



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

Book 2

Lord Efran
and the
Man of Science

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Early in the morning of June 12th, the young wife emerged from her bedchamber to go anxiously look for her husband of three weeks. She found him, as she expected to, lying under the large crucifix in the keep off the foyer.

Exhaling, she knelt over him. With a leather thong dangling from her fingers, she cradled his head, whispering, "Efran. Efran! Why do you sleep here?"

He opened bleary eyes and shifted to press his face into her chest. "You are so beautiful. Far more beautiful than Adele," he muttered.

Her mouth dropped open in shock. Her older sister was universally regarded as the beauty of the family. "How can you say that?" she demanded, smiling all the same.

He sat up somewhat to get his arms around her. "Her face is deceitful. She is a rock adder," he grunted.

"Men don't seem to care," she said wryly.

He lifted to look in her large blue eyes. "The wounded do."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and he closed his eyes again to kiss her. She pulled away, murmuring, "But why do you sleep here? It can't be comfortable."

Pulling himself up, he gathered her into his chest. She sank into that hardness, relishing the strength of the arms that tightened around her. She was still learning about him, and what it was like being Polonti in the midst of contemptuous Southerners. "I flop all over the bed at night, and don't want to hit you," he murmured. He let go of her with one hand to comb back his hair, now long enough to annoy him.

"I don't care," she insisted.

"I do. You're so young, I'll hurt you."

The sixteen-year-old huffed, "I am fully of age."

The twenty-seven-year-old smiled wryly. "You're still a child."

She stood on her knees, elevating herself above him. "I was old enough at fifteen to lust after you in the henhouse."

He laughed, "Not convincingly."

"Really?" She plopped her hands on her knees to eye him levelly. "And what about my operations to assist your

breathing after you had fallen off the roof flat on your back?"

His mouth dropped open. "You knew—what you were doing to me?"

"Of course." She glanced down his body.

He threw back his head to laugh, then said, "I'm having trouble breathing now. I'll come back to bed for your ministrations." As she smiled in vindication, he grew troubled. "My *moekolohe* detection is faulty."

When he stood, lifting her by the hand, she said, "Not necessarily. You were just dealing with a superior deceiver."

He stopped to gaze at her in delight. "You wanted me even then?"

"Oh, yes," she said.

Efran paused. "Your—hysterics at my hanging were too real to be feigned."

"Oh, that was absolutely genuine," she confirmed. "But I was also falling sick with the fever. I . . . would have died without your tending me."

He looked down at her. "I saved you for myself." As his hair flopped over his eyes, he threw his head back again.

Observing that, and his irritation at having to do it, she said, "Here, I brought you something. Sit on the step." She unwound the thong from her fingers.

"Shears?" he asked hopefully, plopping down on the step and turning his back to her.

"Shut up." She began combing his glossy black hair with her fingers. "I'll never let you cut it again," she murmured.

He turned his head slightly. "That would be unreasonably cruel."

"Be still." Holding his hair in one hand, she wrapped the thong around it with the other, then knotted it. "There. That should keep it from bothering you."

He reached a hand back to feel the ponytail. "Are there flowers and bows in it?"

She snorted. "Even if there were, no one would mistake you for a woman."

"Come help me breathe," he whispered, taking her around the waist.

As she was about to reply, a soldier appeared at the door of the keep. "Captain, one of the leaseholders requests your ear."

"Just Efran," he said automatically. "Where is he?"

"At the door of the nursery, sir."

"I'll come," he sighed, having slept in his clothes again (a somewhat white shirt and dark gray pants). Before leaving his wife, he murmured, "Will you bring me something to eat, Minka?"

"Of course," she said, and he kissed her again.

When they parted, he stopped by his quarters to use the garderobe and wash his hands. He paused over the washstand with his towel. He hoped it wasn't the notary come to inspect their children's quarters. Having received a gift of confits when his messengers had delivered their copies of the bequest, their charter, the plat of the Abbey lands, and their marriage license, the notary had kindly reminded them that an inspection of the children's accommodations would be forthcoming.

After news had gotten out that the Abbey fortress was once again operating an orphanage, a flood of unwanted children had appeared at their doors, and there were now over thirty in residence. It was far more than he felt equipped to handle with far too few hands to help, but he couldn't possibly turn any of them away. Now the situation was fairly out of control.

Troubled, he went down the corridor to the nursery strewn with simple toys. He glanced in at the screaming, crying, fighting, unruly mass of small bodies before turning to the visitors.

There were a man and a woman waiting, whom he recognized as among the first leaseholders to receive a small plot of the Abbey land on which to build a house and raise animals. He said to them, "I am Efran. You wished to see me?"

The man bowed nervously. "Yes, Lord Efran—"

"Just Efran." He could hardly get used to anyone calling him "lord," much less "Lord Sovereign," so in all uses of the title hereafter, he simply dropped *Sovereign*.

"Yes, sir. I am Tisling and this is my wife Lina. And we were wondering—" He stopped, staring at Efran.

"Yes?" Efran said, lowering his head. But the man looked frozen, unable to voice his request. Efran looked at the wife, whose silent tears were dropping from her lowered eyes. "The lady will tell me her need," Efran said softly.

The woman looked up at him. "Lord Efran—"

"Just Efran."

"Sir, you have so many orphans, and we have no children. All three of ours died of the fever. We have animals, and we have a house nearly finished, but it is empty—"

At that moment Noah ran up to him with his little sister Ivy close behind. "Efran, there are too many new children here! I can't find my clothes or my book you gave me or the shovel I was using to dig my own garden. Everything's messed up!"

In confirming this, Ivy rushed to Efran's knees, raising her arms. "I can't find Minka Kitty!" she cried. He impulsively lifted her.

The woman said, "Our cat is about to have kittens." Trembling slightly, she smiled as best she could.

As Ivy studied her, Efran said, “Noah, how would you and Ivy like to try out a new home?”

Noah looked dubiously at the couple while Efran told them, “Noah and Ivy were two of the first to come stay with us. They are exceptionally smart and cooperative.”

“You look like a strong young man,” Tisling blurted. “I keep goats.”

“Goats?” Noah repeated in interest.

“Come with me,” Efran said, carrying Ivy rapidly down the corridor toward the foyer. In a small room close to the front doors, Efran’s subordinate Estes kept the documents regarding the leaseholders. He looked up from a parchment-strewn desk as the five crowded in.

Efran said, “Estes, Tisling and Lina here are leaseholders who want to maybe give a few of our children a new home, and Noah and Ivy are willing to give them a try. Can we work up an agreement for probationary adoption?”

“Of course, Captain Efran,” Estes said.

“Just Efran,” he said a little desperately. To the couple, he said, “You must agree to teach them reading and numbers. Someone will come by weekly to look in and talk privately with the children. And after—what? Three months?—we’ll make it a permanent adoption, if all are agreed.” To Estes, he said, “Once the adoption is permanent, let’s give them—what? A thirty-percent discount on their lease per child?”

“Twenty percent would probably be sufficient, sir,” Estes said cautiously.

“All right, write that up. Then make the terms known to other leaseholders who may want to adopt,” Efran said. Still holding Ivy, he knelt to look Noah in the eye. “You may come back to the fortress any time you want. And I will come down to see you. How is that?”

“Good,” Noah said, nodding.

Efran looked at the little girl in his arms. Brows drawing down, he murmured, “I don’t know if I can give you up, Ivy.”

“You come see me, too?” she asked, tilting her head.

“Always,” he said.

“Okay,” she agreed.

Standing, he put her in the arms of her new mother, who smiled while tears poured down her face. “I have a lot of lovely little girl things waiting for you,” she said shakily.

Ivy pursed her lips. “Okay.”

Efran turned back to Tisling. “I assume you know about the wolves. They will not harm you or the children, but if your goats get out, they are fair game. Make your fencing high and strong, for you must not harm the wolves.”

“Yes, sir; we know about that,” Tisling said nervously.

“All right. Good,” he said, backing out of the small room. “Thank you, Estes.”

“Certainly, Captain.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Lina said, trembling.

Nodding distractedly, Efran turned away as Minka came up with a plate of eggs. “Oh, thank you; I’m so hungry,” he said, moving away from Estes’ room. “We may have found a solution for the children.”

“Good,” she said watchfully, handing him a fork. He scooped up a large bite, then lowered the plate with a look of exasperation.

“What’s wrong?” she asked anxiously. “Too much salt? Or not enough? Are they cooked enough?”

He quickly looked at her. “Did you cook these?”

“Yes,” she said, studying him. “What should I do better?”

“Nothing,” he said, scooping up one forkful after another. “They’re perfect,” he said around a mouthful. He quickly finished them off, and handed her the empty plate. “Thank you. They were excellent,” he said with an honest face that she studied dubiously.

He kissed her, then whispered, “I seem to be having trouble breathing again.”

“I can help you with that,” she said with a glimmer.

He had a hand at her back when the gate sentry, Beardall, stepped up and saluted. “Captain, there’s a wolf at the gates.”

Efran blinked at him. “A wolf at the gates.”

“Yes, Captain, and I believe he wants to speak with you,” Beardall said.

Efran digested that. “Well then, please have Bastard bridled and brought out. We won’t need a saddle.”

“Yes, Captain.” He saluted and trotted off.

Efran looked back at Minka, who observed, “You’re not only *aina*, you’re getting more so by the day. Now the animals come calling.” He looked dubious.

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Chapter 2

From the front doors, Efran saw the wolf sitting patiently at the middle of the gates. When he saw Efran, he sprang up and turned around, looking back. By that, Efran knew he was a messenger sent to fetch him.

“My horse is coming,” Efran said. “It’s faster than my following you on foot.” The wolf sat to wait again.

When Bastard was brought around front, Efran checked to see if he were high-stepping. Since he was not, Efran concluded that he himself was not yet *aina*—a Polonti, usually a child, who could command animals. Efran swung up on Bastard’s bare back, and the gate sentry opened them for him.

The wolf immediately turned to lead down the switchback, and Efran, on Bastard, followed. Exiting onto the main road, the wolf led into the area that was being apportioned into individual plots for leaseholders. In barely three weeks, seventeen plots had been leased, three had nearly finished houses and fencing, and the rest were in various stages of construction.

The wolf stopped at plot 17. Efran looked around the plot, seeing nothing remarkable, and looked back at the wolf. The amber eyes were fixed on him, but Efran received no clue as to what it was about. The tenant was not here at present, evidently having gone to fetch building materials. All that was here now was a short stack of planks. Beyond those, Efran saw nothing but a boundary marker—twine stretched between stakes—that ran in a rough rectangle. All plot boundary markers were placed according to Estes’ instructions.

Glancing back at the wolf, who remained steadfast beside the plot sign, Efran began walking Bastard along the boundary line, looking. The grass was high, over Bastard’s knees, so for visibility, the stakes supporting the twine were marked with red flags. As Efran walked Bastard, he looked all over the plot, but nothing on the ground was visible for the high grass.

Suddenly there was a loud metallic *clang*; Bastard bucked mightily, and Efran, totally unprepared, was flipped clear over Bastard’s head to land flat on his back in the grass.

As it was a very hard landing, he had to contend with the airlessness for long seconds until he could finally draw a breath. Having bucked his rider for once, Bastard was done, and now nosed in the grass around Efran, still supine.

He got to his feet, leaning on his knees to breathe. “What . . . was . . . that.” When he could finally straighten, he walked gingerly toward the approximate location of his unseating. Finding Bastard’s hoofprints, Efran followed them to the gouges in the earth which marked his bucking. Here, Efran parted the grass all around until he spotted a rusty iron curve, and he lifted a sprung wolf trap.

Examining it, Efran noted hoof shavings in the teeth, so went over to look at Bastard’s hooves. Sure enough, his left rear foot showed a moderately deep gouge—not enough to injure him, but certainly startle him. Had Bastard stepped on the trap full center, it would have broken his cannon, and they would’ve had to put him down. For a wolf, a trap this size would sever a leg, or pierce a skull, meaning death as well. For the trap had been baited with a dead rabbit.

Efran went over to thoughtfully drop the sprung trap beside the plot marker. Then he led Bastard back to the road and turned his head toward the switchback. Efran slapped his haunches, taking care for the airborne back feet, to return him to the fortress. “Hiya! Get up there, Bastard! CARROTS.” If Bastard did what he should, and appeared at the gates riderless, someone would come down to have a look.

Then Efran returned to plot 17. Taking one of the planks, he began dragging it in the grass all along the boundary line. The first trap he sprang by this means yanked the splintered board from his hand, so that he had to go get another.

All told, he sprang four traps set on the boundary line—apparently, as a hedge against wolves. Of course, they had been a hazard not only for the wolves, but for anyone walking along a neighboring plot. Such an injury would kill or cripple a man as well. Or a child.

Efran went along the entire boundary line twice, just to make sure he had cleared them all. He dropped the sprung traps in a heap in the grass at the side of the road, then he paced and waited. The messenger wolf, having accomplished his purpose, had disappeared.

Before long, a wagon heavily laden with building supplies, drawn by a single horse, came to a stop at plot 17. And there climbed down one of the biggest men Efran had ever seen. Efran himself was tall and sturdy, but the leaseholder of plot 17 was easily a head taller and 50 pounds heavier.

Efran nodded toward the sign post. “Are you leasing this plot?”

The other looked him over with a sneer. “Yup. So head off.”

“What is your name?” Efran asked.

The other snorted. “I don’t answer to no filthy Polonti. Trash rat.”

Insults aside, this man had lost his right to a plot—if he were the one responsible. So Efran asked, “Do you know anything about wolf traps in the area?”

The tenant glanced over with a malicious smile. “I ain’t abidin’ no wolves. What’s my property, I defend however I like. Just have a walk around and see.”

With that question answered, Efran debated how to evict him without a weapon or backup. All the other men were presently at work in the fortress or on the back grounds. Stalling for time, Efran went over to stand beside the carthorse to absentmindedly stroke its neck. “Nice lot location there,” he noted. “You going to graze on it or plant on it?”

The other glanced at him as he unloaded three or four foundation beams at a time. “I got me a herd of mouflon—one ram, two ewes, and three lambs.”

“Ah, excellent,” Efran said. He looked at the whip scars on the flanks of the horse, a mare. She turned her head to see him around the blinders. “Meat or wool?” He ran a hand down her side, feeling her ribs under the heavy tack. According to the Law of Roman, district authorities were entitled to remove any animal shown to suffer abuse from a resident. This horse qualified.

“Wool, fool. Ain’t got enough to kill for meat. Yet.” The soon-to-be evicted tenant lugged the beams to line them up along the foundation lines.

Efran moved to stroke the mare’s neck. When she nudged his hand, he heard her silent plea for help. “Nothing better for blankets. Soft enough for little ones,” he observed. Idly, he began unbuckling the breastplate and girth on the mare right under her owner’s nose.

The many uses of mouflon wool proved to be engaging enough to keep number 17 talking as he unloaded his wagon. With such simple tack, meanwhile, it was easy for Efran to free the mare one buckle at a time. When he folded back her blinders, 17 never noticed.

While he was occupied in positioning the heavy foundation beams just so, Efran stripped off her crupper and dock, then the reins. The last pieces Efran removed were her bridle, throatlash and browband. She was free. Efran clapped her gently on her bony haunches. "Go on up that hill. I'll take care of him," he told her.

But that's not what she wanted to do. As she shook off the remainder of the tack, her owner turned, a deep scowl creasing his face. "Now what kind of foolery are you doing over there, you trash rat?" He came over to pick up the bridle, intending to replace it on the mare's head. Efran lifted one of the boards he had just brought. Hefting it like a bat, he hit 17 in the back with it from across the wagon. The board broke on impact. But 17 merely looked irritated.

"You're gonna pay for that, trash rat," he promised, picking up an iron crowbar. Efran stepped away from the wagon, calculating. But the mare turned her backside to her owner, swishing her tail, and kicked him repeatedly in the chest and stomach. Because she was not a very strong animal, he brushed away the hits and raised the crowbar over her.

Efran abruptly began coming around the wagon, which made 17 pause, turning back toward him with the crowbar. But the mare was not done.

Bowing her head to give extra height to her kick, she unleashed a final blow to 17's head. Efran watched the right side of his head cave in as teeth exploded from his mouth. And with brain matter oozing from the break in his skull, he finally dropped.

Efran and the mare looked down on him, then he patted her neck. "All right, I think we're done here." She put her head on his shoulder and he stroked her nose, smiling. "You remind me of someone. Come on up to meet Minka." She nickered at him.

When Estes and five other soldiers arrived on horseback minutes later, Efran and the mare were already walking up the road toward the fortress. "God have mercy! What happened here?" Estes cried as the men stared at 17's remains.

"A terrible construction accident," Efran said. "Be sure to get rid of the traps in the grass there. Oh, and plot number seventeen is free now. Building materials included." He and the mare walked on.

After seeing Girl stabled, groomed and fed, Efran turned back to look for his wife. She met him in the front courtyard. "Efran, what happened? Bastard came back alone!"

He explained, "I found a great horse for you. She's very smart." He put a hand to her back, trotting up the fortress steps.

Minka exhaled in slight confusion as they passed through the foyer. Efran glanced at her. "Are you having trouble breathing? Or am I?"

"Let's go see," she said, curling her hand under his arm. He tossed her inside their quarters, then followed as she locked the door behind him.

What with one thing or another, they didn't make it out to see Girl that day. But he stayed in bed with Minka that night as she demanded, though he did toss and turn.

The following day, June 13th, he took her out to the stables to meet her new horse. "Minka, this is Girl."

Minka laughed, "Efran, every female is Girl to you."

He blinked. "How is that wrong?"

She shook her head, stroking her new friend. Girl watched with pricked ears. "Oh, isn't she sweet. Efran, look at these terrible scars! Who did this to her?"

"Her former owner. We don't have to worry about him," he said dismissively.

Minka studied him apprehensively. "Is that why Bastard came back without you yesterday?"

Evaluating how much he could prevaricate here, he murmured, "Somewhat. But it all worked out fine."

Again she eyed him, then returned her attention to the mare. "Oh, she's so skinny. I don't want to try to ride her yet; she needs to rest and eat for a while first."

Smiling, Efran stroked Girl's neck. "That is a good plan. We'll feed her and keep her in carrots—" Down the row of stalls, Bastard banged angrily. "Shut up!" Efran shouted.

As they departed the stalls toward the western door of the fortress, a soldier, Krall, met them. "Captain, Estes requests your ear."

"Coming," Efran nodded. He and Minka met up with him almost as soon as they had entered the side door to the foyer. Estes, carrying a long parchment, hesitated with some conflict in his face.

Regarding him, Efran asked, "What is it?"

"Captain, a twenty-percent discount per child on the lease may be too—generous. With the number of children some families have taken, that will reduce their payments to almost nothing," Estes began.

Efran shrugged. "I'd rather they feed the children than pay me. How many were taken?"

"All but one," Estes said.

"All but—" Efran gasped. "Toby?"

"Oh, he was one of the first to go. He's a bright boy," Estes said.

"Then who is left?" Efran asked, heartsick.

Estes hesitated, looking to the lower corridor. There, peeking around the entry, was little Pia—the only Polonti child among the orphans.

Efran strode forward to scoop her up. "Oh, I'm so glad you're still with me." She put her arms around his neck.

“It’s not that she was unwanted, Captain,” Estes said earnestly. He was Polonti himself. “She didn’t want to go.”

Efran smiled at her. “She’s not done teaching me to be *aina*.” His brow creased. “But . . . with most of the children gone, what will the notary say when he comes for inspection? Will that put our charter at risk?”

Estes shrugged. “How could it matter how many children are here at any given time? As long as we stand open to receive them, how can we be faulted? Besides, all the current adoptions are provisional. Some of those children may come back.”

“Yes,” Efran said, still clutching Pia. “But . . . Toby. I would have neither Minka nor Pia were it not for him. He told me where to find them both.”

Pia squirmed down from his arms. When he let her go, she began pacing in circles, hands behind her back. Efran, Estes and Minka looked at each other, and Efran knelt before her. “Pia, you can’t command Toby. He’s not an animal; he’s a person.” She waved him out of the way and continued her efforts.

Sighing, Efran stood to glance toward the open door of the desolate nursery. “Isn’t there a middle ground between one and thirty?” he complained.

Estes shrugged and Minka smiled. “You’ll be a wonderful father,” she whispered.

He looked at her pensively, then watched Pia raise her arms in the completion of her circuit. Efran picked her up again, muttering, “I am so hungry. Are you—?” Pia scrambled down from his arms to head for the front doors.

“I’ll get you something from the kitchen,” Minka said, turning.

He put out a hand to stop her. “Whatever it is, whoever has made it, I won’t complain.”

She lowered her head to suppress a laugh, then they all looked toward the front doors that Pia was trying to push open. They were much too heavy for her to budge. Beardall opened them, however, and in came Toby, weary and disheveled. He looked up at Efran with anxious skepticism. “Can I come back?”

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Chapter 3

Three people gaped at Toby while he stood waiting for an answer, then Efran seized him, shook him, and clutched him till he gasped.

“Were you hurt?” Estes asked tensely.

“No,” Toby said, muffled, so Efran had to put him down to allow him to talk. “No, they just had five other kids already, and they were ordering me around and they really didn’t have much food. So is it okay for me to come back here?”

Efran had trouble getting the words out at first, then he said tightly, “Estes, I’m adopting Toby. He will be mine.”

“And mine,” Minka said softly.

Toby looked dubiously at her. “Are you sure?”

“You got me back to Efran!” she cried. “How could I object?”

“True,” Toby admitted modestly.

“I will get the form,” Estes said, turning toward his cubicle.

Then Efran looked at Pia standing off. “Pia, I want to adopt you as well.” But she turned her back on him and folded her arms.

Efran looked stunned at the rejection. He turned to Minka, then Toby, who said, “She’s not going to let anybody order her around, Efran. Not even you.”

In addition to the rejection, Efran had to grapple with the implicit accusation. “Do I—order you around?” He looked at all of them.

“You are accustomed to command, Captain,” Estes observed, approaching with a parchment.

Minka admitted, “Sometimes I let you.”

“But you listen, Efran.” Toby argued. “That’s the main thing.”

“Come sign on the desk,” Estes gestured. “Toby, are you sure you want this? It’s a permanent adoption.”

“Sure,” Toby said.

“Then you sign first, here,” Estes pointed. “T-O—”

“I can write my own name,” Toby said loftily, and did.

Efran and Minka signed, then Estes signed as witness. “The notary can validate it when he comes, or you can take Toby to his shop in town,” Estes noted.

Efran looked intently at Estes. “Have we hired a cook?”

Estes glanced up. “The men are rotating in the duty.”

“Is there anyone besides me who can cook?” Efran pursued.

“Not to your satisfaction, that I know of,” Estes said.

“Can we make that a priority?” Efran asked.

“I will post a notice to the leaseholders,” Estes said.

“Good. Thank you.” Efran turned. “Everyone to the kitchen.” Out in the foyer, he looked around. “Pia?”

Everyone turned to look for her, but she was gone. Toby shrugged, “She’s all her own, Efran.”

Grimly, Efran ordered, “To the kitchen, the rest of you.” Toby and Minka grinned at each other, and Estes came along to placate the Captain.

While he made them sit at one of the tables, Efran went prowling in the corners of the kitchen, then looked out the back door to the east side yard. To his joy, he found a fresh deer kill hanging in the yard, so he and Estes dressed it at once. While Estes prepared part of it for smoking outside, Efran brought in the neck, shoulders and foreshanks for a huge pot of stew.

Minka jumped up. “I can cut up vegetables.”

Efran glanced up. “Thank you, Minka. Yes, see what Cutch and Truro brought from the market in Westford, then check the gardens in back. Toby, take the baskets under the counter there.” She and Toby went right out with two large garden baskets.

That left Efran alone in the kitchen. To sustain him in the task at hand, he pulled down one of the loaves that all the men knew how to make, and were kept at the ready for just such emergencies as Efran’s constant hunger. He hacked off a slab to devour. There was a bit of leftover butter on the same shelf, but Efran left that for someone in greater need.

After scanning the cabinets to see if there might be anything else to eat, he gave up and began chopping the venison into small pieces and scraping the bones. He stoked the fire, poured oil into the pot, and then scooped a great deal of meat into it as well, where it sizzled with a tantalizing aroma. He washed his hands in a big basin, which he dumped out of the back kitchen door into the east yard.

He reentered the kitchen to stand over the work table, then his eyes went to the wall in front of him. After a moment’s thought, he pulled out the loaf again, from which he hacked two thick slices. He spread these with the remainder of the butter, put them on a wooden plate, and put that on a second work table. He dipped a cup in the bucket of ready water to place it beside the plate with the bread.

Then he returned to the work table. With his back to the plate, he began scooping marrow from the bones with a long, slender spoon. While doing this, he said, “You there behind the door—the stew won’t be ready for hours yet. Have the bread and butter.”

A moment later, a figure hesitantly emerged from his hiding spot to slide onto the stool at the table. Efran did not turn around. With a gasp, the person began devouring the bread. Efran continued spooning out marrow to add to the pot. Shortly, the figure on the stool went still, as the plate and cup were empty.

Efran turned around, then, to regard a skinny adolescent Polonti boy. Efran smiled, “Hello, Me at Thirteen.”

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Chapter 4

Efran asked the boy, "Just out of curiosity, how did you get past the gate sentry?"

"I climbed the fence," he whispered.

"Ho, that's a feat. I tried it. Tore my pants," Efran said, going to the pantry (where the food was actually kept). He brought out a handful of dried apple rings to place before the boy. "We don't want to overload your stomach. The stew is very rich." The boy cautiously took the rings to eat them one at a time.

Toby and Minka banged into the kitchen with overflowing baskets, and the boy started. Seeing him at once, they quickly looked at Efran. "Minka, Toby, meet Me at Thirteen." Turning to the boy, he said, "This is my wife and my son. Obviously, she's not his mother. She's too young. But I'm not. I am Efran, the lord of this fortress, and we house children who have nowhere else to go."

The boy listened as if in shock. Efran picked up a wooden bucket to put on the table in front of him, instructing, "Go draw water from the well," nodding to the back kitchen door.

The boy awkwardly stood, taking the bucket to turn out the door. With Minka and Toby silently watching, Efran stuck his head out to look. He nodded with a faint smile, then in a few minutes there was a little sloshing as the boy entered, lugging a full bucket. He paused for instructions.

Efran nodded, "In the basin."

With difficulty, the boy hefted the bucket and dumped it in. Efran said, "Minka, wash your vegetables well with the brush there."

"Yes, Efran," she murmured, bringing them by handfuls out of the basket.

Efran presented the boy with the empty bucket, nodding toward the open door. "Another." And the boy went out again. Looking over at the cleaned plate, Efran picked up the cup.

The second time the boy brought in the bucket, Efran dipped the cup in it. Taking the bucket, he handed over the cup, asking, "Are you still thirsty?" The youngster drained it as Efran poured the rest of the well water into the large pot. Then he gave the bucket to the boy. "Another."

While the new kid took out the bucket again, Efran handed Toby a large spoon. "Stir the pot. Careful, it's hot."

Taking the spoon, Toby whispered, "Who is he, Efran?"

Shaking his head, Efran said, "A hungry kid. Me at thirteen."

"Efran?" Minka held up her washed vegetables.

He came over to look. "Good. Chop them. The refuse basket for the horses is under the table."

She turned back for a knife, and the boy brought in his third bucket. Efran nodded to the basin again. When it was filled, Efran told him, "Wash your face and your hands." After a hesitation, the boy plunged his hands and his head into the basin, crying in relief at the invitation. Meanwhile, Minka scraped her chopped vegetables into

the pot which Toby stirred, neither of them paying much attention to what they were doing.

When the boy lifted his dripping head, Efran gave him a rag to dry with, which he pressed to his face. Efran asked, "What should I call you besides 'Me at Thirteen'?"

The boy weakly chuckled, "I'm fourteen."

"That's still just a number," Efran said.

"Leeson," he sighed.

Efran leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest to observe, "That's a EurAsian name." Leeson nodded. "You ran away," Efran whispered. His face screwing up, Leeson nodded again.

"Who's your owner?" Efran asked.

Trembling, Leeson said, "Graduliere."

"Really," Efran said, laughing. As three faces stared at him, he said, "Toby, the bottom of the stew is burning. Go draw you more water and keep it stirred."

With words under his tongue, Toby grabbed the bucket and ran out. Leeson was eyeing Efran distrustfully, but neither said anything else until Toby reappeared with a wildly sloshing bucket which Minka helped him dump into the pot. Then Toby grabbed the spoon to start stirring, only to bring his hand quickly away from the rim and stick a burned finger in his mouth.

Meanwhile, Efran was contemplating the high kitchen ceiling. "Martyn," he said. "That's a good, common name in Westford. This boy's name is Martyn," he said decisively. "We will not repeat the other name. Ever."

"Why, Efran?" Minka asked.

He replied, "Martyn was a slave in Eurus and ran away, either before or after his owner moved to Westford. And that man is clerk to Surchatain Lightfoot. Your father."

Uttering a cry, Martyn wheeled to stare at Minka in panic. Efran ordered, "Take yourself in hand."

Trembling, the boy turned back to Efran, who told him, "I'm not certain her father even knows that we're married. What is certain is that he wouldn't approve, because he once ordered my hanging—which she prevented. She's loyal to me."

"Oh, yes," she said, rushing over to squeeze Martyn's thin shoulders in a hug. He was as tall—actually taller—than she. "We won't betray you to anyone."

Looking around in slight confusion, he murmured, "Thank you."

Efran smiled. "Toby. Stir the pot." They were all quiet as Toby stirred.

Over the next few minutes, the expression on Martyn's face progressed from confusion to intense concentration. "If you are Surchatain Lightfoot's daughter. . . ." He shook his head. "He has only two daughters. . . . Minka . . . the cat—" He stared at her. "You are Chataine Sybil!"

“Yes,” she said cautiously, as Efran watched.

Martyn turned to him. “Then you are Efran! And this is—the fortress!”

“As I told you,” Efran said in dry interest. “What have you heard?”

Martyn put his hands to his head. “It was only three days ago that I ran away—we had been in Westford for weeks—before the palace collapsed. They want you dead!” he told Efran.

“Who does?” Minka cried.

“Everyone!” Martyn said. “The Surchatain hates you for taking his daughter, and my master Graduliere wants Chataine Sybil to marry his son so that he can challenge the Surchatain for the throne—which, naturally, no one outside his family knows.”

He turned to Minka. “They were planning this great celebration for your sixteenth birthday when the Captain here stole you away—during which they were going to announce your engagement to my master’s son Justinian. They sent a large force to retrieve you, but the animals driven insane by the curse of the fortress prevented it. They are going to try again. I do not know when or how.”

Efran considered this. “What made you run away?”

Martyn groaned. “I was brought into the Surchatain’s presence on a small errand—he took one look at me and ordered me hanged”—because he was Polonti, obviously. “Before they could build a gallows in the nobleman’s courtyard, I escaped and hid and . . . made my way here.”

Efran’s brow creased. “If you found your way to me, why didn’t you tell me all this to begin with?”

“I didn’t know you were here!” Martyn exclaimed. “I was led—” he broke off. “You will not believe me.”

“Say it,” Efran urged.

Martyn sighed. “The first two nights I spent running and hiding, wandering south. The third night—last night—I lay down under that old bridge over the dry gully and . . . was awakened by a wolf. I thought it would tear me to pieces, but it—it nosed me up until I started walking on the winding road. More came beside me and, every time I tried to lie down and rest, they kept nosing me up until I came near the gates. It was very late in the night, but the front was lit up, so I went around back and climbed the fence. I lay under the trees until I woke, hungry, and . . . sneaked in to hide.”

They were silent until Efran said, “Toby, stir the pot.”

For a few minutes there was no sound but the scraping of Toby’s spoon around the pot. Efran’s head was back, his eyes studying the ceiling. Then he said, “No one here would betray you even if they knew who you are. But we are going to proceed with caution: you are Martyn, a homeless child come to the fortress for shelter. You are going to bathe and wear orphan clothes, in case the notary comes. Are you branded?”

Martyn nodded despondently. Efran asked, “Where?” With a glance at Minka, Martyn patted his right buttock.

“That’s barbaric!” Minka cried. “Who would do that?”

Efran said softly, “Eurusians,” and Martyn looked at her. She felt herself wishing to plunge down through the stone floor.

“Come,” Efran said, gesturing to Martyn. “We will get you bathed and clothed.” As they two left the kitchen, Minka fell down at a table to cry. Toby came over to pat her in reassurance.

The great pot of stew was wonderful, and fed almost everyone in the fortress. Martyn was welcomed by the few who noticed a newcomer, but no one made much of him or questioned anything about him. Minka, glassy-eyed and numb, was unable to eat anything and barely heard any talk or laughter around her. When she glimpsed anyone whispering to anyone else, she thought they must be saying, *Polonti aren't the savages; it's Sybil's people who brand children on their buttocks so they will be slaves all their lives.*

She left the dining hall early to go get ready for bed, then found herself sitting in her and Efran's quarters twisting her nightdress in her hands. Efran came in, and sighed upon seeing her.

She moistened her lips and tossed her head carelessly. “It's ridiculous of me to tell you how you must wear your hair,” she said in what she intended to be a light tone. “I can't imagine a more personal decision. You're the one who has to live with it. But my cutting is no good—I noticed that Detler is very good with shears; you should probably get him to do it.”

He knelt beside her chair, and she smiled on him as if she were a nice person and not a child of ogres. He shook his head, taking her hand to kiss it. “You are not responsible for anything your father does, or his administrators do, or any of their relatives do, or anything anyone in Eurus does,” he whispered.

She blinked as if she understood or agreed with him. She swallowed. “Of course, I *am* immature—I understand that—but I do hope to become more—compassionate, and less—less—”

“Give me back my tyrant,” he whispered. “I didn't fall in love with a nice little girl. I fell in love with a firebrand who screamed at her father because he was going to hang me. I want the girl who sat right on me to watch me come apart and pretended she didn't know. I want you to own my body; I want to be enslaved to you.”

She grabbed his face to plant her mouth on his; he lifted her onto the bed and she struggled to get out of her dress. “That night you came to me,” he breathed in her ear, “and stroked my chest, and kissed my face, and put your forehead to mine—”

She stilled. “What? When?”

Breathing hard, he said, “The—the first night all the children were here, except Pia. You and Ivy were in one room; Noah and Toby in another. You . . . came to my room, and kissed me, and—”

She gasped, “I did *what*? I—came to your bed, and—*what*?”

“You don't remember that?” he asked, lifting up.

“Oh, Efran,” she said in horror. “No, I don't. Did I really do that? How in the world could you *not*—?”

“Yes, *that's* the girl I fell in love with,” he said.

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Chapter 5

The next morning, June 14th, Efran began attempting to follow up on something Estes had told him. First, Efran went to the library on the first floor to look at the books newly placed there. He saw with satisfaction the Law of Roman in a place of honor on one book stand, and the Holy Canon on another. He found the Annals of Lystra on the shelves, as well as a number of books he had been able to save from the bonfire. He pulled out one slightly scorched volume, still readable.

He walked along the shelves, smiling to himself. He'd always wanted a library. Any great fortress should have a great room of books. Then, sinking into despondence, he wondered if he could sell some of them.

With the number of men and animals now at the fortress, Estes had told him they needed money for pay and feed and supplies. While the leases would not produce much for a year or so, the needs were immediate. Oh, they could sell some of the horses and gear scavenged from the Eurusians' attack, but the consensus was that they'd need it all.

"God in heaven," Efran murmured, "will You forgive me for exchanging the lives of the saints for coin? That's almost as bad as burning them, but—I don't know what else to do. The men are looking to me."

Downcast, he went along the shelves to pull out the books of value that were in the best condition. He started a pile on the floor, thinking bitterly of the pile of books to be burned that he'd found in the palace library. Looking at the shelves on the floor where he sat, he paused at a large volume whose spine text read, *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*.

He cocked his head at that. Although not learned in Latin, Efran recognized this as the Latin version of the Holy Scriptures. But this book looked . . . different. Feeling the spine, he discerned that it was not leather, but wood painted to look like a book. And it was so thick!—a good six inches, at least.

Efran gripped the spine to pull it from the shelf, but it wouldn't budge. He eyed it as if it were disobeying an order, then got a better grip to pull harder. It barely inched outward.

Feeling personally challenged, Efran braced both feet on the shelves and gripped the spine with both hands to pull. It did begin coming out then, reluctantly. He got a better grip and pulled again, exposing a few more inches. Putting his back into it, he pulled again, and the book jutted straight out from the shelf without any indication of an end.

Efran sat back to stare: about eight inches of the book was exposed, and still it resisted his efforts. So he gripped the top with one hand and the bottom with another, pulling with his whole body.

The entire book finally emerged, landing on his fingers heavily enough to make him gasp. It was about 10 inches tall and 12 inches long. The shelf was barely deep enough to contain it. The only way to account for its weight was metal pages, which he had seen in some novelty books.

Shaking his right hand, Efran used his left to open the cover, and found himself staring at a mass of gold. He held his breath, reaching in to lift a handful of gold coins and let them stream back into the box. It was an oak box disguised as a book for the safekeeping of the fortress treasury.

Heart pounding, Efran closed the box and left it where it sat. He stood, wiping his mouth, then exited the library to go find Estes.

He was in his cubicle, looking glassy-eyed at lists of supplies needed. Efran came in and bent over the desk to whisper, "Come with me." Raising his head, Estes complied.

Efran walked him to the library and glanced down the corridor before opening the door. Then he took him inside, closed the door, and walked over to the box on the floor to flip it open with the toe of his boot.

Estes sank to his knees in front of the box, then looked up at the Captain in shock. Efran whispered, "Take what you need for now."

Estes' hand shook slightly as he drew out a small handful. Looking at one closely, he cried, "NDF!"

Efran waved him to be quiet, glancing at the door. "What does that mean?"

Sifting through the coins, Estes whispered, "All that I see here were minted during the reign of Surchatain Ares, and are incredibly valuable—much more so than the royals in circulation now." Standing with his handful of seven coins, he said, "This should last us six or eight months, if we spend with drunken abandon."

"Really?" Efran murmured. "But—where can you spend them? Who will know what they are?"

"We'll have to take a few at a time to the banker Rensselaer in Westford to exchange them for royals. He'll recognize them right off," Estes said.

Nodding, Efran said, "Help me get it back on the shelf. It's heavy." Estes pocketed the gold, which caused his jacket to hang crookedly for the weight. Then they got down on their knees to cooperatively lift the box with four hands and replace it as it had been. Estes stood, shook his head slightly, then went out to return to his cubicle and lists.

Efran, still on the floor, reached over to begin placing the lives of the saints back where they belonged. Then he bent over the pile, gasping, "God in heaven! What did I ever do to deserve this bounty? How can I ever repay You?" He sat back to avoid wetting the books with his tears and marring their value. Wiping his face with his sleeve, he got up to reshelve them.

When that was done, he went out to the garden to just walk around for a minute. Martyn approached hesitantly. "Lord Efran, if . . . if I'm to stay here, I would like work to do."

"Yes," Efran said distractedly. "You are going to do chores as all the children do—if I accidentally leave you idle, ask Toby what to do. He knows everything." Martyn flashed him an acknowledging smile.

Efran continued, "You should recognize no one here, but if you do, I want to know at once. Stay in the back areas of the fortress; we sometimes have visitors."

The boy nodded. "Lord Efran—"

"Just Efran."

Martyn looked at him, then opened his mouth in the vain attempt to say the bare name. He exhaled, "Forgive me;

it won't come out that way. I must call you 'Lord Efran' because that is what you are." Efran paused over that thought. Martyn continued, "Then . . . what my master said about the wolves being enchanted is true, isn't it?"

"No," said Efran. "What do you know about the *aina*?"

"The Polonti legends are faerie tales," Martyn said firmly.

Efran said wryly, "So the Eurusians would have you believe. But no, they are not. We have a little girl here who is quite a powerful *aina*. She is helping me learn the art." Martyn eyed him.

"But the wolves," Efran said, looking up to the deep blue sky, "the wolves are . . . beyond that. Without question, our little *aina* made first contact with them. But they seem to have taken it to the next level on their own. They came to me with an offer of peace, which I accepted. I have come to believe that the dominion which God gave us over the animals at the beginning was only a starting point—that it was intended to develop into . . . cooperation. Instead, it has been lost, for the most part."

Martyn looked uncomprehending, so Efran said, "I think I should show you. Come."

They went around to the stables, where Efran asked, "Have you ridden much?"

Martyn laughed, "I? A slave?"

"Shh," Efran reminded him, glancing around.

"No, Lord Efran, I haven't," Martyn corrected himself.

Leading to the newly built tack room, Efran began pulling out a blanket, saddle and bridle. "I'll start you on Strider, who is most reliable with new riders. Just hold the reins lightly and let him go where Bastard leads," Efran said, taking him out to the stables.

Martyn's eyes widened. "Which man is Bastard?"

An angry banging was heard down the row of stalls as Efran, saddling Strider, laughed, "That is Bastard."

A passing soldier said, "I'll saddle him for you, Captain."

"Thank you, Goss," Efran replied, tightening the cinch on Strider. "That is Bastard, who will destroy his stall if I take out another horse."

Martyn looked down the row and laughed, which Efran thought a very good sign in a runaway slave.

After Efran had informed the gate sentry where he would be, he and Martyn began descending the switchback. Martyn rode nervously at first, clutching the pommel, but as Strider had an easy gait, his rider soon relaxed. "It was very dark when I came up here," Martyn said, scanning the Lands. "It is an awesome sight, from this height."

Efran pointed. "You see on either side of the road the plots we are apportioning to leaseholders. We have sixteen so far."

Martyn gaped. "You will be very rich soon!"

“My administrator begs to differ,” Efran said dryly. “We are subsidizing the leaseholders who take in orphans.”

“What advantage to you is that?” Martyn asked.

Efran looked down over the plots. “It makes the years I spent hungry worthwhile.”

Martyn studied him. “That is not the kind of benefit my master would require.”

“Ah. Tell me about Graduliere,” Efran said. “Where is he staying?”

“The Surchatain has given him the estate of Lord Blature, who died of the fever,” Martyn replied.

“Blature?” Efran mused.

“He had grown rich off a mining venture north of the city. Copper and turquoise, I believe.”

“Oh, yes,” Efran murmured. “I was told that he sold most of the mine’s output to Aron the Jeweler.”

“That is a blind of Graduliere’s,” Martyn replied. “The shop has not sold jewelry for many years, nor is the owner named Aron. It’s used to transport money and goods to Eurus, to pay for troops.”

“I see,” Efran said quietly.

By now they had left the switchback for the road that bisected the plots. Glancing at the building activity to the left, on the west, Efran said, “Let’s dismount here, and walk east a ways”—to the right.

Paths that would soon become roads divided one row of plots from the next. Efran and Martyn walked their horses down one such path until they reached the end of the marked plots. Here, Efran tossed Bastard’s reins over his neck to let him graze, so Martyn did likewise with Strider. Then they two walked in the grass.

Efran was silent for quite a while, merely walking and looking. When he had reached a point that was well away from the activity, he asked, “Why do you think the wolves led you to the fortress?”

Martyn raised his hands in ignorance. “I can’t imagine. I half don’t believe it.”

Efran acknowledged that. “I think they would not do something so—unwolflike without a good reason. You see, all this territory is the wolves’ domain.” He spread his hands to encompass the Abbey Lands. “But man will encroach, and fighting man is costly to any animal. So . . .”

He continued to walk, and Martyn walked with him. Efran resumed, “So, when I was returning after receiving the bequest of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, the wolves met me with an offer of peace. I accepted, and have had opportunity since then to prove my good will.”

He walked another dozen paces, until they were almost out of sight of the road. “So then they encounter a young Polonti slave escaping from my enemy, and lead him to me. I think they perceive that you may be of benefit to me, and therefore to the peace we have pledged.”

“I don’t know how,” Martyn half-laughed. “I am nothing, and dead if I am caught.”

“Like me,” Efran said. “But I believe allies should meet face to face. That helps them trust each other.” At Martyn’s expression of bewilderment, Efran asked, “Do you think you would recognize the wolves who led you to me?” Martyn shook his head.

“Behind you is the one I call Bounder,” Efran said. Martyn cautiously turned to see a sitting wolf watching him from between the grasses. “Because that’s how I saw him approach our *aina* Pia—bounding.”

Not knowing what to do, Martyn bowed. “Greetings, Bounder.”

Efran directed a smiling glance upward. “On your right hand is the matriarch, Lady Lupus. She is the one who found you under the stone bridge and started you on your march.”

Martyn bowed low to her. “Please accept my gratitude, Lady Lupus.”

“Behind her is her daughter, Sami. She thinks you’re cute, for a human,” Efran said wryly.

“Oh! I am flattered, Sami,” Martyn said, reddening appropriately.

“There are more, but these were the main drivers of your march. And they tell me that it was well-timed, for your master’s hounds followed your scent clear to the stone bridge, and refused to go on for the smell of wolves. It’s possible he thinks you are dead,” Efran said.

“Do you mean the wolves saved my life?” Martyn whispered.

“Quite likely. Even if Graduliere wished to keep you in service to him, you would have to be punished for escaping,” Efran said.

Agape, Martyn looked down at the tawny eyes fixed on him through high grass. He raised a tentative hand toward Lady Lupus, who turned away forbiddingly. But Sami came forward to receive his pat on the head. He knelt, then, to stroke her coarse fur. “I—I will help you however I can, but—I’m just a slave.”

“That may be all that’s needed,” Efran said. “Come, then.” He turned to Bastard, and the wolves melted away.

But when Martyn stood, he jumped at the sight of a large wolf advancing toward the lord. Martyn opened his mouth to call out, then saw that Efran was aware of it, and appeared to nod at the beast. The wolf lowered its head and disappeared in the grass with the others.

Gaining Efran’s side, Martyn breathed, “That had to have been the leader.”

“Yes,” Efran said, “that is Canis, with whom I made peace. They have now committed to your protection.”

“That—must be a singular honor,” Martyn said.

Efran put a hand on Bastard’s saddle, looking a little miffed. “They took less time to accept you than me. Can you mount?”

“Yes. Yes, I can.” Martyn floundered getting his foot in the stirrup, but swung himself up competently.

As they turned back toward the road, Efran asked, “How are you at detecting *moekolohe*? I fear you’re going to need to, now.”

“I don’t know what that is,” Martyn said, trying to find the reins.

“Ride beside me, then,” Efran directed. And he tutored the boy on all the signs of women who wanted to use him and then discard him. “Some, however—especially the young ones—are clever in obscuring their true aim behind innocence. When you meet one who demands to marry you, it’s best to just . . . submit.”

“You mean—do what she demands?” Martyn sputtered. He couldn’t even say the operative word, *marry*.

Efran nodded. “It’s worth it,” he sighed.

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Chapter 6

When Efran and Martyn arrived back at the stables, Efran showed him how to groom and feed his horse. “Whenever you do go out, you’ll be expected to do that yourself. We don’t have servants here.”

“I understand,” Martyn said, although he really didn’t. He had to watch Efran and the other soldiers for a long time to see that they really did not expect anyone to serve them.

He watched Chataine Sybil—Minka—for quite a while that day, as well. Efran was clearly her obsession: her eyes followed him whenever he was in view. At other times, she tended to her own needs, or worked with Toby in their mutual chores—a fact which astonished Martyn. Not only did she have no maid, but she did menial work without a murmur. This he could hardly comprehend.

Martyn also observed how respectful the men were of her—not in doing obeisance or anything like that, but of taking care around her. She was quite smaller than they; even Martyn himself was taller and (slightly) heavier than she. It took him longer to notice how much Efran watched her, as well. But differently.

While her eyes on him were adoring, his on her were—evaluative. Any time he looked at her, he seemed to be assessing her environment, her movements, her objectives. He took stock of the men around her and what they were doing. He noted animals, equipment, hazards. After some minutes absorbing this behavior, Martyn remembered that Efran had been her guardian. Apparently, he was still. It might require only a flick of his eyes in passing, but Efran was still guarding her in his own fortress.

When Martyn saw Efran pause in the middle of activity all around him, he approached. “Lord Efran, I have a question.”

Efran gave him instant attention. “Yes, Martyn?”

“How . . . did you do it? How did you make her adore you like that?” Martyn asked awkwardly.

Efran looked at him for a long time before saying, “I don’t know.”

“It was nothing you did?” Martyn asked.

“I made her cry,” Efran said slowly. “Other than that, I don’t know what it was. The day we found out she was sixteen—that she produced proof of it—she declared she was going to marry me and made the notary attend to that before we could ask about the bequest of the Abbey. I could hardly believe it. She said it was lust, but I don’t believe that either.”

“*Moekolohe?*” Martyn asked.

Efran exhaled. “If it is, then I have to throw out everything I thought I knew about it.”

The following day, June 15th, a messenger arrived from Adele with a sealed letter addressed to “Chataine Sybil.” Cassel, on door duty, asked him to wait in the foyer, then ran the letter to the Captain. He, in turn, found Minka in the garden with Toby harvesting blueberries. They were not smashing them in each other’s face as they had the blackberries a month ago, but they were still eating most of them.

With Cassel standing nearby, Efran took her basket and handed her the letter, still sealed. She looked up at him quickly. “It came by messenger from Adele,” he said.

She broke the seal and turned her back to him so that he could read it over her shoulder. Adele had written,

“My Dearest Sybil,

“It breaks my heart not to see you any more, especially now that you have reached your age of majority. Your broken-hearted father and I wished more than anything to have a celebration of your majority at the estate of Lord Blature. However, I fear that your guardian may not allow even such a simple request. Therefore, I beg that I may be allowed to visit you in your fortress prison, with a friend who has been anxious to make your acquaintance for some time—Justinian, son of Father’s illustrious Clerk Graduliere. If your guardian will allow the visit of just we two, I would be forever grateful, and your Father mollified in his sorrow.

“Fondest love,
“Your Sister Adele”

Minka issued an unladylike snort. “What a load of stinking manure. After lying to everyone about my age for years, they suddenly advance me two years once I had proof of it. And I have met Justinian, once. He literally sneered at me.”

“This is very interesting,” Efran murmured. Then he turned to scan the men around him. “Doane, will you find—ah, there he is. Never mind.” And he raised a beckoning hand to Martyn, watching from a distance.

Minka said, “Efran, I’m not going to Blature’s estate. I wouldn’t bother to reply except to tell her I’m not going. And they should not come here; they just want to see our defenses. This is stupidly transparent.”

“Yes, it is, and I want to know why,” he said.

Martyn came up to them, bowing. “Lord Efran. Lady Minka.”

Efran exhaled, “Martyn, can you regard me as a—an elder brother?”

Martyn blinked. “If that is my lord’s desire, I will . . . try.”

Minka said, “Martyn, you are so—intelligent and well-spoken. I’ve never heard any boy your age speak with such refinement.”

He gazed at her. “Thank you, Lady. I have been training as a clerk’s scribe.”

Efran observed, “That’s quite an investment to make in a Polonti.”

Martyn turned to him. “Polonti slaves trained in the higher levels fetch a higher price at maturity, as exotics.”

They stared at him. “Intellectual *moekolohe*,” Efran muttered. “Well. That is not what I wanted to talk to you about. Tell me what you think,” he said, handing him the letter.

Martyn took his time reading it. Then he said slowly, “My thoughts—for what they are worth—is that they know you will not bring her to Lord Blature’s estate, but that is not their true aim. Adele wants an invitation for her and Justinian to come here.”

“I told you!” Minka exclaimed.

“It seems—an insufficient reason for them merely to view our defenses. They know already how many we have, and who they are,” Efran murmured.

Martyn chewed his lip, studying the letter. “I believe you are correct, Lord Efran. Efran. There is more to it than that. Their ultimate aim is to get possession of Lady Minka.”

Efran asked, “If this Justinian’s plan is to marry Minka to gain the throne, then why doesn’t Adele marry him herself?”

“Oh, she’d never do that,” Minka scoffed. “Of course she wants to rule, but she’d never overtly defy Father—she values the appearance of loyalty, because many powerful nobles support him. Also, she despises Justinian as much as I do.”

Efran studied her. “So she thinks she can have power by controlling you?”

“Foolish, isn’t it?” she smirked up at him.

“I would certainly say so, except that she has resources I don’t know about,” Efran said thoughtfully.

“That is a big point,” Martyn blurted. “My master Graduliere has begun using a—a man of science who devises—strange instruments and potions.”

“Like what?” Efran asked.

“I can hardly describe them because I never saw them explained to me,” Martyn said. “The one I saw up close was a small pouch that produced an obscuring fog—whatever it surrounded seemed to disappear into the air.”

“Enough to make a person disappear?” Efran asked.

“No, no—all of his tricks are small, but effective at what he claims they can do. I saw another small device of his that exploded with great force when dropped. His name is Arenado.”

Efran's eyes studied the sky for a long time. Then he shook his head. "It would certainly be a risk, but I can't pass up the opportunity to observe my enemies up close." He turned a troubled face to his young wife. "Are you willing to have them here for what we may learn?"

"Whatever my lord desires," she said in perfect confidence, and Martyn looked at him.

"I hope your trust is justified," Efran muttered. He told Cassel, "Please tell Adele's messenger that we will expect her and Justinian late in the morning tomorrow."

"Yes, Captain," he said, saluting, and turned on his heel at a run.

Martyn looked at Efran. "Why must everyone but me show you deference?"

Efran scowled. "Because you are not under my command, you are my younger brother."

Smiling, Minka turned her large blue eyes to Martyn, and he suddenly comprehended something of the word *family*.

The following morning, June 16th, Efran was wakened by his wife splashing water on her face at the washstand by the bed. He sighed, "Come here to me."

"One moment, my lord," she said, muffled by the towel on her face.

He blinked as she bent her head again to the cool water. Raising up on his elbow, he asked, "Why does your face need so much washing this morning?"

"No reason, my lord," she murmured, blotting her face again.

He reached over to take her arm and pull her toward him. Seeing the bright red spot on her cheekbone, he gasped, "I hit you! I hit you in my sleep!"

"It is nothing, Efran," she protested. "It will fade quickly."

"This is why I can't sleep with you," he said tightly.

"I don't care! I want you beside me at night!" she cried.

"And what am I to say to everyone who sees your face battered?" he asked.

"I will tell them it's my fault," she said stubbornly.

"I will not have you make excuses for me like an abused wife," he said angrily.

They stared at each other in a standoff, then she fell on him to kiss him. He gathered her up, gasping, "You will not distract me this way." She turned her blue eyes up, pressing herself to him, and he groaned, "This is *moekolohe*."

"Shut up," she said.

A while later, as she lay victorious in his arms, he stirred, murmuring, “Wear the dress your auntie lent you.”

“Yes, Efran,” she said mildly.

He eyed her. “Your submissiveness is a ruse.”

“Don’t be silly,” she smiled, snuggling him.

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Chapter 7

Hours later, Efran and Minka were dressed in their finest, awaiting their guests in a small receiving room off the foyer. The cloth-covered table displayed refreshments: blueberries, melon balls, and fresh rolls, decent wine, and a ewer of well water. A particularly fine partition, carved with Biblical scenes, graced one wall. This partition had been discovered in a remote storage room. Evidently too fine for display in an Abbey, yet too valuable to be thrown away, it had simply been stored until needed—as it was today.

When Efran and Minka left the receiving room to coordinate with the door guards on last-minute details, Martyn slipped in. Seeing the obvious hiding place afforded by the partition, he stepped behind it. Efran had made clear that he was not to be seen by their guests, but Martyn’s gut was twisted in such knots over this visit that he had to watch. Knowing what subtlety and treachery Graduliere was capable of, Martyn must attend this meeting himself. The pierced-relief carvings in the partition would make this possible.

Shortly, Efran and Minka returned to the receiving room, and Martyn held very still in his hiding place. Distracted as he was, Efran did not detect his presence as he had when Martyn hid in the kitchen. Minka appeared to be relaxed, sipping on a pewter goblet of wine. “Adele will notice it’s not silver,” she said regretfully.

At that, Efran turned to her, lifting her chin to look at her face. “It’s fine,” she insisted.

“Adele will notice,” he muttered. She tossed her head.

The front doors of the fortress were heard to open; Efran and Minka turned at the same time to the open door of the receiving room. There were voices and footsteps, then two finely dressed people appeared. Martyn’s chest squeezed in apprehension; he knew them both, and they could both identify him as a runaway slave. But he peered all the closer through the partition.

“Darling!” Adele cried, leaning forward to pretend to kiss her sister’s cheek. “Whatever happened? Who hit you?” she exclaimed, darting a glance to Efran.

“What are you wearing on your face?” Minka demanded, squinting.

“Oh, this?” Adele put a hand to the mask that covered her mouth and nose. Justinian wore one like it. “Father’s personal physician says that the masks protect us from the fever. So we wear them whenever we go out. You remember Lord Justinian, don’t you?”

Minka glanced doubtfully at the man who bowed low to her. "I guess."

He was almost as tall as Efran but not nearly so well built. His face (under the mask) was shaved, his dark hair styled, and his lip habitually curled. "Darling Sybil, it's wonderful to see you again."

When he leaned toward her as if to kiss her cheek, she said, "This is my husband, Lord Efran."

"Oh, the guardian," Justinian said in amusement, readjusting his mask over his nose. Efran barely inclined his head. Adele had turned her back to withdraw something from the pouch hanging from her waist, but no one noticed except Martyn. She also quietly closed the receiving-room door. "I've heard all about you," Justinian added, smiling broadly at Efran.

"I owe him a great deal," Adele said. Turning, she brought up what looked like a sheep bladder. "Here, try this." She squeezed it and a puff of fine powder engulfed Efran's face. Immediately she directed a similar puff at her sister. Minka dropped at once to the floor; Efran fought it, but a second puff sent him down as well.

Pulling down his mask, Justinian bent to pick up Minka, whispering, "You take care of the door guards. Hurry!" Adele swept out.

In seconds she came back in, her mask still protecting her face. "Bring her to the foyer while I get the gate sentries. I'll need your bladder; mine is spent," Adele said. He reached into a side pocket to hand it to her. With Minka limp in his arms, he looked warily beyond the door, then carried her out.

Hearing the front doors close, Martyn came out from hiding. He bent over Efran to shake his shoulders. "Efran! Wake up! Get up!" But he couldn't rouse him.

Desperately, Martyn glanced around, then grabbed the ewer of water from the table. This he emptied into Efran's face.

Sputtering and blinking, Efran turned his head. As he struggled up, Martyn dropped the ewer to kneel before him. "They've taken her."

Efran's eyes shot to his face, then swept the room. He lurched up, having to brace himself on the floor for a moment. Then he blew through the open door. Martyn picked up the empty ewer.

At the front doors, Efran noted the guards unconscious on the floor, but ran on out. The gates were standing open and the pair of sentries prostrate in front of them. Efran ran to the head of the switchback. He looked down to see that Adele and Justinian had descended about a third of the way with Minka, unconscious, in an open carriage with a driver. At the speed they were going, they'd be off the switchback and gone before he could get a horse and follow.

Feeling his head throb, Efran looked down from the top of the switchback to the next level. The ground between was about twenty-five feet of steep, rough terrain. Efran threw out his arms and jumped. He landed on his feet, then slid and rolled to the road. Crossing over to the edge, he looked down at Adele and Justinian three levels below him. They were unaware of his pursuit from above, but they were approaching another bend.

Backing up to get a running start, Efran jumped again. This was a rougher descent, but the brocade jacket helped shield his arms from sharp rocks and brambles. He rolled to level ground, and again crossed the road. They had paused the carriage: Minka was struggling. From what Efran could see, she was putting up quite a fight, and he smiled grimly. But Adele put something to her face and she went limp again.

Efran backed up and ran as hard as he could to leap over three-fourths of the terrain to the next level. He cut his hand landing, but hardly noticed. Scrambling down to the road revealed that his quarry were on the level directly below, approaching him.

Efran backed up to run forward and make a mighty leap, aiming for the road ahead of the carriage. The driver, seeing him, whipped the horse to a fast canter in the hope of evading him. Adele screamed at the driver—if he attempted to round a bend at this speed, they'd tip over.

As Efran landed short of the road, rolling in the dirt and scree, the horse passed him before he could get a hand on the tack. But he was able to grab onto the side of the careening carriage and hoist himself up into it. Justinian curled into a ball on the far side of the seat while Adele screamed at Efran. Minka, still unconscious, had slipped off the seat down to the floor.

Careful not to step on her, Efran leaned over the back of the driver's seat to pick him up from behind and throw him off the carriage. Vainly attempting to hold on to the reins, the man almost got himself caught under the wheels, but let go in time to roll down the steep, painful incline to the next level.

Efran, meanwhile, took up the reins to gently pull the panicky horse to a stop just before the bend commenced. Then he turned to survey the disheveled passengers: Adele glaring at him, Justinian cowering on the seat, and Minka crumpled on the floor. Watching the other two warily, Efran lifted her, kicked open the carriage door, and carried her down the skewed steps.

While he began carrying her up the switchback, Adele scrambled into the driver's seat to cluck the horse forward at a reasonable speed. The skittish horse negotiated the bend, then resumed a sane trot to progress down the switchback. The driver, unfortunately entangled in bristly green brier, was unable to get himself extracted before Adele and the carriage passed by, heedless of his cries.

Efran nuzzled Minka as he carried her, trying to wake her, but she was unresponsive. "Minka," he breathed, "come back to me. Come back, Minka."

He glanced up at Martyn sliding down the slope toward him with an ewer. "You got her!" Martyn shouted, exultant. Scrambling up while Efran paused, he said, "Let me splash her face, Efran." He held the ewer, refilled. Others came running down the switchback to gather around them.

Efran held Minka up and Martyn gave her a good splash from the ewer. When there was no response, he emptied it on her head, dousing Efran again as well.

She gasped; her eyelids fluttered, then she squinted up at him. "Efran," she sighed.

"Don't worry; I'm not crying," he said.

A mounted guard of three rode up. "Shall we pursue them, Captain?" Hawk shouted.

Efran looked down at the carriage exiting the switchback to progress up the road heading north, with the hapless driver running after them. "No, I know who they are," he muttered, pressing his face to Minka's.

Attended by an armed guard, Efran carried her up the switchback to the gates. "I want to walk," she murmured, but when he set her on her feet, her knees buckled.

He carried her into the fortress, to their quarters, and put her in bed. She looked around groggily, moaning, “My head.”

Tourle, who had the most experience with physic of anyone at the fortress, was called in to look her over. “Don’t let her go to sleep until we know she’s shaken off the poison. What was it?”

Efran said, “I don’t know, but she got a second dose of it on the road. Where is Martyn?”

From the doorway of the bedchamber, Martyn said, “Here. . . Efran.”

Efran stood up to grasp him by the back of the neck, then embrace him. Gesturing to the chair by Minka’s bedside, he said, “Sit and talk.” Martyn nodded, going to the chair.

Efran exhaled, “First: how did you know . . . ?”

“I hid behind the screen,” Martyn said. “I was suspicious of any plan involving my master—my former master.” While a dozen soldiers hung in the room and around the doorway, Martyn told them everything he had seen in the meeting. He ended, “Whatever Adele used, it was certainly a concoction of Arenado’s. No one could possibly predict what he does.”

Efran listened, stroking Minka’s face and hands to keep her awake. “Where can we find Arenado?” he asked in a low voice.

Martyn lifted his shoulders. “I don’t know. He just came whenever my master summoned.”

“What does he look like?” Efran asked.

“He is Eurasian,” Martyn began. “Long red-brown hair, mustache and a short beard. He is no taller than I, but very round.”

“I want a bounty on his head,” Efran said, looking around for Estes, who had not made it to the room yet. Then he looked back at his young Polonti brother. “Had it not been for you hiding behind that screen, they would have made off with her. You have proved your worth.”

Martyn looked wonderstruck at this praise, then tentatively smiled.

When Efran saw Estes lean in at the door, he asked, “How are the men who were standing guard?”

“They’re all awake, Captain; fine but for a headache,” Estes said. “The lady got the worst of it. Did you say she got a second shot of poison?”

Efran nodded. “When she woke up on the switchback.”

Tourle, the medic, said, “Well, that was careless. They could’ve killed her.”

Minka muttered, “Adele wouldn’t care. . . . That might have been her intent.”

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Chapter 8

That evening, Efran faced the dilemma of where to sleep. He didn't want to sleep in bed with Minka for fear of hitting her again when he insensibly thrashed. But he dare not sleep away from her in case she succumbed to the poison.

So he pulled up a chair next to her side of the bed and sat, crossing his arms to watch her breathe as she slept. Periodically during the night, he would place a hand on her chest or lean down to her face to gauge her breathing.

In the early hours of the morning, before daybreak, he awoke to find her curled up on his lap while he sat on the chair. She was asleep on his shoulder, breathing normally. Sighing, he lifted her as he stood, then lay on his back on the bed with her on top of him. She snuggled down on him in her sleep, and he waited for morning.

Instead, he fell asleep again.

When he awoke again in late morning, he found her still asleep, having shifted to his side. So he gingerly withdrew from her arms to dress and go prowling for breakfast.

Famished as usual, he found nothing ready in the kitchen but old bread and half-cooked beans. These he ate grudgingly, then washed himself, immediately preoccupied with his next imperative: planning a counter strike for the attempted abduction of his Minka.

Going to the foyer to look for Estes, Efran was slightly put out by the crowd lined up out the door. Seeing him, Estes emerged from his cubicle with a parchment. "Captain, how is Lady Minka this morning?"

"Sleeping well, thank you, Estes. What is—?" Efran gestured to the crowd.

"Prospective leaseholders, Captain," Estes replied. "Among them is a woman you may want to interview. She claims to have kitchen experience."

"Really," Efran said with the sullenness of the continually disappointed.

"Yes, her name is Madea—"

"Madea?" Efran gasped, his head snapping toward Estes, then looking over the crowd. "Madea!" he shouted.

A small, stout woman leaned around the man in front of her. She had the build of a Polonti but the skin and hair of a Southerner. "Why, it's Captain Efran. Hello, sir."

"Madea!" he cried, rushing forward to pick her up and shake her in joy. "Madea, what are you doing? Where is Rollo?" Seeing her red face, he thought to put her back down.

She smoothed her worn-out dress self-consciously. "Well, sir, after I was dismissed from service in the palace, Rollo expressed himself as he sometimes did, you know, so he was hanged. And since I have the four children, I thought to come see if I might have a plot to work."

“Oh, no,” he said, then amended, “if you want a plot, we’ll find someone to work it for you. But you and the children will live here, in the fortress.” He interrupted himself to raise his face and say, “God in heaven, You are merciful. The only cook in the Southern Continent who can make a decent cream sauce.” He interrupted himself again to place a hand on the head of the tallest child clinging to her skirt while eyeing him in wonder. “Wardly, how you’ve grown,” Efran said.

“Thank you, sir,” the child whispered. The other three children behind her gaped at the big happy man.

He turned to Estes at his side. “Give her whatever she wants, and a private room for herself and her children. Whatever she wants. Get her in the kitchen today. Have someone get whatever supplies she needs.”

Estes was trying not to laugh. “Yes, Captain.”

“When you’re through here, come up to the second-floor meeting room,” Efran said distractedly, looking around.

“I’ll be right up, Captain,” Estes replied, turning to relay the Captain’s instructions to a subordinate, DeWitt. Meanwhile, Efran found the particular soldier he was looking for, and took his shoulder to speak to him.

Shortly, Efran sat at a large oval table in the second-floor room. With him were Minka, Martyn and six of Efran’s most trusted men. They were silent, as Efran was waiting on two more arrivals.

Estes entered first. “Madea has been assigned a liaison to see that she is provided everything she needs for the kitchen and her children, Captain.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Estes,” Efran said, distracted.

The door opened again, and Toby cautiously entered. “They said you wanted me, Efran.”

“Yes, Toby, have a seat,” Efran said, glancing up. “I’m not sure if all of you know that I adopted Toby—Minka and I adopted Toby,” he corrected himself, with an apologetic glance at her. She smiled, unoffended, waiting. “He has been very helpful to me, and will be again.”

While Toby took the seat beside Minka, Efran leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head. “Clerk Graduliere has given offense,” he said contemplatively, “and requires correction. Martyn.”

The young Polonti started. “Yes, Efran?”

“How much does a clerically trained Polonti sell for upon his majority?” asked Efran.

“Oh, well,” Martyn began hesitantly, “upwards of twenty or thirty royals. Only the wealthiest nobles can afford it.”

Efran asked, “Estes, in your best estimate, how many royals are one of our coins worth?”

Estes snorted mildly, replying, “Fifty. The new royals are badly debased.”

“Excellent,” Efran murmured, studying invisible patterns in the air. “I have sent messengers to Graduliere requesting safe passage to meet with him at Blature’s estate. My first order of business will be to buy Martyn’s freedom.”

“You—you what?” Martyn gasped, his eyes filling with tears, and Minka’s did, too.

Efran regarded Martyn dispassionately, then said, “Toby, I’m taking you with me when I go see Graduliere. Only—we will drop you off at one of your old haunts. I want you to scout out other slaves, or children who are on the street. Connor will be your contact; you two will set up a meeting place, and he will get you back to the fortress.”

Toby nodded; Connor said, “Yes, Captain.”

“Meanwhile, I will meet with Graduliere,” Efran said, looking at Minka.

Martyn objected, “Efran, the potion Adele used on you and Minka is just one of his devices. He has any number that we have no knowledge of.”

“I’m sure you’re correct, Martyn, and I will take measures against that,” Efran said. “Now, is Justinian also living at Blature’s estate?”

“Yes,” Martyn said.

“Where are his quarters?” Efran asked.

“On the second floor, the southernmost suite,” Martyn replied.

“Oh, that’s convenient,” Efran said. “How many guards does the lord set around the estate, and where?”

“Guards?” Martyn said blankly.

“At night,” Efran clarified.

“He has a pair at the gates, and a pair at the front doors,” Martyn said slowly.

“How are they armed?” Efran asked.

“Long swords,” Martyn said. “But I think they are just for show.”

Efran blinked. “What do you mean?”

Martyn said thoughtfully, “I’ve never seen any of the guards use them in practice or defense. I think that Graduliere’s position is seen as so exalted, it would be unthinkable for anyone to attack him.”

Efran looked down the table at his smiling men. “We will not be lured into overconfidence. Does he have dogs on the grounds?”

“Oh, yes. A pair of beautiful greyhounds,” Martyn said.

“Are they let out to roam the grounds at night?” Efran asked.

“Oh, no. They sleep on Master Graduliere’s bed at night,” Martyn said.

“Who sleeps with Justinian?” Efran asked.

Martyn turned red. “Various women,” he murmured, glancing at Minka, who was laughing.

“We’ll be discreet,” Efran said. “Tonight, I’m taking you five—Detler, Doane, Greves, Younge, and Krall—to help me kidnap Lord Justinian. Oh, and Detler, bring silver to pay whoever he’s got with him. We don’t want her screaming.”

“Yes, Captain,” Detler said, a hand over his smiling mouth.

Minka demanded, “Efran, what are you going to do to Justinian?”

“Nothing,” he said with his honest face. “Only steal him away.” Looking at the five, he said, “We will meet in the courtyard at midnight, dressed in darks. Krall and Greves, have the small cart and horse made ready. Doane, you and Younge find us a long rope and wheel pulley. Dismissed.” Saluting, the men stood in anticipation of a fun outing.

That afternoon, Efran’s messengers returned with Clerk Graduliere’s official invitation to Efran to visit, as well as the certificate of safe passage, signed by the clerk himself, that guaranteed Efran the right to travel unmolested to and from Graduliere’s lodging in Westford tomorrow, June 18th. Some might argue that the certificate was unnecessary, given the invitation, but Efran was cautious when it was warranted.

And at midnight, the party of five under Efran gathered in the front courtyard of the Abbey fortress. (For tonight, Efran chose a more cooperative horse than Bastard, who was asleep in his stall and did not notice.) The group brought along a lightweight, well-oiled one-horse cart. And since it was a night operation, they all wore dark clothes with dark hoods. Even the horses were equipped with boots to muffle their hoofbeats on hard roads.

At Efran’s silent signal, they set out through the gates down the switchback.

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Chapter 9

The kidnapping party rode in formation up the northbound road toward Westford, not so fast that they should outpace the cart bringing up the rear. They narrowed to single file when they reached the outskirts of the city. In passing the area where the palace once stood, they all glanced aside to the lake shimmering in the moonlight.

Immediately past the palace, they climbed the gentle slope leading to the nobles’ district. Detler, just behind Efran, pointed to the target estate on their left. They departed the road to ride up the private drive. Approaching the great gates of iron scrollwork, they slowed to a stop. “What do you think, Captain?” Detler whispered. “Should we try to hop the walls?”

Before replying, Efran leaned down to the gate latch, feeling for it in the dark. He lifted it and nudged the gate open with his foot. Riding on through, he pushed the gate farther open as he went. “No, I think we’ll go this way,” he whispered back.

“Right-o, Captain.” Detler shook his head at the Clerk’s carelessness. They rode through one by one, with Younge driving the cart. Then they turned their horses to the left, toward the southern wing.

In the shadow of the southernmost face, they stopped and looked up at the second-story window. “Pulley,” Efran whispered, holding out his hand. A wheel pulley strung with a very long coiled rope was handed up to him. Hanging the hook of the pulley over his shoulder, Efran nudged his horse right up against the ivy-covered wall. Then, standing in the saddle, he grasped the thick vines and began climbing.

When he gained the second-floor window, he bypassed it for the roof decorations, illumined by moonlight. The first one he pulled on broke, so he moved on to a gable. Testing this, he went so far as to let go of the ivy and hang his entire weight on it. It held, so he hooked the wheel pulley on it and hung the coil of loose rope on his shoulder. The other end, on which was tied a belt, he left hanging beside him.

Lowering himself to the window of colored glass, he debated how best to break it open, then saw that it was already unlatched. Drawing it fully open, he peered into a bedroom in which two figures were sprawled on a large bed. Efran looked down the ivy to wave his co-kidnapper up.

As quietly as possible, Efran climbed through the window into the room, dropping the coil of rope. The other end, with the belt, dangled inside the window. Before approaching the bed, he took a gag from his pocket. Then he waited for Detler to climb in as well with a second gag. (Just in case someone woke up, they were both carrying binding ropes.)

Motioning Detler to the far side of the bed, Efran approached the near side, his foot brushing a wine bottle on the floor. Detler almost tripped on another bottle before reaching the bedside. And they looked down at the occupants.

Justinian, on Efran’s side of the bed, lay naked with his mouth open, emitting periodic snores. Efran looked across the bed at a woman likewise undressed, also sound asleep. To be entirely safe, Efran tied the gag securely across Justinian’s mouth, which did make the room quieter. He carried Justinian to the window, where Detler fastened the belt around his waist.

With Efran gripping the rope feeding into the pulley, Detler turned Justinian face down and pushed him out of the window. Efran then lowered him toward the cart below while Detler watched from the window and the men watched from below.

It only took a minute for the drooping figure, pasty white in the moonlight, to reach the uplifted arms of Doane and Greves. They unfastened the belt to lay him in the cart. Then Efran climbed out of the window to unhook the wheel pulley, making sure they were watching for it before he dropped it and the rest of the rope.

Meanwhile, Detler put the woman’s pay on the side table and began picking up all the male clothing he could find. “Don’t know if it’s all here, Captain,” he whispered, bundling the various articles comprising a nobleman’s suit.

“It will have to do,” Efran whispered. “Just make sure to take—here.” He picked up Justinian’s felt hat with its jaunty feather and stuffed it into his pocket.

Detler heaved the bundle of clothes out of the window, then he turned to begin climbing down the ivy. Efran followed, closing the window after him. On the way, he dislodged Justinian’s pants from the ivy and tossed them down.

Once on the ground, he checked the cart to see that Justinian was still asleep, and snoring around his gag. Younge covered him with a blanket, and Detler tossed in all the clothing he could find. Efran took a last glance

around the area to see that they'd left nothing amiss, then he gestured to the horses.

They rode out as they had come in, Efran bringing up the rear to close and latch the iron gate behind them. Then they turned south to ride home with their cargo in the cart.

When they arrived at the fortress lit with lanterns, Efran and Krall carried Justinian, still asleep, up the stairway to a bed in a decent third-story room. Krall covered him with the blanket while Greves brought up his clothes to lay them in a bedside chair.

On the way out, Efran surveyed the room: washstand with water, chamber pot, breakfast of fruit and bread, and a small window affording no escape. Justinian, freed of the gag, resumed snoring.

Efran, smiling, shut the door and locked it.

He trotted downstairs, tired but happy, and opened the door to his and Minka's quarters, where he had left a candle burning when he'd kissed her goodnight. Passing through the receiving room to the bedchamber, he jumped to see her awake, watching him enter. "You're back!" she gasped, launching herself onto him.

He held her. "Why aren't you asleep?"

"I was too anxious. Oh, I'm so glad you're all right!" She kissed him as he peeled off his dark coat.

"It was very simple," he assured her. Then he remembered to pull out Justinian's crumpled hat with its sad, broken feather.

She looked at the hat with misgivings. "How is he?"

"Sleeping," he laughed. "He never woke up."

"What did you do to him?" she asked in vague alarm.

"Nothing. He did it all himself with several bottles," he assured her. "Come to bed."

"I want to see him," she said suddenly.

"He's not a pretty sight," he hedged, reluctant to climb the stairs to the third story again. He was tired.

"Efran, what did you do to him?" she asked, genuinely concerned.

Hands on his hips, he looked at her. Then he exhaled, "All right, come see. Put on your robe." He took up the bedside candle.

She threw on her robe and slippers, then followed him down the corridor and up two flights of stairs to a small room. He turned at the doorway. "Are you sure you want to see this?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"So be it." His tone disavowing the consequences, he turned the key in the lock, opened the door, and leaned in with the candle.

In its dim circle of light, they saw that Justinian had thrown off the blanket to spreadeagle on his back, snoring mightily. Efran looked quickly at her, who stared at Justinian before turning away, issuing an involuntary raspberry.

“I tried to warn you,” Efran said, closing the door and relocking it.

She bent double with silent laughter. Every now and then she tried to say something, but wound up gurgling in her throat. Pressing his lips together, Efran took her by the arm to lead her back down the stairs while she helplessly chortled. “He’s so—gangly and skinny and oh! Bony arms—and that wee little—”

Efran laughed abruptly, “Well, now you’re just being mean.” And had she looked in his face at that moment, she might have seen him redden.

As they came off the stairs, she laughed, “He looks like those marionettes at the Faire, with their spindly arms and legs and big heads and noses—”

Efran mused, “I knew I’d seen him before.”

“Oh.” She suddenly stopped so that he almost tripped over her. He watched her eyes glaze in alarm.

“Minka?” he whispered.

She turned hollow eyes up to him. “If you hadn’t come to my henhouse, and made me love you, I would have been married off to him.” She clutched his neck, pouring tears onto his chest.

He breathed in her ear, “Hush, now. Why are you crying? We were married weeks ago. You made me sign the book and everything, remember?”

She pulled away, wiping her eyes. “It came so close to not happening.”

“No,” he said firmly, and she looked at him. “It was meant to be, Minka. It had to happen one way or another. It just happened in the best way possible.”

“Ohh.” She leaned into him.

“You’re tired. Come to bed,” he urged her, pulling the thong from his hair. She was already half asleep.

He laid her in bed, then paused, fighting with himself. He did not want to risk hitting her in his sleep again, but he couldn’t leave her like this. Sighing, he lay in bed on his back, then lifted her to lie on him. That was the safest thing he knew to do. Then he reached over to snuff the candle flame with his fingers.

Late the following morning—June 18th—Minka woke to watch Efran struggle into another dress uniform. He had destroyed so many, it was getting hard to find one that fit him, as he had been reduced to borrowing his men’s uniforms. The pants were adequate, but he was having trouble buttoning the coat. “What a lovely sight to wake up to,” she murmured.

He glanced at her. “Good morning. You woke just in time to tie my hair back.”

“I’m so glad I married a handsome man,” she sighed, getting up to fetch the comb and a leather thong.

He paused before sitting at her knees, but she clearly meant it. All he knew of his face was that it was classically Polonti: flat and broad—and how women reacted when he smiled. He decided to leave the coat unbuttoned. Then he checked the small leather purse that contained two gold coins, and put that around his neck.

“Be still.” She tapped his shoulder with the brush, and he settled down for his grooming. Tying the thong around his gathered hair, she continued, “I had nightmares about being married to Justinian.”

He felt the tight knot at the back of his head, then reached for his socks. “I warned you it wasn’t a pretty sight.”

She flopped back onto the bed, laughing, “Don’t mock me.”

“Never,” he smiled, thrusting his foot into a boot.

She groaned, “Now I have to worry about you going to meet his disgusting, evil, treacherous father.”

“No, no. This will be a pleasure. I’m so confident about the outcome that I’m taking Bastard.” He picked up the invitation and the certificate of safe passage from atop a carved wooden chest to put them in his pants pocket. Then he crammed Justinian’s hat into his jacket pocket.

He leaned over with the intention of kissing her goodbye, but she raised up on her knees to press her mouth to his. He gripped her, whispering, “You’ll make me late.”

She sat back on the bed. “Then hurry and get it done.” Smiling, he turned to the door.

At the stables, he met Connor and Toby dressed in peasant clothing with a complacent old bay hitched to the cart. Nodding to Connor, Efran bent to Toby. “Stay far from anyone well dressed or anyone in uniform. If anyone appears to notice you, get yourself to your meeting place with Connor. Where is that?” Efran asked Connor.

“The old henhouse that was flooded out,” Connor replied.

“Oh yes,” Efran sighed, recent remembrances washing over him. “That’s good. Wait till I’m out of sight before you start out.” He laid a hand on Toby’s head, who nodded confidently.

Detler came up leading Bastard, saddled and bridled, snorting. Taking the reins, Efran told Bastard, “I’ve got no carrots on me, as you should be able to tell. If you want them, behave.” Bastard shook his bridle.

Leading Bastard away from the stables, he paused to see Pia running toward him. “My little *aina!*” He dropped the reins to lift her, and she kissed his cheek. “Thank you,” he whispered.

She looked across the Lands to sweep an arm out, and his brow creased. “What are you doing?” he asked suspiciously. But she clambered down from his arms and skipped toward the back grounds.

Efran looked back to Toby, watching, who translated, “She’s just helping you.”

“Uh huh,” Efran uttered, seeing her disappear around the west side of the fortress. Then he continued with Bastard to the front courtyard.

Not long after departing the switchback to lope up the road to Westford, Efran became aware of the wolves

running in the grass alongside him. This surprised him: they were usually careful to stay far away from the plots under construction or people milling around. There were only one or two wolves at first, and they made no move other than to run in the high grass alongside Bastard, like a—bodyguard. After he had crossed the old stone bridge, more wolves came alongside. And he began to rethink his cavalier attitude toward this meeting with Graduliere.

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Chapter 10

When Efran approached the outskirts of Westford, the wolves dropped away. They would never appear anywhere near the city. He rode past the lake that had been the palace, then turned onto the side street that housed the notary's shop.

Dismounting at the door, Efran entered to the tinkling of the bell. The old notary emerged from a back room, nodding as if he had been expecting him. Efran asked, "Don't you have forms certifying the purchase of a slave? I'm going to buy one off Clerk Graduliere."

"Yes," the notary said. "Is the purchase for use of the slave, or for his freedom?"

"For his freedom," Efran said.

"Ah. One moment." The old man returned to the back room, and Efran looked out the front window to make sure Bastard was behaving.

The notary returned with a parchment in his hand. Laying it before Efran, he pointed. "The name of the slave goes here. The present owner's signature goes here. The signature of the purchaser goes here. You will notice the line that specifies that the purchase is to confer freedom on the slave. Then the date goes here."

Efran paused. "Can I sign now?"

"All lines may be filled ahead of time except for the signature of the current owner. If he will not come to my shop, you see the line here for his witness to sign. After all signatures are secured, the form must be returned to me for recording in the book."

"All right." Efran glanced around, then brought the quill and ink bottle toward him. He signed "Leeson" for the slave and his own name as the purchaser of freedom. He paused over the date, then filled it in as well: June 18 of the year 8153. It was today or never.

He straightened to lift the coin purse from his shirt, but the notary said, "Payment is made when the form is returned." Nodding, Efran shoved the purse back down his shirt and the notary added, "May the God of heaven shepherd you."

Efran looked up quickly, his heart thumping. "I need His help, don't I?"

"Yes," the old man said, knowing Graduliere.

Efran turned his eyes to the greenish glass window in the direction of Blature's estate. "God of heaven," he whispered, "let me do this."

He turned back to the notary, who blotted the lines on the parchment and then rolled it up to fit into a leather pouch. Handing this to Efran, he said, "The pouch may be returned with the form."

Correctly or not, Efran heard a guaranty in the statement and said, "Thank you." The old man smiled.

Outside the shop, Efran turned Bastard's head and mounted in one motion. "Bastard, I judged Graduliere a fool because his son is. I have been corrected. Let's hope it's enough." For once, Bastard did not buck when Efran kicked him.

Efran rode up the hill to the grand estates and saw two guards at Blature's gates. Before advancing farther, Efran opened the purse at his neck to remove one coin. This he put in his pocket, relocating the purse underneath his shirt. Advancing to the gates, Bastard danced while Efran produced the invitation from Graduliere for one guard's inspection, then the gates were opened. From there, Efran rode to the front entrance.

Leaving Bastard to a stablehand—whom Efran told, "I'll be right back out"—Efran trotted up the steps, watching the guards open the great doors before he even reached them. This was not encouraging: Graduliere would welcome him only because of something he knew.

Efran entered a grand, echoing foyer. The door attendant bowed and said, "Please follow me, Lord Efran. My Lord Clerk Graduliere awaits you." Efran followed him, reminding himself that the estate was neither Graduliere's nor Lightfoot's; it had been appropriated from a dead man's family, who were then evicted.

The attendant directed him into a large, lavishly appointed receiving room, bowing to his master as Efran entered. Clerk Graduliere, dressed in robes embroidered with gold thread, sat behind an ornate desk. In his forties, he exuded power far more potently than Lightfoot did with his posturing. Efran noted that unless Lightfoot had improved his furnishings significantly, his clerk had bested him all the way around.

"Lord Efran of the Abbey Fortress, what a singular pleasure to meet you. Please have a seat." Graduliere gestured to a gilded chair in front of the mammoth desk. Bowing, Efran advanced to sit. "Thank you for seeing me, Lord Clerk Graduliere." Then he waited for Graduliere's invitation to speak—a nicety he had learned from Surchatain Lietes.

After a moment during which the two men eyed each other, the clerk said, "What can I do for you, Lord Efran?"

Efran said, "My Lord Clerk, your slave Leeson happened into my territory, and the wolves found him. He is alive, but I fear not very useful to you anymore. Since he is my kin, I desire to purchase his freedom from you." Efran removed the parchment from the notary's pouch to lay it before Graduliere, then took the NDF royal from his pocket to place it on the parchment.

Graduliere picked up the royal first, and Efran detected astonishment, though well hidden. "Interesting. Where did you get it?" Graduliere asked lightly.

Efran smiled. "Do you doubt that it's genuine?"

Having heard about the Abbey Treasury, Graduliere looked at him. "No." He then picked up the parchment to read it through. Reluctantly, he said, "The slave was condemned to death by the Surchatain."

“No one need know about this but you and I,” Efran replied.

Graduliere leaned back in his chair, fingers at his lips. “You are a bold man, Lord Efran.” When Efran did not reply, he said, “Let us discuss this over refreshments.”

As he started to raise a finger in summons, Efran said, “No, thank you, Lord Clerk. I am here only to conduct this transaction. I need your signature and that of a witness.”

Graduliere smiled kindly on him. “And if I decline?”

“I rather think you will not, my Lord Clerk, as it is so profitable to you,” Efran said.

Graduliere’s hand dropped in surprise, and he laughed, “I half think to comply with such a cogent argument, sir.” Again Efran did not reply, so he added, “But since you are interested in this slave, I think I want more than money for him.”

“What do you want?” Efran asked quietly.

“Chataine Sybil,” Graduliere said just as quietly.

“I’m afraid that is not possible, my Lord Clerk,” Efran said. “Would you settle for Justinian?”

Graduliere’s eyes locked on him for several seconds, then he snapped his fingers. When the attendant appeared, Graduliere uttered, “Check Justinian’s room.” The attendant bowed and left. Efran contemplatively looked out the window, noting that the gallows had been finished, and they looked considerably sturdier than Lightfoot’s.

Shortly, the attendant returned to reply, “He is not in his room, Lord Clerk Graduliere. We are checking the game room and bath house.”

“Look everywhere,” Graduliere uttered, still focused on Efran.

When the attendant had left, Efran reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew the crumpled hat. This he laid on the desk before Justinian’s father.

Graduliere’s eyes blazed fire as he regarded the hat, and he uttered, “You play a most dangerous game, Lord Efran.”

“It is no more a game to me than to you, sir.”

“Do you think that we cannot level that little fortress of yours?” Graduliere hissed.

Efran was encouraged to hear the sign of stress in his voice. Brow creasing, he replied, “What makes you think I would be so foolish as to keep him in my house?”

“What do you want?” Graduliere said in a thick voice.

Efran leaned forward. “Call your attendant in as witness and sign the form. Then we will let Justinian go.”

The attendant rushed in. “My Lord Clerk Graduliere, these were found beneath his window.” And he held out Justinian’s pants.

“Oh, I’m so sorry; we dropped those. I can return them to him before he’s released,” Efran said, reaching for the pants.

Graduliere lurched to a stand. But a guard rushed to his side to whisper in his ear, and the clerk’s face was transformed with delight. “Excellent!” he said. “Bring him around back.”

Brimming with satisfaction, Graduliere settled into his chair. “You think to hold someone important to me? Then I will hold someone important to you. Perhaps you would like to revise your terms, Lord Efran.” Then he looked out the back window. His attendant looked out the back window.

Efran looked out the back window. And he saw two of Surchatain Lightfoot’s guards bring a child to stand before the gallows. It was Toby.

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Efran lurched up to flatten the parchment. “Sign it and let me leave or others will die!”

The attendant grabbed the quill. “Where do I sign?” Screams echoed from the back courtyard as other wolves appeared. Graduliere, dazed, looked out at his guards being torn apart on their feet.

“Here,” Efran pointed. The attendant dipped the quill and signed his name with many splotches.

A white-faced guard ran in. “Lord Clerk, wolves! A whole clan attacking!”

Efran rotated the parchment toward Graduliere and dipped the quill himself. “Sign it!”

Upon the cries coming from the front courtyard, Graduliere took the pen and shakily signed his name.

Efran grabbed a sheet of blotting paper to place on the scroll before rolling it up. Then he shoved it into the pouch and ran out. The valuable NDF coin was left on Graduliere’s desk.

Efran ran down the front steps around the bodies of the victims, all guards of Lightfoot’s or Graduliere’s. Looking to the side of the great house, he whistled, and Bastard trotted around to the front. Efran ran toward him to leap on the saddle and grab the reins.

As Bastard bolted forward, he was passed by a stream of wolves returning to their territory. The gates were standing open. Efran looked around for Toby, but knew that he was already gone—the wolves would not leave him behind. So Efran ran Bastard to the notary shop while the wolves streamed south. Flinging himself down from the saddle, Efran fell through the door to the wild tinkling of the bell.

The notary came out as Efran flung the pouch on the counter to extract the scroll. “It’s signed,” he gasped. With trembling hands, he pulled it out for the notary’s inspection.

The old man unrolled the parchment and removed the blotting sheet while Efran swallowed, forcing himself to stop shaking. “It looks hastily done,” the notary observed.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Did he receive payment?” the notary inquired.

“Yes, sir,” Efran said.

“I see. Well, then.” He turned to the shelves for a ledger as Efran breathed. Hearing tumult down the street, he backed up to look out the door. They were sounding the alert, gathering arms.

Efran rocked on his heels at the counter while the old man entered the relevant information in his ledger, then handed the precious document back to him, signed and stamped with the notary’s seal. “The emancipated status of the slave is official. You may pay now,” he said.

“Yes.” Efran fumbled with the coin purse at his throat. Unable to get it open quickly enough, he broke the leather thong to hand it over. Then he crammed the document into its traveling pouch.

As he lurched for the door, the notary shook the coin out of the purse and looked at it. Raising an eyebrow, he said, “You may take the pouch.” Efran glanced back, nodding, and ran out to jump onto Bastard, turning his head.

Bastard passed the old henhouse at a full run. Not seeing Connor or the cart, Efran knew that he and Toby must be back at the fortress. They must be. As Bastard galloped steadily south, Efran saw no more wolves, either. Their part done, they had all preceded him into hiding.

Pounding over the stone bridge and down the road to the fortress, Efran reined up, looking over the leaseholders who had paused their work at his rapid approach. "Everyone up to the fortress!" he shouted. "Quickly!" They dropped their tools and began running to the switchback.

To other, nonhuman ears, Efran shouted, "They are coming to attack. Run hide! We will defend you." He then spurred up the switchback, outpacing leaseholders also on their way up.

At the iron gates, he reached over to begin ringing the bell so hard, it rang through the orchards in back. Men came running. Dismounting, Efran gathered himself to command calmly: "The nobles are preparing to attack. They should arrive soon. I need a man on horseback as watchman on the stone bridge."

"Here, Captain," Koschat said, already mounted, and Efran nodded him through.

Then Efran asked tightly, "Are Connor and Toby back?"

In reply, Toby came leaping up. "Efran! Can you believe it? Did you see them?"

Pouring tears, Efran grabbed him up, shook him, and then pressed the grimy little face to his shoulder. "Toby, that was my fault. I should have known—"

"Aw, don't, Efran! How many people can say they almost got hanged but were rescued by wolves?" Toby cried.

Connor came up behind him; Efran grabbed his shoulder as well, but the man forestalled being shaken by asking, "What do you want us to use against the nobles, Captain?"

"Set up shields for the archers in front, swords behind them. Spread them out in the grass. I will ring for the first volley," Efran said. He took the pouch off his shoulder to hand it to Conte. "Give that to Martyn."

"Yes, Captain." Conte turned inside around a stream of leaseholders going in. Many, however, preferred to go around back of the fortress on the outside.

Men in helmets, carrying shields, bows and swords, began streaming out of the gates and down the switchback. They fanned out as Efran instructed, the archers in front kneeling in the long grass.

Minutes later, Koschat, the watchman at the stone bridge, galloped down the road to signal that they were coming.

Efran, standing at the gates, watched the wolf hunters come—in overalls, riding work horses with rope bridles, carrying cheap bows and farm tools. The mounted wolf hunters were followed by a wagonload of grizzled field help drawn by docile draft horses. Clearly, these men thought they were hunting wolves; they were not expecting to meet an armed defensive force. After some confusion as to the best approach, they began spreading through the grass, aiming at anything that moved. Fortunately, they were nowhere near Efran's archers, armed with bows that had twice the range of the wolf hunters' weapons.

Efran shook his head. These weren't Graduliere's nobles, and Efran did not want to kill men who thought they

were protecting their homes and families. Not many weeks ago, he himself had come down here in just this manner to do the same thing.

Bastard was still by his side at the gates. Efran hoisted himself up to the saddle and turned him to the switchback. As he loped down, one and then another of the mounted wolf hunters paused to watch his descent. Those in the wagon hadn't even got out yet. The fortress defenders lowered their weapons.

Efran rode within hailing range. "You are on my property! Go home!" he shouted.

One man in front yelled back, "You have a pack of mankillers on your property that we aim to clean out!"

Efran paused. How could he answer that? "Who did they kill?"

The leader became impatient at the obstruction. "You want a list of names? We're killing the mankillers, so you'd better get out of the way!"

"Every creature on my land is under my protection!" Efran shouted. "If you don't harm me or my people, my animals won't harm you! Go look for your mankillers elsewhere, because I will have shot the first man who draws a bow on my land!" He whistled a signal to his archers, who stood with bows raised and anchored.

There was a tense standoff. For the first few minutes, no one on either side moved. Then some of the wolf hunters began pointing and some of the defenders turned around to look. Efran perceived that something was happening on the switchback behind him. With a wary last glance at the wolf hunters, he also turned to look.

Swaggering down the road, dressed in a nobleman's coat and orphan pants that were too short, Justinian approached with uplifted hands. Bypassing Efran on Bastard, he said, "Here now, I see that there's been a big misunderstanding here. Whatever attacked your people up there didn't come from here, so what we all have to do is go figure out where they did come from. Now come on back with me to Shay's Tavern; I'll buy everybody a drink and we'll get out our maps and discuss where the threat is at, actually."

The wolf hunters thought this was a fine idea. The men in the wagon waved him up to ride with them, and the rest immediately turned their horses to follow the wagon back up the road toward Westford. The fortress defenders looked at each other, but Efran looked back toward the top of the switchback. "Minka," he said.

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Chapter 12

Dinner that afternoon in the Abbey fortress was amazing. There was venison prepared three different ways; there were pheasant, grouse, rabbit; there were garden vegetables and fresh bread with pastries and fruit for dessert. And there was plenty for everyone.

Efran and Toby had to tell their respective stories over and over again. Martyn walked around as if in a dream, and everyone he met patted his back or hugged him. His face was continually wet because he had not stopped crying since an anonymous soldier had handed him a pouch a few hours ago.

When he finally found Efran in the great dining hall, he could only stand before him, shedding tears. Efran held

him for a minute, then extended him to arm's length. Martyn gulped, wiped his eyes, and waited. Efran said, "We're going to train you to be whatever you want. What do you want to do?"

Martyn's face cleared. "I want to fight. I want to be a soldier."

Efran smiled at him. "Me at fourteen. You will start training tomorrow." With Martyn's tears this time was a smile of gratification.

Minka, sitting at a nearby table crowded with diners, explained, "Polonti are just very emotional. They feel everything deeply, and their blood is very red."

Hearing, Efran sat beside her, lowering his face and biting his lip. Martyn was dragged to another table with men who wanted to give him pointers on his training. (This he received at the fortress until August, when one of the senior-most Polonti soldiers, Goss, decided that he merited special training from a Polonti master who maintained a camp in the Sasany Fields. Martyn was to remain there for ten months.)

Efran regarded his wife. "I want to know what you did to Justinian."

She exhaled. "We talked for a long time. He is actually a very nice boy, and I'm sorry I made fun of him." Efran opened his mouth but she continued, "He's not interested in ruling and he doesn't want to marry me, either. He thinks I'm a 'sweet kid,' but he's in love with Adele. That's what happened with the poison powder. Adele suggested it; his father provided the potion, and he just went along with it. He was very apologetic about that."

"How did you get him to come down and talk us out of war with farmboys?" Efran asked patiently.

She shrugged, "I just offered him the chance to be a hero. We knew what the problem was from Toby"—who, lodged on the bench between her and Efran, nodded. "It was very simple to suggest that Justinian could straddle the divide, so to speak, and he took it from there. So, our peace with the wolves is intact, and I'm sure he's running up a lovely tavern bill for his father."

Efran murmured, "They knew what they were doing."

Minka looked at him. "Who?"

He swallowed. "The wolves. They—went after the soldiers. The first ones they took out were the two who were about to hang a child. Then they went around to the guards in front who might stop me leaving. They ignored the gardener, and the stablehands, and the servants. They were in battle mode."

"Ohh. They were protecting you both," Minka said.

"Yes," he said, looking up.

At twilight, Efran and Toby went down to the meadows. The wolves had come out of hiding to return to their territory, so father and son walked with them, and talked, and explained that the wolf hunters probably wouldn't be coming back for a while.

That evening, after holding Minka until she fell asleep, Efran got up quietly and went to the keep where the crucifix stood. He knelt at its foot, then clutched the base and lowered his forehead to the wood. He whispered, "God of heaven . . . God of all men, God of the slaves, God of the beasts . . . God of mercy and justice and—fearful deliverance. . . . I don't understand Your working; I don't understand Your—power and reach, how You

could compel the wolves to leave their territory to save us. I know that no *aina* has the power to do what I saw today; it was You alone. I am in awe. . . .”

He rolled over onto his back and fell asleep in his customary place.

The first thing Efran did the following morning (June 19th) was send spies to Westford. His plan was to dress them as itinerant merchants, beggars, travelers, entertainers—whatever seemed appropriate at the moment, and they would be frequently rotated. They were to collect whatever news was heard in the streets. Efran determined that he would never be caught in ignorance again.

The following weeks saw extraordinary changes in the life of the Abbey fortress and its land. With funds now available for improvements, Estes had the men build a large laundry house on the east grounds, for which he hired two laundresses. A bathhouse for the men was constructed nearby, equipped with a fireplace for the winter. A full-time gardener was hired, who was provided funds to hire his own helpers.

The most innovative building project on the fortress grounds was the barracks, badly needed for the number of men who had defected from the Eurussian and Westfordian armies to serve Efran. There was no ready place for it within the fortress grounds, which, after all, had not been built to house an army. And Estes was reluctant to use Abbey plots for it, which were too far removed from the fortress anyway.

So a clever building engineer, Gerard, looked over the steep, inhospitable southern exposure of the hill to suggest, “Build your barracks here.”

Efran came over to hear him out. “How?”

Gerard said, “You see the ledge that butts out twenty feet below? And the soft limestone face of the cliffs? It’s quite possible to dig out sufficient limestone above that shelf for your barracks to sit secure in the hillside. Then cut steps above it to the summit. I’d add railings or rope as well.”

Efran listened. “Do we cut the fence for a second gate back here?”

Gerard winced. “I wouldn’t, as it might compromise the integrity of the fence. I’d build a folding ladder to fit over it that you can store on the roof of the barracks.”

Efran looked over the rocky ground stretching down to the Sea. “Do it.” Not only was it quickly done, work crews prepared the hillside to accommodate a second barracks.

A caregiver and tutor were hired for the orphans, whose number varied from a few to a few more. The fortress was never overwhelmed with them again, because of the subsidy that Efran had ordered for families who took them in. Also, the explosion of business opportunities on Abbey lands meant that more hands were needed for work and training.

Someone discovered a chandlery in the back of the fortress, still equipped with many of the necessary supplies, so it was put into operation at once for the production of candles, soaps, oils, and paint, with a pair of competent chandlers to run it.

The critical need of uniforms for the men and textiles for the fortress was addressed when Elvey, a seamstress, moved her entire shop from Westford to an Abbey plot—a double one. She had a staff of spinners, weavers, and seamstresses, and contacts with cloth merchants in Euruss and Crescent Hollow. When she brought samples of

her fabrics to show Estes, he ordered a hundred summer uniforms of linen immediately and a hundred winter uniforms of gray-green wool to be delivered later.

The color of the summer uniforms—red—came about almost accidentally when Elvey was leaving from her meeting with Estes. He had already left his cubicle when she realized that no color had been specified for the linen uniforms. So she asked that information of a random soldier on her way out. That man, Hawk, who had been in Captain Efran's Red Regiment, said, "Red, of course."

"Of course," she laughed, and left to order hundreds of yards of red linen.

The first person to be outfitted, naturally, was Efran, who obediently responded to a summons to her Abbey shop to be measured for his clothes. He submitted to her reaching around his chest with the measuring string, but when she tried to measure his pants inseam, he climbed up on her work table and refused to come down. Minka had to be summoned to measure him herself. (As long as he was having uniforms made, Minka ordered for him a lovely blue serge suit in a civilian cut.)

At that point, it was natural to discuss an identifying standard for the Abbey fortress, as well as livery and dress uniforms for the officers. So Efran gathered Estes, DeWitt, and Cassel to get their input. "Colors," Efran said. "What should our predominant color be? I like blue"—as Lystran blue had been the identifying color ever since the reigns of Ares and Henry, and still was for Westford.

Three disapproving faces looked back at him. "Red," said Estes.

"Red," said DeWitt. (It had been a coup for Efran, and benefit to his army, when Estes persuaded DeWitt to join them. He had been senior aide to Commander Wendt under Surchatain Lietes.)

"How about red, Captain?" Cassel said.

"Red is nice, too," Efran conceded. None of these men knew that the preordained color selection had already been made. Then they discussed the identifying symbol for the standard. Efran insisted on a cross, as that had been prominent on Lystran standards during its period of dominance, but the men also wanted some form of the Abbey or the hill represented, as they were unique to the Abbey Lands.

So Estes took their ideas to Elvey, who soon produced a sample standard which Estes showed the others: superimposed on a square of gold was the shape of a cross on a hill in a deep, rich red. It was clear and forceful, and the men approved immediately. So a quantity of those were ordered, as well as livery for horses and carriages in that same rich red with gold trim.

The officers' dress uniforms were based on Westfordian uniforms in design, except made of red linen with gold trim. Efran's dress uniform was the same, except in undyed linen.

Madea, the kitchen mistress, persuaded her favorite baker and butcher to relocate from Westford to the Abbey Lands, so a most wonderful alliance was formed between her, Averne, and Lowry. Estes, after surveying the southern Passage with a team of builders, used more of the Abbey gold to have a mill constructed where the Passage flowed most forcefully. The old mill in Westford was rotting away. (No one realized at the time that the new mill was technically outside the Abbey Lands boundaries. But it turned out not to matter.)

Each opening of a new enterprise on the Abbey Lands resulted in the establishment of suppliers and homes for workers: the baker required local grains; the butcher local livestock; and all businesses required deliverymen. So Estes paid for the widening and paving of the road from Westford, as well as roads between the plots. He also

began leveling ground for a second road north. It was possible to do this without touching the old gold because the profits of businesses operating on Abbey Lands were taxed. And the tax rates were minimal compared to those in Westford.

There was a downside to the development: the deluge of humans into wolf territory proved too burdensome for the peace to hold, and a wolf on the outskirts of the plots was shot. Pia relayed to Efran the request for an urgent conference.

He met Canis and Lady Lupus on the far eastern edge of the Abbey Lands, where he was informed of the clan's decision to relocate to the wilds of what had once been northeastern Scylla. "I am sorry," he told them. "I beg you not to harm my kin that come down from Eledith to us. And I pledge to protect any wolves that I find remaining here."

They agreed to this, and Efran circulated a notice to all leaseholders that, again, the wolves must not be harmed; should any wolf be spotted, a message must be sent to the fortress at once, and any animal lost to a wolf would be recompensed by Efran.

The sudden transfer of wealth to the Abbey Lands affected the balance of power, as well. In mid-July, Efran's spies brought him news that he knew must be shared with Minka before anyone else.

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Chapter 13

Efran found Minka on the back grounds of the fortress with the gardener, Garrett. He had requested that the old tombstones bearing inscriptions of Renée of Westford be removed to make way for special heritage roses. But Minka, feeling a kinship with Renée, desired the roses to be planted around the stone markers in a dedicated plot. This he had done, and now roses of coral, oyster, and pale yellow tinged with pink sat behind the marble crosses, overshadowing them with blooms.

"Thank you, Garrett; that's perfect," she said, surveying the results.

"Have to admit, it's a nice grouping, Lady," he acknowledged. "Good afternoon, Lord Efran."

She turned in surprise as Efran came up behind her. "Whatever you've done, I thank you as well, Garrett," he said, sliding a hand around her waist. "Ah. I see that Renée of Westford has prevailed again, to no one's surprise."

She laughed at him, and he smiled down on her. "Come sit with me, Lady." She took his hand happily to walk to the newly installed bench under the great old walnut tree. A few children were helping the undergardener harvest greens for the kitchen.

As they sat, Cassius came bounding up to be petted. Efran scratched his ears, but Minka did not want dirty paws on her new dress. "I love the new seamstress. She does such beautiful work," she said, spreading her hands over her full, lightweight skirt. Turning evaluative eyes to his summer uniform of linen, she said, "Oh, that looks nice on you. It must feel good to have clothes that fit, for a change."

“I am glad to not be always destroying someone else’s uniform,” he admitted, glancing down.

She waited, then murmured, “It must be very bad news that you have to tell me.”

He sighed, leaning closer to her ear. “Adele has married Graduliere, and he has evicted your father and his staff from Blature’s estate. I do not know whether your father is still Surchatain, but he won’t be for long.”

She weighed that. “How dangerous does that make Graduliere to you?”

“More than I probably know,” he said. “Nor do I know . . . whether I can save your father’s life.”

Minka looked up at him. “Why would you want to?”

“That would depend on how you felt,” he said.

She faced forward with unfocused eyes. “I went to him the night before your hanging and begged him to spare your life. I told him he could send you away, that I would never see you again, and that I would marry whoever he told me to if he would just spare your life. He agreed to that. He told me he would send you north to fight the brigands.” These were loose bands of robbers that collected in the southern Fastnesses to periodically sweep down to Eurus or even towns along the Passage. But even that effort had been curtailed by the fever.

Minka continued, “So I went to bed grateful in the knowledge that you would live, even though you would never be mine. I felt it was sufficient to remember your kindness to me, and to know that you would make some other girl very happy.

“In the morning I was awakened by someone shouting your name. The strangest thing was, it sounded like your voice. So I got up and went to a window to look out back, and saw you before the gallows being sentenced to death.” She paused to turn around and look him in the eye.

“*He lied to me.* He didn’t have the backbone to tell his pathetic little girl the truth, or the decency to keep his word to me,” she said, shaking.

“That explains your anger then,” he whispered. “That explains it all.”

“What do I care now about him? Whatever happens is his own doing,” she said, angry still.

“My Minka,” he exhaled, gathering her to him. She buried her face on his shoulder, then promptly raised up again. “I’m not marring that beautiful jacket,” she said firmly.

He laughed, picking her up to put her firmly on his lap. “We can have more made.”

“Not if you won’t let her measure you,” she said, twining her arms around his neck.

“That’s your job,” he returned.

She laughed, stroking his hair back from his face. He had been so busy recently that she hadn’t been able to tie his hair back for him before he needed to see. “Is it bothering you?”

“Of course,” he said, shaking his head under her hand.

“You can cut it,” she sighed reluctantly.

“No. Pleasing you is more important than seeing who I’m hitting,” he said firmly.

She laughed, holding his head, and he was perfectly fine with resting his head on her chest. “So, Adele has married father’s clerk. Does it make any difference that she is already Surchataine?” she asked.

“Who knows?” he muttered. “They’ve been rewriting the rules so quickly, I don’t suppose a few more tweaks matter.”

“Is he dangerous?” she asked.

“Very.” He lifted his head. “And very angry at my causing him to lose face.”

She blinked. “Is it that important?”

“It’s all his power rests on right now, until he can legitimize himself as ruler. Which marrying Adele—” He broke off suddenly, and she watched calculations being tabulated behind his eyes. Then he threw back his head and started laughing.

“Efran?” She could hardly help laughing in response.

He picked her up to set her on her feet, then grasped her hand to trot into the fortress. Trotting for him was fully running for her, of course, which was exhilarating in linen, as was watching him move in linen.

He dragged her, willing, to Estes’ little cubicle in the front of the fortress. Leaning in, Efran demanded, “Who is spying in Westford right now?”

Estes looked up. “Towner and Gabriel, disguised as a merchant couple. Doane and Cassel are about to head out as roving minstrels.”

“Stop them before they leave. Bring them here first,” Efran said.

Estes stood. “DeWitt!”

He leaned in. “Yes?”

Efran said, “Bring Doane and Cassel here quickly, please.” He felt strange giving orders to Commander Wendt’s aide.

“Yes, Captain.” Humbly accepting his new position, DeWitt turned to carry out the order. But Estes had plans to elevate him as soon as possible.

Estes reseated himself at the desk in the cubicle. “Hello, Lady Minka. Are you pleased with Elvey’s handiwork? The dress looks very nice.”

She beamed. “Thank you, Estes. Yes, I love it. Though Efran hardly noticed,” she said, cutting her eyes up at him. He pressed his lips together.

“Men,” Estes muttered, lifting another list.

Minka covered a wide-mouthed, silent laugh as Efran raised his eyes to the ceiling and stroked his throat. “Estes, if you weren’t essential to everything—”

“Captain?” A man in motley stopped at the door, saluting. Another stood behind him.

Efran said, “Cassel, I want you, Doane, Towner, and Gabriel to find Lightfoot and bring him here. If you can’t bring him, at least find him. If you can’t find him, find out what has happened to him.”

Cassel paused. “Yes, Captain. But the priority is to bring him here?” he said in possible disbelief.

“Yes. Go quickly,” Efran nodded.

They ran out. Estes and Minka evaluated Efran. He leaned back against the door frame, crossing his arms. “What’s the biggest impediment to Graduliere assuming power?”

“My father,” Minka said.

“Yes. What if,” Efran said, “we gave him safe haven here to issue proclamations and whatnot as Surchatain?”

“Then Graduliere brings an army against you,” Estes said.

“Which is treason, punishable by death,” Efran noted. “So he had better do it well.”

“You’re inviting him to attack us,” Minka said.

“He’ll do that anyway. He told me so. Why should I give him time to prepare?” Efran said.

“From what the spies tell us, the nobles still consider Lightfoot the legitimate Surchatain,” Estes said thoughtfully.

“Yes, they have a lot invested in him,” Efran said.

Minka objected, “I don’t want my father ordering people to be hanged here.”

Efran’s lip curled. “We’ll see that his proclamations are . . . palatable.”

Minka gasped, “I love you!”

“So does Estes. Don’t you?” Efran asked.

Estes grunted.

Several hours later, the gate sentry reported that the four spies were returning with a fifth man on horseback.

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Chapter 14

Efran and Minka went to the gates to watch the party progress up the switchback. As they filed into the courtyard, Gabriel asked, “Is this him, Lady Minka?”

“Yes,” she said in shock. For the figure on horseback in the midst of them was a shadow of her father, in a dirty, ragged robe. He looked around with a bemused expression.

Efran gestured two soldiers forward to lift him down off the horse. Gabriel continued, “We left all the silver we had as surety for the horse, but we must return it. And he owes fifteen pieces as well for his lodging at the Porterhouse Inn.” As Gabriel was still in women’s skirts, and two of the party in motley, the innkeeper was probably justified in demanding surety.

Efran nodded. “Get what you need from Estes, but change into a regular uniform. Take Towner with you. And . . . well done.”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you, sir.” Gabriel shoved his frilly kerchief aside to salute, and the men dispersed to their respective assignments.

After the horses had been taken back to the stables, Efran and Minka stood regarding her father, aged beyond his years. Efran said, “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress, Surchatain Lightfoot.”

Lightfoot blinked at him. “Who are you?”

“I am Efran, your son-in-law,” he replied. “I am married to your daughter Minka.”

He drew her forward by the hand. She was still too shocked to speak. Lightfoot looked her up and down, and said, “Who are you?”

She blinked rapidly, whispering, “I am your daughter Minka—Sybil. Welcome to our home, Father.”

He looked around again. “I command dinner at once.”

“You shall have it, sir,” Efran said, surveying his filthy condition. He gestured a soldier, Conte, forward, murmuring, “Take silver down to the seamstress Elvey—see if she can produce some nice robes immediately. Pay her whatever she requires.”

“Yes, Captain.” Conte saluted, then went inside the fortress to Estes’ cubicle while another man ran to the stables.

Turning to regard Westford’s Surchatain again, Efran told another soldier, “Find me someone to . . . clean him up.”

Minka said, “I will do this, Efran.” She took her father’s arm, saying, “Let’s go get you ready for dinner. You’ll love it. We have the most wonderful kitchen mistress.”

“Who are you?” he repeated, allowing himself to be drawn toward the fortress doors.

“I’m your daughter Minka,” she said, helping him up the steps.

Looking after them, Efran told the soldier, “Have water drawn for a tub in my quarters.”

Before too long, Minka had Lightfoot clean and appropriately attired for a private dinner in a guest room. Efran and Minka sat with him, not eating themselves, but watching him inhale the pheasant, greens and bread as if he hadn’t eaten in days.

Efran finally broached, “Where is your staff, sir? Where are your clerks?”

Lightfoot paused to look at him. “Did I hang you?”

“No, sir,” Efran replied.

“I require more wine,” Lightfoot said. Minka stood, wordlessly taking his goblet to refill it from a bottle on a side table.

She set it before him, and he took a drink. “The wine cellars must be restocked.”

“We will see to that,” Efran replied.

Lightfoot looked at him. “Who are you?”

“I am your son-in-law Efran. This is your daughter Minka,” he said slowly.

There was a knock on the door. Minka rose, but Efran forestalled her. “Please just sit with your father.” He opened the door to step out in the corridor and close the door behind him.

Gabriel and Towner had just returned from Westford. Gabriel exhaled, “What timing, Captain! When we arrived back at Porterhouse Inn, the innkeeper told us that mercenaries had just been there looking for Lightfoot. He’d only been at the inn for one night. Since we paid for his lodging generously, the innkeeper told us further that he recognized the men as being in service to Graduliere. It appears that the clerk waited until his master was off his premises to send assassins after him, so as to disclaim knowledge of it.”

“I see,” Efran breathed. “Well done, again.”

“Thank you, Captain.” He and Towner saluted; Efran turned back into the room.

Reseating himself, Efran asked, “Is the dinner satisfactory, Surchatain?”

Lightfoot said, “I will have my clerk hanged.”

Efran paused. “I am sorry for the indignities you suffered, Surchatain. We will see that you are not inconvenienced here on out.”

“Refill my drink,” said Lightfoot.

Minka started to rise, but Efran was already standing with his goblet. “Allow me, sir.” She watched him pour a little wine into the cup, to which he added water. This he placed beside Lightfoot’s plate.

As the (suddenly) aged man began to slow his eating, Efran broached, "I think we need to reassert your sovereignty, Surchatain." Efran looked across to Minka. "The nobles pay heavy taxes. But now that the palace is no more, and the army is no more, and the Surchatain is homeless, all that income goes to Graduliere. We need to cut off the flow."

While she mutely agreed, he rose to go to the door again. "Get Estes," he told an unseen sentry.

Efran remained in the doorway until Estes appeared. They had a long, quiet conversation, then Estes left. Efran lingered in the doorway until Estes and a soldier, Tourse, reappeared with sheaves of parchment, quills and ink bottles. These they placed on the table, then Estes dismissed Tourse and shut the door.

Efran said, "Surchatain Lightfoot, may I present your new clerk, Estes. He is a faithful scribe."

Estes bowed and Lightfoot said, "The wine is terrible."

Estes replied, "My gravest apologies, sir. We'll correct that."

Lightfoot scrutinized Efran. "Who are you?"

Carefully, Efran replied, "I am your son-in-law Efran. This is your daughter Minka."

Estes was leaning over a parchment, writing. "If you really wanted to make this hurt, you'd make it retroactive to the first of the year," he told Efran.

"Oh, yes," Efran breathed. "Payable by Graduliere."

Estes glanced up. "Of course. He's the head clerk, isn't he?"

"I will have him hanged," said Lightfoot.

"Perhaps tomorrow, sir. It's too dark already," Efran said. Minka gazed at him, knowing the context of the original remark. Efran glanced at her, and if he were the type of man who winked, he would have.

After a few minutes of diligent scratching, Estes put down the quill. "There. How's this? 'By the order of Surchatain Lightfoot, Ruler of Westford, it is hereby decreed that the nobles and families of Westford, having been grievously afflicted by the scourge of the fever, shall henceforth have their taxes reduced by half. Whatever each family owes to the crown shall now be half of what was previously assessed. Further, this reduction shall be retroactive to January first of this year.

"My faithful clerk Graduliere, having received these payments on my behalf, shall immediately make restitution to each family as they are owed. Any deficiencies in payment shall be corrected by him upon complaint.

"Signed and sealed this sixteenth day of July in the year eighty-one fifty-three from the creation of the world."

Estes stopped and looked up for feedback. Efran asked Minka, "What do you think?"

She hesitantly said, "Well, overall, it's very good. The tone is perfect. But the proper form of his title is, 'Ruler of Westford and its entire domains.'"

“Change that,” Efran said.

“Yes,” Estes agreed, scratching.

Minka said, “Also, payments are directed to the Treasury, not the crown.”

“Yes,” Estes said, writing again. Lightfoot was nodding over his empty plate.

“Anything else?” Efran asked her.

Slightly frowning, she held out a hand for the parchment. Estes handed it to her, and both men were silent while she reread it. “No, it looks good. Only—is tomorrow July the sixteenth?”

“Yes,” said Efran.

“Then that’s when it needs to be distributed. It requires his signature and seal,” she said.

“Do we have his seal?” Estes asked.

“No. But let’s address the signature first,” Efran said. Putting the scratch copy before Lightfoot, Efran gently nudged him awake. “Surchatain. Surchatain Lightfoot, sir.”

“The wine is terrible,” Lightfoot said, starting up.

“Then let’s have your signature on this, sir,” Efran said. Estes handed him the ready quill.

As this was a familiar practice, Lightfoot took the quill and scrawled his name. Efran held it up for Minka’s inspection. She gasped, “That’s perfect.”

Efran turned to Estes. “How many copies do we need?”

“Ten conservatively,” Estes replied.

Efran began shifting through the parchments. Glancing at Lightfoot nodding off again, he slipped a blank parchment under the scratch copy so just the bottom showed. “And your signature here, sir,” Efran said, handing him the quill again.

He signed the bottom portion of the blank parchment, and Minka nodded at the result.

Efran quickly put another under the scratch copy, redipping the quill. “And here, sir.” As Lightfoot signed again, Efran said, “We need more parchments.” Estes shot up to leave the room.

Lightfoot had signed four more blank parchments by the time Estes returned. As long as Efran kept feeding them to him, he kept signing.

Finally, they had ten blank papers signed, and Lightfoot drooped. Minka stood, helping him up. “I will get him to bed,” she murmured.

“Who are you?” he asked, blinking at the men at the table.

Efran said, “I am your son-in-law Efran. This is your daughter Minka .”

“I don’t want any more ox-tail stew,” Lightfoot said indignantly, which is not what he had eaten at the fortress today.

“We will see to that, Surchatain. Rest well.” Efran watched as Minka guided her father to the attached bedchamber.

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Chapter 15

When Minka emerged from putting her father to bed, closing the door to the bedchamber softly, Efran asked, “Did your father always use the same seal?” Estes was intently copying the proclamation script to a signed page.

She thought about that. “No. There were times that he lost a seal, or that one of the clerks started using it too frequently, so he changed seals.”

“How did he validate the use of the new one?” Efran asked.

“By using it,” she shrugged.

Efran turned to Estes. “Have we got anything we could use for a seal?”

Estes paused in his copying with a look of mild surprise. “Just days ago I found the seal of the Abbey of Saint Benedict on the Sea in a cubbyhole with writing supplies. I don’t know if it is original, but it is old.”

“Excellent, my friend. That is what we will use.”

Estes stood. “I’ll get it, and the wax.”

Pulling a blank parchment toward himself, Efran said, “I’ll help you write out the proclamations.”

“No, Captain,” Estes said abruptly, and Efran looked up. “Ah, your hand was not made for—nice lettering. Sir.” He refrained from adding that it was sometimes barely legible.

Efran hesitated, looking at his large hand. Minka held out her hand. “Mine, on the other hand, produces a lovely script.” Estes promptly placed a blank signed document and the quill before her. Efran sat back, having nothing to say.

On the first completed document, Minka was consulted as to the color of the wax for the seal and its placement. Also, did Lightfoot use ribbons? Not usually, it turned out. When she had approved the final signed, sealed proclamation, the copying on the other signed parchments began in earnest.

She and Estes worked intently on the documents while Efran stamped them with the Abbey seal and proofread. The rare errors were blotted out (wiped away with blotting paper) and the text satisfactorily rewritten. Then the documents were blotted, and Estes carefully gathered them. Minka was shaking her sore hand.

“Tomorrow morning,” Efran said. “Have five riders take two each to Westford—”

“We need to retain our own original,” Estes noted.

“Yes, yes,” Efran agreed impatiently. “They’re to wear dress uniforms, and post them all over the city. Make sure to leave one copy with the notary.”

“Yes, Captain. Good night. Good night, Lady Minka,” Estes said. She smiled at him, very tired. Efran called over a sentry to stand at their guest’s door, then they two went to their own quarters. He flopped back on the bed with minimal undressing; she changed into her nightdress and snuggled down beside him. After she fell asleep, he relocated her to lie on top of him.

In the morning, July 16th, Efran was awakened by a quiet knocking on the outer door. “I’m coming,” he said in a low voice. Minka was pressed against his side under his arm, still asleep. First, he checked her face for signs of his restlessness. When she looked to be undamaged, he slid out of bed and went through the receiving room to the door. Again, he had slept in his clothes.

Ellor, who had been standing guard, said, “The Surchatain is awake, sir.”

“Thank you; I’ll be right there. Have his breakfast sent to his room.” As Ellor saluted and left, Efran sat to put on socks and boots, then emerged to walk the corridors.

Before reaching the corridor that housed the Surchatain, Efran heard the banging on the door, which was not locked. Opening it, he looked at the wary face of his guest. “Who are you?” Lightfoot demanded.

“I am your son-in-law Efran. Minka is your daughter. Did you sleep well, sir?”

“What am I doing today?” Lightfoot asked suspiciously.

“Having breakfast, first.” Leaving the door open, Efran guided his father-in-law to sit at the table and poured him a cup of highly diluted wine.

“I don’t want the ox-tail soup,” Lightfoot said irately.

“Good, because we don’t have any. Ah, here we are.” Efran took the trencher from the soldier to place it in front of him. There were fried eggs, crisp toasted bread, and cool blueberries. Efran’s stomach growled.

“The wine is terrible,” Lightfoot said.

“Yes, I’m sorry; I can’t have you getting drunk,” Efran apologized.

Ellor reappeared at the door to tell him, “The runners have left for the city, Captain.”

“Thank you,” Efran acknowledged. “Bring me breakfast, please.”

“Yes, Captain.”

The trencher that appeared for him contained everything that was on Lightfoot’s, with the addition of a thick slab

of ham and a bottle of undiluted wine. “Whatever we’re paying Madea is not enough,” he sighed.

By the time he had finished eating, Minka appeared at the doorway, freshly dressed. “Did you sleep with me last night?” she asked, mildly suspicious. “Good morning, Father.”

“Who are you?” Lightfoot demanded.

“I am your daughter Minka. This is your son-in-law Efran.”

Rising, Efran said, “Of course I did. Didn’t you sleep all night? Let me get you a plate.”

“Sit down; it’s coming. Yes, I must have,” she said, brushing his hair back out of his face. She leaned over to kiss him.

“At least I can always see you,” he murmured, in that she loved to play with his hair, thus getting it out of his eyes.

“Let me find you another thong,” she said almost desperately.

“Now you understand my difficulties,” he smiled.

Lightfoot peered at them. “I need new clothes!”

They looked at him blankly, then Minka looked under the table. “Oh, no,” she groaned.

Efran got up. “I’ll fetch the laundress and see if Elvey can send us another robe.”

“Have they got an extra tub to bring in here?” she asked.

“We’ll find one. I can have a man bathe him, Minka.”

“He’s my father. I’ll do it,” she said firmly.

“No,” he said, and whistled for a man to take him out to the men’s bath house.

When Stephanos came to the door, Lightfoot irately told him, “I don’t want the ox-tail soup.”

“Ah, the Porterhouse must have given you the leftovers,” Stephanos said sympathetically, leading him away.

By the time they had Minka’s father, the chair, and the floor all cleaned up, and Lightfoot dressed in a beautiful new robe, Doane, standing as door sentry, approached Efran briskly. “Captain, three of the Surchatain’s clerks are here. They demand to speak to him.” Estes came from the foyer as Doane was giving the message.

“Graduliere?” Efran asked, his stomach knotting.

Estes replied, “No, it’s three of his long-time clerks. They have a copy of the proclamation.” Minka came up to listen.

Efran exhaled, “They want to validate it.”

“Understandable,” Estes admitted.

“We have to let them speak to him, or it won’t be regarded as legitimate,” Efran said.

“That is correct,” said Estes.

“But not in this room. We need a setting conveying authority. Where are they?” Efran asked.

“In the foyer, Captain,” Doane replied.

Efran instructed, “Put them in the receiving room off the foyer to wait. Give them refreshments.” As Doane saluted and trotted off, Efran turned to Estes. “Have the large chair that looks like a throne placed before the crucifix in the keep. I am going to change into a dress uniform and stand beside him.”

“Captain,” sighed Estes, “once they hear him—”

“If we are exposed, then we are exposed. I intend to play it out,” Efran said.

“I am standing with you,” Minka said, adding, “I happen to be already dressed.” She smoothed Elvey’s handiwork in pride. He looked at her, and smiled.

Shortly, Lightfoot was led by the hand to sit in the great chair in the keep, with Efran standing at his right hand and Minka at his left. Efran had started to explain to him what was about to happen, then gave up the idea.

The three clerks were brought in to stand before Lightfoot, and a crowd of soldiers entered behind them to watch. Surveying the clerks, Efran recognized one of them, Wedderburn, as having presided at his aborted hanging.

After the clerks had bowed, Efran said, “As you requested, Surchatain Lightfoot has condescended to grant you an audience. State your purpose.”

Wedderburn began, “Surchatain—”

Sitting on what appeared to be a throne and seeing people advance to bow put Lightfoot in a familiar frame of mind, even without the clarity. “Who are you?” he barked.

Wedderburn was caught off-guard. “Sir, I am—”

“This is my son-in-law Efran and my daughter Minka!” Lightfoot shouted.

“Yes, Surchatain, I recognize—”

“You are a potato!” Lightfoot said.

As they gaped at him, Minka cleared her throat. “That is a family idiom for a . . . dullard,” she explained with reluctant sweetness.

“Is this your proclamation?” Wedderburn shouted, waving the document.

“Did I sign it?” Lightfoot out-shouted him.

A secondary clerk said in a conciliatory manner, “It looks like your signature, Surchatain, but—”

“Who asked you, potato head?” Lightfoot erupted, now red in the face. “How dare you question me.” This last statement, uttered in a flat tone, caused silence to fall in the hall.

Wedderburn swallowed. “Forgive us, Surchatain—”

“I will have you hanged,” Lightfoot said in that same toneless voice.

The clerks backed away, paling. Efran stepped forward to say, “Gentlemen, if you leave now, I will attempt to mollify my father-in-law over your presumption.”

They bowed low to the throne and to Efran, then jostled each other to get out.

Those remaining in the keep listened quietly to the retreating footsteps and the great doors closing. Efran gestured at Neale, who ran out. Momentarily he returned to say, “Their carriage is off the switchback and away.” (He had noted another carriage ascending, but Gaul, at the door, greeted that visitor and escorted him inside.)

Everyone in the hall let out his breath and started laughing in relief. Efran turned to catch Minka up and kiss her. “Tell me that ‘potato’ is truly an idiom in your family.”

“It is now,” she said impishly, and his smile faded in tenderness as he held her. But she asked, “How did you know it would work out like that?”

“I didn’t,” he said helplessly. Then Efran turned to face the crucifix. “God of heaven, you are the Master of subtlety. Again You have saved us.”

“Amen!” some said heartily, and some laughed on their way out of the keep.

“The wine is terrible!” Lightfoot said, offended.

Sighing, Efran mounted the steps under the crucifix to place his hands on the arms of the chair and look his father-in-law in the face. “Surchatain, you have earned the good wine. I will have you sent a bottle.”

Regarding him, Lightfoot said thoughtfully, “I am glad I did not hang you.”

Efran looked down, his heart breaking all over again for Blake. But he murmured, “I as well.” Turning, he gestured to Shane. “Take him back to his quarters and fetch him a bottle.”

Minka came up to take her father’s hand. “Come, I will sit with you till it arrives.”

“Who are you?” he said.

“I am your daughter Minka. Efran is your son-in-law,” she said, smiling, and half the keep repeated it with her.

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Chapter 16

When everyone else had left the keep, Efran and Estes stood contemplatively looking out the open doors to the foyer. “We must follow up on this immediately,” Estes said.

“We need another proclamation,” Efran said, searching.

“What will most damage Graduliere—besides the blow just now?” Estes mused.

They thought about this for a few minutes. Then as the obvious course occurred to Efran, he expelled a breath. “Lord Blature’s family must reclaim his estate.”

“Yes,” Estes said. “But where are they?”

“Send two scouts to find them. Equip them with gold to furnish the family’s immediate needs. Find out how quickly they can relocate, and promise them support. Once we have a plan in place, we will give Graduliere advance notice of the proclamation.”

“How much notice?” Estes asked.

Efran shrugged, proposing, “Hours.” Smiling grimly, Estes left to get the scouts out immediately.

One of the gate sentries, Teschner, entered from outside. “Captain, two children are coming up the switchback. I just thought—”

Efran passed him going to the courtyard, then exited the gates to look down the switchback. Recognizing the two even at a distance, he began trotting down to meet them. The only reason he wasn’t running was that he had learned from experience that running down it immediately preceded rolling down it.

After he had rounded two bends, the older child looked up and saw him. The boy waved and began running, but the little girl couldn’t keep up, so he slowed.

Efran reached them soon enough. He swept up Noah on one arm and Ivy on the other. These children, two of the first brought to the fortress, had been provisionally adopted by a couple bereaved of their children by the fever.

Efran turned to begin carrying them up to the fortress. “Did they hurt you?” he asked.

“No,” Noah sighed. “They just wouldn’t take me as Noah.”

Efran frowned. “I don’t understand.”

“They kept trying to make me into the boy that died,” Noah said. “At first when they gave me his clothes and his toys, that was fine. I liked that. But then they started calling me ‘James,’ and didn’t hear me at all when I told them I’m not James. And they dressed up Ivy in the girl’s clothes, and called her ‘Reitz,’ and Ivy started crying at night to go back to the fortress, but they wouldn’t let her come to my room, and they wouldn’t let us out to play.”

“How did you get out today?” Efran asked. Ivy had her face pressed in his neck.

“They took some goats to market and locked us in the pantry. But it didn’t lock tight and I got it kicked open,” Noah said with some pride. “Ivy was scared of the dark.” Efran felt Ivy nod in his neck.

Noah went on, “I know there are a lot of children, but you can make room for us, can’t you?”

Efran said, “There aren’t as many now”—as it had been over a month since Noah and Ivy had left. “But it doesn’t matter, because I am adopting you.”

“Really, Efran?” Noah gasped, and Ivy raised up.

“Oh, yes. You and Ivy will have your home with us,” Efran said. Noah inhaled a deep sigh and Ivy put her head back down on Efran’s neck.

Entering the foyer with them, Efran looked around for Estes. Instead, he saw Toby emerge from a corridor holding the hand of an old man. Martyn was walking on the old man’s other side. Toby looked to be explaining something. Cassius, beside him, bounded up to greet Noah happily.

When the man looked appraisingly at Efran through his spectacles, Efran finally recognized him: it was the notary. Without the backdrop of his shelves of ledgers, Efran had not placed him right away.

Toby began, “Efran—Noah! Ivy! You’re back!”

“Efran is adopting us!” Noah cried.

“Then we’ll be real brothers!” Toby said, hugging him.

Efran looked pensively at Martyn. “Have I adopted you yet?”

Martyn looked older, taller, and more self-possessed, somehow. “That’s not necessary, Efran. I’m your younger brother.”

“That’s right,” Efran said. “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress, sir,” he said to the notary. “I hope you are finding everything in order?” This must be the promised Inspection.

The notary actually smiled. “Young Master Toby has been giving me a most profitable tour.”

“He knows more than I do,” Efran admitted. “So, as long as you are here, sir, please take back to your shop adoption records for him, Noah, and Ivy. Minka and I are adopting them.”

“I will happily do so, Efran,” the notary nodded.

Efran breathed in relief. “Good. Thank you.”

Estes went to his cubicle to pull out the records. “All right. Noah and Ivy’s provisional adoption by Tisling and Lina took place June twelfth. We will cancel that. What reason should I put down, Efran?”

Efran pressed his lips together. “An unhealthy environment.” He was truly sorry for the couple, but he would not sacrifice the children’s well-being for anything.

Estes was writing. “We’ll send a messenger to them with notice.” He recorded the permanent adoption of the three by Efran and Minka, which he, Toby, Noah, and Ivy signed.

Estes looked at Efran. “A signatory is missing.”

Efran blinked at him. “What?”

Toby laughed at him. “Minka needs to sign, Efran!”

“Oh. Yes.” Efran sent a soldier to bring her from her father’s room. When she arrived, he explained, “We’re adopting Noah and Ivy as well as Toby.”

“Of course,” she said. “Oh, I’m so glad you’re back!” she told them.

Estes turned his ledger to her. “Then please sign here, Lady Minka. And sign these copies for the notary.”

“Certainly,” she said. “How are you, sir?” she asked the old man.

“Very well, thank you, Lady Minka,” he smiled.

Teschner, on the gates, ran into the foyer, then spotted Efran at the door of the cubicle. “Captain, a mob is coming up the switchback.”

Efran stared at him. “Lock the gates. Bring everyone inside. I will go up to look.” He put Ivy down.

Turning, he told the notary, “I hope you don’t need to leave immediately, sir. All of you stay here. I will be right back.” Then he turned to run up the stairs to the small balcony overlooking the front courtyard. Estes followed him, and they stepped out to look at the mob.

There were certainly a lot of people—hundreds, at least, crowding the switchback to ascend as rapidly as possible. “I don’t see pitchforks,” Estes observed.

“No,” said Efran.

“They certainly are colorful,” Estes noted, peering. “And . . . they don’t sound angry.”

“It looks as though the proclamation has been verified,” Efran said with a hazy smile.

The crowd of all ages, laughing, dancing and carrying flowers, was advancing to the gates calling, “Surchatain Lightfoot! Hail, Lightfoot!”

“I’ll go bring him up,” Efran said, turning. Upon descending, he paused in the foyer to tell the notary, “Come up to the courtyard balcony to see a sight, sir—you and Minka.” With that, Efran went to their guest’s room.

It took some persuasion to separate Lightfoot from his bottle, but Efran finally got him up the stairs to the small balcony. Minka, Estes, and the notary were already there, looking over the crowd. Efran drew Lightfoot to the railing, telling him, “Your people greet you, sir.”

As soon as the crowd beyond the gates saw the great man in opulent robes, they waved, cheered, and threw flowers. Fortunately, the grounds of the upper level switchback were large enough so that people were not being

crushed into the fence. It helped that the outside edge of the switchback was elevated, providing a better view for those who stayed back.

Lightfoot looked over the cheering, waving crowd. Then he threw his arms up, and Efran quickly righted him from his tottering. “My people! You are bumpy!” Lightfoot hiccuped.

They cheered at his greeting. The women blew him kisses, and he blew kisses back to them. Efran, laughing, looked over to Minka, who was shaking her head in delight. “This is my daughter Efran and my son-in-law Minka!” Lightfoot cried, draping an arm around Efran’s neck, and they roared in approval. “The wine is better today,” Lightfoot added, patting Efran. He, in turn, noted that his lucidity seemed about the same.

When some in the crowd began trying to climb the gates, Efran waved to them and firmly dragged his father-in-law out of view. The rest of those on the balcony came down behind them in amazement. Lightfoot, weaving, said, “That was vast.”

“Yes, it was, Father,” Minka said, still laughing.

Efran said, “Surchatain, the notary has visited us today”—he paused, realizing that he had never heard the notary’s name.

“That is Ryal,” Lightfoot said loftily.

The old notary inclined his head. “I am pleased that you remember, Surchatain.” Efran studied him. *Who are you?*

Efran cleared his throat. “Well, I feel our beloved Surchatain has had enough excitement for one day. Come, sir.” Lightfoot gladly allowed his son-in-law, or whoever he was, to take him back to his rooms. Efran dumped him in haste so that he could run back to the foyer.

There, he found the notary, Ryal, about to slip out the front doors. Efran caught his arm, gently. “Sir, let me take you back. The crowds may press you.”

“I have a carriage, Efran,” he said. “But thank you.”

Heart pounding, Efran drew closer. “You are someone who could . . . tell me things. Who are you?” he whispered.

Ryal smiled. “The old books know. They will tell you.”

“I don’t have enough of them,” Efran whispered through gritted teeth.

“You will, son.” Patting his arm, the old man went on out.

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Chapter 17

Some time later, the scouts returned from their mission, having successfully found Blature's displaced family. His wife and two children were staying in the home of a noble friend, Lord Rinkart, who gratefully accepted the relief funds that Estes provided. They were all ecstatic to hear of the proposed proclamation, and declared themselves ready to move within hours.

Since Efran had so unwisely given Lightfoot a whole bottle of wine, he was in no condition to sign another ten proclamations that day. So Efran, Estes, and Minka prepared ten copies of the second proclamation ordering the return of Blature's estate to his family, and the payment of damages for their eviction. The current occupants—Graduliere, his son and their staff (and presumably, Adele)—were to be given three days to relocate, which was about three days longer than what had been given Blature's family.

The following day, July 17th, Lightfoot happily signed all ten proclamations after having been promised more good wine. (The seamstress Elvey had supplied him with absorbent, waterproof underpants.) Hours after messengers had delivered a sealed letter from Efran to Graduliere, the new proclamation was duly circulated, and no one questioned its authenticity.

It created quite a stir, naturally. Three days later, crowds lined the streets to cheer the returning family, escorted by fifty mounted Abbey soldiers in their smart new summer uniforms. Graduliere and his staff had slipped out during the previous night, so no one knew where they were now. He had yet to pay any retroactive tax refunds or reimbursement to Blature's family.

Two days following, July 22nd, Efran received messengers from Graduliere requesting a meeting at a mutually acceptable location. At the same time, but by a different hand, Efran received an anonymous, sealed message that read: "If you do not give us relief, I will tell her what you and I did together."

With cold hands, he threw it on the fire and raised his face to think. So Adele thought to blackmail him with the fact of his having slept with her.

It was the night before his scheduled execution, before he even knew he loved Minka, much less was married to her. Adele had come to his cell and laid herself naked on him, so, yes, he put up almost no resistance to servicing her. He could not guess how Minka would react to having this information thrown in her face.

Nonetheless, it was arranged that in the afternoon of July 24th, Graduliere and Adele would meet Efran and Minka in the back room of the notary's shop, the old man having given his permission. Adele was the one to stipulate the attendance of the wives, of course. She said she wanted to see her sister.

The night before the meeting, Efran sat Minka in their chambers to tell her the news himself. Waiting to hear what was troubling him, she watched him with loving anxiety. He regarded the adoration in her eyes and lowered his head in shame. Finally, he said, "Adele demanded to be included in the meeting tomorrow."

"Yes, you told me," she said. "I am sure she will be petty, cutting and spiteful, but I'm used to it. Don't give in to her, Efran."

For a heart-stopping moment, he thought she knew. Then he realized that she was simply making a general statement. He swallowed. "I don't want you to be hurt," he said brokenly.

She returned a derisive look. “I’ve been dealing with her all my life. What more can she do to me?”

He almost groaned in response. He could not tell her.

That evening, as he was undressing for bed, she lay down before he did, patting the space beside her. “Sleep with me, Efran.”

Standing at the foot of the bed, he whispered, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t, and I will show you why. Lie down,” she ordered. He obeyed, and she lay close in his side as usual. His left arm was under her head, his right hand on his stomach. “I can feel it when you start getting restless,” she whispered, “so I hold your hand, and you stop.” She reached across his stomach to lay her little hand on his and grasp his fingers. “That’s all it takes.”

He opened his mouth then to tell her, but the words would not come. She snuggled down and went right to sleep. He lay awake all night.

The next day, in preparation for the meeting, Minka put on her favorite dress that Elvey had made. It was not the fanciest, but it fit her well and had a nice round skirt for riding (as they would be taking horses—not a carriage—to the notary’s shop). While Efran was dressing for the meeting, she said, “Oh! Wait. I found them.”

She went rummaging in her chest while he idly watched, then she brought out a leather thong. “I bought a dozen from the shoemaker. Sit and I’ll tie your hair back.”

He sat. “Thank you. I may need to see Graduliere to hit him. Or Adele.”

She snorted. “That is my plan.” He leaned over abruptly. “Sit up!” she chided. He did, so that she would not see the tears.

They left at the appointed time with four bodyguards—two for the front door and two for the back. She glanced at them uneasily. “Will Graduliere take them as a sign of bad faith?”

“I don’t care if he does,” Efran said dully, watching the road ahead. “I won’t allow anything to happen to that man or his shop.”

They were the first to arrive. Efran escorted Minka in, nodding to Ryal. “Thank you for the use of your room, sir. I trust it won’t take long.”

Ryal nodded, the creases in his face especially prominent today. “I hope it goes well, Efran.”

“Thank you, sir,” he breathed.

In the back room, they found four chairs around a table with wine and goblets. A plate of summer fruit and cheese sat on a side table. But Minka was most interested in looking over the floor-to-ceiling shelves of books and ledgers. “He has a treasure house here,” she murmured. Efran nodded.

Minutes later, Graduliere and Adele arrived. He looked haggard, but she was positively glowing. “Well! Here we all are. This is going to be very cordial, I can tell.” She directed a lingering look to Efran, who turned his eyes away in disinterest.

Minka went to the table to pour the wine. She gave the first cup to Efran, then served Graduliere and Adele. Taking the last for herself, she leaned against a bookcase to take a sip and watch. Adele drank heartily; Graduliere nervously. Efran took a token sip and said, "What do you want of me?"

Adele put her goblet on the table. "We're not paying back anyone retroactive taxes. We're not giving Blature's family a copper. We've already left their estate; that's enough."

Efran leaned around her to ask Graduliere, "Is that your word?"

He straightened, inhaling. "Yes."

Efran arched his back as if he were tired, which he was. "Defying your father's order is an interesting strategy. But do as you will."

"Shall you force us?" Graduliere asked.

"I'm going to think on that," Efran said, looking at the wine in his cup. It was a very fine vintage.

"Do you really think you should?" Adele purred.

Efran directed his gaze to the books on the opposite wall. Seeing the Annals of Lystra, as well as the Annotations and the Latter Annals, he felt the distinct stirring of envy. "I will think on whatever I choose. But I may decide it's not productive to go to war with you over taxes not mine. In either case, good luck collecting future taxes."

There was a momentary silence. Then Adele said, "We demand ten thousand royals for the inconvenience you have caused us." Graduliere stared at her; Minka gasped.

Efran looked at her, seeing the gauntlet thrown down. He picked it up. "No."

With a luxurious laugh, Adele turned away from him. He waited for what was coming. Toying with her hair, she directed her beautiful blue eyes—the one feature she shared with her sister—to Minka. "Such a lovely dress you're wearing, Min-KA. Efran is such a good husband to buy you nice things." Minka watched her silently, knowing that she pronounced her name that way just as an insult.

Adele delicately put her goblet back on the table, directing another long look at Efran. "It must be wonderful being married to him. You can tell just by looking at him. But I know even better why: because we are lovers. Aren't we, Efran?"

"Once was enough with you, and I was facing the gallows the next morning," he said.

That took her aback slightly, but Minka set her goblet down as well. All she said was, "Goodbye."

Efran leaned over to open the door for her to exit first, then followed her out. They went quietly to their horses; the bodyguards sprang up to mount, and they loped back to the fortress.

Arriving in the courtyard, Efran watched Minka dismount and run up the steps to the great doors. Barely seeing that he had handed his reins to the sentry, Efran ran after her. He entered their chambers to find her sitting absently at her dresser. He sat at the table.

Minutes passed, and he said, “She came in to me—”

“Don’t tell me about it,” she said, raising her hands. “I know what she does.”

“I did not pursue her, Minka. I never wanted her,” he said, sweating.

She lifted her head abruptly in obvious disbelief, and there was a knock on the door. Efran stood to open it. Estes said, “Will you be joining us for dinner?” He glanced in concern from Efran to Minka, sitting with her back to him.

“Send us trenchers here, please,” Efran said. Estes nodded and Efran closed the door. He sat at the table again, but neither said anything until trenchers and wine arrived some minutes later.

Efran received them and placed them on the table. The door closed, and he sat again. Neither of them moved to eat.

“Talk to me,” he whispered. “Scream at me, hit me, spit on me. Please.”

She jerked her head again. “If you want to sleep in the keep tonight, that will be all right.”

He absorbed that, then stood and walked out.

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Chapter 18

As directed, Efran went to the keep. With the sun setting, it was already dark in here, and no one would invade it tonight. He lay down in his customary spot. It was too dark for him to see the lettering on the wall opposite. His only thought right now was the rooftop of the new barracks, and how convenient a leap it was to the Sea.

But that thought was smothered by the knowledge that it was a prohibited exit, an iron door welded shut. He had no choice but to walk the road before him: the consequences of doing evil.

No, he hadn’t pursued Adele, nor had he been married to Minka. Yes, it would have been difficult and certainly less comfortable to refuse to accommodate Minka’s *sister*; but that was the right thing to do, and he had chosen not to do it. Invariably, evil blew back to burn the man who gave it passage. He knew to be wary of *moekolohe*; he knew Adele was using it; he just chose to forget why it was dangerous.

As he lay there with his ribs broken open and his heart ripped out by his own hand, he wondered how to place his feet on a road paved with sharp rocks. Almost idly, he contemplated how to make it from one day to another, or even from one hour to the next, without her constant, uplifting love. He couldn’t see how it was even possible, much less desirable. There was just a wasteland of sorrow and regret before him.

Unable to bear his own thoughts anymore, he fell asleep.

How much later he woke, he didn’t know. It was still dark, but a figure in a riding skirt was wedged into his side under the crucifix.

Efran gasped, raising his free hand, and she reached out to hold it. “Be still,” she said. But he couldn’t; he was crying into her hair, trying to lift up. “Do you know when I first fell in love with you?” she asked.

“No,” he choked out, wiping his face on her hair.

“After you fell off the henhouse roof,” she said. “You fell flat on your back—that had to have hurt—then you started laughing. When I asked you why you weren’t angry, you said, ‘You did the best you could.’ I—I didn’t realize—you were so strong, I didn’t realize that my grabbing your shirt would actually make you fall off the roof. You—you weren’t angry with me for making you fall because I was doing the best I could.”

She paused, and he could hear her quietly crying. “I know what Adele does to men. I tried to copy her, but couldn’t ever make it work for me. When she came after you, I’m sure it was pointless to refuse her; she would have punished you a thousand ways for that, and it would have hurt me as well. She made you fall, Efran, but you did the best you could.”

“You’re being generous because you love me,” he groaned. “I could have, and should have, booted her off the cot.”

“No, there’s more to it,” she said. “Don’t you see that that meeting was not about taxes or reimbursement? It was Adele looking for an opening to bring that up just to hurt me.”

He paused. “That was . . . just an excuse to rub your face in the fact that—that I had—?”

“Yes,” she said. “She’s furious that her mousy little sister has found happiness with such a man—a lord, and leaseowner, rising in respect. How dare I marry someone so blest and beautiful?” She sat up. “Isn’t it the nature of a rock adder to bite? Well, I refuse to let her poison my happiness.”

He sat up to hold her under the crucifix, rocking her. “You always were the smart one.”

“Next to Adele, that’s not such an accomplishment,” she murmured on his neck.

“Next to me,” he uttered. “I never would have guessed. But, your forgiveness means more to me than—”

She pulled away. “What forgiveness? How did you wrong me? We weren’t married; you owed me nothing.”

He winced. “It was bound to hurt you, whenever you found out.”

“Which is why she told me, in front of you—to make you suffer as well—and her husband!” Minka said.

“Worse and worse,” he sighed. Then he said, “Can we have dinner now?”

“Yes,” she said.

They had a wonderful dinner together, and an even more wonderful dessert. She snuggled into his side to sleep, finally, and when he started thrashing, she reached for his hand, and he stilled.

The following morning, July 25th, they stayed in bed for so long that people came knocking on their door. From the bed, Efran shouted to Estes that he’d cover whatever that was with him a little later; then he told Madea in

the same way that dinner last night was very well done and he didn't care what she made for dinner tonight; then Minka was kissing his neck so he had to roll on top of her again and could only tell the next person who came knocking that he'd be out very soon.

When he finally emerged from the room, he had such a sleepy, woozy, contented look that his men had to lower their faces to keep from smiling. He went first to lean on the doorway to Estes' cubicle and sigh, "Yes?"

Estes sat back to look at him. "What does Graduliere want?"

Efran had to focus for a moment to remember who Graduliere was. "Ah. He probably wishes he hadn't married Adele. They can't make tax reimbursements or pay Blature's family for damages."

"Which makes him all the more dangerous," Estes muttered.

"Probably, yes," Efran agreed.

"I don't like this," Estes said, drawing a notice off his pile. "These have been posted all over Westford."

Efran took up the notice which read, "In celebration of Saint Francis of Assisi, the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea will head a procession to Cloverdale Green on July 27."

Efran peered at him. "I take it this is news to you."

"Yes, and it's highly suspicious. But it's almost impossible to get out of it because the people are expecting it, and if we fail to deliver, they may send a genuine mob to our gates." Processions in celebration of the saints entailed tossing copper and silver pieces to the crowd along the route.

"Didn't we just slash their taxes in half, which they don't pay to us anyway?" Efran said irritably. "The twenty-seventh is—"

"Day after tomorrow," Estes said.

"Cloverdale Green is in far northwest Westford," Efran observed.

"A dangerous route. Lots of hiding places for ambushes," Estes said.

Efran raised his eyes, thinking, then shook his head. "I see nothing for it but to make it a short procession, with lines of mounted soldiers on each side."

"Agreed," Estes said.

From there, Efran went to the kitchen to see what Madea was planning for tonight, and then checked to see that Noah and Ivy were settling back into fortress life again.

That evening, Efran stopped by his quarters to get ready for dinner. But the door was locked, so he had to stand in the corridor for quite a while until Minka finally came to unlock it with wet hair, freshly dressed.

"Oh, excellent," he said upon entering, and began stripping. "It's much nicer to use your bath water than to draw my own. You never get very dirty."

She laughed, locking the door again behind him. He yanked the leather thong from his hair, dropping it to the floor. Then he sat in the tub and submerged fully to wet his head. “Soap,” he said, hand out, eyes shut. She put it in his hand and he began lathering up.

Smiling, she glanced at him from time to time as he bathed, then her face grew questioning. He stood and stepped out, taking the towel and shaking his head vigorously like a dog. “Stop! You’re getting me wet!” she cried, backing away.

“Sorry,” he laughed, applying the towel to rub his head instead. When he lowered the towel, he found her appraising him curiously again. “What is it?” he asked.

She shook her head slightly. “Your face is always smooth, but I’ve never seen you shave.”

He glanced up as he dried his body. “Polonti don’t grow hair on the face. Not much on the body, either.” He held the towel away from himself to show her. As she blinked at him, he went on, “Some mixed-breeds do. But not pure Polonti.”

He watched her jaw hang open. Then she came up to caress his face. “The things I learn about you. You are so interesting.”

She kissed him and he dropped the towel. But then he said, “No. Not right now. Madea is making sweet and sour pork dumplings for dinner.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said. So she let him dress and they went to the dining hall. They were warmly greeted, and Efran was able to appropriate several children to carry around. He was even able to capture the elusive Pia, who had been spending most of her days with the animals that roamed the hilltop. There were even a few shallow caves around the hilltop to play in, which Efran had checked himself (to make sure they were uninhabited).

While it was vain to attempt to keep Pia within the fence, Efran had made her understand that she must not go down the switchback without a bodyguard. Also, he had to ban hunting on the hilltop for fear that one of the men might accidentally kill one of her friends—or worse yet, hit her.

Madea’s dinner of sweet and sour pork and venison, garden greens, and fresh clover rolls made everyone feel that life was worth living. Also, she had established a connection with a vintner who produced quality wines, even if they were not old. Old wines required a stability that had not been seen in the area since the reign of Henry the Great.

Lightfoot did not appear at dinners; he spent every day in his room with a bottle. Efran and Estes discussed how to keep him upright in a saddle for the procession, in which he must appear. They decided the only thing for it was to withhold his bottle that day until after the procession was done. Both men had serious misgivings about it, as all signs pointed to a trap. But Efran felt that some traps must be played, so they planned accordingly.

Two days later, it was time.

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Chapter 19

Late in the morning of July 27th, the participants assembled in the courtyard. Efran, dressed in his red linen uniform, looked over the party. In another gorgeous robe from Elvey, Lightfoot, complaining bitterly, was being hoisted onto a docile mare. Minka, wearing a beautiful new gown, had mounted her horse by herself with the aid of a mounting block. Efran did not notice her dress, only the glow of her face.

Even Estes had a new uniform to wear as he rode behind her. Four soldiers dressed as monks would carry the bags of silver and copper pieces to be thrown to the crowd as the procession wound its way up through Westford. Alongside the principals, a line of five armed soldiers on either side were to ride. The road would not be wide enough in places for more than three abreast, but regardless how crowded they were, Efran had determined that soldiers would be on either side of Minka the whole way.

Seeing that everyone was ready, Efran turned to his old friend Bastard with a sigh. The men responsible for stable maintenance had requested that Efran take him today; due to Efran's recent neglect, Bastard had destroyed his railings two days in a row. So Efran swung up into his saddle, and the gates were opened for the procession to ride out. To hopefully restrain Bastard's bucking, Efran kept his heels still. He did not want to entertain the crowd by losing his seat.

They descended the switchback and proceeded up the road north. There were not many citizens along the road here, as most would be waiting in Westford. But the soldier monks tossed coins to the lucky few who had come this far south to watch.

The order of the procession had been hotly debated but decreed by Efran: he alone would ride in front. He would not allow anyone else to be point man in the trap that he had decided to engage. Behind him rode Lightfoot; behind him was Minka, and behind her, Estes. On either side of this line rode five soldiers, and the four soldier monks brought up the rear on foot.

The party was relatively relaxed at this stage, as there was no place to spring an ambush. The houses and buildings along the road here, being unfinished, provided poor cover, and the lone tree in the area grew just north of the old stone bridge, fifty yards ahead.

Efran, scanning all around, did not interact with the sparse crowd. He left it to beautiful Minka to smile and wave. Besides the coins, she was the bright spot in the procession. The beloved Surchatain scowled at the people, frequently referencing potatoes and his demand for wine.

As they approached the stone bridge, the attack was sprung, and the rapid actions accompanying it took barely three seconds.

While Efran was looking back over his left shoulder at the procession, Bastard encountered something unfamiliar in the road which caused him to buck. Efran, already off balance, was thrown forward over Bastard's right shoulder as a rapidly traveling projectile brushed his left arm. Catching Bastard around the neck from underneath while his right foot hit the ground, Efran saw an arrow bury itself in Lightfoot's chest.

Cries went up; Efran dropped off Bastard's neck, regained his footing, and ran back to yank Minka down from her horse. He threw her to the ground and fell on top of her while she cried, "My dress!"

The thin crowd dispersed immediately, scrambling up the road to Westford. The mounted soldiers, arrows

nocked, were looking everywhere for someone to shoot. “It wasn’t anyone along the road!” Estes warned, lest they shoot a fleeing citizen in the back.

Efran lifted his face to shout, “It came from directly ahead!”—which seemed impossible, as there had been no one in front of them.

“Efran, you can let me up now,” Minka said from underneath him. He looked down at her for a moment before slowly getting up off her.

The members of the procession were looking around blankly. Lightfoot lay dead in the road with an arrow protruding from his chest. Bastard bucked again, and Efran walked over to see that his right front hoof was caught on something. Efran released his foot and raised a taut wire. “There is a wire running across the road here,” he said.

The men came over to look. By pulling up on the wire, Efran found that it had been firmly anchored in the ground at the right-hand side of the road. As he continued to pull from there, they all watched the wire popping free of a shallow trench that began on the left side of the road. The wire came up in a path around the left-hand (western) edge of the stone bridge and up the trunk of the lone tree. The wire had been secured by rounded pins hammered into the trunk to allow its free movement. And at the wire’s terminal was a crossbow tied firmly among the lower branches.

They all stared at it for a moment. “That’s ingenious,” Estes breathed, and Efran blinked.

“Get it down.” Efran gestured to the soldier on his left, Koschat, who readily climbed the tree. In a few minutes, he brought down a standard crossbow that all Southern armies used. Another man wrapped the wire in a compact coil.

Everyone looked at Efran, who stood silently calculating. Then he gestured. “Back to the fortress.” The procession was over.

Returning Minka to her horse, he whispered, “Did I hurt you?”

“No, just the dress,” she sighed, indicating a small rip. He nodded without seeing it, then lifted her onto the saddle.

Another soldier, Tourse, pulled the arrow out of Lightfoot’s chest so they could drape him over his saddle to walk his horse back. And the procession began to return in reverse, being led by the bodyguards Mumme and Neale.

Estes, bringing up the rear with Efran, asked, “Didn’t you tell me something about a man of science that Graduliere had employed for the poison powder?”

“Yes,” Efran said. “His name is Arenado, according to Martyn. And I will send to Graduliere to meet me again.” He reached down to pat the old friend he was riding, who had saved his life with his irritable habits.

Upon returning to the fortress, Greves asked Efran, “What shall we do with the Surchatain’s body, Captain?”

Efran shrugged. “Throw it out to the Sea.” *Murderer of Blake and destroyer of knowledge, how else should I honor you?*

Then he sat with Estes to compose a letter to Graduliere informing him of the death of Surchatain Lightfoot and demanding another meeting immediately. This he handed to Doudney and Gaul, telling them, "Find Graduliere, wherever he is, and put this directly into his hands."

"Captain." They saluted, departing with the letter, while Minka cleaned and repaired her dress herself.

That afternoon, Efran received a reply from Graduliere confirming another meeting at the notary's shop for the following day, July 28th.

Efran forgot until the next morning to tell Minka about the meeting and that she was coming with him. "Wear your best dress," he said into her ear.

When she did not immediately reply, he murmured into her neck, "And I'll need you to tie my hair back again."

"What? Oh, Efran," she sighed.

"I want to be able to see his face when I tell him," he grunted.

"Who?" she breathed.

"Graduliere," he said, his voice muffled.

She did not answer for several moments, then said clearly, "I hope Adele is there."

Again, she and Efran were the first to arrive at the notary's shop. She kissed Ryal's cheek, beginning to feel that he was more of a father to her than Lightfoot had ever been. Neither she nor Efran realized that she never asked what happened to her father's body, or expressed any sorrow for him. She just forgot all about him.

Efran told the notary, "Thank you for the use of your back room, again. You may want to note the fact of Surchatain Lightfoot's murder yesterday."

"Oh, yes," Ryal said. "If you witnessed it, I'll need a description of the death and your names in the book here."

Efran said, "Yes. It was by a crossbow rigged to fire upon the trip of a wire. It was a very clever device—my men have never seen anything like it." He and she both signed as witnesses to the death of the Surchatain, then they went to the back room to wait, standing.

When Graduliere and Adele entered the room, Minka immediately leaned on Efran to kiss him. Coincidentally, she was wearing the fabulous dress that she had repaired yesterday. He received her affection with a smile, then observed to Graduliere, "Well, you finally got him."

Graduliere looked at him tensely. "I had no hand in his death."

"No, of course not, that was Arenado's device," Efran said. "I have a bounty on his head, by the way." He squeezed Minka's waist briefly, then released her so he could pace. "To you, however, I must clarify my stand so that you will be fairly warned before I strike you."

"The new Surchatain has such a sense of honor," Graduliere said sardonically. He remained standing while Adele dropped to a chair.

“That is the first point we must clarify,” Efran said. “I have no intention of becoming Surchatain of Westford.”

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Chapter 20

Graduliere and Adele stared hard at Efran. He went on, “I am Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands; that is plenty enough work for me. I have no desire to add to it the administration of a crumbling city. Oh—except this shop. I will see that no harm comes to it or its proprietor.” It dawned on him that the best way to do that was to convince the old man to move, but he did not voice that thought right now.

Efran continued as he paced, “I also wish you to know that the lives on my lands are sacred to me, and if they are threatened, I will use whatever force I think necessary to defend them.” He looked fixedly at Graduliere, but the former clerk merely stared back at him.

“Furthermore, if any of your citizens come to me for refuge, I will give it. If they have committed crimes, I will extradite to you for trial any who look to be guilty of a serious crime. Anyone else who flees to my lands will be sheltered and defended,” Efran told him.

“Your citizens will not hunt on my lands,” Efran continued. “Any of yours who bring arms onto my land will be evicted. Or shot.”

At this, Graduliere stirred. “We have no idea of your boundaries.”

Efran nodded. “We will set up boundary markers, and I will have made for you a copy of our notarized plat.”

There was silence as Graduliere thought about that. He finally said, “Then . . . you have no objection to my being Surchatain?”

“None, as long as you abide by what I have laid out. I will have it written up for you,” Efran said. At the moment, neither of them contemplated how drastic a fall it had been for Graduliere to ask that question, and for Efran to answer as he did.

“What about the refund of taxes and the payment to Blature’s family?” Adele interposed.

Efran looked at her coolly. “Those were by order of your late Surchatain, and are between you and your people. I will have nothing to do with either.”

Graduliere and Adele looked at each other. Efran glanced at Minka, who was watching him with a slight smile of intense appreciation. He had to look away because of the reaction it caused in his loins.

Graduliere stirred, lifting his hands. “I can’t find anything objectionable in what you say.”

“Then we will have drawn up an agreement. Terms you wish to add will be considered,” Efran said.

As Graduliere was agreeing to this, Adele got up to rush to Efran, gushing, “Oh, you are so—”

He drew back. “Don’t touch me.”

She stopped as though slapped and Graduliere sighed, “Adele, sit down.”

Efran said to him, “Write to me of terms you wish to include, and we will consider them for our next meeting.”

Graduliere nodded. “I will do so.” He inclined his head to Efran, then to Minka. He opened the door and said, “Come, Adele.” She exited in a dramatic swirl of skirts, and Graduliere followed.

Efran leaned back, smiling at Minka, and she leapt on him to squeeze his neck tightly. “You amaze me,” she whispered.

“Because you love me,” he whispered back.

Shortly, they exited into the outer office where the notary was perusing a large plat. Efran leaned on the counter. “There is something you must do,” he began.

“There is something you must see,” Ryal replied. He rotated the plat to face Efran and Minka. “The plat of the Abbey Lands you have is outdated. I have found a later plat that shows the additional land granted to the Abbey by Surchatain Henry. The northern boundary is accurately marked by the old stone bridge. However, the western boundary is the Passage, and the eastern boundary is the east fork that issues from Willowring Lake. The southern boundary is the Sea.”

Efran and Minka stood dumbfounded. “That’s—that’s—” he stammered.

“Yes, considerably more than we thought. It’s approximately fifteen miles from the hilltop to the east branch of the Passage. But I have the documentation of the land grant here”—he withdrew another parchment from the ledger—“so it is unquestionably genuine. I will have another plat drawn up to replace the one you have.”

His elbows on the counter, Efran leaned his forehead on his hands. “Why would God in heaven show me such favor?” he whispered.

“His ways are past finding out,” Ryal noted with a tinge of humor. [Rom. 11:33]

Minka looked at him with tears shimmering in her eyes. “Come live with us. Please come to the Abbey Fortress.”

Efran raised up. “I want to build you a new, larger shop on the Abbey Lands. I want to move your treasure house to my safekeeping.”

The old man pursed his lips while they gazed at him in hope. “I will consider that,” he finally allowed.

Minka drew in a quick breath and grasped his face to kiss him multiple times. But Efran was saying, “Come back with us to look at the land. Pick the location you want. We will start construction immediately.”

But Ryal said, “Let me copy this plat today. I will bring it down to you tomorrow, and look at the land then.”

“I will send you a carriage,” Efran argued.

“I have one,” the notary countered.

“I want soldiers protecting you and this shop,” Efran continued to argue.

“And draw attention to it? I have been left alone all these years because no one thinks anything of value is here,” Ryal said with a wry smile. “I will bring your new plat to you tomorrow.”

Efran surrendered. “As you say.”

“Thank you,” Minka whispered earnestly, and the old man smiled on her.

Riding home that afternoon, Efran and Minka paused on the old stone bridge to look around. The fortress was barely in view; the Passage could be glimpsed on their right. But the east fork was far out of sight beyond meadowlands that gave into oak forests. The Sea was yet miles off to the south.

He and she hung there in awe. “What shall you do with all that land?” Minka whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said softly. “I don’t think we need to know yet.”

“Oh, Efran! Could you ever have guessed that making the fortress your safe place would result in such bounty?”

“No, but I see it now,” he said. “Safeguarding you was the beginning of every blessing to me.”

“Finding a stranger in my henhouse was to me,” she replied, lowering her chin.

He reached for her hand, and she stretched it out so he could kiss her fingers. “Then let’s go up,” he said.

They kicked their horses on, and Bastard bucked.

When they arrived at the fortress, Efran went straight to Estes to tell him of the meeting, the new plat, and his desire to bring the notary and his treasure to the Abbey Lands. Estes listened quietly, then said, “Lightfoot simplified everything by getting himself shot. How do you think Graduliere will rule?”

Efran exhaled, “Oppressively. As Lightfoot would have. But that is not anything I’m willing to step into. I only want the notary and his shop out of Westford.”

“That’s prudent,” Estes agreed.

They were up early the following morning (July 29th) to await the arrival of the notary. By mid-morning, Efran could stand it no longer, so sent a bodyguard of four mounted soldiers to escort the notary’s carriage to the fortress. He also asked Madea to prepare a special midday meal for him when he did arrive.

When the carriage and its escort were finally spotted crossing the old stone bridge, Efran, Minka and Estes were in the courtyard waiting. The notary was received with all honor, then escorted into the fortress with his new plats of the Abbey’s land.

First, both copies were taken to Estes’ cubicle for signing, then Ryal spread out the fortress’ copy for Estes to inspect. “You say the additional land was granted by Surchatain Henry?” Estes mused, looking it over.

“Yes,” Ryal responded. “The granting document must remain in my shop—”

“Until you move,” Efran interrupted.

“Until the shop is moved,” the notary acknowledged. Efran, having won, merely lifted his face in satisfaction.

“I saw on the proclamation that you have found the Abbey signet,” Ryal said.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“May I see it?” Ryal asked.

Efran looked to Estes, who opened the top drawer of his desk to bring it out and hand it to Ryal. Like many seals, it was crafted as a ring. After appraising it, Ryal extended it to Efran. “Put in on your finger, please.”

Efran did, though the only finger small enough to accommodate it was his little finger, and that only halfway.

At this time, Estes took up the plat along with his measuring tools. “If you will excuse me, sir, the first thing I must do is have the northern boundary marked, as Efran promised Graduliere.”

“Thank you, Estes,” Efran said, and Ryal nodded.

Minka said, “And I will go tell Madea that our guest has arrived.” She smiled glowingly on Ryal, who inclined his head to her. Efran watched her in satisfaction as well.

Ryal then said, “Perhaps this is a good time to look at your library, Efran.”

“Certainly. Come,” Efran invited him.

Efran led him out of the foyer to the main corridor, opening the door of the first room on their right. Preceding him in, Efran said, “I was able to save only a few books from Lightfoot’s bonfire, but I’m grateful to have those. By far, most of these books were here when we arrived.”

Ryal walked along the shelves, nodding. “And I saw that you found Surchatain Ares’ royals.”

Efran paused in surprise. “You knew about the Treasury?”

“I knew about the coins. You paid me with one,” Ryal said with the shade of a smile.

“Yes I did,” Efran laughed, remembering. “We have no idea what ‘NDF’ means.”

Ryal looked up with fondness to the books above his head. “It stands for *Nisi Dominus Frustra*, which is abbreviated Latin for ‘unless the Lord is with us, our labor is vain.’ Surchatain Ares desired that legend imprinted on the coins, but his steward, finding the cost prohibitive, shortened it.”

Listening open-mouthed, Efran laughed again. “You see why I want you here. You’re a river of knowledge.”

“There is more to come,” Ryal said. “If you will, fetch us a lantern, Efran.”

Nodding in some confusion—high windows in this room provided good light—Efran nonetheless went out to locate a lantern, lit. He returned to the library with it to stand beside Ryal, questioning.

First, Ryal closed the door to the corridor. Walking to the far left corner of the library, he looked to his left at the scrollwork along the edge of the bookshelf. He reached over to press a scallop, and the shelf before him unlatched with a click, turning on a center pivot to reveal a slender opening. Looking back at Efran, Ryal asked, “Would you like to see?”

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Chapter 21

Efran quickly followed with the lantern as Ryal stepped through the opening into another book room, this one windowless. Gesturing for the lantern, Ryal took it to walk around the room so Efran could see that the shelves had been largely emptied. As Efran looked around, Ryal said, “I will ask you to guess where the books that used to be here are now.”

“In the back room of your shop,” Efran whispered.

“That is correct. After the fortress was abandoned and the bequest drawn up, I had great fears that it would fall into the hands of an unworthy party who would strip it of its treasures. I cared nothing for the gold and the stores, but the loss of knowledge seemed to me unbearable. So I removed the rarest, most valuable books to my shop. Now it is time for them to come home.”

Efran blinked. “You want to move your books here?”

“They belong to the owner of the Abbey Fortress,” Ryal said.

“I will not cry. I will not cry,” Efran said, having no idea he was speaking aloud.

“Hold back for just a moment,” Ryal said.

He took the lantern to stand before an empty shelf in the back corner. Here, Ryal again pushed a scallop, which again released the shelf to turn on a center pivot. Efran came up quickly to look through the opening at a winding staircase.

Ryal began ascending with Efran close behind. “It is good that you found Surchatain Ares’ contributions to the Abbey,” Ryal began, “but that is not the Abbey Treasury.”

At the top of the staircase, they were confronted by a steel door decorated with a most intricate design in its center. Ryal turned to Efran. “You are learned, for a soldier, Efran. Do you recognize this illustration?” He held the lantern close to it.

Efran concentrated on the concentric circles, the lettering, the symbols. “It is the—Cosmographia,” he whispered.

“Do you see the elements?” Ryal asked.

“Earth, water, air and fire,” Efran said.

“Look on your signet,” Ryal said, lowering the light for him.

Efran worked the ring off his finger to look at the face of the design. “Yes. Earth, water, air and fire.”

“Fit your signet onto the engraving, fire meeting fire,” Ryal said. Holding his signet as steady as he could, Efran placed it on the design of the door. “Press, and you will feel when it engages,” Ryal said.

Efran pushed gently, levelly, and was startled by the sudden click and turning of gears. The door eased open, and the two men stepped inside.

“This,” said Ryal, holding the light up, “is the Treasury of the Abbey Fortress.”

Efran could take in only a glimpse of the walls lined with fiery gold and bright silver wares, ornaments, and jewelry—enough priceless treasures to fill a house were packed here in one windowless room. He turned away, gasping, “It’s too much. Ryal, I can’t—I’m afraid to even look at it.”

The old man nodded. “Step out again, and the door will close behind you. It will not close when the signet is within.”

Efran immediately came out, and Ryal followed. Only after the door gently wafted closed did Efran start breathing again. He looked at Ryal with glazed eyes, opening his mouth. But nothing came out.

Ryal patted his shoulder. “Now you know it is here. And you know that the signet is for more than making proclamations.”

As they went back down the staircase, Ryal said, “Observe the rock all around you. The Treasury room is built directly into the rock of the hilltop. Apart from the door, which the signet alone opens, the only way to access the Treasury is to level the fortress.”

In the hidden room at the foot of the staircase, Ryal showed him exactly which scallops opened the doors into the other rooms. “There are more hidden spaces in the fortress, but you will find those as you go,” he said.

“You took the books for safekeeping, but nothing from the Treasury,” Efran observed.

“There is no place safer than where it is now,” Ryal observed.

“I can’t imagine. . . .” Efran closed his eyes. “I haven’t felt this faint since I first saw a man die.” He looked at Ryal again. “How could you bear the knowledge of it?”

“Because it is not truly valuable, Efran. It is only a tool.” Ryal studied him. “Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Efran whispered.

“Good. Keep it to yourself,” Ryal advised.

“Minka. . . .”

“You will tell her when it’s time to use it,” Ryal said.

Efran looked around, blinking. “Let us go see what Madea has for us, and then . . . we’ll look at plots for your shop.”

Ryal agreed, “Excellent idea, Efran.”

Madea had wonderful flaky baked trout, lightly seasoned, with blueberry cobbler for dessert. And after that, Efran, Minka, Ryal and Estes rode down to the plots to look at locations. Right away, Ryal chose a corner lot on the main road and a side road, both now paved. He chose to build the popular Abbey Lands model of shop in front, living quarters behind in a one-story structure, and Efran gently impressed on Estes his desire to see it constructed immediately.

The next priority, which Ryal suggested, was to have Abbey carts convey the valuable books in Ryal’s keeping to the fortress at once. Efran sent a fleet of carts to the notary’s shop, which then brought the books in a caravan to the fortress, attended by armed guards.

Since Efran couldn’t shelve the books himself right now, he wouldn’t let anyone but Minka do it. So she took charge of the inner library room, sorting, dusting, perusing, and shelving the precious volumes with an array of lanterns.

While the notary was preparing to leave, she came to Efran in the courtyard with a book in her hands. He turned to her attentively as she said, “‘Ryal’ is not a common name in Westford, is it?”

“No,” he said, noting the book she held. “What have you found out?”

“I’m not sure,” she said. But she opened the book to show him a passage. “This is book eight of *The Latter Annals of Lystra*. It’s based on events from about seventy years ago. And there’s mentioned that Surchatain Henry’s page was the son of Commander Thom, and his name was . . . Ryal.”

He stared at her, then his head jerked up as the notary’s carriage departed the gates and began down the switchback. Efran ran after it to leap on the side of the open carriage, almost causing the horse to rear. The driver looked around in astonishment, but Efran never saw him.

While Ryal eyed him over his spectacles, Efran said breathlessly, “You were Henry’s page, the son of Commander Thom.”

“Yes,” said Ryal.

Efran was so surprised that he just hung on the carriage for a moment. Then he dropped off and said, “You will tell me everything you know.”

Ryal sighed. “Read the books first, and I’ll fill in the gaps.” And he gestured his driver to go on.

Efran returned to the courtyard, still stunned. “Well? Is he?” Minka asked.

He looked at her. “Yes.” When she gasped, he added, “Come. I have something more to show you.”

He escorted her back to the library, shutting both the outer door and the secret door to the inner room in which she had been shelving books. Then he walked over to the half-filled shelf to press the scallop on the side and open that doorway. “Another!” she whispered.

Taking one lantern, he led her up the winding iron staircase, then took the signet off his little finger to hand to her. “You see the ring of fire on the signet? Press it on the corresponding ring, here.” He angled the light to the engraved design on the door.

She brought up the signet to place it as instructed, and the door again opened. Efran pushed it fully open and entered with the light. “This is the Abbey Treasury,” he said. His eyes were on her, not the gold and jewels.

She scanned the room, stunned. “Ryal showed you this,” she whispered.

“Yes,” he said. He took the signet from her hand to put it on her finger. When it almost fell off, he put it on her thumb instead. “You are the keeper of the signet. I will have another seal made for letters. But I can trust the signet to no one else, especially not myself.”

“Efran.” She leaned into him, overcome. “I’m not—I don’t feel adequate—”

“You are fully of age,” he said dryly. She laughed into his neck, drawing strength from those arms around her.

He added, “The important thing to remember is that we need do nothing with it now. We have Ares’ royals, which will suffice for a great long while. For now, we just hold the knowledge of it to ourselves.”

“Yes,” she said, closing her fingers around the signet.

“Come now.” He led her out. They watched the door waft shut, then they descended to the inner library room to quietly resume shelving the treasures.

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Chapter 22

Efran slept very little that night. But it wasn’t because of the discoveries of the day, it was because of something he remembered from almost two weeks ago, when he went to Blature’s estate to buy Martyn’s freedom from Graduliere. Upon finding that Efran was holding Justinian, Graduliere had said, “*Do you think that we cannot level that little fortress of yours?*”

After Ryal’s comment about leveling the fortress to get to the Treasury, Efran remembered that threat, and he did not think it empty. Graduliere believed he had the means to destroy the Abbey Fortress. And if it had anything to do with Arenado, he probably did. But Efran could not imagine what that might be.

When early morning daylight hit the bedroom window, Efran slipped out from under Minka to go stand in the keep and look at the crucifix. Again, he knew it was only a depiction, and not the reality. But there was power in it still, just as a reminder of the reality. “God in heaven, I need to know,” he breathed. “I need to know if his words were truly a threat; I need to know what I must do—what is even possible to do.”

When he turned, he saw Minka in the doorway, watching him. He assured her, “I just now came in. I slept with you.”

"I know," she said, coming to him. "The place you lay was still warm." As he wrapped her up, she said, "I hid the signet."

"Don't tell me where," he said.

Goss, who had been standing sentry, came to the doorway. "Pardon, Captain. You are requested to come to the barracks."

Minka turned. "He will be there immediately after he has had breakfast."

Goss flashed a smile at her and said, "Yes, Lady Minka," before withdrawing.

She raised defiant eyes to her husband. Smiling, he looked up to the ceiling, then bent to kiss her. "Thank you."

"Let's go see what Madea has for us this early." Victorious as usual, she took his fingers.

Madea was not in the kitchen yet, but she had left excellent leftovers for the throngs of continually hungry men. Minka and Efran feasted on dumplings, sausage, and blueberries. As they were leaving, he warned her, "The second barracks is being constructed today, so I may be out there all day."

"Yes, my lord," she said sweetly.

He shook his head. "You don't fool me anymore. You do exactly as you please."

"That's what you said you wanted," she reminded him, pressing up against him. There was no one else in the dining hall at present.

He groaned, "You have completely overthrown my understanding of *moekolohe*."

"As you say, my lord," she said, snuggling him, then let him go answer the summons.

He had to climb a hinged ladder over the back fence, but he was still smiling when he arrived at the cliffs south of the fortress. The first barracks had been successfully built into the limestone cliff, and was now being equipped with furnishings and supplies. The foundation for the second barracks, beside the first but slightly lower, was being laid in the depression that had been carved out of the cliff for it.

Approaching, Efran greeted the building engineer, Gerard: "How goes it?"

"Well enough, Captain, but we've spotted something curious that we thought you should see," he replied.

"Yes?"

"Let's go down to have a look," Gerard said. Efran nodded, and Gerard turned to begin descending steps cut into the limestone, holding a rope for safety. Efran followed.

They stepped onto the broad ledge that would support the second barracks. Efran looked at the foundation being leveled, but Gerard turned his attention outward. "Here, sir." He was pointing down.

Efran came to look over the ledge. The rocky face of the hillside descended unevenly at an 80-degree slope to the sea about 30 feet down. Gerard pointed. "The black things in the water. We noticed them just this morning."

Efran squinted. Bobbing on the surf below were a score of what appeared to be black balls, perhaps 18 inches in diameter. “What . . . ?”

“Exactly. No one knows what they are. We feel that we should find out,” Gerard said.

“I agree.” Efran knelt on the ledge, placing a hand down for balance as he looked. They were bobbing half out of the water, it appeared, against the face of the limestone cliff, washed to relative smoothness by the beating of the waves.

Efran stood. “How would you suggest getting one up here?”

Gerard inhaled, looking down and above. “I’d suggest we lower a man down there with a basket on a rope.”

Efran nodded. “Rig it up.”

Gerard began to issue instructions, and soon they had a series of ropes securely tied together with a halter on one end and another rope with a large basket attached separately to the main line. As a volunteer was being buckled into the harness, Efran told him, “Scoop it into the basket without touching it if you can. Bring it up softly; don’t let it hit the rock or you.”

“Yes, Captain,” the man said, and a group of men lowered him from the ledge down the cliff while another handful watched. He successfully reached the water to scoop up one ball and lift it in the basket, which shed the excess water. Then the group hauled him up again with his sample.

He set the basket on the ledge before climbing up himself, and the group leaned over Efran as he knelt to study it. It was black and roughly round, with a slightly bumpy exterior. He tentatively touched it, finding a waterproof skin that gave ever so slightly.

Carefully, he tilted the basket to roll the ball out. It was all over the same, with no projections or openings. He sat back in deep thought.

One of the men said, “I’d almost think it looks like an egg, but I’ve never seen the likes of it.”

Another said, “We don’t know what creatures there are in the Sea that might lay something like this.”

Another said, “I’ve lived by the Sea my whole life, and have never seen anything such as this.”

Efran ran his hand again over the skin. “This doesn’t strike me as a natural covering. It looks and feels like waterproof paint, but whatever below it gives. It’s not wood. Yet it floats.”

“Should we cut it open?” another asked.

“Not yet,” Efran said. He gently loaded the ball back into the basket, then looked up. “Let’s take it above, easy.”

The original volunteer looped the basket rope over his shoulder and began climbing the steps. Efran followed him, eyes on the basket, until it and he had topped the edge of the cliff. The other men followed.

Efran directed one of the men, “Get Martyn out here.” He ran off.

Then Efran knelt to gently roll the ball out onto the sparse grass about ten feet from the edge of the cliff. Kneeling beside it, he waited.

Minutes later, Martyn was hustled over the fence to the waiting group. Efran, still kneeling, gestured to the ball. “Ever seen it? Or anything like it?”

Open-mouthed, Martyn knelt to look at it without touching it. “Perhaps,” he whispered. “I pray not.”

“What have you seen?” Efran asked patiently.

“One of Arenado’s inventions,” Martyn said, “though much smaller. He called it his fireball. When thrown down, it erupted with an awesome blast, making a great hole in the ground. As much damage as that small one did, I fear to think what one this size would do.”

There was a profound silence, then Efran stood. “Thank you, Martyn. You may go. Don’t speak of this to anyone.”

“Yes, Efran,” he said, with another wary look at the ball.

After he was back over the fence and well away, one of the men, Gaul, whispered, “A string of these blowing up at the base of the cliff could topple the whole hill into the sea.”

“What would make them blow?” Shane asked.

“A storm battering them against the rock,” said Tourle, and they looked up at the gathering clouds.

Efran glanced to the east. “Before we pronounce doom, let us see what we have here.” Loading the ball gently into the basket again, he gave orders for horses for five riders, plus himself. “But not Bastard. I can’t have him bucking today.”

After climbing the ladder back over the fence, Efran gingerly carried the basket around to the front courtyard, accompanied by five of the men: Connor, Tourse, Towner, Neale, and Hawk. Their horses were brought up, and Efran handed off the basket to Connor to hold. Once Efran was mounted, he reclaimed it. After making sure that the basket handle was sturdy and secure, Efran prompted his horse to a gentle lope down the switchback. The other five followed.

At the end of the switchback, Efran immediately turned east on the road fronting the plots for leaseholders. Past the plots, this road continued on, being part of the Coastal Highway South. But having been so sparsely traveled over the years, it had degraded into little more than a sheep path. Still, it was reliably free of gopher holes, and his men followed in a line. All the way, Efran held the basket out from the saddle as if it contained eggs.

The meadowland they rode through gradually showed oak seedlings here and there; farther away, they were seen to become a mighty forest. The highway through the meadows faded, and the riders slowed in caution.

Almost an hour later, they came to the boundary of the Abbey Lands: the east branch of the Passage that issued from Willowring Lake. Here, Efran turned his horse to the right, to follow the shallow, lazy branch to the Sea.

And then they came upon the terminus, where the east Passage flung itself over cliffs to the Sea below. The men dismounted; Efran handed off the basket to Tourse while he got down from his horse. Then he took the basket and they all walked to the edge of the cliff to look down.

Unlike the shoreline beneath the Abbey hilltop, the bottom of the cliffs here was lined with scree and rocks, the spindly waterfall having made a modest pool in the midst of them. Standing at the cliff edge, Efran motioned his men back. He eased the ball out of the basket, which he dropped at his feet. Then he lifted the ball over his head to throw it forcefully down to the rocks.

It landed, and the resulting explosion made the cliffs underneath them shudder, causing them all to fall back.

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slippery—the ropes, the steps, the ledge—and more than one man caught himself sliding.

The original volunteer took the second basket preparatory to descending again, but Efran stopped him. “If you tire, let us get another.”

“I’m not tired, Captain, but learning better how to handle the dam’ things,” he said, so Efran let him descend. He brought up another, then another, then the men heard an echoing *boom* from the east. “I had better see that man back here again in one piece,” Efran muttered.

Each ball that came up went in a basket with a rider to the terminus of the east Passage. But the sky was getting darker all the while. *God of heaven*, Efran kept repeating. *God of the heavens*.

As the storm blew in, the clouds sealed out most of the light, so the men on the ledge could no longer see the volunteer below. They had to creep along the ledge on hands and knees so as not to slip or be blown over to the Sea. “He can’t find them,” an unknown man said.

But the volunteer whipped the rope to be raised. Blind in the dark, the men pulled him up by feel, and gloved hands brought another filled basket up with him. Unseen hands took it and passed it along to a man that would climb blindly up the steps to carry it east. “Can you see down there?” Efran asked their fisherman.

“Yes, Captain. It’s not so dark as that,” he replied. As he did not appear to be winded, Efran did not insult him by asking if he were tired, but let him go again.

From the steps, a man alerted him, “Captain, Lady Minka is above.” Another *boom* sounded from the east.

Exhaling in distress, Efran scampered up the slippery steps. Sure enough, in the gloom he saw Minka in a cape with a large covered basket on her arm and another lady behind her. Both had climbed the ladder over the fence. “Minka, you mustn’t—”

“You haven’t eaten since breakfast,” she said, extending the basket. He found that it contained slabs of ham and bread. “Which means your men haven’t eaten, either, and you can’t work if you get faint.” When he took that basket, she turned to the woman behind her for a second covered basket, likewise filled.

“Thank you.” Dripping, he leaned over to kiss her in the heavy rain. She held his face, then turned with her companion to climb the hinged ladder back over the fence.

Efran ate a slab, then handed the baskets around to the others, especially the volunteer fisherman and the riders.

Another *boom* sounded, by which time Efran had lost count. But now the sun was descending behind the western hills, and what remained of the light disappeared. The men looked around, seeing nothing of each other but glints in the eyes. And the wind blew harder, sweeping up waves that battered the balls against the cliffs.

Where he stood on the hilltop, Efran fell to his knees, fear sweeping over him. “God of heaven,” he gasped, “You are not a God of futility, to pour out blessings on us only to sweep it all into nothingness. God of mercy, give us light. Be our light.”

Someone almost tripped over him, so he got up. “Nothing on the ground there,” he said hastily.

Making his way blindly through the pummeling rain down the steps, he eased his way forward until he located the men with the rope. “Captain?” one said.

“Yes, I’m here,” he said.

“We’re pulling up Lyte now. He has another.”

“Good,” Efran breathed. So now he knew the name of his fisherman. He wasn’t one of the forty who had come to his aid against Adele’s army. Still, the name was familiar, but Efran couldn’t place it right away. He waited, feeling Lyte come up over the ledge with his basket. Efran put out a hand to touch the ball. “How did you manage to find it?”

“Easily, Captain. There are seven left,” he said.

“How can you tell?” Efran asked.

“Look,” Lyte replied. “Carefully.”

Efran got down on his belly to look over the ledge. And what he saw were seven black blobs in a sea of blue luminescence. “The sea lights. Of course,” he breathed, standing.

“I’ll take another bite of bread, if there’s any left,” Lyte said beside him. “And then I’m good for another go.”

“Here’s the basket,” one man said, putting it in Efran’s hands.

Efran reached in to bypass the soggy bread and take out a piece of ham. “Here,” he said, nudging Lyte, who took it. And another far-off explosion was heard: *Boom*.

The work progressed, though gruelingly slow, for the riders could not lope blindly over the unpaved road through meadowlands nor run to the terminus of the east Passage with their deadly basketloads. But through the dark, the rain, and the whipping wind, they kept at it. Lyte grew increasingly adroit in catching the bobbing balls.

Toward sunrise, with the light growing stronger, he brought up a ball which he handed to Efran, saying, “This is the last one, Captain.”

“Are you sure?” Efran gasped.

“As nearly as I can tell. We should check again in full light,” Lyte said.

“You have earned yourself a special meal from Madea and a day in bed,” Efran exhaled.

“Thank you, sir,” Lyte said in tired satisfaction.

Efran turned away and then stopped dead: Lyte’s exhaustion gave away his accent. Turning back to him in mild surprise, Efran said, “You are Eurussian.” Some of the men around paused.

Lyte glanced up guiltily. “Yes, sir. I decided not to give up my eyes to crows so that Euruss could take your fortress.”

In the faint light, Efran studied his guilty face, which is how a Polonti looked in Euruss. “Now I remember! You went shopping for our wedding dinner with the royals Minka gave you.”

“That’s correct, Captain,” Lyte laughed.

“Well, if I didn’t welcome you then, I do now. You have earned your place,” Efran said, extending his hand.

Lyte grasped it. “Thank you, sir.”

Efran clapped him on the shoulder, whereupon other soldiers converged on him in congratulations. Efran didn’t tell Lyte that he was to receive the Meritorious Cross—the highest commendation in the army—for his incalculable value as fisherman. (As were many aspects of the Abbey army, this award was a carryover from the army of Westford.)

Taking up the basket with the last device, Efran carried it up the steps to the cliff, over the fence, and to the courtyard. This one he would take himself, for he had a thought. Passing men who had worked through the night, Efran shouted to them, “This is the last one!” and likewise hailed those returning from the east Passage as the storm finally passed. Those men were also to receive commendations.

Efran himself appropriated a horse to ride into the sunrise with his basket. And in all that, his hair had remained out of his face, as Minka had tied it.

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Chapter 24

Loping down the road to the east, which was visible as a trail of mud, Efran paused at the east fork of the Passage to look to his left, at the small house on the bank of the thin river. With the lethal basket in hand, he turned the horse toward the house.

Approaching, he noted that it was windowless and quiet—no animals nor garden. He rode around it, seeing one door, locked. One chimney. And a large bucket by the door.

He turned the horse away again to proceed south to the river’s terminus. But when he reached the cliff, he looked around and withdrew ten paces to a cluster of hilltop plants which included common polypody. Here, he hid the last ball in its basket.

From there, he dismounted to walk to the cliff and look down. There were numerous craters among the rocks at the base of the cliff and a few landslides in its face. But as far as he knew, these cliffs were a composition largely of sandstone. So he was unsure how the damage here would compare to that of the Abbey hilltop.

Exhaling in weariness, he swung up into the saddle and proceeded home.

Arriving in the courtyard, the first thing Efran did was instruct a sentry to bring him Thrupp with a report. (This was the most competent structural engineer Efran had known in Westford. Engrossed by his first sight of the Abbey fortress, Thrupp had moved his family here.) When he came to the courtyard, Efran asked anxiously, “Damage?”

“None that I can see, Captain. I even set my instruments to measure vibrations. None registered,” he replied.

“That’s very good news, Thrupp. Thank you,” Efran said, patting his shoulder.

Entering the foyer, he paused at the entrance of the keep to look at the light streaming in on the crucifix. “How little I think of You,” he whispered. “How greatly I underestimate You. Thank You. Again.”

He dragged himself to his chambers and opened the door. There he was mildly startled to see Minka look up from her seat at the small table. She had a glazed look and dark circles under her eyes. “Oh, my poor Minka. You haven’t slept,” he said.

She got up to practically fall on him. He took her in. “It’s all right; it’s all done. I’m here. You can rest now.” He lay down on the bed for her to snuggle into his side, though he was still damp. Three minutes later, when she was asleep, he got up to go to the kitchen. He was hungry. Again.

He joined the other night laborers in their breakfast, slapping shoulders in greeting. Taking the trencher Madea handed him, he lifted his cup and said, “A commendation is due you all, and an extra helping to our fisherman Lyte.” The men applauded; Lyte waved, dismissive of his own efforts.

Efran sat to inhale everything in front of him, then rose again. Someone said, “Stay, Captain. What’ll you do in reply to this little trick?”

“Ah. Thank you for reminding me. Seeing Gabriel approach, Efran told him, “Send a messenger to Graduliere. He alone is to meet me at the notary’s old shop in Westford tomorrow morning at ten of the candle.” Then he raised a hand to the hall at large. “Excuse me. My poor Minka has not slept at all.” They laughed knowingly, and he turned out smiling.

He quietly opened the door to his quarters and slipped inside. Shedding his damp clothes, he lay on the bed to reinsert Minka in his side. Eyes shut, she said, “I know you needed to eat; that’s fine.”

He hugged her. “Thank you. I need to bathe as well. I must be filthy.” There was the old stigma reasserting itself.

“No, you are rain washed,” she murmured, opening her eyes. He blinked, then rolled over on her.

They stayed in bed for most of that day.

The following day, however—August 1st—Efran had some loose ends to tie up. When Minka woke as he was dressing, he leaned over the bed to tell her, “I need you to tie my hair back—I have an errand to take care of this morning, then I am meeting with Graduliere. It will be just he and I. If Adele comes, I will throw her out. You may not come because I have some words for the clerk, and you distract me.” As he said this, he pulled his quiver and bow out of his wardrobe.

Eyeing his preparations, she murmured, “Yes, Efran,” and got up to find a comb and thong.

Madea sent breakfast trenchers to them at that time, so he was shortly able to sit and enjoy ham, eggs and fresh peaches with Minka before rising again to sling his weapons over his shoulder.

First thing, he asked Doudney, standing as sentry, to summon Martyn to the foyer. When the boy arrived, Efran told him, “I suppose you’ve heard by now that your knowledge helped save the fortress.”

Martyn shrugged, “I heard, Efran, but what little I knew was useless without your knowing what to do with it.”

Efran acknowledged that with a brief smile. “Since it seems certain that Arenado made the devices, do you know anything of where he stays?”

Martyn inhaled, looking off. “No, I only know that he has a secret workshop in some secluded area. If it was where he created the fireball, it would have to be a place where explosions would not cause a panic.”

“Obviously,” Efran agreed. “Does he have help? An assistant or accomplice?”

“I don’t think so,” Martyn said doubtfully. “He trusted no one.”

“Except Graduliere,” Efran said.

“Oh, there was no trust involved. Only gold,” Martyn said.

“I see. Thank you,” Efran said with a pat on his shoulder. Martyn looked at the bow and quiver, and smiled.

Out front, Efran asked Doudney to bring out a calm horse for him—not Bastard. While waiting, he asked another man for a follow-up report from the engineer Thrupp: was there any damage from the blasts?

By the time his horse was brought to the courtyard, his man returned with Thrupp’s final word: no, they found no damage. Inhaling in gratitude, Efran looked up to the sky. Then he rode down the switchback and turned east again.

He arrived at the little house on the bank of the east Passage to look it over. Dismounting, he walked around the house. This time, he noted little peep holes in every wall. Also, the bucket by the front step was wet.

Laying his bow and quiver at the corner of the house, Efran went up the step to knock on the door. Were there sounds inside? He wasn’t sure, as the house was solidly built. He tried the door handle, which was locked. When no one answered, he stepped back and kicked the door open, splintering the lock stile. And he went in to look around.

He saw tables of materials and tools, flasks of liquids, and devices in different stages of construction. There were dishes of various powders, and measuring instruments. Then Efran picked up a large square of black waterproofed cloth. More balls were in the making. Arenado had been here recently, and no doubt would soon return.

Efran went outside to mount and ride back to the polypody where he had hidden the basket with its lethal device. Lifting it gently, he held it out from him as he remounted to walk the horse back to the small house. Just as gently, he dismounted to remove the ball from the basket and place it on the center of the threshold of the open door.

Replacing the bow and quiver on his shoulder, Efran remounted to ride across the shallow, lazy east Passage. He guided the horse far east of the Passage to tie the reins to a sturdy young oak. Then he retraced his steps to stop at what he judged to be the far limit of his range shooting straight on—about 300 yards—to the house.

Taking an arrow from the quiver on his shoulder, he twirled it as he fixed on the black spot in the doorway. Then he nocked and lifted the bow, pulling back to sight down the arrow. He took his time to center on the spot, holding the bow still but not tightly, the fletching at his cheek. Then he released.

The resultant explosion sent a fireball a hundred feet into the air, knocking Efran off his feet and making the young oaks shudder behind him. He lay stunned for a moment, then got up to look at the deep black crater where the house used to be. He looked behind him at the horse scrambling up, shaking himself.

“Well,” Efran said, “that takes care of his shop. Now I have to take care of Arenado.” As he walked back to his mount, he added, “And check with Thrupp again about damage.”

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Chapter 25

As it turned out, some pottery had gotten broken in this latest detonation, so Thrupp and his team checked again for cracks or structural damage in the fortress walls and foundation. (Their report came later in the afternoon: there was no damage. At the same time, the engineers requested that the bombardments cease. Efran assured them that they were done. He hoped.)

Before he left for the meeting with Graduliere, he welcomed Ryal again to the fortress. The notary had brought another load of overlooked books for the fortress library, and stopped to check on the progress of his new shop as well. “I hope you’re pleased with it,” Efran said, extending a hand to greet him.

“Yes,” Ryal said, breaking a small smile. “It will be a very nice change.”

“I am very glad,” Efran said, and refrained from demanding to know right this moment everything there was to know about the great Henry.

But Ryal said, “I noted the book on Ares of Westford that apparently came from your own collection.”

Efran almost blushed. “Yes, that—that is a—very meaningful part of history to me.”

“Excellent,” Ryal murmured, and Efran self-consciously smiled at his feet.

For his meeting with Graduliere, Efran took with him Connor and Lyte, dressed in workmen’s clothes. DeWitt had arranged with the manager of the inn across the street for those two men to make trivial repairs to its façade at no cost during the meeting. They were to be on hand in case Graduliere had any more devices or potions to try out on Efran. Also, he, Connor, and Lyte arrived early to search the mostly empty notary shop for any surprises. When nothing was found, the workmen went over to the inn, and Efran sat with a bottle of Ryal’s wine to wait.

Clerk Graduliere appeared at the door of the back room composed, but not nearly as godlike as he’d been in Blature’s receiving room. “Have a seat, Graduliere,” Efran said, pushing out the opposite chair with his foot. “The notary has some very fine wine.”

As the clerk cautiously sat, Efran poured him a cup. Graduliere took it, but did not drink. Efran asked, “Did you receive the treaty draft which Estes prepared?”

Graduliere cleared his throat. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Efran. “I wish you to know that I will tear it up unless you deliver Arenado to me today.”

Graduliere’s face went slack. “I do not know where he is.”

“Then how do you get his pay to him?” Efran asked over his cup.

Graduliere made a gesture of dismissal with an unsteady hand. “I swear to you, Efran, I paid him only for the sleep powder. It was a foolish endeavor, but he assured me it was harmless.”

Efran sat back, cup at his lips. “He has attacked me twice since then, and is responsible for the murder of Surchatain Lightfoot, to your advantage. I am going to find him and kill him. You may want to help me look, for if he attacks me again, I will kill you, as well.”

“I don’t know where he is!” Graduliere leaned forward so abruptly that he knocked over his cup of wine. “He has a workshop somewhere in the wilds that has a very clever hiding place. When he is working, if he perceives any interference, he goes into a secret shelter under the shop which is undetectable from above. He can stay down there for days—weeks if he has to—so that no one can find him.”

“Really?” Efran laughed.

“Yes, yes, I swear it!” Graduliere said, sweating.

Efran sat back, eyes on the ceiling. After a few moments’ thought, he asked, “How is Adele?”

Graduliere almost writhed. “Well. She’s well.”

“That’s good.” Efran looked at him, smiling. Graduliere made several false starts at speaking, then gave it up. Efran was too decent a man to reference the fact that he had slept with her before she was ever Graduliere’s wife.

They sat without speaking for several more minutes while Efran surveyed the empty book shelves. Then his face changed and he abruptly stood. Graduliere lurched up.

Efran said, “All right. You will hear from me.” Graduliere stood hovering uncertainly, and Efran looked at him to add, “You may go.” Graduliere made a semblance of a bow and hurried out.

When Efran was sure he was gone, he went to a bookshelf that had a scalloped edge. Experimentally, he began pushing the scallops until he heard a click, and one bookcase swung out.

Opening it fully, Efran looked into a closet space which contained nothing but a large wooden box, approximately 8 by 42 inches, with a depth of only 4 or 5 inches. Efran brought it out by its rope handle, then laid it on the floor. Finding a latch to lift the lid, he looked down on a beautiful old sword cushioned on blue velvet.

There was a label tied to the grip which read, “The sword which Commander Ares used in leading the Green Regiment in defense of Westford against the Qarqarian invasion of the year 8069 from the creation of the world, bequeathed to the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

On his knees, Efran bent over the box without even promising not to cry.

When he emerged from the notary shop some minutes later, Connor and Lyte abandoned their work to join him. They noticed the large box but said nothing as he mounted with it, laying it across his leg to ride. He was unaware that they, seeing Graduliere leave urgently without him, had looked into the back room as he was bending over his find. So they had returned to the inn.

Upon mounting, Efran turned in the saddle to tell them, “We have a stop to make along the east Passage before we head home.”

“Yes, Captain,” Lyte acknowledged; Connor raised two fingers in casual assent as they turned their horses after him.

Efran led them to the blackened crater on the banks of the Passage. Gazing at it as they dismounted, they listened to him explain, “If it’s possible, we’re going to see if we can find human remains. This was Arenado’s shop before I detonated the last ball here this morning.”

In interest, both men looked over the crater. Efran added, “Take care; there may be poisonous residue.” They nodded, then all three men climbed down into the pit.

They began poking and prodding in the blackened debris. In minutes Connor said, “I believe this is a lower leg, Captain.” Efran and Lyte looked over as he worked a partial bone free from the side of the crater.

Studying it, Lyte said, “It’s human.”

“Agreed,” Efran concurred. “All right, we’re done here.” Connor tossed the bone over his shoulder and the three climbed back out of the pit to remount. Efran took the box back upon his leg.

When they returned to the fortress, Efran was disappointed to hear that Ryal had left again to pack some items. With the number of men that Estes had put on the construction of his house and shop, it was projected to be finished out in a week.

Efran took the sword to show it to Minka, but she was not in their quarters. Nor was she in any room of the library. Nor was she in the garden or the kitchen.

Before Efran could lose his composure, he put the sword in their quarters and stepped out to instruct the first man he saw: “Find my wife.”

“Yes, Captain!” That man, Greves, ran in the direction of the foyer. Efran stayed where he was beside the door to their quarters.

In moments Estes came to him. “Efran, Minka went to see Adele after receiving a message from her. She took a bodyguard.”

Efran slowly digested that. “Where . . . is Adele?”

Estes inhaled. “I don’t know, but several of the men have run messages to her and Graduliere. Detler has—let me summon him.” Efran stayed by the door to his quarters as Estes walked off.

Shortly, Estes returned. “All right, Captain, Gabriel says he knows where Adele and Graduliere live. Do you want him to show you?”

“Yes.” Efran finally moved toward the courtyard. “Get another to go with us. Whoever’s available.”

“Yes, Captain,” Estes said, moving away again.

Still half-frozen, Efran went out to the courtyard. Shortly, Gabriel came around the corner leading two horses; Stephanos, already mounted, was following him. Efran leapt up on the bay gelding offered him, then the three exited the gates and began down the switchback.

Almost immediately, they saw Minka and her bodyguard of Ori and Cutch coming up the switchback. Efran jerked his head back: “You may go.” With salutes, Gabriel and Stephanos turned back to the gates; Efran proceeded down the switchback at a walk.

Cutch drew Minka’s attention to Efran above them. She stopped where she was, telling her bodyguard to go on. So they rode on up, saluting as they passed the Captain while he walked his horse down to where she waited.

He drew his horse abreast to hers, nose to tail, and looked in her face. She was pale but composed, and her lips were red. This was a combination that Efran had not seen before, so he waited for a translation.

She gave one. “Efran, Adele is with child.” She paused, then added, “The midwife believes she is about three months along.” He did not react, so she further added, “Around the time you were supposed to be hanged.”

When his face turned an ashen gray, she knew he had understood that he could be the father of Adele’s child.

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Chapter 26

Still mute, Efran turned his eyes away. She said, “Efran, look at me.” Woodenly, he looked back to her. “This has nothing to do with you and me. This changes nothing between us. Whether you are or you aren’t the father, we will deal with that when we know. You are mine and you always will be.”

Wetting his lips, he started to breathe again. But he couldn’t yet form any words. She went on in a whisper, “Efran, I will not let Adele use this to break you. Graduliere is her husband, so he is the child’s father. If the baby is Polonti, we will take him. Efran, I will win on this. I will not let her kill my love for you.”

His head jerked slightly. “That night,” he began in a raw whisper, “when she came to me, I asked her if I was worth saving. She said, ‘Let’s find out.’ So I . . . thought that if I pleased her. . . . So I didn’t—every other time, I would always stop before—there was a chance of making the woman with child. But with her, I thought . . . that. . . .”

He couldn’t go on, because what he had thought was that if Adele enjoyed him as a lover, she might accept him as her husband. So he was not so careful as he usually was; he may have even hoped to make her pregnant to encourage her to marry him. It was only after he had come to know her better, and had fallen in love with Minka, that he realized how naïve he had been about who Adele was and what she really wanted.

“She used you, Efran! How could you not do what she wanted?” Minka cried softly.

He shook his head. "It's just an excuse."

"You saved your life for me, Efran," she said. "Don't you understand? If you had refused her, do you think she would have said a word to Father to spare you? He didn't stop your hanging because of my screaming at him, Efran! He stopped it because Adele whispered in his ear. You thought it was my doing, but it wasn't. He saved you because she told him to!" Minka cried.

He looked at her. "How can you know?"

"Because that is how it always was!" she said, tears coursing down her face. "I was the seconds; she was his favorite, his darling, his beauty. Had you not pleased her for all your worth, she would have let him hang you for pride's sake, and I would have died of grief with you."

"Minka," he breathed. He reached over to lift her bodily off her horse and put her in front of him on his saddle. While she held his neck, wetting his summer jacket, he gently kicked his horse on up the switchback. The riderless horse followed. "It's good we're not trying this on Bastard," he whispered, and she laughed.

At this scene, a score of watchers in the courtyard above breathed in relief. But when Efran looked up to the gates, they were all busy at their duties.

Efran and Minka went straight to their quarters. He sat on the bed, leaning against the headboard, and she snuggled into his side. For a while they did not speak, then Efran said, "I just realized that Graduliere is my brother-in-law. I threatened to kill him just today."

She issued a gentle snort. "I do not see a discrepancy there."

Efran frowned slightly. "Does he know that Adele . . . ?"

"He must, by now," she murmured, shifting to reach farther around his chest with her arms.

"He did not mention it at our meeting," he observed, then remembered his taunting Graduliere about her. He paused, conflicted as to whether that was indecent or brilliant. "Oh," he remembered, getting up. "I have something to show you. A gift from Ryal."

Efran laid the box on the bed and opened it for her, showing her the tag. She read it and gasped, "What did he tell you?"

"He wasn't there, at his old shop. It had a secret closet like the library! The moment I saw the scallops, I knew to try them." He reclosed the box in satisfaction. "This also will go in the library, on display."

"Where it belongs," she said.

"Yes," he said. Then the taunting thought came to him: *Are you really worthy of Ares' legacy? You who impregnated your sister-in-law?*

She watched impatiently while he removed the box to a corner and sat on the bed beside her again. She curled up to him with a contented sigh, but his eyes were glazed as he looked into the recent past. He whispered, "You are continually pulling me back from the brink."

“You are worth saving,” she said.

He raised his face in fresh guilt. “Are you sure about that?”

She lifted up to look at his broad features and red eyes. “Ask any of the hundreds you have provided a home here. Ask anyone who knows you saved the whole hill from falling into the Sea.”

“I had help,” he reminded her.

“But you knew what to do,” she reminded him.

He exhaled, grasping her hand. “I would like to stop hurting you.”

“Then stop punishing yourself.” She reached up to softly kiss his neck.

Closing his eyes, he said, “Don’t. I can’t—”

She laughed in her throat. “You always can,” she said, and progressed to his face.

He opened his eyes at this incontrovertible truth, and rolled over to her.

They appeared in the great hall for dinner relaxed and happy, and were greeted happily in return. Everyone there knew of the drama surrounding Adele’s pregnancy, and were relieved to see that their enterprise was not threatened by it. And while the situation was widely and quietly discussed, no one found fault with Efran. Minka’s opinion in the matter was evidenced by how tightly he held her hand.

Efran’s dinner (of wonderful venison cakes) was frequently interrupted by someone wanting to hear about the detonation of Arenado’s hut. He gave out the particulars a few times, then thereafter said, “Go ask Doane [or Gabriel or Towner or DeWitt]; he knows all about it.”

As evening fell, Efran and Minka went contentedly to their quarters, and he left the window open on a sultry August night without a single explosion ripping the air.

The next morning, August 2nd, Efran showed the sword to Estes, and asked him to place it in a conspicuous spot in the library. Then, in a concession to his old friend, he took Bastard down to view the progress on the notary’s new shop on an Abbey plot. While it was not going up as quickly as he wanted, it looked solid and square. Remembering the shoddily built gallows, Efran conceded that care took precedence over speed.

While he was looking over that plot, one of Madea’s contacts from Westford stopped his wagon beside him. “Lord Efran, hello. I’ve just come from town, and the notary asked if you would stop by his shop, sir.”

“Yes, certainly,” Efran said, turning Bastard up the northbound road.

Arriving at the old shop, he noted two good horses outside. Ryal obviously had visitors for whom Efran was summoned. As he entered the shop to the tinkling bell, two men standing at the counter turned. They were both clean-shaven Southerners, well dressed.

Ryal said, “Lord Efran, thank you for responding so quickly to my request. May I present Lord Barnby of

Venegas and his personal attendant Stebbins? Lord Barnby, this is Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

“Hello,” Efran nodded genially.

Barnby paused to regard him in some skepticism, as the man standing before him was a long-haired Polonti dressed in workman’s clothing—a somewhat white shirt with the sleeves rolled up and thick-woven gray linen pants. Stebbins, obviously the bodyguard, stared at Efran without speaking. Barnby cleared his throat. “Yes, well. Do you know anything about a great blast yesterday near the east Passage?”

“Yes,” Efran said.

There was a short silence, then Barnby said tightly, “That blast did great damage to some buildings of mine, and I want to know who is responsible.”

Efran said, “I’m sorry to hear that. The man responsible was killed in the blast. His name was Arenado, and he was a chemist and tinkerer. His workshop at the center of the blast contained many dangerous chemicals and potions. He had been hired to blow up my fortress, but one of his devices blew up his shop as he was working.”

Barnby and Stebbins regarded Efran for a moment, then the Venegasan lord turned back to the notary. “Do you have any knowledge of this, sir?”

“Not of the blast itself, though I heard it as well. But I have a great deal of knowledge about Lord Efran, and would be confident of whatever he tells you,” Ryal replied.

Dubious, Barnby looked again at Efran, who asked, smiling, “Did you see the crater?”

“No,” said Barnby.

Efran nodded to the door. “Come have a look.”

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Chapter 27

The gentlemen from Venegas preceded Efran out of the notary’s shop while he paused to tell Ryal, “Your gift will be displayed in the library, with my great gratitude.” Ryal nodded in satisfaction.

Efran went out to see Stebbins whipping Bastard with a riding crop. “Here, now,” Efran said with a conciliatory wave. “That will just make him madder.” He hopped up easily into the saddle.

Barnby said indignantly, “Your beast bites, sir.”

“Oh, that’s only one of his tricks,” Efran sighed. “But he saved my life, so I humor him. This way.” He led his guests directly east from the shop.

Passing the lake where the palace of Westford used to be, Barnby noted, “That is a strange location for a pond.”

“Yes, it is,” Efran agreed.

They continued east to Willowring Lake, following the southern shore until they came to the east fork of the Passage, where they turned south. Efran was careful to keep his heels off Bastard’s sides, though the horse still kicked at the interlopers whenever they came within range. So there was no conversation as they rode.

They followed the skimpy river over uncertain terrain for almost an hour until the great blackened pit came into view. “Good heavens!” Barnby exclaimed.

“That’s about as high as it went up,” Efran said, careful not to get Bastard too close to the crater, as he didn’t want to be thrown into it. “If you care to get down and explore, you’ll find at least one of Arenado’s bones. Oh, there it is, toward the far side.”

Barnby and Stebbins rode around the pit in wonder. Efran added, “If you continue to follow the Passage branch to its end, you will see smaller craters at the bottom of the cliffs, where we detonated the devices he had put in the Sea beneath our hill. We spent a bad night getting rid of them all.”

“Well,” Barnby said in displeasure, frowning at the black pit, “I want compensation for the damage to my buildings.”

“I cannot help you there, friend. It was all I could do to save my own hill,” Efran said. “However, I can offer you an excellent midday meal for your trouble. Come, I have the best cook on the Southern Continent.” He jerked his head over his shoulder as he turned Bastard west. Barnby and Stebbins looked at each other, then followed.

They rode down the well-worn path through the meadows until coming to the plots. Efran raised a hand to the workmen, who hailed him in return, then he led his guests up the switchback to the fortress. Before they got to the gates, they were opened by alert sentries who saw the Captain on his way up.

As the three dismounted in the courtyard, stablehands rushed up to take their horses. Barnby was looking all around at the gates, the soldiers, the courtyard, the gleaming white stone of the fortress, and the broad circular steps. Stebbins stayed at his master’s side while Efran bounded up the steps.

Pausing at the great doors standing open, Efran said, “Come in, gentlemen.” Barnby shut his mouth to follow, and Stebbins followed him.

Efran took them to Estes’ cubicle, where he introduced them, saying, “Lord Barnby unfortunately suffered damage from Arenado’s hut blowing up, so I thought the least I could do was offer them dinner.”

Estes said, “Let me go alert Madea.”

“Stay, we’re on our way to the kitchen,” Efran said, waving him down, and Estes smiled. Nothing put Efran in a better mood than showing off his people.

As Efran turned to lead them through the large foyer, Minka entered from the main corridor. Her smiling eyes lit on him, and he drew up to introduce her to his guests.

But Barnby gasped, “Sybil!” and clutched her shoulders to kiss her cheek.

Everyone in the foyer froze, including Minka. Efran, exhibiting stellar self-control, stepped beside her and whispered, “Let go of her.”

Seemingly unaware of the frozen faces around him, Barnby stepped back, laughing. “That was inappropriate, wasn’t it, as we’re not yet married. Goodness, Sybil, it’s amazing to see you again, and here, of all places! You look so grown up! I’ve been waiting forever to hear from your father. He owes me a letter or two!” Barnby chided, smiling.

“He’s dead,” she whispered, gazing at him in shock. Efran was silent, watching.

“Oh, I’m so sorry to hear that,” Barnby said. “Regardless, our betrothal is still in force.”

“Our what?” she said. Efran’s eyes became dangerously watchful.

Barnby looked at her as though hurt. “Surely you remember me. Didn’t you get my letters?”

“I’m sorry; I have no idea who you are,” she said carefully.

“Now I hardly believe *that*,” he chided, reaching out as if to caress her face.

Efran intercepted his hand. “Don’t touch my wife.”

Barnby stared at him but Stebbins intervened by grabbing Efran from behind around the neck in the crook of his arm. A half-dozen soldiers fell on the bodyguard and a melee ensued.

“*Stop!*” Minka shouted, and they all did, except Stebbins still held Efran around the neck. Minka turned to Barnby and said, “Tell your man to let go of my husband.”

“Your what?” Barnby gasped.

“Tell him to let go!” she shouted, eyes blazing. His patience exhausted, Efran reached back to Stebbins’ ear and twisted it, causing the man to cry out and, let go. Efran straightened, returning placidly to Minka’s side.

“Now,” Minka said, smoothing her dress. “Who are you?”

Deeply offended and now as watchful as Efran, he said, “I am Lord Barnby of Venegas, and I am your legally betrothed husband-to-be.”

In the deep silence of the foyer, Minka studied him. “I remember you,” she said, and Efran looked at her. “You came to visit us in Eurus some time ago. Two years or so.”

“Yes, two years this October,” Barnby said. “I came to Eurus at the invitation of Surchatain Loizeaux for the harvest fest. Your father was High Counselor to him at that time—I understand that he has since taken the throne as Surchatain of Westford. At any rate, your sister Adele was everyone’s object for betrothal, but I fell in love with you.” Efran looked at him in understanding, but said nothing.

Barnby continued, “Since you were underage, I asked your father for a binding betrothal. He agreed, and I paid three hundred royals for the privilege of being guaranteed your hand in marriage when you turned sixteen.”

In the foyer silence, Minka said, “I never knew any of this.”

“I wrote you letters, and was very hurt that you never responded,” Barnby said.

“I never got them,” she replied.

“Well,” he said, exasperated, “I can show you the legal betrothal form. I keep it with Adele’s betrothal to my good friend Lord Monsell—”

“Wait,” said Efran. “Adele was betrothed two years ago?”

“Yes,” Barnby said, turning to him.

“Did she sign it?” Efran asked.

“Yes, of course,” Barnby said.

“Why do you have it?” Efran asked.

“Because I signed as witness,” Barnby said. “I was supposed to return it to Loizeaux’s notary the next time I came to visit Sybil, but I fell ill and was unable to travel for quite a while. Then Surchatain Lietes died, and Lightfoot’s entourage came to Westford—nevertheless, all that is quite beside the point. I have a legally binding betrothal to Sybil.” He turned to her to state firmly, “When you turn sixteen, you are mine.”

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Chapter 28

“Well, I can clear up that question,” Minka said. “I never knew of this betrothal and never agreed to it. Therefore, I refuse to be bound by it. I married the love of my life after I turned sixteen, so that’s how I remain,” she shrugged.

Efran’s eyes rested contentedly on her, then his brow creased. “It’s strange that your father never told you or anyone about it. I should have been told when he appointed me your guardian. And then they tried to force you to Eurus to be betrothed to Justinian.”

Barnby bristled, “If that is so, it’s highly irregular behavior. I have a legally binding agreement. Bring your notary down and he will show you.”

“That is a good idea,” Efran said, turning to a nearby soldier, Hawk. “Send a carriage for Ryal to settle a legal question for us.” Hawk saluted and ran out.

Then Efran sighed, “Come, we’re not enemies. Let’s go eat.” He took Minka’s hand to go to the dining hall. Everyone looked at each other, then followed.

Madea had venison stew, poached eggs, fresh greens and raspberry tarts, all of which everyone enjoyed. Despite the serious question at hand, there was light, friendly talk. Efran almost apologized for Stebbins’ bruised, swollen ear. Almost. Clearly, Efran was not worried about losing Minka to a phantom betrothal.

Instead, he asked Barnby, "Tell me about Monsell."

"Oh, he's a great lord of the midlands, very rich from the logging on his estate. If I remember correctly, he paid a thousand royals for his betrothal to Adele. Your sister could do much worse," he said, shaking his finger at Minka. She almost bit it.

"Is her betrothal still in effect?" Efran asked.

"Yes, of course," Barnby said. "I understand that Lord Monsell has been trying to get hold of her for years," he added with a troubled air. "How difficult women are."

"Oh, very," Efran agreed, eyeing Minka. She eyed him back, wondering how much to trust his cavalier attitude about who was going to be her husband.

Ryal was announced, and Efran asked that he be brought into the dining hall. "He can eat after he settles our dispute," Efran said.

"You are being very decent about this," Barnby observed.

"I know what the Law says," Efran replied.

So Ryal came in with his large Book of Notary Rules. This book was regarded as the gold standard for notaries across the Continent. He sat to listen as Lord Barnby explained his position and Minka explained hers. Then he opened the great book.

He seemed to be taking his time finding the correct reference, and Efran studied his disconcerted air. Finally, Ryal settled on a page to read silently. Then he looked up at Efran.

Resettling his spectacles, Ryal read, "Regarding Betrothals for Daughters. A father's betrothal for a daughter who is of age; that is, who is sixteen or above, shall require the consent of the daughter. However, a father's betrothal for a daughter who is underage; that is, who is less than sixteen years old, shall be considered permanent and binding, even after she reaches her age of majority."

"See! I told you!" Barnby said triumphantly.

"No!" Minka cried. "That is unjust! It is cruel beyond measure! I will not abide it!"

"You have to, or be put in prison," Barnby said with an unhealthy relish.

"No!" she cried. "Efran! No!"

He was looking at Ryal, who was looking down at the book. Efran leaned over and turned the book to read the passage himself. Then he straightened and walked out.

"No!" Minka cried after him. "No, no." She put her head down on her arms and sobbed. Ryal got out his handkerchief to wipe his eyes behind his spectacles. The whole dining hall watched in silence; Madea was seen to be crying with Minka. But Barnby looked unsympathetic.

Efran reentered the dining hall carrying a large old book. He walked over to drop the book onto the table with a resounding *bang*. "This is the Law of Roman," he said. He opened it to begin turning groups of pages. "Under

the section on Oaths, we have Promissory Notes, Bequests, and Betrothals,” he said, turning pages.

“Here under Betrothals, we have Binding and Non-Binding. A binding betrothal, Roman tells us, is ‘one that the father has made with the consent of a daughter who is at or above her majority of sixteen years old.’ A non-binding betrothal, he says, is one ‘made by the father for a daughter who is below her majority.’ Then he goes on to say, ‘A betrothal made for a daughter below the age of sixteen shall be subject to the daughter’s approval once she reaches her majority. A daughter shall not be bound to a betrothal made before her majority to which she objects upon reaching the age of sixteen.’”

In the ensuing silence, he turned the book for Ryal to read. Barnby said, “That’s irrelevant. This Law of Roman only applies to Westford. I am a resident of Venegas, and the betrothal was made with a EurAsian. Therefore, the Continental-wide Book of Notary Rules applies.”

“That is the question,” Efran said. Smiling, he asked the notary of Westford, “Which takes precedence, Ryal? The Book of Notary Rules or the Law of Roman?”

Ryal sat up to wipe his glasses with his handkerchief. “There is no question: the Law of Roman prevails, as stated in your charter. I had forgotten that section, Efran, and had I remembered, I would not have bothered bringing the Notary Rules.”

Minka fell on Ryal to cry out her gratitude and he patted her back. Barnby objected, “We’re not even in Westford here!”

Efran turned to him. “As Notary Ryal said, our founding charter dictates that the Law of Roman be our legal standard. But I hope to take some of the sting out of it for you. I will pay you back your three hundred royals if you will bring me Adele’s betrothal to Lord Monsell.”

Barnby stared at him, then said, “You will have it within three days.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, then lifted a hand. “Madea? A trencher for Ryal over here, please.” She brought it, with a firm hug for Minka.

Lord Barnby and Stebbins left immediately with handshakes and good wishes. When Ryal left later, he drew Efran aside to apologize. “I am sorry for the distress I caused you both, Efran—”

“Ryal—sir,” Efran interrupted. “I was actually glad for that, because for a while, I was not even sure that you were human.”

Ryal shook his head. “Too human, and I hope to never make a mistake like that again.”

“Welcome to my life,” Efran sighed.

And Minka could hardly wait to get him alone that evening. Before he could even undress, she had pushed him to the bed and fallen atop him, crying all over again at the scare. He smoothed her hair back to kiss her. “It’s nice to be the rational one, for a change,” he said.

She cried, “Oh, when I thought I might lose you—”

“Now you know how I feel all the time,” he said.

She grabbed his head to press her mouth to his. When he flinched slightly, she lifted up and saw blood on his lip. “Oh! I bit you! I’m sorry!” she cried.

He put a finger to his lip in surprise. Then he smiled: “I didn’t marry a nice little girl.” And snorted: “It might have been fun watching Barnby try to rule you.”

“Shut up,” she said, kissing him again, and he did not flinch.

Two days later, messengers from Lord Barnby arrived with the betrothal agreement between Adele and Lord Monsell. After looking it over, Efran authorized Estes to give them 300 royals. Of course, they were new royals, worth a fraction of the old, valuable coins. But no one felt it necessary to mention that.

On the following day, August 5th, Efran asked Graduliere and Adele for another meeting with him and Minka. But he was done going to the old notary shop; instead, he asked them to come to the Abbey fortress. So they came that afternoon, and the four of them met in the receiving room off the foyer, sitting around a table of fruit, cheese, bread, and a good wine from Madea’s vintner.

“Thank you for coming,” Efran said, closing the door and pulling up a chair. The other three were already seated. “This will be a nice family meeting,” he promised. “How are you feeling?” he asked Adele.

“Miserable,” she said, with dark circles under her eyes to prove it.

“I’m very sorry to hear that,” he said briskly. “First,” he said, looking at Graduliere, “I have good reason to believe that Arenado is dead, so you can disregard any threats I made concerning him.”

“Thank you,” Graduliere said dryly.

“You’re welcome,” Efran replied. “So now we have to talk about this.”

He handed a parchment to Graduliere. He took one look at it and gasped, “Where did you get this?” Adele leaned over to take it from his hands.

Efran began, “That also is irrelevant, but—”

Adele tore the document into tiny shreds. “There! What’s next on your agenda, dear Efran?”

He sighed. “That was a copy, Adele. You’ll notice there’s no seal. I have the original. I want to give it to you, and I will, if . . . your child is Polonti, and you give it to me, I will give you the document. If your child is not Polonti and you want to keep it, I will give you the document. I will never make it public. But if the child you have is mine, and you refuse to give it to me, I will keep the document.”

He leaned back in silence. Minka watched silently as well. Adele shrugged, “That’s hardly necessary, Efran. I certainly wouldn’t keep a child of yours, so you’d be welcome to it.”

“If you kill the child, I will keep the document,” Efran said.

Graduliere exhaled, “We will do as you ask, Efran.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Now, who’s thirsty? The wine is very good.”

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Chapter 29

But the meeting was not concluded, as Efran discovered while pouring the wine. Graduliere said, “Now I have a request of you.”

Efran’s eyes flicked up. After a moment, he said, “Ask it.”

Graduliere said, “I want your support to become Surchatain of Westford. The nobles respect you. If you support me, I can attain the throne without violence or loss of life.”

Efran sat back, cup at his lips. Then he looked at Minka. She shook her head, having nothing to offer. So he inhaled, looking back at Graduliere. “I will require that you follow the Law of Roman.”

“I am prepared to do that,” Graduliere said.

Smiling, Efran said, “But I will not simply take your word for it, friend. I will require that you hire councilors that I judge to have sufficient commitment to the Law, and that they have free recourse to me. If I find that you are backsliding on this promise, I will oppose you. And that will be much messier than your fighting to gain the throne yourself.”

“I will abide by your terms,” Graduliere said.

Efran paused at the quickness of his acceding. All Efran could think about—which he kept trying to ignore—was that Graduliere had ordered the hanging of a child. And there was his brutal bargaining over a slave who had been condemned to death.

Setting that aside also, Efran stood to open the door. Gesturing to a sentry, he said, “Tell Estes I need him.”

He continued to stand in the doorway until Estes appeared moments later. “Yes, Captain?”

“I need your assistance to work out an agreement here. Also, the treaty. Where is Ryal? I’ll need him, as well.”

“We’ll see to that, Captain,” Estes said, moving away.

As Efran returned to his seat, Adele groaned, “I can’t sit here for all that.”

He glanced up. “You are free to leave.”

She directed a withering look to him. “Do you possibly have a place I can lie down, dear Efran?”

Minka stood. “I’ll find her a comfortable spot, Efran.”

He looked at her with a brief crinkling of the eyes. “Thank you, Minka. You’re free to come and go as you like, but I will ask you to look over any documents before they’re signed.”

She nodded, looking pointedly at his healing lip, and he smiled.

Outside the room, Minka pointed as she began down the corridor. "We have very nice rooms ready this way."

Adele grunted, "If I had known how much trouble it would be carrying Efran's baby, I never would have lain with him."

Minka smiled vaguely, saying nothing. Adele glanced at her silence. "Besides, he wasn't all that wonderful," she added.

Now Minka had to duck her head slightly to hide her smile. Adele appraised this reaction, but had no time to comment before Minka opened a door into a furnished suite. "The bedroom is through that far door. Would you like anything to eat or drink?"

"Stay and talk to me for a moment," Adele said, entering to critically examine the receiving room. Then she opened the door into the bedroom to lie down on the covered bed.

At the bedroom doorway, Minka said, "Adele, you're not going to hurt me with anything that you say about Efran."

"Why should I want to do that?" Adele protested, patting the bed. "Come sit."

"No, I'm sure you need some rest. There is a bell pull at your head that rings to the kitchen."

Minka started to move away, but Adele said, "After I have this baby, I'm leaving Graduliere."

Minka shrugged. "So?"

Adele said, "I'm going to marry one of the nobles who oppose him. So if Efran signs an agreement to support Graduliere, he will be directly harming me." Minka was listening, so Adele continued, "The noble I'm going to marry already abides by Roman's Law. Graduliere will drop it the moment he feels he has enough power."

Minka regarded her, then said, "Wait here."

She went back down the corridor to the receiving room. The door was standing open as Estes and Efran were conferring over a scratch document. Leaning into the room, she said, "Efran, I need you for a moment, please."

He glanced up in slight impatience; seeing her steady gaze, he said, "Excuse me, Estes."

As he walked with her down the corridor, she murmured, "Adele has told me some things you need to hear." He raised his head.

She led him into the guest room, then pointed to the bedroom. He looked back to make sure she was following. As he leaned on the bedroom door frame, she bypassed him to sit on the bed, giving her a clear view of both parties.

"Yes, Adele?" he asked.

She lifted up to sit on the bed, and Minka moved to put a pillow at her back. "Thank you, dear," Adele said. Then she turned to Efran to tell him everything she had just told Minka.

Efran listened, then said, “Who is this nobleman?”

“Lord Cennick,” Adele said.

“He is married already,” Efran objected.

“His wife died of the fever almost a month ago,” Adele said.

Efran flattened his back on the wall to look up at the ceiling. Then he told Adele, “You are asleep.” She slid down to arrange herself on the bed. He then told Minka, “Stay with her, and don’t let Graduliere take her. She needs to rest.”

“Yes, Efran,” she said. And he turned out again, thinking, *I knew I should have nothing to do with you. You almost hanged Toby, bastard.*

He returned to the receiving room where Graduliere, Estes and now Ryal were waiting for him. “I’m sorry, gentlemen, we’ve had a minor emergency that I need to attend. We will set another time for this meeting. Ryal, sir, please stay.”

“Can I assist you, Captain?” Estes asked.

“Yes,” Efran said. Then he stood back from the doorway to say, “Thank you for your cooperation, Graduliere.”

The other stood reluctantly. “You will send for me?”

“Of course,” Efran said. “When I need you.”

Out in the corridor, Graduliere looked around. “Where is Adele?”

“Oh. Probably that second door on the right. If she’s not there, it will be on down the corridor,” Efran directed.

“Thank you.” Graduliere turned into the corridor to open the second door. Seeing the bedroom door ajar, he went over to push it open.

Minka rose immediately from the bed on which her sister lay with her eyes closed. With a finger to her lips, Minka nudged him out of the receiving room. “She needs to sleep.”

“Oh. Well, Efran has canceled the meeting,” Graduliere said, disconcerted.

“You can’t wake her yet. We’ll send her home when she’s ready,” Minka said.

“Oh. All right, then.” He turned back to the foyer to exit to his waiting carriage.

After watching him leave, Efran told Estes, “Invite Lord Cennick to come meet with me. Tell him I strongly encourage him to come at once. Except—we’re going to move to a larger room on the second floor.”

“Yes, Captain.” Estes gave the order to a sentry and gestured to Ryal.

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Chapter 30

Lord Cennick arrived within a half hour. Kaas met him at the door, bowing. “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress, Lord Cennick. Please follow me.”

Cennick nodded, and Kaas led him up a flight of stairs to a meeting room with an open door. As Cennick stepped inside, four people at an oval table turned toward him, and Efran walked over to meet him. Cennick was a healthy, astute man in his 30s, with short, curly brown hair, a firm jaw and a smooth face.

“Welcome, Lord Cennick, and thank you for your prompt response to my request. I am Captain Efran; you may know some of those here.” He introduced them, going around the table beginning at his right: “This is my Administrator Estes, my wife the Lady Minka, her sister Adele, and the Notary Ryal. Please have a seat.”

Nodding to those at table, Cennick took the only available chair, that between Ryal and Adele. The table was set with individual plates of fresh zucchini rounds, toasted bread, and steamed river mussels, with goblets of wine at each place and a refill bottle at Efran’s hand. Cennick nodded rather formally to Adele on his left, but looked with interest at the plate before him.

As Efran sat, he said, “I have only recently learned of the death of your wife from the fever, Lord Cennick. Please accept my condolences.”

“Thank you, sir. Please dispense with my title; I almost look over my shoulder to see whom you’re addressing,” Cennick replied. He absently laid the napkin on his leg.

Efran smiled in acknowledgment. “We are combining necessary talks with necessary eating,” Efran said, gesturing at the plate in front of his guest. As several others were leisurely eating, Cennick picked up a mussel. But then Efran said, “Tell me then: what is your opinion of the Law of Roman?”

Cennick had to swallow, but said firmly, “It is the most concise, thorough, balanced exposition of legal principle and practice that the Continent has ever seen.”

Efran weighed that answer, dipping bread in the sauce. “What does it say about loyalty oaths?”

“They are prohibited unless voluntary; any punishment for refusing a loyalty oath renders it illegal,” Cennick replied. After each answer, heads turned from Cennick to Efran.

Efran sat back, wiping his fingers on a napkin as he studied the ceiling. “What does it say about usurpation?”

“That is a capital crime, which is punishable by death, as is attempted usurpation,” Cennick said, shifting easily as he downed another mussel. He seemed to be almost enjoying this examination.

“What does it say about abdication?” Efran asked, toying with the wine goblet in front of him.

Cennick paused, then said, “A ruler may abdicate at any time, for any reason. If he wishes to choose a successor, that man must be approved by a senior council of ten.” He took a sip from his goblet, looking back at Efran for the next question.

Efran paused over his plate to ask, "Must his successor be a man?"

Cennick looked off in thought at the unexpected question. "No, I don't believe so. But whoever it is still must be approved by council." This he said as though it were only to be expected.

Efran refilled his goblet, then held up the bottle. "Who needs more?"

Estes said, "Here, Captain," so Efran handed him the bottle.

Then Efran asked, "What does the Law say about a steward who takes bribes?"

"He's to be turned out of office," Cennick said, pausing over a zucchini slice. When Efran looked up, Cennick amended, "He or she."

A light laugh went around the table. "What about a steward who steals?" asked Efran. As Minka reached for her goblet, his eyes went to her just because he liked looking at her. She smiled at him.

"That also merits death, if it is proven," Cennick said. His tone implied that it was regrettable but necessary. He took a bite of sauce-covered toast.

Efran looked directly at him now, going for the hard questions. "What should the primary attribute be for consideration of a man as Commander?"

Chewing, Cennick hesitated. "According to the Law, it should be the ability to command. But Surchatain Ares had issues with that," he admitted as if in agreement.

Efran looked at him for a long time. Then he asked, "Are you seeking to be Surchatain of Westford?"

Cennick looked back at him. "Yes."

"Who is contending against you for the office?" Efran asked.

Cennick looked off, frowning in uncertainty. "As far as I know, my most serious opponents are Graduliere and Webbe."

"Webbe?" Efran looked at Estes. "What do we know about him?"

Estes shifted thoughtfully. "He is certainly wealthy; he has some well-connected friends, but . . . I don't know that he's got the stamina or the will to rule. I have heard him described as a dabbler."

Efran nodded, looking up to the ceiling. Then his eyes went again to the person seated next to Estes. "Lady Minka, what do you think of Lord Cennick?"

All those at table looked at her. Raising her glittering eyes, she said, "He appears to be a man after your own heart, my lord."

Cennick looked at him quickly while Efran sat back, laughing. "You know me so well," he said affectionately to her.

Then Efran looked at the aspiring Surchatain again. “Do you know my sister-in-law, Cennick?”

Cennick turned to Adele beside him. “Yes. I want to marry her,” he said, committing himself. She gazed at him with full eyes and red lips.

“Do you know her condition?” Efran asked quietly.

Cennick almost choked, but looked at him to say, “She is pregnant with your child.”

Efran looked at the notary on his left. “Ryal, can we draw up an emergency petition of divorce of Adele from Graduliere?”

“Yes, Efran. I should have everything I need here,” Ryal replied.

“Do that, then.” Efran looked off, calculating, while Adele looked at him with moist eyes. Cennick sat straight-backed, also watching him.

Turning to Estes again, Efran asked, “Who is governing Westford now?”

Estes raised his shoulders. “No one, that I know of. Graduliere was handling accounts, last I heard, but—with the palace gone, and the army virtually disbanded, I don’t know what there is to administer. The Notaries Shaffer and Ryal have been handling questions of law,” he said, nodding at him across the table.

Efran looked cautiously to his sister-in-law. “Adele, can you tell us anything about Graduliere’s governing?”

She took a moment to consider this, then said, “After my father’s proclamation on the halving of taxes, the collectors quit, and the administrators left. There was no more money to govern anyone. He doesn’t have the support or the funds to do anything . . . which is why he was so eager for your help.”

Efran nodded. He put an elbow on the table to rest his face on his fist, thinking. Turning to Cennick, he asked, “You have an estate?”

“Yes. Forty acres of land bordering Willowring Lake on the south and the Passage on the west. Primarily, I raise Gascon cattle. My beef feeds most of the Southern Continent,” Cennick said.

“The Abbey Lands as well,” Efran remarked. “How many men can you muster?”

“A thousand, in a pinch,” Cennick said.

Efran said, “Ah. Well, it appears to me that you should just announce yourself Surchatain of Westford, with the endorsement of your friend, the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Anyone who wants your protection must accept your governance and your right to collect taxes—at the new, low rates, of course.” He looked around the table. “What am I missing?”

They all looked back at him with nothing to add. Cennick said, “Your counsel and friendship are most welcome. I will do as you say, Lord Efran.”

“Just Efran,” he said, and Cennick nodded, lowering his face.

“Well.” Efran stood, and the rest did likewise. To Cennick, he said, “Have the Certificate of Divorce that Ryal

draws up sent to Graduliere, and then—take her home with you,” he waved. “Oh—the baby comes to me,” he added with a neutral gaze, and Cennick nodded hastily.

As Minka came to Efran’s side, he put an arm around her and opened his mouth, then closed it again at Adele’s approach, arms outstretched. “Oh, Efran—”

He moved Minka defensively in front of him to face her. “Cennick, your woman wants you.”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on August 5th of the year 8153 from the creation of the world.

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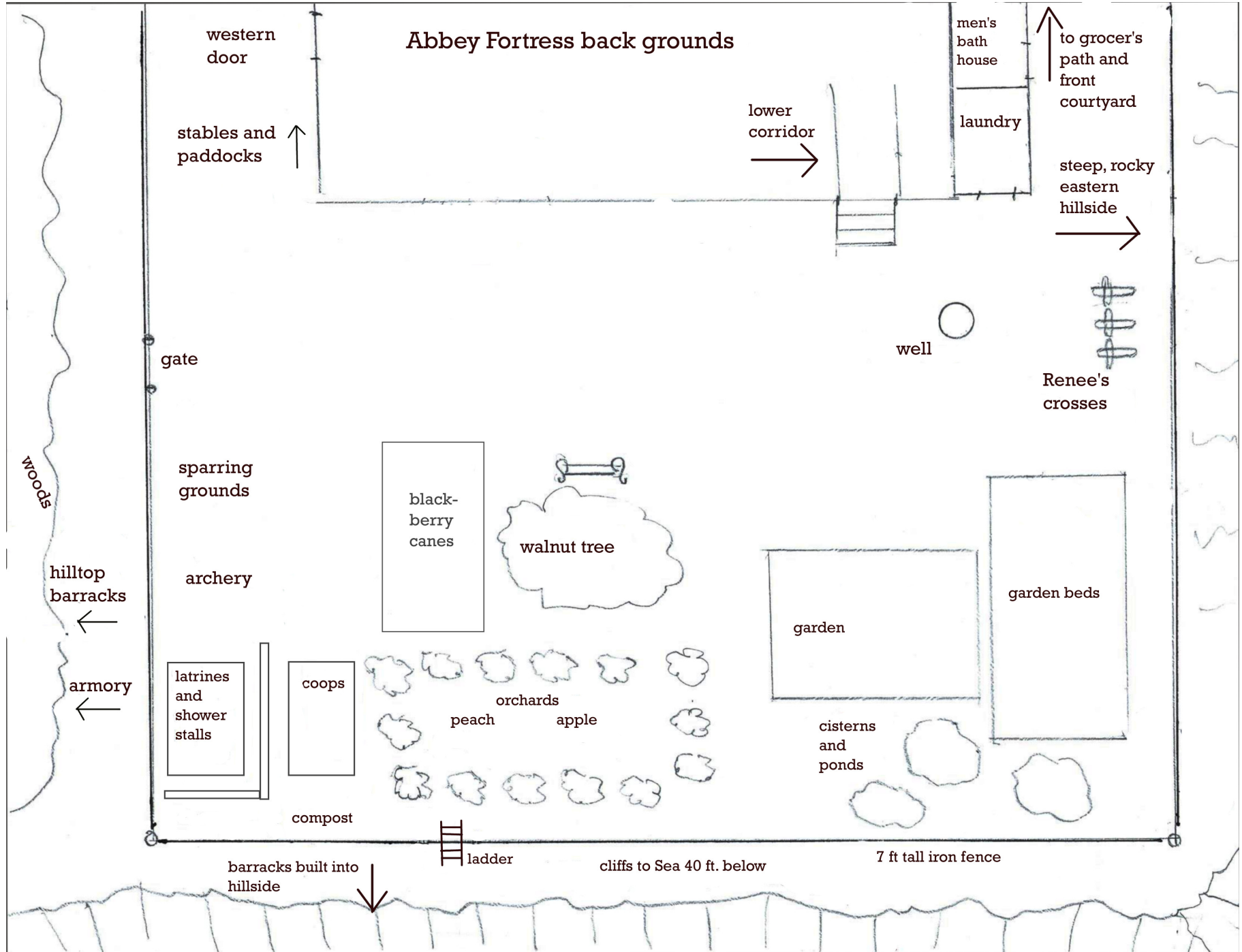
Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Man of Science* (Book 2)

© Robin Hardy 2024

Adele—ah DELL	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	polypody—paul ee POH dee
Arenado—air en AH doh	Prie Mer—pre MARE
Ares—AIR eez	Qarqar—KAR kar; Qarqarian—kar KAR ee an
Assisi—ah SEE see	Reitz—rights
Averne—ah VURN	Renée—ren AY
Beardall—BARE duhl	Rensselaer—ren seh LAIR
Blature—blah TURE	Rinkart—RING kart
Canis—CANE iss	Rollo—RAW low
Cassius—KA shush	Sasany—SASS an ee
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	Scylla—SILL eh
Chataine—sha TANE	Shaffer—SHAF er
Conte—cahnt	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Cosmographia—cause mah GRAH fee ah	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
coup—koo	Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Doane—rhymes with <i>loan</i>	Sybil—SEH bull
Efran—EFF run	Teschner—TESH nur
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Elvey—ELL vee	Venegas—VEN eh gus
Estes—ESS tis	Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Eurus—YOUR us	Webbe—web
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Wedderburn—WEH dur burn
ewer—YOU er	Whobrey—WAH bry
Gascon—GAS kuhn	
Goss—gahs	
Graduliere—gra DUE lee air	
Greves—greevs	
insigne—en SIN yeh	
Justinian—jus TIN ee un	
Kaas—kahs	
Koschat—KOS chat	
liaison—lee AY zahn	
Lietes—lye EE teez	
Lina—LEE nah	
Loizeaux—lwah ZOH	
Lowry—LAHW ree	
Lystra—LIS trah; Lystran—LIS trun	
Madea—mah DAY ah	
Marguerite—mar ger EET (hard g)	
meritorious—meh ruh TAW ree uhs	
Minka—MINK ah	
<i>moekolohe</i> —moh ee koh LO ee	
Monsell—mon SELL	
mouflon—MOO flahn	
Mumme—mum	
obeisance—oh BAY sense	
Ori—OR ee	
Pia—PEE ah	
Pindar—PIN dhur	
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)	

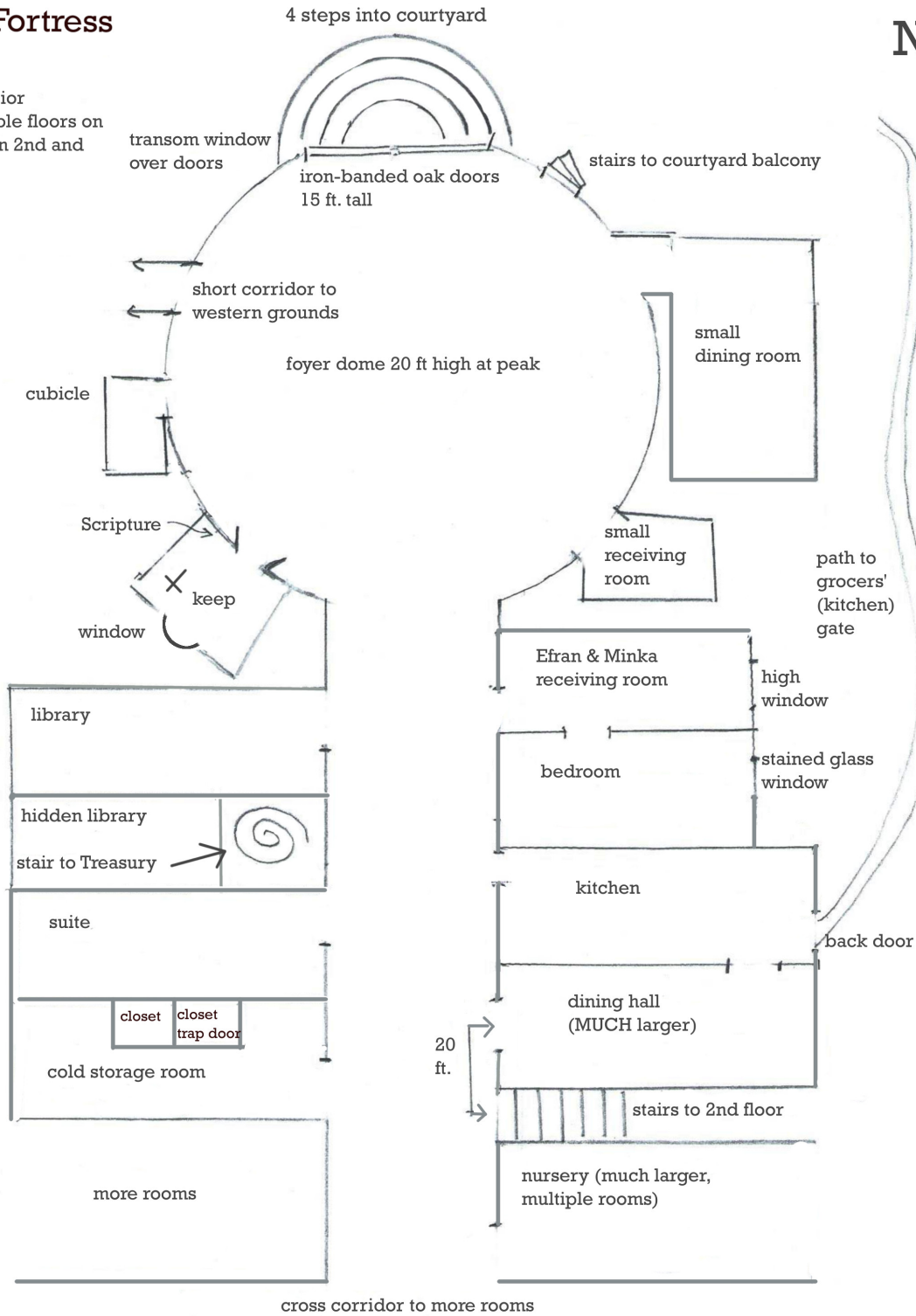
Map 1: Back Grounds

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Abbey Fortress Interior

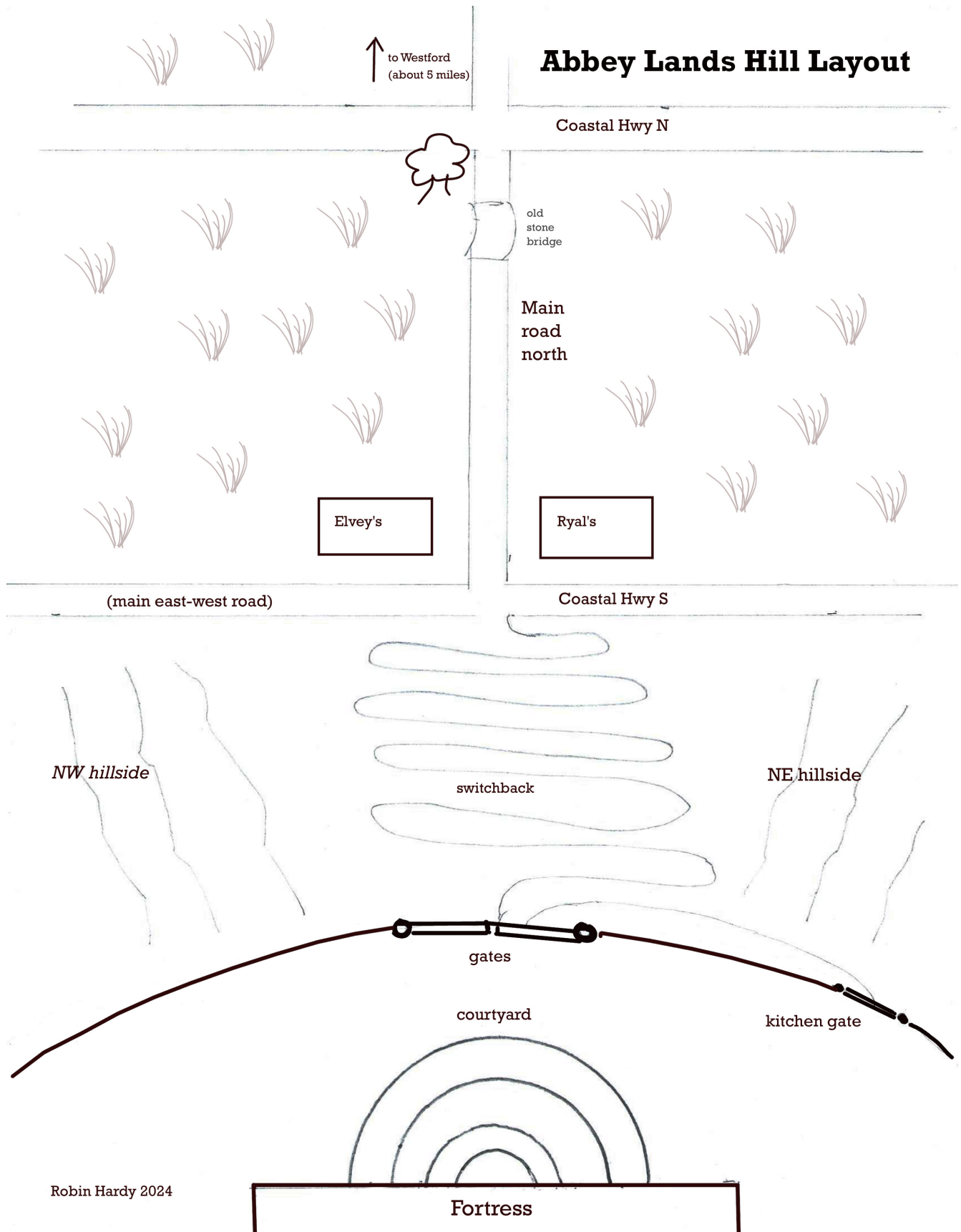
white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



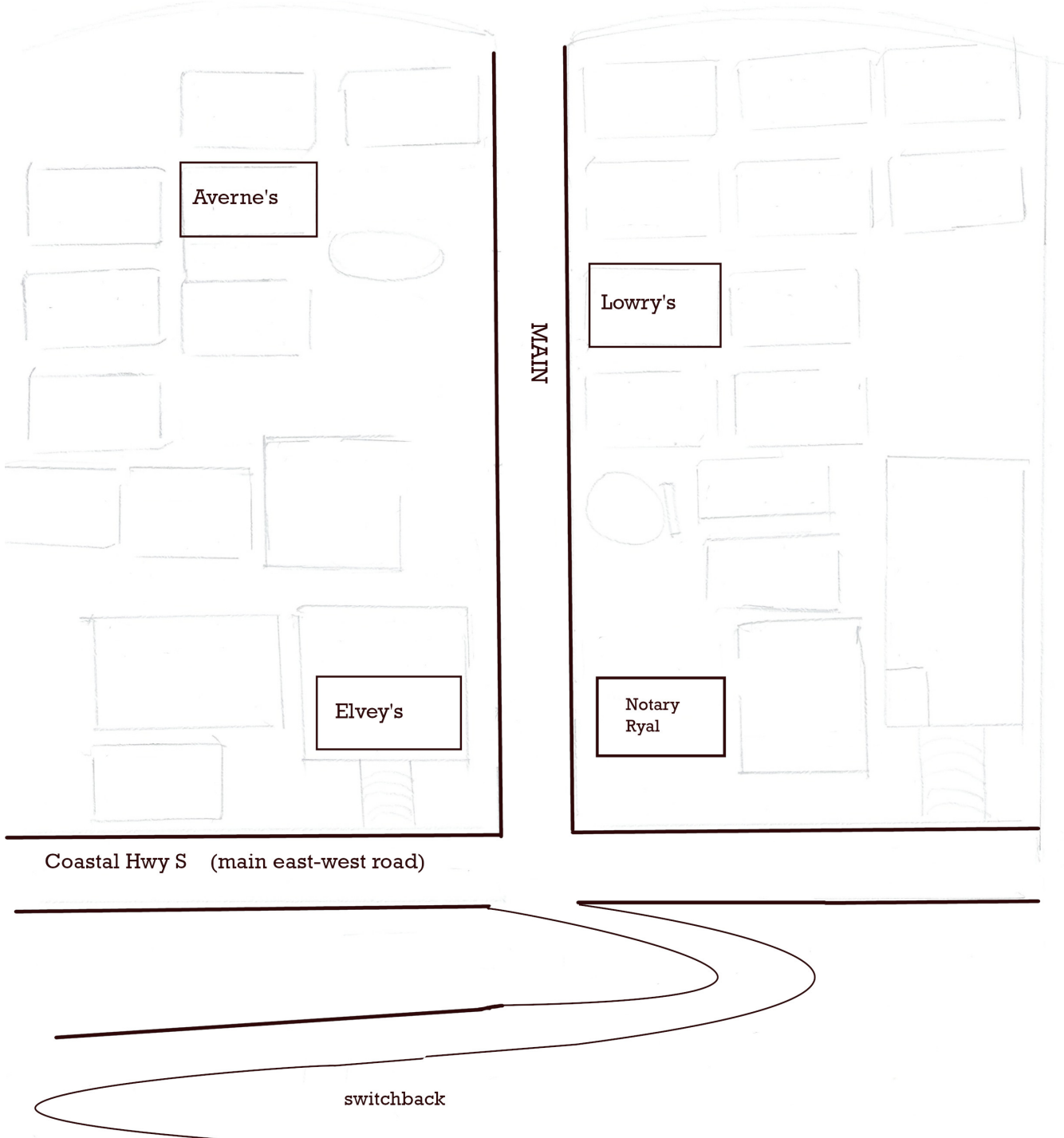
NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024

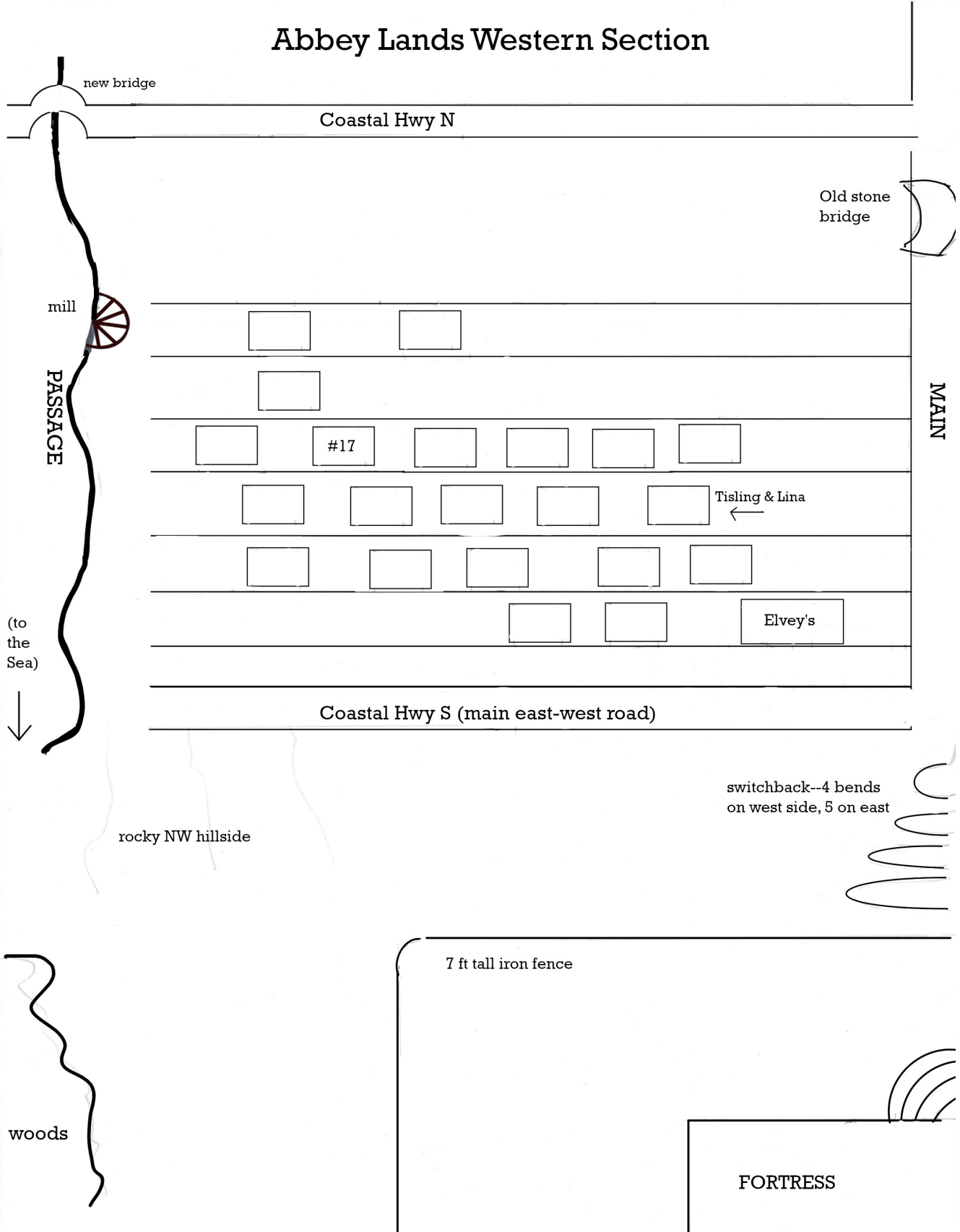
main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds



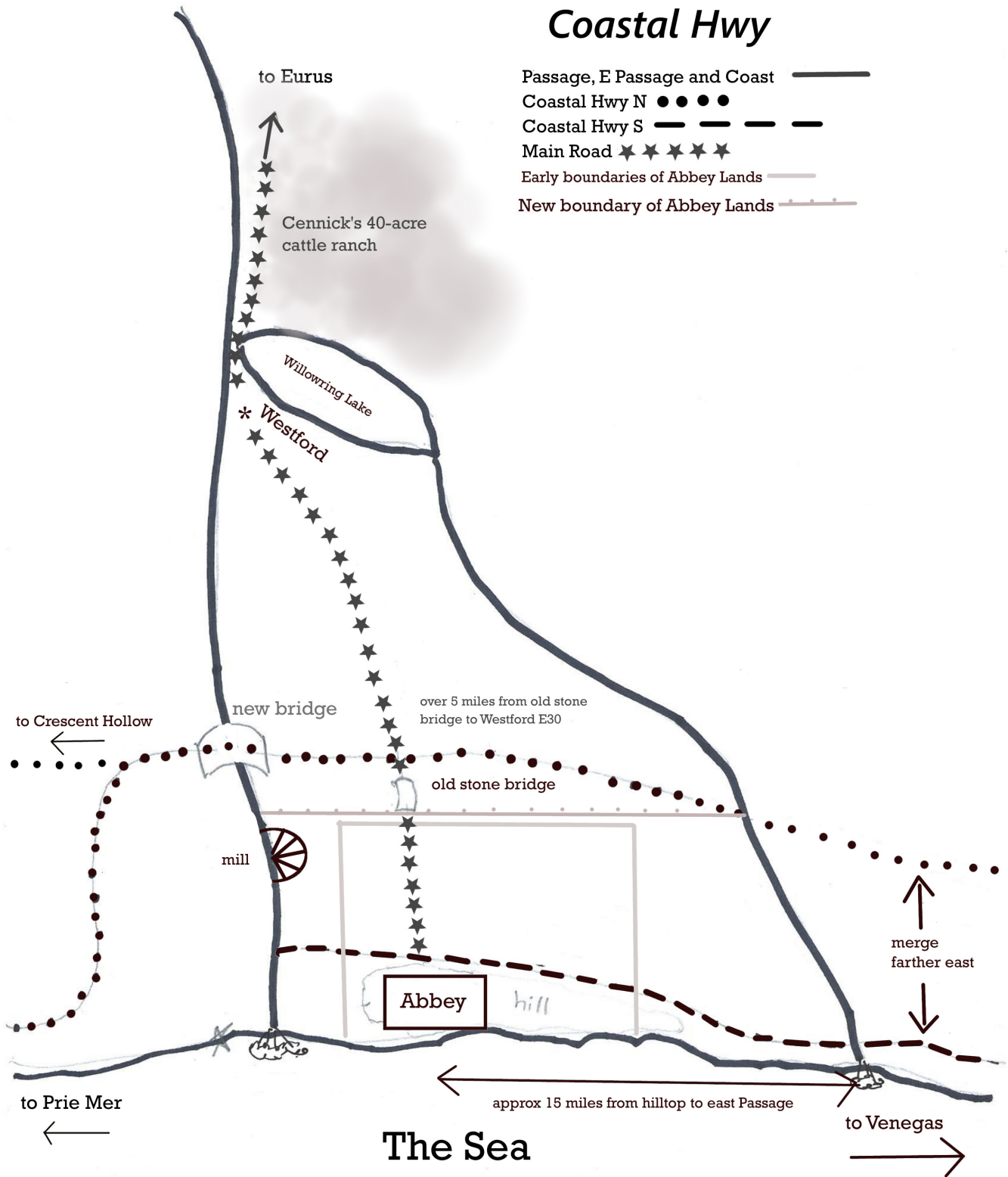
Abbey Lands Main Road

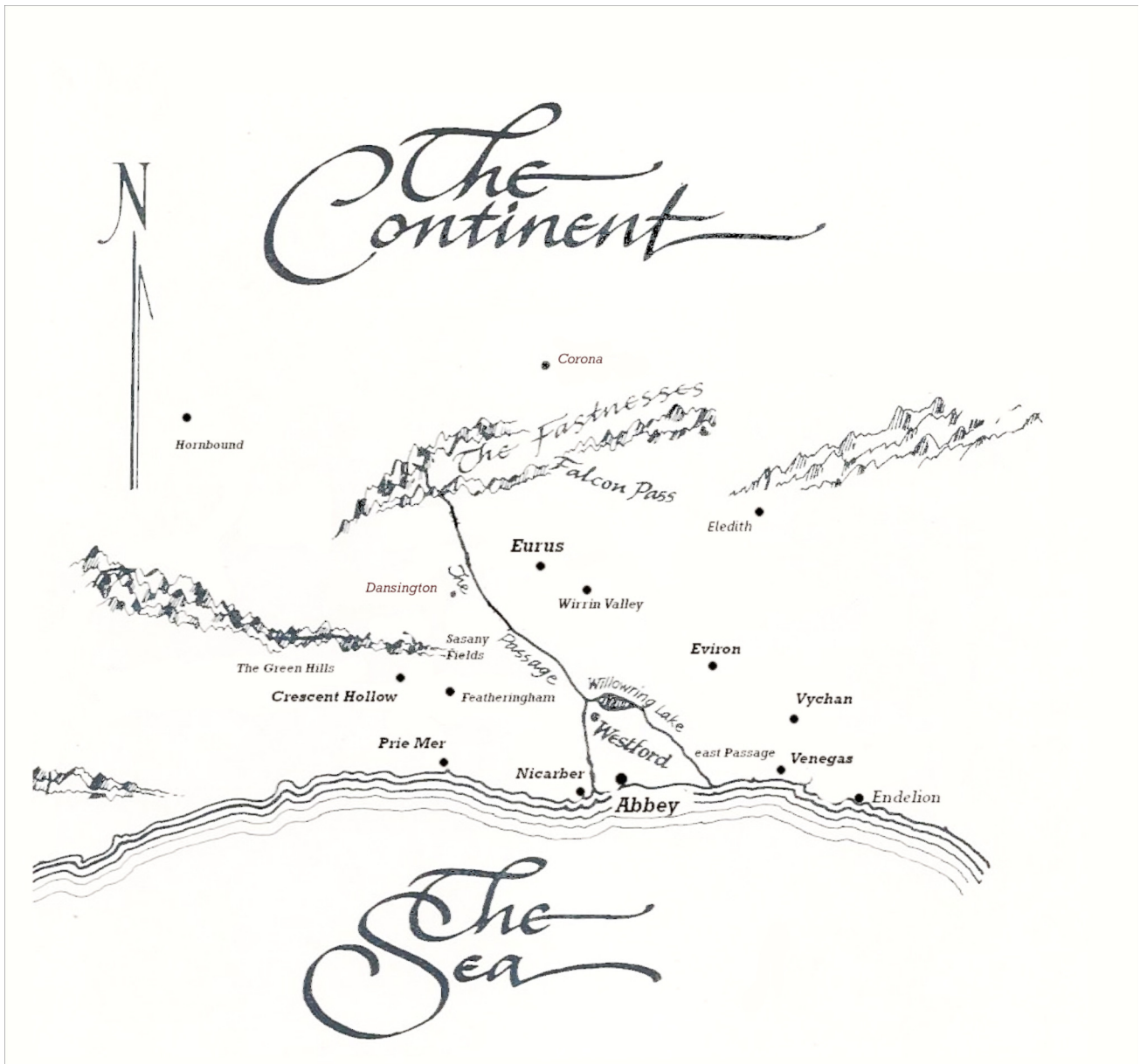


Abbey Lands Western Section



Coastal Hwy





The Trap Sprung (Book 2:
Lord Efran and the Man of Science)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



It's a good thing I don't have to make a living as a graphic artist. But I'm having fun making hybrid real-life, cartoon illustrations for the Abbey Lands stories.

For this book, I was determined to show Bastard bucking off Efran (and saving his life). I wanted a convincing horse for this, so resorted to [iStock](#), where I found the bucking horse image below (photographed by [LifeJourneys](#)). I also needed an old stone bridge, so used this one, also from iStock (which link doesn't work anymore.) True, it doesn't meet the exact specifications for my old stone bridge, but nothing I found did. I may have to build my own.

Because this scene was so busy—and the bridge photo so beautiful—I decided to try it in color. Also, I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

