



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

Book 7

Lord Efran
and
Master Crowe

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Efran sat on the short stairway leading down from the cold storage closet to the cavern below the fortress. It was very dark down here, as he had shut the door to the closet enclosing the trap door to this level—he didn't want anyone looking for wraps or bottles to fall down the gaping hole in the floor. But ever since he and Lwoff had killed about 40 biting eelfish down here two weeks ago, he had been thinking about them.

He wanted them out of his cavern waters. But because these waters fed into the Sea, there was not much he could do about them himself. So he was looking for help.

He had been down here for about an hour, and unless the help he was seeking came soon, he'd have to go back up; people would be looking for him. "Swimmer," he murmured again. "I know you're out there somewhere. Please. . . ."

Efran's eyes were drawn to ripples in the water—too large and lazy to be those of the eelfish.

Hello again, Efran.

Inhaling in relief, Efran got off the stairway to stand at the edge. "Thank you for coming to talk to me. You warned me about the teeth in the water. They weren't always in the caverns; they weren't here when I fell in, else I would have died. Swimmer, I want them out of these waters. Someone else is going to fall in at some point; I don't want anyone else to die here [as Krems had died, presumably]. How can I get rid of them? Help me."

There was a period of silence, then Efran heard,

The Heye only can help.

"*Heye*," Efran repeated, trying to recall what that meant. It was certainly a Polonti word. Then he remembered the giant octopus arm that had swept the ledge clear of dead and wounded eelfish. "The octopus? The octopus eats them, doesn't it? Can you ask the *Heye* to eat the eelfish but not hurt us?"

I will ask.

With that, Efran watched the ripples recede. He glanced over the water one last time before turning to climb the stairway and hoist himself up through the trap door. He replaced the door, then shut the closet upon exiting. Pensively, he went out into the corridor.

Immediately Gaul, who had been standing sentry, met him. "Captain, there's a group of leaseholders that want to speak with you."

Efran winced. "How long have they been waiting?"

"They—just got here, Captain," Gaul said in mild confusion.

"Good," Efran exhaled. "A group. Did they say what they wanted?"

"No, sir. But they're the serious ones, you know. The kind of people that are always unhappy about something," Gaul said with the slightest of sneers.

Efran laughed silently. “That’s good to know. Then fetch Estes and DeWitt down here. I won’t take a serious beating alone.”

Gaul snorted as he saluted. “Yes, sir.” Then he turned up the stairway.

Efran smiled, but a group of serious leaseholders with a complaint was not a joke. Unresolved complaints had a way of spreading, and there were any number of things they could complain about: the plots being so near a dangerous river, the caverns, the increased traffic of sightseers and prospective leaseholders, the noise of new construction—so many things.

Efran paused in the kitchen doorway. “Dobell! Will you send ale and refreshments to the small dining room? For seven or eight.”

The kitchen assistant looked up. “Sure thing, Cap’n.”

“Thank you,” Efran said, moving off.

He entered the foyer to see the group of five waiting. Because he was in uniform (that he had put on for a fitting and then forgotten to take off) they might have recognized him even if he hadn’t said, “Good afternoon. I am Lord Efran. Please come in and have a seat.” He opened the door to the small dining room.

As the group filed in, he immediately recognized the strictly correct matron who had been outraged to see him kissing his wife Minka in the foyer. So he had let go of Minka to kiss her, and she had not objected. That was only six weeks ago, but she clearly did not recognize him today.

Efran stood aside for Dobell and a maid to bring in bottles of Goadby’s Best Ale and snacks of flatbread with fruit dip, raisin cakes and nut cups. As Efran was thanking them, his rescuers appeared at the door.

Efran lifted his hand to make introductions. “Here is my Steward Estes and my Administrator DeWitt”—the latter having been promoted by Estes due to the work that Estes had been offloading onto him. To them, Efran said, “I understand that these good leaseholders have some concerns to share with us, which I have not heard yet.” To everyone, he said, “Please be seated. And help yourself.” The refreshments were in the center of the table. All three of the Abbey leadership took an ale; Efran also took possession of a nut cup.

DeWitt was in the process of laying out paper and his quill set to take notes. “For our records,” he began. “The meeting of June the fourteenth of the year eighty-one fifty-four from the creation of the world. May I have your names, please?”

One man cleared his throat and said, “We are the Committee of Concerned Citizens of the Abbey Lands.”

Efran almost choked on a nut. DeWitt glanced at the speaker. “Excellent. And your name, sir?”

The speaker said, “I am Heeren.” Going around the table, he pointed as he said, “This is Hines, Kocher, Theakston, and Lady Nianne.”

The only woman, Lady Nianne, was the one who had objected to Efran’s kissing his wife. There were only a few nobles among the leaseholders, because their titles elsewhere could not be imported into the Lands without explicit permission from the Lord or Lady Sovereign, and only he or she could designate nobility in the Lands (who were given special favors due to their status). DeWitt, who knew all of the Lands’ nobility, knew that

Neanne was not one of them. But he saw no reason to mention this now.

Efran said, "Thank you, Heeren. What is your concern?"

Heeren looked at his committee members, then told the Polonti lord, "Frankly, Lord Efran, our main concern is the number of Polonti who have been allowed plots on these lands."

The Polonti were the race of hardy black-haired, brown-skinned people who originally populated the harsh region of Polontis. Some 50 years ago, the Polonti elders decided to move their capital Eledith from the remote eastern Fastnesses to the southern foothills, far closer to the cities and villages of the Southern Continent. This allowed for greater integration of Polonti among Southerners. Half a century later, Polonti were still despised by certain Southerners, particularly in Eurus and somewhat in Westford. But since the titled lord of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea was also one, he saw no reason to keep others out. Estes also was Polonti.

DeWitt, a Southerner originally of Westford, asked, "Why is that a concern, Heeren?"

"They are criminals, like the monster Awfyn that showed up here, trying to abduct a young woman," Heeren said.

DeWitt said, "Frankly, Heeren, I know far more Southerners who are criminals than Polonti who are. And the Polonti on our lands were carefully vetted to make sure they had no association with Awfyn." Neither Efran nor Estes attempted to respond to Heeren. Yet.

Heeren's brows drew down. "They practice dark magic."

"Give me the names of those whom you know to practice dark magic," DeWitt said, quill poised. This practice involved the use of dangerous substances which were prohibited by both Continental Law and Roman's Law.

"It is common knowledge," Heeren said.

DeWitt sat back, regarding him. "We must have clear evidence of wrongdoing to evict any leaseholder from a plot. 'Common knowledge' does not suffice."

"They *intermarry*," Heeren said, leaning forward.

"With . . . ?" DeWitt inquired, opening his hands.

"Non-Polonti," Heeren said.

"That is not a crime, Heeren," DeWitt said. Efran and Estes, both married to "non-Polonti" women, merely listened. At this point.

"Decent people admit that intermarriage between unmatched persons is abhorrent," Heeren said.

DeWitt sighed, laying down his quill. "Unless you have more substantive complaints, I am afraid we can't help you. The Law of Roman does not allow us to prevent Polonti, Qarqarians, those from the Far North or beyond the Sea from sharing our mores."

"The Law of Roman? What does a relic have to do with anything?" Heeren asked.

“The operating charter of the Abbey specifies that it follow Roman’s Law. Therefore, the leases that all of you signed specify the same,” DeWitt said, leaning back in his chair.

This was met with stark silence as the committee members considered that. DeWitt added, “If you wish, we can pull out our copies of your leases to verify your signatures. And if you find that they are not your signatures, then you must vacate your plot immediately.”

Then Lady Neanne spoke. “I was assaulted by a Polonti in this very fortress but a month ago.”

Efran leaned forward. “That is outrageous, madam. Can you identify him?”

“If I saw him again, certainly,” she said, lifting her face courageously, as she had done right before he kissed her.

“Then let us ascertain the assault,” Efran said, while Estes and DeWitt watched in alarm. “Did he approach you at a run or a walk?”

She looked off, thinking. “At a walk. He walked toward me in a very threatening manner.”

“What did he say?” Efran asked.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Did he slide his arms slowly around your waist?” Efran asked.

Still looking off, she nodded.

“Did he bend his face to yours?” Efran asked. Estes covered his face with a hand, knowing the identity of the perpetrator.

“Yes,” she said.

“Did he caress your lips with his?” Efran asked in a near whisper. The other committee members stared at him. DeWitt put his head in both hands, also knowing.

“Yes,” she said, also in a whisper, eyes on the corner of the ceiling.

“For a long time?” Efran asked.

She raised a shoulder. “Maybe a minute.”

“Did you open your mouth?” Efran suggested. The woman didn’t answer, looking conflicted. “Did you put your arms around his neck?” Efran pressed.

“I don’t remember,” she gasped. The citizens were concerned that this interview was turning into an assault itself, but they didn’t interrupt, waiting to hear more.

“How long did it last?” Efran asked gently.

“A while,” she breathed.

“Did you enjoy it?” he murmured, smiling.

“No, of course not,” she said, breathing heavily.

“It certainly seemed to me that you did,” he said.

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Chapter 2

“And I was pleasantly surprised at how well you kissed,” Efran continued, leaning back.

The committee members stared at him; Neanne finally looked hard at him, then giggled.

Efran got up for a cup and a bottle of Goadby’s. This he poured to place both cup and bottle in front of her. “We can reenact it, if you’re unsure of the details.”

She sat back laughing, a hand at her chest, and drank the ale while Efran drank his, laughing with her. DeWitt shook his head. Estes looked resigned.

The committee members rose silently from the table and began filing out. Efran stood by the door to catch Neanne by the hand as she was leaving. “Come complain to me any time,” he said, leaning down. And she reached up to kiss him quickly.

After the Committee of Concerned Citizens of the Abbey Lands had departed the foyer, Efran said, “That was fun.” DeWitt tore the meeting notes in half, and Efran objected, “Those are official documents.”

“Efran,” Estes began, then couldn’t find the words to express all of his mixed feelings.

They exited the small dining room into the foyer. “*Moekolohe*,” Efran told DeWitt. “That’s the word for Southerners’ sexual attraction to Polonti whom they otherwise treat like dirt. Minka taught me how to turn it inside out,” he said contemplatively.

“Did you really kiss the woman like that in the foyer?” DeWitt demanded.

“In front of a foyer full of people, after she walked in and objected to my kissing my wife,” Efran said. “I’m pleased that Lady Neanne got into the spirit of it today.”

DeWitt said, “Yes, well, her title is not legitimate here.”

Efran asked pensively, “Can I award her the title?”

Estes and DeWitt looked wary. DeWitt replied, “Yes, but you have to state a reason.”

“Easily,” Efran said, raising his face to the vaulted ceiling. “Award her the title ‘Lady Member of the Abbey Fortress and Lands’ for her ‘gracious accommodation of unmatched persons.’ The wording is important.”

“If you insist,” DeWitt exhaled in resignation. (The orders of nobility specified in the Abbey charter were: Lord

[or Lady] Member, Lord Officer, Lord Commander, and Lord Sovereign, which was Efran's title. Minka was Lady Sovereign.)

Efran patted his shoulder. Then he asked Estes, "Have we sent men to the moneyer in Eurur recently?"

"Our last group returned a few days ago, but Meineke told them to hold off bringing him any more for now, as he's moving his shop soon. And that fact is not to be made known," Estes said.

Efran stilled. "Where? Where is he moving to?"

"I don't know; he didn't say," Estes replied.

Troubled, Efran looked toward the corridor as Minka came out of their quarters with a potted plant. She was in a demure riding dress, not her pants. When she stopped before him with a clouded face, his gut tensed. He grasped her elbows, as her hands were full. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Oh, Efran, one of the leaseholders lost a child. It was an accident with a horse they've had for years. She was standing near it and he kicked at something, hitting her. Wallace could do nothing for her, and she died within an hour."

"I will go with you," he said, taking the plant.

"Yes, thank you," she whispered. Estes patted his shoulder and she smiled sadly at him and DeWitt. Glancing at Efran's uniform, she said, "You have to return that to Elvey when we get back."

"Oh, yes," he said, looking down at himself. "I forgot."

Efran kept an arm loosely draped around her as they went out to the courtyard to wait for horses. She mounted by herself, as she insisted on doing, no matter how high the horse—although then she needed the mounting block. Now all of a sudden, she was averse to using it. So alert stablemen brought out the smaller horses for her. Efran mounted smoothly with the plant balanced in one hand. Minka shook her head in envy at his constant grace. He never stumbled (so she thought).

They waited for their armed attendant, Finn, to trot up. Even when Efran was with her, he always required a man to accompany her outside the fortress.

Trailed by Finn, Efran and Minka rode down the switchback at a walk while the gate sentries watched from above. The plot of the leaseholder in question was in the far northern area, almost to the stone wall. As they approached and turned off on the leaseholder's road, two finely dressed men watched. "That's her," one whispered.

"Yes, I've seen her before," the other acknowledged in a bare breath. He bowed his head nicely to a passing matron, who nodded in return. "The problem is, she rarely comes down this far from the fortress."

"Cennick has arranged for a decoy to bring her down here. We'll have a cart standing by outside the gates," the first whispered, looking around by shifting only his eyes.

"And the men at the gates will be on them instantly. Besides which, she'll have a man with her. See?" the second uttered, gesturing to the bodyguard trailing the lord and lady.

“No, friend; we have a distraction planned for them. If all goes well, they won’t even be able to get out themselves.” He turned to the other to add in a voiceless whisper, “They keep the key in the lock.”

The second quickly looked to the gates that were presently open. Yes, even from where they stood, he could see the gate key in the lock. He moved his eyes to the portion of eastern wall completed. “All they have to do is ride around twenty feet of wall.”

“But there will be additional obstructions by then. We have planned well, friend; Cennick will not accept failure.”

“Then let us visit our decoy.” The second nodded to a young woman tending a flower bed on a plot close to the main road. She raised up at their approach, and the three talked.

Efran and Minka dismounted at the home of the bereaved family, leaving their horses with Finn as they came to the door. Mourners who had gathered in the front yard greeted them respectfully, thinking it very decent of Lord Efran to dress up for this call. Minka acknowledged them with a nod; Efran scanned them for anyone watching her too closely.

The front door opened to them before Efran had a chance to knock, and they were brought inside by a young man who murmured, “Ma and Pa are back here.”

“I’m so sorry,” Minka breathed.

He said, “Thankee, Lady Minka. We’re appreciative of it.”

They entered the main room where a woman sat in a rocker, disconsolate. Minka fell down beside her to grip one hand. “I am so sorry,” she said with genuine tears. The woman patted her hand, nodding.

Efran sighed, turning to the father who stood nearby with red-rimmed eyes. Extending the plant to him, Efran said. “We are very sorry for your loss.”

The man accepted the pink sweet pea. “Let me show you where it will go, Lord Efran.”

Efran accompanied him out the back door, and the bereaved father took him to a corner of his plot. “We got permission to plant our Lily here, so we’ll plant yours with her.” He placed it at the base of the funerary statue set over the grave. Efran gazed at the statue with constricted heart and shallow breathing.

It was of a young girl, sitting and smiling, feeding a dove on her shoulder from her hand. And Efran saw the image as a portent of death. Minka was going to die.

He was unaware of going back to the front of the house and remounting. (“Speechless for sorrow, the lord was,” the grieving father told his wife.) He was unaware of anything around him, even Minka, until they were back in the courtyard, giving up their horses to the soldiers. “Efran?” she was saying.

He turned to her in shock, holding her shoulder and stroking her hair. “Don’t leave me,” he gasped.

“Why would I do that?” she asked, studying him. “Come.”

She led him by the fingers into the foyer. Estes came up to say, “Efran, we’ve sent notices to. . . . Efran?” Estes looked down at Minka in alarm.

She shook her head. “We just came back from visiting the family who lost a child. I . . . have to talk to him to find out what happened.”

Estes nodded, studying him. Efran looked at him with speechless grief. “Send me word,” Estes murmured. He reached out to pat Efran’s shoulder, who grasped his hand. But he still did not speak.

Minka drew him into their quarters and shut the door. She sat him at the table before checking on Joshua, who was still asleep in his crib in their bedroom. Then she came out to sit beside her husband. “Efran, what happened?”

He raised his face to her, blinking and breathing again. “The—girl’s father took me outside to her grave where, they had a—a statue of a girl—with a dove on her shoulder that—that she was feeding. And it was exactly like the dream I had of you, when you were in Awfyn’s hut. It made me feel then that, you were alive and all right, but when I saw it today, it told me that you would die.”

Helpless, he looked at her. She got up to sit on his lap, and he wrapped her in his arms, closing his eyes to press his head into her chest. “Efran, you were right the first time,” she whispered. “It’s a common image; I’ve seen it in paintings. The message you got at the time was the right one. For that family, the message is one of hope that they will see her again. But that message is not for you; you have me here now, and I will be here with you.”

He listened, then after a moment, he sat up. “Yes. Yes, you’re right.” He wiped his mouth, and she leaned down to kiss him lightly. He took a deep breath, then weakly laughed, “I need you to explain things to me.”

She stroked his hair, and he closed his eyes at her warm touch. She murmured, “That must have been a shock, to see it on her grave.”

“Yes,” he said emphatically. “I’m still shaking. But no, it doesn’t apply to you.”

They heard Joshua utter a groggy cry, and Minka got up. “Your son lives, as well,” she said, smiling.

He stood. “Yes. And that is a gift I will never forget.” He watched while she brought the sleepy baby back out, who turned to blink at his father.

Efran stroked the sparse wisps of baby hair. “When will his hair grow back?” he asked.

“Before it matters,” she laughed.

He smiled, leaning down to kiss her, and she saw the anxiety resurface for a moment. But he shook it off. “Estes wanted something. What was that?”

“I don’t know. We’re going for a bottle,” she said, as the baby was trying to eat his hand.

“Don’t go down to the cavern,” he said quickly.

“I won’t; I’ve seen enough of it. I’ll have to find other adventures,” she decided.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” he muttered as they both left. She laughed at him over her shoulder, and he turned to trot up the stairs to Estes’ workroom.

When he entered, Estes looked up in concern. “Efran, what happened?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Efran grunted, but Estes would not be dismissed. So Efran had to explain about the funerary statue again, and Minka’s reply to his fears.

When he finished, Estes said, “Yes, she’s absolutely right. You know that because of what happened afterward.”

“I realize that,” Efran conceded. “Show me the notices you got out.”

So as Estes pulled out the paperwork on this trivial but necessary matter, Efran attended uneasily. While they both agreed that Minka was right, he appeared to be not entirely sure of it.

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Chapter 3

Over the next few days, Efran continued tense and irritable, especially regarding anything Minka wanted to do. A young woman, daughter of a new leaseholder, had seen Minka’s purchases at Mouris’ plant shop and asked to see her flower beds. Efran allowed it only on the condition that two men stand by at all times. While Minka was used to their presence, Arne and Stephanos did seem to intimidate the woman, Cass. As Minka walked her from bed to bed, pointing out all she had planted, Cass kept glancing at the men within earshot.

“This is all so lovely,” Cass said. “I was hoping to get your opinion on my beds—I’m not quite happy with them. But will you have to bring these men down to the plots?”

“Oh, probably just one,” Minka said. “But don’t mind them; they’re harmless,” she said, smiling at Arne, who grinned back at her. Cass glanced at him dubiously, as Arne had a particularly strong jaw and a broken nose.

But even Minka began to grow weary of Efran’s overprotectiveness. He had to know where she was and what she was doing every moment. And if he didn’t know, no one else got anything done until he did. So on another day when Efran was looking out a second-story back window and did not see her in the gardens, he turned to run down the stairs to locate her.

Estes caught him as he shot off the stairway. “Efran, you’re going to break something running down the stairs!”

Efran snorted, “I’ve never been hurt in battle; I’m not going to hurt myself on the stairs.” (On this point, he was being deliberately forgetful.)

“Don’t tempt fate,” Estes snapped. “Now, what is so urgent?”

“I don’t see Minka,” Efran muttered, looking aside.

“I just saw her a few moments ago outside the nursery. Bethune has a new matron, Nesse, who is wonderfully capable and dedicated to the children,” Estes said.

“Is she still there?” Efran asked.

“Oh, yes, she’s full-time,” Estes assured him.

“Minka,” Efran corrected him.

“Minka is fine, Efran; she can’t go anywhere without your permission,” Estes said through gritted teeth.

Efran dropped his head, admitting, “I know.” Then he glanced up to see her coming toward him, smiling, and he met her as though she had been gone for a week. While he gripped her, she looked over his shoulder at Estes stroking his forehead in exasperation.

She pulled away gently to eye her husband. “Efran, don’t do this to yourself,” she whispered.

He closed his eyes, pushing her arms tighter around his neck. “I can’t help it.”

“Have some faith, Efran! My guardian angels are bored to tears,” she pleaded.

He laughed a little. “I’ll try.” He inhaled. “Detler wants me to come have a look at the new armory, so I had better do that.”

She released him to step back, and he let go reluctantly. Smiling, she said, “Then I know where to send when I need you.” He tried to smile as well.

The new armory was outside the fence on the hilltop next to the barracks. It was not only larger than their first armory, but lit by high windows with glass, making lanterns or torches unnecessary during the day.

Surrounded by workmen and soldiers, Efran inspected everything with approval. Lwoff came up to greet him like an old chum. “Ey, Cap’n! Time for another go at the eelfish?” Having had fun bashing eelfish with the Captain, Lwoff was now quite a bit more comfortable in his presence.

Efran shook his head, laughing, “Lwoff, I almost gave them my right foot for dinner. Are you not just a little hesitant about going back down there?”

“Nah,” Lwoff said joyfully. “Twere fun! And I ain’t gonna live like a dead man, else what’s the use of all the scars I got?”

Efran studied his grinning face. Minka was not dead, and it was a mistake to live in constant fear that she would be. She was right: that was faithless. He grinned back at Lwoff. “You have a point. Before we go back down, I’m trying to get Heye’s help. But then I’m taking you and your scars with me.”

“There y’ go, Cap’n!” Lwoff said, and a few of the men around them wanted to hear more about the eelfish. Lwoff was happy to narrate the saga of how the Captain got the eelfish bite holes in the toe of his boot.

Following, Efran did ease up, to everyone’s relief. But he continued to run down stairs.

Two days later, on June 19th, Cass again asked Minka to come down and give her suggestions on her flower beds. Efran granted this, sending Connor down with her. So while Cass rode back down the switchback on her little donkey, Connor and Minka went down on horseback. She wore her usual linen work dress, suitable for riding.

Connor, personable and amiable, was nonetheless a seasoned soldier. So when they finally arrived at Cass’

father's plot, Connor looked around in unease, glancing past the small house. They were right on the road, a stone's throw from the gates, standing open for visitors. Other than the two gate sentries, there were no other soldiers or Abbey workmen around—the work on the eastern portion of the stone wall was a good thirty yards off.

Also, there were inexplicable stacks of wood and construction debris blocking the easement between Cass' father's plot and the wall. The barracks were right here, but were practically empty, as all the men were on duty elsewhere.

At the same time, the area seemed crowded with men who were doing little but coming and going. Connor also noted the horse and cart standing off the road just outside the gates. The flower beds that the woman was pointing out to Minka looked to be nothing special to him, but she was required to stand practically in the road to give her suggestions.

In rising concern, Connor turned to look back up the road, but the small house on the plot seized his attention. It wasn't a house at all, but merely a large storage shed for construction materials. No one lived here yet.

Wheeling, Connor whistled to the gate sentries, raising a hand to beckon them over. At the same time, there was a shout as two men started fighting on the road. There was a sudden tumult around them, so that the guards left the gates to run toward the combatants. "No!" Connor shouted. "Come back here—!"

He flung himself practically on top of Minka, but men were coming at her from both sides. The men who were fighting each other suddenly turned on the gate sentries. Connor, shouting at the top of his voice, knocked away the first two men who tried to grab Minka. But a third stabbed him in the side, and he fell, gasping. One man picked her up, kicking and screaming, to run out to the cart by the road and throw her in it while Connor lay writhing in the dirt.

Another man closed the gates, reaching through the balusters to turn the key and throw it away. Then he ran to the moving cart and jumped into it while Minka was fighting the man who had a tight hold on her.

Connor's shouts faintly reverberated way back up to the courtyard. Barr and Lyte, preparing to leave on an errand for DeWitt, looked down at the fracas. "Minka is down there!" Barr shouted. The courtyard gate sentry began clanging the bell, but Barr and Lyte jumped onto their horses to start pounding down the switchback.

By the time they arrived at the scene, everyone had disappeared except the gate sentries, who were slowly picking themselves up from a beating, and Connor, who was bleeding into the dirt beside the road.

Efran and Estes, in his workroom, heard the clanging bell, both knowing that Minka was down in the plots. Efran blew out of the room first to start running down the stairs. He turned around partway to say something to Estes behind him, missed a step, and tumbled the rest of the way down. He landed at the bottom, gripping his foot in pain. Estes only paused over him before running out the front door.

Barr and Lyte saw Connor in the road, but left him to the care of others to pursue the vanishing cart. When they found the gate locked and the easement blocked, they had to backtrack to a relatively clear path east in the meadow until they came to the end of the wall. From here, they had to run north again around the finished portion of the wall and cut back west to the road.

Fifty yards up the road, out of sight of the wall, they came upon the horse and cart, abandoned. So they stopped where they were to study the ground without dismounting. "A carriage," Lyte said. "They transferred her to a carriage." Barr nodded. Heads down, they began following the tracks of the carriage wheels at a trot.

After Minka had been transferred from the cart to the carriage by her abductors, two other men dressed as nobles held her down to tie her hands behind her back and blindfold her. They sat her on the floor with her back against one door. So she held still to listen.

They spoke very little, naturally, but Minka caught her native Eurasian accent in what few words they used. They were satisfied as to the progress of their plan thus far, and “he” would be coming to interview their guest some time tonight. By this time, Minka firmly had Cennick in the driver’s seat of this plot.

She noted the carriage turning right off the main road onto a rough side road for a distance, then turning right again onto an even rougher road. After a short, bumpy ride, they stopped. Opening the carriage door, one man carried her out while the other went before him. She heard the creaking hinges of an old door opening, then she was placed on a cushion, apparently, while the door was shut and locked. Then she heard the carriage roll away.

It took only a few minutes for her to wriggle one hand out of the rope bonds and pull down her blindfold. She was sitting in a mean, windowless hut with gray wood walls. It was not dark, however, because the thatch roof was rotting away in places. While Minka removed the rope from her other wrist, she evaluated her surroundings.

For her comfort—or someone else’s—she was sitting on a metal-frame bed with a decent mattress in the middle of the hut. The only other furniture in it were a small table and chair. A cup, a pitcher of water, and a bowl of figs were on the table. There was also a chamber pot in a corner, but that was all. However, directly above the bed were spots of daylight through the roof.

This Minka examined for a while, having never seen a thatched roof from the inside. There were a great many poles made of saplings which formed the skeleton of the steeply sloped roof. Tied in rows across the highest level of poles—the rafters--were bunches of thatch. Whatever had been used to fasten the thatch to the poles had mostly rotted away. (Below is an approximation of what she saw.)



But what caught her attention were the lower-most rafters. These were the largest saplings, about eight inches in diameter. They ran horizontally from the top of one wall to the opposite wall, about nine feet high. And one of these rafters ran directly over the bed.

After removing the dishes to the floor against the wall, Minka experimentally hauled the table up onto the matted bed, and immediately found that too unstable. So she removed the table and pulled off the mattress to

lean it against the wall out of the way. Then she hauled the table back onto the bed frame to align the table feet with the bed slats—

Or try to. But the slats were actually round metal rods that had been welded into the bed frame. Not only were they immovable, but an insecure base for the table legs. However she tried to rest the feet on the rods, they just slipped right off. Exhaling in frustration, Minka regarded the table resting defiantly on the floor in between the rods. She climbed up on the table anyway to see how close she could get to that rafter. Reaching up, her fingers fell at least a foot short.

So she climbed down to get the chair and place it in the center of the table. Gingerly, with a little prayer, she climbed up on the table, then onto the chair, then delicately stood. From here, she could get her hands around the sapling.

Tightening her grip on it, she brought up one foot as far as she could. In kicking to get it over the rafter, she accidentally knocked the chair off the table. So now she was committed to climb, with both hands and one foot over the rafter. She crossed her arms tightly over the sapling, then pushed her leg on over. With that support, she found that she could inch up over it until she was sitting up.

From there, she began to carefully scoot along the rafter toward the wall. But a diagonal sapling which intersected the rafter stopped her progress about two feet from the wall. Here, she had to rise to a crouch to step over the obstruction. Then, in the cramped angle between the sloping roof and the rafter, she was able to hold on to a horizontal sapling to pull away rotting thatch from the lower edge of the roof.

This opened a window for her to step out onto the ceiling plate of the wall. Shaking, she bent down to hold onto this pole and let one foot, then the other, slide down off the edge of the roof. She hung for a moment against the outside wall, then dropped the last two feet. Landing upright, she brushed off her sore hands and looked around to see the dirt road that the carriage had taken. So she began walking back up it, following the tracks of the carriage wheels.

Efran waited on the floor of the corridor next to the stairway while men rushed out to the courtyard. Wallace paused over him, but Efran waved him out. His wife Leese came to kneel beside him. “What happened?”

“An attack of stupidity,” Efran said dully. “Please go out front, find out what is happening, and come tell me. Then you can look at my ankle.”

“Oh dear,” she said, but got up and went out. Some minutes later she came back to kneel beside him again. She tentatively began feeling his lower leg while his eyebrows elevated in a demand for information. So she said, “Connor was stabbed defending Minka. Wallace is down there looking at him now; it doesn’t appear to be life-threatening. She’s been taken, but Barr and Lyte have ridden after her. That’s all we know right now.”

“They will find her,” Efran said calmly. “Now—” He gestured to his right foot.

First, she had to get his boot off, which proved to be difficult and painful. While Efran held up his right thigh and extended his foot, she pulled on the boot. He leaned back against the wall, every muscle tense. Shortly, she gave up. “I’ll have to cut the boot off. What are these holes in the toe?”

He doubted her ability to cut through the leather and didn’t want to lose these boots. Grimacing, he gripped his boot with both hands, steeled his leg, and worked the boot off with a soft groan. She removed the sock from the swollen ankle as he leaned back, panting. When she touched his ankle, he clenched his teeth. She said, “I need to

feel if bones are broken.” He nodded, so she carefully felt along his puffy ankle while he held still, sweating.

“All right, I don’t believe you’ve broken anything, but you will have to stay off it for a few days—possibly a week or more. I’m going to bring you a wrap to help keep it immobile, and a crutch to walk,” she said.

“Wonderful. Thank you,” he gasped, glassy-eyed.

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Chapter 4

While Leese was gone, Efran thought, *When was the last time I got so hurt as to be unable to walk?—discounting the fever.* And he had to go back to when he was about thirteen, and the mule had stepped on his foot. But not in any of the battles he had been in. How many battles had he been in? He tried counting, but got lost at 25.

Leese returned with a bandage that she wound around his throbbing ankle. Then he pushed himself up along the wall, and she handed him a crutch that would suit Minka. “I don’t think we have anything longer, but I’ll look.”

“Thank you,” he said as she turned back up the stairway. He left the crutch on the floor while he hopped to the foyer on one foot, and from there to the courtyard steps. Concentrating, he hopped down them one at a time. Then he hopped to the courtyard gates to watch a cart ascending the switchback with Wallace and Connor, who was lying down. Estes came to Efran’s side, looking at his wrapped foot.

As the cart pulled into the courtyard, Efran leaned over him. “How is he, Wallace?”

“It’s fortunate that he’s a strong young man,” Wallace observed. “It looks like that wall of muscle prevented the knife from hitting organs, but he’s lost blood and in a lot of pain.”

Connor looked up at Efran to cry, “I lost her, Captain!”

“Estes, get this man a commendation. Ellor, Bennard, Gaul—help Wallace get him in there; get him comfortable. Where’s his girl?” Efran said, looking around.

“That would be his wife now, Efran,” Estes said.

Bennard observed, “That’s her, running up the switchback.”

“All right,” Efran said. “Carefully, men,” he said as the soldiers were positioning themselves around Connor according to Wallace’s directions. “Mohr, bring his wife in when she gets here.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said.

While Connor was lifted out of the cart, gasping, Efran leaned back against the gate. “Estes, help me up the steps, and have them send a case of Goadby’s to my quarters. I am going to drink until Barr and Lyte bring Minka back.”

“Good plan,” Estes said wryly.

As Minka walked along the dirt road, she noted the daylight waning in the trees, and thought she probably better find shelter. Besides, she was getting hungry. So she looked down side trails as she walked until she came to the first dirt road that the carriage had turned onto from the main road. There were two ways she could go here: either right or left, and the road was a mess of tracks and hoofprints both ways. Thinking back, she remembered that the carriage had turned right from the first dirt road to the second, so she turned left here.

Walking along this road toward the main north-south road, she saw that she was heading directly into the setting sun. *So I am going west*, she thought. Coming across a modest but not ramshackle house, she decided to knock. First she looked back at the road from the house. To continue west to the main road, she needed to go left from the door onto this road. Having determined that, she went to the door and knocked.

As she had hoped, a middle-aged housewife answered. “Hello,” Minka said. On the verge of explaining her kidnapping, she suddenly wondered if there were a reason this house was so convenient to the hut she was taken to. So she said, “I fell off my father’s wagon and just need a place to wait for him to come get me.”

“Oh! Of course, dear, come in,” the woman said.

“Thank you,” said Minka. Entering, she glanced around at a threadbare but clean sitting room.

“Are you hungry, dear?” the woman asked, bustling ahead of her.

“A little, please,” Minka said.

“Certainly. We were just sitting at table. What is your name, dear?”

“Adele,” Minka said, glimpsing figures in the next room.

“Lovely name. I am Portia.” The woman brought Minka into the central room, where three other people turned to look at her. “Little Adele here got dropped from her father’s wagon, and needs just to wait for a while.” So saying, Portia guided her to a place at the table and went to a sideboard for a plate and utensils.

Placing dinnerware before her guest, Portia introduced her family: “That is my husband Plunkett, our son Clute, and our daughter Hassie.”

Minka nodded to them as she sat across from Clute, a solid young man about her age, 17. Hassie was about 8. She was skinny, with wispy blonde hair. As the father passed a large bowl of potatoes to Minka, Portia added, “Just help yourself, Adele.”

“Thank you,” Minka said, ladling potatoes onto her plate. She added boiled dandelion greens to that, then began eating while smiling at Hassie, who looked at her brother. Clute was staring at Minka with unblinking eyes. *I sure won’t be sleeping here*, she thought, looking away as she lifted a cup of well water.

“Where do you live, Adele?” the father, Plunkett, asked.

“On a little farm outside of Westford,” she replied.

“What’s your father’s name?” he asked.

“Clancy,” she replied. “He’s a widower and I don’t have any brothers or sisters.” She didn’t even want to try to come up with family names.

Portia looked up. “Then how in the world did he not see you were missing from the wagon?”

“It was all packed with—barley,” Minka replied.

“Barley’s not ripe yet,” Plunkett observed around a mouthful.

Minka also took a bite, and had to chew before answering. “Some places pay him for green barley. I don’t know why.” *I’m a terrible liar*, she thought. *Efran is so much better at it.*

Plunkett raised his eyebrows in consideration of green barley. Clute continued to stare. Minka smiled at Hassie again, who tilted her head.

They ate mostly in silence, except when Plunkett made some observations to his wife about the price of peat. Apparently, he sold peat.

Minka ate just enough to satisfy her hunger before standing. “Thank you so much. I need to get back to the main road so my father can find me again.”

“Oh, dear. It’s so late; it’s almost dark!” Portia objected.

Plunkett said nothing but Clute uttered, “You’re not leaving here.” Looking at his set face, Minka believed him.

In the waning daylight, Barr and Lyte followed the trail of carriage wheels to the mean little hut (despite the cross tracks that had baffled Minka). Dismounting, they looked it over, but there was nothing apparent about the thatched roof from this angle. Lyte walked up to knock on the door. “Lady? Are you in there?” He tried the handle. “It’s locked.”

So Barr stepped up to raise a foot and kick the door in, splintering the jamb and the lock stile. He and Lyte walked in to look at the bed frame, the table, the chair, and the shredded thatch roof. Then they looked at each other. Lyte observed, “The Lady Minka did not care to wait around to be rescued.”

“Where from here?” Barr asked.

“If you were escaping kidnappers and trying to get home, where would you go?” Lyte posed.

“The main road south. You can’t miss it,” Barr said. Lyte nodded.

So they got on their horses and returned to the main road. Looking up and down it in the twilight and seeing nothing, Barr said, “Let’s just wait here.”

Dissatisfied with that idea, Lyte walked along the road in the waning light to scan for other signs of passage. Finding nothing, he sat with Barr while the horses grazed.

After Minka had helped Portia and Hassie clean the table and wash the dinner dishes, she attempted to slip out of

the house. But Clute appeared from nowhere to stand in front of the door. Almost truly frightened now, Minka looked up at him. “Adele, dear,” Portia called.

Minka turned. “Yes?”

“Here, you can sleep with Hassie in her room,” Portia said, leading her to a small side room.

“Is there a lock?” Minka asked.

“A lock?” Portia asked. “No, why would you need one?”

“No reason,” Minka breathed. She entered the room to see Hassie sitting up in the small bed, covers pulled up to her chin. Minka came to sit beside her, smiling weakly.

“Goodnight, girls!” Portia called sweetly.

“Don’t take your clothes off,” Hassie whispered.

“I won’t,” Minka said. She got up from the bed to begin pulling a dresser over to block the door. Since it was heavy, she could only move it inches at a time. Hassie jumped up from bed to help push while Minka pulled. Almost as soon as they had it in place, someone attempted to open the door. When it wouldn’t open, it was slammed into the dresser. When that failed to give entry, it was slammed harder and harder into the dresser, making it rock. Hassie ran to get under the bedcovers. Minka went to sit on the bed between Hassie and the door.

“What’s that?” Portia called. “Clute? Go to bed.” The slamming stopped.

Minka took a moment to stop shaking, then turned to Hassie as she was peeking out from under the covers. “I’m leaving to go home. Do you want to come?”

Hassie nodded, climbing out of bed again. For the first time, Minka noticed that she had put on more clothes to go to bed. She was now wearing a thin jacket over her dress, buttoned to the top. She even wore pants under the dress, and shoes and socks.

“I see you’re ready,” Minka murmured. She went to the window to attempt to pull up the sash, but it wouldn’t budge. Hassie reached over to unlock it. Minka smiled at her as she pulled up again on the window. It came up stiffly, an inch at a time. But she got it raised enough for her to slip out and help Hassie through. Minka took her hand to skulk along the side of the house to the front, then turn left on the road and begin walking.

It was scary walking up the black road. Things made noises in the trees around them: creatures scuttled, and the wind rattled the treetops. It wasn’t dense woodland, but it was thick enough to infect the imagination. “It’s dark, Adele. I’m scared of the dark,” Hassie said in a small voice. She looked back into the darkness. Was Clute following them? She did not see the shadow coming around the corner of the house to the road.

“We have guardians around us that you can’t see, Hassie. And, my name is Minka. I gave your family a different name just—out of caution. But I’m not afraid now, because I am going home to the Abbey Fortress. It’s such a wonderful place. You’ll love it, Hassie.”

To stave off fear of the darkness around them, she began describing her fortress home: the beautiful gardens, and the conservatory, the horses, the chickens, her adopted baby Joshua, the funny, kind soldiers, and the best soldier of all, the lord of the fortress, Minka’s husband, who protected everyone.

As they walked, Minka told her how she had found him lying in her henhouse after he had been so sick with the fever, and how she had fallen in love with him. Hassie listened as Minka told her how her father tried to have him hanged for something he didn't do, and how she had run out to stop it, then how he had taken her away from a sinking palace to their safe place, the fortress. Hassie held her hand, absorbing all of it.

Stubbing her toe on an unexpected root, Minka stopped to look around. When she saw nothing but trees, she realized that they had strayed from the road, as it was so hard to see in the dark. So she stopped right where she was. "What's wrong?" Hassie whispered.

"I've lost the road," Minka said, studying the sky. Hassie began crying, but Minka said, "Shh! It doesn't matter. Look up at the sky. Do you see the Big Dipper?"

"What is the Big Dipper?" Hassie asked.

"It's a group of stars that look like a pot with a handle. Can you find it?" Minka said.

Hassie looked up earnestly. "Yes! There!" She pointed.

"Do you see the two stars that make the front edge of the pan?" Minka asked.

"Yes," Hassie said.

"Take the distance between those two stars, and go up five times that. Do you see the star at the end of that?"

"Five times. One, two, three, four, five. Yes, there!" Hassie said, eyes fixed above.

"That's the North Star. If we walked directly toward it, we would be going north. But we need to go west. So which way do we go?" Minka asked. Hassie looked at her helplessly, so Minka faced the North Star and made a quarter turn to her left. "West! Let's go."

Hassie took her hand eagerly and they set out again due west. "How did you know all that?" she asked.

"My Captain showed me," Minka sighed.

They walked for a little while longer, keeping the North Star to their right. Then the moon came out, and they looked ahead at the main north-south road glittering like a silver ribbon in the night. Hassie was stumbling for tiredness, and Minka knew that they couldn't walk farther tonight. So she sat Hassie in the grass beside the road. "You rest, and I'll keep watch. We'll start walking in the morning." Hassie nodded, falling right asleep.

Minka didn't know how long she could stay awake after such a stressful day, but she knew she needed to try. Unknown to her or to Barr and Lyte, they were sitting on the same side of the road about twenty feet apart. And someone else approached who was aware of all of them.

At the fortress, Lyra came to lie beside Connor in his bed in Wallace's quarters. Everyone was relieved to hear Wallace's prognosis for a complete recovery, though Connor needed to stay still as long as possible for the muscles to heal. Estes already had his commendation written up.

Efran only drank two bottles of Goadby's that afternoon, because it wasn't really strong enough to blunt the pain.

He wasn't able to eat much, either. Still, he wasn't overly anxious about Minka getting home; he had probably more confidence in Barr and Lyte than he had in himself because they weren't stupid enough to run down stairs. Bethune was back to sleeping on the daybed for the time being to take care of Joshua, since Efran couldn't very well do that, either. And he was back to sleeping under the crucifix in the keep—rather, lying under the crucifix. There was no sleeping with this much pain. But he would be spending his nights here until Barr and Lyte brought Minka home.

Sitting at the edge of the road, Minka was half asleep. In her half-dreams, she heard the clopping of a horse pulling a carriage from the north. She looked sleepily up the road, and the carriage lantern illumined a face looking out from under a purple hat, over a purple jacket—

“Justinian! Justinian!” she called, running out into the road. Hassie woke with a start to run out after her. The carriage careened to a stop, and two men with horses ran onto the road. Hassie cried out in fear to see them, but when they drew closer, calling out to Lady Minka, she said, “Barr! Lyte! Oh, God sent three of my favorite people to see me home!”

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Chapter 5

Justinian, his driver, and footman were astonished to see all these Abbey Landers standing around the carriage on the road just south of Westford. When Justinian emerged, Minka hugged him tightly, which made everything coherent. However, she also hugged Barr and Lyte, then told them all, “This is my friend Hassie and she is coming with us.”

To Hassie's amazement, all these men bowed to her. “Am I dreaming?” she asked.

Minka reached down to squeeze her as well. “Wait till you see the Abbey Lands, then you'll think for sure that you're dreaming.” Justinian assisted his guests to clamber into the comfortable carriage, where he offered them treats. Minka accepted the biscuits for herself and her new friend, but declined the Goadby's.

So the carriage started off again with Barr and Lyte riding alongside as bodyguards. They were unaware that another figure ran out onto the road to watch them depart.

Justinian asked Minka, “What in heaven's name were you doing out there?”

“I'll tell you later,” she said, glancing at Hassie. He followed her glance, and understood.

So he, thrilled with the company on a lonely carriage ride, embarked on a series of stories to entertain them. “So the lord comes down to pound my table. ‘What have you done with her?’ And I raise my hands in innocence: ‘Sir, as you can plainly see, she's nowhere about!’ But as he turns away, the lady, who is under the table, sticks her foot out to trip him, then draws it back behind the tablecloth while he picks himself up in a rage.

“I obviously have done nothing, but he comes around the table thinking to throttle me, so management has him thrown out, and I am hero to oppressed wives everywhere,” Justinian ended in triumph. Lyte, on his horse next to the carriage, could be heard laughing. Hassie smiled, watching Minka laugh. And Hassie regarded Justinian's

purple suit—even though gray in the dim lantern light, it was unlike anything she had ever seen in her life. Then she ate some more biscuits.

Shortly, the sleepy wall gate guards at the Abbey Lands had to unlock the gates for the procession, and sent up to the sleepy courtyard gate guards, “Lady Minka! The Lady Minka comes!” So in the middle of the night, the gates’ bell began clanging. Lanterns and torches were lit all around the courtyard and foyer.

The fortress woke at once and people began pouring out of the front doors half-dressed. In the keep, Efran lurched up beneath the crucifix, but had to position his non-dominant left foot to support his weight without anything nearby to hoist himself up. He finally had to lean back against the crucifix, hoping it had been securely installed.

As the carriage pulled into the courtyard with its honor guard, they were swarmed by welcomers. The gate sentries opened the carriage door and pulled out its steps. Emerging, Minka fell into Estes’ outstretched arms, turning to pull Hassie after her. Minka hugged him and DeWitt tightly, and grasped the hands of Gabriel, Geneve, Coxe, Neale, and Younge. Other men whom she did not know pressed around her as well. But she cried, “Connor! How is Connor?”

“He is healing, Minka; he will be well,” Estes said, trying to restrain the growing crowd. Efran’s officers also turned to form a barrier between her and overeager soldiers. Justinian couldn’t even get out of the carriage yet. Hassie was pressed behind Minka.

Then Minka began looking around for someone who was not there. She got up on the carriage steps to look over the heads of the welcomers, but still did not see him. “Estes,” she said brokenly, “where is—”

She spotted him, then, coming out of the fortress doors to begin hopping down the steps on one foot. With a cry, she began pushing through the crowd toward him, and the soldiers parted for her. Hassie followed at her back.

Minka rushed up to Efran to press up under his shoulder on his weak side. He leaned on her just a little to get off the last step. “Efran, what happened?” she cried.

“I fell down the stairs,” he said ruefully, smiling down at Hassie’s wondering face. Because she was female, his eyes crinkled at her, even though he didn’t intend them to. “Who have you brought us, Lady?”

“This is my new friend Hassie,” Minka said, gesturing to her with her free hand. “Hassie, this is my husband, Efran. He is Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

Hassie continued to gape up at him as he said, “Welcome to the Abbey Fortress, Hassie. Please do not run down the stairs.” Justinian came up behind them to regard Efran’s wrapped foot.

Efran looked at Barr and Lyte approaching to salute. “I knew you would bring her back,” he said to them, almost dry-eyed.

Lyte shook his head. “Captain, we just followed her.”

“Come to the small dining room. You also, Justinian,” Efran said. Then he turned to look at the ascending steps with a faint groan. But with Minka providing balance on his right side, he was able to begin hopping up them. Hassie came over to take his left hand, and Efran sighed in the completion of his debasement.

DeWitt shouted, “All right, everyone, we’ve welcomed the lady beyond all reason. Back to bed.”

While the crowd dispersed, Efran, Minka, and Hassie, followed by Estes, DeWitt, Justinian, Barr and Lyte, entered the small dining room that a kitchen assistant had lit with three or four candelabra. Another assistant was bringing in refreshments. “Custard!” gasped Minka. “Oh, Hassie, try this. You will love it.” Minka placed the bowl in front of her at the table before taking one for herself.

“Can you sit?” she asked Efran anxiously.

He smiled, grieved. “Yes, dearest nursemaid.”

“All right,” Minka said in satisfaction, taking a spoon to her own bowl. She sighed, “Madea is wonderful. Oh, it’s so good to be home.”

Estes said gently, “Minka, tell us what happened.”

“Yes,” she said, scooping up the last spoonful of custard. “Do you want more?” she asked Hassie, who nodded. “Can someone bring Hassie another bowl, please?” Everyone waited while Hassie was brought another bowl of custard.

“What happened,” Minka exhaled, gathering herself for narration. “As soon as Connor and I got down to Cass’ father’s plot, he saw that something was wrong. He put me behind his back and started for the wall, but there was a bunch of trash piled against it. Then he called for the gate guards, but they were trying to stop a fight.” She described the fight behind him and the men around them. She told how she was grabbed and thrown into the cart, then transferred to the carriage by two men dressed as nobles.

“They were definitely EurAsian,” she said, “and I suspect Cennick’s. But they were careful enough not to mention him, of course.” Then she told how she was dropped off in the hut and locked in, then how she climbed out by way of stacked furniture to the roof. Most of her hearers sat with open mouths. Not wanting to talk about Hassie’s family—particularly Clute—in front of her, she just skipped all that for tonight, intimating that she picked up Hassie along the road. Hassie just listened.

Minka went on to tell them how she and Hassie walked the dirt road to the north-south road, and sat to wait. Barr was shaking his head. “What is it?” Efran asked him.

“We were sitting feet away from each other,” he said ruefully, “and didn’t hear her until she jumped up to hail Justinian.”

Justinian said, “That was an unequaled experience. I looked out the window to see Minka rushing toward me. I thought I was dreaming, until her bodyguard showed up.”

Lyte added, “We tracked the cart to the carriage, then the carriage to the hut. Since it was not possible to track farther, we decided to return to the main road and wait. That’s all we did.”

Efran asked Justinian, “What were you coming to report so late?”

“Cennick is marrying Fanny,” Justinian said. “Though I don’t know what she can offer him other than the status of a beautiful wife.”

“That’s all he wanted,” Efran murmured. “Any other questions?” His foot was throbbing, and he was anxious to get it up.

No one had any more tonight, so Efran worked his way to a stand. As he glanced dubiously at Hassie, Minka put an arm around her. “She can sleep with us tonight, can’t she?”

“Whatever she wants,” Efran said through waves of pain. He turned to hop to the door with Minka ahead of him, her arm around Hassie’s shoulders, and that is the way he preferred it.

As they all entered his and Minka’s quarters with candles, Bethune raised up from the daybed. “I’ll sleep in the nursery, Efran,” she murmured.

“Bethune—thank you so much,” he breathed through the pain, and she patted his shoulder.

“I’m so glad you’re back, dear,” she said, kissing Minka’s cheek and smiling at Hassie before wearily taking herself to the nursery to get some sleep.

Efran hobbled back to the bedroom to see that Joshua was soundly asleep in his crib. While Efran laid himself down on his bed of torment with a pillow under his foot, Minka showed Hassie the garderobe and the washstand.

Then Minka peeled off her own soiled dress to put on her nightdress, offering one to Hassie, who shook her head. Hassie was looking around as to where she would sleep. “Here,” Minka said, “the daybed is good for sleeping.” So Hassie lay down on it, eyes open wide. Leaving a candle burning beside her, Minka kissed her on the forehead and went to the bedroom to curl up happily in Efran’s side.

Before the lord snuffed their candle, Hassie watched what she could see through the open door between them. But there was a high window in this room which let in blue moonlight. So she looked at the closed door to the corridor. Did Clute follow them? She lay awake, watching the door.

A little while later, Hassie got up from the daybed to peek into the bedroom. Moonlight pouring through the stained-glass window high above showed the baby in his crib beside the bed and Minka pressed into the lord’s side, all of them deeply asleep. Hassie looked up at the beautiful window, and at the wall on which the moonlit colors shone. Minka had told her that this was their safe place. This was a safe place.

She looked again at the lord. He was lying on his back shirtless, his head turned toward his wife, his chin resting on the top of her head. Minka was smiling in her sleep. The baby was breathing quietly, a finger in his mouth. But there was an empty place on the lord’s right side. “*Whatever she wants,*” he had said.

Carefully, Hassie climbed onto the bed, mindful of the baby beside it and the lord’s injured foot on the pillow. Then she checked Minka’s position, and lay down (in her clothes) on the lord’s other side likewise, moving his arm slightly to make room. He was warm. Then she curled up in his side like Minka. Unconscious, he moved his arm to lie protectively across her back. So she closed her eyes.

And Efran woke a few hours later to find that there were two females inserted in his sides. Hemmed in thus, he had to just lie there. But his foot was not throbbing this morning, for which he was so grateful, he resolved to not ever run down stairs again. Experimentally, he rotated his foot slightly. It was still tender.

Minka inhaled deeply, stretching in contentment, then reached up half asleep to kiss his neck and his jaw. “We have a visitor,” he whispered.

She blinked sleepily at him. Looking across him, she saw the child asleep, fastened to his other side. Laughing silently, Minka whispered, “We all fall in love with you. You’re a Singer even when you’re asleep.” (Singers

were Polonti gifted with the power to draw women through their songs.) “Why are there no women Singers?” she asked in a whisper.

“That’s—redundant. Unnecessary,” he whispered back. “That’s why so many of them become prostitutes. Easy money, and a lot of it.”

“Oh.” Her brows drew down in dismay. “How is your foot?”

“Better. Probably can’t walk on it yet.” At the whispers, a small head bobbed up, and a little hand grasped the rim of the crib to pull up so that curious brown eyes could look around the bed. He spotted the sleeping child and waved to her. He also let them know that he was hungry.

So Minka got up to get Joshua out of the crib and take him to the outer room to change his wraps. Efran rose up also, easing himself out from under the child, as he was unwilling to stay in bed with her alone. But she was still fast asleep, so he slid off the bed to get pants and a shirt from his wardrobe (which mostly housed weapons rather than clothes. Those were in the chest in the outer room, now blocked by baby things.) Gripping his pants and shirt, he hobbled around the bed, finding that he could walk on his right foot as long as he didn’t put much weight on it. So it was healing.

He went out to sit on the daybed to get his clothes on, standing to complete the process. Minka turned with Joshua. “Can you hold him while I get a bottle?”

“Yes,” he said, sitting again to reach for him. Minka laid the baby on him and left; Efran lifted his son upright to watch how well he held his head up. Joshua gurgled, slapping his father in the face.

Hassie came out from the bedroom with wide, sleepy eyes. Efran lowered Joshua to tell her, “Good morning. Minka went to get a bottle for our baby. She’ll be back soon.”

Hassie nodded, sliding onto a chair at the small table to watch him. After a moment, he asked, “Did you sleep well?” She nodded again. He smiled, “I’m afraid I take up a lot of room.”

“You didn’t bother me,” she said in a small voice.

“Good.” He smiled again, bouncing Joshua. “This is my son, Joshua. He’s almost six months old.”

“Minka told me about him, and you,” Hassie said.

He said, “There are other children in the fortress that you’ll meet soon. You can stay here in the fortress with them, or if you find that you like one of the families in the Abbey Lands, you can go stay with them. Whichever you want.” He glanced at her as he made the baby dance on his legs. Joshua chortled.

There was a knock on the door. “Yes?” Efran called.

The door opened and Estes stuck his head in. “Oh, good, you’re up,” he said to Efran. “Good morning, Hassie. Did you sleep well?” She nodded, and he returned to Efran. “DeWitt, Younge and I would like your input on proposed changes for our gate protocol to prevent future incidents.”

“Yes,” Efran said, adding, “I want commendations for Barr and Lyte.” He was rolling Joshua in the air over his head. The baby squawked and laughed.

“Certainly,” Estes agreed. “Although both say she could have gotten home just the same without them.”

“That’s irrelevant,” Efran said. “And Justinian. . . .” He lowered the baby to his chest, thinking.

“Too bad that he’s not eligible for a commendation. He has surprised us all, especially in taking down Doddridge,” Estes said.

“He has,” Efran said thoughtfully. “He keeps surprising me. I want. . . .” He paused, looking at Estes while the wheels turned behind his eyes. “I want to confer a title of nobility on him.”

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Chapter 6

“You want to confer a title of nobility on *Justinian*?” Estes said in shock.

“Yes,” Efran said with a half smile. “He is to be named Lord Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.” Hassie watched keenly. While she didn’t understand the specifics, she knew that the lord was proposing to honor the funny man in purple, and she had an opinion on this.

“*Lord Justinian*?” Estes exclaimed. “*Why*?”

Hassie burst out, “Because he makes us laugh!”

Efran shrugged at Estes. “There you have it. What more reason do you need?” He was watching Joshua try to stuff his shirt into his mouth.

While Estes looked between them, Efran added, “How much easier do you suppose it would be for Justinian to get the kind of information we need when they all see that he is legitimately titled? Isn’t that why he dresses like a nobleman, apart from vanity?”

“That’s true,” Estes admitted. Looking at Hassie, he said, “If he impresses you, I suppose that’s reason enough.” A glow came over her.

“Isn’t there some kind of decoration, insigne that they wear?” Efran asked. Joshua earnestly sucked on his finger for a minute, then began to cry.

“Yes, once their certificates are registered with a notary, they can take them to a jeweler, who will make a special badge for them,” Estes said. “You and Minka could have badges made, if you wanted.”

Efran curled his lip, and Estes added, “Oh, Neanne has received her certificate as you ordered, so she is now Lady Neanne for real. Whately, the jeweler, has already made a badge for her.”

“I did not know we had a jeweler,” Efran said, impressed.

“As of—about a month ago,” Estes confirmed.

“Well, get Justinian’s certificate registered and have him a badge made that I can present to him immediately,” Efran said.

“So I have been commanded,” Estes sighed in resignation, turning to smile at Hassie.

She cocked her head. “I think I would like to go stay with you.”

“Ma’am?” Estes said in surprise.

“Lord Efran here said that I could go stay with whoever I liked, and you are nice. I like you,” Hassie said critically.

“Thank you,” Estes said, eyes wide.

“Keep him on your list, Hassie, but take some time to look around,” Efran advised. “Others are cuter.”

Estes squinted at him, but Minka came in with a bottle just as Joshua was working up to a good loud demand for milk. “Oh, I’m sorry. I just had to stop in Wallace’s rooms to see how Connor is doing. He’s still in a lot of pain,” she said, taking the baby to sit on the daybed next to Efran.

Hassie told her, “Lord Efran is going to make Justinian a noble.”

Minka’s eyes went to her, then quickly to Estes and Efran. When they silently confirmed this, her face opened in delight. “That’s wonderful! Oh my goodness, that will give him access to Marguerite’s circle, who know everything in Eurus.”

Efran raised his eyebrows at Estes, who silently conceded this. Joshua was happy with his bottle. Hassie was watching Estes. Seeing that, Efran said, “Estes, please take Hassie to get introduced to the new matron and a few of the other children. She’ll need breakfast, too. Then you can bring DeWitt and Younge to the small dining room with their proposals for gate protocol.”

Agreeably, Estes stood, holding out his hand to Hassie. “Come with me to meet some other nice people.”

“All right,” she said, sounding like Minka, and rose to take his hand. Efran and Minka smiled at each other as Estes took Hassie out.

“She decided Estes was nice and she wants to go live with him,” he told her.

She laughed in surprise, but observed, “She’s not wrong.” Then she remembered, “Oh, I need to tell you about her family. . . .”

Listening to her describe Clute and his parents as she fed Joshua, he leaned back on the daybed to prop his foot on a chair. When she had related all that, he was quiet for a minute, then said, “I see why you brought her, and, why she was willing to come. Still, you—act like nothing happened.” She blinked at him, and he went on, “I would expect some reaction to all that other than delight to be back home.”

“Oh,” she said. “I was never afraid. It seemed so . . . silly. The only time I was afraid was at Hassie’s house, with Clute. But it was easy enough to get out of the house, and that gave me a chance to get Hassie out, too. The woods were scary, but I had someone to walk with, and—I can’t tell you how amazing it was to see Justinian drive by, and then have Barr and Lyte spring onto the road! I came home feeling that I had been protected all

along. It was all just to get Hassie out.” She stopped to lift Joshua on her shoulder and pat his back. He burped nicely for her.

“Well, I am proud of you,” he told her. “Not surprised, but—pleased at how you kept your head.”

An Efranesque smile spread on her face. “It was fun.”

“You are *not* joining the army,” he said. Then he lowered his head, and she watched his tears darken the velvet on the daybed. He wiped them with an impatient hand.

“Efran . . . what?” she breathed. Seeing that Joshua was asleep on her shoulder, she took him back to the bedroom to lay him in his crib. Then she came back out to fall on the daybed next to her husband. “What is it?” she demanded.

He exhaled, shaking his head. “My pride. You’re . . . outgrowing the need for a guardian. Which I should be glad of,” he said, forcing a smile.

She laughed, her own eyes watering. “Oh, yes. I am outgrowing my need of you so well that I can’t sleep at night unless you are beside me. The clothes I wear, the food I eat, the seedlings I buy at Mouris’—all are what you have provided. I can’t outgrow you any more than I can outgrow breathing. Oh, Efran! How can you think that?”

“Because of—how well you did without me. You didn’t even need Barr or Lyte!” he said helplessly.

“It’s so strange, but, that’s what I was trying to tell you. This was something God sent me to do, so you were not needed to protect me. That was probably why He disabled you from going, by allowing you to fall down the stairs! Had you been with me, there would have been no need to stop at that house, and Hassie would still be there today. It was a circumstance that may never be repeated. But tonight, and tomorrow, I will need you again. And every night and tomorrow after that,” she said, reaching up to sweep his hair off his forehead.

He leaned over to brush his lips lightly to hers, barely touching. She endured that for a little while, then pressed her mouth to his. “You’re rushing the seduction,” he murmured.

“Shut up,” she said, twining her arms around his head to kiss him.

Even though Efran was late getting there, the meeting on wall gate protocol was short and productive. Henceforth, three men would guard the gates, one mounted to run messages up to the fortress. Each of the other two guards would wear gate keys on their persons. A bell like that at the courtyard gate would be installed immediately.

While Efran refused to order that names be taken of all visitors—an onerous and intrusive requirement—guards were free to question or evict loiterers or suspicious persons. The guards were also to ensure that the four-foot easement inside the wall was kept clear, and were given the authority to order other soldiers to get it done.

Regarding the scheme that had just taken place, the plot that was supposedly leased by Cass’ father was actually not yet leased to anyone, and it appeared that the perpetrators determined that just by observation. The large shack that looked like a small house had been erected with permission, and was still needed for the ongoing construction all down the main road.

“Cass” had disappeared, as expected. So from now on, anyone who made a request of Minka was to be vetted—which should have been happening already, and Efran blamed himself for the oversight. After Geneve had demonstrated a woman’s ability to fight, he should have been warned that women could be enemies. (Adele transcended the class of “enemy”; she was “Minka’s erratic, power-hungry but unfocused sister.”)

Following that, Efran decided to go below the cold storage room again. It had been almost a week since he had talked with Swimmer, and he wanted to know if the *heye*—the octopus—would help him. So he descended through the trap door again, and again closed the closet door.

Communicating with a fish was harder than with a wolf—it was like trying to talk underwater, and the presence of anyone else would make it that much harder. That is why Efran did not take a man down with him.

With the handrails, it was easy to let himself down the steps without putting weight on his healing foot. Then he stayed at the back of the ledge for a while, letting his eyes adjust to the dark. “Swimmer? . . . Swimmer?” He sat to wait cross-legged, his right foot on top. “Swimmer?” He looked down at the dark water for ripples. There were none that he could detect, only a strange kind of billowing. . . .

Suddenly remembering what that signaled, he fell back, but too late and not far enough. Three giant octopus arms extended out of the water to coil around him. Efran held still, gasping. As he looked down the ledge toward his feet, he saw two great eyes ascend over the edge, followed by a bulbous head. Heart hammering, Efran looked at those eyes for some time before realizing that he was being studied in return by it—her. It was a female.

Slowly, Efran sat up. The arms that were coiled around him were merely examining him—feeling his arms and legs, poking his abdomen, and running over his head. That’s when he understood that she considered him as strange a creature as he considered her. “I’ll have you know that I’m very attractive to females,” he said.

He didn’t quite catch the response—she could have been laughing at him. One arm was brought close to him in what he believed to be an invitation to touch. So he did: he ran his hand over it, finding a smooth, wet, leathery surface. But as his hand rested on the arm, its texture and color changed to match his left arm so perfectly, he had to move his right arm to see if that was it.

The octopus—*Heye*—then laid another arm across the ledge, and reproduced the color and texture of the rock so that the arm seemed to disappear. Efran had to reach out to feel the limb to know that it was still there. “All right; that’s impressive. I can’t do that,” he admitted.

An arm coiled around his waist to begin pulling him toward the water. He panicked only slightly: “I can’t swim—my foot is injured. And I can’t breathe underwater.” The arm uncoiled from his waist while another investigated his left foot, then his right. Then the first arm wrapped lightly around his chest to feel his aspiration, which was fast and shallow right now. When she stopped pulling him, he felt more confident that he was successfully communicating with her.

“Will you help me with the eelfish? Will you get rid of the teeth in the water?” he asked. The arms withdrew and the head submerged. Efran watched in disappointment as the billowing ripple faded.

While he was leaning over the water, there was a great uprush that soaked him through, flinging him back, and she reappeared over the ledge with a squirming eelfish in one coiled arm. Efran sat up, watching her crush the eelfish until its guts oozed out. Then she lifted her head to insert the remains into a beak-like mouth. Slowly, she submerged again, and the billowing water subsided.

Efran leaned over the ledge again. “Women are dangerous,” he breathed, and a small ripple of (what he believed to be) laughter floated up.

He got up unsteadily on the slippery ledge, then hauled himself up the steep stairs on one foot. After putting everything in the closet back as it was, he was walking lightly, dripping heavily, up the corridor when Mohr, today’s door guard, ran up. “Lord Bowring asking to see you, Captain.”

“How long has he been waiting?” Efran asked in mild alarm.

“Just now arrived, sir,” Mohr said.

“Good. Put him in the receiving room off the foyer with refreshments while I change,” Efran exhaled.

“Sir.” Mohr saluted and took off with a hop.

Efran tentatively opened the door to his and Minka’s quarters to find her and Joshua gone. So he quickly changed into work clothes, seeing with dismay the suit on the floor that he was supposed to return to Elvey. Depositing his wet clothes properly in the laundry basket, he went out with the crumpled fitted suit to hand it to a passing man. “Take this to Elvey, please.”

“Captain,” the man said, saluting and not laughing. Efran turned to close the door behind him, already forgetting about his foot. It only twinged when he put too much weight on it, so he stepped lightly.

He went into the foyer, which was filled with private guards who turned to him attentively. Efran eyed them briefly, then looked at Bowring standing in the doorway of the receiving room. “Yes, Lord Bowring?”

“Why is my daughter Trina forced to wait in the courtyard?” Bowring asked in distress.

“What can I do for you, Lord Bowring?” Efran replied blankly.

Bowring sagged. “In here,” he said, entering the receiving room.

Efran entered behind him, closing the door. He immediately saw what appeared to be the gold ewer he had given Bowring as Awfyn’s appeasement, still wrapped in burlap. Efran looked at Bowring for an explanation.

Sweating, Bowring said, “I would like to sell you the ewer for a thousand royals. I am not doubting that it is worth much more, but—I cannot find anyone who will buy it. The most I was offered was three hundred royals, which is—ridiculous. But, I am in straits, Lord Efran, so, if you can give me a thousand for it, I would be extremely grateful.”

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Chapter 7

Were Efran vindictive, he might have commented on the worth of Bowring's gratitude. But he didn't doubt that the man was desperate, as it had been about a month since the ewer had passed into his hands, and he had needed money then. But during that time, Estes had been sending a constant stream of men with gold and silver to the moneyer in Eurus. So, yes, Efran could buy it back easily—and being able to do so was a stamp of legitimacy on the Abbey. Originally, in fact, the ewer had come from the Abbey Treasury.

First, Efran unwrapped the ewer to look it over. It was definitely the same one, unaltered in any way. So he stepped out to wave Mohr over. In the hearing of Bowring and his guards, Efran said, "Please ask Estes to send down a thousand royals. I wish to buy the ewer from Lord Bowring."

"Sir." Mohr saluted crisply and pushed past Bowring's men to exit the foyer.

Efran moved another man out of his line of sight to Bennard, also at the door. "Get you another couple of men to keep all visitors out of the foyer until my transaction with Lord Bowring is complete."

"Captain," he said, and gestured to another man, Allyr. Having heard the instructions, he ran off.

Turning back to Bowring in the small room, Efran said, "It will be a few minutes. Please have a seat and help yourself to refreshments." The lord dropped into a chair, looking at the Goadby's. He took up a bottle to open it.

In minutes, four men were stationed at the doors, and Estes appeared with Gabriel, who held parchment, quill and ink. Beside them was a sturdy soldier, Stephanos, who placed a heavy wooden chest on the floor. Estes said, "Lord Bowring, there should be one hundred royals in this chest. I am going to ask you to count them now. At the same time, I will ask you to confirm the moneyer's stamp, and the fact that they are genuine."

Bowring gestured at his men, two of whom knelt to lift the lid and pour out the stream of royals. Bowring picked up several to look at them closely, front and back. He nodded briefly in confirmation, tossing the royals back to the pile that his men were counting back into the box. When they had finished, one man looked up. "There's only ninety-nine, sir."

"There's one under your knee," Efran observed, taking a bottle of Goadby's for himself. His ankle was beginning to throb a little.

With a gasp, the man lifted his knee to place the errant coin with the others. "That's one hundred, sir."

Estes had the lid of that box nailed down and marked, "1." This Gabriel recorded on two parchments. Another box was brought down from Estes' workroom, and the process repeated. Bowring took up one or two random coins to look at them front and back, then dropped them to the box with a shrug of wonder.

The boxes began piling up in the foyer. Efran observed, "I take no responsibility for transport, and it all must be gone today."

"Yes, of course," Bowring said, wiping his sweating face with his kerchief.

Still the boxes came. Bowring took up several more random coins to study them and drop them again in the box, raising his hands in disbelief at the quantity.

When the tenth box had been counted and nailed shut, Estes presented the two copies of the bill of purchase for Bowring to sign. Estes signed them as well, and had two of Bowring's men sign as witnesses. Then he gave one of these documents to Bowring. "Thank you for giving us the opportunity to purchase it, Lord Bowring," Estes said with a bow.

"You're welcome," Bowring said unsteadily. He turned to say, "I am speechless, Lord Efran."

"You're welcome," Efran replied, turning up a bottle.

Bowring had brought a wagon, but the boxes were so heavy that Efran had to loan him another wagon with a pair of horses. Efran directed that the courtyard, switchback and road out of the Abbey Lands be cleared of any other vehicles for the transport. He told Bowring, "I will protect you no farther than our own boundary, which is the old stone bridge."

"I understand. I can hardly believe it, but again, thank you." Bowring earnestly shook his hand. Efran nodded. Part of him felt that this was a divine penalty assessed for his baiting Awfyn with Bowring's house Tuttiett, which resulted in the deaths of so many men. Knowing that he was guilty of incredibly bad judgment, Efran considered the penalty light.

He, Estes and the Abbey soldiers watched the boxes being loaded in the courtyard. Watching as well, Trina came to stand beside Efran, but he did not look at her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She wanted to tell him that she had lost friends because of what she said to him about his wife's mother, but the words wouldn't come. He shifted his eyes to her and nodded minutely.

When the carts were loaded, Bowring sat by the driver in the first cart, and Trina sat in the second. Their mounted guards collected around them, and the Abbey Landers watched them descend the switchback and roll down the road over the old stone bridge.

Then Estes turned to exclaim, "Well done, Efran! How did you manage that?"

"He came to me!" Efran laughed. "He's desperate; no one else would buy it."

Estes marveled, "So we are the only ones wealthy enough to produce a thousand royals on demand. What a coup for the Abbey!"

"True," Efran acknowledged. "How much of that tray is left, by the way?"

"Over two-thirds; I can't tell you precisely right now, but DeWitt has the figures," Estes said.

"Well then, put the ewer back in the Treasury. And find a better hiding place for the signet than the top of a book," Efran said irately. Estes nodded, half laughing. He didn't tell Efran that it was Minka's choice for a hiding place.

As they turned back inside, Efran asked, "How is Hassie?"

"Making herself at home with the other children, though she keeps asking if Clute followed them," Estes said. "What do you know about this Clute?"

"Oh, I'd better tell you what Minka told me." After covering Hassie's family situation with him, Efran added,

“I’m wondering if we should do something about Clute.”

Estes grimaced, “Let’s not seek out trouble; let’s deal with what’s already on our own land.”

“Agreed. But we may be done with the eelfish,” Efran said contemplatively. As Estes paused, Efran explained why. Estes also told Minka this later, just to reassure her.

Dinner was turned into a celebration as Connor, on his feet, came down to the dining hall from his sickbed in Wallace’s quarters. From now on, he would recuperate in his own house. The men were considerate enough to not slap him on the back. And Minka did not kiss him, but his wife Lyra on her cheek, congratulating her (rightly) for his quick recovery. Also, his commendation for heroism in defending Minka had already been awarded.

Efran cornered Estes to ask him, “Where is my badge for Justinian? He’s going back up to Westford and then Eurus tomorrow.”

Estes sighed, “Efran, you just told me about—your plans for Justinian today. [Efran wanted to keep it quiet until he presented it to him.] The document has been registered with Ryal and the order placed with the jeweler, but not everyone jumps at your command.”

Efran chewed on that. “Why not?”

“You don’t kill enough people,” Estes said.

“Awfyn,” Efran offered.

“Regular people. Deranged giants don’t count,” Estes said.

“Well then, I’ll—Martyn!” Efran said. Estes quickly looked at the young Polonti entering the dining hall. Now 15, he looked years older than the boy whom Efran had bought out of slavery a year ago. Since Martyn had expressed a desire to be in the army, Goss had sent him for special training under a Polonti master, Crowe, who maintained a camp in the Sasany Fields. Just today—June 20th—Martyn had returned to the fortress after ten months under Master Crowe.

Hearing his name, Martyn looked over. “Efran.”

Martyn walked over to greet him, and Efran had to restrain himself from shaking him. “Martyn, you look good.” Efran was almost shaken himself by the changes he saw: Martyn looked like a man—slender, but self-possessed and deliberate.

Estes reached out a hand, “Good to see you, Martyn. You look ready to fight.”

“Thank you, sir. Master Crowe decided that I was,” Martyn replied.

Estes said, “Cutch will be your unit commander. You’ll report to him tomorrow morning.”

“Yes, sir,” Martyn said, looking around.

“If I see him, I’ll point him out to you,” Efran said. “But you will not be expected to recognize him.”

“Martyn!” Minka breathed, approaching from behind Efran. “I hardly recognized you! You’re not a boy anymore.”

“No, Lady Minka,” he grinned.

She turned to Efran to state: “I want to hug him.”

He inhaled, glancing away. “You may hug him.”

So she joyfully threw her arms around Martyn’s shoulders, and he held her lightly, smiling. “Everyone’s taller than me now,” she pouted. “Oh, Martyn, I am so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” he said, looking almost like his old self. Although numerous men were trying to get him to come tell them about his training under Master Crowe, Minka desired him at her table with Efran, and she won.

She heard all that he was willing to tell her about camp, then Efran said, “Minka just came off her own adventure.”

Martyn looked back at her, smiling, and she said, “Oh, it was really nothing. A comedy of errors by incompetent kidnapers. The only scary part was a man named Clute.” So she had to tell him about all that, and he did laugh when she described stacking furniture to climb out of the hut by way of the roof.

While they were having a wonderful dinner with good food, good news, and renewed friendships, another family was having a less wonderful dinner.

“I can’t understand what happened,” Portia said. “Why would they climb out of the window? Where did they go?”

Her husband grunted, but her son, face down in his hash, said, “They hopped a carriage on the main road going south.”

Portia put a hand to her chest, gasping, “How do you know, Clute?”

He looked up. “I followed them.”

“Why didn’t you stop them?” she cried.

“Couldn’t get close. Men in the brush.”

“But—there’s nothing south but a little community of—strange people,” Portia said anxiously.

“Abbey Lands,” Clute said. “We go down tomorrow and get them back. Both of them.”

“I should say so!” Portia said. “Would you like another helping, dear?”

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Chapter 8

The following morning, June 21st, Minka desired to take Martyn down to the plots to show him all the development since he was last here. “Or do you need to vet him?” she asked Efran, chin down.

He smiled grimly at her little joke. “You may go down with Martyn, who will demonstrate classic Polonti patience during your tour.”

She cried, “Efran!” Then she winced, looking to Martyn. “He’s probably right.”

“I don’t mind, Lady Minka.” He said it so nicely, she didn’t have the heart to object to the title.

So she took him by the hand, and as he was not fully grown yet, his hands were still small enough for her to hold, unlike Efran’s. They two went down the switchback on foot so as to explore all up and down her favorite shops. And she proudly wore her pants.

After they had left, Estes asked Efran, “Shouldn’t you send a couple of men with them?”

“Not after he’s had ten months with Master Crowe,” Efran muttered. “I don’t know that I would last that long.”

Minka certainly put Martyn through an endurance exercise. The first place they stopped was Mouris’ plant shop, but it was not very well stocked, and she saw neither Mouris nor Adele, so they went on from there. She showed him (from afar) the mill and the tannery, then they walked through Elvey’s for a little while, and she had him measured for his new uniform.

From there, she found the shop with hunting gear that had been skipped in her previous shopping tour, and she made Martyn pick out whatever he wanted. When he didn’t pick out enough, she made him pick out more. When she was satisfied, the owner agreed to have the gear sent up to the fortress, along with the bill. She wasn’t sure if she had enough money with her.

They walked along, chatting and looking, and Minka found that she did have enough money for food, so they stopped at Croft’s Tavern to eat. Martyn looked around in wonder. “When I left, this was practically all wolf land. Efran introduced me to several of the wolves who had found me under the bridge and made me walk up to the fortress.”

“Yes,” Minka said. “But when there got to be too many people, the wolves left.”

“That’s sad in a way, but inevitable, I suppose,” he murmured.

“Efran still protects any that linger. Oh! And I need to take you to the cavern under the cold storage room,” she said.

“Cavern!” he said.

“Oh, yes, there’s a whole string of them. Efran was the first to find them—by falling down into one,” she said.

“I want to hear about that,” he said.

“Come,” she said, standing. “I’ll tell you on the way to our next stop—a rice and crayfish farm.”

So they went down to see that, and by now were close to the northern border of the plots, protected by the wall. “Oh!” she said. “I need to show you the hut that the boys have renovated.”

As they went out the gates, Minka made sure to tell Tourle, one of the gate guards, that she and Martyn were going to look at the boys’ hut. “Thank you, Lady Minka,” Tourle said. And he watched the two walk over the old stone bridge and turn west, heading for the new bridge over the Passage. Tourle was not permitted to leave his post to follow, but he did keep an eye on the road for their return.

As always, there were a number of sightseers flowing down the road to the Abbey Lands. Today there were so many that they formed a line at the wall gates which stretched clear back over the old stone bridge. Although the guards were not taking names, they evaluated them all, in some cases asking what their business was. A few disreputable-looking men were turned away.

One family—mother, father, and nearly grown son—who arrived on foot took their place at the end of the line as Minka and Martyn emerged from the hut’s fence gates and came out of the woods. When they began crossing the new bridge over the Passage, the son turned to see them. He peered as they came closer, then his face settled in recognition.

Walking east on the coastal highway toward the Lands, Minka was deeply engaged in whatever she was telling Martyn. So they were within 30 feet of the old stone bridge—and the end of the line—when she finally looked up for Clute to pin her with his stare. She stopped dead, staring back in fear. Martyn looked at her, then looked at the man who had departed the line to begin stalking toward her.

Portia turned. “Clute? What is it?” She watched as far as she could, but she really needed glasses. Her husband was looking at the shops ahead.

“That’s—that’s—Clute!” Minka stammered.

Martyn drew in front of her. “Stay behind me, Lady Minka.”

Tourle, seeing the young man leave the line, stepped out to see his walking determinedly toward the lady, who was taking shelter behind the boy. “You! Stop!” Tourle shouted. When Clute did not stop, Tourle turned to order the second guard, Doudney, “Ring the bell.”

Doudney began hauling on the bell pull, and the people in line objected, holding their ears. The ringing was repeated by the courtyard gates bell, which was heard by practically everyone inside the fortress. Efran and Estes, in his second-floor workroom, heard it and looked at each other. Then Efran turned to calmly exit the room, walk down the corridor, and descend the stairs carefully before heading out the front doors. Estes was right behind him.

On the road outside the walls, Clute continued striding toward Minka while Tourle shouted at him. Martyn merely said, “Stop.” And he said it only once.

Clute kept coming. He was not only older than Martyn, but also taller and bulkier. Behind Martyn, Minka looked in near-panic for a place to run, seeing only the Passage behind her. But her bodyguard was so still, waiting, that Minka stilled. Clute kept coming.

By now, Tourle abandoned his post to run out of the gates. He veered off the northbound road, taking a short cut through the meadow toward the coastal highway where Martyn, with Minka behind him, watched Clute advance.

Clute came up with outstretched arm as if to thrust him aside, but Martyn grabbed his hand, wrenching his wrist, and then struck him in the face with the heel of his palm. Clute dropped immediately, his face so bloody that Minka couldn't look at it. His nose was gone.

Martyn continued to stand where he was, but asked over his shoulder, "Are you all right, Lady Minka?"

"Yes," she said in shock.

Tourle arrived to look at Martyn, look at Minka, and then look at Clute on the ground. Clute's mother came running up. (His father Plunkett was still in line.) Portia cried, "What have you done to my son?—You! Adele!"

When she started toward Minka, Martyn said, "Stop."

Whereupon both Minka and Tourle shouted at her to stay back. She did pause.

At that time Efran, on Trud, followed by twenty mounted soldiers, exited the wall gates. Seeing the small group on the road, he trotted over. Except for the dead man on the ground, they all looked up at him.

"This hooligan killed my son!" Portia screamed.

"Is that Clute?" Efran asked. Minka, beside Martyn, nodded confirmation. She was obviously unharmed and perfectly composed.

The soldiers behind Efran rode up to have a look. "Well done, lad!" Arne cried.

People in line began running over to have a look. Tourle threw out his arms and roared, "STAY BACK!" They obeyed. Plunkett never looked over, and when the majority of the line left, he was able to walk on through the gates to have a look around.

Martyn looked up at Efran, who leaned on the pommel and said, "I don't know anyone else who earned a commendation before he was actually in the army." Minka hugged Martyn's arm, and he patted her hand—fortunately, he used the hand that had grabbed Clute's wrist, and not the other one.

Portia cried, "I demand justice for my son!"

Efran looked down on her. "What is your name?"

"I am Portia, and that is my son!"

Efran said, "Madam, my men may use whatever force necessary to protect my wife. You may take your son's body and leave. Don't ever come back."

"Is my daughter here?" she demanded.

"Goodbye, Madam," Efran said. He turned to his men. "Arne, Detler—haul him off the road."

Those two dismounted to each take an arm and begin dragging the dead man, head lolling, into the meadow. The crowd that had left the line followed them to watch. Portia, conflicted, finally followed the body. By this time, Plunkett was talking with the leaseholder, Knapp, who had the rice and crayfish farm.

“My wife, who provides opportunities for commendations whenever she sets foot outside the fortress,” Efran murmured.

“I did nothing wrong, or even irregular,” she replied, eyes closed.

“And yet—” Efran moved his lips across her face—“you require a unit of soldiers.”

Her brow wrinkled as she twined her arms around his neck. “Twenty in a unit? That’s not so bad.”

“Forty. Too many new recruits for twenty,” he breathed.

“You didn’t tell me that,” she said.

There was loud knocking on the outer door. “Justinian’s badge is here!” Estes called.

Minka started to get up, but Efran held her down. “I’m not through with you.”

“Beast,” she whispered, sinking into him.

“Is he back?” Efran called.

“Not till tomorrow, probably,” Estes called.

“Come back then,” Efran said.

“What?”

“Come back then!” Efran shouted.

Estes shouted something else upon departing, but Minka had stopped Efran’s reply.

When she was done comforting him about her near-encounter with Clute, she went to look for Hassie in the children’s quarters. Told that the children were outside at play, she went out to find them romping in their designated area and not the gardens. Looking around, she saw Hassie talking with Toby and Ivy (Noah was off with Bethune’s Erastus).

So Minka went over to join Hassie and her new friends. “Hello! Are you having fun?”

Toby turned to her with wide eyes. “We’ve been hearing about your escape!”

“Yes, Hassie was so brave. She was good company in the dark woods,” Minka said, and Hassie smiled. Minka continued, “I have something to tell you, Hassie. Clute did follow us.”

Hassie went rigid, her face draining of color. “Listen!” Minka ordered. “One of Efran’s men stopped him. He knocked Clute down so that he died. Clute will never follow you again. You are safe.”

“Oh.” Hassie went limp in relief. Minka put a hand out to her, but Ivy had embraced her and Toby patted her back.

“This is our safe place,” Toby explained.

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Chapter 9

Justinian, having been ordered back down to the Abbey from Westford, arrived the following day (June 22nd). He was disgruntled at the interruption, but did not grouse excessively because Madea’s kitchen produced the best fare he had eaten almost anywhere. Tonight they served amazing steaks—venison, pork, beef, and lamb—along with an abundance of side dishes from garden produce, and lemon-lime pie for dessert.

As he ate, Justinian listened to Minka tell, again, how 15-year-old Martyn killed her pursuer by hitting him in the face. Justinian observed, “Men come after you like bears to honey. No wonder the Gargoyle won’t let anyone near you.” He then looked up in mild alarm. When he saw Efran making his way to the front of the dining hall, he leaned over to kiss Minka on her cheek. “I’m glad you’re all right.”

“Thank you,” she said. She glanced up at Martyn watching in concern from the middle of a table of men. She smiled and shook her head at him; he smiled and turned to listen to someone who was talking at him.

At the front of the hall, Efran raised his hands. “Let me interrupt you for only a moment. First, I want to thank Madea and her staff for another wonderful dinner, which they produce daily without fail.” He turned to applaud her, so of course the diners did also. When Justinian stood to applaud, everyone else had to stand as well. Madea and her cooks smiled and waved.

As the diners sat again, Efran said, “I’m sure you’ve all heard of the Lady Minka’s recent difficulties. I wish to commend the men who performed so ably in her rescue. Barr, Lyte, and Martyn—please come up here.”

Those three left their tables amid loud applause. Barr and Lyte were chagrined at the honor, being unaware of how their presence had indeed saved both Minka and Hassie. (Lyte was already the possessor of the Meritorious Cross, the highest honor the Abbey could give, for his service in helping to remove Arenado’s fireballs.)

When the three honorees were lined up beside Efran, Younge stepped up to hand him one badge, which he pinned to Barr’s jacket before shaking his hand. Barr saluted and stepped back. This process was repeated twice more for Lyte and Martyn. The young Polonti received his badge on a borrowed jacket because his uniform was still under construction at Elvey’s.

There was additional applause after this; Justinian applauded lightly, as he was concentrating on the lamb. Only Madea could make it so tender.

Then Efran said, “I have one more man to recognize in the rescue of my wife, although he is not part of the army. Justinian, please come forward.”

Everyone turned to look at Justinian, who froze with wide eyes and a full mouth. He swallowed with difficulty, looked at Minka beaming beside him, and rose to warily thread his way around tables to the front of the hall. He stood by Efran, regarding his half-smile, and wondered if he were remembering Justinian’s own part in attempting to abduct Minka in a crazy scheme of Adele’s.

“Justinian, you have served me and the Abbey well, not just in saving the Lady Minka and Hassie, but in leading us to the sheep brains for the Graetrix, and assisting in the killing of my kidnapper Doddridge. [Justinian was wincing, shaking his head in denial.] Besides these actions, you have contributed essential information for the protection of everyone in the Abbey Lands.

“For all this—” Efran turned again to Younge, who handed him another badge—“As Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, I confer upon you the title of Lord Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, with all the privileges it entails.” As Justinian gaped at him, Efran pinned the badge to his purple jacket, shook his limp hand, and put into it the registered document confirming his nobility.

Minka sprang up to applaud, so of course everyone else had to, especially as Estes, DeWitt, and all of Efran’s officers also stood.

Justinian, tears in his eyes, continued to stare at Efran. “I don’t deserve this.”

“That’s not your decision,” Efran said. Then he smiled, patting his shoulder. “Go back to your table. Minka wants to hug you.”

So Justinian staggered back to his place. Sure enough, Minka hugged him, but quickly, then sat to pull him down beside her. The rest of the hall then sat to consume an excellent dinner while speculating whether the Captain had finally lost his mind.

Late that evening, Justinian sat staring at his certificate of nobility and the badge, all official and registered. While he could hardly believe it, he began to see how useful it would be, particularly in Eurus, with Efran’s enemy Cennick. Oh, yes, Cennick would be a sucker for a noble who had Efran’s ear. . . .

The next day, June 23rd, Justinian met with Efran briefly before leaving. “I’m going straight up to Eurus,” he said, smoothing out his jacket with the new badge in place. “I’ll stop at Marguerite’s Featherstone first, and have her introduce me to one or two people who orbit Cennick.”

“Excellent,” Efran murmured.

Justinian then handed him a parchment. “Cennick is known for his paranoia, especially regarding spies. So if I come across anything you should know right away, I’ll send letters in code. Here is the key I’ll be using. Since these will be chatty letters, I will be sending them to Minka. I will also chat in them. But if they contain any of these words, you’ll know what I wish to convey to you.”

“Very good, Justinian,” Efran said, looking over the sheet. “But—take care. Cennick is quick to kill.” That Cennick slaughtered Loizeaux’s honor guard particularly grieved Efran, as some of his own soldiers were defectors grateful for a second chance.

“I know,” Justinian said as he shook out his sleeves. “But the title confers a responsibility that I can’t ignore.”

“Now you alarm me. Minka will be devastated if anything happens to you,” Efran said, studying him.

Justinian smiled. “That’s good to know. She’s a nice kid.” And he appeared to mean it.

Watching him leave, Efran thought, *I’m glad I took him off mucking stables*. Then he took the code key to his quarters to share with Minka, and tell her of Justinian’s plans.

She thought that was wonderful, of course, and hid the key among her books on the small table. As they were emerging from their quarters, the door sentry Detler came up, saluting. “You’re requested down at Mouris’, Captain, as they’ve got some kind of ruckus going on.”

Efran inhaled, starting forward. But as Minka came with him, he paused in reluctance. “It has to involve Adele,” she said.

Wavering, he said, “Will you stay on your horse until I see what risk there is?”

“Yes,” she said.

So they went out to the courtyard for horses and a few soldiers. The ones available right now were Hawk, Doudney, Tourse, and Geneve. So those four followed Efran and Minka down the switchback and across to Mouris’ plant shop, where Efran had killed the Polonti giant Awfyn when he came for Adele.

As the riders approached Mouris’, they saw the crowd gathered in front. But it appeared to be just onlookers, at whom Efran whistled to disperse. Most of them did back away from the oncoming horses. Arriving at the shop, they heard shouting, so Efran glanced back at Minka in a reminder of her promise, and she stayed put.

The soldiers used their horses to force the crowd away from the shop front, all which was open under an awning. Efran dismounted, instructing, “Tourse, stay here with the lady, please—the rest of you in with me.” There was a crash from inside.

Efran led the way in, flanked by Hawk and Doudney, who unconsciously nudged Geneve to the inside. Displeased, she went around Doudney to the outside. On the way, they glanced at shelves overthrown, pots broken, plants littering the ground—and the box of tree stakes overturned. “Someone may be armed,” Efran said in warning.

Then they came upon two men—Mouris and another, who was shirtless—facing each other, both wielding tree stakes. Efran said, “Drop the stakes.”

Minka and Tourse, from their vantage point astride their horses, could see into the shop clear to the antagonists. Tourse said, “Oh ho! Two men facing off. There’s a woman involved.”

Minka groaned, “My sister.”

“Do you have a sister, Lady Minka?” Tourse asked in interest.

“Let me think about that,” she muttered.

The combatants in the shop turned to Efran. Sagging, Mouris put down his stake, so the other dropped his. “Who are you?” Efran asked the shirtless one.

“Hassler, sir,” the man said reluctantly.

“What are you doing here?” Efran asked.

When he didn’t reply right away, Mouris said angrily, “Lying with Adele in *my* bed with the silk sheets *I* bought!”

“Where is Adele?” Efran asked, glancing beyond them.

“Back in the living quarters,” Mouris said. This building was a one-story structure with the living quarters behind the shop rather than above it.

At the moment, however, Adele was not in the living quarters; she was slinking out a side door to take an oblique route to the road. Tourse, seeing her, said, “Whoa, guilty party escaping, Lady Minka.”

She turned to look, then tapped her horse lightly to pursue Adele at a walk. Tourse followed. The other four horses watched them, but waited for their riders. “Adele? Where are you going?” Minka asked.

The guilty party looked back at her, startled. “Just—out for a bite,” Adele said. Shouts were heard from within the shop, and Tourse barely restrained his laughter.

Trying to ignore him, Minka demanded, “What have you done, Adele?”

“Nothing much,” she shrugged.

Tourse loudly whispered, “Should we tell her that her dress is misbuttoned, Lady?”

Adele looked down at the buttons along the front of her dress, and unbuttoned the top four to rebutton them. A man across the road stopped to watch. Tourse chortled deep in his throat. Minka closed her eyes in exasperation. “Adele!”

There was more shouting within the shop. Mouris bellowed at Hassler, “You wait till I leave, then come in my house, and lie on my bed with my—my—”

“She invited me in!” Hassler shouted. “For all I knew, she was your hired help!”

While Efran’s soldiers watched the combatants in amusement, he was contemplating his own past incursions into married women’s beds at their invitation. He had never gotten caught; never came close (except for the woman who complained to his Commander after Efran had left early) because he never accommodated a woman in a bed she shared with her husband.

Outside, Minka was asking, “Adele, what are you going to do when Mouris kicks you out?”

“He won’t kick me out,” she scoffed. “He needs me too much.”

“Well then, what happens when he can’t afford lease payments because he’s not tending his shop? I was just here two days ago, and it was practically bare—now it’s almost destroyed! You’re not helping him at all. What happens to you when his shop folds?” Minka demanded.

“I have options,” Adele said defiantly up at her sister.

Inside, Efran sighed, “All right, Hassler, get out, and stay out of his shop.”

Hassler paused. “Can I go get my shirt and shoes?”

“Quickly,” Efran said. So Hassler ran to the back, then emerged a few seconds later pulling his shirt down over

his head, his shoes jammed on his feet. *Don't ever take off your boots in a strange bed*, Efran thought—one of his cardinal rules from those days. He'd never try that now; Minka would push him off the bed. But now that he had her, he could see how his past strategies to feel loved were not only hazardous, but sad and . . . pitiable.

As Hassler passed the soldiers, Hawk cleared his throat loudly, and Doudney made a swift gesture. Hassler looked down, then, to button his pants. And he walked on out.

Emerging onto the road, Hassler came right upon Minka, Tourse and Adele. The latter raised her eyes, and he directed a small, swift jerk of the head to her. So she went with him away from Mouris' shop. "And, curtain," said Tourse. Minka responded with pained laughter.

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Chapter 10

Efran and his soldiers came out. His head swiveled as he looked for Minka; seeing her and Tourse a short distance away, he mounted and rode over easily. "Well, I don't know where Adele is—"

"With the other man, whoever he is," Minka said listlessly.

"So, that's that," Efran muttered while his men—and girl—remounted to catch up with him. As they all started to walk back toward the main road, Efran half-turned to his soldiers. "I apologize for wasting your time with that."

"No, Captain, it was entertaining *and* educational," Tourse said. Hawk gurgled in his throat.

"At least we didn't need Martyn," Efran said. So they were all startled by the bell at the wall gates clanging. Efran immediately turned his horse to begin loping toward the gates, and the others followed—including Minka's horse, despite her efforts to direct him otherwise.

When they arrived at the gates, Efran dropped from the saddle to land on his knees beside an Abbey soldier lying on the ground, bleeding, while another man held his jittery horse. It was one of the scouts sent out on a routine sweep of the road. Efran swung to address the rider at the rear of the group: "Minka, please ride up to get Wallace and a medical cart."

"Yes, Efran." She turned the horse and kicked authoritatively; he responded as required.

Meanwhile, Efran was bending over the man, Caswall. "What happened?" Efran asked.

"Cap'n, me and Koschat got separated—Cennick's sending a force to bust the wall and get one of the girls—uh, name's Moultrie—she knows something—"

"All right. You just lie still now," Efran said. He looked back at Tourse: "Tell Estes, DeWitt or Coxe that we need to know where the courtesan Moultrie landed—where she's working or who she married—and get her up to the fortress."

"Right, Cap'n." Tourse turned his horse with the flick of a wrist and began galloping up. By now, the wall gate guards were turning away visitors—only Abbey Lands residents or those on necessary business were allowed in.

Next, Efran looked to Geneve: “Grab any officer and tell him I need eighty archers down here at the wall.”

“Captain.” She turned and likewise galloped toward the switchback.

Then Efran said, “Hawk, you and Doudney go grab bows and quivers for you and me. Get mine out of my weapons closet in my bedroom.” This was his wardrobe, which presently held more weapons than clothes.

“Yes, sir!” And they two spurred toward the switchback. By this time, Wallace was riding down in a medical cart with a driver. Minka was on her horse beside them.

Without removing Caswall’s jacket, Efran was studying the rips and blood. “Sword or arrow?” Efran asked.

“Sword, Cap’n—came barreling down the road, demanding if we’d seen this girl. Don’t think—they even knew what they were doing or who we were,” Caswall breathed. He was not in uniform. Yes, Efran thought, sending an armed force after a courtesan was stupid. Who was leading this group?

Wallace knelt beside the injured man to open his jacket. Efran stood, looking back at Minka. He walked up to her in the saddle, placing a hand on her thigh. “I’ve sent Tourse up to find out where the courtesan Moultrie is. If you can catch him, I want you to go with him to get her into the fortress.”

Joy spread across her face at being useful to him. “Yes, Efran,” she said, turning her horse. Efran pensively watched her ride rapidly up the hill, then he turned back to see Caswall being placed in Wallace’s cart.

On the switchback, Minka passed Hawk and Doudney, who were descending with several sets of archery gear. Then in the courtyard, she noted Cutch assembling archers who were preparing to descend on horseback to the wall. Upon dismounting, Minka told the gate sentry, “I’m coming right back for this horse.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said promptly, taking the reins.

“Thank you.” She walked quickly through the crowded courtyard, glad of the pants that didn’t inhibit her movements. From the foyer, she went straight up to Estes’ workroom on the second floor. As she entered, she encountered Tourse walking out. “Efran wants me to go with you to get Moultrie,” she told him.

“Ah! I am favored, Lady Minka,” he said. “Estes tells me that she’s working at Elvey’s.”

“In what capacity?” Minka asked.

He paused. “I don’t know. Is it important?”

“We will find her quicker if we know what department she’s in. But we can ask Elvey’s labor coordinator,” Minka said, heading back out.

Tourse hopped after her. “I see that I am guided by an expert. Do we need any soldiers?”

“Oh no!” Minka said, glancing at him as they passed through the foyer. “They would only frighten her. All I need is a handsome man.” Then she caught herself, hoping that she didn’t sound flirtatious.

Tourse merely lifted his chin and straightened his jacket. “That is my primary attribute, Lady Minka.” She laughed silently.

They had to wait for their horses while the archers received theirs and departed the gates (Minka's horse having been drafted for them). She asked Tourse, "Why are we collecting Moultrie?"

"Cennick's after her for something she knows," Tourse related.

"Oh, dear," Minka breathed.

They received their horses and began down the switchback at a walk, watching the archers lope to the wall. Minka kept her back straight to the vertical as she had seen Efran do. Then she led the way to Elvey's. When they entered, Minka turned to the receptionist. "Lord Efran wishes Moultrie brought up to the fortress, but I don't know where she is working. She is a recent hire."

"One moment, Lady Minka," the woman said, rising.

Tourse regarded Minka with admiration, and she whispered, "I'm here a great deal."

Momentarily, a woman of authority emerged from a back room. "I have sent for Moultrie, Lady Minka. She is being brought from the cutter's room."

"Thank you, Matron Eola. Please know that this is not her fault; she's done nothing wrong," Minka said.

The matron replied, "I will advise her supervisor, Lady Minka."

"Again, thank you. And, I'm anxious to see your new summer dresses," Minka said, grinning.

"Oh, we'll send up some samples to you. They're in the lightest cotton you can imagine, in the new pastels," Eola smiled.

"I can't wait!" Minka clapped, giddy.

Then a young, apprehensive girl was brought out. The matron said, "Lady Minka, this is Moultrie."

"Hello, dear," Minka said, taking her hand. "This is our escort, Tourse. [He bowed with a flourish.] You haven't done anything wrong; we just wanted to ask you a few things."

"Oh. I have a quota to get done," Moultrie said, pointing back to her distant workroom.

Minka said, "Matron Eola has assured me you won't get in trouble."

As Minka and Tourse led Moultrie out to their horses, Minka looked down the road to see a mass of mounted soldiers in purple converging on the wall gates. "Tourse, please help Moultrie up behind my saddle—quickly."

"Stop!" Efran shouted at the oncoming troops. He was standing on stone steps behind the eight-foot wall topped with spikes. At that signal, his mounted archers lifted their bows with arrows nocked all along the wall. The opposing officer raised a hand, and his mounted ranks drew to a halt about thirty feet away. Spectators and sightseers who had been denied entrance to the Abbey Lands stood around in the meadow to watch.

Efran continued, "You in front—come tell me what you want."

So the ranking officer trotted forward to Efran, who ordered bows lowered. Perhaps the young officer thought that the spiked wall would protect him as well as the Abbey defenders, for he drew up rather close. “Who are you?” Efran asked, leaning on one arm on the top of the wall.

“I am Captain Shanko,” the other replied. “Surchatain Cennick requires the return of a traitor.”

“Well—how many of us?” Efran asked peevishly, and his archers grinned.

Tight-lipped, Shanko replied, “Just one, a courtesan named Moultrie.”

Efran asked, “Can’t Cennick get a woman any other way?” A few of his men guffawed at this, which Efran did not discourage. Meanwhile, he studied the captain, who was young—in his early twenties—and inexperienced, to come so close to an opposing barricade.

One of the spectators shouted, “Hiya, they got men sneakin’ down the wall there!” The northern wall was only partially completed east of the road; after about 80 feet, it was open.

Efran whistled at the eastern-most ranks of his men, who loped around the end of the wall to chase away the skulkers, who were on foot. Without orders, a couple of EurAsian soldiers behind Shanko had ridden into the field of spectators to go after the informer, resulting in chaos in the meadow. At the attack on civilians, Efran whistled his signal to fire, and his archers brought down the two misbehaving soldiers. This contributed to the disorder in Shanko’s spread-out ranks.

When the young captain turned in his saddle to see what was going on behind him, Efran put a knee on the wall to lean over and grab him by his fancy breastplate, hauling him over the spikes. Too surprised to fight, Shanko fell on his back on the ground beside Efran’s stepping stones. Nearby archers dropped off their horses to take up the captain by his arms.

Spanked on the south, east, and west, and now deprived of their captain, Cennick’s troops turned to retreat north. Efran watched them go, then instructed his men to check for injuries among the spectators, and to bring him Shanko’s miscreants who had ridden into the meadow.

While the civilian informer was exulting with upraised arms over the retreat of the EurAsians, the two soldiers who had come after him were left with nonlethal but painful wounds. Efran ordered them taken to Wallace, and Shanko to be escorted to guest quarters in the fortress.

In the meantime, Minka and Tourse had brought Moultrie to Estes in the workroom. He looked at the girl—who was pretty, obviously—then said, “Minka, it seems to me that you’re the best one to make the young lady feel comfortable”—the objective being to find out why Cennick was after her.

“Dam’,” Tourse said quietly.

Minka and Moultrie both laughed at him. “Maybe she’ll talk with you later, Tourse,” Minka said, deliberately dropping his name. She took Moultrie’s hand as the girl looked back appraisingly at him. “Do you like Goadby’s?” Minka asked her.

“Sure,” she said, smiling. So upon reaching the first floor, Minka detoured to the kitchen to appropriate a couple of bottles on her way with the girl out to the back grounds.

Minka was happy to take charge of her, mostly because she was the only other adult Minka knew who was shorter than herself. To be sure, she asked cautiously, “How old are you?”

“Eighteen,” Moultrie said, studying Minka’s pants.

“Good,” Minka said, secure in her pants.

Minka took her around the lush flower beds to the bench under the great walnut tree, and they sat in its shade. “Oh, it’s nice back here,” the girl said.

“Probably my favorite place on the fortress grounds, except for the conservatory. We can walk through it a little later, if you like.” Minka handed her a Goadby’s, then opened the other one.

“Sure, but—why am I here?” Moultrie asked, taking the bottle.

“Did you see the soldiers coming to the wall gates?” Minka asked, and Moultrie nodded, taking a swig. “They came for you. There’s something Cennick doesn’t want you to tell us.”

“Oh.” The girl looked disconcerted.

“You . . . don’t know what that might be?” Minka asked.

“Well, I slept with him,” Moultrie shrugged.

“While Loizeaux was alive?” Minka asked cautiously. Moultrie nodded. “Was there anything—different about him?” Minka asked uncomfortably.

“Not really,” Moultrie said, taking a drink.

“Then, can you think of any reason Cennick would want you back? Does he want to marry you?” Minka asked.

“He didn’t say anything about that,” Moultrie said.

“How often did you sleep together?” Minka asked.

The girl raised her eyes to think as she took another swig. “Only twice, because he didn’t want me sleeping with Loizy at the same time.”

“Loizy?” Minka repeated, with wide eyes and a half-grimace.

“That was my pet name for him,” Moultrie said, wiggling on the bench.

“Oh, that’s cute,” Minka said, trying to imagine Efran’s reaction if she called him “Effry.” Or maybe worse, “Effy.” “So, did you go back to Loizy then?” She took a drink.

“No, because he didn’t like pregnant girls in his bed,” Moultrie shrugged.

Chapter 11

Minka stared at her. “Were you pregnant before you started sleeping with Cennick?”

“Unh uh.” Moultrie shook her head.

“You’re pregnant by Cennick?” Minka asked, still staring. Moultrie nodded. “At least, I think I am.”

“All right. Let’s find out.” Minka stood, leaving both bottles on the bench. Garrett’s garden help came over to finish them off.

Meanwhile, Minka took Moultrie up to Wallace’s quarters on the second floor. Without knocking, Minka opened the door to peek in. “Wallace? Leese?”

Wallace’s wife Leese came up. “Oh, hello, Minka. Wallace is working on an injured man.”

Minka pulled Moultrie into the room. “Well, we need you, Leese. This is Moultrie. She thinks she might be pregnant, and we need to know if you can tell, but, she can’t be seen by any of Cennick’s men.” Minka looked cautiously back to Wallace’s surgery.

“Bring her in here.” Leese opened the door to another room. “Please wait out here while I examine her, Minka.”

“Yes. I’m going to arrange a room for her in the fortress. Please keep her here until I come back,” Minka said. Leese nodded as she shut the door.

Minka went quickly to Estes’ workroom. When he looked up at her entrance, she cautiously scanned the otherwise empty room and said quietly, “Moultrie thinks she’s pregnant; if she is, Cennick is the father.”

“Ohh.” Estes leaned back in his chair. “There it is, then.”

“Leese is examining her now, but we need a room for her,” Minka said.

“I’ll get a man on it,” Estes said, getting up.

“Ask Tourse,” she said with deliberate indifference. “But tell him she’s pregnant. If she is.”

Estes scrutinized her with a smile. “Are you matchmaking, Minka?”

“He started it,” she shrugged, and he laughed.

By the time Minka returned to Leese’s rooms, the doctor’s wife told her that, yes, Moultrie appeared to be pregnant. Tourse showed up to take her to a third-floor room, which ended Minka’s responsibility for her. So Minka got Joshua out of the nursery.

Kissing his face, she noted his hair growing back lush and black, as he would shortly be six months old. Then she got a blanket and a book to take him outside to the gardens. She was disappointed to find her Goadby’s gone, but it was unreasonable to leave it within reach of thirsty gardeners and expect it to stay put.

When she put Joshua down on the blanket, he immediately pushed up and began rocking on his knees. “What a fast learner you are,” she murmured, stroking his soft head. And she tried very hard not to cry. Courtesans who didn’t want babies got them, while those who wanted them badly were left barren.

“No,” she said, closing her eyes. “I have you. You are Efran’s, so you are mine.” She kissed that soft head. Looking up at her, he accidentally rolled over onto his back, where he kicked and chortled. “Yes, you are so very his,” she laughed, nuzzling his tummy.

At that time, Efran was interviewing the captain whom he had taken prisoner. Efran came into the young man’s temporary quarters on the third floor with two bottles of Goadby’s, one which he set on the table before his prisoner, and one which he kept in hand while sitting himself.

Efran leaned back, resting his right ankle (twinging only a little) across his left knee as he turned up the bottle. He watched while Shanko glanced at the label, glanced away, then reached over to pick it up. “You’re Eurussian nobility,” Efran observed.

The young man looked at him quickly. “How did you know?”

“Just a guess,” Efran said, studying his fussy haircut. “Who are your parents?”

“My father is Pierpont. My mother is Clairvaux,” he said in resignation.

Efran looked off, then shook his head slightly. “They’re not familiar to me, but Marguerite will know them.”

Shanko looked up with skeptical eyes. “Don’t try to tell me that you know Lady Marguerite.”

Efran smiled. “I am her darling Sybil’s handsome man.”

Shanko stared at him a moment, then his mouth dropped open. “Then you’re the Captain who stole her!”

“I am,” Efran laughed, taking another swig.

Shanko exhaled, looked at the bottle again, then took a long drink. “We can hardly get these in Eurus anymore.”

“Because we’re drinking it all down here,” Efran said with a pursed grin.

“Dam’ you; you’re not going to make me like you,” Shanko said, half laughing.

“No, I can see you’re made of steel,” Efran sardonically noted. “Why are you in Cennick’s army? Why are you in the army at all?”

“Dam’ you; I’m trying to earn some honor,” Shanko said, taking another long drink.

“To do that, you have to serve under an honorable man,” Efran observed.

“You?” Shanko asked, turning up the bottle again.

“I don’t know that we have an opening,” Efran said, grimacing.

“Oh, come now; you expect me to believe that I couldn’t buy my way under you as well?” the boy said, emptying his bottle.

“Let me get you another,” Efran said, standing. He opened the door to speak to the man outside, who ran off to quickly procure two more bottles. These Efran placed on the table, opening only one, as his own was still half full.

Shanko picked up the new bottle. “You were trying to convince me that you’re not interested in my money.”

“To be honest, no, I’m not. I just like you. I don’t want to see you get killed,” Efran said.

Shanko was bobbing a little. “If you cry when you say that, you’ll sound just like my mother.”

“Who sounds like a wise woman,” Efran said.

Shanko put both elbows on the table to turn up the bottle. “I want to do something meaningful.”

“Good! We’ll look around. You may want to train under Lord Justinian,” Efran said.

Shanko squinted as he drank. “Who’s that?”

“My ambassador, and a man of great skill,” Efran said.

“What will he teach me?” Shanko asked, blinking.

“Diplomacy. Subterfuge. And when necessary, how to kill,” Efran said.

Shanko eyed him as he drained the second Goadby’s. “The bottles are getting smaller,” he noted, focusing on the label.

“That’s what happens when you drink on an empty stomach,” Efran said. At a knock on the door, he rose to open it to a man with a plate of fried veal cutlets. He had also brought a fork, but no knife nor napkin.

As Efran put the plate on the table, Shanko lifted up. “What is that?”

“The work of an artist. When was the last time you ate?” Efran asked, picking up one cutlet to take a bite. He chewed, nodding. “Perfection.” Restoring the cutlet with a bite taken out of it, he nudged the plate toward his prisoner.

Armed with only the fork, Shanko dispatched both cutlets, then wiped his hands on his pants. He asked, “This is from your kitchen?”

“Yes,” Efran said with relish.

Shanko looked around. “I want to live here.”

“We might could arrange that. But first—” Efran got up to retrieve writing supplies from another table. “I want you to write your parents, and Lady Marguerite. Then you can rest.” And Efran dictated the letter to all three recipients while Shanko wielded the quill.

When Joshua was all worn out, and lay down to begin sucking his finger (not his thumb, his forefinger), Minka gathered up her blanket, her book, and him to take them all back to her and Efran's quarters. Almost before she laid him in his crib, he was asleep.

She went listlessly to the outer room with her book. She sat at the table to begin reading again, although she kept looking away from the words on the page. There was a fresh bottle of Goadby's on the small table, so she opened it to take a drink. She thought, and drank, and thought some more. By the time Efran opened the door, she had almost finished the bottle.

"Minka!" he said, smiling.

"Effry!" she greeted him.

"*Effry?*" he mouthed soundlessly.

"If you don't like that, we can go with Effy," she said, holding her head to giggle.

He picked up the almost empty bottle to put it out of reach. "When was the last time you had something to eat?"

"Eat? Eaty? Effry eaty?" She collapsed in laughter as Efran looked into the bedroom to see Joshua asleep. Then he went to the outer door to ask the man to bring him a plate.

"Did you get Moultrie out of Elvey's?" he asked cautiously, sitting with her at the table.

Minka nodded, her head bobbing. "She called him 'Loizy,'" she said, snorting.

He watched her. "Loizeaux? She called him 'Loizy'?" he repeated.

She nodded, laughing silently now. "Oh! I wonder if she calls Cennick 'Cennicky'?" She almost fell off the chair laughing, so he jumped up to catch her and set her back in the seat. "Or, 'Cenny,'" she laughed. "Which one would you rather be called, as the father of her baby?" she asked in sudden coherence.

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Chapter 12

Efran's face cleared. "Moultrie is pregnant by Cennick?"

Minka nodded repeatedly and unsteadily. "Leese confirmed it. Leesy did, too." She put her head on the table to laugh, her shoulders shaking. But something changed about her laughter, which started sounding like gasps, so Efran put her on his lap to hold her.

While tears hung on her eyelashes, she said, "The c-courtesans don't want babies, but they—they have them. I want a-a baby, but I c-can't have one." She turned to lay her head on his shoulder, and he rocked her, his own eyes watering.

“Then I will keep trying,” he whispered. At the knock on the door, he sprang up to put her in the chair and open the door. “Thank you,” he said, taking the plate and fork without looking up.

Arne looked at him, then glanced at Minka crying softly at the table, “I want a baby. I want my own in my stomach.” As Efran shut the door, Arne turned away with tears in his eyes. He was a sentimental man.

Efran put the plate on the table, then reached over to gather her onto his lap. “Here. The veal is very good.”

“I don’t want any,” she said, head on his shoulder.

“You need to eat,” he whispered.

“I’m all right,” she said, sitting up. “I just had to get it out of my system.”

“Please eat just a little,” he said, cutting it up with his fork. Yes, it was that tender.

She took the fork so he wouldn’t try to feed her himself. She ate a couple of bites, then put the fork back down. “It’s very good.”

“Eat just a little more,” he coaxed, so she took another bite.

“I’m all right now,” she assured him. “So, you don’t care for Effry?” she asked, smiling wetly.

“I . . . never imagined being called ‘Effry,’” he admitted. “But if you like it—”

She burst out laughing. “No, it’s perfectly silly, but your reaction was just what I hoped for.”

“I will keep trying,” he promised.

She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I have you and Joshua, and Toby, Noah, Pia, Ivy, and now Hassie. I don’t need to go through the pain of having my own. I don’t think I could. And I think that’s why I haven’t.”

He understood. He held her on his lap, her head on his neck. She reached up to brush his hair away from his eyes. “Joshua’s hair is growing back in. Did you see?” she said.

“Yes,” he said.

She whispered, “You and he are all I need. He is mine, because you are mine, and I didn’t have to almost die to get him.”

He nodded, sitting back to wipe his mouth. They were silent while he thought through this new development. “If Leese can already confirm a pregnancy, then Cennick had her while Loizeaux was still alive,” Efran observed.

“Yes, that’s what Moultrie said.”

“And then Cennick clears out the courtesans in a righteous rage when he assumes power. Oh, that looks bad,” Efran laughed.

“You confessed your sins to me,” she said, sitting up on his lap. He looked startled. “You didn’t know what I would do when you told me about the married women, and I did punish you for a while, until God decided you’d

had enough. But because I know that you tell me the truth, then I know I can trust you, and that you will be faithful.”

“Oh, there’s—no one else can touch you. I’ve never had anyone love me like you have—” he stammered.

“You don’t have to convince me. I’m already convinced.” She leaned over to press his lips with hers. “Have you eaten yet?”

“No,” he said, with a pained look.

“Finish my plate, and we’ll go into dinner for more,” she said. He dutifully picked up her fork.

They entered the dining hall minutes later, smiling and relaxed, though people who knew Minka well saw that she had been crying. But Efran had a firm hold on her hand as they sat at the back of the dining hall and he lifted his face at a kitchen assistant, who promptly came over. Efran wanted a full plate but Minka only wanted fruit and custard. This they received.

Toby sat to tell them about his and Tarrant’s latest project: building a storage shed for the hut. They had grown-up helpers (vetted by Ernst, the stonemason) who had authorized the use of a horse and cart to transport materials from the eastern portion of the stone wall under construction. Tarrant was already skilled at driving a cart; Toby was thrilled to learn.

Hassie came to sit beside Efran and Minka for a while as well, desiring to cuddle Efran. He smiled uncomfortably, trying to encourage her to sit up and talk to them, but she just wanted to scrunch up under his arm. He looked to Minka for help, who shook her head. “She’s safe there. You’re safe.”

So he loosely draped his right arm over Hassie while eating with his non-dominant left hand. After a little while, Cleo and Ivy called to her, so she jumped up to join them. Brows raised meaningfully, Minka smiled at him. *See? She’s safe.*

Estes came over to lean down between them and murmur, “Kelsey’s in some discomfort, so Bethune thinks it will be soon, probably tomorrow.”

“Can I help?” Minka breathed. “I can keep you in hot water.”

“Oh, your husband does that well, Minka,” Estes said earnestly.

Not getting the joke, she said, “Oh, no, he’ll be far too busy.”

So Estes smiled, “Yes, Minka, you’re welcome to come help.” She smiled, exhaling, while Efran and Estes exchanged glances.

Midmorning of the following day, June 24th, Minka had Joshua on the blanket in the gardens when Detler approached. “Lady Minka, the Captain wanted to advise you that Lady Kelsey’s in labor now.”

“Oh!” Minka gasped. “Thank you! I’ll be right up.” As Detler bowed and departed, she gathered Joshua up with his blanket, kissing him, and he put both little hands on her face. She paused at those deep brown eyes. “You are the very image of him,” she whispered. Cuddling him, she added, “Don’t worry; Kelsey will be fine.”

She took him to the nursery, seeing that there were two attendants in the babies' room. Then she hurried up to Estes' and Kelsey's rooms on the second floor. She knocked lightly and then went in, stopping at the door of the bedchamber. Estes and Bethune were leaning over Kelsey, who was breathing hard, gripping Estes' hand. Minka watched a ripple cross her uncovered abdomen, and Kelsey gasp in response.

Bethune looked over. "Hello, Minka. We'll need a lot of hot water soon."

"Yes," Minka said, turning to stoke the fire in the outer room. After checking to see how much water there was, she went to open the outer door and tell the man stationed there, "We need a lot of water." He gave her a brief salute and trotted off.

In Estes' second-floor workroom, Efran and DeWitt were bending over plot maps showing the projected wall construction eastward. "The wall stopped Cennick's troops dead on the road," Efran murmured. He remembered not long ago when there was no impediment to oncoming troops but meadowgrass. "We must get it completed around the eastern plots. When we expand beyond those, we'll add another section of wall."

"Agreed," DeWitt said.

A sentry appeared, saluting. "Captain, Mouris requests your ear."

Efran hung his head, uttering, "I'll be right down," while DeWitt looked at him with a tight smile. Efran raised his face as if about to say something, then shut his mouth and walked out.

Downstairs, Efran found Mouris waiting in the receiving room off the foyer. Entering, Efran shut the door behind him and regarded the desolate man.

Mouris looked at him with a frank, resolute face. "I'm ruined," Mouris said. "My shop is empty; I have no money left. I have not enough for my lease payment this month. And I have no idea where Adele is."

Efran sighed, "Minka did warn you. Thoroughly."

"I didn't believe her," Mouris said. "I thought that Adele would fall in love with me—women usually do. But she. . . ." He trailed off, unable to express in mere words the complete annihilation of his business, his hopes, and his life that she had caused in a mere five and a half weeks.

Efran groaned, "I know." He paused to consider his options, then said, "I will help you, once. If you take her back after this, I will not regard you at all."

Mouris sputtered, "Surely she wouldn't have the gall to come back after—"

"Not only will she come back if she needs to, you *will take her back* unless you insert an iron rod in your spine," Efran said through clenched teeth. "Surely you know this," he said, quieter. Mouris studied him, then nodded reluctantly.

"Marry you a good woman," Efran said almost pleadingly. "She will shield you." Mouris looked dubious, so Efran held up his hands. "I've said my piece. You are forewarned."

He opened the door to gesture to Bennard at the front door. "Go tell DeWitt—he's in Estes' workroom—that I need fifty royals"—an exceedingly generous amount for the situation at hand.

“Cap’n.” Bennard saluted and went off at a light run.

Efran and Mouris waited quietly until Bennard returned to hand Efran a heavy pouch. “Thank you,” Efran said, then turned to give it to Mouris. “Regard what I told you; I mean it.”

Mouris took the pouch. “I will. That’s good of you,” he said as if making a concession. He went across the foyer to Doane’s cubicle to pay his lease fee for the month, then walked on out.

Regarding the vaulted ceiling of the foyer high above his head, Efran thought, *He holds me responsible because Adele is Minka’s sister. In his view, since I can afford to pay, then I should.* Expelling a breath, Efran muttered, “Hassler will come to me next.”

As Kelsey’s labor progressed, Minka worked like a galley maid to keep hot water available at Bethune’s every gesture. Kelsey gasped, and cried out a little, but she never screamed like Adele had. Then before long, Bethune was telling her to push. Minka came into the room to watch the baby slide out into Bethune’s waiting hands.

“Wash your hands, Minka,” Bethune said, and Minka promptly turned to the basin she had just brought in. When she had shaken them dry, Bethune said, “Get the scissors and the string on the cloth there. Remember?”

“Yes,” Minka said. Under Bethune’s direction, she had cut Joshua’s umbilical cord. Now, with scissors and string in hand, she watched as Bethune tilted the new baby on his side and patted his back. A little fluid came out of his mouth, then he started crying. And Bethune put him in Estes’ waiting hands. “Oh, he’s beautiful,” Minka breathed.

“Wait a moment,” Bethune told Estes, who was trying to show him to Kelsey. “All right, now, Minka—you may tie the cord and cut it like you did for Joshua.”

“Yes,” Minka said. When she had done this, Estes was able to place his newborn son into his mother’s arms. Kelsey, crying, put him to her breast at once. Bethune was examining the afterbirth to see that it was intact.

“Oh,” Minka breathed in wonder, stepping back. She washed her hands in the basin again, then stepped out of the room. Without regarding anything around her, she went down the corridor to Estes’ workroom.

DeWitt looked up as she stood in the doorway. “Kelsey has had a beautiful baby boy. They are both fine. Please tell Efran,” she said, eyes glazed.

He smiled. “Yes, Minka. Thank you for telling me.”

She nodded and withdrew, going immediately to the nursery for Joshua. He was asleep, so she left him there to go outside to the gardens. She walked from bed to bed, looking at the Forget-Me-Nots and Primroses, the raspberries and grapevines, and the rabbit sneaking a bite from the lettuces. Then Minka sat on the bench under the great old walnut tree, marveling.

“He just—came right out. There was a little blood, but, she didn’t scream, or hemorrhage—oh, thank you, God.” She put her head in one hand to cry in relief.

Arne, watching her from a distance, turned to enter the fortress back door. He went up the corridor toward the front, where he saw Efran coming toward him. “Cap’n,” Arne said, his voice cracking.

“Yes?” Efran came up to him in concern. Arne was crying, which was unprecedented. “What is it?” Efran breathed in fear.

“She’s on the bench under the walnut, sir,” Arne got out, his face wracked in grief. Efran patted his shoulder and ran down the corridor to the back door.

He hastened down the steps, eyes on the girl sitting on the bench. When his foot hit the edge of the step so that he almost fell again, he heeded the warning to slow down. From there, he only walked quickly toward her.

Minka looked up with a wet face and gleaming eyes. “Oh, Efran!” She raised her arms and he caught her up. “Oh, she made it look so easy! They have a beautiful baby boy—I don’t know his name yet—but she’s fine, Efran. He just came right out like he was supposed to, and—they’re fine.” She shrugged as if the miraculous happened every day.

“I’m so glad,” he whispered, gripping her in utter relief. “I will go up and see them, if Bethune will let me in. And—you might want to go comfort Arne.”

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Chapter 13

Minka blinked at Efran. “What?” she said.

“Arne saw you crying, and it upset him very much,” Efran said, laughing a little.

“Arne? The—big one with the broken nose?” she said dubiously.

“Yes. I left him crying in the corridor,” Efran said.

“He was crying because I was crying?” she asked, pained. He nodded. “Oh, dear. I need to be more careful what I do outside,” she murmured.

“There he is. He just came down the steps at the back door,” Efran said with a discreet nod. “I’ll go up to see Estes’ baby, and you can tell Arne—you’re all right,” he said cautiously. He didn’t want to give her permission to hug soldiers, but, Arne was a good man and it might be warranted, in this case.

“You’re afraid I’ll hug him,” she said with a dubious smile as they walked toward the back door. Arne turned away, trying to look busy at something. Efran grimaced, admitting nothing.

So while Efran entered the back door, Minka paused beside the soldier at the steps. “Hello, Arne.”

He inclined his head to her, not looking up. “Lady Minka. What can I do for you?”

“I wanted to tell you that Estes and Kelsey just had a baby boy. I got to watch his being born, and—it was so wonderful to see that he came out all right, and Kelsey is fine. I am very silly to cry over happy things sometimes, but, today when I cried, it was because I am very happy for them.” She looked up at him with a tentative smile.

“That’s good to know, Lady Minka,” he said, sniffing. “Thank you for telling me.” He was dropping tears.

“Don’t cry; you’ll make me cry!” she cried.

“I’m sorry, Lady Minka!” he said, his face screwing up. So of course she had to put her arms around his great chest, as far as she could reach, so that he would know it was fine.

“Are you handing out healing hugs?” someone said, and Minka turned to look.

“Connor!” she cried. “You’re up!” He grinned, receiving her hug. So men began lining up behind him.

But when Martyn cut to the front of the line, they dropped away. “May I walk you inside, Lady Minka?” he asked with the barest smile, offering his arm.

She lowered her abashed face. “Yes. Thank you, Martyn.” While the men returned to their work, Martyn took her into the fortress. “I need to check on Joshua in the nursery,” she murmured. He nodded, escorting her clear to the nursery door. “You’re a good guardian, Martyn,” she said, smiling, and reached up to hug him. This he permitted.

Efran saw Estes’ son, and then heard from several confidantes about all the men who wanted to hug his wife. In the workroom again with DeWitt, he muttered, “What do I do? I can’t lock her in our rooms.”

“Eh, I wouldn’t like it if a bunch of men wanted to hug my Tera,” DeWitt said. “But with Minka it’s different. I know she’s your wife—we all do—but she’s also something of an icon, a symbol of the Abbey. Minka is always happy, except when she’s in tears, but—she loves this place and its people, and she expresses that. I think that’s what the men are seeing in her.”

Efran thought about that. “I think you’re right, as far as most of the men are concerned. But there are a few, like Krems and Clute, who want her in a—personal way.”

“Yes, I’m sure there are. But if any of the other men saw that, they’d deal with it as young Martyn did. Perhaps not as efficiently, but with the same result,” DeWitt said. While not entirely satisfied, Efran accepted that.

Three days later, on June 27th, Minka received a letter via Marguerite’s messengers. One of them handed it to her with the seal broken. “Lady Minka, from Lord Justinian. We were stopped on the way by Cennick’s guard, who looked at it and gave it back to us.”

“Oh! Thank you,” she said, taking the wrinkled packet. She turned to a nearby man. “Mohr, please get them dinner and put them in a room for tonight. It’s too late for them to return to Eurus.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, gesturing the two weary riders to follow. Ever since she saw Arne crying, she began making the effort to learn the soldiers’ names. It just seemed right to acknowledge them.

Minka opened the parchment to read:

“My dearest Minka,

“I have had the most wonderful reception by our dear Auntie Marguerite. I cannot begin to describe to you the food, but you know exactly the kind of fare that our Marguerite serves. Hartshough is continually running out of foie gras AND servants, so he’s going out all over the countryside trying to procure both. What a scene!

“But at least Hartshough has plenty of chicken crêpes for everyone. Marguerite loves them, you know—she had three times as many as anyone else I saw, even Boylston! And he is such a pig! By the way, Marguerite is sending funnel cakes to friends all over the area, including Schwedler, because she is so fond of them.

“Oh, and the hired help are VERY unhappy with the housecleaning that Hartshough has ordered. Some of them are trying to get him fired! Can you imagine it? His butler is threatening to leave, as well.

“ANYWAY, I can hardly wait to see you and that curmudgeon of yours, although if I see just you, that will be even better.

“Much love and many kisses,
“Your Justinian”

After reading this letter several times—and enjoying it each time—Minka pulled out the key that he had left with Efran. She knew that this letter must be about more than Hartshough and funnel cakes. The relevant items in the key appeared to be:

Words used in letter —> mean this

Hartshough —> Cennick

butler —> Fanny

any name starting with “S” —> Efran

any name starting with “B” —> Loizeaux

any food starting with “C” —> taxes

any food starting with “F” —> money

servants —> troops

hired help —> nobles

housecleaning —> aggression

sending —> hiding

After studying the letter and the key, Minka found paper, ink, and quill to write her decryption:

Cennick is running out of money and troops.

He is raising taxes on everyone; Marguerite is paying three times what she paid under Loizeaux.

Marguerite is hiding resources with friends, and may be sending some down to the Abbey Lands. (?) [Minka was unsure of her decryption here.]

Nobles are very unhappy with Cennick's aggression and want him deposed.

Fanny is threatening to leave him.

Having produced this, Minka took Justinian's letter, the key, and her decryption up to Estes' workroom. She thought that Efran would be here—which he was—but she was pleased to see Estes as well. "Oh, Estes! You're back at work! How is Kelsey? And the baby?"

Estes smiled. "She's sore but recovering nicely with Bethune. And our little warrior is feeding well. His name is Malan." This was a Polonti name, of course.

"I'm so glad," she said. Efran waited while she sighed, then presented him with sheets of parchment. "The letter is from Justinian at Marguerite's Featherstone. Her messengers said they were searched, but allowed to go on with his letter after Cennick's man had read it. I've translated it as best I could. Oh, and I put them in a room for the night."

"Thank you, Minka," Efran said, then he and Estes bent over the sheets. While they studied these, Minka drifted to the window to look over the eastern Abbey Lands. The east branch of the Passage, which marked the border, was barely in view from here. Minka could hardly believe that all this land belonged to them.

"Well done, Minka," Estes said, raising up. She looked back to them, smiling.

Turning his eyes up at her, Efran said, "My, he enjoyed writing that. But yes, I think your decoding is accurate."

"Now, knowing that our reply may be seen as well, what do we say?" Estes asked.

Efran stretched out a hand to give her back the parchments with his request. "Tell him how vexed I am about the biting eelfish in the cavern waters. [A lie.] Tell him that the courtesans were unhappy here, and most have left for Crescent Hollow. [Another lie.] Tell him that we have many soldiers living on the plots now. [Minimally true.] And tell him . . . Awfyn's brother is coming for Fanny." About six weeks ago, Efran had killed the giant Polonti criminal after he had come to try to take Adele from Mouris.

Estes and Minka stared at him. "Does Awfyn have a brother?" Estes asked.

"He does now," Efran said. "His name is . . . Orwig," he shrugged. "He is also a giant, of course, and has a following of not only Polonti, but also disgruntled Southerners."

Estes gaped. "The depth of your duplicity is—stunning."

"Thank you," Efran smiled. Glancing at Minka, he said, "I'd prefer you not adore me for that."

"I can't help it," she laughed.

"Understandable," Efran admitted, leaning back. "Send the messengers off with our reply in the morning, but since they're not ours, they don't require hugs."

“Beast,” Minka murmured, still laughing.

The following morning, June 28th, Marguerite’s messengers were dispatched with Minka’s reply to Justinian, containing all the points that Efran had dictated. In addition, Minka sent a newsy, loving letter to Marguerite, unsealed, as it contained nothing that required concealment.

A few hours after the messengers had departed, Minka was again in Estes’ workroom, showing him and Efran copies of the letters she had sent to Justinian and Marguerite. (She had been delayed by the necessity of visiting Kelsey and her baby Malan with a gift, and then taking Joshua out to the exploding gardens in the brilliant June sunshine.)

While she was in the workroom, they heard the courtyard gates bell clanging. As Efran and Estes rose to leave the room, Minka followed. Efran looked back at her, and she said, “Let me come see if someone is hurt.” This he permitted, and they went on out.

They pushed past the onlookers at the courtyard gates to see a group of about twenty armed men on horseback stopped at the wall gates far below. The wall gate sentry who had ridden up the switchback saluted to Efran. “Captain, the leader of the group below says he’s Awfyn’s brother Wigner, come to avenge his death.”

Estes and Minka stared at Efran, who looked interested. “Horse!” he called, and one was promptly brought to him. As he swung up to the saddle, he smiled down at them. “Well, here is our fabrication come to life. With any luck, and Goadby’s Best Ale, we can sidetrack them up to Eurus. Oh—send a man in to tell Madea we have about twenty guests for her second- or third-best fare.”

Estes agreed, laughing. Accompanied by the wall gate sentry, Efran rode down to the closed gates to pull up before the motley crew of Polonti and Southerners. They were poorly armed, somewhat ragged, on inferior horses. “I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Lands. Who are you and what do you want?”

A Polonti in front, tall but no giant, raised his spear and shouted, “I am Wigner, brother of Awfyn, and have come to make you pay for his death!”

Efran replied, “Brother Wigner, Awfyn was my *maka*, and his death grieved me. But if you and your men will lay down your arms, I wish you to come feast in my house and enjoy Goadby’s Best Ale as consolation.” This was not a lie: Efran grieved Awfyn’s breaking faith with him, and killed him in self-defense.

Several of Wigner’s men immediately threw down their spears while Wigner himself hesitated. “All of your weapons,” Efran said. “The Polonti babies in this fortress have their own”—referencing Wigner’s subpar weaponry.

Some of the group squinted, wondering if they’d just been insulted, but Wigner tossed down his spear and knife. So the rest did likewise, and Efran gestured for the gates to be opened. “Come, then,” he said, turning his horse toward the switchback.

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Chapter 14

Efran had the group seated in the large dining hall, where they feasted on Madea's roasted chicken and fried trout, plus all the Goadby's they wanted. Then he asked Wigner how he knew of Awfyn's death. Wigner told him, Estes, and Barr: "We saw the woman Adele when she was with him in Westford, but then they broke camp there, and had to leave the woman behind. But then he heard she was here with a plant seller, and came for her."

Efran said, "I see, but I want to know how he heard of Adele and the plant seller."

"A man here, Grice, told us. He gave us news for money," Wigner said unwarily, having had two Goadby's by this time.

Efran turned his eyes to Barr, who blinked in confirmation: Grice was one of their own men. Efran told Wigner amiably, "I see. Well, Grice was correct about that, but he could not foresee what would happen. None of us could. For while Adele was here at that time, she is not the one who was smitten with Awfyn. Have you heard of the Lady Fanny?"

Wigner squinted. "Was she . . . a whore of Loizeaux's?"

"She was his favorite *courtesan*, the most beautiful woman on the Southern Continent. But she left Loizeaux, and showed up here, to fall in love with. . . ." Efran trailed off.

"My brother!" Wigner cried.

Efran inclined his head. "You said it. But Cennick, the usurper who murdered Loizeaux, has taken her captive in Euris. As a matter of justice, and in memory of your brother, I will support you in riding to Euris to free her." His men cheered this, and called for more ale.

Efran gave it to them, then told a guard, "Summon Lwoff."

The man froze. "Who, Captain?"

"Lwoff. He sees to the armory in the woods," Efran said without rebuke.

"Captain." The man saluted and ran out. Wigner and his men continued to eat and drink.

Lwoff appeared in the hall, wondering but composed, and saluted Efran. "Cap'n?"

"Lwoff, this is Awfyn's brother Wigner and his men. Wigner, Lwoff is a decorated soldier, an expert in arms, who personally helped me with a difficult task. [All true.] Lwoff, I wish you to equip these men for an expedition to Euris to free the Lady Fanny from Cennick. They will rest today and tonight in the woods and leave first thing tomorrow morning. I wish Grice to go with them as guide. When they are ready to leave in the morning, I will have them given a packet of royals for their expenses," Efran said.

"Yes sir, Cap'n!" Lwoff said agreeably. Wigner and his men found this plan most satisfactory.

Before Lwoff took charge of them, Efran had one more word for Wigner: "When you complete your mission, Cennick will look for you here first, so don't come down this way; strike out for your camp." Wigner agreed, and Lwoff took them out.

Efran told Barr, “Find Goss or Krall—whoever’s with Pia in the woods—and tell them why all the men are there. I don’t want her anywhere near Wigner’s crew.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr nodded, moving out.

So early the following morning, June 29th, Efran went out to the courtyard to inspect Wigner’s party. He found their horses groomed and rested, and themselves fully armed and ready to ride. Efran silently counted the men, making sure that all of them were here, and Grice as well (who looked vastly uncomfortable). The kitchen sent out pouches of provisions, and Efran handed up a packet of twenty royals to Wigner, who fastened it around his waist.

Then Efran stepped back. “For Awfyn and Lady Fanny.”

“For Awfyn and Lady Fanny!” the men shouted, emerging from the courtyard gates to trot down the switchback. Efran, Estes, Barr and others of the army watched them go, smiling.

When they were well away, Efran said, “That was fun.”

Barr grinned, but Estes said, “I am still wondering how you managed to produce a younger brother for Awfyn out of thin air.”

“No magic,” laughed Efran. “I just remembered Awfyn mentioning him. And you of all people should know how the Polonti are about avenging a death.”

“True,” Estes murmured.

That day, Efran received two replies to Shanko’s letters (Cennick’s young captain whom Efran had hauled over the wall)—one from his parents, and the other from Marguerite. Both had been delivered by the same messenger, who had been stopped by Cennick’s guards to have his messages opened and read. For almost a week now, Shanko had been training in Neale’s unit, which included Efran’s stealth fighters: those who operated unconventionally. (This was also the unit that Gabriel and his sister Geneve were in, who had both received commendations for their part in rescuing Toby and Tarrant from the cavern.)

While sitting in the workroom with Estes and DeWitt, Efran opened the first letter, that from Shanko’s parents:

“Dearest Shanko:

“I fainted dead away upon receiving your letter that you are now in training with the notorious Polonti captain who took to wife the young Sybil before she could be married off decently to someone of repute, and am earnestly expecting to see you back on our doorstep when it becomes apparent how futile such service under a criminal is. I hardly can imagine how we shall explain to the distinguished Surchatain Cennick your actions, and expect that you shall come to your senses immediately upon the receipt of this letter. Furthermore, by no means are you to make contact with that criminal of the shifting shop Schmolck; I absolutely forbid it. Do heed my entreaties, darling Shanko, and come to us with all haste.

“Your pining mother,
“Clairvaux”

“Shanko:

“Can you get us Goadby’s up here?”

“Regards,
“Pierpont”

Efran had a good laugh at this, then asked Estes and DeWitt, “What is this about the ‘shifting shop Schmolck’? She wants Shanko to go see him.”

Estes looked up from his paperwork to shake his head. DeWitt mused, “Schmolck’s shifting shop. I’ve heard of it, but. . . .” He looked to the sentry just outside the open door. “Doudney.”

“Sir.” Doudney stepped in, saluting.

“Get Towner up here, please,” DeWitt said. Doudney saluted again and disappeared.

While he was gone, Efran went on to Marguerite’s reply to Shanko:

“My dear Shanko:

“My, what a sensation you have caused, getting yourself captured by Sybil’s notorious Captain. Your sister would never approve. I hope you have not shifted from the values of your dear parents.

“With all love,
“Marguerite”

The intrigue of this short letter captured Efran completely. There was a wealth of information in these three sentences, if he could only interpret them right.

While he was deep in contemplation of this, Towner appeared at the door. “Sir?” Towner asked, glancing at all three. Efran looked at him pensively while DeWitt said, “Yes, Towner, you know something about the shifting shop of Schmolck’s, don’t you?”

“Yes, sir, somewhat, though I’ve never been there. This Schmolck moves his shop daily to avoid the tax assessor—don’t ask me how! But to find where he is on a particular day, you have to know one of his confidential contacts. And his shop is unusual—it’s like a consignment shop, except for particular buyers. What I mean is, someone has something for someone else, but for one reason or another, they can’t give it to the person directly. So they will place it with Schmolck, and let the recipient know to go to him. The recipient pays Schmolck, who then gives him the item that the first party placed with him. He’s very reliable and has never been caught. Ever,” Towner said.

Efran said, “Get me someone who can find Schmolck and get what Clairvaux placed with him for Shanko.”

“Yes, Captain,” Towner said. “Only, his fee may be as much as ten, twenty royals.”

“Take forty. Estes?” Efran turned.

Estes got up to give Towner a heavy pouch. “There’s fifty, Towner.”

“Thank you, Sir. Captain. Administrator.” Towner saluted and went out with the pouch.

Efran returned to Marguerite’s letter, boring into it with every ounce of concentration he had. At length he put it down; there was more information he required to understand it. So he asked Doudney to bring up Neale.

When he appeared and saluted, Efran asked, “So, Neale, after six days of watching Shanko, what do you think?”

“Well, Captain,” Neale said, looking pained, “he—hasn’t hurt himself yet.”

All three men laughed, and Neale scratched his eyebrow in contemplation. “He has great aspirations, sir, just—no real drive or self-discipline. His greatest talent, frankly, is whistling tunes. He can whistle anything.”

Mildly snorting, Efran said, “All right, Neale, let him hang around a while longer until I see where he fits. His mother wants me to.”

“Yes, sir,” Neale laughed.

Deciding that this was a good time to check on the east wall construction, Efran took a horse to ride down and have a look. Ernst was proud to show him their progress; after another twenty feet, they would turn construction southward to the hill, with gates and openings for probably three of the east-west plot roads. But Efran, seeing how effective even a partial wall had been in impeding Cennick and Wigner, wanted it completed. Quickly.

Turning back west from there, he rode across the Passage to see the boys’ work on their storage shed. Tarrant, Toby, Noah, Ivy and Hassie were thrilled to show it to him, as all of them were working on it under Connor’s supervision. He assured Efran that he was quite healed for this moderate activity, and that any more lying in bed would drive him insane.

Following that, Efran went to his quarters to find that Minka had just brought Joshua in to nap after exercising in the garden. So he had to tell her all about Shanko, his letters, the east wall, and the children’s storage shed. When they had gotten dressed again after that conversation, Efran was requested to come to the workroom, where Towner’s man had just returned from Schmolck.

As Efran entered the workroom and shut the door behind him, he glanced at Estes and DeWitt sitting at the table and three young men standing before them. Efran walked over to look at them, and Towner said, “Captain, you know Truro; he’s in my unit now.” Truro saluted, and Efran nodded: he was one of the Forty who came out to support him when Loizeaux attacked. Towner continued, “He found Schmolck’s shop and retrieved the item Shanko’s mother had left for him. And, that is Shanko’s cousin Xavier. He wants to be in the army.”

One look at Xavier fully enlightened Efran regarding Marguerite’s letter. The youngster before him was slender, with a hard, dangerous face, dressed in a nondescript gray uniform, used but not ragged. Efran said, “So Clairvaux left Xavier with Schmolck for us.”

“Apparently so, Captain,” Towner said.

Glancing at Truro, Efran said, “Well done.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Truro saluted.

Efran told him, “Make another run to Schmolck. Take him a case of Goadby’s for Pierpont of Eurus.”

“Yes, sir!” Truro grinned as he saluted and left.

Efran returned his attention to the aspiring recruit. “So, Xavier, how old are you?”

“Fourteen,” came the husky whisper.

Efran said, “New recruits are required to pass physical tests, you know”—implying that Xavier’s passing was doubtful.

Xavier’s face went black as Efran smiled, chin down. In a flash, Xavier lunged at him with something shiny. DeWitt shouted and Towner jumped while Efran caught the wrist in one hand and shook the blade free.

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Chapter 15

DeWitt lit into the youngster: “The use of a weapon against a superior is—”

Efran said, “Pardon, Administrator DeWitt, but I invited it with an insult.” With the same hazy smile, he looked back to the youth. In another burst of speed, Xavier shot a foot toward Efran’s groin, getting very close before Efran caught the foot to flip the recruit to the floor.

Xavier quickly rolled over, squatting in a three-point stance to make a lightning-quick feint at Efran’s eyes while catching one of his fingers. But Efran had been tutored by Geneve’s use of this technique—he jerked his hand free and grabbed Xavier’s wrist. With a spin, Efran caught the other wrist to cross the arms as binding ropes. It almost looked like a dance.

Breathing heavily, Xavier’s head hung in defeat, and Efran let go. “You pass. You’ll be in Neale’s unit. I already have one woman on his squad; she can help you acclimate. And you need not hide your sex.”

Everyone in the room stared at Efran. He said, “I take this to be Shanko’s sister. I need to know your real name.”

She looked up reluctantly. “Tess, Captain. How . . . did I give myself away?”

He sighed, “There’s something about a girl’s hips.” She smiled tightly in embarrassment, and Efran added, “Besides which, Marguerite told me in her letter to Shanko.” Her eyes darted back to him with a humorous glare.

“How old are you, really?” he asked.

“Seventeen, Captain,” she said.

“Minka’s age,” he murmured. “Please no one tell her that I put a seventeen-year-old girl in the army,” he groaned.

They laughed, mostly in disbelief, and Efran gestured. "Take her to Neale, please, Towner."

"Yes, Captain," he said, stepping back to make way for the strange creature.

"Now," Efran said, turning to DeWitt and Estes, "help me figure out how to tell Clairvaux that we have her daughter here, tell Marguerite the same, and tell Pierpont to go get his Goadby's."

After some discussion, they came up with this:

"To the Lady Clairvaux, Lord Pierpont, and Lady Marguerite of Eurus

"From Efran, Lord of the Abby Fortress and Lands:

"Greetings. I have intercepted your letters to Shanko, and regret to tell you that despite your wishes, I will keep him and his cousin confined here until I decide what to do with them. Your warning about Schmolck is also pointless; I have checked and the man has nothing for Shanko or Pierpont.

"While your loyalty to Cennick is disturbing, I have no intention of challenging him, so you need not worry about seeing your son and nephew die in Eurus."

"That's rather elegant," DeWitt said in admiration.

"Touching, really," Efran agreed. "Let's seal it up and get it out tomorrow morning, Estes."

"Yes," Estes said, reaching for the sealing wax.

The following morning, June 30th, the three men were again in the workroom after having handed that letter to their couriers. DeWitt reminded them to be reluctant but not defiant in allowing Cennick's men to open it, should they demand.

At that time, Tourse requested entrance, and was granted. He saluted, looking haggard, and said, "Captain, I respectfully request that another man or woman be assigned to Moultrie so that I may perform a more rewarding task, like mucking the stables."

His hearers laughed, then DeWitt asked, "What is the problem?"

"Oh, the vacuity, sir," Tourse groaned. "I had mistakenly assumed that she was like—" He broke off, looking at the Captain, who smiled. Then Tourse asked, "Is Lady Minka's sister anything like her?"

"No, oh no," Efran said in warning, while Estes shook his head and DeWitt looked squeamish. "She destroys people, especially men," Efran added, then asked DeWitt, "There's no reason Moultrie can't go back to Elvey's, is there?"

"No, but there's no telling how long she can work, being pregnant," DeWitt said.

"Very well; we'll keep an eye on her. Take her back to Elvey, and then you're free," Efran told Tourse, who saluted and left.

Shortly thereafter, Minka entered. “What’s wrong with Tourse? I just passed him in the corridor, and—”

Efran stood, almost glassy-eyed. “I will put him to mucking stables if he asked you for a hug.”

Minka looked at him in near-consternation. “No, I just patted his shoulder. That’s all right, isn’t it?”

Efran sat, still dark. “How many pats?” he asked. Minka raised her shoulders helplessly.

DeWitt said, “Don’t mind him, Minka; he’s just very satisfied with our recent letters.”

She glanced at DeWitt blankly, then said, “I’d . . . like to see if Mouris has the new hand tools he promised me.”

“Take two men with you. Don’t hug them,” Efran said.

Looking hurt, she began to turn out, but Efran jumped up, intercepting her before she could leave. He bent down to whisper in her ear; she nodded, raising her arms to his neck. After a few minutes of consolation, he released her, happy again.

When she had left, Efran flung himself into his chair and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. He looked at the ceiling to mutter tightly, “This is absurd. I’m either quivering in fear that something will happen to her, or raging in jealousy.” He looked at the other two men.

Because he was waiting for them to say something, Estes observed, “Part of the problem is that she’s so visible, Efran. Everyone watches you, so everyone is looking at her, as well. You’ll find your balance, and you already know who you can trust.”

Efran mutely agreed with that, then looked to DeWitt. He smiled sympathetically. “You have to trust her, Efran. And when all else fails, trust God.”

That pointed counsel made Efran put his head in his hands.

When going anywhere without Efran, Minka chose a conventional riding skirt rather than pants. So that is what she was wearing this morning when she came down to the courtyard to request a horse. She also told the guards, “I’m to have two bodyguards today.” She couldn’t help that it came out so dismally.

“Certainly, Lady Minka,” one man said, whose name she didn’t know. And she was afraid to ask, for appearing forward.

Minka did not know that Efran had stipulated an order of preference for her bodyguards: Martyn, Barr, Rigdon, or Hawk, in that order, were to be assigned her when she went out, if they were available. They were not to be taken off current duty in order to attend her. So today, the two who reported were Martyn and Geneve.

Minka greeted them, smiling tentatively. “Thank you for volunteering to babysit me. I’ll try not to take up too much of your time.”

Martyn said, “Lady Minka, it’s an honor.”

Geneve added, “It certainly is; the Captain is very particular about who he allows to guard you.” Minka smiled, not much comforted.

As they mounted and began descending the switchback at a walk, Minka told them, “I hope Mouris has his shop restocked; he promised me hand tools that I need for gardening. It’s getting harder to do it with Joshua, as well—he loves digging in the dirt. He eats it if I’m not watchful!”

She was so horrified by this new habit that they laughed. “I think that’s a necessary part of childhood, Lady Minka,” Geneve said.

“Just Minka, please,” she said. “I’d like to pretend we’re not minding rank.” Geneve glanced down, nodding.

Martyn observed, “Efran was always insistent about that, as well. I had almost forgotten how often he told me not to call him ‘Lord.’” Minka glanced at him in gratitude.

Arriving at Mouris’ shop, Minka said hopefully, “Well, at least it’s open.” They dismounted and tied off their horses, then went into the large front space that showcased his stock.

As Minka walked down the nearest aisle, her hopes deflated. It was orderly but mostly barren. Many of the plants were dry and wilted, and Minka saw no hand tools. There were not very many pots, either.

She began to turn out when they all heard shouting from the back: “Just because I have to take a few days off—no really, the way you were working me. . . . Oh, that’s just an excuse. There was nothing between us—no, of course not! What do you think I am?” It was Adele’s voice. Mouris’ voice was fainter, as he was doing a better job controlling his temper.

“We can go now,” Minka exhaled.

She was exiting with her bodyguard when Adele emerged from the back, catching sight of her. “Well, look who’s here! You’re the one who told Mouris to ‘get a backbone’ with me!” Adele sneered, bearing down on her.

“Stop,” Martyn said.

“You mustn’t hurt her, Martyn,” Minka breathed.

“Understood, Minka,” he said. But he and Geneve blocked Adele’s path as Minka began to leave.

Mouris, emerging to see Minka walking out, ran forward. “Oh, don’t leave, Lady Minka! I just got in new stock that I was about to put out.”

Adele screeched in laughter. ““Oh, don’t leave, Lady Minka!”” she cried mockingly. “Please stay and spend your husband’s royals on my worthless stock!”

Mouris turned and slapped Adele across the face. Geneve and Martyn looked quickly at Minka. She paused, then resumed her exit. They stuck right with her.

As the three mounted, Mouris ran out after them. Adele followed him to mock and jeer, encompassing Minka in her abuse. She rode off at a walk, Martyn and Geneve on either side. They watched her bow her head to cry silently.

Then Geneve said, “I think we need to stop at Croft’s. What do you think, Martyn?”

“That sounds like a good idea, Geneve,” he said.

“I c-can’t get drunk,” Minka said.

“You don’t have to drink, but you should eat. I’d like something to eat. Doesn’t Croft’s have really good Brie and Edam?” Geneve asked.

“I’ve heard they do,” Martyn said.

“I’d like that. I’ve never been to Croft’s,” Minka said, smiling.

“You haven’t? Then let’s!” Geneve said.

So they three left their horses with Croft’s hostler and went in to find a nice corner booth. Soon they had a cheese plate with a side of vegetable soup and a Goadby’s each. Minka announced, “You and Martyn may have two, but I’m limited to one. They make me laugh.”

“Oh, well, funny stories can do that,” Geneve said. “Did I ever tell you how much trouble Gabriel got into when he was little?”

“No,” Minka grinned.

So Geneve told her stories about her troublesome older brother, and Minka laughed hard. Then she had to tell them all about finding the handsome Polonti captain just recovering from the fever in her henhouse, and everything that happened in the days following. Over cheese, soup, and ale, Geneve and Martyn found these stories intensely interesting—as did several eavesdroppers nearby.

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Chapter 16

While Minka, Martyn, and Geneve were at Croft’s, Estes, DeWitt, and Efran were finishing up maps of projected plots east of the main road. Just when they had agreed to ride out with the surveyors to assess the cavern situation, the courtyard gates bell rang. Efran looked up quickly at the other two, but DeWitt held up a hand. “You should not be running out to handle every issue that comes up, Efran. We have competent men to do that.”

“But, Minka—” Efran began.

Hand still raised, DeWitt insisted, “Let’s see if this involves her or not.”

“Yes. You’re right.” Efran sat determinedly.

Saluting, Loseby appeared at the door. Efran had stood before Loseby said, “Steward, the Lady Kelsey requests your presence.”

“Yes,” Estes said quickly. “Excuse me, Efran, DeWitt.”

They nodded, and Efran eased back down. Another sentry, Dango, appeared, having come from the courtyard gates. “Captain, a fight has broken out at Mouris’ plant shop.”

Without looking, Efran felt DeWitt’s restraining gaze. So Efran asked, “Is Minka there?”

“I don’t know, sir,” Dango said.

Efran, composed, said, “Find out if she is there, and who is guarding her.”

“Yes, sir.” Dango saluted and ran off.

Although Efran was still sitting, he had to concentrate to bring down his escalated heart rate.

In a few minutes Dango returned. “The Lady Minka is not at Mouris’, Captain; she left some time ago with her guardians Martyn and Geneve. The Gate Commander Krall is assessing damages from the fight, which involved Mouris, Adele, and at least two other men who ran off.”

“Ah. Thank you,” Efran said, sitting back.

“Should we search for the Lady Minka, Captain?” Dango asked.

“When she’s with Martyn and Geneve? No,” Efran said.

After Dango had left, Efran admitted to DeWitt, “You were right.” DeWitt grunted, being about ten years older than Efran. When he had been a Captain in the Westfordian army, DeWitt had been aide to Commander Wendt.

They were finishing up their notes, waiting to see if Estes would make it back any time soon, when the door sentry Eustace showed up. “Pardon, Captain; Edson requests your ear.”

Efran paused, not knowing the name, but that never stopped him from listening to someone. “Show him in, and stay yourself.”

“Sir.” Eustace departed, then brought in a sharp-eyed man in tradesman clothes.

Efran glanced up from the table at which he sat. “Edson? Have a seat.”

“Thank you, sir, but it might be best if we spoke in private,” the man said, slightly nervous.

Efran barely looked up again. “Oh, these men are entirely discreet,” he said dryly. “What is the problem?”

“Well, sir, to be frank—it’s your wife,” Edson said.

Both Efran and DeWitt regarded him with hard eyes. “Yes?” Efran said.

Edson jerked his head nervously. “She’s at the tavern, sir, laughing and talking with a couple of other people.”

“Laughing and talking,” Efran repeated with a flat voice and blank face.

“Yes sir,” Edson nodded, shaking his head in dismay as well.

“And . . . the problem with that is . . . ?” Efran said.

“Well, it’s rather a spectacle, sir,” Edson said.

“Is she standing on the table?” Efran asked.

“No sir,” Edson said.

“Rolling on the floor?” posed Efran.

“Not yet, sir,” Edson said gravely.

“Punching other patrons?” Efran asked.

“Oh, no, sir!” Edson exclaimed.

“Then what is she doing wrong?” Efran asked.

“It’s just—unseemly, sir,” Edson said distastefully. “She’s gabbing it up with a young man and a woman in pants, sir, that looks like a uniform which is—terribly unseemly company for the wife of a lord.”

“Thank you for your report. Goodbye,” Efran said.

Muttering to himself in disappointment, Edson left with the unsubtle encouragement of the door sentry. Efran sat there, gazing blankly at the table. “My poor wife,” he whispered, raising his eyes to DeWitt. “She can’t laugh and talk without being criticized for it—and she’s *seventeen*,” he groaned. DeWitt exhaled in sympathy.

Estes sent word down that he was detained, so DeWitt left to go meet with the surveyors. But Efran waited to hear from Minka. It was over an hour later that she finally appeared.

She blew into the workroom laughing, but a glance told him that she was not drunk; she was happy. “Oh, you’re still here!” She fell into his lap and he sat back to gather her and her skirts in.

“Did you find anything at Mouris’?” he asked, smiling.

“Oh.” Her face fell. “Yes, him and Adele fighting, and nothing on the shelves to buy. So Geneve suggested we go to Croft’s—Martyn was with us—so we did, and we had cheese and soup and I had only a half bottle of Goadby’s, and we talked, and it was so nice. I asked Geneve if she and I could go out again some time, and she said yes. It was so wonderful to talk with someone like a sister, who didn’t make fun of me or call me Sybil.”

He had to blink back tears, but she didn’t notice. “Oh, and, I hugged Geneve, but not Martyn—I just patted him on the shoulder once or twice. Not too many times,” she avowed, and he hurt.

She laid her head on his shoulder to kiss his neck, as they were alone in the workroom right now. “Oh!” She sat up. “I need to check on Joshua!” She scrambled off his lap.

“I will go with you,” he said, standing, at which she looked back at him in joy. And that *really* hurt.

Following dinner that evening, Minka took Joshua up to see his “little brother” Malan. (New mother Kelsey had required some husbandly reassurance from Estes earlier, which everyone understood.) But while Minka was

otherwise engaged, Efran summoned Martyn and Geneve to the receiving room off the foyer.

When they arrived, Efran shut the door and turned to them tentatively. He wanted to be careful about maintaining a proper distance, but almost the moment he started talking, he had tears in his eyes. “I have to thank you for taking Minka to Croft’s and—being sociable with her. She has very few people she can freely talk with, but—even today, someone came to complain to me about her ‘laughing and talking’ at a pub, so, you also may receive criticism for taking her there. Please know that you have my gratitude for it.”

Martyn regarded this speech without expression, but Geneve was fighting back tears herself. He said, “Captain, I will give credit to Geneve, who suggested it, and I will agree that it was good for Minka.”

Efran turned to her. “I know that this is not what you signed up for, Geneve, but, any time that you are free to—spend time with her, it directly benefits me.”

She smiled. “We all enjoyed it, Captain, and learned a great deal about you in the process.”

“Oh,” he winced. “Well, such are the hazards of duty.” Even Martyn laughed at that.

The following day, July 1st, Efran went out to work on the east wall, as he sorely needed the physical activity to offset the mental stresses. Barr went with him, which Efran welcomed, except for the fact that Barr was free to do it because his new (and first) wife Lucy had tired of the demands of his army service and gone back to her parents to become engaged to a farm boy, whom she would marry after the necessary waiting period following a divorce.

So again, Efran had to listen to the heartbreak of an abandoned husband, and he deeply hoped that Connor and his new wife Lyra were happy, because he did not want Connor out here working on the wall while he was recovering from a knifing.

While Efran was occupied on the wall and Joshua was napping, Geneve was also free. So she sent to Minka, asking if she’d like to have lunch at Croft’s. Minka responded with pathetic eagerness, and was waiting in the foyer long before Geneve arrived.

When she did, she brought a surprise: “Minka, this is our newest soldier, Tess. The Captain just approved her two days ago. I thought you might enjoy her company, as well.”

“Hello,” Tess said cautiously, but she needn’t have worried about her reception, for Minka stared at her in delight. As Efran had instructed, Tess no longer attempted to pass herself off as a boy. Her hair was still short, but not plastered back, and she had unbound her breasts and opened the tight collar of her jacket (as it was no longer necessary to hide the fact that she had no prominent Adam’s apple). The greatest relief was being able to speak in her normal voice, which was unquestionably feminine.

“Another woman in the ranks! I’m so proud of him!” Minka cried. “Oh, come—I want to hear everything!” She swept out in her riding skirt to ask the gate sentry, Bennard, for three horses. And she made sure to tell him, “I will be at Croft’s with two guardians.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, admirably restraining his wonder at the two young women in uniform.

Croft’s was busy, as it had become very popular with residents and visitors (who were allowed mostly unrestrained entrance to the Abbey Lands today). Minka did not mind standing in line, but Croft recognized her

immediately and opened up a corner booth for her and her friends. She was glowing and appreciative; they ordered and sat patiently waiting for their food from a busy kitchen.

The young women were closely observed by fellow patrons who pointed out Lord Efran's wife to each other, but Tess answered all of Minka's questions in a low voice, so nothing was overheard by the nosiest diners.

Minka asked, "Why did you want to be in the army? Do you have a brother serving, too?"

"I have a brother, Shanko, who wants to serve, but I doubt he'll make it," Tess said, glancing around.

"Oh. Why not?" Minka asked.

"He's not tough enough. He got his position in Cennick's army just because of who our parents are. People of privilege don't understand how difficult life is for everyday people. When you go shopping and buy whatever you want, or ride in your fancy carriage, of course you're going to look down on the little people who aren't married to a lord—ow! What?" Tess looked angrily at Geneve.

"Our drinks are here," Geneve said, reaching out for the tray of bottles and glasses.

"Thank you," Minka said, opening one bottle to pour it into her glass. "I love this place! It's so nice to get out—"

"And mingle with the little people?" Tess asked with a sardonic smile.

Geneve looked at her with a tight face, but Minka laughed, "It's hard to find anybody littler than me."

"With the wealth of the fortress and lands behind you," Tess said.

Minka looked back on the recent past. "We came here with practically nothing but a charter—"

"And rents from all these people who are working the land for you," Tess said. "You're not poor." Minka's eyes wandered off, and Geneve began talking about the first time she flubbed weapons drills.

After they had been there for about an hour, as the midday rush was thinning out, two weary workmen who had been on wall construction for the last four hours entered. While Efran leaned on the counter to give their order, Barr looked around the dining room. Seeing Minka and her party, he nudged the Captain, who turned around to look.

So while Geneve was telling Tess and Minka about her attempt to impersonate Minka to Krems, two husky Polonti workmen slid into their booth, crowding them. One nudged up brazenly to Minka. "May we sit?" he asked, looking down on her, and her reply was a gaze of delight.

"If you don't object." Barr was more formal with Tess, not having met her.

Tess studied him, looked at Efran, then back at Barr. "Are you related?" she asked in mild wonder.

"Only by race," Barr said hastily.

"All Polonti look alike," Efran told her, receiving his Goadby's with a nod of thanks. Tess looked back quickly at Barr in obvious interest.

“Oh,” Minka said, “Barr is married.”

She sounded so disappointed that several people almost spewed their Goadby’s, but she was actually distressed by Tess’ aggressive interest. While Barr turned red, Efran said, “Ah, his wife unfortunately decided that she couldn’t abide marriage with a soldier, so left him in heartbreak and loneliness.” Then he turned to address a comment to Geneve, leaving Barr unprotected from Tess’ attentions.

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Chapter 17

The intrusion of Polonti laborers into the young women’s booth aroused some indignation at a few tables. Those who recognized Minka guessed immediately who the forward Polonti was, while those who recognized Efran sat quietly laughing to themselves. However, the quick, respectful service of Croft himself quelled the nascent outrage in more than one breast.

Minka tried not to overtly cuddle her husband, as Geneve was the only woman at table without a handsome Polonti at her side. Efran found much to talk to Geneve about as well, especially her brother Gabriel’s shortcomings this week, which Efran facetiously noted without regard to truth or fairness. Cruelly, he also waited for Geneve to take a bite before making his most outrageous comments, such as: “What are you teaching Gabriel? I see that he’s started handling his bow like a girl.”

But Efran had an agenda besides making Geneve laugh. He had spotted two Eurusians sitting at the bar, trying hard to blend in, whom he pegged at once as spies for Cennick. Efran’s tormenting Geneve helped obscure his interest in the Eurusians as he tried to decide whether to detain them, have them quietly followed, or leave them alone.

After deliberating, he decided that option B was best at the moment. So he slid out from the booth to bend to the ear of a man at another table. That man listened and barely nodded; Efran returned to Minka, who was watching. A few minutes later, the man paid his bill and left to alert another man that a string of unobtrusive watchers was required for the two Eurusian spies in Croft’s, identifiable by their obvious attempts to mimic Abbey casual dress without the benefit of Elvey’s.

Shortly afterwards, Efran slid out again: “Slave labor going back to work on the wall.” Minka raised her face expectantly, so he leaned down to oblige her on the lips. Tess looked at Barr, and he paused in consternation. After Efran said something to him, Barr leaned down to kiss Tess quickly and chastely. She looked satisfied while they all watched the men walk out.

Tess turned to Minka. “What did the Captain say to him? Did you hear?”

Minka nodded, but hesitated, almost unwilling to admit it. Still, she confessed, “He said, ‘She wants you to.’” Tess grinned, looking back at the door.

In mock peevishness, Geneve said, “I feel betrayed. You’re not here to get a man, Tess.”

Tess shrugged; Minka told Geneve, “I can look around for you. They have new men coming in all the time.”

Geneve declined, laughing.

While on the wall, Efran received a report that the two Eurussians from Croft's merely rode around, looking for a while before leaving. Efran nodded; nothing more need be done, then.

Two days later, July 3rd, Minka received another message from Justinian, apparently without using code at all. Also, it arrived unopened. He said:

"My dearest Minka:

"So much outrage here! We simply cannot fathom what has happened! But Lady Fanny, wife of our much-loved Surchatain Cennick, has been kidnapped by a scruffy band of Polonti! And only a handful, from what I hear.

"The lady had been in her carriage en route to a dress shop (because the poor dear had simply nothing to wear after coming up from the provincial lands, ha ha) when these savages surrounded her carriage and simply tossed the driver from his seat, one of their own taking his place, and driving off with her! Since the dear was riding with her windows closed, she was apparently unaware of the need to call for help. I heard that the carriage was opened by the marauders at some point during the abduction, at which time her bodyguard was ejected without his pants, unfortunately. Nonetheless, the carriage was found empty and abandoned the following day, and no trace of the lady has yet been discovered.

"Almost as bad, the moneyer, Meineke, has abandoned his shop here in Euruss and disappeared. We've heard all kinds of rumors as to where he might be moving, but rest assured it won't be down to your little province, because he wants to be close to the authorities who send him the most business, and that's certainly here in Euruss. While it's true that our dear Surchatain has not yet sent him any gold for coining, we understand that it's only a matter of time till he has a great treasury in his hands. So we are all agog, waiting.

"I also cannot wait to see you again, Minka, in your dear little pants. You are so daring!

"Much love and many kisses,

"Your adoring Justinian"

"Oh, my!" she said, and ran upstairs to the workroom. To her astonishment, it was empty. So she went to the front door sentry, who today was Caswall. She gasped, "Caswall! How are you?" She remembered that he had arrived at the wall gates wounded.

"Much improved, Lady Minka, thank you," he said, pleased.

"And your partner—" She could not remember his name.

"Koschat, Lady. He arrived some hours later all in one piece, the villain," Caswall said.

"I'm so glad. Oh! Where is Efran?" she asked.

"I believe he's on the wall again today, Lady," Caswall said.

"Of course." When he was anxious for something to get done, he started working on it himself, and then found

volunteers by the droves as well. “Thank you. And I’m so glad you’re better.”

“Thank you, Lady,” he said.

Before going out, she went back to the cold storage room, where kitchen staff kept demijohns of water in wicker carriers. She put the letter in her pocket and hefted a demijohn by its strap, then lugged it out to the courtyard to ask for a horse. Since she was going to Efran at the wall, she hardly needed a bodyguard. But the gate sentry appropriated her water at once.

When her horse was brought, she mounted in a swirl of skirts (which couldn’t be done in pants, after all) and waited while the guard fastened the carrier strap of the demijohn to her saddle. She rode at a walk down the switchback and up the northbound road all the way to the wall gates. There, she asked the gate guard, “Is Efran working on the wall?” She craned her neck to look.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, opening the gates.

“Thank you.” She rode out and turned east along the dirt road following the wall. (All of the Abbey roads had now been paved, except the new northbound road under construction. However, the administrators saw no reason to pave this road outside the wall. Yet.)

In early July, the sun was brilliant. Therefore, the men should have been broiling out here, but with the Sea so close by, it was hardly any warmer than spring.

Walking her horse along the wall, Minka admired all that had been done over just the last few weeks. She passed Ernst, who greeted her cordially, then looked down to the end where Barr and Efran were working shirtless. They looked so much alike at this distance that Minka had to study them a few moments to discern which was which. She was finally able to pick out Efran because his hair was a little longer, and he was tossing his head to get it out of his eyes again. Barr was more diligent about keeping his cut.

Efran spotted her then, and paused. She waved and he lifted his chin; Barr turned to look. As she approached, she said, “How much you’ve gotten done! Where will the corner be?”

“I’m not sure; that keeps changing,” Efran said, lifting up to look. “We’ve got almost a mile of wall east from the main road done, but before we take the wall south, Ernst wants to see how stable the cavern opening is. Oh, and we’ll leave a gap here for gates across the new northbound road.”

Barr was unfastening the demijohn from the saddle. “Thank you, Lady Minka.” He uncorked it to hold it up and pour the water down his throat without touching the mouth.

“Just Minka,” she sighed, as Efran helped her dismount. “Letter from Justinian,” she told him, pulling it from her pocket. “The seal was unbroken.”

“Really?” he murmured, opening the letter. They were silent while he read, then he hooted, “They did it! Wigner and his misfits captured Lady Fanny! Oh, that’s. . . . Meineke.”

He looked up. “If Meineke is moving. . . . I wonder if those two Eurusians in Croft’s were actually from him instead of Cennick, and were checking us out as a new location.”

“That would be good for us,” Barr said, handing him the demijohn.

Efran turned it up to drink as Barr had done. He choked slightly, then said, “And a far more profitable location for him than Eurus. Well. I’m glad I let them alone, then.” He looked at Minka to say, “I do believe Justinian is in love with you.”

She laughed. “You must know that he’s teasing you.”

“I suppose so. Well, write to him of your outrage regarding Fanny,” he said, handing her back the letter.

“I wonder if she let them do it,” she murmured.

“Let them abduct her?” Efran asked. “Just to get away from Cennick?”

“Yes. I bet she comes back here,” Minka said.

“I don’t want her down here. She’s disruptive and destructive. Like Adele,” Efran said.

“Yes,” she murmured. She reached up to kiss him, then, as Barr turned back to resume work on the wall. Hiking a foot to remount, she noted, “Tess likes him,” loudly enough for Barr to hear.

Efran laughed, “Yes, she made that plain. Seventeen-year-olds are so obvious.”

Minka stared down at him. “She’s *seventeen*? My age?” Barr turned away to laugh quietly.

Efran was caught with his mouth open. “Who said that? I—”

“Not only a woman, but a seventeen-year-old in the army!” Minka cried. “*I could be in the army!*”

“No,” Efran said quickly as Barr shook his head.

“Why not?” she demanded imperiously.

He looked up at her. “The treasure does not fight. It is the treasure.”

She was struck silent, remembering, then fell off the saddle onto him. “Oh, Efran.”

He held her, kissing her head. “Let me take the blows. You welcome me home,” he whispered.

“Yes, Efran,” she said, and he hoisted her back up into the saddle.

In the late afternoon of the following day, July 4th, a carriage and a cart surrounded by armed men stopped at the wall gates. The wall gates’ bell was repeated by the bell at the courtyard gates. Efran and Estes, followed by twenty riders, set off down the switchback and up the main road toward the gates.

As they approached, a passenger disembarked the carriage to stand at the gates. Younge, riding behind Estes, said, “Captain! That’s Meineke the moneyer!”

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Chapter 18

Younge, being one of the riders who took gold and silver to have coins minted by Meineke in Eurus, certainly knew him by sight.

Efran pulled up his horse at the gates. "I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Are you Meineke?"

"Yes, Lord Efran. I am coming to ask sanctuary," he said. In his late fifties, he was sedately dressed and grim in bearing. The long drive with valuable equipment from increasingly hostile territory took its toll on him.

Efran turned his horse to tell his men, "Back up! Open the gates and let them through." Meineke reentered his carriage and the gates opened for it, the cart and the private soldiers to pass through. Then they were shut again behind them.

The procession wound up the switchback; Efran had his men pass along word that the visiting soldiers were to be taken around to see their horses stabled, then brought to the dining hall with their weapons left in the barracks. Efran also directed that the first man through the courtyard gates would run to the kitchen to alert Madea and her crew of approximately thirty guests for dinner.

Efran dismounted in the courtyard, sending his horse to be stabled, and waited for Meineke's carriage to arrive. Estes chose to ride on back with the cart, which contained all of the moneyer's equipment. As long as it was at the fortress, it would be guarded around the clock.

The carriage pulled up, and from it descended Meineke and a young woman. Efran approached to bow to them both, and Meineke said, "This is my daughter Jewel. She is also my apprentice."

"I am pleased to welcome you both to the Abbey fortress," Efran said. Jewel looked around warily at all the soldiers.

Minka appeared at the top of the steps, and from behind her descended maids bearing basins of washwater for their guests to clean up their faces and hands before they came to the dining hall. Efran, smiling, said, "And this is the Lady Minka, my wife. Minka, this is Meineke, the moneyer, and his daughter Jewel."

She curtsied. "Welcome to the Abbey fortress, friends. Please refresh yourselves while the kitchen makes ready for you. Jewel, if you will come with me, I will see to your needs."

"Thank you, Lady," Meineke said wearily, gesturing his daughter to follow her. While they two went in, he and his associates did help themselves to the water and hand towels to remove some of the grime of travel. From there, Madea's chief assistant Dobell and his helpers showed the travelers to tables at the front of the dining hall with chairs for seating. (All the other tables in the hall were equipped with attached benches.) There, bottles of Goadby's were set before them while an early dinner was prepared.

As Meineke sat, he picked up the Goadby's, shaking his head. "These cost a royal a bottle in Eurus now," he told Efran. Meineke looked up as Minka entered with Jewel, who sat beside her father. Efran sat on his other side without eating.

"Perhaps we'll send up an enterpriser with a cartload," Efran proposed. Around them sat or stood Minka, DeWitt, Coxe, and most of Efran's unit commanders.

“Not presently,” said Meineke. “The most ridiculous situation is at hand. This woman Fanny, supported by a large Polonti band, is challenging Cennick for the throne. She has occupied Marguerite’s Featherstone from which to run her campaign. Marguerite, her man Hartshough, and your man Justinian are being held captive there.”

Efran sat back, folding his arms across his chest. He looked over at Coxe to say, “Prepare the men to leave immediately. Each commander will deploy three-fourths of his unit, fully armed, to Eurus under me—only the able-bodied. Have two men from each unit make ready travel provisions. Estes will command the defense of the fortress if necessary.” Coxe and a half-dozen other men got up to sprint out; DeWitt held one man back to issue further instructions.

“You are welcome to make use of my men, Lord Efran,” Meineke said.

“Thank you, sir, but I am counting on them to guard you and your equipment in our absence,” Efran said. “We protect the treasure,” he said, raising his eyes to Minka, and she exhaled.

While Meineke, his daughter and his men relaxed over another superlative Abbey dinner—this one of beef stew, fresh greens, warm bread, and platters of strawberries in cream—a surge of preparation was occurring, mostly under DeWitt, who had more experience than Efran or Estes in directing an invasion of occupied territory. Efran deferred to him on everything, while consulting him about tactics.

DeWitt had stern counsel: “If the situation is as Meineke says, and the Polonti have taken possession of the mansion, you must kill without mercy, Efran. You will be unable to take prisoners and free your people both.”

“I understand,” Efran said with bowed head.

Estes added, “Efran, Wigner’s group is wild like Awfyn’s—uncivilized, criminal. They are not the Polonti of the Abbey Lands, Westford or even Eledith. They are the kind to accept your mercy and then knife you for it.”

Efran nodded to him. “Pass word among our Polonti. Those who can’t kill their own must stay here.”

Blessing Elvey, Efran had all of his troops, including himself, dress in Abbey uniforms of deep red. These were not only essential in identifying the Abbey Polonti, they were practically invisible at night. And their invasion would occur as soon as they arrived, at night. Today was July 4th.

At twilight, Efran took Minka in his arms to bend to her and whisper, “Pray, but don’t worry.”

“I know,” she murmured, running a hand along the unfamiliar deep red linen. It was both alarming and reassuring.

He kissed her deeply, meaning it, then swung up on Trud. Looking back at the waiting ranks that extended around the corner of the fortress, he gestured, riding out of the courtyard gates. His troops followed, about 150 men (plus Geneve; Tess was too new to go yet). They flowed in a river of red down the switchback and up the northbound road. Given the need for speed, Efran had them all mounted, which required every healthy horse the Abbey owned—even Bastard was brought out of retirement.

Some plotters came out to watch, among them Ryal and Giardi, both of whom had been informed of the mission. Having been blessed at birth with the gift of helping, Giardi reached out to the ranks that streamed past the notary.

Westford's shops were closed when the red river came upon it. They passed through the dark and sleepy city, threading the narrow channel of land between the Passage on the west and Willowring Lake on the east. Then they rode through long stretches of dark road through woods. Efran allowed only one stop to rest and eat along the way; they could not afford to let daylight creep over them before their invasion was underway.

Coxe and Towner rode at the Captain's left and right as his lieutenants. The rest of the unit commanders—Cutch, Younge, Lyte, and Neale—rode behind them, as did Barr, whom Efran was looking to promote at the next opportunity. While the waxing crescent moon did not give much light, it was enough to illumine the glittering road, with which all the riders were familiar.

Entering Eurus, they slowed, watching for Cennick's sentries. There was a very real possibility that Efran would have to fight Cennick's troops in order to fight Fanny's Polonti. But since Efran was headed to the nobles' district and not the palace, Cennick's men did not show up to stop him.

Efran and his troops arrived in the vicinity of Featherstone several hours after midnight. The gates were closed, but unchained and unmanned. Efran left four men there on watch before the rest proceeded through the tree-lined avenue bordered by woods to the white mansion at the end.

The sky was dark; the house dark; Efran discerned no exterior lights nor men on watch. First thing, he had about thirty men bed down under Towner in the woods. They earnestly objected, but they all had been awake for 24 hours now, and Efran knew what happened when, after the first heat of battle, no one was fresh or even coherent. He left with them two men standing watch to wake them when necessary.

Efran concealed their horses in the woods with more men, then he and the remainder crept up close to study the front façade of the mansion. They could see no one standing watch. He turned to whisper to Coxe and Younge, "Send thirty men around the house to the right and the left to enter *quietly* wherever they find an opening [as they had lock picks]. They're to look for Fanny—she's probably in a bedroom upstairs—and bring her to me in the dining room. They're to kill anyone who opposes them."

"Captain," they whispered, turning to dispatch the required men with instructions.

Then Efran stood, gesturing to the fifty men who remained, and drew his sword. He led them to the double front doors. Finding them unlocked, he opened them wide to walk into the foyer, his men behind him.

As far as they could see, the foyer was empty but blood-stained. Efran advanced, directing a few men to side rooms until he came to the dining room, the doors of which were ajar. He opened them wide to enter.

Here, he and his men looked at the remains of a feast on the long dining table, illumined by faint light from the large windows all along the wall, and candles nearly burned out. Scattered in chairs, but mostly on the floor, were several dozen Polonti warriors, passed out. Not one stirred at their entry. "Are these our invaders?" Barr whispered.

Efran exhaled, "Probably, but, I don't know." He went over to the large butler's pantry to look in. No one was inside. Taking the key from the lock, he said, "Drag them all in here. Lock them in." He handed the key to Barr. "Whenever they wake, they're liable break the door down, so be ready."

Barr nodded, and the Abbey soldiers collected all the dead drunk Polonti to lock them away. Barr kept ten Abbey men with him, then Efran told the rest, "Search the upstairs for Fanny. Bring her here to me." Efran, Barr and his men helped themselves to leftovers on the table, then Barr directed five of them to rest underneath it.

Barr unlocked the butler's pantry for more candles, stepping over the bodies of the dead drunk, while other men cleaned out the fireplace and rekindled the fire. Efran, sitting in a dining chair with his feet on the table, asked, "Barr, is there cutlery in that pantry? Knives and forks?"

He listened to Barr rummage in the drawers and cabinets. Then he came out. "No, Captain, that appears to have been all cleared out."

"I see. Lock them in again," he said.

While Barr did that, Efran folded his arms across his chest and looked up to Marguerite's molded ceiling to think. Fanny could not challenge Cennick with 25 Polonti, regardless how fierce. Where were the rest?

Riding out for reinforcements, he decided. Whatever happened here was just the preliminaries; the real battle was yet to come.

Some minutes later, one of Efran's men returned with Justinian, rumpled but uninjured. "Never thought I'd be so glad to see you, old man," Justinian muttered. (He was two years younger than Efran, who was 28.)

"What happened?" Efran asked, sitting up while Justinian plopped into a chair to begin delicately picking among the leftovers.

"It would have been—day before yesterday now," Justinian said, unsteady. "Marguerite was hosting one of her lovely parties when these animals roared in to start hacking people to death—"

"Marguerite?" Efran asked tightly.

"She's all right, as far as I know, though I don't know where Fanny put her," Justinian said, looking suspiciously in a cup before setting it aside.

"Is Fanny here?" Efran asked.

"I don't know," Justinian said. "She swept in to tell her pets that they were killing the wrong people, then she put the savages in here to keep them happy while she went about her business. She let the other guests go—the ones who were still alive, that is—but recognized me, dammit, and locked me away in a closet. I saw nothing after that but the kind face of your man who just now let me out."

"Barr, open the pantry," Efran said, then jerked his head toward Justinian. "Tell me if you recognize them."

Brow creasing, Justinian got up to look at the sleeping assembly. "Ho, what a collection. Yes, those are Fanny's animals who came in with knives out. They killed—six or eight people, at least—I couldn't see—" Justinian was rattled, unable to go on. Shuddering, he returned to sit at the table.

Efran glanced outside at hints of daybreak shimmering off the pond out back. "Then there's no need to keep them on hand. Barr, dump them all in the pond."

"Yes, Captain," Barr said. He motioned to his men, and they took the heels of the dead drunks to drag them out of the butler's pantry. Barr's men paused for Efran to scrutinize the renegades in the stronger light of the dining room, not finding Wigner. Efran saw one that might have been Grice, but Wigner was definitely not there.

Did that mean that Fanny was taken from him, or did he never kidnap her at all? Thinking on that, Efran gestured for the drunks to be hauled on out to the pond. At the table, Justinian leaned his head on his arms.

Men began returning from searches. One reported, “Captain, we found Lady Marguerite unharmed and asleep in her bedroom with her man on the floor, also asleep. So we left them for now, but we have two men at her door.”

“That’s good; thank you,” Efran said. Others came in to report servants, groomsmen and the gardener released from locked closets unharmed.

But by the time the whole mansion had been searched, Fanny had not been found. Mohr reported, “Captain, the head groomsmen said that she rode off with the leader of the Polonti in the middle of the night.”

“Then they are bringing reinforcements. Go bring the horses to the stables and paddocks here and bring in all the men. Have those we left at the gates lock them and leave two on watch, mounted, to ride to us immediately when they see her coming. No one’s to defend the gates; I want everyone here. Array archers in every window, front and back, but they’re to eat and rest until we know that Fanny’s friends are on the way.”

“Cap’n,” Mohr said, turning out.

“Now we wait,” Efran said, putting his feet back up onto the table and closing his eyes.

While Efran was gone, Minka wandered the fortress like a ghost, looking for something, anything, to distract her, or occupy her profitably until he should come home. She enjoyed seeing the flowers she had planted erupt into glorious displays of color, and watching the chickens bicker and scratch, and she cherished taking care of Joshua while loving on all the children, but all this just made her miss him even more.

In desperation, she went to the library looking for something, anything, to read. She pulled out a few dusty books, but found them too deep for her right now. She regarded with respect Ares’ sword on display, flanked by the old, scarred Holy Canon and the great, heavy book of Roman’s Law. She paused before this book, remembering how Efran’s knowledge of it saved her from a betrothal her father had made without her knowledge.

She opened it now, looking for the section on Binding and Nonbinding Betrothals. Because the book was so well organized, she was able to quickly find it, and reread with satisfaction the words that had confirmed her freedom to choose her own husband. Those dry words had meant life to her.

From there, she began flipping through the pages to peruse other headings—land ownership, business licenses, adoptions, and disinheritance. Associated with this last topic, she found a unique section on Involuntary Servitude.

Slavery was unequivocally prohibited in the Law. But there were some interesting exceptions, which Involuntary Servitude covered. This section said, in part, “If a child or dependent of maturity, that is, of sixteen years or older, proves to be a burden to his parents or relations by refusing to work in an honorable profession, or by continually causing trouble or mischief, the party that is held responsible for him may consign him to involuntary servitude to another party for whatever length of time the responsible party shall ordain. The responsible party may ask for and receive whatever payment the purchaser agrees to. The child or dependent so consigned may appeal to the notary or ruler of the district in which the consignment occurs, whose decision shall be considered final.”

This so impressed Minka that she remembered it for a long time.

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Chapter 19

About an hour after closing his eyes, Efran woke. Justinian was asleep in the chair opposite him; Barr was standing by the door to the corridor. Seeing Efran awake, Barr said, “Captain, they’re bringing down—”

Marguerite appeared beside him, and Efran rose to go to her. She looked very old and frail compared to when he had seen her last, just eight months ago. He put his arms around her, and she reached up to pat his shoulder. “I am so glad to see you,” she said unsteadily. “Thank you for coming.”

Efran opened his mouth, but her faded eyes lit on the demolished table and she roared, “HARTSHOUGH!” with all the volume of old. Men stopped in their tracks and Barr’s eyes widened in delight.

Efran laughed, “That is music to my ears today.”

Better yet, the man himself appeared, rumpled but composed. “Yes, my Lady?”

“Hartshough—this—” She gestured in dismay at the table.

He said, “At once, Lady Marguerite,” and went out to begin issuing instructions. Soon, servants were cleaning up the table and restocking it with fresh food for Efran’s men, who began wandering in.

Efran sat her at the table and took a seat beside her. He said, “I know you have many questions, which I’ll try to answer. First, Sybil sends her love, and, we have Shanko and his sister Tess safely at the Fortress. But I need to hear all about Fanny first.”

“Oh,” Marguerite exhaled in frustration, and Hartshough placed a cup of something before her as well as a bottle of Goadby’s in front of Efran. He nodded at Hartshough without picking it up, concentrating on Marguerite while she took a sip of the drink.

Her voice was stronger as she said, “She thinks she’s going to use these Polonti to depose Cennick. It will never work; while they may outnumber him, neither she nor they have the knowledge and resources of the palace.”

“How many does Fanny have?” Efran asked.

“Hundreds. Three or four hundred at least, from what I heard,” Marguerite said.

Efran nodded: that was enough to overrun his numbers here. “Who is their leader?” he asked.

Her white brows drew down as she thought out, “A man from the wilderness. . . . Crowe.”

Efran’s eyes shot up to Barr. “Is Martyn with us?”

“I will check,” Barr said. And he turned out of the dining room.

Marguerite sat and drank from her cup while Efran sat sweating. Master Crowe at the head of three or four hundred Polonti could depose anyone Efran knew of, including himself, and especially one as weak as Cennick. But from all Efran knew of him, Crowe was a man of high principle—else Goss would not have entrusted the training of a child to him.

Barr appeared in the doorway with Martyn at his side. “Captain?” the boy said, saluting.

Efran leaned back. “What do you know about Master Crowe helping Fanny depose Cennick?”

For all his self-discipline, Martyn’s jaw dropped. “Nothing, Captain. I’ve heard nothing like this.”

Efran looked up to heaven beyond the ceiling, seeking help. “Barr, gather all the Polonti you can find.”

“Captain.” Barr disappeared from the doorway. Efran was looking off intently.

Tourle ran up. “Captain, the men at the gates say that Fanny and hundreds of Polonti are on their way.”

Efran stood. “When Barr returns, tell him to bring all the Polonti up to the front balcony.” Tourle saluted, standing aside, and Efran gestured to Martyn: “Come with me.”

Efran took him up to the balcony overlooking the large front courtyard of Featherstone. Far down the drive, they could see the mass of men in black approaching. Efran told Martyn, “When they come close enough, tell me as soon as you know whether the man with Fanny is Master Crowe or not.”

“Yes, Captain,” Martyn said. And they waited, watching.

In a few minutes, Polonti in red uniforms began coming out onto the balcony. First there were only five, then ten, then twenty. Barr came last. Looking left and right, Efran said, “I require only that you stand.” They turned to face front at attention.

As the Polonti drew closer down the drive, most of them on foot, Efran regarded their black uniforms, their marching formation and their consistent stride. Yes, they evidenced the self-discipline and restrained power for which Master Crowe was legendary. When the leaders of the mounted Polonti entered the courtyard, they looked up at once to the men in red filling the balcony. Fanny looked luscious in a purple riding dress. The Polonti leader with flowing black hair beside her rode with great poise—

“Yes, that is Master Crowe, Captain,” Martyn said.

When the leaders had come within hailing range, Efran shouted, “I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. I have come to the aid of my great friend Lady Marguerite, whose guests you killed when they were no enemy of yours. You will kill me, Master Crowe, but I will damage you enough to prevent your deposing Cennick. Attack as you will.”

Fanny began screaming at Efran, but Crowe merely extended the fingers of his left hand and she went silent. He studied Efran a moment, then said, “We would come talk with you.” His voice was deep, resonant, and powerful. He did not have to shout to be heard.

Efran replied, “We will give entrance to you and the woman alone.” Crowe inclined his head in assent.

Efran turned. “Barr, you will open the doors and have our Polonti escort him and Fanny to the dining room.”

“Captain.” Barr saluted and the men descended quickly.

Efran turned to tell Martyn, “You will accompany me.”

“Captain,” he acknowledged.

Efran and Martyn trotted down to the dining room, where he told his men, “Everyone out to guard the corridor except Marguerite, who will remain sitting right where she is”—which happened to be at the head of the table. “Don’t stand at all,” he told her, and she nodded. His men left, closing the door behind them.

Efran glanced over the table, newly refreshed with cheese, fresh fruit, canapés, Goadby’s and cold pitchers of light, fruity wine. With a nod, Efran directed Martyn to stand with him behind the table facing the closed door.

Barr opened the door for Crowe to enter with Fanny behind him.

Crowe was a most impressive man—not a giant, but taller than Efran. His build was magnificent as well—muscular, solid, well-proportioned. His head was regal, topped by a flowing, lustrous black mane. His eyes might have been his most unique feature: they were so light brown as to be almost gold. Despite this aberration, he was unquestionably Polonti. His manner was deliberate; his movements smooth and fluid.

Six of his men, lieutenants, filed in to stand at the wall. This was contrary to Efran’s stipulations, but as they stood back, unmoving, he passed over the infraction. In fact, there was not much he could do about it.

Efran and Martyn bowed to Crowe, then Efran said, “Lady Marguerite, this is Master Crowe and—Fanny.”

Fanny shot a black look at Efran for omitting any hint of a title, but Crowe bowed deeply to Marguerite, who said, “Welcome to my home, Master Crowe and Fanny.” Fanny managed a brief, flippant curtsy, as she had lately been in full possession of the property.

Crowe said, “My deepest apologies for the inexcusable deaths of your guests, Lady Marguerite. If you will produce the offenders, I will punish them.” His voice was soft but deep, and his diction was perfect.

She looked inquisitively to Efran, who said, “They are dead.”

Fanny looked mildly alarmed at this, but Marguerite said, “Then please everyone have a seat, and help yourselves.” Crowe’s men along the wall remained invisible.

Efran and Martyn took their seats at once. Crowe said, “Thank you, Lady,” and assisted Fanny to sit opposite Martyn while he himself took the chair opposite Efran. And they studied each other.

Crowe regarded Martyn for a moment before asking Efran, “And how has Martyn performed since his training?”

“Exceptionally well. He is highly regarded by soldiers far more experienced, including myself,” Efran said.

“Ah. That is good to hear,” Crowe said with a nod to the boy, who inclined his head. As invited, Fanny began helping herself to the canapés and wine.

“So, Lord Efran,” Crowe began, “what is your objection to Cennick’s being deposed?”

“None at all,” Efran replied. “My objection is to my friend’s house and property being seized for purposes detrimental to her. She has survived under numerous Surchatians by remaining disinterested in political maneuvers and loyal to whoever was in power.”

“I see,” Crowe said thoughtfully. “There has been an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

“Pardon, Master Crowe, but I do not see any explanation sufficient for the violence done to her person, her home, her help, and her guests,” Efran said tightly.

“Granted, Lord Efran,” Crowe said with an engaging self-effacement. With that, Efran began to sense an undercurrent of mental energy. Among many other gifts he undoubtedly possessed, Crowe had the gift of persuasion; specifically, he was able to convince others to a course not entirely of their own preference.

Efran began to sweat; if Crowe could persuade Marguerite to willingly give up her home to their cause, Efran was powerless to prevent her ruin. In his mind, Efran looked to the crucifix in the keep.

“What I should have said,” Crowe explained, “was that the Polonti originally given the task of enlisting Lady Marguerite’s help were the wrong type.” Fanny raised her hands in disavowal.

With a tinge of contempt, Efran asked, “What benefit, then, is the woman to the endeavor?”

“While she is not your scintillating Minka, she completes the picture, my friend,” Crowe said.

Wanting to avoid the topic of Minka at all costs, Efran replied, “So you are to rule, and not her.”

“Jointly,” Crowe said.

“Again, what business is it of Marguerite’s?” Efran asked.

“She gets to keep what she has,” Crowe said.

“Does she? When you—or the woman—already attempted to take what she has?” Efran asked.

“Consider, my friend, what you have seen Cennick do, and what you have seen me do,” Crowe said, gesturing lightly to Martyn, “and tell me, which you would prefer ruling Eurus?”

Efran studied him, then said, “You may well be a better ruler than Cennick, for all I know. Nonetheless, I will not permit your using her house in any way to further your aims. Nor will I be persuaded that this is her desire. I will fight you first.”

“Is it worth your life, my friend?” Crowe asked.

“Yes,” Efran said quickly. “Yes. I will absolutely lay down my life to prevent your using her.”

“My, you are interesting,” Crowe said, sitting back. “I sense the stream of sacrifice beneath you.” At that, Efran remembered what Minka had said about him to Bowring, but he was careful not to react.

There was silence as the parties disengaged to think. Efran looked off in disinterest. Crowe continued to study him, then glanced at Fanny. Crowe asked Efran, “If we leave Marguerite alone, will you help us?”

“No,” Efran said. “I have my hands full already.”

“Let me rephrase that,” Crowe said patiently. “If we leave Marguerite alone, will you not hinder us?”

Efran squinted, then said, “I don’t know what that entails. If you leave Marguerite alone, I will not fight you. But I make no promises based on generalities.”

“Have you other friends in Eurus that you wish to protect?” Crowe asked, smiling.

“Today is only about Marguerite,” Efran said.

“Lord Efran,” Crowe said, shaking his head, “in any other circumstance, we would be allies. Did I not do well in another case?” he said, again indicating Martyn.

Efran glanced at the boy. “You had good material to work with.”

Crowe sat back smiling, and glanced at Fanny. She smiled at him in utter boredom. Seeing it, Efran smiled: it was a sign of weakness that Crowe needed a beautiful but stupid woman. Efran looked pointedly at Martyn, who looked back at him with something meaningful in his eyes. Efran’s face tightened as he regarded Martyn’s expression. He was communicating something to him.

Efran turned his head, listening. Then he realized that the door to the foyer was shut. Getting up, Efran opened the door to look into the foyer, and saw nothing but Crowe’s men filling it.

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Chapter 20

While Efran had been concentrating on what he assumed were negotiations, Crowe’s men had been using their skills to silently overwhelm Efran’s own men. He turned around to Crowe. “Well done.”

“Thank you,” Crowe said, rising from his seat. “So, I believe we’ve accomplished everything needed here.”

“Where are my men?” Efran asked.

“Probably various places,” Crowe said. Turning to Martyn, he said, “You will come with me.”

“Yes, Master Crowe,” Martyn said without expression, but Efran saw that he was expecting punishment. For what? Probably, Efran thought, for alerting him to the incursion of Crowe’s men into the house. And the punishment would be bad.

God of heaven, if You have ever helped me, help me now. Shield him. As Efran’s prayer went up, he heard something. He wasn’t sure what it was, as it was very faint. He glanced at Marguerite, who returned a look of composure. She was not afraid. Although she had a lot to lose, she was not fearful. What was he hearing?

One of Crowe’s men approached him. “If you will accompany me, Lord Efran.”

Efran turned to Crowe, who said regretfully, “You may not see your men for a while.” As he was saying this, Efran was looking at Martyn in his peripheral vision. And he saw something like sorrow cross his face. Returning his attention to Crowe, Efran said, “If you hurt that boy, I will kill you.”

“Will you?” Crowe said.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Or will you die?” Crowe asked.

“Both, perhaps,” Efran said.

“Well, I will not kill you or your men, Lord Efran; as I believe a future alliance between us is possible. But you must not roam free.” Smiling again, Crowe nodded to his subordinate, who extended his arm for Efran to walk before him. So he did.

Two of Crowe’s men took him to a door on the second floor. First, one man went through his pockets, removing everything he found—small tools and coins. Then he removed Efran’s belt, and bent for his boots. At this, Efran began to resist, but the second man put a thumb to his throat. Efran stilled, knowing that the man was about to crush his windpipe. So he let them take his boots.

Opening the door exposed merely an empty storage closet. The man wordlessly invited Efran to enter. He did, and the man began closing the door. But his eyes flicked up with a flash of—interest? Efran could not interpret it before the door was shut and locked, but this man had been in the dining room while Crowe bamboozled Efran with talk.

Exhaling, he slumped to the floor of the closet, thinking what a neat trap Crowe had set for him. The only way for Efran to have avoided it was to refuse to talk to him. And what reasonable man would refuse to talk? Then Crowe played on his ego by seriously listening to and answering his questions, as if any of it mattered. That gave his men time to execute their sweep.

Efran closed his eyes in the darkness, having slept one hour out of the last 36. *Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night?* “Is that you, Therese?” he whispered—his tutor for about three years, a nun who took him off the streets to save him. “It must be you; it’s Scripture. Isn’t it? Where is that from?” He closed his heavy eyelids again, listening to a faint song from somewhere.

Efran did not know how long he slept; a crick in his neck from his hanging head woke him. As he put a hand out in the darkness, he thought at first that he was in the cavern, in the grave, that God had drawn him out of. He looked up, but there was no jagged line of light. It was all uniformly dark.

Remembering where he was, he felt for an inside door handle; there was none, of course, in a closet. He could spring the latch with almost anything, but they had left him nothing. And as it was an outward-opening door, the hinges were on the other side.

He leaned back against the wall. “Where is God my Maker, who gives songs in the night?” he whispered. Then he heard again what he had heard before: a whistle. Efran put his ear up against the right-hand wall. Yes, there was a whistle. Quietly, he answered it with a whistle. Then he heard it once more, closer, as if someone were right up against the wall on the other side. He answered it again.

There was a scraping noise, and the screech of wood sliding against wood, which quickly stopped. He heard something hiss like a whisper, and suddenly the wall fell away. Efran was in another dark place, but there were hands on his arms, and Hawk whispered, "Finally! Go tell 'em we found him!"

"Right-O." That sounded like Detler, and there was quiet scrabbling as he moved away.

"Hawk?" Efran muttered.

"Yes, Cap'n, can you walk?" Hawk whispered.

"Yes. What—?" Efran began.

"Shh! Sir," Hawk whispered.

With Hawk supporting him on numb feet, Efran moved as silently as possible down a passageway, lit randomly through cracks in the wood here or there. Finally, they entered a larger room lit by a candle, and Efran blinked around at twenty-five or thirty of his men. Efran began, "How did you--?"

"Lady Marguerite, sir," Rigdon answered. "This place is honeycombed with secret passages that Crowe and his men don't know about. They locked us in different closets all over the place, but Hartshough or one of his servants came and got us. We had a hard time finding you, though."

"I was asleep," Efran half-laughed. "But where is Martyn? Have you found him?"

"Not that I know of, sir," Rigdon replied.

"We've got to find him right away. Crowe put him somewhere to punish him," Efran said.

"Oh!" Koschat said. "While we were listening through the wall, Hartshough was telling another servant that there was a rat in the basement, a large rat, and the man kept saying, 'no, sir, there's not,' but Hartshough kept insisting. We better check out the basement."

"Can we get there through the passages?" Efran asked.

"Probably, but it will take a while to figure out how," Bennard said.

"Where are Crowe and his men? Anyone know?" Efran asked. When no one spoke, he got up. "I'm going to go look."

A dozen men sprang up then. Neale said, "I'll go check, Captain." He went out through an opening at the other end of the room.

"What's past that door?" Efran asked.

"Butler's pantry," several men said.

They waited a few minutes, but Efran got impatient, knowing that Martyn was suffering somewhere. As he started toward the opening, Neale suddenly appeared. "It's dark, perhaps a few hours before midnight. It appears that Crowe is directing his men on some kind of night operation—he and almost all of them are gone."

Efran said, “Good. I’m going down to the basement—it’s just down the kitchen corridor, down the stairs at the very end. I may need help, so, follow me in twos and threes.” Then he went out in his socks, taking a candle.

In the butler’s pantry he used the candle to light a lantern. From there, he exited into the dark dining room, then cautiously cracked the door into the corridor. It was clear, so he quickly walked to the end and opened a door to begin descending the stairs to the basement. At the bottom, he stepped off the stairs into a vast cavern of wine racks, vats and casks. He walked the floor with the lantern upraised, seeing nothing. Standing beside a huge, upright wine vat, he scanned everywhere, growing tense. And he heard something like . . . groaning.

His heart seized, because it made him think of the palace at Westford coming down around them, but . . . no, this was someone groaning. His men began collecting around him. One murmured, “What is that?” They were all looking for the source of the sound. Efran still saw nothing, then raised the lantern to look up—

And he saw dangling feet. Stumbling back to get perspective, he closed the reflective side and back panels of the lantern to focus the light, then lifted it to look again and saw Martyn hanging by his hands over the wine vat. And groaning. Even from the floor, Efran could see that the top of the vat was not lidded, but covered with a large, light cloth. After hanging like that for any period of time, were Martyn to fall with his hands bound, he’d drown in wine.

The men swore quietly, and the glassy-eyed anger descended on Efran again, but this was cold calculation: *How do I get him down?* There were ladders around the basement, but none long enough to reach the top of the vat.

Visually, Efran traced the beam from which Martyn was hanging to the wall, and from there, to the wine racks that could provide footholds to the ceiling beam. By this time, men were coming down the stairs with more lights.

Since Efran was already in his sock feet, he gave his lantern to someone else, pulled up his beltless pants, and walked over to a set of metal stairs leading up. But someone used the lantern to illumine the stairs terminating at a pair of doors, probably leading outside. So Efran moved left down the wall to a wine rack, and began climbing that, attended by lantern light. Fortunately, the rack had been solidly nailed into the wall. And where a bottle impeded his foot placement, he merely went over to the next opening.

When he reached the beam, he looked back over his shoulder to make sure it was the right one. He was now about twenty feet above the stone floor. He released his hold on the rack to wrap both hands around the beam over his head. Then he brought up his feet to cross them at the ankles over the beam. Hanging thus under it, he shimmied along by his hands and feet until there was room between the beam and ceiling rafters for him to pull himself right side up and creep on hands and knees.

His men watched tensely below in the murky darkness, focusing the lanterns up to illumine his path. “Should we climb up to help him?” one asked.

“No. Listen,” Neale said. “The beam he’s on is creaking. It’s cracked. More weight may break it.”

Reaching up to the ceiling rafters, Efran was finally able to stand and walk along the six-inch beam until he came to the knotted rope over Martyn’s purple hands. Lying down, Efran stretched down as far as he could to grab Martyn’s belt. Then slowly, painfully, he began hauling the boy up with one hand until he could lay him on his stomach across the beam. Then Efran shifted him inches at a time so that he was lying on his front lengthwise, facing him.

From there, it took long minutes for Efran to loosen the ropes around his hands and finally get them off. Martyn's hands dropped uselessly from dislocated shoulders. Head to head with him, Efran kept a hand on Martyn's belt to keep him balanced on the beam. Sweat in his eyes, Efran looked down. "Blanket?" he whispered. "To catch him."

"Wait," Rigdon said. He ran to a corner, then brought out a great wicker basket used for carrying grapes. Four men held this under the beam and looked up. But now Efran had to move Martyn about eight feet to get clear of the vat below him. Head down beside Martyn's ear, Efran asked, "Can you push with your legs?" In response, Martyn crossed his lower legs.

Someone came down to the basement, then; Efran's men melted behind the vat and Efran held still, his hand fastened on Martyn's belt. It was Marguerite's sommelier. He went over to inspect the wines available in the rack and select a bottle. Then he went out again, carelessly leaving another, larger lantern, which helped them a great deal.

Bit by bit, Efran scooted backwards on the beam, pulling Martyn by his belt. By this time, Martyn was able to push himself by his legs, and hold on somewhat with his hands, so Efran needed only to help him balance.

Finally, when they were past the vat and over the basket, at a sign from the men, Martyn uncrossed his legs and let go of the beam. He fell straight down for the four to catch him neatly in the basket. But he stifled a cry as he landed on his shoulder. They lifted him out to lay him on the stone floor and assess his injuries.

Efran kept an eye on them as he scooted backwards on the beam to the wine rack to climb down. Detler had popped Martyn's left arm back into the shoulder socket and was working on the right when Efran came over. Hawk was vigorously rubbing one purple hand.

As the second shoulder joint popped into place, Martyn, tears streaming down his face, looked up at Efran, whose eyes were dry and clear. "Let's get him to the safe room and see if we can connect with the other men," Efran said.

"Right-O, Captain," Detler said in satisfaction.

"So it *was* you," Efran murmured. Detler grinned. They lifted Martyn to his feet and took the lanterns to light their way up the stairs and out to the corridor. When they had Martyn in the dining room, someone opened the door from the corridor and they swiveled, prepared to fight.

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Chapter 21

But all Efran and his men saw were more red uniforms around Justinian, who muttered, "I may never be able to look into another closet again."

Cutch said, "We found him in the corridor, Captain; someone else had let him out—probably one of Marguerite's servants."

Efran looked out; morning was still hours away. "All right, Cutch, you and these three with you put Martyn and

Justinian in a carriage—Fanny’s will do—and escort them back to the Abbey quickly, before Crowe returns. Take with you anyone else who’s injured. Take the back road out; the stableman will show you.”

“Captain.” Cutch and his handful of men took Martyn and Justinian out briskly to the stables.

Efran took a step, then looked down in exasperation. “I need my boots,” he muttered.

“Yours are the ones with eelfish bite holes in them, right, Captain?” Mohr asked. He went to the kitchen and then returned with a pair of boots and a belt. “The servants are putting all boots they find in the mud room.”

“Yes!” Efran sat to put them on with great relief, as well as the belt. While it wasn’t his, it would serve.

Mohr paused. “Captain, the servants also think that someone else is here besides us and Crowe’s men—several of his guards have had their throats slit or heads bashed, and we’re not the ones doing it.”

Efran looked at him. “Cennick’s men?”

“We don’t know, sir. Bennard caught sight of a Polonti with long hair in tattered clothes—definitely not ours or Crowe’s. His men are particular about their grooming,” Mohr said.

“I noticed,” Efran murmured. “Well, dump the dead in the pond. We don’t want Crowe’s men to retaliate. Yet.”

“Captain.” Mohr saluted, then he and his companions slipped out. Meanwhile, Efran made a foray of his own to the kitchen to consume whatever he found.

Watching early morning light spread across the sky from the dining room windows, Efran wondered, was Cennick reduced to accepting scruffy Polonti into his army? Perhaps, but Efran couldn’t worry about that now; he must deal with Crowe. Efran didn’t want to kill his men, just Crowe—cutting off the head would take care of the hands and feet, as well. But Crowe projected an aura of invincibility that was hard to puncture. He had no weaknesses . . . except for Fanny. A stupid woman was a weakness.

Could Efran use that? He decided that he would try. He turned as Hartshough entered to assess the needs of the kitchen for the day. “Good morning, Hartshough. How is Marguerite?” Efran asked.

“Good morning, Lord Efran. Her ladyship is fatigued from the number of uninvited guests, but is encouraged by your assistance,” Hartshough replied.

“I’ve been more assisted than assisting, but I will keep trying. Where is Fanny’s room?”

“Second corridor to the left, the last room on the right,” Hartshough said promptly.

“Thank you.” Efran patted his shoulder, then walked out in his boots with the eelfish bite holes.

He found Fanny’s room and tried the door, which was locked. So he turned up the belt, hoping to find it equipped as most of his men’s were—yes, there was a pin, which he used to pop the lock. He replaced the pin in the belt before entering the room.

Since it was still early morning, the maid had not entered with breakfast yet, so Efran went on back to the bedroom. The lady was spread out in a large, luxurious bed. Efran sat on the bed and reached over to remove her sleep mask. “Good morning, Fanny.”

Her eyelids cracked open. “Get out,” she mumbled.

“You don’t want me with my clothes on?” he asked, hurt.

“I don’t want you at all,” she said. “Don’t make me scream for help; it’s too early.”

“I’m afraid that Crowe and his men are gone, but someone else is here. Cennick,” he said, stretching what little he thought might be true.

She looked at him quickly. He said, “I don’t know that Cennick himself is here, but it looks as though his men are. Someone is killing Crowe’s men, and mine are all locked in closets,” he said with his honest face.

Fanny sat up. “You’re just trying to frighten me.”

“If I were you, I would be frightened. Cennick is the type of man to take a fight on the road. What do you think he’ll do when he finds you here with Crowe?” Efran asked.

Fanny stared at him, then sent the bedcovers flying. “Get out.”

“If you insist,” he sniffed, and left, having accomplished his purpose.

A half hour later, he was watching out the back kitchen window as Fanny raised a ruckus in the stableyard over her missing carriage. She settled for Marguerite’s, instead, loading it up with many wardrobe boxes.

As this was taking place, several of Efran’s men joined him at the window to watch a couple of red uniforms drop Crowe’s deceased guards, weighted, into the pond not far from the back drive. When that was done, and Fanny’s driver began leaving by the back road, Efran turned away. But Dango, watching out the window beside him, said, “Captain!”

So he turned back to see two unkempt Polonti skitter up the side of Fanny’s carriage and toss the driver from his seat. Two more Polonti appeared on horseback from the stables, and another pair opened the carriage to jump in. The men in red uniforms on the rear grounds watched all this with interest, but did not interfere. Then the new driver took up the reins and whipped the horses on down the back road.

“Wigner!” Efran said. “That’s who’s been in the shadows—Wigner and his men got Fanny back!”

The men with him applauded lightly, then looked over as Truro and Arne entered the back kitchen door. Concurrently, Tourse stuck his head in from the dining room. “Crowe and his men are back, so we’d like to see you all in the safe room off the butler’s pantry, please.”

“Yes,” Efran said, and those with him went back with Tourse into the hidden passage.

One of the benefits of the passages was the number of peepholes along the walls. With these, Efran’s men learned that Crowe and his men had just attacked Cennick at the palace to be firmly rebuffed. In fact, Crowe had lost about thirty men, while another twenty had ridden back to Marguerite’s wounded.

This was bad enough, but Crowe was also fuming over the number of men who were missing from their guard posts. Yet the closets and storage rooms that once contained Efran’s men were still locked. (Efran would not learn until much later that, on the initial incursion of Crowe’s men, only four of Efran’s had been wounded

fighting. Most of the rest dispersed, being hidden by Marguerite or Hartshough; only a small minority were locked away as Efran had been.)

Crowe should have killed us, Efran thought, and he doubted Crowe's explanation for why he didn't. Men like Crowe did not rely on alliances. Rather, Efran believed that Crowe intended to keep them alive for some special celebration after he had vanquished Cennick. That was truer to the ancient Polonti tradition of wholesale slaughter of one's enemies after a decisive victory.

If that were the case, however, it meant that Crowe had to secure a quick victory over Cennick's forces. How would he do that with only 300 men? Set fire to the palace? That would be short-sighted, to burn down his own prospective seat of government—unless Crowe intended to rule from Featherstone. In that case, Marguerite would be a guest of honor at his victory celebration, as well.

So Efran couldn't afford to pick off Crowe's men a few at a time—or wait on Cennick's men to kill them. Efran needed a quicker strategy, and he wasn't going to burn down Featherstone, either.

One option was challenging Crowe to hand-to-hand combat. But Efran would rather have a strategy that held at least a chance of success, as Crowe would beat him to dust. So what was left?

"A trap," Efran whispered. "An . . . illusion."

In the hidden passage behind the butler's pantry, Efran asked, "Do we know where all our men are? Can anyone find Barr?"

Truro, beside him, said, "Tourse has been good about keeping up with who's where. I'll get him to find Barr for you."

"Thank you," Efran said, settling down on the floor.

Some minutes later, Truro, Tourse and Barr entered the passage where Efran was seated. Tourse said, "Barr produced as commanded, Captain. I have many more tricks."

"Funny you should say that. Sit. You, too, Barr," Efran instructed. "I'm ashamed of my ignorance of my own heritage, Barr, but—you know more. Some Polonti are supposed to have the gift of illusion, right?"

"Oh, yes," Barr said. "Crowe is a master at it, of course, in making others think what he wants them to think."

"Yes, I got a taste of that," Efran said ruefully. "What I want to know is, how do we turn that on him? How do we make him believe an illusion?"

Barr shook his head. "I don't know that." Looking up at Tourse, he said, "Can you find Conte? He's Polonti; last I saw, he was at the peephole of Master Crowe's room."

"Be right back," Tourse said. After saluting Efran, he practically skipped out.

Evidently feeling the need to explain Tourse's levity, Barr said, "Some of the men are treating this as a pleasure trip."

"They're not wrong," Efran said. "They'll get serious when they need to."

And shortly thereafter, Tourse was back with Conte, who saluted. “Captain?”

“Yes, Conte, sit down,” Efran said, indicating the floor again. When Conte sat cross-legged, Efran said, “I was asking Barr about the Polonti gift of illusion. We’re all agreed that Crowe is good at it, but I want to know how to use it against him.”

“Oh,” Conte said. He was what Efran called “very Polonti”: a large man with almost exaggerated traits of the flat face, broad forehead, “cushy” lips, and thick black hair. He was also highly educated and very serious; one would not find him skipping. “That’s a tricky business, sir—when illusion is met with illusion, there are unanticipated folds and warps, and Master Crowe already deploys extensive illusion.”

“That sounds exactly like what I want—to fold and warp him. How do we call up an illusion?” Efran asked.

Conte said hesitantly, “I am not a master of the craft, sir, only a—novice. So whatever I tell you might not produce the results you were hoping for.”

“Could it produce worse results?” Efran asked, smiling.

“Well, yes,” Conte said. “And it will certainly produce something. It’s like dropping a rock in a pool in which there are already ripples. You may cancel out the ripples or multiply them, but there will be some effect. Bear in mind that—if you come up against him, it will be difficult for you to discern what is real and what is illusion. An illusion is powerless unless you believe it, but that’s the point: it is very hard to disbelieve what you see with your own eyes. And an illusion that you believe to be real can kill you.”

“I see,” Efran said, trying to understand that. Moving on, he asked, “Now, what exactly do we do?”

Conte considered this. “Master Crowe must be present, awake and attentive. We must have all the Polonti we can muster—all those who stood behind you on the balcony. Then when you wish the illusion to take effect, we all gather in a place that has emotional significance to you, and we concentrate on the same mental image. It can be anything, but the simpler and more concrete images work best. They act as a lens to focus the illusion you desire.”

“And . . . how do I communicate the illusion I desire?” Efran said tentatively.

“You think it while we who support you are concentrating on the image you select. Oh, and, the image must not be one so common that Master Crowe would recognize it, but the more meaningful it is to you, the better,” Conte said. “The image that we focus on and the illusion that you project are *not* the same thing,” he stressed. “The image we use is focused on you; the illusion you use is focused on Master Crowe.”

Efran thought about this. “Have all the Polonti seen the crucifix in the keep?”

“Oh, yes, certainly. Yes, that would be an excellent image,” Conte said.

“Good. That’s what we’ll do.” He looked over at Tourse. “Is Crowe here now?”

“Yes, Captain,” Tourse replied.

“Then gather all the Polonti in the basement—Barr, you and Conte help him find all of them. When they are gathered, I will go to Crowe with a challenge for hand-to-hand combat there,” Efran said.

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Chapter 22

About a half hour later, Tourse returned to Efran in the safe passage and told him, “All the Polonti we have here are waiting in the basement. In fact, all our guys are down there”—about 120 men. “Since a number of Crowe’s men heard about it somehow, the basement is getting rather full. Everyone wants to see you and Crowe fight hand to hand.”

Efran stood. “Good. Tell them I’m going to Crowe now. Let’s see what happens.”

Efran and Tourse exited the safe passage into the butler’s pantry, then through the dining room into the corridor. Hearing approaching footsteps, they quickly slipped into a side room. From there, they heard a number of men pass through the corridor into the dining room.

When the corridor was silent again, Tourse opened the door to peer out, then he and Efran left the side room. While Tourse went toward the stairs to the basement, Efran went the opposite direction to the front doors, where Crowe would certainly have men on guard. Efran wanted to be escorted to Crowe with his offer of combat.

Sure enough, as he walked down the corridor toward the doors, Crowe’s guards turned to come for him. And he said, “Kindly take me to Master Crowe. I have a proposition for him.”

The guards looked at each other, but it would have been very un-Polonti to deny this request, so they escorted him, surprisingly, to the dining room. And Efran realized that the master was among those who had just now entered it.

As Efran’s escort brought him in, Crowe, in the act of sitting with his lieutenants, looked up with a wry face. “Why am I not surprised that you managed to get out of your closet?”

“Master Crowe,” Efran bowed. “I propose to settle our differences with hand-to-hand combat. As the challenger, I request that it be in the basement. Now.”

Crowe stared at him, then slowly stood with a face of incredulous delight. “So the rumor is true? Are *you* challenging *me* in hand-to-hand combat?” His men looked at Efran as though he had offered them the Abbey Treasury.

“Yes, Master Crowe. I will try to make it interesting for you,” Efran said.

Crowe raised his hands in welcome surprise. “What can I say? I accept.”

“Thank you, Master Crowe. Shall we go down?” Efran said.

“After you, my good challenger,” Crowe gestured graciously. Efran turned to stride down the corridor, his heart pounding with every step. *God of heaven? Are You in this with me? Will You help me?* It dawned on him that he might should have asked that before committing himself, but—it was a little late now.

As Efran began trotting down the stairs, he tried to picture the specific illusion he wished to project. To make

himself huge or Crowe little? To make him look funny or weak? To make him cry or scared? Or. . . . Efran decided to project the image of Fanny throwing a temper tantrum. He almost started laughing just thinking about it. He looked down: even on the stairs, he saw the basement below brightly lit by a score of lanterns. They were set in a ring of fire delineating the fight space.

When he entered the basement, the line of Polonti in Abbey red, eighteen of them, turned to him. They were standing in front of the huge vat that Martyn had been hanging over. Efran paused to take in that vat, but the light from the lanterns did not reach very high; the beam above the vat was as black as its surroundings.

Still, Efran soaked in the image, reliving the anger of seeing Martyn hang there. Besides Efran's Polonti in front of the vat, the rest of his men were sitting and standing everywhere, almost shoulder-to-shoulder with Crowe's men, all waiting for the fight.

Crowe and his lieutenants came off the steps after him. Crowe's officers lined up behind their master, as Efran's Polonti were arrayed at his back. Then Efran looked at Crowe, picturing Fanny's angry face which transformed her from a stunning beauty to a whiny child.

Crowe started laughing. "Oh my! This is too much. You are attempting to foist an illusion on *me*?" With his laughter, he seemed to grow three feet.

"Begin!" shouted Crowe's top lieutenant.

With an arm length that suddenly exceeded Efran's by six inches, Crowe reached out for him. *This is an illusion. This is an illusion*, Efran told himself. Therefore, he was unpleasantly surprised when Crowe seized his jacket and flung him against the concrete wall. From there, he fell to the floor on his back.

Stunned for a moment, Efran could only roll away as Crowe attempted to stomp on his stomach with a foot approximately 18 inches long. Efran couldn't see that his own Polonti were not watching the fight; they were staring at the blank wall, picturing the crucifix in the Abbey fortress.

At first, Efran did not even try to land a blow on the giant before him; he concentrated only on staying out of his grasp while picturing Fanny at her worst. Things went from bad to very bad when Crowe caught Efran's foot as he tried to scramble away and held him upside down. But as Crowe was about to swing his head into the wall, Efran kicked him in the throat. Crowe let go of him then. Efran suffered a hard landing on his shoulder, but still managed to wrench Crowe's knee by grabbing it and twisting.

Whether it had any effect on him was hard to tell, because Crowe punched Efran in the stomach hard enough to make him vomit. He fell to the side to evade Crowe's next punch, which cracked the concrete instead. Then on the back swing, Crowe struck Efran across the face, breaking his nose and his cheek bone. Falling, he knocked over a lantern. Someone righted it quickly before the leaking oil could catch fire. But it splattered on Efran's shirt, along with the blood and the spew.

In the midst of the pain and the gushing blood, light caught Efran's eye, and he looked up. There was a stream of light descending from somewhere onto the beam above the vat. There was an eternity in the moment that Efran had to study that light, and its illumination of the instrument of torture. He could see the beam in detail, down to the splinters and cracks, the ends of the rope lying loose, and even the motes drifting in the light around it. There was serenity; there was peace, but there was also power in the light.

That light illumined Efran's mind and enlightened his strategy: the illusion Crowe projected was powerful, but there was also a real man under that illusion who had weaknesses. Crowe's reliance on illusion was a weakness

in itself, and only a weak man chose a woman solely on the basis of her beauty, which was illusory. So Efran was correct to pick Fanny's image as his mental attack. But he also must land physical blows on the real man. Strengthened by this insight, he need not give in now.

Rejecting the pain of his broken facial bones as illusion, Efran came off the wall. As Crowe leaned over to laugh at him, Efran imagined Fanny jeering while he rammed the heel of his hand into Crowe's nose. But as the blow landed, Efran felt the lack of substance; his hand had hit nothing real.

Still, he heard it. They all heard it. Fanny's jeering came out of Crowe's mouth. When Efran smiled through the blood, Crowe roared loudly enough to make Efran's ears ring. But he heard it as Fanny's high-pitched screech instead, and Crowe hiccuped. While he was distracted by the mental games, Efran must find real flesh and bone to strike. *God of heaven, guide me.*

Efran's men were tight in concentration, even those who didn't know about the illusion. They willed him on, some with tears running down their faces. And Efran ducked his head to ram his shoulder into Crowe's stomach.

Crowe did fall back a little—maybe even shrank a little, but laughed all the same, grabbing Efran's jacket with both hands and pulling him close. Efran, too weak to break free, watched Crowe rear back his head, preparatory to bashing Efran's brains out. Efran cried, "Hello, Fanny!" as he stabbed his fingers into Crowe's eyes. Again, the strike was ineffective, but the taunt was not.

As Crowe dodged Efran's fingers, his magnificent mane morphed into Fanny's black curls. Efran laughed; the men looked on in disbelief. While Crowe still clenched the jacket bunched under Efran's chin, the fingers were slender and manicured. So Efran bent his bloody head to bite one hand, hard (without stopping to realize that his teeth were intact).

Efran had hit on something real: Crowe roared in pain, ending on a high-pitched shriek. His grip loosened, enabling Efran to twist free and roll to the side. Looking up at Crowe's foot raised over his face, Efran caught it in both hands to shove as hard as he could, waves of pain roiling his stomach. But Efran dismissed the pain as illusory, and it evaporated. Crowe, arms waving, fell onto his back. He was no longer ten feet tall.

Efran jumped on him to clench him by the throat and squeeze—nope, nothing was beneath that, either. Crowe brushed him away with little effort, but was slow getting up. Scrambling to his feet while Crowe was still crouched, Efran said, "You fight like a girl!" Using the force of his whole body, Efran kicked Crowe in the gut.

The blow landed on something real and fragile. Emitting a howl, Crowe raised his face to bare his teeth at Efran, but something was happening. Efran, sinking to his knees, watched in fascination. They all watched.

Crowe's features were changing, shifting, morphing as if undecided who he was. His masculine Polonti mane went to styled black curls, then black wisps, then gray wisps. His eyes went from an authoritative gold, to an almond shape outlined in charcoal, to squinty beads. His mouth went from cushy to luscious to thin and pale. All of these changes waxed and waned all at once, simultaneous with similar changes in his body: his height fluctuated shorter and taller by several feet; his arms went from muscular to feminine to flimsy; his head went from leonine to delicate to lumpy.

Then in a wave, all changes ceased, and the figure slowly rising from the floor assumed a final form. Everyone gaped at the short, paunchy man with wispy gray hair, pitted skin, squinty eyes, and spindly arms and legs. He was not even Polonti. Glaring at them all—his men and Efran's—the dumpy little man made a dismissive gesture with a hand that bore bleeding purple teeth marks. Then he limped painfully toward the stairs. Efran had broken through the illusion.

Master Crowe's top lieutenant ran forward to grab the little man, at least two feet shorter than himself. "You—you deceived us! We who fought for you and died for you!"

"You're all fools!" the little man jeered. His voice was reedy and raspy. His lieutenant lifted him off the ground by his throat, and the other men moved in to finish the job.

The Abbey soldiers—Polonti, Southern, Eurasian, and mongrel—converged on Efran, first, to check his injuries. But as the entity that had inflicted them was an illusion, Efran's injuries also disappeared. His features revealed themselves as unbroken, and he was able to stand unhindered. Even the cracks in the concrete disappeared. Efran did suffer a slight sprain in his wrist when he had attempted to choke Crowe.

"The God of heaven sweeps away whatever is not real, whatever is not of Him," Efran murmured, finally understanding. He looked up at the beam, which was now dark as before. "And all of you helped me," he said, looking around.

They slapped his back and congratulated each other, grinning, whooping, raising fists in the air.

Once Master Crowe's body was left crumpled on the basement floor, his men melted away. The basement emptied considerably, except for Efran's men, who were opening bottles of wine to celebrate. A few of Crowe's men paused, and one came up to Efran to say, "We have heard that you accept defectors."

"Yes," Efran said. "I will take any of you who will swear loyalty to Roman's Law. Except—no one who took part in that"—and he pointed up to the beam where Martyn had hung. "If you had a hand in that, don't bother." They looked up to the beam, and one man walked off.

Barr then asked Efran, "What about Master Crowe's body?" And they looked at the small, pathetic heap.

"Oh, we're taking that with us," Efran said. "I may have it stuffed and mounted. I don't know."

"I can connect you with an excellent taxidermist, Captain," Tourse said. Efran laughed, gripping his shoulder.

They spent the remainder of that day and the next resting, eating, and helping to clean up and restore Featherstone. Crowe's defectors, about thirty of them, assisted in humiliated disbelief. A greater number went out to kill themselves. When Efran saw that, he sent his Polonti after them, to stop them and bring them back. And he neglected to ask any of them if they had participated in Martyn's torture.

Efran sent messengers to the Abbey to tell them they would be returning soon. Marguerite was back to her old self, hugging all the men, pressing food and drink on them. Her frequent cries of "HARTSHOUGH!" brought tears of joy to their eyes.

Cennick sent a contingent with congratulations to Efran for routing the legendary Polonti master, and asking for cooperation between them. Efran told his representatives, "I will leave Cennick alone if he will leave the nobles and merchants alone. I expect Marguerite's taxes to be rolled back and communications left unhindered."

Cennick's representatives agreed to take that message back to him, then asked for the whereabouts of Fanny. "I have no idea, except that she's not here," Efran told them. So they left.

Early on the third day, July 8th, the Abbey army took their leave of Featherstone while Marguerite and her staff

stood out front waving goodbye. It was a very nice departure, and a pleasant midsummer day for traveling. Forty-three of Crowe's men had chosen to come along, and as the red wave flowed south, more defectors in black appeared at the end of the troops.

When they arrived at Westford in the late afternoon, Abbey scouts hailed them in great excitement, having received Justinian and Martyn a few days ago. The scouts heard from Efran himself that Crowe was dead, his men dispersed, and Marguerite left in peace. Then Efran paused the troop movement to give the scouts time to get back to the Abbey and pass the word. Also, his men wished to pillage the Porterhouse Inn and Shay's Tavern with cold, hard cash. But Efran waited for Madea's fare.

An hour later, at the onset of twilight, the Abbey troops resumed their ride homeward. When they crossed the old stone bridge, they were astonished to see the road lined with leaseholders and merchants cheering their return as the wall gates' bell was rung. Efran had not realized how many people were living on the Abbey Lands now, but it seemed they had all turned out to welcome their victors home. Shouts went up as the men waved to the right and the left; Efran noted Ryal and Giardi standing at the front of his shop to wave. Although it seemed much longer, the Abbey army had only been gone five days.

Accompanied by the courtyard gates' bell, the troops began ascending the switchback at a walk, and Efran looked up with a full heart. A crowd was waiting in the courtyard, as well; although he could not see her, Efran knew that she was there, straining to see over taller heads.

"I hope she doesn't start running down the switchback," he muttered. She tended to do that when he returned after any length of time away, and she always fell down, because that's what happened whenever anyone tried to run down the switchback.

"She had better not try to run down it," he said again, watching. "I hope she knows not to do that."

He smiled to see the gates open so that Minka could begin walking down the switchback. Wearing her pants for easy movement, she walked calmly but quickly down to the first (the highest) bend. Then as she looked over to see him raise his hand, she picked up her pace, still safe, but trotting.

When he rounded another bend toward her, she dispensed with all caution, running on the incline and predictably sprawling full length. Efran cried out, laughing, and loped up to rein around, reaching one arm down to her as she jumped up to him. He brought her up to sit in front of him, and she held his neck to cry.

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Chapter 23

Martyn, declining to run down the switchback, was among those waiting in the courtyard. Efran let Minka down, then dismounted himself as he told Martyn, "I have something to show you. But we have to get inside first. How are you? Show me your hands." Martyn had to show Efran that he was completely healed from his ordeal, save a little scarring.

Estes and DeWitt were there to pat Efran's shoulder; people were pressing all around them to greet their warriors. DeWitt said, "So you killed Master Crowe?"

"No, God did that. Or, made his men do that. After I beat him. Which God enabled me to do when he was killing

me,” Efran said, distracted, as Minka was insistently kissing him, having to stretch up on her toes to reach his jaw.

They stared at him, and he explained more coherently, “I defeated him in hand-to-hand combat after one of our Polonti, Conte, told me how to use illusion against him. God came into it, and—did something. Crowe’s own men killed him after that. Here,” Efran said, as the small casket containing Crowe’s remains entered the courtyard on a cart, along with much of the men’s gear. Efran lifted out the casket, tucking it under one arm to keep the other free for Minka. “Let’s go in.”

“What’s in that?” Estes asked, indicating the casket.

“Master Crowe,” Efran laughed, and they stared at him. He turned around to tell someone, “Get Conte and Barr to the workroom on the second floor.” Then he had to lean down to kiss Minka, who was being persistent about it.

Suddenly remembering, he raised up to ask, “What of Meineke?”

Estes replied, “He’s set up shop in the new area and has already produced another minting of about five hundred royals for us.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, looking down at his wife.

While the men celebrated their homecoming, and the wounded received Wallace’s attention, Efran ate a plate of sausages in the dining hall and bounced Joshua. “How could he have grown so much in five days?” he muttered. The six-month-old held his head up and looked around, waving at anyone nearby.

“He’s impetuous, like you,” Minka murmured on his arm. He hugged her with an acknowledging laugh.

Then he took the baby, along with Minka, Estes, DeWitt, Barr, Martyn and Conte up to the workroom. First, he had them open the casket to see the corpse. “That is Master Crowe,” Efran said.

Martyn looked in, shaking his head. “No. That’s impossible.”

“Yes,” Efran replied. “That’s his true appearance. Everything of him you saw before was illusion.”

Holding Joshua, Efran had Conte explain their tactic of counter-illusion, and what they saw during the fight between Crowe and Efran. Staring at the shrunken figure in the casket, Martyn listened in shock. The others, never having seen Crowe’s illusion, took at face value the consistent description that the men offered.

Efran ended, “Most of his men left, but some wanted to come join us, so they are here. You might know some of them, Martyn. Like all new recruits, they’ll be required to swear loyalty to Roman’s Law. But I forbade anyone coming who had anything to do with your punishment.”

Martyn looked up. “Why?”

“Because it was unacceptably brutal,” Efran said tightly.

“But that was the Master’s order, and, no one could defy him. His power over us was complete. You cannot hold them responsible for that. I would have been compelled to do the same, if the Master had ordered,” Martyn said. The others listened silently.

“I will consider that,” Efran said reluctantly. “You . . . seem more like your old self.”

“Yes,” Martyn sighed. “The hand has been released from me. And in fact, he was not responsible for my training at all; his lieutenants are the ones who taught me the fighting techniques.”

“Did any come with you?” DeWitt asked Efran in cautious excitement. “If so, they may prove a boon to our own training.”

“I don’t know. We’ll check among them in the morning, and I . . . will tell them of your wish for clemency,” Efran told Martyn, who nodded.

Minka finally got Efran and Joshua back to their quarters. The baby was already asleep, and she was desperate to get Efran into bed.

“My poor Minka,” he murmured as he pulled off his shirt. “How did you ever sleep while I was gone?”

“I didn’t,” she said, looking cross. “I just waited.” She flopped into bed in her underclothes, and he crawled in beside her. But as soon as he wrapped her up in his arms, she was asleep. He kissed her head and held her close. But he did not sleep; he waited until he was sure she was sound asleep. Then he carefully slid out of bed and left their quarters.

He went to the dark keep to stand before the crucifix. This is where he preferred to pray; not that there was anything in the wood or the paint, but in the Reality they depicted. He hung his head before the image of the Sufferer, addressing the Person that the image represented.

“You were there,” he whispered. “When I was beaten by this little man and his mental power, You stepped in on my behalf, and Martyn’s, and all the others who were in his power. Again, You saved us, just—because I asked. I will never forget the light,” he exhaled. Then he went back to bed before Minka could wake and find him gone.

Since there was so much to be done the following morning—July 9th—Efran decided, naturally, to check the cavern waters below the cold storage room. And, of course, he forgot to tell anyone else where he would be.

When he descended the steps to the rock ledge, he saw something in the water right away. Because it was so very dark down here, he couldn’t see what it was. But it had the shape of a rock—or a man’s back—floating on the water. It didn’t look like it was moving. So he went up the ladder again to get a lantern and light it by the kitchen fire.

Taking this down to the cavern, he thought at first that the thing was a body, a man, face down in the water. Placing the lantern on the ledge behind him, Efran got on his knees to drag the thing to the ledge. And he found that it was simply a work jacket buoyed by an air bubble as it lay on the water. The cut of it looked like what Cennick’s men wore. Therefore, Efran was fairly sure that it had belonged to one of Cennick’s team scouting the tunnel opening. Efran tossed it onto the rocks at the far side of the ledge.

There was a disagreeable scum clinging to the jacket, so without thinking, Efran returned to the ledge to wash his hands in the water. He pulled them out with a jerk, remembering, then studied the placid water. Eelfish would have left the jacket in tatters, were they here. So were they gone? He was unwilling to find out with his own appendages.

“Swimmer? Heye?” he murmured, scanning the water. He waited for a while, watching, but when neither appeared, he reluctantly took the lantern to begin up the steps. Glancing back again, he saw an octopus arm emerge from the water to brush the ledge. So Efran left the lantern by the steps to come kneel at the edge again.

He stroked the arm, backing away to make room for two more arms and the head to emerge. He looked at the lidded black eyes and asked, “Are you all full?” Her arm coiled gently around his, and he asked again, “Are the eelfish gone?”

She tugged gently on his arm, and he pulled away. But she extended two arms to coil around his, again pulling gently. Had she wanted, she could have easily dragged him into the water, but this was an invitation.

Inhaling deeply, heart thumping, he said, “Let me take off my boots.” She released one of his arms, and he reached down to pull off his boots with the eelfish bite holes. Then, shaking, he slid off the ledge into the cool water beside her and dove down.

Under water, he opened his eyes, momentarily paralyzed by the sight of her bulk. She was really big. But she moved aside gracefully, and he looked down into a wonderland of light and color.

Collecting around his moving arms and legs were bright blue dots. The more he moved, the more they spread around him, encircling him with jewels. Why he had not been able to see this from above, he didn’t know, but it was thrilling to see the Sea’s blue lights exhibited here.

He surfaced to breathe, and Heye’s great bulk moved him gently but insistently away from the edge, and the jewels followed him. He was scared but cooperative as she nudged him toward the opening of another room of the cavern. Here, draped from the ceiling all above him were long, delicate strands of blue and silver, cascading like a meteor shower across the sky. On down the cavern, as far as he could see, were stars of green and blue covering the ceiling like sapphires in the night firmament. They were so bright here as to be reflected in the black water below.

Efran breathed in wonder at the sight, so vast and glittering that he could hardly take it in. Then, feeling something brush his leg, he gasped, thinking of eelfish. But Heye, still nearby, was placid, and the bulk below him too large for any eelfish. “Swimmer—you scared me,” Efran said, blowing water.

Hello, Efran Swimmer.

“You’re making fun of me, but that’s all right today,” Efran said. “Are the eelfish gone, then?”

Heye eat the eelfish.

“Thank you, Heye. Thank you,” Efran breathed. But she had submerged somewhere far below. The depth of the cavern, the lights, the *hopeful* absence of the eelfish—it was all too much for him. Overwhelmed, he turned back to swim for the ledge.

But he couldn’t see it. In the utter darkness of the base cavern, he couldn’t see where the ledge was, nor did the bioluminescence illumine it. He couldn’t even see the lantern he had left. Aware that there were other openings off this cavern, he knew he could not simply swim around the walls looking for the ledge; he would lose himself in the other rooms.

Efran began floundering in the water. “Swimmer, I can’t see—where the ledge is—”

A great bulk rose under him, and Efran found himself gasping on Swimmer's broad back. The massive fish moved soundlessly through the water, then reared up over the rock to deposit Efran in a wet heap on the ledge. He looked over at the wide laughing mouth receding back into the water. "You may laugh again at me. That's twice today," Efran breathed, and Swimmer flipped away, splashing him.

"Three times is excessive," Efran said, shaking water out of his ears.

He rose unsteadily, taking up his boots and the now-extinguished lantern to climb the steep stairs. Leaving a trail of water, he exited the closet and went out of the storage room toward his quarters.

There, standing in the corridor in front of his door were Minka, Estes, and DeWitt. They turned to regard his dripping approach. Minka asked, "Are the eelfish gone?"

"Yes," Efran said.

Estes nodded complacently. DeWitt said, "When you've dried off, will you kindly come out to the back grounds, Captain?"

"Of course," Efran said amiably.

The men went on down the corridor; Minka opened the door, cutting her eyes up at him. "I'll help you change."

"I don't have time for you today," he said, peeling off his wet shirt, and she locked the door.

So it was a while longer before Efran made it out back. When he arrived, however, he found numerous men in groups on the sparring grounds. He looked on from a distance at the skills training in progress. Then Martyn came up with a tall, solid Polonti of middle age. "Captain, this is Nares. He was my primary trainer in skills."

"Welcome, Nares," Efran said, extending his hand. "Martyn's recommendation is sufficient for me. I assume you are willing to be tutored in the Law of Roman?"

Nares accepted his hand. "Yes, Captain. We are all . . . unhappy by the, the . . . fraud of Master Crowe." Having spoken mostly Polonti all of his life, he found it difficult to express himself in the Southern Continental language.

"Then I am glad to welcome you. Martyn's training was no fraud," Efran said.

Nares saluted, and Martyn took him to be introduced elsewhere. Looking over the grounds, Efran was pleased at the number of Polonti, and the fact that the other men appeared to be receptive to them, especially as regards the training they brought. "We'll need more barracks," he thought out loud.

Then he saw a commotion on the grounds, and squinted. From this distance, he couldn't discern what was causing the new Polonti to turn in unison. They were bowing, some kneeling, at someone passing through them. Then Efran spotted Goss and Krall, and Pia between them. The little *aina*, who had the gift to command animals, was being greeted by the Polonti as a person of consequence.

Her animals friends from the hilltop woods—deer, rabbits, chipmunks, and smaller creatures—gathered at the fence to watch her; forest birds landed on the railing or circled overhead. The poulterer emerged in aggravation that the chickens, deciding that they could fly, flapped out of their coops and over their fencing to congregate around her.

Efran exhaled, hands on his hips, then stalked forward to meet her. “So for the new men you come out of the woods, but not for me,” he complained, sweeping her up in his arms.

She grinned at him. “You are my *haumana*”—pupil. But she consoled him with a kiss on the cheek. The Polonti gathered around them to pay their respects to her, some requesting to touch her. This she permitted, within reason.

Being less in demand, Efran had to get out of the way. But he handed her over to Krall to be held, lest the larger bodies overwhelm her.

Turning away, Efran found Doudney waiting. “Captain.”

“Yes?” Efran said.

Doudney said, “You’re requested at Mouris’ plant shop, sir.”

Efran laughed and groaned, “My, it’s good to be home. Find Minka and send her to the foyer, please. I’m not going without her.”

“Sir.” Doudney saluted and trotted off.

Efran paused to watch more of the drills, which had resumed under Neale, Cutch, Nares, and another new Polonti. “Excellent,” he murmured, then turned to head for the foyer.

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Chapter 24

Arriving at the foyer, Efran was gratified to see Minka there, waiting for him. When she turned her blue eyes up to him, and he regarded her humorous exasperation, he raised his brows in innocence. “What? I came as soon as I was summoned.”

“Not you,” she said, leaning into him. “My sister.”

“Is she at Mouris’ again?” he asked in alarm.

“I don’t know. But surely she’s in there somewhere. Else why would we be called?” she asked.

He bent to face her eye to eye. “Then I will be silent and abide by your edicts,” he told her.

She laughed, pained. “My record of edicts is dismal.”

“Better your record take another hit than mine,” he smiled.

She made a fist as if to beat him, but pulled him down so that she could kiss him instead. “Then be my guardian,” she whispered.

“Forever,” he said, his eyes watering. “Oh.” He lifted up, closing his eyes in remembrance.

“What?” she asked in alarm.

“Remind me to tell you about Fanny on this trip,” he said, gesturing outside to where their horses waited.

“Fanny was there?” she asked sourly on their way out.

“For a little while, for comedy. When I tell you, you’ll never feel inferior to her again. If you ever did. Which I doubt,” he said. As he threw a leg over the saddle, he looked back at her. “Pants. So you’re feeling confident enough not to need battle gear.”

She laughed, mounting her own horse by herself. “That, and the fact that they’re comfortable. Much easier to work in than a dress.”

“Which is why I seldom wear a dress,” he said primly. She lifted her face to laugh at him, and he decided there was no more beautiful woman on the Continent.

They arrived at Mouris’ to see new signage and a shop full of new stock. Mouris came out to meet them, greeting them loudly, “Lord Efran and Lady Minka! Thank you for stopping by today!”

Minka answered politely, “You’re welcome, Mouris. What did you need?”

“Need, Lady Minka?” he asked blankly. Efran looked at the young ex-courtesan manning his payment counter, which meant that Adele probably was not here.

“Didn’t you ask us to come?” Minka asked Mouris.

“Oh! I just wanted you to see all of our new stock, Lady Minka!” he said, lifting a hand. He smiled warmly at another woman who walked in.

“I see.” Minka began dutifully walking the aisle. Then she looked back at Efran, who was waiting by the front, leaning on the wall. He turned his eyes to her, and she abandoned the aisle to start walking back toward him. He straightened, smiling.

Mouris stopped her. “Did you see our new bedding plants, Lady Minka?”

She glanced at them. “They’re lovely, Mouris, but—it’s July. I’ve planted all the flowers I’m going to plant this season. But I will buy your hand tools,” she said, brightening.

“Hand tools.” His eyes glazed over.

“Oh. Well, let me know when you have them in stock.” She turned back to fit herself under Efran’s outstretched arm, and they walked out.

“As long as we have the horses, let’s go over to see Ryal and Giardini,” he said, taking the reins.

“Yes! But why do you call her that?” Minka asked, standing by her horse.

“Did I not tell you?” he said. “That’s her birth name! She is Sophie and Henry’s first child!”

“Really?” she breathed. “How wonderful. Oh, that she and Ryal have met again after so many years—!”

“Yes,” he said, and there was a catch in his voice. “How these coincidences just happen here.” He put both hands on the saddle without mounting.

“Now, what about Fanny?” she asked darkly, feet still on the ground.

He started laughing, and since it was so much easier to talk quietly on foot than on horseback, Efran and Minka were then seen walking closely together, leading their horses with the saddles sitting empty on their backs.

They arrived at the notary shop with the afternoon sun golden behind them and Minka wide-eyed. “Wigner’s band captured her AGAIN?”

Laughing, he could only nod as he opened the door to the shop. Then he called, “Ryal! Giardini!”

She came out quickly from the back room, slightly flushed and straightening her dress. “Why, hello, Efran! Minka! So good to see you both.”

Efran looked at her steadily, lips slightly parted. Minka was grinning tight-lipped at the floor. “What was happening back there, Giardini?” he asked in a low voice.

She looked at him in wide-eyed guilty surprise. “Why, nothing, Efran.”

Ryal entered from the back room. “Minka! Efran. Hello. What can we do for you?”

Efran leaned on the counter to address Giardi. “Let us ascertain whether anything happened. Did he slide his arms slowly around your waist?”

“Lord Efran!” she cried, laughing. Minka was laughing. Ryal was turning red.

“Did he bend his face to yours?” Efran pressed.

“Yes! Yes!” she said.

“Did he caress your lips with his?” Efran asked in a whisper.

Giardi said, “No, he just flat-out kissed me.”

“Well, that has to be assault in anyone’s book,” Efran said, rising off the counter.

“And I kissed him back,” Giardi said with a careless toss of her head.

“Counter assault. Here it gets murky,” Efran said.

“*What* can we do for you, Efran?” Ryal said, composed if red.

Efran looked at him seriously. “Why are you not Lord Ryal yet?” Ryal studied him. Efran looked down at Minka. “If Justinian is titled, shouldn’t Ryal be?”

“Yes.” Minka nodded vigorously.

“We’ll correct that, then. Come up to dinner with us,” Efran said. As Ryal began an objection about getting out the carriage, Efran said, “But we brought you horses.”

Ryal looked out front. “There are only two.”

“That’s because Minka and I are walking up. Do you mind walking up?” Efran asked her.

“Not at all. I’m wearing pants,” she said.

“So am I!” Efran said in delight. Turning to Ryal, he explained, “Since we’re both wearing pants in which to walk up, you and Giardini may ride.”

As there was no credible argument to be found to that, Efran lifted Giardi to Minka’s horse, and Ryal mounted Efran’s, then the lord and lady led their horses up the switchback like attendants while the notary and his assistant rode like royalty. Efran deposited them in the dining hall to receive another wonderful dinner by Madea and her staff (meat pies tonight, of rabbit, chicken, venison and beef).

Then Efran accosted Estes, who was persuaded to interrupt his dinner to begin the paperwork for Ryal to be named Lord Commander of the Abbey Fortress and Lands due to his many years of ongoing service as notary in Westford and the Abbey Lands. (“Lord Commander” was just one level below Efran’s “Lord Sovereign.”) Kelsey forgave Efran for the interruption, as he remarked on how big and burly three-week-old Malan was.

Following dinner, Efran made sure that Ryal and Giardi had horses and escorts to get them back down the switchback, and that Ryal carried the paperwork to register at his shop, upon which the title would be made official.

That evening, while Joshua lay asleep in his crib, Efran, satisfied, moved to lie beside Minka. She brushed his wet hair back out of his eyes, and he murmured, “It’s getting warm at night. Shall I open the window?”

“Not if you have to get up,” she said sleepily. Then her eyes cracked open, and she corrected herself, “If you’re uncomfortable, yes.”

So he got up to climb on the headboard and crank open the leaded-glass window to let in the cool night air. When he had replaced himself beside her, she sighed, “While you were gone, and I did fall asleep, I dreamed that you were beside me at night.”

“I was. I thought of you constantly,” he murmured.

“But I am so grateful to have you back in the flesh,” she said, her voice breaking.

“Shh. Here I am, in love with you forever.”

And the moonlight cast colors through the panes while the night wind breathed its song.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on July 9th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

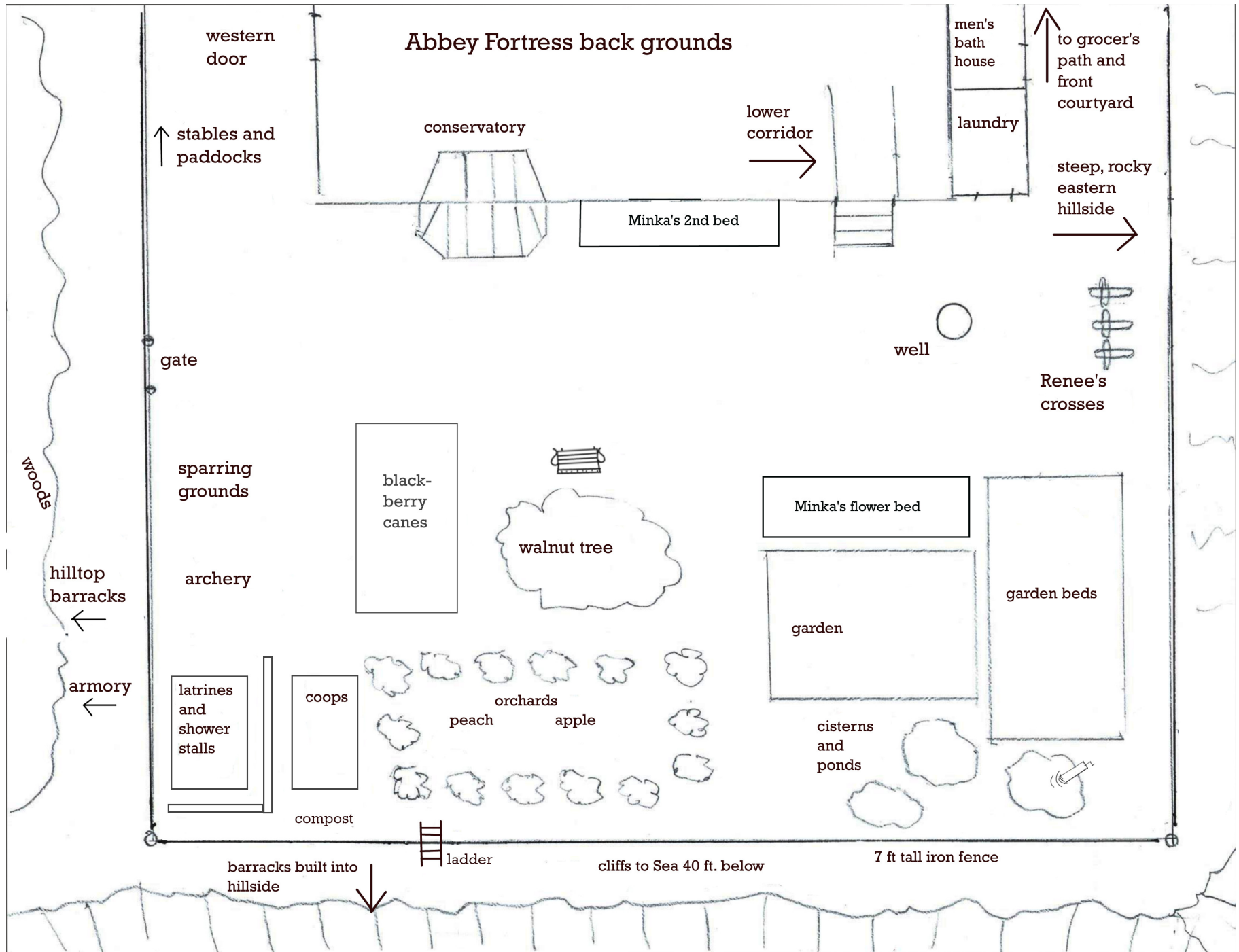
NOTES: See more about bioluminescence [here](#).

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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and Master Crowe* (Book 7)

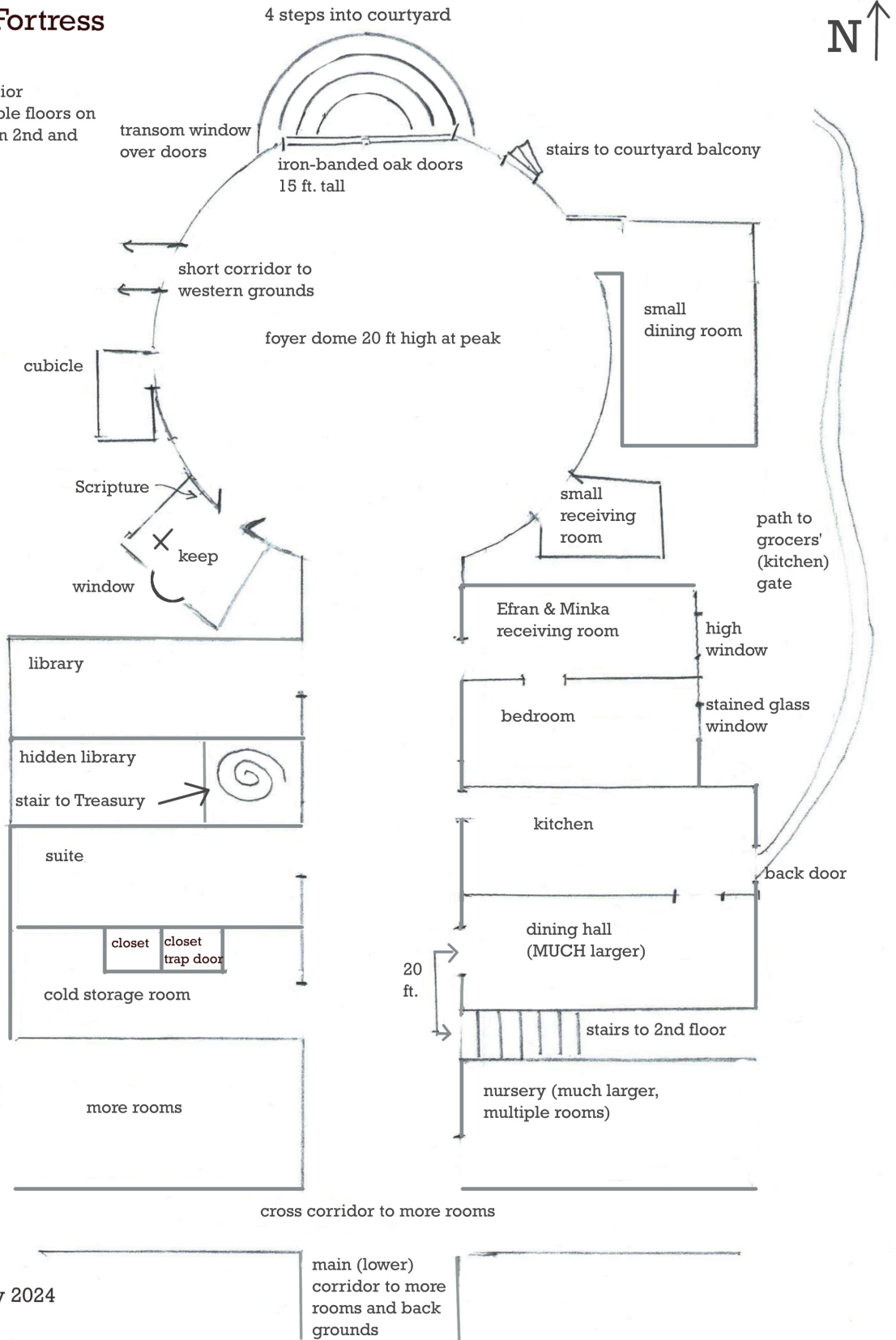
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Adele—ah DELL	Marguerite—mar ger EET
<i>aina</i> —AY nah	Meineke—MINE eh kee
Allyr—AL ur	meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
Arenado—air en AH doh	Minka—MINK ah
Arne—arn	<i>moekolohe</i> —moh ee koh LO ee
Awfyn—AWE fin	mores—MOR ayes (social conventions)
Bennard—ben ARD	Mouris—MORE iss
Bethune—beh THUNE	Nares—NAIR es
Bowring—BOWE ring	nascent—NAY sent
Brie—bree	Nesse—ness
canapés—KAN ah payz	onerous—AWN er uhs (burdensome)
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	Pia—PEE ah
chagrin—shuh GRIN	Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Clairvaux—kler VOH	Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Clute—kloot	Portia—POOR sha
Conte—cahnt	Qarqar—KAR kar; Qarqarian—kar KAR ee an
coup—koo	Sasany—SASS an ee
courtesan—KOR tuh zahn	sommelier—soh muh LEE eh
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	Stephanos—steh FAHN os
Dobell—DOH bull	Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Efran—EFF run	Sybil—SEH bull
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Tera—TEE rah
Elvey—ELL vee	Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Eola—ee OH la	Trina—TREE nah
Erastus—eh RAS tis	Tuttiett—TOO tee ett
Estes—ESS tis	Whately—WOT lee
Eurus—YOUR us	Xavier—ZAYV yer
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	
Eustace—YOUS tis	
ewer—YOU ehr	
foie gras—foy grah	
fracas—FRAY kuhs (brawl)	
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)	
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)	
Goadby—GOAD bee	
Goss—gahs	
Graetrix—GRAY trix	
<i>haumana</i> —ha MA nah (student)	
Hartshough—HART soh	
Heye—HAY yuh	
insigne—en SIN yeh	
Justinian—jus TIN ee un	
Kelsey—KELL see	
Knapp—nap	
Koschat—KOS chat	
Loizeaux—lwah ZOH; Loizy—LWAH zee	
Loseby—LOWS bee	
Lyra—LEER ah	
Madea—mah DAY ah	
<i>maka</i> —MAH kah (friend)	



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors

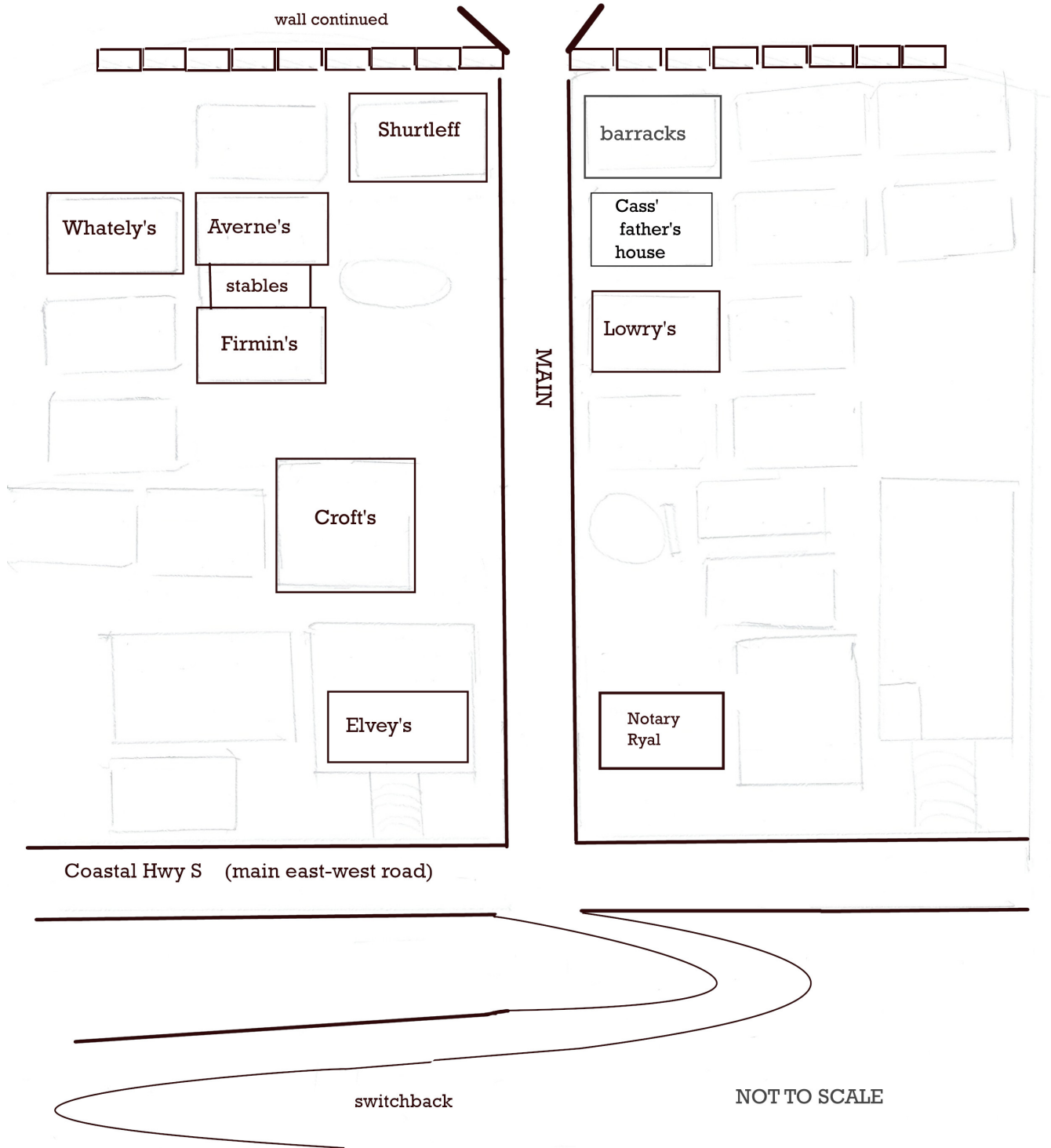


NOT TO SCALE

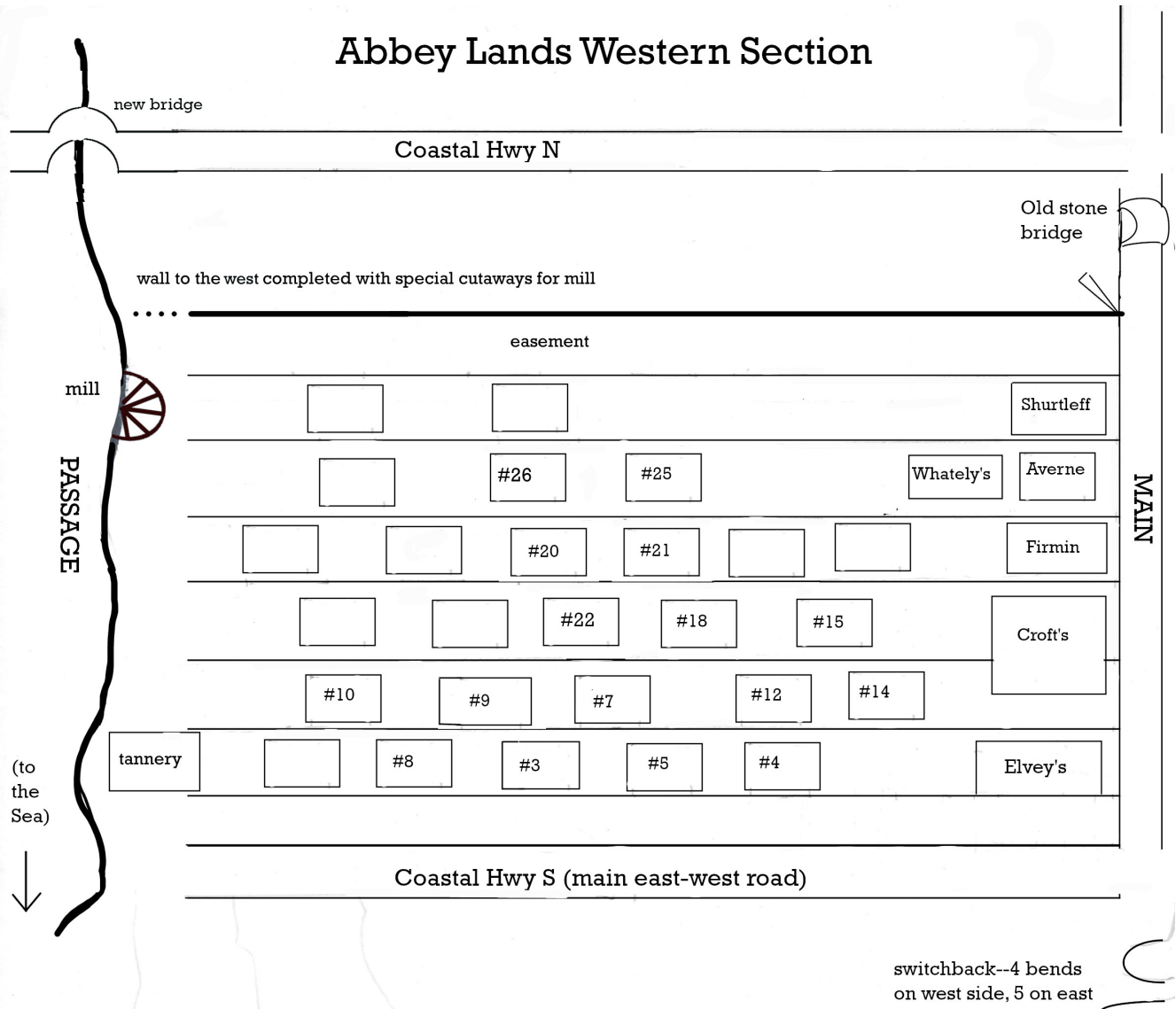
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main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Lands Main Road



Abbey Lands Western Section



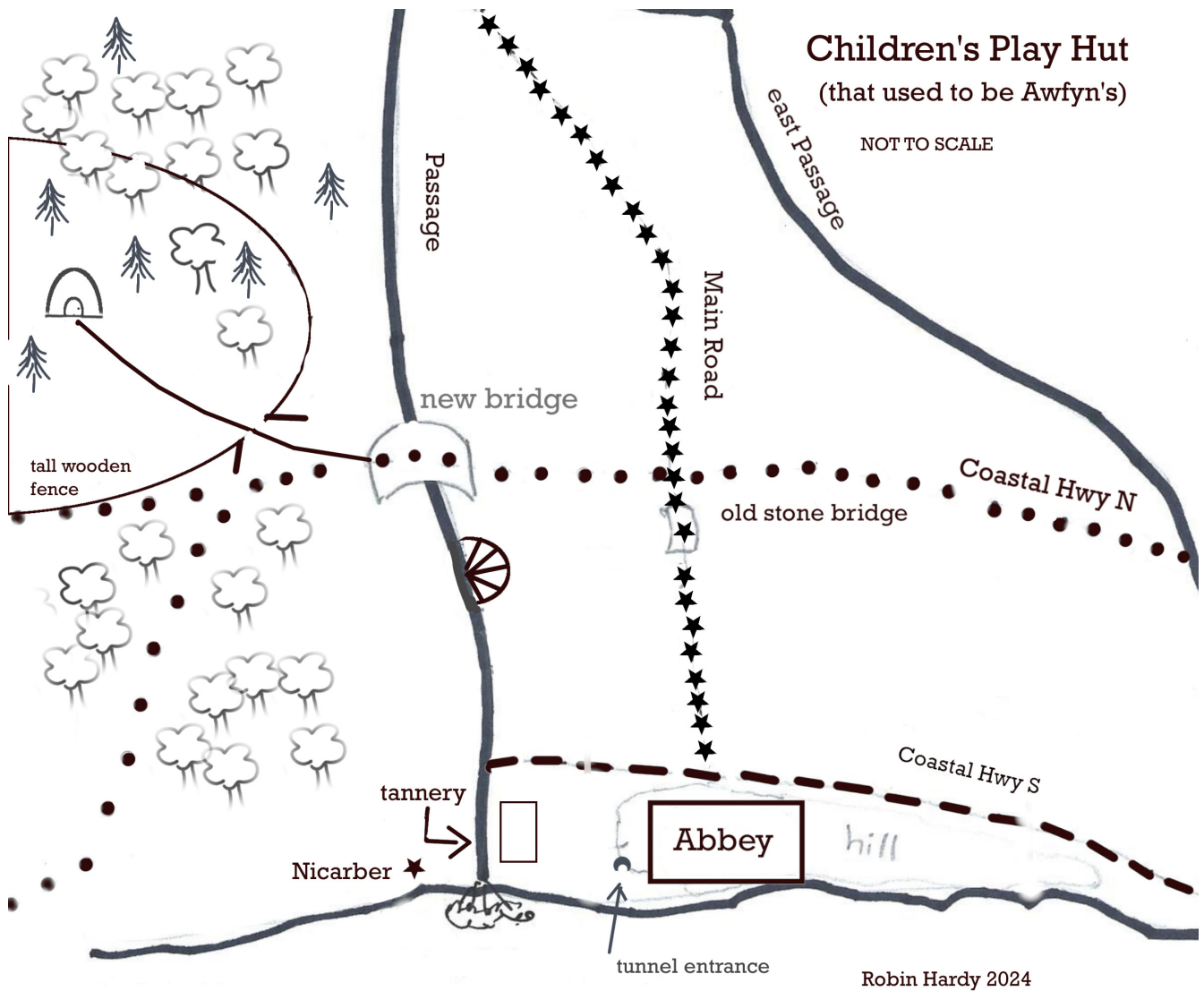
KEY

- 3 - Mouris' Plants
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house

7 ft tall iron fence

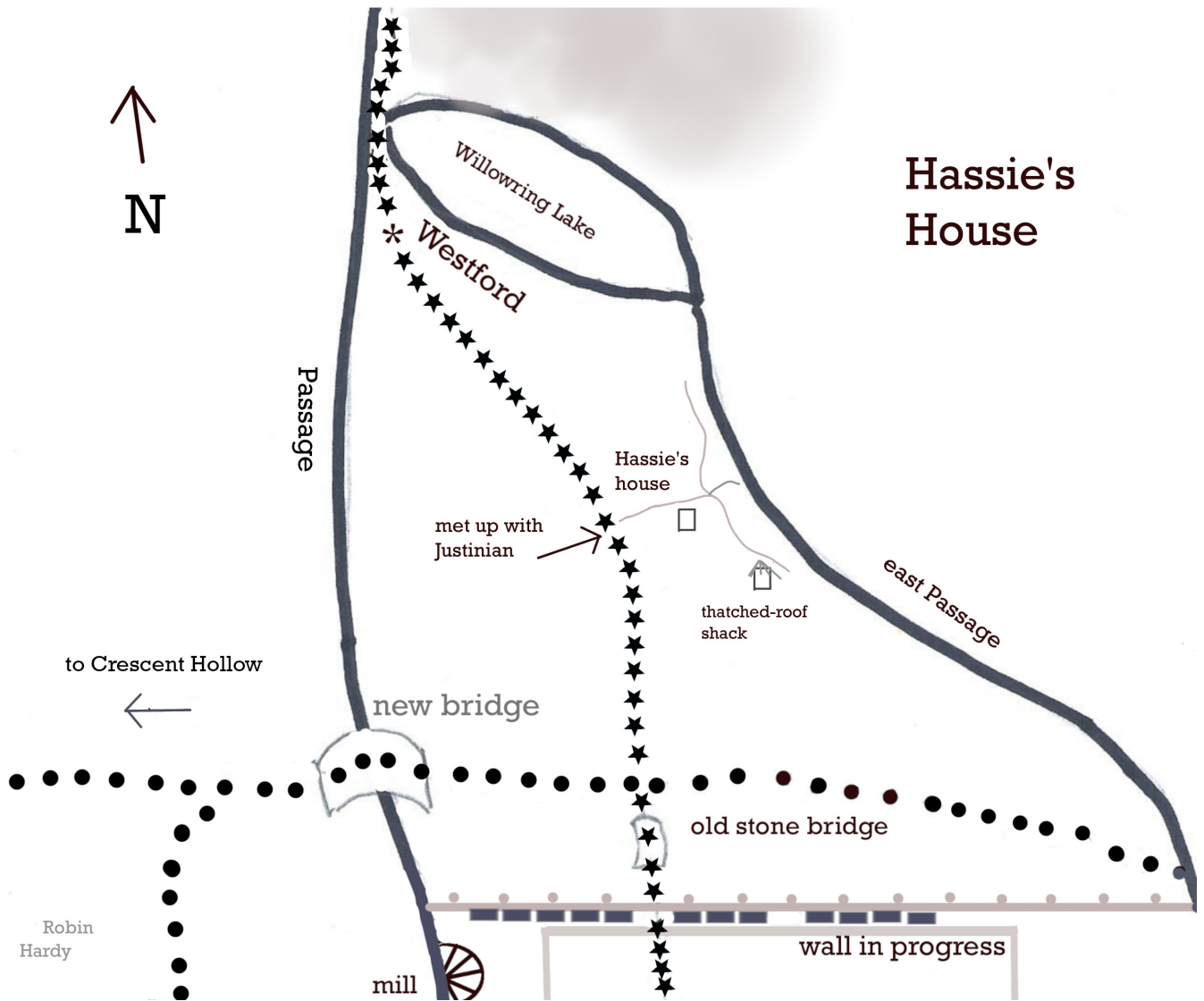
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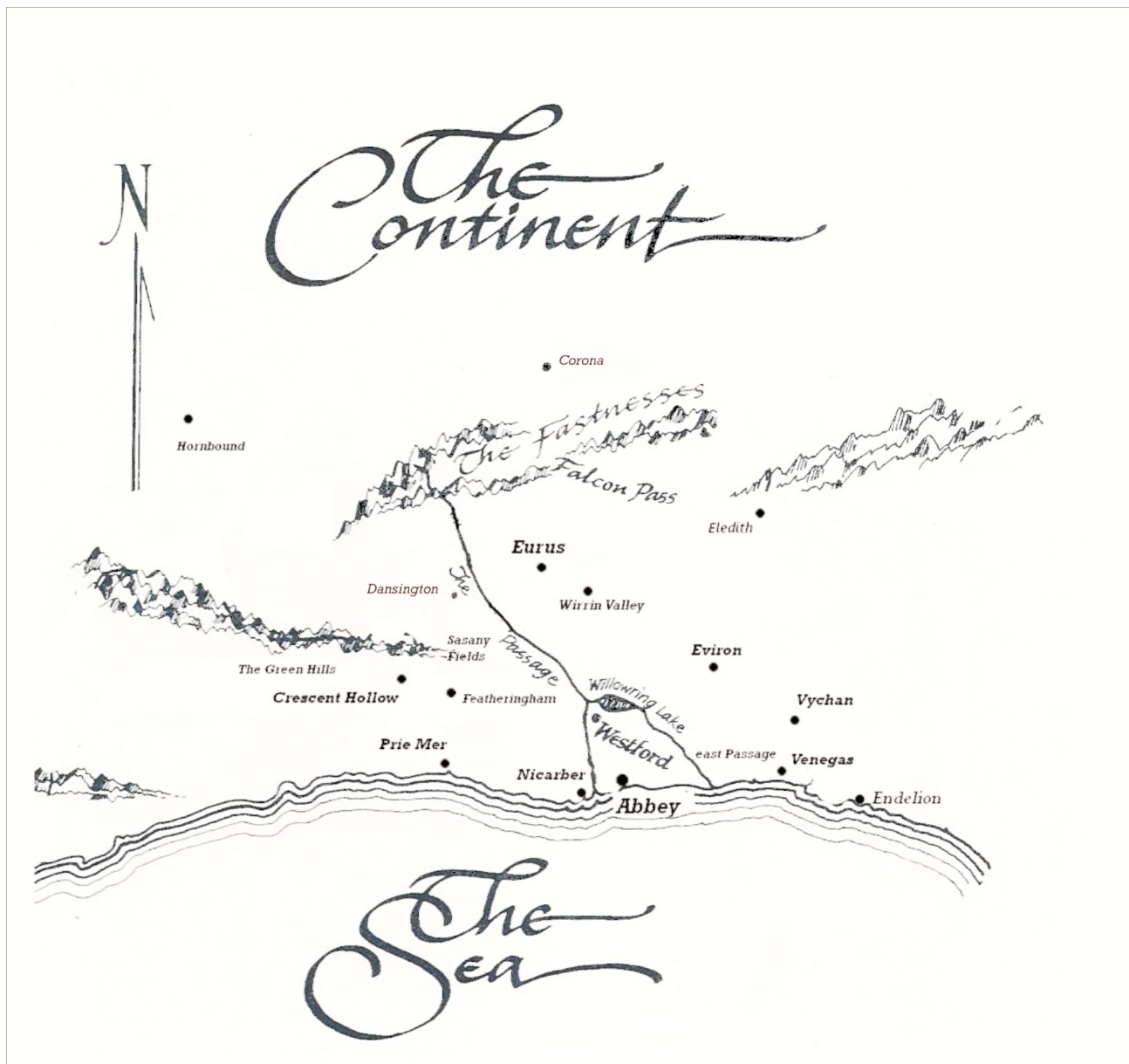
woods



Coastal Hwy







Master Crowe (Book 7:
Lord Efran and Master Crowe)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Well, it looks as though Master Crowe has upstaged Efran. Isn't Crowe beautiful?

I can't remember where I got the hair, but I found Crowe's ensemble [here](#)¹. And I was surprised to discover that a [fencing jacket](#)² makes a good base for an Abbey uniform jacket. Marguerite's [basement/wine vault](#)³ apparently includes a framed welcome note to visitors.

Do you recognize Crowe? Hollywood's bad boy [Robert Mitchum](#) turned out to be perfect for the part. I've never seen [The Night of the Hunter](#), but when I ran across stills while researching faces for Master Crowe, I knew I'd found the one.



Although he's not Polonti, that sardonic glance has earned him honorary membership in the race.

Robin Hardy
April 20, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [volfdrag](#) on Pixabay
2. Photographed by [Ben Kerckx](#) on Pixabay
3. Photographed by Pixabay contributor [marshalynnphillips](#)