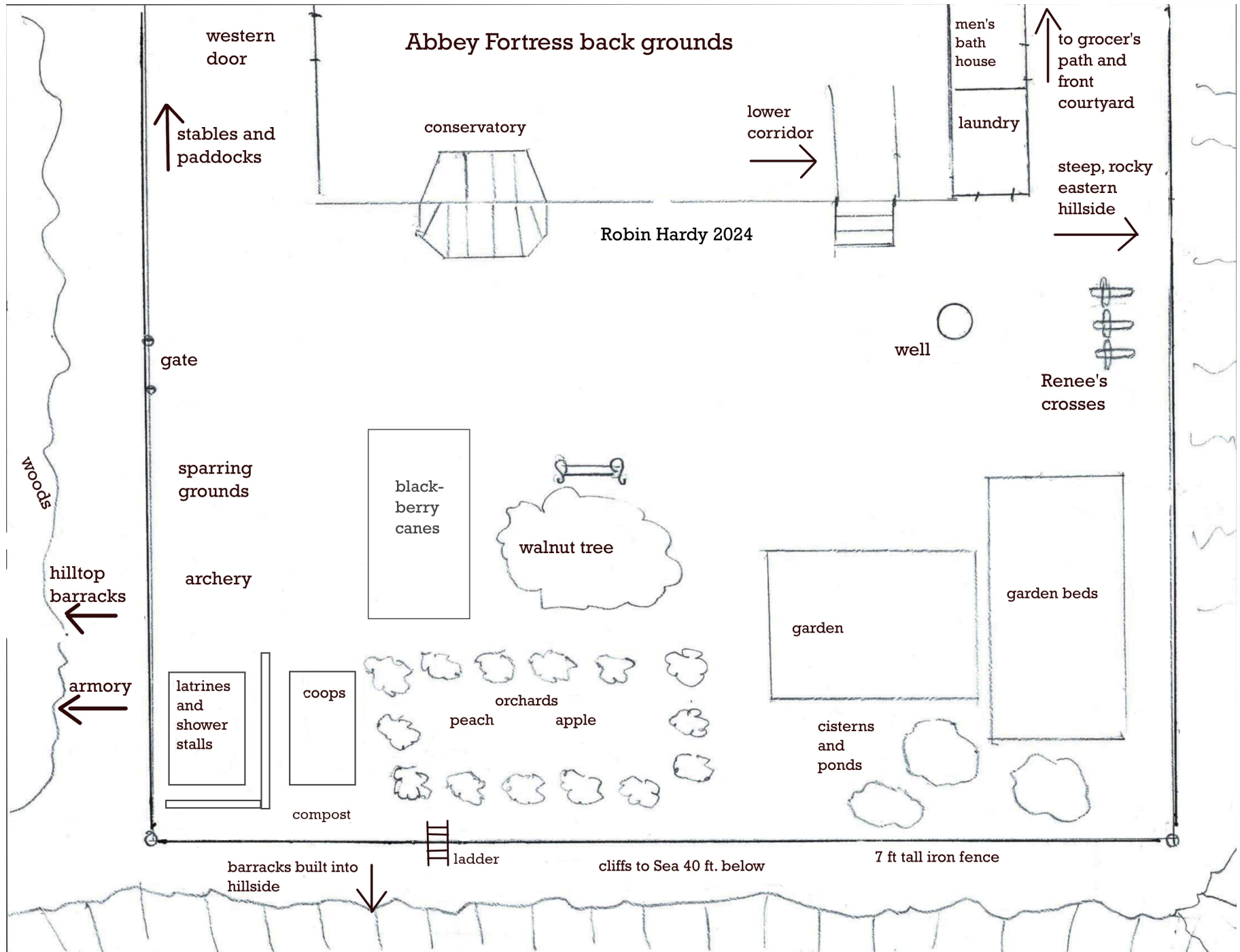
"You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you will live, and I will place you in your own land; then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it." ([Ezek. 37:13-14](#))

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and Awfyn the Giant* (Book 4)

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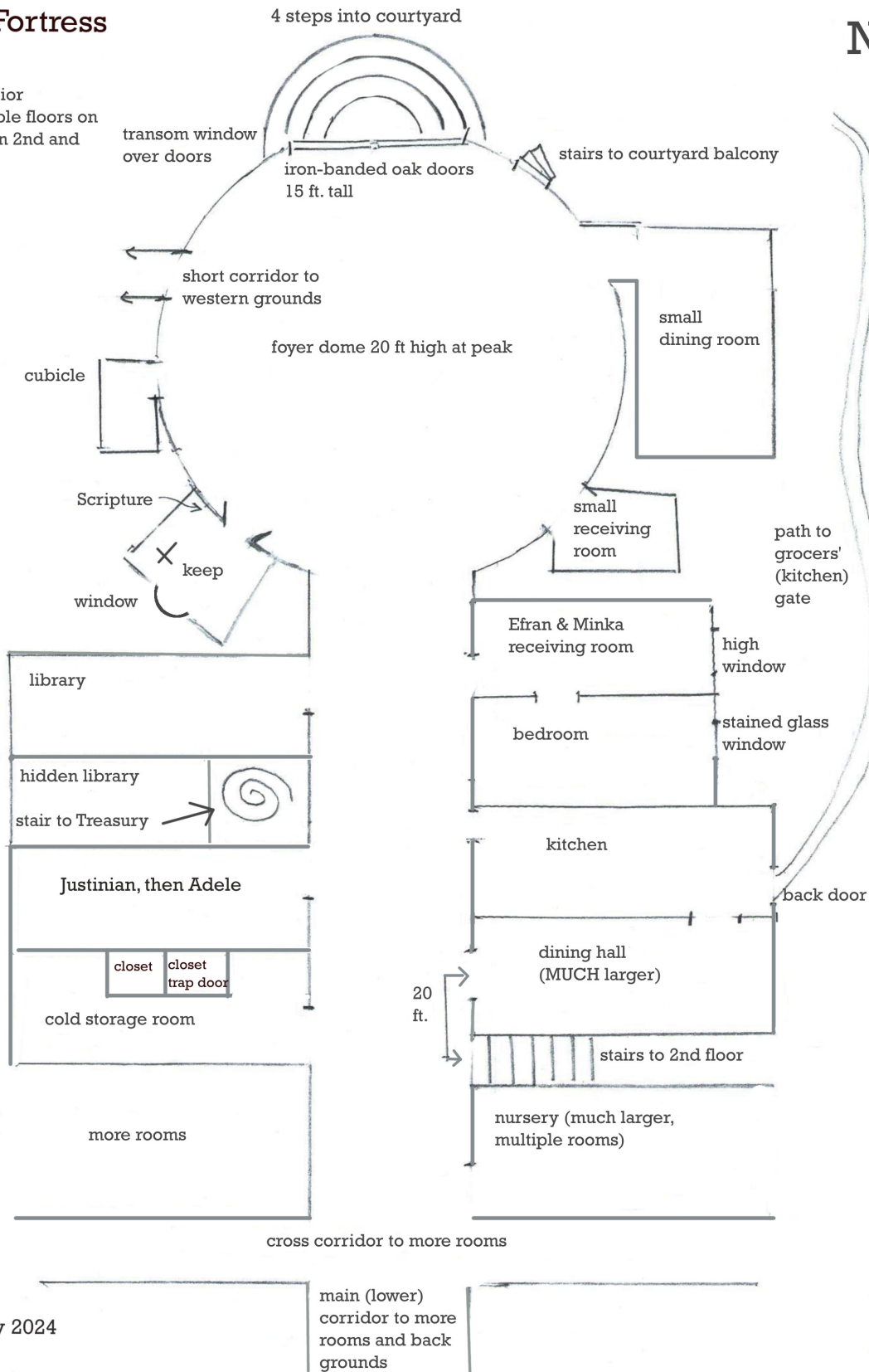
Adele—ah DELL
 aina—AY nah (child who commands animals)
 apothecary—ah PAH tuh ker ee
 Arenado—air en AH doh
 Ares—AIR eez
 Arne--arn
 Averne—ah VURN
 Awfyn—AWE fin
 Beardall—BARE duhl
 Bethune—beh THUNE
 Blature—blah TURE
 Blevin—BLEH ven
 boudoir—boo DWAAR
 Bowthorpe—BOH thorp
 bowyer—BOH yur
 Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)
 Chataine—sha TANE
 Chior—KEE or
 Conte—cahnt
 courtesan—KOR tuh zahn
 digestif—die JES tuh f
 Doane—rhymes with *loan*
 doppelgänger—daw puhl GANG er
 Efran—EFF run
 Eledith—ELL eh dith
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Erastus—eh RAS tis
 ermine—ER men
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus--YOUR us
 Eurussian--your uh SEE un
 Eviron—ee VIRE un
 ewer—YOU ehr
 Fiacco—fee AH koh
 Gerdie—GUR dee
 Goss--gahs
 Gotha—GOTH ah
 Graduliere--gra DUE lee air
 Greves--greevs
 Hartshough—HART soh
 Justinian--jus TIN ee un
 Kaas—kahs
 Keble—KEE buhl
 Kelsey—KELL see
kupa'a—koo PAY ah (oath of protection or loyalty)
 Loizeaux--lwah ZOH
 Lowry—LAHW ree
 Lystra—LIS trah
 Madea—mah DAY ah
mahalo—mah HAY low (thank you)

maka—MAH kah (friend); *maka ae*—mah kah AYE
 Marguerite—mar ger EET (hard g)
 Marlett—MAR let
mele—MAY lay (singer)
 Minka—MINK ah
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
 Monsell—mon SELL
moolelo—moo LEE low (Polonti history)
 Nicole—ne COLE
 Nyarko—nuh YAR koh
 ogle—OH guhl
 Ori—OR ee
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pindar—PIN dhur
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 Qarqar—KAR kar; Qarqarian—kar KAR ee an
 Renée—ren AY
 Rinkart—RING kart
 settee—seh TAY
 soirée—SWAH ray
 Stites--stights
 Surchatain—SUR cha tan
 Surchataine—sur cha TANE
 Sybil—SEH bull
 Tera—TEE rah
 Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
 Venegas--VEN eh gus
 Venegasan--ven eh GAS un
 Verrin—VAIR en
 Vories—VORE eez
 Windry—WIN dree
 Wirrin—WEER en



Abbey Fortress Interior

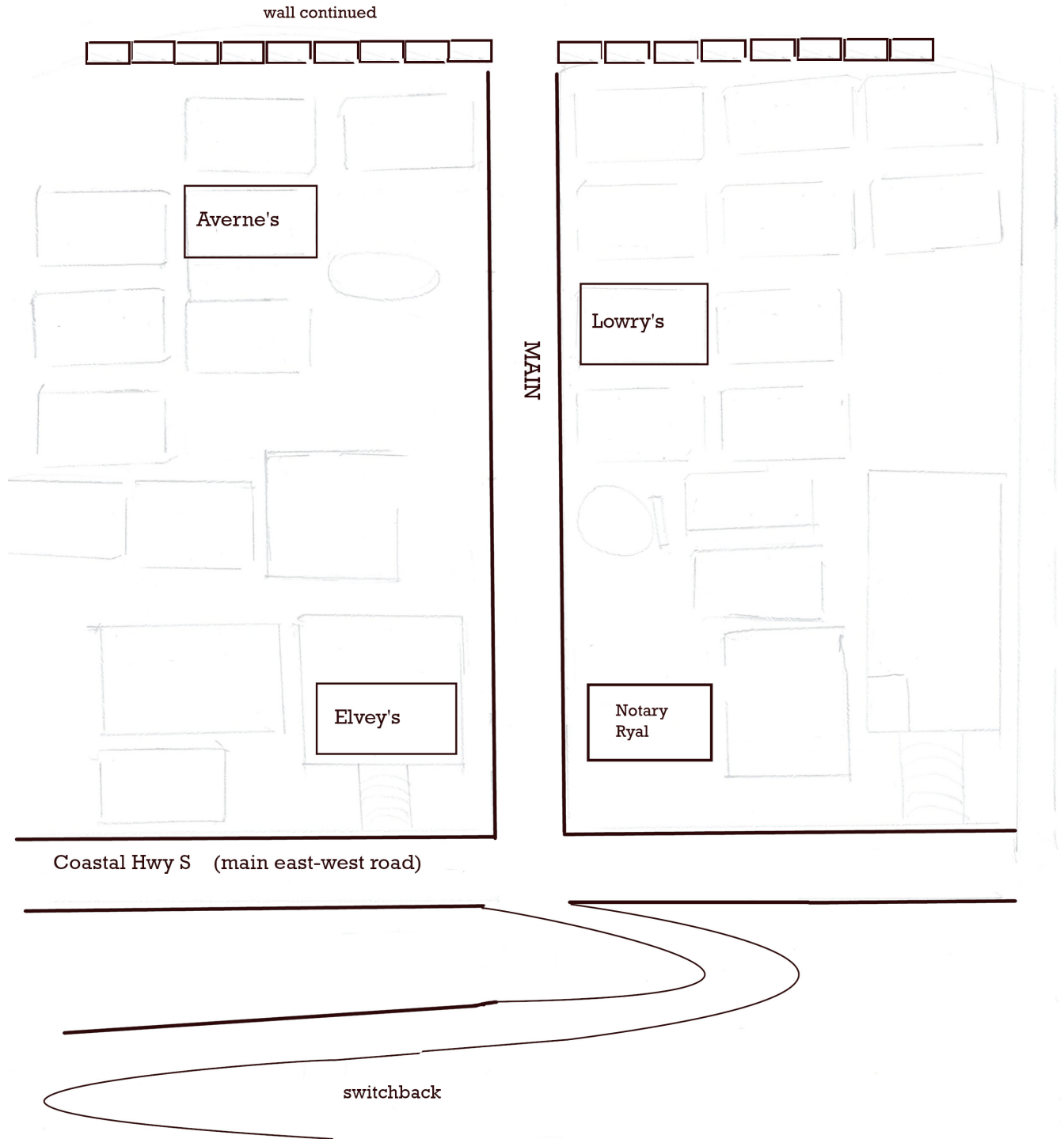
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



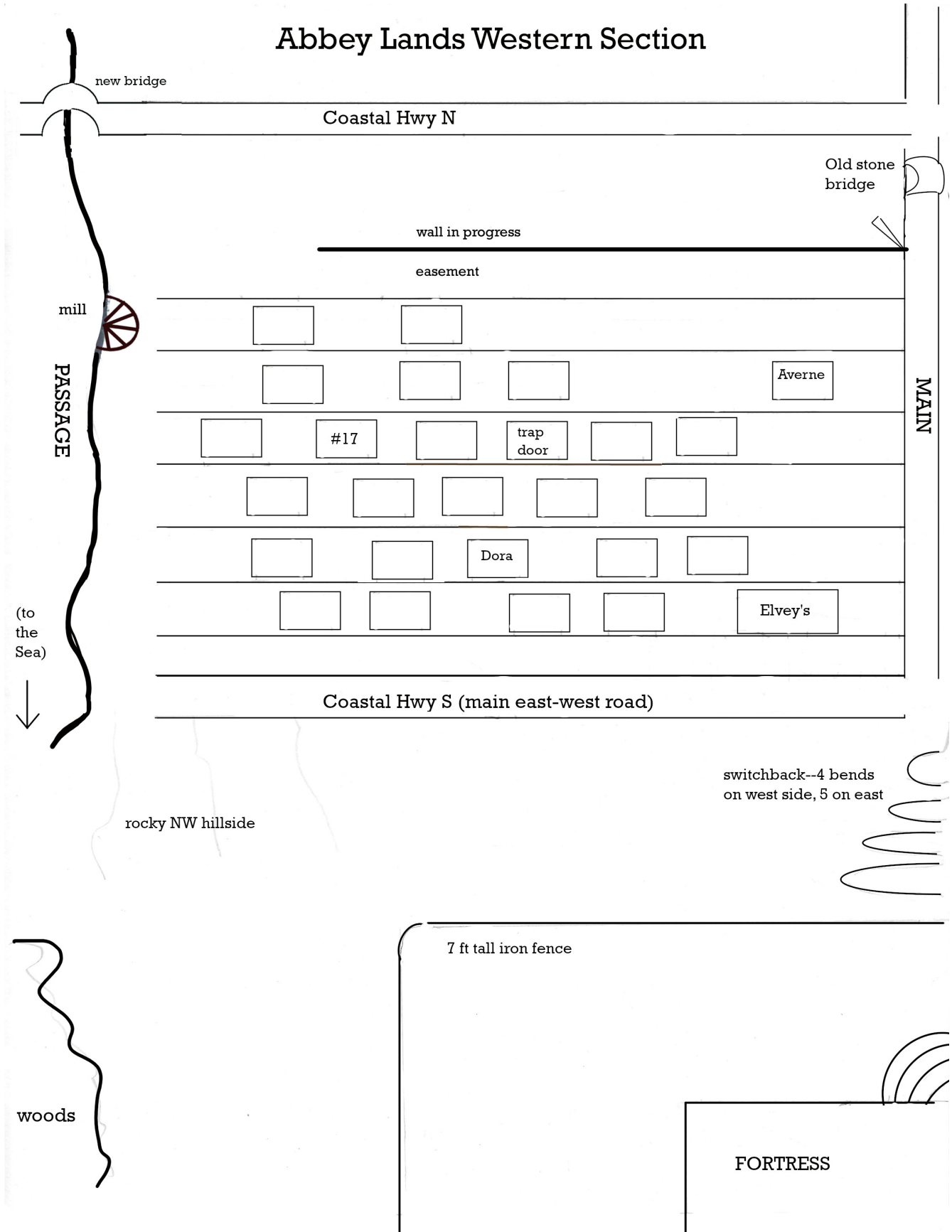
NOT TO SCALE

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Abbey Lands Main Road

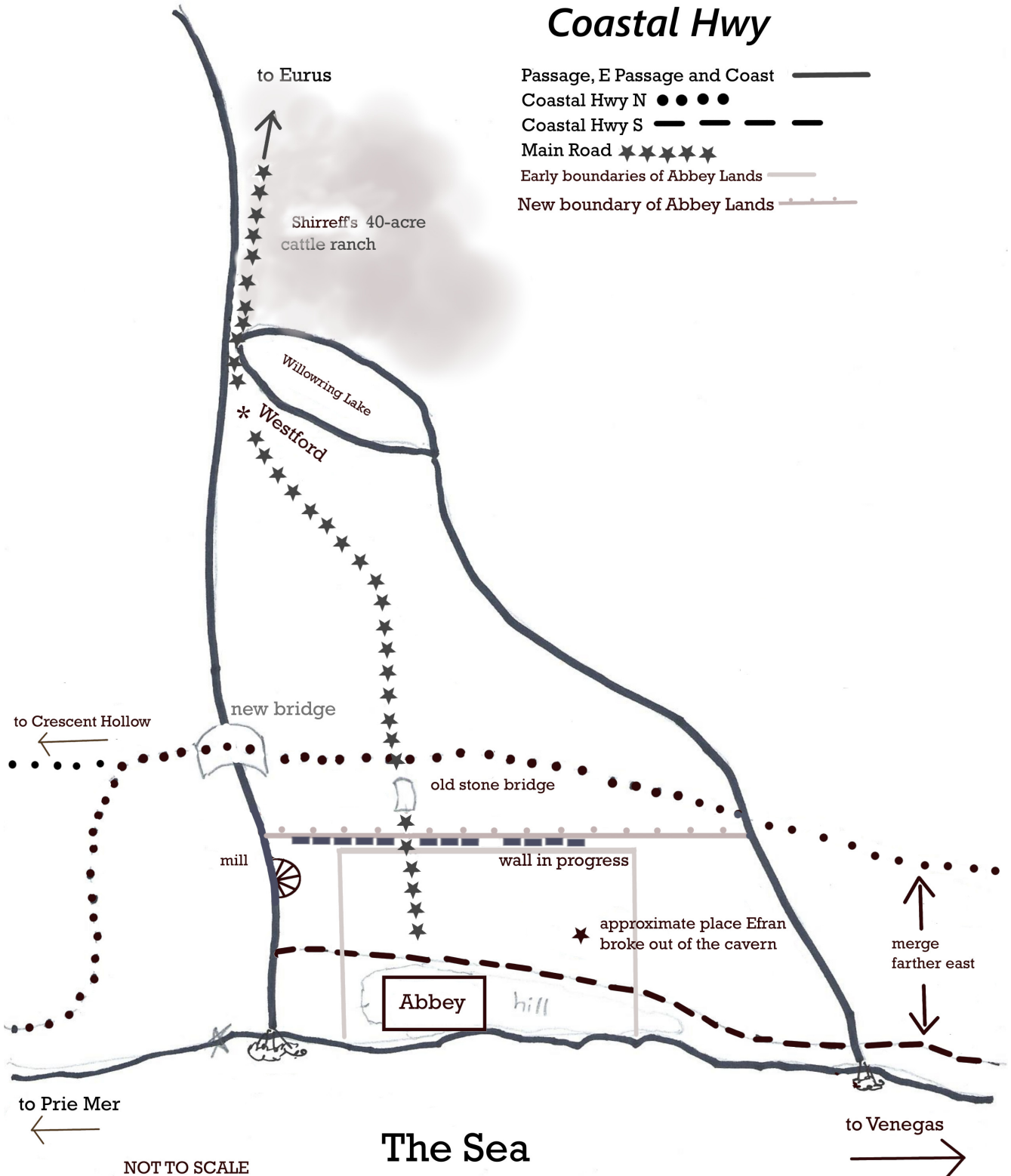


Abbey Lands Western Section



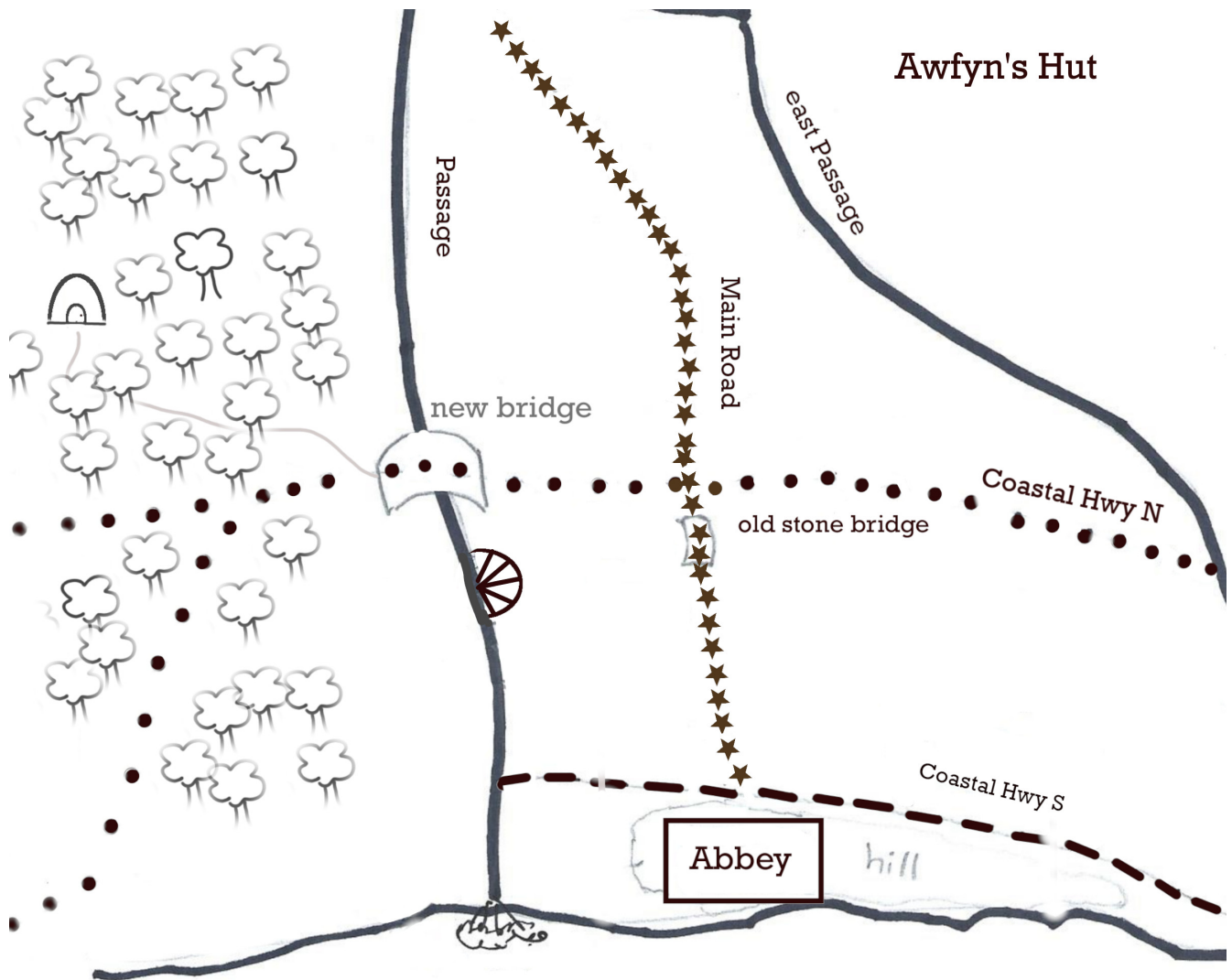
Coastal Hwy

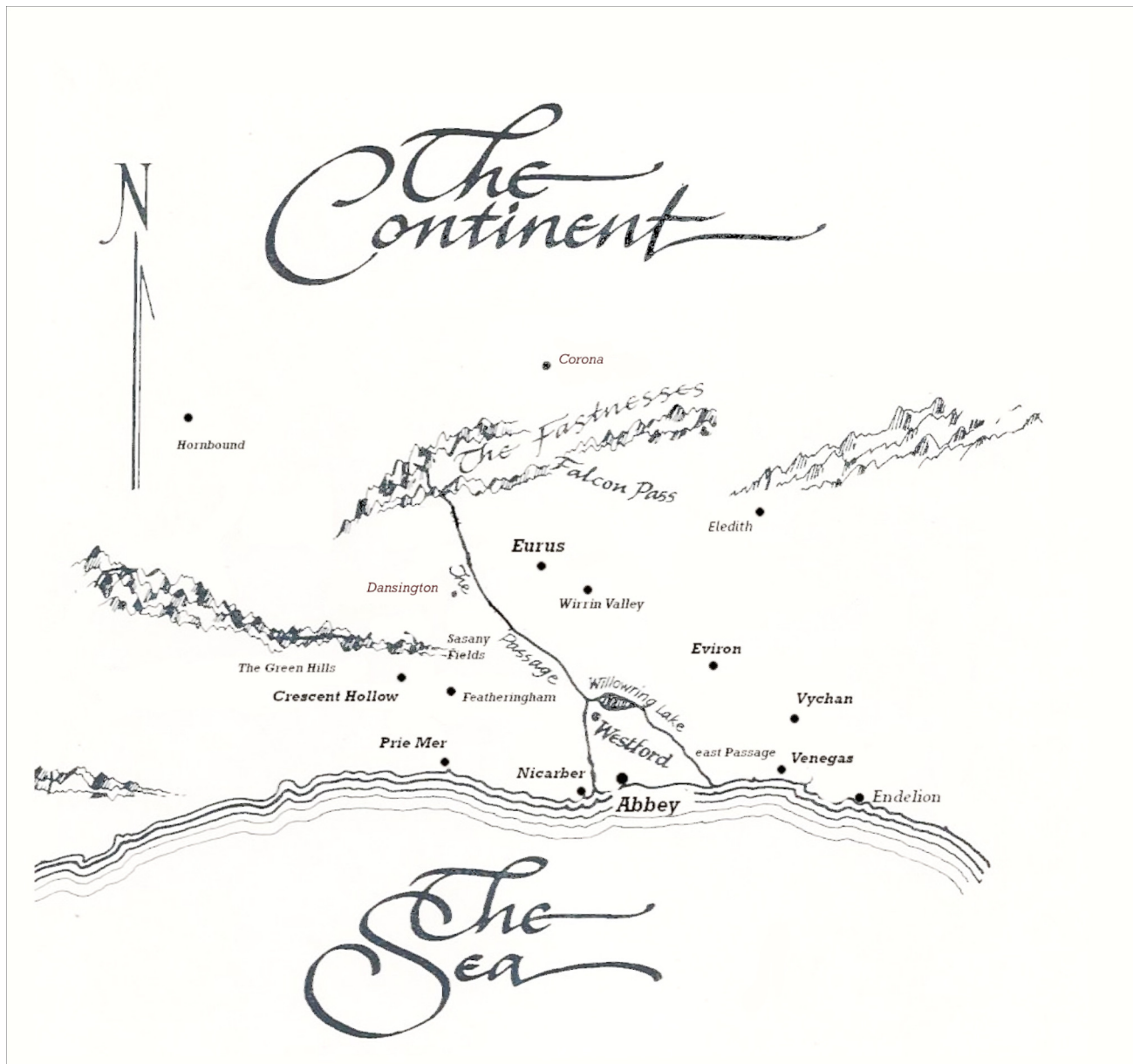
- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ———
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ———



NOT TO SCALE

The Sea





Minka Meets Awfyn (Book 4:
Lord Efran and Awfyn the Giant)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Author's Notes on Minka Meets Awfyn
(Book 4: *Lord Efran and Awfyn the Giant*)

I think this one is my favorite so far. Almost all of the images were taken from Wikimedia Commons except for Minka's face, to which I lost the link. But her expression is perfect. Her cloak came from a sales website.

Awfyn is portrayed here by [Jason Momoa](#)¹. (Awfyn never looked better.) The [campfire](#)² was also a nice find. The [gold ewer](#)³ is a real Iranian artifact from the Buyid Period (the third quarter of the tenth century CE).



Robin Hardy
April 13, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

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