

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

Book 1

Lord Efran
In The Beginning

Robin Hardy

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Chapter 1

Groaning, Captain Efran looked around from his pallet on the floor. Similar pallets were shoved up against his, covering the whole floor of the infirmary that he could see. And the patients on them were suffering the same debilitating fever that consumed him. Many were dying; some already dead, but there was no one on his feet to tend them.

The air was rank and stuffy; Efran, burning with thirst, opened his parched mouth to plead silently for water. But even should he make himself heard above the other cries, there was no one to respond.

I will die if I lie here much longer. Unless something miraculous happened, his recent 27th birthday was going to be his last. A bright light flashed above him, and thunder resounded. Efran opened his eyes again to see that there was only one pallet between him and the wall, in which the shutters of the window trembled against the force of the rain.

Efran closed his eyes to gather what remaining strength he had. Then he pushed himself up on his left elbow, toward the window. Dragging leaden knees, he began crawling across his neighbor on the pallet directly against the wall. The man did not object, being already dead.

Propping himself on his knees on the dead man's torso, Efran lifted a hand to flail at the shutters, but could not reach the latch. Trembling, he hung on the sill a moment, then raised his face to the far-off latch. With an anguished grunt, he hefted himself by his arms alone, as his legs were useless, and strained upward. His fingers found the latch, shoving it up from its cradle.

The left-hand shutter banged open inwardly, almost dislodging his grip on the sill, and the right-hand shutter struck his shoulder, sticking there. While the rain beat on his head, he shifted left to free the shutter, which then struck the wooden wall with the force of the storm's entry.

Efran took in the deluge for a minute, then threw his arms out to pull himself across the sill. He leaned far out, tucking his head to fall out the window onto his back. It was a one-story structure, built to house peasant labor. When they all fell ill with the fever, as did many others, the building had been quickly converted to an infirmary. On the ground underneath the window, Efran lay with his mouth open to the pelting rain, breathing in the fresh air.

The effect was almost immediate: he was able to open his eyes and look around with some clarity. Not caring for the mud in which he lay, he collected himself to roll to a nearby patch of grass. There, he was able to lie in relative comfort, looking up at the dark afternoon storm clouds rolling across the meadows south of Westford.

For the next hour or so he let the diminishing rain refresh him, but as twilight approached, he decided he'd rather be dry on what was sure to be a cool spring night. Looking around, he saw a large shed close by, so stood shakily to stagger toward it. Wrenching the door open to fall inside, he groaned, "Oh, God in heaven, I am so hungry."

He lay on his back in the hay of the shed, then squinted at the murmurings that reached his ears. Looking

straight up, he saw the shadowy outline of a curious head leaning over to regard him. Then he quickly rolled to one side to avoid the droppings that splattered where he had lain. And he apprehended that he had found refuge in a henhouse.

Lurching up, he thrust a hand in the nearest nesting box to bring out two eggs. He cracked them in quick succession to swallow the contents. The second he had to choke down somewhat, in that it contained a developing chick. But it was enough to take the edge off his hunger. With night falling, he crept to a relatively safe corner and stretched out to sleep.

“Get out, you filthy Polonti!”

Efran opened his eyes, then turned his head in the direction of the command. There was no hiding the fact that he was pure Polonti, with his solid build, broad forehead, high cheekbones, straight black hair and brown skin. But as a decorated officer—Captain of the Red Regiment of the Army of Westford—he seldom encountered such disdain here.

“That’s Captain Efran to you, girl,” he mumbled, closing his eyes again. Then he opened them, realizing two facts: it was late in the morning, and his fever was gone.

“I don’t care if you’re Surchatain. This is my coop, and I want you out!” she insisted.

Smiling slightly, he eyed her silhouette—short and slender, she was standing in the open doorway. He felt so good to be finally free of the fever that he said, “Thank you for your generous assumption that a filthy Polonti *could* be Surchatain.”

She seemed embarrassed, then. Efran noted that fact, considering it a point in her favor. Lifting his head, he regarded her in mild curiosity. She was young and obviously not of rank. He remarked, “Aren’t we on the palace grounds here? So if you’re owner of this henhouse, that makes you Surchataine. But I’ve seen her and you’re not.”

The girl lowered her bucket of feed and sat, at which the hens converged on her. After carefully evaluating him, including the fact that he did not seem inclined to get up, she told him, “She died two days ago. Hadn’t you heard?”

“I’ve been . . . preoccupied.” With the effort of the convalescent, Efran raised up on his elbow, trying to remember all that happened right before he fell ill. “The Surchatain died right after his brother. . . . I was one of the last to have an audience with him. If the Surchataine has died now as well—who of the ruling family is left?”

“I don’t think there are any. That’s why. . . .” She trailed off, then got up to take her bucket out to the yard to scatter grain, and the chickens eagerly followed.

Rising and stretching, Efran helped himself to a few more eggs. But he held them to the bright morning light first, and put back one that was too far developed. (Efran overestimated his ability to discern a developing chick in bright sunlight.) Then he exited the henhouse on his feet, pausing to watch her toss the grain to her flock. She pretended not to see him. So he went around to the back side to relieve himself.

As he was buttoning his pants, she came around the side of the coop in curiosity. Efran kept his smiling face down—this was a pattern he had observed over and over. Females south of Polontis sneered at his race while at the same time taking any opportunity to study him closer. They were fascinated by his hair, his skin, his build—and some more than that. A full-blooded Polonti could keep his bed occupied with any number of Southern women who wanted to explore him. But in public, these women—sometimes men—were the first and the harshest to revile.

It was such a common phenomenon that the Polonti had a name for it: *moekolohe*. And having been subjected to it since early puberty, Efran had become expert in detecting it and avoiding the women who exhibited it. Doing so was basic self-preservation.

Exercising that caution now, he lifted his head to study this girl, and she startled slightly at his scrutiny. To make sure of what he was seeing, he approached to within two feet of her to look in her face. He had to bend to do that; with him in low-heeled work boots and her in peasant shoes, the top of her head came no higher than his underarm.

She had messy brown hair carelessly tied back with a frayed ribbon and the slightly angular face of early adolescence—maybe thirteen, he thought. But her large blue eyes were beautiful. She didn't look frightened yet, but wary. Then he relaxed, smiling at her. No, there was no tinge of *moekolohe*, just a childlike curiosity.

At the same time, she studied him, never having seen a Polonti this close. She had heard that they were ignorant and dangerous, but his face was alive with humorous intelligence. His deep brown eyes were clear and evaluative, but not threatening. And when he let out his breath and smiled, she was embarrassed by the tingles that ran down her spine.

She smiled tentatively in response, putting a self-conscious hand to her unruly hair. When Efran went around her to see where he was, she returned to her chickens.

He studied the area, noting a well, a stand of oak, sycamore, and a few beech trees, then much farther off, the palace of Westford. The ancient stone bridge that had once spanned a fork of the Passage (now dry) was about 5 miles to the south. All was relatively quiet; he saw no army drills, nor workmen, nor merchant carts rolling down the road. Evidently, the fever still prevailed. Then he listened to the howl of a wolf from the south--it was uncomfortably close.

He smelled smoke. At the same moment, he heard her scream.

After some consideration, he went to the front of the henhouse where he saw her pointing wildly at the infirmary nearby. It was smoking, and a flicker of flame appeared on its roof. "My chickens!" she cried. "The coop!"

He evaluated the flames and the distance to the coop. "I doubt it will catch fire," he said, as there was not even a breeze today. First thing, however, he went to push open the infirmary shutters and look in. A few pallets besides the one he had left were empty; the rest were covered with sheets.

This was no longer an infirmary, but a crematorium. Someone must have come just now to cover the dead and set the whole aflame. And had the God of heaven not sent a storm yesterday afternoon, he would be one of those destined for the fire today. He stepped back from the window to evaluate the possibility of a

grass fire, which looked unlikely. After the deluge, everything was sodden.

She ran to his side to pull on his arm. "Save my chickens!" she pleaded.

He sighed, "All right." He doubted they needed saving, and he was too weak to do much, but he couldn't brush off her genuine distress.

As the flames consumed the crematorium, he returned to stand at the front wall of the henhouse. Collecting himself, he jumped up to grab the edge of the roof, then brace a foot on the wall and haul himself up, throwing one leg up after the other to lie on the edge of the roof horizontal to the ridge.

Settling on his back and closing his eyes, he said, "Get me water from the well."

"It's dry," she said anxiously.

"That's a poor excuse for a well," he observed. The Passage was nearby, but it was a fast-running, dangerous river. He wasn't about to send her over there.

Sighing, he rolled onto his front to look down over the roof edge. "Well, empty your bucket and fill it with dirt." With an arm dangling over the edge, he waited while she did this, then he waved. "Hoist it up to me."

She could only lift it a few inches. "It's too heavy!" she complained.

"You could empty some out," he suggested, rolling away from the roof edge to lie on his back. Sounds from below indicated that she had begun doing that. He put a hand to his pounding head. *How long is it going to take to get my strength back?* Intuitively, he felt that he didn't have much time.

He stretched out to wait while she continued to empty her bucket. This consisted of her dumping out most of it, then refilling it a bit, then finding she couldn't lift it and emptying some out, then deciding that surely she could lift more than that. After a few rounds of this, the crematorium had almost burned to the ground. "There! I emptied half of it," she said in self-congratulation.

Opening his eyes, he rolled over again to see this accomplishment for himself, and chuckled. When she looked up, he covered himself by coughing.

"All right, lift it up to me." He gestured over the roof edge. She strained to lift it as he reached down. "Can you get it over your head?" he asked.

"I don't think so," she pouted.

He lay on his back in silent laughter at this farce of fire prevention. "Then empty some more."

He listened to her exhale in exasperation. "If you say so."

Closing his eyes again, he waited until she said, "There. This will work. Oh! I forgot about the stool. That will help."

“Good,” he said, enjoying the gentle sun on his face. Besides, he felt safer up here than down there with her.

The bucket was suddenly pushed up onto the slanting roof beside the crown of his head. Eyes closed, he reached up to move it away a few inches.

“I’m coming up,” she announced.

He opened his eyes in mild alarm, and one small feminine hand came up to grasp his shirt front. He said, “Wait! Don’t—” But when she pulled, he was unable to keep himself from rolling off the roof and taking her down with him. The bucket of dirt followed, ejecting its contents. Fortunately, she landed on top of him when he hit the ground on his back, knocking the breath out of him.

“Oh! Oh! I’m so sorry!” She clambered off him in horror.

When his breath returned, he started laughing. After a frozen moment, she dropped to her knees beside him. “Why aren’t you angry?”

Still laughing, he gasped, “You did the best you could.”

She sat back to absorb that. “Here. I can help you get your breath back,” she said authoritatively. Whereupon she straddled him to begin gently pushing on his diaphragm. Except, her pushing moved her to sit much lower on his body than where she had started.

Efran gasped, “Girl—”

“Your breath will come easier in a moment,” she assured him.

“No—please—get up,” he said in a strained voice.

“Wait, I’m not done,” she protested.

He sat up, searching for how to lift her off his loins, but there was no safe place he could see to put his hands. So he said calmly, “Girl, please get up.”

Disappointed, she stood and watched him roll onto his front in the dirt. “Didn’t it help you at all?” she asked.

“Oh yes,” he said, lying on his front.

“Your breathing is not quite right,” she said critically.

“It will go back to normal in a minute,” he said.

She sat to study him. “You . . . were in there—the infirmary—weren’t you?”

“Yes. I crawled out of the window during the thunderstorm. Made it to your coop and ate a few eggs.” He lifted his head to focus on her. “Who are you?”

Reluctantly, she said, “I’m the poulterer’s girl. My father died four days ago. So the chickens are all I have.”

He risked sitting up. “Then thank you for sharing your eggs.” He checked again for *moekolohe*, but there was still not a whiff of it. She genuinely didn’t know. Still, he cocked his head at the lie he had just heard.

“I am Efran,” he repeated. “What is your name?”

She glanced at him warily. “It’s not important. I’m no one,” she murmured, and he studied her.

At the sound of voices, he glanced toward the path to the infirmary and held up a cautionary hand. She heard them, too, and scooted closer to him when he moved to the henhouse steps. There should have been nothing alarming about onlookers drawn to a burning building, but even before he himself fell ill, Efran had seen the fever wreaking havoc on the normal way of life. In fact, this girl should not be coming out to an isolated henhouse alone.

There were two of them, two men, who approached the remains of the crematorium to look it over. Fortunately, they passed by the back side of the henhouse, so saw neither of them sitting on the steps at its door. It was not possible to hear everything they said, but they appeared to be casually interested. They noted the complete destruction, and the fact that it was a good thing to clear out one obvious source of infection. As they turned to leave the way they had come, one declared, “—barracks is next.”

Efran hung his head, thinking. “What is today?”

She stirred. “Um, the twenty-first. Of April.”

He raised his face with a quick intake of breath. “The twenty-first! I lost—four days! It was the seventeenth—the day of inspections—when I started feeling hot. And then. . .” He groped in his memory, trying to pull up any recollection between then and yesterday afternoon.

“I have to go,” he said abruptly, getting to his feet.

As he felt her startle, he paused to look back at her. It seemed necessary to say something. “Will you . . . allow a Polonti to return for more eggs?”

Nodding, she lowered her eyes with a subdued smile of relief.

As Efran started toward the palace, his face settled pensively. “She wouldn’t give me a name,” he murmured, scanning the landscape ahead. “And lied baldly about her father. The poulterer had no daughter, but a son, Jayden. He was—is still, I hope—in the Gold Regiment.” He shook his head, walking on.

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Chapter 2

Approaching the palace, Efran deliberately circumvented it to head straight for the barracks beyond the pens and practice fields. Along the way, he looked everywhere, growing increasingly agitated at the barrenness. He began to trot, then lightly run. Feeling himself too weak still for such exertions—and ravenously hungry again—he restrained himself to walk.

Reaching the double doors of the main barracks, he yanked on one and entered, letting the door fall shut behind him. He looked over the large hall of tables, pallets, lockers, and scattered debris, seeing no one here but ghosts. (Pallets were workers' beds: narrow wooden platforms set on feet about six inches off the ground, covered with thin linen or cotton mattresses that were stuffed with hay or wool.)

He trotted to the opposite doors, opening them into the kitchen and mess. Here, at least, he found a partial loaf of old, dry bread, half bottles of wine, and a few raw carrots and turnips. All this he ate and drank while he searched cabinets and closets. Finding a canvas sack of potatoes and a string of onions, he tossed both over his shoulder, carrying with him two empty bottles that he had just drained.

Emerging into the backyard, he deposited his bounty in an abandoned hand cart. While still looking everywhere, he put a hand to his queasy stomach, at the point of rejecting the bitter turnips.

He paused indecisively in his distress. "I must. . . ." He took up the handles of the cart to pull it through the side yard to his own quarters, which he had shared with the captain of the Blue Regiment. Entering, he saw the tub still filled from his last wash day, so he quickly discarded his stinking work clothes and sank into the water, reaching for the soap. Following his bath, he cleaned the inside of his mouth and teeth thoroughly with a coarse rag.

Once clean, he felt much better, so he rifled his cubbyholes for all the clothes he had. He put on his dress uniform with its captain's insigne, then piled the sparse remainder of clothing in the handcart, along with the soap, wrapped in a cloth. He even put on his dress boots, putting his work boots in the cart.

Then he paused over his bookshelves. Why should he take any books? The men would come back, and the army re-form under a new Surchatain, wouldn't it? "Yes," he murmured, turning away from the bookshelves. "They will come back. I will continue to serve." It was his life, after all, and had been since he was 14.

But the question lingered. He pulled the cart back to the shadow of the barracks, looking for some direction or enlightenment. He needed to know more, so much more, but saw no one to ask. "God in heaven," he breathed again, almost unconsciously.

Movement caught his eye, and he focused on a solitary figure emerging from the back of the palace. Efran's eyes lit up, and he began trotting toward him. The man caught sight of him at once. "Efran!" He began running as well.

Meeting in the practice field, Efran caught his shoulders to shake him. "Pindar! Where are my men? Where are the regiments?"

At the same time, Pindar was saying, “Efran! Last I saw, they were hauling you to the sick house! Thank God you lived! You are one of the few left.”

They continued to talk over each other until Efran shut his mouth to hear Pindar explain, “Since the deaths of the Surchatain and his wife, our men have mostly scattered to their own homes. A few of your regiment [the Red, the second highest in the army] now serve in mine [the Blue, the highest] but most of the army [including the Gold and Green regiments] are in hiding until they see what the new ruler should do.”

“Who is that?” Efran asked.

“A distant relative of Surchatain Lietes, from Eurus,” Pindar said despondently. “His name is Lightfoot; he’s been a high Counselor to Surchatain Loizeaux. He’ll be arriving shortly. His daughters came down some days ago.”

“Lightfoot?” Efran scowled, barely restraining the observation that he once had a horse by that name. “They could not find anyone eligible in Westford? And how is it that he comes so quickly?”

Pindar exhaled, “Lietes died almost a week ago, Efran. There have been wolves circling ever since.” After a pause he added, “The army—those who wish to continue to serve—will be required to swear allegiance to him, you realize. Those who do not will be put to death.”

Efran blinked. “That’s against the Law.”

“I gather that he does not feel compelled to follow Roman’s Law, and . . . there is no one left to make him,” Pindar said. Efran nodded, then Pindar added, “He is from Eurus, you realize.”

Eyes on the ground, Efran did not catch his inflection at once. But upon Pindar’s silence, Efran looked up. “Oh,” he breathed, enlightened. “Eurus. Where Polonti are regarded as rats.” At this observation, Pindar nodded. Efran added, “That also is contrary to the Law.”

“The Law will be—revised, I’m sure,” Pindar muttered.

Efran studied him. “And you . . . have no problem with this?”

“We each keep our lives as best we can,” Pindar whispered.

An invisible barrier descended between them. Efran backed away an inch. Reaching out his hand, Pindar said, “Guard yourself well, my friend.” Efran took it, then Pindar turned away.

Efran stood chewing his lip as Pindar entered a doorway leading to the audience hall. Then Efran raised his eyes to the second floor of the palace, where the library was located. Hesitantly, he entered the door leading to the back stairway.

Something on the ground floor before him caught his eye, and he cautiously advanced to the back of the great foyer, now empty and echoing. At the rear of the large curving stairway, Efran saw piled on the floor the banners that had once hung in the foyer, representing the ruling houses of Westford through the centuries.

Atop the pile, obviously intended for the next bonfire, was the banner of the great Surchatain Henry, who decades ago had shepherded Lystra through her most trying times of war and betrayal . . . until now. For Lystra, as a country, no longer existed. Only Westford remained.

Warily, Efran moved to the foot of the wide foyer stairway, still hearing nothing. So he turned up this quick route to the second floor. Emerging into the broad corridor, he paused to look both ways before trotting to the immense library. He pushed open the door and closed it quietly behind him. All was still, for now.

The shelves containing hundreds of the great books of Lystra were still in order, but there was an ominous pile in the middle of the floor. Kneeling beside it, Efran spotted at once the great old book of the Law of Roman, which every ruler in Westford had sworn to uphold for over 200 years now. This also was destined for the fire.

Efran lifted the book from the pile to place it beside him. Doing that uncovered the Holy Canon, thrown down so carelessly that it lay on spread, wrinkled pages. Taking up that book, Efran smoothed out its pages and closed it properly, placing it atop the Law.

Glancing warily at the closed door, Efran returned to the pile in front of him, and dislodged the books of the Annals written during Roman's time. These he added to his pile, then regarded its height. He doubted his ability to carry more on one trip. Urgently, he hefted them all, staggering slightly under the weight, and turned to the door.

It took him a moment of maneuvering to turn the handle, but he was finally able to shoulder the door open and look out. Feeling vibrations in the floor from some unknown source, he quickly exited to the back stairway, easing down the dark, narrow steps with his burden.

Again leading with his shoulder, he pushed open the back door and glanced around. Seeing no one, but hearing noises from his left, he ran his burden to the hand cart hidden at the side of the barracks. Unloading the books with relief, he shook his arms and looked back toward the palace. If he could, he needed to pull off one more heist.

Assuming the air of authority that came naturally with the uniform, he strode toward the back door of the kitchen and opened it. Here, he found it occupied by a new kitchen mistress unknown to him. As she turned at his incursion, he leveled a benign but commanding gaze on her.

Her face screwed up in disgust. "Get out of here, you dirty Polonti." Her Eurussian accent was unmistakable.

Efran bowed slightly and withdrew. It was indeed time to get out.

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Chapter 3

Upon leaving the kitchen, Efran took a leisurely, roundabout route to the barracks, surreptitiously watching all around. Once out of sight of the palace, he raced around the back of the barracks to his own quarters. This room he ransacked for all the weapons he could lay hands on—his long sword, his bow and quiver, a hunting knife and hatchet. He also took his heavy cloak, a flint box, candles, a few pieces of tin ware, and several large waterproof tarps.

Then he returned to his bookshelves. All of these books, purchased with his meager salary, were precious to him, but he could not possibly take them. But—surely he could carry a few. He pulled out the book on Ares of Westford, which chronicled the battle which secured his right to rule, and put that firmly in his cart. A few other books had to go with him as well, then he made himself turn away from the rest.

Trembling from the exertion, he continued to look around, then stripped his pallet of its blankets. Moving all this took several trips to the handcart, which was now alarmingly full. He lifted the handles with a grunt, then had to set it back down to rearrange his bounty so it all would fit. This he covered with one black waterproof tarp.

He paused again. Knowing this was probably his last chance, he reentered the mess to perform a more thorough search of its storage spaces, since he had been unable to get anything from the kitchen. All he found was a sack of pearl millet, which he took.

He found sufficient space in his cart to cram down the millet and re-cover it with the tarp, securing the edges. Then he lifted it again to wheel it to the south side of the barracks, that farthest from the palace.

In the late afternoon, he peered around the corner of the barracks to see horses being stabled. There was also activity around the back kitchen door. And—dogs. He flattened his back against the southern-facing barracks wall. If they were allowed to roam the grounds, he'd be discovered in no time. The dogs that had been trained to kill wolves were particularly dangerous.

As he squinted into the bright afternoon sun, he realized that should he set out across the grounds now, his long shadow would point to him for the whole way to the front of the palace. He must wait.

Lingering on the edge of discovery was exhausting for a man newly recovered from the fever, but he had no choice. His one advantage was that they had no reason to suspect any unwelcome party, unless the kitchen mistress alerted someone, or . . . Pindar said something. . . .

Efran shut out the suspicion and sat with his back against the wall to wait.

Some time later he snapped awake. Realizing that he had dozed off in such a tenuous position caused him to gasp, and he looked at the waning afternoon light. There was not as much danger now of telltale shadows.

He inched forward to look around the corner of the barracks, and saw no more activity in the rear yard. The covered walkway, the laundry pit, the kitchen door, the entry to the back stair—all were still. Efran had braced himself to rise when something made him look at the palace windows on the second floor.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw a face gazing out over the rear complex. While it was apparent that Efran had not been spotted, any movement would surely draw eyes. He remained frozen until the face withdrew.

Even then, Efran dare not move. He had to wait, still.

While the minutes crept by, Efran watched the fading of the light. Moment by moment, he gauged the level of light according to what was necessary to hide his movements while allowing him to see obstacles in the path of his handcart. Total darkness was as much a hindrance as too much light, yet he could not afford to wait for moonrise.

Finally, in deep twilight, he stood. Checking all windows, all doors, all walkways, he saw nothing moving, though he was not sure that he would see anything at all. He took up the handles of the cart, deciding to draw it behind him rather than push it before him. Again the thought went up, *God in heaven*, but this time he was aware of it. So he set his eyes forward and thought, *God in heaven, cover me; cover the Law and the Canon*. And he stepped out from the dark shadow of the barracks.

He pulled the cart slowly, maintaining a steady, even pace, alert to any noise that would indicate pursuit or something falling from his cart. He deviated here and there to the most even ground that led away from the palace toward the chicken coop in the distance.

Just as he was beginning to relax, approaching the southeast corner of the palace, he glimpsed an animal bounding toward him—a large gray dog. Not looking directly at it, Efran slowed the cart to a stop and stood still. The dog had found nothing to bark at yet; sniffing the cart, he also smelled nothing interesting. Then he came up to sniff Efran's hand, who did not move.

“Cassius!” a distant voice called. “Cassius! Heel, boy! What are you doing? Heel!” The voice grew angry.

Agreeably, the dog turned to run back whence it came. Efran, watching, did not start moving again until it was well away. Taking up the cart handles, Efran continued to watch for any sign of its return.

Fifty yards farther, Efran passed the southwest corner of the palace, which brought him relief unlike anything he had experienced besides recovering from the fever. Looking back toward the front of the palace, he saw lighted rooms and carriages within the still-open gates of the courtyard.

At this point, Efran turned the cart handles to begin pushing instead of pulling. He was most anxious to catch anything that might fall from it, giving away the existence of a thief. And he began to push at a run.

He had to stop now and then to gauge his direction until he discerned the burned-out rubble of the crematorium glowing from deep within. And the light of the waxing gibbous moon directed his way reliably to the henhouse.

He pushed the cart up to the door and leaned over to pull it open. Then he began unloading the cart in the far recesses of the shed.

When he heard a gasp, he turned his head to whisper, “It’s just the Polonti.”

“Ohh,” she exhaled. “I didn’t think you’d ever come back. I fell asleep!”

Efran paused. Why hadn’t he noticed it before? There was a definite tinge of Eurussian in her voice.

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Chapter 4

Efran resumed unloading the cart, thinking all the while. When he had everything out, he covered it all with one tarp and wheeled the cart back outside. Then he came back in, leaving the door open. When the door was shut, it was intensely dark inside.

“Who are you?” he asked quietly. He felt her stirring as in preparation for speech, and forestalled her, “Don’t lie. You’re not the poulterer’s daughter; he has only a son, who I taught to use the long bow.” He waited a few beats, then asked, “Who did you stay with in Euruss?”

She remained very quiet and still. Exhaling, he reached out and found her arm, then pulled her to the open door where they could see each other in the moonlight. And he saw that she was scared. Although she looked him in the eye, she was trembling in fear. He regarded that, then let go of her arm and said, “Give me a name. Just give me something to call you besides ‘Girl.’”

“M-M-Minka,” she replied, shaking.

“All right, Minka. Go lie down. I’m going to sleep against the door here so as to know if anyone comes calling.”

He stepped back to close the door, and heard her dive into the hay in the far corner. “Oh,” he remembered. Opening the door again, he went to the pile of booty in the corner to withdraw both blankets. These he stretched toward her corner, which was apparently not close enough for her to discern what he held. So he tossed them in her direction. “Good night.”

In return came the bare whisper, “Thank you.”

He lifted up, disturbed. “You’re not afraid of *me*, are you?”

“You? Ha! Of course not!” she said, slightly shrill.

“Didn’t you recognize my insignia? I’m a captain in the army. I swore an oath to protect people like you. It goes against everything I believe to harm a young girl,” he protested—ineffectively, he feared.

He heard the sudden scraping of her shoes as she sat up. “A *young girl*? I’ll have you know I don’t need yours or anyone’s protection! I can take care of myself! Don’t you dare think that just because you’re strong and—brown, and have muscles, that I think anything of you at all! And you’re not cute, either! You’re not at all cute when you smile and your eyes crinkle. Your lips aren’t nice, either. I mean, they’re too . . . cushy. You should have thin lips like most men. Now leave me alone!”

Efran could say nothing to all this for a few minutes afterward, as laughter threatened to emerge the moment he opened his mouth, and he couldn't see any point in hurting her feelings. Finally, he choked out, "Well, you should know that I sleep soundly, so, if you were to try to step over me to the doorway, it wouldn't wake me."

"Hmpf!" she snorted.

"I give," he breathed, closing his eyes. But it disturbed him to think that he was terrifying a young girl trapped in an isolated henhouse with him. Not knowing how to reassure her, he remembered a tavern song, an offshoot from a centuries-old love song. Efran usually avoided singing, as it was not something he did well, but he could perform in a pinch if he had to. So he quietly sang,

"I am bound in your beauty,
I am wishing you to see
How I hope that you love me;
I am faithful; can you be?"

Hearing nothing after that, he sank into sleep. He didn't know that she not only heard, but remembered it for a very long time.

What felt like minutes later, the resident rooster announced sunrise inches from Efran's head. He groaned, attempting to catch it by the foot, but found his movements hampered by a hen who was contentedly spread on his stomach. "You don't need a rooster for eggs. We'll roast him for breakfast," he muttered.

When there was no reply, he raised up to look in her corner. The early morning light showed it empty but for the blankets.

Efran lay back and closed his eyes, glad that she took him up on his invitation to escape. But that introduced another question: where was she sleeping? She didn't sleep here night before last; she came yesterday morning to find him trespassing. So she must have a home around here somewhere.

That need not concern you, part of him said. *No, it needn't,* he concurred, *if only I knew what she was afraid of.* The interior voice replied once more, *That would be you, fool.*

Was it? He was afraid so—which meant that, weak as he was, he had to get out of her henhouse before she brought reinforcements. There was no longer any place for him in Westford; he would not swear loyalty to this Lightfoot and didn't wish to be hanged for it. But until he could leave, he must placate her as much as possible.

The rooster crowed again, and Efran, disturbing the hen, leaned over to the bundle in the corner to withdraw his knife. "Come down, Chanticleer," he invited.

Two hours later, Chanticleer was satisfactorily roasting on an improvised split-wood spit over a low-burning fire. Efran heard the girl, Minka, coming, but did not pause in turning the spit. It was so essential for getting a good, even roast. She stopped beside him, dropping her bucket of water. He quickly righted it before it could douse his fire. "You killed one of my chickens!" she cried.

“No, no—just the one you didn’t need,” he corrected her. Glancing up, he said, “I’ll share. Sit down.”

She sat dubiously, and he noticed that she was wearing a different dress. So she had a place to sleep and change clothes. He twisted the thigh off the body with the leg attached and handed it to her. “I’m not sure if the breast is done yet,” he explained.

Tentatively, she took the leg and blew on it, then delicately bit down. She glanced at him in surprise, then blew again and ate the meat down to the bone. “How did you do that? It’s so moist.”

“Basting, of course.” He lifted the tin cup at his side. Regarding her over the fire, he added, “Are you ready for another piece?” She flicked her braided hair over her shoulder and nodded, so Efran tore off the other leg for her.

She took it almost reluctantly. “You haven’t eaten any yet.”

“Wait,” he said. First he cut several sycamore branches thick with leaves, which he spread on the ground near the fire. Then he removed the spit from its braces and nudged the bird off it onto the leaves. There, he cut it open and boned it, eating as he went. He separated a great deal of the breast onto a large leaf, folded it, and handed it to her. The rest he ate himself.

She ate with downcast eyes. “I’m sorry I called you filthy,” she murmured. “And told you that you weren’t cute.”

His throat seized up with the effort of containing the laughter, but he did convincingly choke out, “That last part hurt.” She sighed in repentance.

He got up to begin gathering the leaves, bones and sticks, which he carried to the rapid-running Passage to toss the whole bundle in. Then he came back, scanning for other trash, and remarked, “I’m wondering why a well was dug so close to the river.”

She shrugged, and he nodded to her bucket. “Where did you draw the water?”

“The river,” she murmured. “The rope isn’t long enough to reach the well water.”

He nodded, then his brows drew together. How did a well go dry so close to a river? Spotting other bones, he bent to pick them up. Nothing must be left to attract the wolves to the area. The chickens could flap to their roosts, but he had no such refuge.

When the clearing was completely clean, he returned to the henhouse see that Minka had refilled the chicken’s water. Now, she brought out her bucket of grain to pensively stir the little that remained. So Efran dug in his corner pile for the sack of millet, and brought it out to her. She opened it, frowning, then looked up quickly in surprise.

He returned to his corner to hang the potatoes and onions presumably out of reach of the chickens. He had to climb onto a perch to accomplish this, and was gratified that it held his weight. Another, higher perch crossed this one at right angles at the level of his chest. Studying the design of the coop, and the room it provided for the eight remaining birds, he was impressed.

Hopping down from the perch, he noted her watching him. So he sat amiably on the top step at the door of the coop, and she hesitantly came over to sit beside him. After a moment of silence, she observed, "You're a soldier."

"Yes," he said.

"Do you kill people?" she asked.

He leaned back. "I try not to, but sometimes it's unavoidable."

"Would you kill someone if I asked you to?" she asked darkly.

"No," he assured her. At her disappointment, he proposed, "Can't we think of a better way of dealing with an irritant? The snub you gave me when you were feeding your chickens was really cutting."

Her laughter was pleasant, and he smiled in response. She let it taper off, then said tentatively, "You talk like a—a diplomat, instead of a soldier."

"When I don't have any weapons on me, sometimes I have to talk my way out of trouble," he said. This was actually true.

She laughed again. "No, I mean you sound so intelligent, in the words you use," she said.

"Oh, I read a lot. I like history, especially the Annals of Lystra," he said.

If she had wanted to get him really talking, she could have asked why he liked those books, but she asked instead, "Do you have lady friends?"

"No," he said, with the most honest face he could muster.

"Why not?" she asked in smiling disbelief.

"I'm afraid of women. They're dangerous," he shuddered.

"Coward," she taunted with a smile.

"No, Lady, it's only respect. Men may slay me in battle, but your sex kills for no reason and then steps over my body without a backward glance," he said, shaking his head. This also was uncomfortably true, were she able to understand it.

She laughed again, and he smiled at his boots in victory. She accused him, "You're crinkling your eyes again."

"Self-defense," he said instantly, smiling at her.

She studied him, sighing, and he suddenly wondered if he exuded some male version of *moekolohe*. "Have you been hurt?" she asked sympathetically.

“Yes. Often.”

“What happened?” she asked in concern.

Oooh, we don't want to talk about that, he winced. He leaned his head back on the door frame to think. “Sometimes I trusted people who . . . didn't care about me as much as they pretended to.”

“I know how that feels,” she said, eyes downcast. “No one cares about me.”

“You have to give them a chance. They're not going to show they care until you do,” he said. When she looked at him closely, he realized that he could have phrased that better.

After a moment's silence, she asked, “Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, I'm past the fever. Still weak,” he said.

She groaned, “So many people have died. It's scary to see who will suddenly not be there anymore.”

“I understand that,” he said softly, tracing a finger in the dirt between his feet. “I've watched many good men die.”

“Fighting?” she asked, and he nodded. “It must be unbearable,” she said brokenly.

He shrugged. “I know that I will join them at some point.”

“You'll die?” she cried softly.

“Most people do,” he observed, eyes on his doodle.

“How can you say that?” she demanded, sounding heartbroken.

He looked up quickly at the tears brimming in her eyes. “It's—not like I *want* to die,” he stammered in alarm. “I just can't let fear get in the way of doing my duty.” Placating her was proving to be complicated.

She studied him, reaching over to brush the hair out of his eyes. “Would it make a difference to know that someone cared about you?”

He blanked out. “There . . . there was a Sister—”

Her expression suddenly changed, and she scrambled to her feet. “I forgot! Sister—I have to go.” She started off, then suddenly turned back to kiss his cheek, which startled him. Despite the shock, he knew it was still not *moekolohe*. The problem was, he didn't know what it was, except that it made him uneasy.

As she ran off, Efran quietly moved past the obstructing trees to watch the route she took. At this point, she looked to be headed in the direction of the palace. But that was unlikely, and she disappeared from view before he could ascertain her true path.

He leaned back on the henhouse, thinking. It was past time to leave. But he couldn't carry the books with him; he must find a place nearby to hide them first.

Exhaling, he returned to his corner to uncover his treasury of books. He sat on his heels to regard their old, scarred bindings in dismay. The coop was a poor hiding place, but he had nowhere else to put them. They must at all costs be protected not only from discovery but from moisture. It was futile to bury them anywhere around here, even in the tarp, for the spring rains were in mid-course and the Passage was known to flood from time to time.

He leaned back, groaning at his useless efforts to save them. Eyeing the slit of light that transected the dormer window high above, he thought again, *God in heaven*. Then he cried out loud, "God in heaven! What am I to do? I—"

He brought his fists to his head in frustrated rage at the sudden thought burning through his brain. "The stupid well! What does it have to do with anything?" Gritting his teeth, he got to his feet to go look at the stupid well.

Then he considered: If it really were dry, he might be able to suspend the books part way down the well on a rope. Of course, that would work only if no one looked closely. But it was all he could think of at the moment.

Standing at the wellside, he looked down in its dark recesses, but nothing was visible. So he turned the handle of the wheel pulley to lower the bucket. Sure enough, the rope fully played out before the bucket had touched water. Winding it back up, he felt the bottom edge of the bucket, which was dry.

He peered down the well again. "I must determine the water level," he muttered, but he had no other, nor longer, rope. Maybe, however. . . .

Efran returned to his corner to dig out the flint box and candle, which he brought to the wellside. He was loath to lose a candle in the well, and may yet be unable to determine the depth at which it was extinguished, but he didn't know what else to try.

So, crouching at the wellside, he gathered a little tinder, slipped the firesteel over his knuckles, and struck the flint to it until a spark ignited the tinder. He blew this gently into a small flame to light the candle. Bringing the burning candle up to the well opening, he paused, then dropped it.

While he watched, the candle dropped about 20 feet, then stopped in midair to continue burning. Disbelieving, Efran leaned far over the well, peering down. He could clearly see the candle burning in place.

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Chapter 5

Efran glanced around in confusion for a moment, then looked back down the well. This time, he observed the inner side of the circular well. It was about five feet in diameter, built of stone. But the stones were unevenly aligned: at frequent points, some stones protruded farther out than others. They looked almost like . . . handholds, or toeholds. . . .

Climbing down the inside of a well was folly—if he fell, it would kill him, and once he climbed down to a certain point, there was no guaranty he'd have the strength to climb up again. But the candle was still burning. He sat abruptly on the ground to remove his boots—stiff and heavy, they were poor for rock climbing. He took off his socks as well.

Hesitantly, he stood to throw his right leg over the side of the well and twist on the edge so as to bring his foot down inside, searching for a toehold. When he found one, he rested his weight gingerly on it until he was sure it wouldn't give way. Then he brought his left foot down to repeat the process. As he descended, he gripped the protruding stones that his feet had rested on. And he continually looked down over his shoulder at the burning candle, watching it grow larger and brighter as he descended.

Finally, when the candle looked to be at the level of his feet, his downward progress was abruptly stopped by an obstruction. Feeling with his toes, he determined it to be painted wood. Before releasing hold of the stone, he directed his toes as far along the wood as he could reach. It seemed to abut the stone all around the inside of the well, and it felt solid.

He shifted his weight almost entirely to his right foot on the wood while holding onto the protruding stones. Then, heart hammering, he let go.

He stood on a solid wood floor in the depths of the well. Tentatively, he bent over to pick up the candle, which had been burning on its side. Holding it close to the floor, he ran his hand over the surface. It had been not only painted black, but waterproofed. There was a thin layer of dirt or decayed debris covering the floor, but it was not wet. He looked up at the well roof far overhead—it was sturdy and large, overhanging the well all the way around.

Experimentally, Efran stepped on every part of the wood, feeling no give. Kneeling to examine the edges where the stone abutted the floor, he determined that it had been mortared in place. There were just a few small gaps here and there for drainage. And suddenly he wondered: what if this well were never meant to hold water, but only extended a foot or two beneath the floor?

Standing again, he held the candle to the curved wall, running his hand along it. There was no moisture. Raising the candle over his head and peering along the wall, he could see no drips. He leaned against the stones, thinking hard.

He knew there were limestone caverns all through this area clear to the Sea. The dungeon under the palace at Westford had probably been created from one such cavern. But it had been abandoned due to the flooding, and the engineers had expressed concerns about the stability of the palace itself. But here. . . .

Lifting the candle again, he held it close to the stone to see, for the first time, the glazing. The well stones had been waterproofed as well. When was this done? How long would it be effective?

There was no way to know, but at this point, it didn't matter. He snuffed the candle with his fingers and stuffed it into his pocket. In the dense darkness, he began to climb again.

It was an easy ascent. In moments, he was clambering back over the edge of the well. He paused to glance over the expanse of meadow, seeing no one. From here, he ran back to his corner to bring out the books.

These he wrapped thoroughly in one tarp, wishing he had twine to secure the bundle. But all he could do for now was fold and refold the tarp, creating pockets in which to insert folded points. Shortly, he had a reasonably tight package.

He carried this to the well, setting it down to remove the rope from the wheel pulley. He scanned the meadows again, still seeing no one. Glancing at the chickens foraging in the grass and wooded undergrowth, he relaxed, knowing they'd alert him to trespassers. So he set about tying the rope around his heavy bundle, leaving as much slack on one end as possible.

Then he brought the bundle up to the well edge, wrapping the loose end of the rope securely around his right fist. Gripping the rope with both hands, he nudged the bundle over the edge—and almost followed it down head first as the weight wrenched his arms.

Grunting, he braced his knees against the well exterior while he attempted to lower the bundle gently. But after descending only a few feet, it dropped entirely out of his hands, leaving rope burns on his wrist and palms. Hearing the thump below, he winced, then began immediately scaling down the well again.

Reaching the floor, he fearfully stuck out a foot to feel for broken or loose boards. But he felt the bundle sitting on the floor against the rounded wall. Cautiously, he shifted more of his weight onto the floor, listening for the creaks or groans of splintered wood. But all held firm.

Finally, he stood fully on the floor and knelt to feel for the rope around his bundle. Locating the rope ends by touch, he loosened knots to draw the rope away. He felt all over the bundle, still secure, and the floor, still solid. Then he stood, coiling the rope from wrist to elbow and draping it over his shoulder. With that, he ascended again.

Throwing himself over the edge of the well to the ground, he found that he had to just sit and breathe for a few minutes. He momentarily evaluated the rope burns, then reached over for his socks and boots. Shod again, he warily raised his eyes to the bright blue sky, grappling with the realization that the hiding place for the books had been arranged long before he ever took them. He got to his feet to replace the rope on the useless wheel pulley and tie the dry bucket on the end.

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Chapter 6

With the books in a secure hiding place, Efran turned to the next most urgent item on his agenda: getting something to eat. Having no more appetite for raw eggs—and no tin ware sufficient to cook them in—he took off his boots and socks (again) and rolled up his pants above his knees. Then he took an arrow and positioned himself on the edge of the Passage, watching in seams and eddies for the brown trout that were so abundant in the spring.

In minutes he had speared three decent-sized trout, throwing them one by one up on the river bank while he scanned for the next. Deciding that was enough for himself, he took his catch to his improvised rock fire pit, gathered tinder and kindling, and set it all burning with his firesteel and flint. Then he filleted his catch (with his hunting knife), cutting the flesh skillfully away from the row of tiny bones while the rocks heated up.

Following, he draped his lovely fillets, six of them, across the hot rocks. While waiting for his dinner to cook—which would only take minutes—he went gathering green leaves to cover the bare ground. Again, he must leave no scent to draw the wolves. Shortly, he settled before the firepit again, testing the flesh to find it just done.

Hearing the crackling in the undergrowth and assuming it to be Minka, he said, “Are you hungry?” At the gentle answering whine, he quickly looked into the eyes of the large gray dog he had met last night.

Efran inhaled, settling back on his heels. He did not want to share his catch with any dog, even one so patiently waiting as it salivated on his pants. However, a hungry dog was also likely to kill chickens, which he also didn’t want. He glanced back to see that they had apparently taken refuge in the coop.

In resignation, Efran gingerly took one fillet off the rocks, tossing it in his hands before laying it on the leaves to strip off the skin. He tested it again to make sure it was not too hot, then tossed it toward the teeth at his elbow. In one quick snap, the fillet disappeared.

The remaining fillets were then consumed by himself and his new friend. When the fire rocks were bare, the dog licked his snout, licked Efran’s face, and trotted off. Grumbling, Efran got up to catch more fish.

An hour later, he had eaten his fill, disposed of the trash, and then discovered that he had inadvertently lain in chicken droppings while in the shed. He was sensitive about cleanliness anyway—years of hearing “filthy Polonti” had their effect—but it was also unwise to go on the run with the smell of fowl all over his clothes. He was vaguely intending to head south, through known wolf territory. The last place he wanted to go was Eurus, to the north, or Eledith, far northeast of Eurus. However, if Nicarber had been rebuilt. . . .

On the bank of the Passage where there was a covering of trees, he stripped and bathed with the purloined soap, then washed the poop from his clothes. Scanning the area, he dressed in the work uniform (white shirt and gray pants) he had taken from his quarters. Following that, he hung his wet clothes on the upper perch of the coop.

Wearily, he went out to sit against the wellside, thinking, *All right, some things must be left behind. Where shall I hide them?* And he closed his eyes.

“Taking your rest, are you, Captain?” He opened his eyes at the sardonic comment. Squinting to clear away the mists, he saw that Minka had changed clothes again. She was wearing a much finer dress, one that would not be out of place in the palace. He silently castigated himself, realizing that he had slept away yet another opportunity to get himself gone.

But the implications of her wardrobe selection disturbed him even more, and he evaluated her puckered lips. If he had progressed beyond “cute” in her estimation, he was thinking it would be safer for her to be afraid of him. He looked down at the Buff Orpington on his lap.

When he couldn’t think of anything to say, Minka sat on the ground near him. “Have you been sleeping all day?” she chided teasingly.

“I was very sick,” he reminded her.

The rebuke momentarily stymied her. She tossed her head, and he saw a new ribbon in her braid. At once the imperative of leaving overrode any idea of placating her further. And it didn’t matter if she saw him go.

He got up, causing the Buff to flap away in aggravation. “Where is the millet? I think your chickens are hungry,” he said as a distraction. He needed to get his weapons out of the corner.

She also rose, laying a hand on his chest. “They’re fine. You’re damp,” she noted.

“I fished,” he explained, moving out from under her hand. He entered the henhouse, calculating how to pull out his gear without overly alarming her. He didn’t see the profit in being a brute about it.

She sidled in after him. “You’re the one who’s afraid now,” she smirked.

He turned on her. “Now that you mention it, yes. How old are you?”

“Twenty,” she said firmly, looking him in the eye.

He laughed hoarsely. “Twenty! Not by any means. You’re fourteen at most, and probably twelve.”

Her mouth dropped open. “*Twelve*—! How dare you!” she cried, advancing to beat on his chest.

He ducked under the lower perch. Grabbing it, he hoisted himself to straddle it, bring a knee up, and then stand, grasping the high perch above him to balance.

She gaped up at him. “What are you doing? Get down from there!”

“No,” he said.

She grabbed his pants leg. He pulled free to chin up to the high perch, pushing aside the drying clothes. He brought a leg up to balance lengthwise on the perch, as there was not room for him to stand or even sit on it.

She watched him in astonishment, then looked very hurt. “That’s so mean of you to run from me like that!”

He was no longer smiling. “I have seen men hanged for molesting young girls. If you accused me, I would die like a criminal with no one to speak in my defense.”

While she gazed up at him, horror crossed her face. “I . . . I’m sorry. I never meant to—make you—” She burst into tears. “I—I’m not twenty. But I’m older than everyone says I am, and I don’t have far to sixteen, because when I’m sixteen, then I can do as I like without everyone ordering me around, and—and—I’m sorry! I wouldn’t let you be hanged; I’d tell them it was my fault. . . . What?”

“Where did you get the dress?” he asked for the third time.

“The dress?” she wiped her eyes, and he watched her think. “I borrowed it.”

“Well, go return it and put on something suitable to clean the coop, and I’ll come down,” he said.

She eyed him sullenly. “You’re mean.”

“I don’t want to hang,” he replied.

“About cleaning the coop,” she clarified.

“It needs it,” he said.

With a sigh of resignation, she gave in. “Very well. I’ll return straightway.”

“All right,” he said, but did not give up his safe perch until she left the coop.

When he was sure she was fully away, he climbed down from both perches with a sense of urgency—finally, he could run. Then he realized: *She borrowed the dress.*

Someone knew what she was doing. Someone knew about him. Someone would be coming to find out who he was and what he was doing in a little girl’s henhouse.

He ran forward a few steps to look across the meadow toward the palace. In the distance, he saw Minka standing before a group on horseback that had evidently been coming in this direction. Even this far away, he could see that she was arguing with someone in front. That someone apparently ordered her home, for one of the riders took her arm to lift her behind his saddle and turn his horse.

Efran hopped back toward his corner to take up all his weapons—his sword, knife, hatchet, bow, quiver, and flint box—and run to drop them into the well. Then he pulled his uniform jacket off the drying beam and put it on.

With the door closed on his escape, he sat to await his visitors.

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Chapter 7

Efran sat on the top step to the henhouse door, resting his arms across his knees. In moments he felt the vibrations through the ground, and put a hand down to feel. *Seven . . . eight riders*, he decided. Then he brushed the dirt from the rope burns on his palms and waited.

They came around the trees as a group, and Efran was not surprised to see that most of them were soldiers of his own army. Pindar was among them, behind the leader, who was—

Efran slowly stood. It was a woman dressed in mannish riding clothes. Her long blonde hair was gathered in a braid under a broad-brimmed hat. He walked forward to meet her, seeing something familiar in her face.

She appraised him thoroughly, then leaned down from her saddle with a sardonic smile. “Captain Efran, I assume. My little sister is in love with you.”

Three facts he apprehended at once: She was 20, the beauty of the family, and—awash in *moekolohe*. He lifted his face with only a vague smile in reply.

So she dismounted, and her bodyguard did likewise. Efran's eyes flicked up at their reluctance. Then he returned a steady gaze to Sister's face, now drawn close to his. She was exhibiting all the confidence and poise that Minka was trying hard to emulate. “But now you've made her cry,” she said, eyes flicking down his body.

“I told her to go get on proper chickening clothes,” he admitted.

Someone behind her snorted, which caused her to stiffen in anger without turning around. But she recovered to add, “She said you had been sick with the fever.”

He nodded. “Very. I was in the infirmary”—jerking his head toward the burned-out rubble. “It was—two, three nights ago, the night of the thunderstorm, that I crawled out the window to the henhouse.”

“And you killed the rooster!” she accused him mockingly.

“Not till this morning,” he offered in his own defense. “Part of which she ate.”

Several hands were raised to cover faces behind her, but her eyes were locked on Efran. “And you had no idea who she was.”

He paused to tread carefully on this most dangerous ground, as he still didn't know. “She told me her name was Minka.”

She bent forward in laughter, which gave the men behind her an excuse to expel the breaths they had been holding. Efran glanced at them while her face was down; several of these men were in his own regiment. One, Estes, who was Polonti, made eye contact: *You are not alone*.

When Sister condescended to straighten from her merriment, she explained, “Minka is her cat.”

Efran nodded. “That makes perfect sense for a twelve-year-old.”

“Oh!” she burst out in mock horror. “You have erred greatly, sir, and have transgressed beyond all forgiveness. My sister is thirteen.”

He smiled, then. “She told me she was twenty. There is someone she is striving to imitate on all points.”

Sister’s look changed; he had exposed something personal. Her eyes flicked back at the men behind her as though she wished they weren’t there. Efran waited for what she would do next.

“Well,” she said, dropping all tinge of humor, “I am instructed to bring you to Father for an interview. So—” She turned to the group behind her to consider their formation. Then she observed, “You should know some of these men—certainly Captain Pindar.”

Efran allowed two seconds to elapse for a reply from Pindar, which did not come before Efran said, “No.”

She noted the soldiers’ sudden glances at each other, but Pindar himself did not speak. She motioned curtly, “Walk beside me, then.”

As she and her bodyguard remounted and turned, Efran agreeably came to her horse’s side. The animal turned its head, pricking its ears in recognition of him, and Efran patted its neck. He’d ridden this horse often on assignments from his Commander. When the horse nosed his pocket, Efran murmured, “It’s empty today, Bastard.”

Her face turned down to him. “How rude!”

He couldn’t help laughing. “He earned the name, Lady. I wonder that you would choose him to ride.”

When she directed a swift glance to Pindar, Efran lowered his face in dismay. She said loftily, “Well, he has been most courteous with me.”

As she dug her heels into his sides, Bastard bucked slightly in warning, and she gasped. Efran slapped him on the haunches before taking hold of the bridle. “I would not allow him to bolt back to his stall, Lady,” he murmured. She clenched her jaw, but dropped her heels and loosened her hold on the reins.

On the long walk through the meadow to the palace, Efran held Bastard’s bridle and he did not misbehave again.

In the twilight, the group entered the high, iron-banded gates into the cobbled courtyard. Efran led Bastard to the palace steps, holding him still for Sister to dismount, which she did competently. The soldiers dismounted behind her, but she flicked her eyes only toward Efran to instruct, “Follow me.” He bowed slightly.

She trotted up the steps and strode into the great foyer. Seeing her bypass the audience hall where judgments were normally rendered, Efran breathed in relief. Glancing up, he caught sight of Minka at the

head of the stairs on the second floor, hiding partially behind the ornate newel post.

He returned his eyes to Sister's back as she led down a lower corridor to what once had been the butler's pantry. It was a moderately sized room, 20 by 20 feet, that now held an elegant, cluttered desk behind which sat a man attended by numerous clerks. This, then, was Surchatain Lightfoot, and Efran's stomach dropped when Sister said, "Father, I've brought Sybil's Captain Efran."

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Chapter 8

The clean-shaven man in his mid-fifties looked up with an air of importance. "Oh? Good, Adele, thank you, dear." He broke off to give instructions to one of the many clerks, who scurried away. Then he turned his attention to the Polonti standing before him. Sister Adele dropped unobtrusively a few feet behind Efran on his right.

"Well," Lightfoot grunted. "Come forward, you." Efran stepped up to the desk and bowed, then straightened to wait, his hands lightly clasped in front of him. The bustling activity around them stilled.

Eyeing the Captain with remote contempt, the new Surchatain asked, "What did you do to my daughter?"

Efran replied, "Entertained her, mostly. Ate her eggs. Showed her how to cook on a spit."

No one dared react, but Lightfoot uttered, "Your insolence is not helpful to your cause, young man."

"No disrespect intended, Surchatain. Only honesty," Efran said, composed. The whole room watched in silence.

"Did you molest my daughter?" Lightfoot said through clenched teeth.

"No, Surchatain," Efran said. He was glad beyond words that this was true.

Lightfoot sat back in his luxurious chair, regarding him. Without altering his gaze, he said, "Your opinion, Adele?"

She said, "I believe he is telling the truth, Father. Sybil told me everything."

"Well," he grunted, scooting back up to his cluttered desk, "if you can handle my youngest without incident, you should keep your post." Sifting through papers before him and not finding what he wanted, he beckoned to an underling. "Where is the soldiers' vow?"

The attendant sprang forward to uncover a script on the desk. "Here, Surchatain."

"Ah." Lightfoot waved it toward Efran, and the attendant advanced to hand him the document.

The regular bustle in the room resumed as Efran took the parchment to read it through. Then he raised his eyes and laid it on the desk without comment. Adele nudged him in the back, whispering, "You sign it, stupid." Efran did not respond. He merely waited, knowing what was coming.

Engrossed in something else, the Surchatain did not react right away. Glancing up to see the Captain standing in silence, he gestured. "You have to repeat it and then sign your name."

"No, sir," Efran said. The bustle in the room paused again, and Adele stared at him in disdain.

Lightfoot blinked in disbelief. "What did you say?"

"Forgive me, Surchatain, but I made a vow years ago to abide by the Law of Roman, and cannot accommodate this vow within its dictates. The Law takes precedence," Efran said. He belatedly realized that he sounded like a lawyer, which probably wouldn't endear him to Minka's father.

"You presume to lecture me on which vows take precedence?" Lightfoot gasped.

Efran squinted in consideration. "Only as it regards myself," he clarified.

"The penalty for refusing to vow loyalty to your Surchatain is death, young man," Lightfoot said, trembling slightly at the affront.

"I know," Efran said softly. He felt Adele's gaze, but did not move.

Lightfoot gestured shortly. "Hang him. Now."

Several people spoke at once. Adele began, "Father, Sybil—" but she was overtaken by the attendant at Lightfoot's side, who observed, "It's almost dark outside, Surchatain. No one will be able to see it tonight. Such an important warning should wait for the morrow."

The Surchatain heard him, and nodded. "You're correct, Wedderburn. Lock him up for the night, and hang him first thing tomorrow morning."

The attendant bowed, gesturing to someone behind Efran. "You take him to a room in the corridor next." With a short bow, Pindar stepped up. Efran glanced at him, then turned to follow. He paused before Adele to see her face pinched in anger. He smiled at her, then followed Pindar out.

The Captain of the Blue walked the Captain of the Red to the corridor next, opening the door into a small room with a real bed, wash basin, and chamber pot. Efran raised his brows in surprise, then went over to sit on the mattress. "Admirable accommodations for someone awaiting a hanging," he observed.

Pindar checked the corridor before whispering, "Someone will be by to unlock the door around midnight."

Efran snorted. "Thank you, my friend. It won't do any good."

"I'd take whatever chance I had to escape, were I you," Pindar hissed.

Leaning his head back against the wall, Efran mused, “That’s not the way out. I don’t know what is, but it’s not that.” It smacked of cowardice, which Efran couldn’t abide.

Pindar went out, shut the door and emphatically bolted it.

Settling back on the bed—with a pillow!—Efran sighed in exhaustion. He looked up to the low, stained ceiling to whisper, “God in heaven, you have to send someone to get the books out of the well.” Then he closed his eyes.

He was somewhat awakened by the shaking of his shoulder. He opened bleary eyes at Adele hovering over him. He whispered, half asleep, “You are very beautiful.”

She did not hear. “How can you think of sleeping?” she cried in a low voice.

“I was very sick,” he muttered, struggling to sit up.

She turned to place a serving of breaded croquettes onto a small table beside the bed. He had popped one into his mouth before she could even turn back to him. He chewed, eyeing her, and chewed some more. Thickly, he said, “Is this the traditional meal for condemned soldiers?”

Her mouth dropped open. “This is from the Surchatain’s table!” she cried softly.

“No one in Eurus knows how to cook. Get you cooks in Westford,” he groaned as she gaped at him. “May I have something to drink?” he asked, swallowing with effort.

Exhaling in exasperation, she left the room. In moments she returned with a goblet of wine. “Ah. Thank you,” he said, taking a gulp. Then he lowered the goblet with a grimace. “Kill your winemakers, too.”

“Oh! You!” She grabbed his face to kiss him. He dropped the goblet as she laid full across him, reaching for his belt. “Sign the vow. Please. I want you alive,” she breathed into his lips.

He laid his head back on the nice pillow, laughing. She broke off, raising up at the insult. “What is so amusing?” Her voice was thick with anger.

“You’ll pleasure yourself on me tonight and then gladly watch me hang tomorrow,” he observed.

She stood, shaking, and slapped him across the face, hard. He took the blow and looked back at her, still smiling.

“As you wish, fool.” She left, and he heard the bolt drawn across the door again.

Settling back on the pillow, he looked up to the ceiling once more. “Well, at least I held on to my honor,” he said sardonically. Then he glanced down at the rock-like croquettes and thick wine splattered on the floor. “Ugh.” He rolled over to go back to sleep.

Hours later he was awakened again, partly. Hands were unbuttoning his shirt, shoving it aside. Groggy, he looked around, but the room was pitch black. He smelled a woman’s scented soap.

Efran came fully awake when feminine hands unfastened his belt and unbuttoned his pants. He floundered for the hands. “Adele, what are you doing?”

“What do you think? Just pretend I’m Sybil,” she said derisively.

“Why bother? You don’t care about me,” he said, hoping for a rebuttal.

“No, but you have the most beautiful body,” she said, muffled.

He muttered tightly, “As long as you don’t see my face”—with his Polonti features.

“Naturally,” she laughed. She dropped something beside the bed and laid her bare body on him.

He caught his breath, and all kinds of wild hopes flared up inside him. He fought them down. “You—expect to make me think—Am I worth saving tomorrow?”

She raised her head to whisper, “Perhaps. Let’s find out.”

He wrapped her in his arms and rolled over on top of her.

When she’d had all she wanted of him, she climbed off the bed and bent for her robe. Combing his wet hair back out of his face, he sat up to watch her in the murky darkness. “Will you speak to your father for me?” he whispered.

“Of course, darling.” Then she left, locking the door.

And Efran knew he’d hang tomorrow.

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Chapter 9

“C-Captain Efran, you are s-summoned for execution, Sir.”

Efran opened his eyes at the stammered announcement, then looked past the footboard at young Blake, a member of the Gold whom Efran had taught to swim after he almost drowned.

“At ease, Blake. I’m coming,” Efran sighed. The youngster looked to be on the verge of tears. Sitting up to regard him, Efran added, “We all must take what comes to us.” *She has said nothing to her father. There is no reprieve coming for you,* he told himself.

“I hadn’t thought to be assisting in your execution, Captain,” Blake said tightly, blinking.

Efran stood, stroking his face. “Since neither of us can get out of it, it’s comforting to have a friend attend me, Blake.”

The youngster nodded. “I am that, Sir.”

“Good.” Efran smiled, then bleakly regarded the new plate of croquettes sitting on the little table.

“You’re entitled to a last meal, Captain,” Blake gestured.

“We can skip that,” Efran uttered.

Escorted by the Gold youngster into the back courtyard, Efran looked straight into the glory of sunrise on the horizon before him. That also was comforting. It was a beautiful last sight. He docilely turned for another young soldier to bind his hands behind his back. *I always knew death was waiting for me. I just expected to die fighting.*

There were few soldiers up to witness his hanging this morning—they were either reluctant, undisciplined, too few, or all of these. Dubiously eyeing the newly erected gallows, Efran hoped it was solid enough to sustain his hanging. It would be uncomfortable for it to crash around him before he could die.

A sleepy attendant (whom Efran recognized at Wedderburn from yesterday) appeared on the second-floor balcony overlooking the gallows and began to read inattentively from a scroll: “This execution on the morning of—of April the twenty-second—” The clerk nearby corrected him, and he revised, “—on April the twenty-third is for the punishment of one Captain . . . Bertram, who was found—”

“Efran!” He shouted from below.

“What’s that?” Wedderburn asked, leaning toward the railing, and the clerk checked his roll.

“EFRAN!” he bellowed. *She’s too tired to come watch me die*, he thought wryly. The Surchatain couldn’t be bothered, of course.

There was a short conference between the two scribes, then Wedderburn resumed, “Captain Efran of the—the—Red Regiment—” On the point of shouting again, Efran nodded.

Wedderburn went on, “Having failed to perform the vow of loyalty to Surchatain Lightfoot as required by law, this Captain Efran is sentenced to hang by the neck until dead, so as to fulfill—to fulfill . . .” he trailed off.

Aware of some sudden commotion, Efran looked at the back walkway. There was someone tussling with guards somewhere under the balcony. Efran looked around anxiously, hoping that wasn’t Blake. He’d be punished for interfering in an execution.

Then Efran glimpsed a plain blue dress— “No,” he breathed. “Oh no, no. Not you.”

A piercing scream erupted, and Efran watched in dismay as Minka—Sybil, that is—ran out from under

the balcony toward him. He shucked the rope off his hands to extend his arms to her, and she landed on him, still shrieking.

“They can’t! You can’t! He did nothing wrong! He never touched me! You can’t kill him! You can’t!” she screamed over and over, arms tight around his midsection, as far as she could reach. Efran bent to kiss her head and brush back her disordered hair, whispering to her, trying to bring her down from her hysteria, but she could see nothing but the gallows at his back, and she could not stop screaming.

People began emerging from the palace, the kitchen and the barracks to look. Quietly, determinedly, Efran kept talking in her ear, but made no headway against the outpouring. If anything, she grew louder, hoarser, tighter in her clinging.

He knelt in the dirt, then, forcing her arms from around his body so that he could cradle her like a baby. He rocked her as she cried out her anguish. The soldiers in the yard watched stonily; they all had mothers, sisters, wives or daughters; they all saw their own lovers in place of the girl thrashing in his arms.

Adele appeared on the balcony, then quickly ran back inside. Sybil’s screams finally subsided as she began listening to him. “Shh. Hush! I have something for you,” Efran said shakily. Trembling, she watched as he unfastened his captain’s insigne from his jacket with one hand, pinning it to her chicken dress. “This makes you Captain of the Chickens,” he said importantly. “It means they have to follow your commands.”

She fingered the insigne, looking at him with hollow eyes. “Will you be there to show me how?” Unable to lie to her, and lost for what to say, he pressed his cheek to hers. Understanding perfectly, she held his neck and began crying again.

“Captain Efran!” came the loud command from above. Everyone looked up to where Surchatain Lightfoot stood with Adele by his side. Efran raised his face, but it was to look at her. Was she actually pleading on his behalf? He really wanted to fall in love with her.

Sybil silently looked up at her father. Having universal attention, the Surchatain continued, “Captain, you have been—”

Sybil sprang out of Efran’s arms to raise both little fists to the balcony. “I hate you!” she screamed. “You are killing him for no reason! You are evil and horrible and I hate you, hate, hate, hate—” Efran scrambled up to hold her from behind but she wrenched away to stagger forward a few steps.

“He never did anything to me! He was kind and you are hateful! You are horrible! I will hate you forever!” Efran was leaning down at her side, whispering until she finally fell back on his neck.

Meanwhile, Adele was talking to her father, with frequent interjections from Wedderburn, who was concerned about the rebellious mood of the witnesses. Courtiers were slipping out of the courtyard. The soldiers were coming together to hiss at each other. Pindar was watching with tears in his eyes.

“I have come to a decision,” Lightfoot announced, and there was a skeptical lull in the stirring of his audience. Efran wasn’t even looking at the balcony anymore; he was attending the child in his arms. “My decision is that, in view of the service of this soldier and the regard of my children for him, his life will be spared.”

There was dead silence in response. Everyone looked at Efran, who seemed not to have heard. He was pressing his face to Sybil's as she hung in his arms. Then he stood with her limp body, carrying her to the back of the palace. Stopping at the walkway, he told a servant, "Show me her room, and bring me clean water. She has the fever."

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Chapter 10

The first whisperings, of course, were that the Chataine Sybil had caught the fever from the Captain, but then a favorite maid of hers was found to have come down with the fever several days ago, and now lay suffering in her tiny, airless room. Efran brought her up to Sybil's receiving room, where he tended them both, as far as he was able. No one interfered.

The day following his scheduled execution, he requested an audience with Adele, who gave it. He was permitted entrance to her receiving room. As he bowed respectfully, she smirked, "It's so sweet how you've taken charge of my little sister's care. Everyone's talking about it"—obviously referencing the gossip.

She threw herself on me to save my life while you stood on the balcony to discuss it, he said inwardly. Out loud, he said, "Since you have no more physicians here, I know better than anyone what to do for her. She—and her maid—need frequent bathing with cool wet cloths. But I don't have authority over your servants to order it done."

She nodded. "I'm sure you don't."

He waited for more, then said, "You can order it done."

She assumed a troubled air. "I don't know that I can. The servants are so skittish right now, they're prone to leave at the slightest inconvenience."

"Then you do it," he said tightly.

"Oh I'm so sorry," she breathed. "I'm far too crucial to the rule of Westford to risk getting the fever myself. Sybil would understand." He stood looking at her, and she shrugged, "You'll have to manage the best you can."

Wiping the sweat from his upper lip, he left her receiving room as she watched in malicious amusement.

He returned to Sybil's receiving room to drop into the chair between her bed and that of her maid, Edie. Gathering his courage, he looked back at the door, then took up a wet cloth that he wrung out over a shallow bowl. With this he wiped down Sybil's face, neck and arms.

Her eyes cracked open. "Efran," she murmured.

He leaned forward to run the cloth over her face again. "I'm to be your nursemaid today, but they haven't got a frilly apron to fit me."

She laughed weakly, mouthing something. Knowing what it meant, he lifted her head and put a cup of water to her mouth. She drank a little; he made her drink more, and then lowered her back down to the damp bed. Glancing at Edie, he went over to perform the same ministrations on her.

Being not quite as sick as Sybil, Edie studied him as he wiped her down, avoiding her chest, and helped her sit up to drink. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered.

"You need it," he said without looking at her as he laid out the cloth to dry.

"I understand you taking care of Sybil, but, why me?" she asked.

He shrugged, "I take in abandoned children." He blinked at the sweeping assertion that came out of his mouth, but didn't correct it. Edie, about Sybil's age, lay back to watch him.

While he was pacing between the beds, thinking, the outer door opened. A stranger in a crisp new Westfordian uniform without insigne said, "Captain Efran, the Commander requires your presence at the barracks." He had a pronounced Eurussian accent.

Efran eyed him languidly. "Who would you be?"

The other thrust out his chest. "I am the Commander's Second-in-Command Thucius, and you are ordered to appear."

"Oh. Yes." Sometimes new officers had to wait for their insigne. With an anxious glance toward Sybil's sickbed, Efran nodded. "Please tell Commander Wendt I'll be there immediately, as I—"

"Wendt has been removed. Commander Brengleigh is your new superior," Thucius informed him.

"Brengleigh?" Efran snort-laughed. "You can't be referring to Brengleigh from the kitchen."

"No," Thucius huffed. "He was deputized as lieutenant while in service to Surchatain Lightfoot's clerk Graduliere, and then promoted to Commander."

Efran gaped at him. "You *are* referring to Brengleigh from the kitchen?"

The Eurussian snapped, "You will show respect to your superiors and come at once."

Efran's mouth dropped open. Then, borrowing Adele's air of disappointed regret, he said, "I would, but I'm still waiting to be executed by the Surchatain's command."

Thucius blinked several times, then turned smartly on his heel and left the room.

Sybil turned her head, moaning, "Efran?"

He sat again, taking up the wet cloth to squeeze it out. "I'm here."

She groped for his hand, and he closed it over hers, feeling the heat radiate from it. "You don't have to sit here with me," she said miserably.

"You didn't have to run out and spoil my hanging, either," he replied. She uttered a weak laugh.

Hearing the door open behind him, Efran quickly released her hand and looked over his shoulder. A slovenly lesser cook ran in with a bowl which he slopped onto the bedside table before running back out. "Ah. Here's your gruel." He put the rim to his mouth to taste it and gagged. Whereupon he went to the wardrobe in the room, opened the door, and flung the bowl and its contents inside.

"I'll be right back," he told the girls.

He went downstairs to occupy the kitchen, brushing aside the Eurasian kitchen mistress, and ordered, "Meat! Any kind, as long as it's fresh, not spoiled, not salted. Put it in clean, fresh water—nothing that's been left over. Don't put any seasonings in it! Boil it! Then use the meat and bring me the broth! Two bowls. If I don't get it quickly enough to suit me, I will come back down and make it from whatever you're cooking for dinner." And then he turned out again.

He got two bowls of gruel almost before he had made it back to the sickroom, and it was good.

He gave the girls water frequently, whether they requested it or not. He left the large windows open to air and light, unless it was raining heavily. And he was determinedly there, remembering what it was like to burn with thirst and see no one standing over him. When the girls opened bloodshot eyes, or moaned half-awake, they saw him turn to them.

When others in the palace fell ill, he refused to turn Sybil's chambers into an infirmary. Instead, he told other caretakers what to do and left it to them. Those who followed his instructions produced survivors. But always, no matter what else he was doing, he had the well in the back of his mind. It wouldn't leave him alone; he was not finished with it, somehow.

Within days, both girls were sitting up, awake and responsive. He sat between their beds and talked to both of them. Edie wanted to hear all about their chickening, which he let Sybil tell, for the most part. Except—he continued to call her "Minka." When Edie asked why, he shrugged, "It's the name she gave me, and I like it." Sybil sighed and reached for his hand.

At night, he slept in the corridor at the door to Sybil's chambers—the traditional place of a guardian. That way he could check on them at night, or be available to comfort her when she had nightmares.

His third night there, Edie woke him to tell him that Sybil was thrashing and crying in her sleep. Groggy, Efran went in to see that she was almost destroying her bed in her distress. He sat down to take her hand. "Minka. Minka! It's all right. I'm here. Hush." He gathered both of her hands to still her.

Her eyelids barely opening, she moaned, "I dreamt it again—that Father was going to hang you. I can't get it out of my head. I wish it would go away. It's just a dream, right? It's not going to happen, is it?" she pleaded.

He deliberated. "I'm here, aren't I?"

"Yes," she smiled. She went back to sleep holding his hand, and he pensively looked out the window at the waxing moon.

Four days after Efran's aborted execution, April 27th, he paused outside Sybil's sickroom as a lesser kitchen cook hurried up to him with a soup bowl in her hands. "The vegetable soup you ordered, Captain," she murmured with a slight curtsy. The soup slopped a little over the rim.

"Ah. Good. Edie's ready for it, at least," he said, bringing the bowl up for a taste. He grimaced and flung the bowl out the nearest corridor window. A faint cry was heard from below, so he hurried over to look down. "Sorry!" he shouted. Then he turned to stalk swiftly down the corridor, the little cook following anxiously.

Striding into the kitchen, he told her, "Put clean water on to boil." Glancing around, she filled a medium-sized pot with ready water and hung it on the trammel hook which she swung back into the fireplace. Then she knelt to stir the ashes underneath, adding sticks to make it flame up. Aware that he was tending Chataine Sybil, no one dared refuse his orders.

Meanwhile, Efran was rummaging through the produce baskets. While the kitchen mistress was not present, other cooks and servants watched surreptitiously. One servant, a native Westfordian who was kept on because she was pretty, paused in the kitchen at the sight of him. He did not see her, but she whispered in the ear of a girl who fixed on him with a delighted, scandalized grin. Then the first girl sauntered away.

"These," he said, bringing out a handful of string beans. The little cook came to his side, nodding. He paused to ask her, "What is your name?"

"Kinsey, Captain," she said with a slight tremor.

"Kinsey. Very good. String them first down both sides." He broke the tips off one long bean to strip away the strings on either side. "Where is the pig basket?"

Wide-eyed, she merely looked at him. He said, "Bring me a basket for refuse that can be fed to the pigs."

"Oh." She glanced around, and a servant handed her a basket for the pigs they no longer had.

This she presented to Efran, who nodded to the floor. "Put it down here." She did, and he shook off the strings into the basket.

As he continued to give instructions, the grinning girl whispered to another cook, who looked at Efran appraisingly. A kitchen maid came up to the girl to whisper, "What about him?" so she had to be told. Soon every girl in the kitchen had heard about Efran, and all were smiling as they watched him show the lesser cooks how to prepare vegetables for cooking.

Efran glanced at Kinsey's progress with the string beans, then went to the bushel of carrots. He picked out one that was straight and unblemished, then turned around to almost run into an alert servant. "And your name is—?"

“Cami, sir,” she replied, parting her lips.

He paused at her invitation, but handed her the carrot. “Cami, scrape this clean with a paring knife. Put the shavings in the pig basket. Cut it fine into the pot.”

“Oh, that’s easy, sir,” she said, tracing circles on her face with the tip of the carrot. Perceiving the flirtation, Efran cautiously scanned the kitchen for anyone he might have known before the Eurussians arrived.

Kinsey raised up victoriously from the fireplace. “Green beans are in the pot, Captain.”

“Thank you,” he said, then supervised the addition of the carrot, potato, parsley, oregano, thyme and salt. Finding a long spoon to stir the soup, he glanced up as the dairyman brought in a bucket of fresh milk. “Ah. Skim the cream,” Efran instructed.

The little cooks looked warily at each other. “That’s just for the Surchatain’s table,” Cami said faintly.

Efran glanced at her, then went over to pick up a cup and skim the cream off himself. Stirring it into the pot, he said, “Well, this is for the Surchatain’s daughter. No difference.” Laying the spoon aside, he added, “I’ll be down to get it when it’s ready. All right?” He smiled down on her, and she raised her eyes coyly. Then he walked on out, and did return in a half hour.

After filling bowls for the two girls but finding no tray, he nodded to Kinsey. “Here, I’ll take the bowls, you bring their bread and spoons.” She quietly cooperated before the kitchen mistress would return.

Arriving in the Chataine’s suite, they found Edie sitting up and ready for soup. But Sybil was sleeping uneasily. Feeling her hot face, he glanced around for the water pitcher, but it was empty. So he told Kinsey, “I’m going to get more water. You feed Minka when she wakes.”

“Yes, Captain,” she murmured, sitting by her bed.

Efran departed with the pitcher to trot down the stairs. On his way to the well from the kitchen corridor he paused, looking down at his feet. What was that? What was he feeling?

Before he could investigate the sensation, Pindar drew up to him with a bloodless face and whispered, “The Surchatain has ordered your hanging the moment Chataine Sybil emerges from her sickroom. She’s to be sent on a holiday back to Eurus.” Efran studied him, and Pindar added, “Your example must be quashed.” Then he looked deliberately out to the back quadrangle.

Following his eyes, Efran saw a line of soldiers in front of the gallows. Then he watched a young soldier brought to stand under the balcony. Moving to the walkway outside, Efran heard the bored attendant above—Wedderburn again—read, “On this day, the twenty-seventh of April, you, Blake, are hereby condemned to hang by the neck until you are dead for revoking your vow of loyalty to Surchatain Lightfoot. This decree is ordered to be executed without delay.”

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Chapter 11

“No,” Efran gasped. “No!” Dropping the pitcher, he bolted outside to knock over the first three soldiers he hit on his way toward the gallows.

Others stopped him, of course. Wedderburn paused, displeased at the interruption, then continued droning out the death sentence. “No, no!” Efran cried, struggling, but they forced him face down in the dirt. He craned his head to see the noose fitted around the young man’s neck, who calmly submitted. “Blake! No!”

He watched helplessly as the trap door was sprung and the boy dropped. When he finally stilled, the boots were lifted from Efran’s back, as he could no longer interfere.

He raised up slowly to his knees, trembling in rage. Then he thrust his fists upward, crying, “God of heaven! GOD OF HEAVEN!” And he pounded the earth.

The courtyard emptied around him while he sobbed on his knees. Then he looked down at their trembling. But the trembling did not originate with his knees. He put his hands down to the ground to feel the tremors. What was that?

As he sat kneeling, a hand was laid on his shoulder. He looked up at Kinsey’s worried face. She said, “Captain, the Chataine Sybil couldn’t take any of the soup. She’s in a bad way, crying for you.”

Unsteady, he stood. Wiping his dirty, tear-streaked face on his sleeve, he passed over the broken water pitcher and turned up the back stairway. Then he ran down the second-floor corridor. Long before he reached her chambers, he could hear her cries. He turned into the doorway to see Edie sitting up in dismay, watching Sybil thrash.

Efran sat to take her in his arms. She was burning hot again, sobbing, writhing. He held her to breathe in her ear, “Minka, I’m here. Be still. I know you’re uncomfortable, but you must be still.”

Her eyes cracked open to look at him. “Efran! Oh, I dreamt it again! You died; I watch you die on the rope and it was horrible,” she groaned.

Tears pouring, he laughed shakily. “Silly Minka, aren’t I sitting right here? Isn’t this me? Stop crying and look at me.”

She focused on him then, running her fingers down the tear tracks on his face. “Yes. It’s you.”

“That’s right,” he said. “Now that we have that settled, there’s something else we have to talk about. Minka? Listen. You need medicine. I need to go gather the plants to bring down your fever. I may be gone hours, so you have to be patient and wait for me. All right?”

“Yes, Efran,” she said, sinking down and closing her eyes.

“Good.” He pressed his lips to her forehead, then stood. Looking across to Edie, he said, “How are you?”

“Much better, Captain,” she said, showing him her empty bowl. Her eyes were very large.

“All right. Do you have water?” he asked. She looked around blankly.

He turned to Kinsey, who was gripping the door frame. “I need you to get them water and stay with them while I am gone. Make Minka drink as much as she’ll let you.”

“Yes, Captain,” she gasped. He nodded and turned out of the room.

In the corridor, he paused to collect himself. He wiped his face with his sleeve again and willed his trembling to stop. When he felt himself under control, he progressed downstairs. The thought crossed his mind to wonder why Adele had not ever been in the sick room, but it passed quickly. He already knew why.

He came to the door of the Surchatain’s workroom and told the sentry (whom he knew), “Damon, I must see the Surchatain regarding Chataine Sybil.” The young man ducked his head and opened the door.

As Efran stepped into the room, a dozen heads turned toward him and everyone stilled. Lightfoot sat back with hatred covering his face. Knowing that they’d all been informed of his interference with today’s execution, Efran said, “Surchatain, Chataine Sybil has relapsed. Her fever is such that I must go get the herbs to treat her right away.”

All heads swiveled to Lightfoot, who stirred derisively. “You really think I’m going to let you run off on the pretext of gathering plants?”

“Oh, I am going, because she’s likely to die without medicine. Send someone with me if you like, but I am going to find what I need to take care of her,” Efran said.

Lightfoot flicked his wrist toward two soldiers. “Go with him.” Efran glanced at the two who came forward, recognizing them without remembering their names. He turned and walked out.

He went to the stables with the sentries on his heels and looked in to see what mounts were available. While the soldiers claimed the best two horses, a glance told Efran that most of the rest were in sub-par condition, poorly fed and over exerted. Except . . . Bastard. He alone looked rested. Bastard turned his head, pricking his ears toward him.

Smiling grimly, Efran withdrew from the stables to walk back into the kitchen. Going straight for the vegetable bins, he picked out two large carrots and walked out again unchallenged. He broke one carrot to fit the pieces into his pants pocket. Re-entering the stables while the soldiers watched, he broke the second carrot in front of Bastard’s face and offered him half. This was quickly accepted, then he watched while Efran pocketed the other half. Following, Bastard allowed himself to be saddled and bridled. While leading the horse from his stall, Efran picked up a large canvas bag to strap behind the saddle.

Emerging from the stables as the soldiers waited on their mounts, Efran saw Cassius, the large gray dog, bound up. “There’ll be no fish on this trip,” Efran told him, but Cassius began following anyway. Efran mounted to tap Bastard lightly with his heels. Knowing what was in the rider’s pocket, Bastard complied to lope.

Efran debated, *Where to look? Where would they be growing?* A number of plants could help Minka's fever, but none grew in the immediate vicinity of Westford, not even in the kitchen gardens (which, inconveniently, were nowhere near the kitchen). Just because he didn't want to go north, he rode south. The soldiers followed, as did Cassius, though he fell farther and farther behind, unable to keep up with the horses.

Past the palace environs, there was an old road largely untraveled not only because of the wolves, but because it led nowhere in particular but to an abandoned fortress on a hilltop. Slowing to trot on this road, Efran looked all around for likely herbs, but saw only rabbitsfoot, bluegrass, meadowgrass, fescue, and the like. Finally, he left the road at a walk, leaning down from the saddle to examine the flora under Bastard's feet. But there was nothing he could use, so he continued south at a lope through unchanging meadowgrass. Finally he saw the switchback ahead. It was even less likely he'd find anything useful on this rocky hill.

While the soldiers behind him watched, bored, Efran raised a despairing face to the sky. "God in heaven, I haven't much time, and I need. . . ." He looked at the fortress atop the hill before him. Built of white stone, it was golden in the afternoon sunlight. In his mind he saw the well, and his face cleared: he would find what he needed here.

He was trotting Bastard toward the switchback when a wolf appeared in front of him, snarling. Efran threw a hand back. "Your sword, quickly!" Other wolves then appeared from the left and the right, tightening their noose around their prey: the solitary rider in front.

The soldiers immediately turned to gallop back to the north. Efran circled on the road, seeing that he was surrounded. Having no weapon, he yanked the canvas bag from the saddle to wrap it around his fist. Bastard began the preliminaries of bucking.

Then a flash of gray appeared at his feet: Cassius streaked past Bastard to sink his teeth into the throat of the lead wolf and yank from side to side. And Efran realized that Cassius was part of a wolf-hunting team.

Before the wolves could converge on Cassius, Bastard began bucking, striking two behind him. While Efran clung to the horse's neck, another wolf leapt up to snag its teeth on his pants. Bastard kicked at it as Efran leaned down to punch it in the eyes. Cassius fastened his jaws on the wolf's back leg and thrashed.

That was enough to make the wolves run, some limping badly, leaving one dead in the road. Efran breathed out, looking at the scratch on his leg under his torn pants. While the wolves disappeared, he glanced down at his ally smiling up at him, blood smeared on his jaws. With the way cleared, Efran raised his face to the fortress.

Coming off the switchback at the top of the hill, he drew up to a pair of gates in an iron fence. Noting the unusual design on them, he dismounted to open one gate, then shut and latch it behind him, Bastard, and Cassius, in case the wolves decided to follow. From there, he looked up at the fortress. It was a beautiful structure, tall and broad. Curved stone steps led up to the arched front doors of oak, fifteen feet tall, banded with iron.

Although pressed to find the herbs he needed, he felt drawn up the steps to stand before the doors. He reached out to grasp one latch and turn it, and the door opened to him.

Efran stepped into a large foyer of carved stone. Holding his breath, he looked around. There were doors before him and on either side, some open to reveal furnished interiors. Although unquestionably empty, the fortress had not been stripped or vandalized. It was just . . . waiting.

Exhaling, he turned out, carefully closing the door behind him. The wolves must have been enough to deter thieves, vandals, or squatters. But Efran had an urgent task at hand. He remounted Bastard for the sake of speed.

Trotting around the exterior of the fortress, he found it much deeper than it looked from the front. Finally, he came around the southeastern corner to see that the entire grounds, front and back, were encompassed by that black iron fence. That was good, because the drop-off was very steep in places.

At the corner of the fortress stood a well, and beyond that a long-overgrown, untended garden. Efran's heart rose in hope. Leaving Bastard to graze, he began to walk lightly through the remains of once-productive plots.

Seeing a large, old rosemary bush, he almost cried out. But there was more: yarrow, and lemon grass, and— "Meadowsweet!" he cried. "Verbena!" He was aggravated at having brought no tools, so he had to just dig around the plants with his hands to bring up as much of the roots as he could. Fortunately, the ground was not hard. These plants he packed in his canvas bag, then stood to look for Cassius. They must get back at once.

Fastening the bag back to the saddle, he whistled. Shortly, Cassius appeared with a rabbit in his mouth. Efran expelled a laugh. "Fine, hope you can keep it on the way back."

He exited the gate, closing it again behind him, and started down the switchback. Cassius was content to carry his prize on the run, and they emerged onto the road leading back to Westford.

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Chapter 12

To not leave Cassius behind—in case the wolves returned—Efran kept Bastard to a lope. When they passed the carcass of the wolf, Efran scanned in all directions for the rest of the pack. But they did not appear.

The closer they got to Westford, the faster Bastard went, regardless of Efran's wishes. It made no difference to Cassius, who peeled off from the road to enjoy his dinner in peace before entering the city.

Arriving at the stables, Efran awarded Bastard all the carrot pieces in his pockets before watering him and checking to see that he had hay in his feed trough. Without taking the time to groom him, Efran left to trot up the kitchen steps with his canvas bag.

Entering, he glanced around. The kitchen was bustling with dinner preparations underway, but he must prepare his infusion. Opening his canvas bag, he spotted glazed clay pots under a work table, two of

which he took out to the kitchen yard. Here, he stuffed the pots with the slightly wilted verbena and meadowsweet plants along with the dirt clinging to their roots, then doused them with ready water.

Now. . . he went to the well to draw water, first to wash his hands. He picked up a nice clay bottle that had been lying beside the well, and smelled inside it to find that it had contained olive oil. He washed it out, then returned to his plants to tear off a handful of flowers to drop inside the bottle. This he took into the kitchen.

Seeing a kettle already steaming over the fire, he took up a cloth pad for the handle and poured the boiling water into his jar. Then he opened the cabinet for a clean pastry cloth, and . . . that was it. Blinking at the unexpected ease with which he got the medicine prepared in a busy kitchen, he took his infusion back up to the second floor.

He paused outside Sybil's door to listen. Hearing nothing, he opened it quietly. Edie was gone and Kinsey was dozing in a chair beside the sickbed. Sybil, miserably flushed with fever, turned her head listlessly as he entered. "Efran," she whispered.

"I have something for you," he smiled. "We have to let it cool, but I think it will help." Then he touched Kinsey's shoulder, and she startled awake. "Thank you, Kinsey. They may need you in the kitchen now."

"Oh, Yes. Captain," she said, disoriented. She unsteadily got up to leave.

Efran took her seat. "All right. Let's wait while it cools." Indifferently, she moaned under her breath. Feeling her hot skin, he got up to dip a cloth in cool water and pat her face with it.

Her outer door was flung open, and a EurAsian soldier thrust his head in. "You are back!" he exclaimed.

Efran glanced at him coldly. "Get out."

After staring at him open-mouthed, the soldier clamped his jaw shut and withdrew again.

"Now, let's see here." Efran put the pastry cloth across the opening of the bottle and poured the infusion into the cup on Sybil's table. It was green and sweet-smelling, still warm. "Sit up against me."

Muttering, she did her best to rise, but he had to hold her up against his chest. Putting the cup to her lips, he ordered, "Drink." She pressed her face against his chest in reluctance, but he turned her head. "Drink."

Bit by bit, he got the whole cup down her. Then he released her to the pillow and sat back to wait. Meanwhile, he shook the spent flowerheads out of the bottle to eat them.

He watched the clouds pass outside the window, thinking. He must explore the fortress further. What had it been? Not a garrison; its layout was wrong for that. It was also too . . . beautiful. Elegantly designed and constructed as—how to describe it? A work of art? An act of worship?

The iron fence was interesting as well, particularly the design of the gate: a wreath of roses with thorns. While obviously meant as a barrier to invaders, it was also a . . . sign of welcome by its beauty. Efran sat for some time pondering the mystery of this structure.

Sybil stirred, and he looked down at her. “I have to use the garderobe,” she murmured.

“Here.” He pulled the chamber pot out from under her bed.

“No,” she scowled, getting up unsteadily. “I want to go myself.”

He followed anxiously as she made her way across the room to the closeted garderobe. “Why can’t you use the pot? I’m afraid you’ll fall. It’s a long way down, and a very unpleasant landing.”

Opening the door, she glanced darkly back at him. “I know how to use a garderobe. I’m not a child.”

“You certainly are,” he said.

“Shut up,” she muttered, closing the door.

He hovered in growing anxiety outside, listening but hearing nothing—until there was a sudden banging, and she screamed.

Throwing open the door to peer into the dark closet, he saw her sitting back and laughing. She was laughing at him. “You—!” He grabbed her out of the closet and crushed her to his chest.

She put her arms around his neck and sighed, “I love you, Efran.”

His blood curdled. He released her and picked her up to practically throw her back on her bed. “No you don’t.”

She laughed again. “I scared you. That was funny.”

“No it wasn’t,” he objected, covering her with the sheet.

“Yes, it was,” she chuckled, closing her eyes. Immediately she was asleep.

Swallowing, Efran studied her healthy color. He put a hand to her cheek to feel it warm, but not hot. The infusion appeared to have worked almost miraculously.

The door opened again, and Edie came in with clean laundry. “Captain! You’re back.” Approaching the bed, she gasped, “She’s sleeping! Oh, she looks so much better! I’ll sit with her now,” she added, putting the clothes away in their designated cubbyholes.

“Yes,” he said, backing out. “I’ll check on her later.” He turned down the corridor to flee to the nearest alcove. There, he buried his face in his hands: *God in heaven. I’m falling in love with a child.*

He sank to his knees in self-loathing. A moment later, he raised his face. *No. The herbs are working. She’ll be better soon; she’ll go to Eurus and I will follow Blake.*

The thought of his imminent death was actually comforting. He’d certainly rather die than dishonor himself with a child. He remained on his knees for while, then blinked. He put his hands to the floor to feel nothing . . . unusual. No trembling.

He got up and left the alcove to walk in measured steps down the corridor. No, there was nothing.

He took the southernmost back stairs to the first floor. Here it was more difficult to feel for vibrations in the foundation, as there was no rear corridor on the first floor corresponding to that above. He had to exit to the covered walkway outside in view of the gallows. So this he did, keeping his head down to concentrate on his feet.

When he had drawn close to the entrance to the back stairway and the rear foyer, he felt it: that trembling. It was faint at first, then grew stronger as he passed the foyer. Beyond this was the entrance to the dungeon . . . that had been abandoned due to the flooding, which . . . might imperil the foundations of the palace, built on limestone.

Efran stood thinking, then opened the back door into the rear foyer. From here, he found the obscure door to the dungeon. He tried to open it, but it wouldn't budge, so he knelt to study it in the dim light. The hasp was secured with a lock.

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Chapter 13

Efran stood, glancing around, then walked over to the surgery, which was empty. This was the first part of the palace to be abandoned when the fever struck. No physician could be found to risk his own life treating fever patients.

In the surgery, he briskly opened drawers and cabinets until he found a sheath of surgical tools. As he was selecting one of these, he glanced down at an overturned beaker that was giving off a strong, unpleasant smell. Exiting quickly, he took the scalpel back to the dungeon door. On both trips, he had to pass the Surchatain's current work room, but the door was shut and the sentries paid no attention to him.

Kneeling before the dungeon door, Efran inserted the point of the scalpel into the lock and worked it delicately. The lock fell open; he removed it from the hasp to store it in his pocket. Then he flipped the hasp and opened the door.

It was intensely dark on the descending stairs, but he heard the lapping of water very close by. Cautiously, blindly, he began down the slick steps. The sixth step was wet, and the seventh was half submerged. He chose not to attempt to find the eighth.

Standing still on the sixth step, he felt for vibrations, and was surprised not to discern any. But there was something else. . . .

Listening intently, he heard an odd moaning, or vast creaking, like that of a long-buried giant awakening. Where was it coming from? He turned his head one way, then the other, but could tell no difference—

Because it was coming from all around him. The sound emanated from the structure all around him and above him.

And at some point in the past, the palace engineers had been concerned about the stability of the foundations.

Efran tossed the lock and the scalpel into the deep, dark water before him, then turned to ascend. Outside, he closed the door and reset the hasp, without the lock. Then he stood staring across the foyer with unseeing eyes.

Presently, he went across the foyer to the Surchatain's door. The sentries eyed him languidly. "He'll want a report on his daughter," Efran said. That got him inside.

As he walked in, everyone looked up. Lightfoot eased back in his chair with a sardonic smile. "And here is our herbal physician," he announced. There were sniggers and chuckles in response.

"I gave Chataine Sybil an infusion of verbena and meadowsweet," Efran said. "Her fever is down, and she is sleeping. I believe she will be completely well in a matter of days."

The hangers-on were silent, looking to the Surchatain. "You do," he said thoughtfully.

"Yes. You may send to check her at any time," Efran noted. Lightfoot flicked his hand toward an underling, who hastened out. Before sharing any further news, Efran chose to wait until the report on Sybil came down.

It did, quickly. The aide returned to say, "That is correct, Surchatain. Her fever seems to be all but gone, and she is sleeping quietly."

A broad grin spread across the Surchatain's face. "Well, that is good news," he said, studying Efran, and those around him smiled.

Efran added, "I have another report which you should hear."

"Oh, do tell me," Lightfoot invited.

"The flooding in the dungeon has risen to the seventh step from the top, and last I heard, the engineers were concerned about the stability of the palace," Efran said.

Lightfoot's mouth hung open in amusement. "The *whole palace*?" he repeated in exaggerated concern.

"Yes, Surchatain," Efran said.

"Then what should we *do*?" Lightfoot asked in the same derisive tone.

"Leave. Quickly," Efran said.

There was a moment of silence, then Lightfoot opened his mouth wide to laugh, and the room was filled with such laughter as to rattle the framed documents on the walls. They laughed and laughed until the laughter became strained, but as long as Lightfoot was laughing, no one else stopped. Efran waited.

Finally the Surchatain raised a hand to end it, wiping his eyes. “Oh,” he gasped. “My boy, you are a never-ending fount of entertainment. But you shall not slip away so easily as all that. Lock him in the lower corridor,” he generally ordered. There was some confusion as to who had the keys to do this, but at last one soldier found a key ring and directed Efran out.

He was taken to the same cubicle as before, with the now-rumpled bed, pillow, and chamber pot (almost full). Also, the wine stains and croquette fragments still littered the floor, and the last dinner of croquettes, untouched, remained on the table. Not even rats nor roaches had molested it. As Efran entered to sit on the bed, the soldier noted, “Look, there you have your dinner already.”

“Yes, I do,” Efran sighed.

Only minutes passed before there was a rattling in the door lock, and Pindar came in. “Will you stop getting yourself locked up?” he hissed.

Efran stood. “The water in the dungeon is up to the seventh step, and the foundations are unstable,” he said urgently.

Pindar stared at him. “Are you mad?”

“Go look for yourself! Go to the dungeon and listen!” Efran urged.

Pindar hung his head to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Go . . . wait in our quarters. Have a bath and I’ll see what I can do for you.”

Efran frowned, but said, “As you wish.” Technically, there was no difference in their rank, but Efran usually deferred to him out of courtesy to a senior officer.

He trudged out to the room he had shared with Pindar. But when he got there, he looked around at the dirty bathwater, the stripped bed, and the absence of clothing, and said, “What am I doing here?” Not caring to spend the night in this barrenness, he was still sensitive to the suggestion that he needed a bath. So he trekked across the grounds and the meadow to the henhouse.

He found the ladies ensconced in their palace for the night, having raided the open sack of millet with a side order of insects. He helped himself to a few more eggs, wishing he could fry them. He also walked around a bit, eating all the dandelion greens he could find.

Then he unwrapped his soap and enjoyed a refreshing bath in the Passage. He cleaned his mouth and his teeth of raw egg, washed the clothes he had been wearing, and put on his dress uniform (dry but wrinkled). Taking his cloak, he trooped back to the palace, very tired. He went up the back stairway to Sybil’s room.

Quietly, he let himself in. He looked at Edie asleep in her bed, then leaned over Sybil, still asleep. He felt her cheek with the back of his hand, finding it only slightly warm, then kissed her forehead. Yawning, he went out and shut the door. Then he lay across the doorway, bunching the cloak under his head.

Some time later, he was nudged awake by a boot. “What are you doing here?” a voice hissed.

Efran barely opened his eyes. “She is my charge,” he muttered, and went straight back to sleep. So the soldier had to go report where he found Captain Efran, and it was decided to send the underage girl who had been waiting in the officers’ quarters home, with her wages.

When Efran opened his eyes again, it was fully morning of April 28th. He sat up, weaving, then heaved himself up to open the door.

The girls were not here. The beds were gone from the receiving room, having been returned to the bedroom. And he had slept through it all. Efran blinked stupidly at the emptiness, then went downstairs to fix himself breakfast. The kitchen mistress was here, as well as a crew cleaning up after the Surchatain’s breakfast. Efran ignored her and them. They did likewise for him while he fried eggs for himself and cleaned the pan. When done, he went to the common latrine outside, taking the pan with him. He would not eat raw eggs any more.

At this time, Sybil was with her father in his receiving room on the second floor. Adele was also there. The three of them had just finished a lackluster breakfast, of which Sybil had eaten only the eggs and toast, finding the meat unappealing. But she was clearly free of the fever.

“I am delighted to see you looking so much better today, dear,” her father said, smiling on her.

“Thank you, Father,” she murmured. As far as she was aware, he had never been to her sickroom. Neither had Adele.

“So, to celebrate, we are sending you on a holiday trip to see your old friends in Eurus,” he said with a fake smile.

She studied him, then glanced at Adele’s smiling likewise at her. Sybil had no friends in Eurus, which both of them probably knew. So she divined that the purpose of this excursion was to separate her from Efran, and keep her ignorant of what may happen to him. “Thank you so much, Father, but I don’t feel quite strong enough yet. Efran is very afraid that I will relapse with too much activity.” She had no idea that this was true.

Lightfoot leaned back slightly, his face dropping in disappointment. Sybil added, “I’d rather go check on the chickens.”

He waved away the suggestion. “They’re fine.”

“I want to see them for myself. It’s not far,” she pressed.

“It is unsafe, dear Sister,” Adele interjected sweetly.

“Efran will go with me,” Sybil argued. They had never objected to her early solo trips to the henhouse.

The elder daughter exchanged a glance with her father, and Sybil began to burn. But she kept her mouth shut and her temper in check.

“Let us think on that, dear,” he said, leaning forward to pat her hand. Sybil shot a glance at her sister,

wondering why Adele was given veto power over Sybil's movements.

Pretending along with them, Sybil rose to curtsy. "Thank you, Father. Adele. I believe I should go rest now."

"Of course, dear," he nodded, and Adele smiled benignly.

When the door had closed on Sybil's departure, Lightfoot grunted, "We will have to think of something else."

Thoughtfully, Adele said, "She seems to consider him a . . . guardian." And they looked at each other.

Directly outside the door, Sybil paused. She suddenly remembered that she did have a friend in Eurus: her great-aunt Marguerite. She was a wealthy benefactress who had always been kind to Sybil. In fact, Auntie Marguerite had attended her birth.

Thinking on this, Sybil began heading for the stairs—slowly at first, then briskly as random thoughts coalesced into a plan. She descended the stairs at a trot, opening the door to the first-floor room her father had been using for audiences. She looked over his work table, then picked up the candle to light it from the glowing embers of the fireplace.

Settling in his great chair, she drew a piece of his official parchment toward her, and dipped his quill in the inkwell. With care, she wrote out a short letter, blotted it, and then folded it to write "Lady Marguerite, Featherstone, Eurus" on the outside. She heated the sealing wax over the candle flame, then dripped it on the folds and took up her father's official seal to press into the hot wax.

Looking at her handiwork in satisfaction, she blew out the candle and put the blotting paper on the embers, where it burst into flames and disintegrated. Then she took her letter to the runners' station, from which messengers were sent and received. Handing her letter to the officer in charge, she said, "This must go to Auntie Marguerite in Eurus right away."

He glanced at it, nodding, then quickly looked up. "Pater, hold up—here's another for Eurus." A mounted rider wearing a green sash leaned down for the letter, which he stuffed into a bag that he then strapped closed. Sybil turned away, smiling.

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Chapter 14

Sybil ran upstairs, where she had left Efran sleeping across her threshold. As soon as she turned onto the second floor, however, she saw him gone. Just to make certain, she opened the door to her chambers to look in. He was not there, either. So she ran back downstairs to look for him.

She found him sitting on a bench on the back walkway, vacantly looking at the gallows. She sat beside him, not close enough to cause whispers, and he turned his head toward her. "How do you feel?"

“So much better, because of you,” she whispered. “I . . . don’t want to look at that thing,” she added, lowering her face.

“There have been no executions since—recently,” he said.

“I hope there are no more ever,” she murmured back.

He inhaled, looking over the grounds again. “There may not be. There are far fewer soldiers here now than when I came back after the fever. It seems that those who didn’t wish to sign the pledge of loyalty decided not to stay around to be hanged.” He looked at her once, then again. “Where is your Captain’s insigne?”

Vaguely, she murmured, “Eddie told me that one of Father’s clerks came in while I was sleeping and took it off my dress. I don’t know what he did with it.” He nodded. He’d never need it.

I don’t have to die on the gallows. I can go now, he thought. But he didn’t want to leave Sybil alone. Surely she had family other than Lightfoot and Adele. So he said, “Your father has been busy establishing himself as Surchatain, but I’ve seen nothing of a Surchataine. Where is your mother?”

She thought about this, her eyes roaming the grounds. “I don’t know.”

Efran looked at her. “What happened to her?”

She blinked. Again she replied, “I have no idea.”

He turned full toward her. “Do you and Adele have the same mother?” As she just looked at him, he said, “I know; you don’t know.”

They were silent for a few minutes, then Sybil whispered, “My turn. Where were you raised?”

He glanced at her. “I . . . was born in a small village north of Eledith,” he began.

“Where is that?” she asked.

He paused. “On the edge of the southern Fastnesses, just southeast of Falcon Pass. It’s the largest city in what used to be Polontis.”

“Isn’t that a long way from Westford?” she asked.

“Well, yes,” he admitted. “I . . . spent my childhood in the village, but . . . there was never enough to eat. So when I was ten, I decided I’d seen enough of a pauper’s village, and struck out for Eledith.”

“By yourself?” she demanded.

“Yes,” he said, glancing at her tone of personal vindication. “And I almost starved to death. I certainly would have died, but a nun in Eledith, Therese, took me in. She—taught me how to survive. She taught me plants, and food preparation, and reading. I read a history of Westford there, which made me want to

join their army. Oh, she made me read everything. She taught me the Holy Canon, and gratitude, and prayer—which I practice too little now,” he said in dismay.

Sybil waited quietly for him to continue. Seeing that, he went on with difficulty: “Most of all, she was . . . kind. She could be stern about the important things, but she did not punish me for my ignorance.” He sighed, glancing away. “I attended her upon her death about three years later, then the cleric in charge of her order made me leave. He gave me nothing but a cloak—actually it was a very good cloak of soft wool, striped, with a hood. It probably saved my life on some very cold nights. At any rate, I spent most of my thirteenth year and part of my fourteenth walking south here, to Westford, to offer myself to the army—as if I were an asset,” he snorted in derision.

“I knew nothing of fighting or weaponry or anything that a soldier should know, but Captain Reedry of the Green Regiment took me in hand. He taught me the basics of self-discipline and obedience and attention to detail, then drilled me with every kind of weapon. I will never understand why he would bother, but he—he—”

“Was kind,” she said.

He glanced at her. “I never thought of it that way, but yes. He yelled at me at great deal, but not abusively. He seemed intent on me learning everything he could teach me.” He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, hands clasped. “He died fighting the Qarqarians, and I was promoted to the Gold.”

They were silent as a sentry passed in front of them on the back walk. She watched the soldier’s back until he turned into the palace, then she fixed her blue eyes on Efran again. Seeing that, he sat back, sighing, “I passed into the hands of Captain Von, who—” he paused to shake his head—“who singled me out for special assignments. Anything challenging, anything important, he threw my way first. I can’t understand why. I didn’t always succeed. But he kept . . . believing I would. It was enough to advance me to the Red Regiment.

“Then, I was never even promoted from the Red to the Blue. When the captain of the Red was killed, Commander Wendt promoted me straight up to replace him. We had a lot of Polonti in the Red at that time, and the Commander said, ‘They’re all wild, just like you. They won’t listen to anybody else.’” Efran laughed, shaking his head.

“Commander Wendt became my father. He—treated me like a son. I disappointed him on some levels, but, he—he gave me a sense of purpose just in carrying out his commands,” Efran remembered. “I wish I knew what happened to him,” he added in a whisper.

“They cared about you,” she said. “The nun and the officers cared for you.”

“Yes,” he said.

“I never had anyone to care about me until you came along,” she said levelly.

As he stared at her, his eyes filled with tears, which she watched dispassionately. It had something to do with children, he knew, though he didn’t understand it. He had an innate desire to—to take in the children he saw running unwanted from house to house. Despite his being able to do nothing about it, the desire was stronger than ever. So when she unknowingly presented herself as an unwanted child. . . . He

dismally watched his last opportunity to escape melt away before her need.

“Well, here is Sybil with her lover,” Adele's voice said sardonically. She had emerged from a doorway to Efran’s right. Neither of them reacted, although Efran tried to blink the tears from his eyes.

She approached to regard their sitting quietly. Efran was looking at his hands as Sybil watched the few sheep graze. “Well,” Adele said, “Father is having an open audience which he thought might interest you both. Come along.” She swished away in embroidered silk skirts.

They got up to follow her at a slight distance into the palace. Efran wiped his face fiercely with his sleeve. “Captain Reedry always told me I cried too much,” he whispered, and Sybil chortled in her throat. Adele glanced back.

They entered the vast, echoing audience hall, glancing at the 20 or so in attendance. Lightfoot was sitting on a large, old, ornately carved wooden throne on a raised dais. Looking displeased at their tardy entrance, he gestured at an attendant who had a scroll in hand. Efran tensed.

The attendant stepped up to the edge of the dais to open the scroll and read: “Surchatain Lightfoot has called this audience of April the twenty-eighth for two purposes. The first is to appoint a guardian for the Chataine Sybil. Captain Efran, advance and kneel.”

Efran obeyed, dropping before the throne on both knees and bowing his head. The attendant glanced down his scroll, even on the back, as everyone waited. “Isn’t there a vow?” Lightfoot asked impatiently. Flustered, the attendant turned to rummage on a side table.

Efran looked up to say loudly, “I, Captain Efran, swear before God to guard the life and honor of Chataine Sybil with my life, whether inside or outside of the palace, until such time as I am relieved of my duty. I understand that failure to protect her life or her honor will mean my death.”

He fell silent and the whole hall, all 25 or so, stared at him. The color deepened in Sybil’s lips, but she stood very still. Lightfoot looked troubled that his name wasn’t in there anywhere.

Adele stirred. “Thank you, Captain Efran. You may rise.” He stood and stepped back without looking behind him, so a servant had to sidestep quickly.

Raising his scroll, the attendant said, “The second and more momentous announcement is the appointment of Adele, daughter of Surchatain Lightfoot, as his Surchataine.”

There was mostly silence in response, as only one person in the audience understood what this meant. Sybil watched Efran look quickly at Adele, then drop his eyes. The new Surchataine looked over the heads of the audience with a set smile.

Lightfoot gestured angrily at the attendant, who dropped his scroll to begin applauding. Everyone in the audience applauded; after a few minutes of that, Efran stopped. The applause died at once.

“You’re dismissed,” Lightfoot waved, scowling particularly at the captain.

While the audience drifted out, Sybil whispered to her guardian, “I want to go see the hens.”

He glanced at her. As Lightfoot was unsteadily rising from the throne, Efran stepped up to the dais and bowed. “Surchatain, the Chataine requests an outing to the henhouse. I believe the sunlight and fresh air will speed her recovery, and I will make sure that she does not overexert herself.” He waited respectfully for a reply.

Lightfoot’s lips curled, but Adele said, “I think that is a fine idea.”

Efran turned to bow formally to her. “Thank you, Surchataine.” Sybil was quick to catch the slight difference in pronunciation of her title from her father’s. Apparently it registered with Adele, too, as she smiled in approval on him.

Turning to his charge, Efran held up his right arm parallel to the floor from the elbow to the hand. Sybil blinked at him. “Place your left hand on mine,” he whispered. She did, and he walked her out of the audience hall. She felt like a—a Surchataine.

He walked her thus to the great curved stairway, which they began ascending. She stumbled as her toe caught in the hem of her long dress. He held her arm to steady her, whispering, “Hold your skirt up with your right hand.” She caught up a fold of the dress as he repositioned her left hand on his.

She glanced a query at him—*Am I doing this right?*—and he nodded. He escorted her up the stairway to the second floor, glancing all around. Pausing with no one nearby, he asked in a low voice, “Do you have a riding skirt?”

She blinked again. “I . . . don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Adele does. Tell Edie to find it and bring it to you. Have her bring you a wide-brimmed hat, too—straw, not leather. Put on boots if you have them. Then come down to the stables,” he instructed. Her face opened in joy, which made his heart throb. “Well? Go,” he prompted, and she flew to her quarters. He turned back down the stairs, wiping sweat from his lip.

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Chapter 15

As soon as Efran appeared in the stables, Bastard began weaving expectantly in his stall. “I don’t know why you think you deserve anything,” Efran grumbled, but the horse recognized carrot bulges in his pants pocket.

Sighing, he looked down the sparsely occupied row, and a piebald mare pricked her ears hopefully. Efran went over to run a hand across her back, then glance in her trough. She had no hay nor water, but her eyes were clear and attentive. So he brought her both hay and water, and while she ate, he gave her an overdue combing. Bastard snorted angrily from down the row. “Shut up,” Efran muttered.

When Sybil came skipping to the stables, he looked over, smiling. She was all dressed out as he had

instructed. He had a bridle on the mare already, which was tied to an exterior post. Throwing a blanket over the mare's back, he asked, "How often have you ridden?"

"Oh, a lot," she said confidently. He turned his eyes to her, lifting the saddle atop the blanket. Squirming at his silence, she amended, "Well, some." He flipped up the stirrup to bring up the girth, still silent. Looking down, she sighed, "I had no one to show me how."

"Well, Girl here seems cooperative. Let's see how you do on her," he grunted, pulling the billets tight.

He helped her mount. Then, explaining how to sit, hold the reins, move with the horse, and use her feet, he walked her around a small pen to watch her form. Satisfied, he threw the reins back over Girl's head and let Sybil take her around the pen on her own. Bastard, meanwhile, was banging angrily in his stall.

Watching Sybil ride by herself, Efran nodded. "All right; you're good." And he went to saddle the petulant beast. Sybil lifted her face in triumph, the straw brim flapping in the breeze.

As he led Bastard out and threw a leg over the saddle, he felt a stab of pain at her happy, expectant face. "Did you take a carriage everywhere in Eurus?" he asked, turning Bastard's head but keeping his heels off the horse's sides.

"Carriage?" she asked, turning Girl to follow him.

"Did you walk everywhere?" he asked, brows raised.

"I . . . never went anywhere. Why do you think I was so taken with the hens?" she exclaimed. Efran turned his face away. How could a dirty Polonti have a better childhood than a privileged Eurusian? At her age, he was learning self-sufficiency from the ground up, roaming over hills and meadows on both donkeys and horses under the eye of someone who cared about him.

They walked their horses placidly through the grass, as he would not allow her to lope or even trot. "I don't know how Girl will react to Bastard's temper tantrums," he explained in a mutter.

"That's fine," she said, looking all around from Girl's back. Then her face darkened and she pulled closer to him. Bastard laid his ears back and Efran slapped his haunches in warning. "Efran, what does it mean that Father made Adele his Surchataine?"

"Well," he hesitated, "as far as I can tell, it means he's sharing the rulership with her. You noticed that she gave permission for our outing and your father didn't object."

"Does it mean she'll be his . . . wife?" she asked.

"Not necessarily, no," he winced. "The law allows the Surchatain to appoint any woman he sees fit to be his co-ruler. He's free to marry again."

"I saw your face when it was announced," she remarked. "You did not look happy."

He thought through his reply. "It does mean that they share the same . . . goals and . . . means of achieving them."

“Hanging soldiers who won’t swear loyalty to him?” she asked.

“Apparently.”

“And to her?” Sybil asked.

He briefly closed his eyes. “That would mean they’d have to hang me twice.”

“Then why did they name you my guardian?” she cried in a low voice.

He reined to a stop, looking back over their path and all around from there. “It makes it much easier for him to find a legal reason to hang me.”

“How?” she whispered, anguished.

“Minka, if I’m seen holding you, that’s enough,” he whispered back. “Touching you in any way other than in protecting you. Kissing your forehead would be reason for any legitimate Surchatain to hang me. And we will be watched closely from here on out.”

She gazed at him, then turned in the saddle to look stonily ahead. “No one else holds me—certainly not Father. No one else kisses my forehead or holds my hand. To all the world I might as well be a leper.”

Efran’s jaw tightened, and he reached over to lay his hand on hers. “Then we just must be very careful.”

She quickly looked at him. His pensive smile caused her to face forward and lift the reins, removing her hand from under his. “I wish to see the chickens now.”

“That we will do, Lady.” He smiled as he kicked Bastard lightly, who bucked lightly.

Disdainfully, she half-turned to say, “You are not cute when you crinkle your eyes at me.”

“So you told me,” he laughed, and she looked ahead with a full heart.

They found that the chickens had enlarged their domain to encompass the surrounding trees, apparently feeling no obligation to confine their foraging to the spilled millet, mostly gone, or the grass. Going from one nesting box to another and finding them empty, Sybil cried, “Where are their eggs? Have you found any?”

“A few,” he said from outside. Emerging from the hen house, she watched him retrieve one egg, then another, from the crook of an oak tree.

She laughed in disbelief. “Should we take them back to the palace?”

He frowned dubiously. “I don’t know how old they are.” He held one up to the bright sunlight, then his mouth dropped open. Turning the egg, he raised it higher and shook his head.

“What is it?” she cried.

“There is another rooster somewhere.” He lowered the egg to scan the surrounding tree tops. She sat on the ground in the riding skirt to laugh.

He replaced the eggs in the crook of the tree, eyeing her on the ground. She was leaning up against the wellside. Bastard and Girl were both engrossed in a nearby patch of luscious green grass.

He went over to sit beside her, looking out across the meadow. From this position, no one could see them without approaching very near. Smiling, she was watching him, then he began to take off his boots and socks.

She blinked at him. “What are you doing?”

Still looking out over the meadow, he said, “I’m going to show you something. If you see anyone coming, you must tell me.”

A look of cautious confusion covered her face. “What are you going to show me?”

Both of them leaning against the well, he studied her. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she uttered firmly.

“Good. Keep an eye out for riders on the meadow,” he said, standing. Then he threw a leg over the edge of the well to find a toehold, and brought his other leg over.

“Efran! No!” She grasped his arms in fear.

“Shh!” he ordered. “Watch the meadow. I’ll be right back.”

Stunned, she watched him climb down the inside of the well. “Efran!” she cried softly as he disappeared into the darkness.

“Watch the meadow!” his voice ascended.

Obediently, she looked up to scan the meadow, then peered down into the black recesses again. There were noises below: some quiet clanking.

For the next several minutes, she divided her attention between the well and the meadow. Then suddenly his head broke into the light, and she stepped back with a gasp of relief.

As he hoisted himself to the well edge, she threw her arms around his neck in relief. “I can’t climb out with you holding on to me,” he said into her floppy hat.

“Oh.” She released him to step back again. Eyeing the stretch of meadow, he threw one leg over, then the other, then slid down beside the well to retrieve his socks. “What did you do down there?” she demanded.

“What do you see different about me?” he asked, pulling on one sock and reaching for the other.

She looked distractedly down his person, then said, “You’re wearing a sword.” She failed to notice the hunting knife in its sheath strapped to his other hip.

“Very good,” he grunted, pulling on a boot.

“Efran, what is this? What is down there?” she breathed.

Shod, he stood and offered her a hand. “I’ll explain on the way back. We can’t stay out here long, for I have another place to show you on another day, and I may need the sword to get us there.”

Open-mouthed, she stood.

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Chapter 16

On the slow walk back through the meadow to the palace, Efran told Sybil everything about the books, the well, the fortress and the wolves—but not the flooding in the dungeon. He judged that she was not ready to hear that yet. Halfway home, they spotted riders from the palace coming after them, but neither of them cared anymore.

Bastard wanted to run, of course; every time he started to bolt, Efran pulled back hard on the reins, which certainly hurt his mouth. When Bastard cooperated, he got a piece of carrot; when he didn’t, he got a hurt mouth. Bastard finally opted for the carrots, enabling Efran to talk and Sybil to ask questions.

As he talked, watching her listen and hearing her questions, he became aware of her new maturity. It had been barely a week since he had crawled through the rain to her henhouse, and her first words to him were an outraged insult from a self-centered child. But now . . . her poise rivaled Adele’s.

Surpassed it, actually. Today, when the advance of the soldiers caused Efran and Sybil to stop talking, he thought about the night before his scheduled hanging, when Adele had come to his cell. Her first tactic was sensual: offering him food and kisses for him to save his own life by changing his mind about the loyalty oath. When he wouldn’t cooperate, she added a strong dose of *moekolohe* to the mix.

But when Minka saw him about to be hanged, she risked herself to cling to him and pour abuse on her father. And that had been—what? Two days after she had first found him taking up space among her hens. It had taken her only two days to decide that there was nothing required of Efran to save his life; the onus lay on her father to not kill him.

He shook his head. Regardless, all that made no difference: he could not touch her—a prohibition they repeatedly and emphatically transgressed just today.

Was it sexual? He recoiled—no, no. He wanted to cover her, protect her, not use her. At the same time, he did not trust himself with her. He did not know what he was capable of justifying.

Finally, belatedly, he became aware of barking at his side. He peered at the soldier who had ridden between him and Minka to issue orders about something that he was required to do right away. Efran snarled, “I don’t answer to you and you do not come between me and my charge.” Hauling back on Bastard, Efran shook his foot out of the stirrup and landed the soldier’s horse a solid blow under his tail. The animal bolted, bucking the man off and heading for the stables at a dead run.

Sybil gasped, looking at Efran wide-eyed while the other soldiers veered away to give him plenty of room to close the gap between himself and her.

Days later, in early May, everyone began noticing the changes in Sybil. It was most obvious in the way she dressed—she took greater care to wear clothes suitable for a young woman, not a little girl. She hadn’t changed to finer, more expensive clothes; she still preferred comfortable cottons and linens. But they were longer, fuller, and fit her better. (They were all handed down from Adele. Sybil had never received brand-new clothing.)

She began brushing her hair instead of just braiding it, and it was always clean. She wore headbands or ribbons to hold it back out of her face, and it looked much neater, while showing off the gold highlights of hair that used to be hidden in messy braids.

But the underlying change, the one that prompted the others, was her new quietness and self-possession. She was calmer, more evaluative, less emotional. She was, frankly, much more stable.

All these changes, coming so quickly, terrified Efran. On the second of May, she announced to him, “I will celebrate a birthday next week.”

“Fourteen. Not old enough,” he said quickly.

She gave him a long look, then replied, “That’s fine. I will wait for you to grow up.”

He stammered for some time searching for a rebuttal to this, but all he could piece together was, “How is it that you—you are so—different . . . ?”

“That’s your fault,” she said. He paled, almost sliding down the nearest wall. She explained, “You keep treating me like something precious—something worth protecting. You make me feel that’s really what I am.”

He whispered, “I wish you would stop making me cry.”

Other changes were rolled into this new sense of self-worth. One day she announced that her name was Minka and she would acknowledge nothing else. And she meant it. She refused to answer any summons from her father that addressed her as “Sybil”—a name that she had always hated, in fact. She read nothing addressed to this “Sybil,” and threw out anything inscribed to her.

Efran had no problem with this change, as he preferred to call her “Minka” anyway. But he asked, “Where is this cat who gave you the name?”

“Father said she was responsible for giving me the fever and had her drowned,” she replied.

He opened his mouth in dismay and turned away. She watched him go in mild disappointment, as she would have loved some token comfort from him.

But an hour later he returned, and placed in her hands a newly weaned, black-and-white kitten. “Minka the Second,” he murmured. She gasped, cuddling the tiny thing, then grabbed his head to kiss his cheek. It was a stroke of kind fortune that no one else was nearby to see it, but even if there had been, Efran would have considered it worth dying for.

Two days later she found him in the back courtyard looking at the gallows. She sighed in concern, coming to his side without touching him. “No one’s died on it for weeks now,” she murmured.

“I know. It just—looks different. I know it wasn’t well constructed, but—does it look leaning to you? I keep seeing it lean,” he muttered.

She shook her head, then hearing a tiny *mew*, looked down to see her new kitten trying to climb her skirts. “Silly Minka,” she laughed, bending to pick her up. Efran, smiling, glanced down at the wee adventurer, then returned his scrutiny to the gallows. But when Minka the girl tried to lift the kitten off her skirts, the sharp little claws stuck fast in the linen and would not be dislodged. Efran was inattentive to this dilemma.

When a soldier newly imported from Eurus (and having no qualms about swearing loyalty to Lightfoot) saw the lady’s predicament, he advanced to lend a helping hand. Placing himself beside her practically at Efran’s back, he knelt to begin working the kitten free of the linen. Eyes widening, Minka shook her head and waved him earnestly away, but he couldn’t see the problem and bent closer to her skirt to focus on the tiny claws. Finally, she just froze.

It had to happen; Efran had to turn around to see the man’s face inches from his charge’s skirt. At the sight, Efran blinked once, then picked him up and carried him two steps toward the laundry pit. The soldier unwisely struggled, expostulating, so Efran hurled him over the stone rim into the sudsy water.

The water surged unexpectedly. Holding the kitten, Minka ran over, and the three of them watched the laundry pit rapidly empty of water until the man sat in an empty stone pit, cracked through the center.

There were loud creaks from the gallows behind them; Efran pushed Minka behind his back where she peeked around him to watch the wooden structure list crookedly to the side and crash in a pile of splintered lumber. The sound of other sharp cracking made Efran, Minka and the soldier in the pit spin as the low portico roof of the palace, about twenty feet beyond the laundry pit, sagged while the pillar supporting its corner cracked.

“It’s happening,” Efran mouthed too quietly to be heard.

But that was all. The three of them waited breathlessly for more, but the shaking stopped. For now.

Shortly thereafter, Lightfoot issued orders, and the banners from the foyer were piled onto the gallows debris. Great piles of books were brought down from the library and thrown onto the pile. Then torches were laid to it all.

Minka watched from the back walkway while Efran almost lost his mind seeing the banner of Henry the Great crackling away into black soot, and the precious volumes, a hundred years old, turned into ashes. But he did not cry, he jumped onto the small mountain to heft armloads of books which he carried into the shadows. There, no one saw the former soldiers Estes and Connor take them to hiding places elsewhere.

Even when the flames grew high and hot, the Eurusians laughed as Efran darted into the pile to rescue what few remaining books he could grab. Pacing in fury around the great burning heap, he seized a flaming book on the perimeter and threw it toward the palace.

“Curse you!” he shouted. “I curse you! You kill good men and burn the lives of the saints! May you sink into oblivion!”

Trembling, Minka reached out imploring hands to him. “Efran, please come away from the fire,” she whispered. “Efran.”

He saw her, and strode over. Looking hard at her, he said, “You are the only jewel in this place.”

She covered her mouth, but could not respond before Adele came up to protectively put an arm around her shoulders. “Is he being savage, dear Sybil? They’re like that. Here, let me help you get ready for bed.” Efran turned away, but slept in her doorway, as always.

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Chapter 17

That day, May 5th, opened a new chapter in the life of the palace. Soldiers, servants and courtiers vanished, taking with them whatever they could carry away. With a diminished staff, Lightfoot and Adele carried on the business of ruling, holding audiences of a dozen to hear new proclamations.

Efran had been preparing meals for himself for some time; seeing what Minka was reduced to eating, he doubled the portions. The day following the bonfire, he went down to the kitchen to find it quite literally empty: there were no cooks nor servants, no food, and few cooking implements left.

Jaw working, he surveyed the remains, then went back upstairs to her chambers. He knocked on the door of her receiving room and waited to hear her give permission to enter. When he did, she looked up from her chair to smile at him, quickly hiding the bloomers she had been mending.

He knelt beside her chair. “I am going out to the henhouse—”

“Oh! Let me come!” She half rose from her seat.

He waved her down. “Not today. Another day. There are—things I must find and bring back. Stay here.” He paused to look toward her bed chamber. “Where is Edie?”

“I haven’t seen her today,” she said, troubled.

“Lock your door,” he uttered, rising.

After hearing her turn the key from the inside, he went back down to the kitchen. He got down on the floor to scrounge in the deep recesses of a lower cabinet, from which he withdrew a bunch of slightly spotted carrots. Pulling out his hunting knife (which he wore constantly now) he shaved off the bad spots and cut the carrots in half. Then he fished around for a canvas bag to hold them.

From there he went to the stables, which ominously stood open. And he looked in to see only one horse remaining: Bastard, whom no one wanted. The ropes attached to his halter were tied to a post, because he bit. But from there he could not reach hay or water. The horse could barely turn his head far enough to see Efran enter.

“Stupid animal,” Efran muttered. But he went over to release his rope and turn him to the water trough. Bastard nosed his pocket instead, so Efran gave him a half carrot. Then while Bastard slaked his thirst, Efran gathered what remaining hay he could find for the horse’s breakfast.

Going down the stalls, Efran saw that they had been completely stripped of tack: nothing useful remained but an old wooden bucket and a short length of rope. Both these he picked up on his way back to Bastard’s stall.

While he and Bastard eyed each other, Efran stuffed the carrot sack through his belt, making sure that Bastard noticed. Then he drew the rope reins back over his head and leapt up on his bare back. Bastard kicked in token resistance, then agreed to head out.

Efran loped him through the meadow, scanning all around but seeing no one. Drawing up to the henhouse, Bastard veered to the nice patch of grass, which Efran allowed. Then he slid down from the horse’s back to survey the area. He looked up to the hens far out of reach in the upper tree branches before turning into the abandoned coop. Here, he reclaimed the onions and potatoes, as well as his clothes, soap, flint box and the second tarp. He paused to eye the hand cart, but left it for now.

He glanced over the nesting boxes, but knew that any eggs here would be old. So he brought out his reclaimed supplies to drop them all beside Bastard, and looked over to the well.

He scanned the area again before sitting to strip off his boots and socks. Then he climbed down the well to retrieve his quiver, bow, and hatchet. The books must remain for now; he had no way to transport them and no place to put them. But that would be rectified shortly.

When he had everything together, he shook out the canvas bag and raised his eyes to the trees. Selecting the one that seemed most favored by the ladies, he began to climb. He found six eggs in that tree.

On the ground, he knelt to run his hand over various clumps of brush, and found another two eggs. A short climb up a second tree produced two more eggs. These ten he carried gingerly in the bag to the well, where he untied the bucket and removed the rope from the wheel pulley. Filling the bucket half full from the Passage, Efran dropped in the eggs one by one. Those that sank he set apart to one side. Those that floated he held up to the light. Two of the floaters he tossed into the Passage; one he returned to the clumps. That left seven good eggs he could take back.

Exhaling, he eyed Bastard, who raised his head to eye him back. Efran knelt to spread the tarp on the ground and arrange everything except the eggs on it. This he rolled up in a tight, compact bundle, which he secured with one end of the rope. Then he took it over to Bastard while he grazed. Efran passed the other end of the rope lightly around Bastard's neck, then up under his belly to tie the bundle securely against his side.

Holding the sack of eggs in his left hand, Efran hopped up to Bastard's back, draping his leg over the bundle on his side to prevent its bouncing. Then he turned the horse's head by means of the rope on his halter and murmured, "Carrots, Bastard."

The horse started home at a sedate lope while Efran kept the bundle clamped under his right leg and the sack of eggs dangling freely in the air to his left. But the bundle irritated Bastard, who picked up his speed, kicking for good effect along the way. Efran balanced on his bouncing seat, forgoing the useless rope reins to knot his right fist in Bastard's mane. And he was careful to prevent the eggs knocking against his arm.

They arrived back at the stables in good time, Bastard going directly to the stall in which the sack of carrots resided. Sliding off his back, Efran first checked his bag of eggs: none appeared to be broken yet. Before Bastard could rip open the carrot bag with his teeth, Efran secured his rope to the food and water trough and gave him a few of the carrot pieces. The rest he shoved under the trough out of reach.

While Bastard ate the hay, Efran untied the bundle, hefting it underarm to carry it in along with the eggs. Before turning up the back stairway with his burdens, he listened to the echoing voices and random footfalls here and there. Shaking his head at the desolation, he ran up the stairs to Minka's quarters.

At the door, he called, "Minka? Are you there?" He waited tensely until he heard the key turning in the lock. She pulled the door open, regarding the bundles he brought in. He set down the rolled tarp while handing her the bag of eggs. "Here. Careful."

She opened it to look. "Oh, Efran! How are the chickens?"

"Reigning on high," he muttered, untying his bundle. Then he looked up. "Do you have any crockery, any dishes up here?" The pan he had stolen from the kitchen was up here now, coincidentally, but it was too small for what he needed today.

"Yes," she said, turning. "I think a few things never got taken back down." She went to rummage in several cubbyholes, bringing out pewter plates, utensils, and cups.

He glanced at them. "Excellent." He put an onion and two potatoes into the well bucket, then stood with that and the sack of eggs. She watched his air of distraction.

With all this in hand, he said, "Where is your key?" She picked it from a side table and he nodded her out.

In the corridor, he instructed, "Lock this door." Astonished, she did, and he said, "Keep the key on your person." She dropped it in her skirt pocket and he nodded down the corridor.

He led her downstairs, watching at every intersection. Then they entered the deserted kitchen, where he climbed up on counters to search every cabinet. "Ah." He brought out a pot of lard to sniff it. "This is

good.” He handed it down to her and continued to search, eventually bringing out a stiff brush, wooden spoon, and pot.

Then he clambered back down to hand her the bucket. “Well water.” She smiled at his succinct manner, running out to draw the water. When she brought this back in to him, he plopped the two potatoes into the bucket, handing her the brush. “Wash them well.”

She took the brush and began scrubbing, eyeing him as he turned at small sounds outside, continually glancing at the doors. In the dead fireplace, he piled up tinder that he had gathered from the floor, then stacked kindling over it. Dropping the firesteel over three fingers, he struck it against the flint to produce sparks which set the tinder aflame. Scrubbing intently, she watched all this.

He patiently blew the flame till the kindling caught, then had to scrounge around for firewood. “No one left to cut wood, even,” he muttered. He set the pot over the flame and spooned a bit of lard into it. As that heated, he appropriated her potatoes and rapidly chopped them up with his hunting knife, then scooped them into the pot. “Stir,” he said, handing her the spoon.

She took the spoon, reaching for the pot handle, but he made a noise in his throat and caught her hand to put a cloth in it. She blinked at it, and he uttered, “Hot.” She carefully folded the cloth to place on the handle, and he inhaled. She returned a bleak smile.

He skinned the onion, chopped it vigorously and scraped it into the pot, then nodded, “Eggs.” She took one out to look at it and look at the pot. Before he could tell her to break it first, she tapped it competently on the edge of the pot and emptied it in.

When everything was added, he leaned back against the hearth to watch the doorways while she stirred. Glancing in the pot, he said, “All right. Get the plates.”

Because she’d eaten nothing since last night, she was quick to put out the plates and forks. He lifted the pot to spoon half in each plate. She blew gently, took a bite, and breathed, “This is wonderful.” He grinned briefly, scooping up mouthfuls.

There was a scraping at the back door, which caused them both to quickly turn. A young boy in rags stood there, transfixed by the smell of the food but terrified by the sight of the Polonti.

Before Minka could even lower her plate, Efran had knelt to offer him a bite from his own fork. Wide-eyed, the child hesitantly accepted, then Efran offered him another, and another. In moments the boy had eaten it all. He backed out of the doorway, looked at Efran still kneeling, then ran off.

When Efran stood again, Minka said, “Hold up your plate,” as she separated out half of hers.

“Eat it,” he ordered. Then he added, “I know where they’re laying now.”

Efran and Minka cleaned up everything with well water, then he bundled the lot in the canvas bag to take back to her rooms. As she began up the back stairs, he paused. “Wait,” he whispered. “Wait there.”

She turned on the dark stair, but he backed out to tread across the rear of the foyer to check. . . . Just to check.

Approaching the dungeon door, he laid a hand on the handle, then looked down at his feet. Water was sloshing out from under the door.

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Chapter 18

Efran stepped back, heart in his throat. “I have to get her out of here,” he breathed.

He returned to the stair, where she was still waiting. “What is it?” she whispered.

“Up,” he ordered. They ran up the stair, her holding her skirts with one hand. He hurried her down the corridor to her chambers, barely waiting while she produced the key and unlocked the door.

Within, he fell on the tarp to extract his bow and quiver, slinging both across his shoulder. He stood to shrug them in place, patting his knife sheathed on his hip. He said, “The palace is coming down around us. I must get you out, but first I have to clear out the wolves from the road to our safe place.”

Her lips parted as she drew a quick breath. “*Our* safe place, Efran?”

“Yes, of course, what do you think?” he asked irritably, glancing toward the window.

Impulsively, she reached up to his lips and he almost fell down backwards. “Don’t, Minka! Don’t!” he shouted. She looked stunned, and he said tightly, “You mustn’t kiss me. I won’t be able to—to—stop—”

She drew back, mortified. “I’m so sorry, Efran. I didn’t realize—” Distressed, she watched him wipe the sweat from his upper lip with a trembling hand. “Oh, Efran, I didn’t know—”

“Stay here. Keep the door locked. I will be back as soon as I can,” he said, still breathing hard.

“Yes, Efran,” she whispered, watching as he blew out of the door.

Turning down the corridor, he caught sight of skirts around the corner to the stairway. He scowled. Could that have been . . . ? Could she have overheard . . . ? He sagged, looking back to Minka’s room. Even if Adele had overheard everything, there was nothing he could do but what he said. The road must be cleared before anything else.

He went in the opposite direction to the back stair and ran across the rear courtyard to the stables. It would be nice to have Cassius come along about now, but he was nowhere in sight—his trainer had obviously taken him. Careening into the stables, Efran jerked Bastard’s rope reins off the post and leapt onto his back. Turning his head, Efran emphatically dug his heels into the horse’s sides.

Bucking just as emphatically, Bastard set off at a dead run and Efran turned him to the south road.

Very quickly, he arrived in the vicinity of the wolves' domain, and Efran reached under Bastard's head to pull back on the tie ring of the halter. This induced him to slow, which he did willingly. Bastard walked, then, as Efran drew an arrow from his quiver and nocked it, scanning the grass all around him.

"Easy, Bastard," Efran whispered, raising the bow and sighting down the arrow. He released, and a crouching wolf sprang up to run a few steps, then collapse with the shaft sticking up from its throat.

Bastard shied, so Efran stroked his neck. "Think about the carrots in your stall," he whispered. "Shhh. Easy. . . ."

He nocked again, turning toward Bastard's haunches. He had to pause and resettle when Bastard also turned. Raising the bow and drawing smoothly back, he waited until Bastard stopped swaying, then released again. With a yelp and a whimper, another wolf ran off with the arrow bobbing from its shoulder.

When Efran nocked and looked up again, he had barely time to drop his bow and draw his knife before a large wolf crashed into him, knocking him off Bastard. Efran felt the wolf's breath on his face as he brought the knife up into its stomach with both hands. He had to kick away another while wrenching the blade away from the wolf's belly. Then he rolled off the road to escape Bastard's hoofs, who was wildly bucking in every direction. He took out at least one wolf that Efran saw.

Rising, Efran sheathed the knife and recovered his bow and quiver, scanning in every direction. Seeing one young wolf struggle against the arrow in its shoulder, Efran walked over to slit its throat and recover the arrow. Dropping the knife, he quickly sighted on another wolf running away, and downed it.

For the next several hours, Efran prowled the area, watching where they regrouped and coolly taking them out when they did. By then, Bastard was calmly grazing.

Late afternoon, Efran took a final survey of the area, and found it clear. Walking over to Bastard, he wearily shouldered his bow and quiver to hoist himself on the horse's back. When Efran knotted his fist in his mane and uttered, "Carrots," the horse sprang homeward with a preliminary bucking.

Upon reaching his stall in the early twilight, Efran slipped off to tie his rope to the water trough and bring up a handful of carrot pieces. While Bastard ate, Efran looked for the curry comb, which had also disappeared. So he ate a few carrot pieces himself, being very hungry. Then he turned toward the palace.

He bounded up the stairs and trotted down the corridor to Minka's chambers. Knocking on the outer door, he called quietly, "Minka?" When there was no answer, he pushed open the unlocked door. The room was disordered and empty. Efran dropped his bow and quiver to the floor, moving to open the bedchamber door. This room was also empty. They had taken her away.

His stomach turned to lead, but he kept himself in hand to turn on his heel and trot to the Surchatain's receiving room on the first floor. This also was empty.

Thinking hard, trying to remember where Adele's room was, he ran back up to the second floor. All the royal quarters were on this floor. So he went from one door to another, kicking them open. He didn't even bother to turn handles first; he just kicked. Like Bastard, he needed to kick.

A soldier stepped out of the door next to the one he was about to batter down, and said, "In here,

Captain.” Efran put his foot down and followed him into the room.

There, Lightfoot and Adele were sitting at dinner. They looked up at his entrance, and Adele gestured him to a third chair at the table. “Have a seat, Captain,” she smiled.

He wavered, and then came over to sit. Adele asked, “Would you prefer the duck or the venison?”

Without looking at the dishes, he asked, “Where is she?”

She leaned on her elbows to regard him with a sigh. “She’s on her way to Eurus, Captain.”

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Chapter 19

“If you stop and think a moment, you’ll see that’s best,” Adele continued gently. “She’s determined to play with you, Captain—it’s not malicious, it’s just that she’s still a child, and is—entranced by the power she has over you. If we let you continue to guard her, she would eventually wear you down, even without intending to. You would inevitably compromise yourself with her, ruining her and signing your own death warrant. For her sake and for yours, we must prevent that.”

As he listened, Efran knew that she was right. Minka loved him as much as a child could love, and wanted all of it with a child’s ignorance of the consequences. “I know,” he whispered. Remarkably, Lightfoot was silent, concentrating on eating.

“I’m so glad you understand, Efran,” Adele said. “And, who’s to say? In a few years, when we bring her back to Westford, you can meet again and see how you feel about each other.”

He nodded slightly. “That is wisest.”

“There you are!” She sat back, lifting her hands. “Now sit and eat. You must be famished.”

He looked at the dishes, which smelled tantalizing for EurAsian fare, and murmured, “Thank you. In a little while.” Then he got up to go downstairs in the twilight.

With hollow eyes, he looked out over the blackened back quadrangle. Without question, that was the correct course. Minka wanted to love him as though she were a woman, but she wasn’t. He, being the only adult of the two, had to be the one to keep that from happening. And yet. . . .

He had sworn an oath as her guardian. He had sworn to protect her. When she had been taken out from under him, certainly against her will, the only acceptable action of a guardian was to recover her, period. Anything decided after that was contingent upon his fulfilling his duty to restore her personal autonomy. Nothing else mattered, not even his own life.

And that resolution brought him peace. *I’m going to die either way, so I might as well die doing my job.*

So he turned to the stables again. *Bastard, I hope you're rested. We have a long way to go tonight.*

As he swung into the stables, he looked up to see Bastard's stall empty. With a constricted heart, he looked down the whole row of stalls. Bastard was gone.

With the realization that his only means of recovering her had been taken away from him, Efran broke. He leaned his head on Bastard's stall and began to sob like a child. Yes, he loved her. Yes, he wanted her back. But Adele had outmaneuvered him, and won.

It took him some time to perceive the tugging on his jacket. Blinking, he looked down at a small figure. He had to wipe his eyes to focus on him. After a moment, he recognized him as the child who had eaten his eggs and potatoes.

Seeing that he finally had Efran's attention, he gestured to him, then moved away a step. When Efran just stood there, the child gestured again for him to follow. Numbly, Efran did. Leading him by the hand, the boy took him out of the stables and past the front courtyard toward the shops of Westford.

They were all closed now. Even had there been no fever ravaging the city, the shops would be closed after dark anyway. But now they were not only closed, but abandoned . . . except. . . .

Leading Efran down one dark city street and up another, the boy stopped at a house that had a lit upper window. Then the child whispered, "She's in there."

Efran alternated staring at the child and staring at the upper window. "What is your name?" he finally asked.

The boy said, "I'm Toby."

"Where can I find you, Toby?"

"Anywhere," the child shrugged.

"Go lie down in Bastard's stall, Toby. I will come for you," Efran whispered.

The child nodded and moved away into the darkness.

Efran looked back up at the house. Like most those in the city proper, it had a shop on the lower floor and living quarters above it. On its signboard, this shop bore an ornate crown with the legend "Aron the Jeweler" above it.

Quietly, Efran scaled the fence around the property to look in the tiny back courtyard. There, a carriage waited, and in the pen next to it stood Bastard, asleep on his feet. Efran smiled.

Sliding down the inside of the fence, he stepped back to study the house and ascertain the best means of entry. Picking a lock on the ground floor was easiest, but ascending stairs was risky unless you knew where all the occupants were. Far better to scale the outside and look in. . . .

Momentarily, he was climbing the ivy that grew thickly up the back of the house. Reaching a second-

floor window, he was able to look through the distorted green glass into the candlelit room. He saw Minka lying on a small bed, turning her head from side to side, evidently crying. Then Pindar entered the room to brusquely speak to her. She shook her head in refusal, and he leaned down to slap her. He stepped out again, slamming the door.

Efran coolly studied the window, which had been nailed shut on the outside. Withdrawing his knife, he used the blunt edge to pry up the nails and drop them below. Then he quietly raised the sash as far up as it would go, and resheathed the knife.

He feared at first that the window was too small for him to wriggle through, but he found that by getting one shoulder through at a time, he could just fit. Glancing at the bed as he worked his way inside, he saw that she had exhausted herself to the point of insensibility, and was now asleep. Efran shook his head: children wasted so much energy crying.

Once both shoulders were past the window frame, he was able to grasp it and pull himself the rest of the way in easily. From the floor, he looked her over in the candlelight. Other than the red handprint on her face, she appeared undamaged.

Withdrawing his knife, Efran quietly crossed the small room to listen at the door. He heard nothing, but it was locked from the outside. So he took a pin from his belt to kneel before the escutcheon. The pin was less effective than the scalpel, but he soon had the door unlocked so he could barely open it. He slipped out, closing it gently behind him, then paused on the landing to look down the stairs. There was only one figure pacing in the shop below.

Efran descended the stairs softly, placing his feet at the extreme edges of the treads, where they were less likely to squeak. He came down off the stairs approaching Pindar's back and waited for him to turn around. A moment later he did, startling upon seeing Efran in front of him. And Efran swiped the knife across his throat. Pindar dropped with a wretched gasp.

Efran bent to clean the blade on Pindar's blue sleeve, then resheathed it and stood to return upstairs. He lifted Minka, draping her partly over his shoulder, still asleep. He carried her like this downstairs, exiting the back door to the courtyard. The cool night air brought her around, and she gasped, pushing herself up from his back. Then, feeling his shoulders, she faintly cried, "Efran!"

"Hush," he admonished, setting her on her feet beside Bastard. Turning to feel the carriage tack in the dark, he separated out the bridle and cut the bearing reins. Then he draped the bridle over Bastard's head, waking him. "Carrots, Bastard," Efran reminded him. The horse shook his head, but accepted the bridle.

Efran lifted Minka to straddle Bastard's bare back. After opening the gate to lead him out, Efran closed it again after him. While she clutched Bastard's mane, Efran led him down city streets to the back of the palace complex, and his stall.

But Efran was here only to pick up the bag of carrots and Toby, who barely woke. Efran loaded both carrots and child on Bastard's back in front of Minka, then turned to walk the horse out of the palace complex toward the road leading south out of Westford.

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Chapter 20

While Toby drifted off again, Minka made herself stay awake by talking. “How did you know where to find me?”

“The little informant in front of you,” Efran replied over his shoulder. “Do you recognize him?”

“Is he the one who came to the kitchen this morning?”

“Yes. He found me in the stables and led me right to you,” Efran said.

“Oh!” she exhaled. “I can’t believe it. Oh, Efran, Captain Pindar is the one who took me!”

“Really? That’s unfortunate.” *He knew the duty of a guardian. He knew what to expect if I found him,* Efran thought.

“Yes,” she said, distressed. “He’s in love with Adele, but she’ll never marry him. She’s just using him to do the unpleasant things she wants done.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he replied. *That’s what women do,* he thought bitterly. “All of them but you,” he murmured, looking up at her shadowy form, and the glints of gold in her hair softly illumined by the rising moon. He took her closest hand to press his lips to her palm, and she brushed the hair out of his eyes.

“Where are we?” she asked uneasily. In this area, the smell of wolf blood was pungent. That may have been why Efran saw no wolves. He had been anxiously scanning for them ever since crossing the old stone bridge.

“South of Westford,” he said.

“How can you tell?” she asked, unable to discern the road beneath them.

“Did we come from Westford?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said doubtfully.

“Look up at the sky. Do you see the Big Dipper?” he asked.

She leaned way back to look up, and he had to stop Bastard to put one hand on Toby and another on her to keep either from slipping off. “Yes! There!” She pointed.

“Do you see the two stars that make the front edge of the pan?” he asked.

“Yes,” Minka said, head still far back.

“Take the distance between those two stars, and go up five times that. Do you see the star at the end of that?” he went on.

She had to turn clear around to Bastard’s tail to see it. “Yes!” she said.

Efran kept his hands on both of them. “That’s the North Star. If we walked directly toward it, where we came from, we would be going north. So going directly away from it means that we’re going. . . .”

“South,” she said, turning back around so that they could resume walking. “But *where* are we going?”

He looked up at her. “We are going to our safe place.”

She started to cry. “Efran, I won’t try to kiss you again. I promise!”

He doubted that, but said, “Thank you.”

By the time they made it up the switchback, Minka was asleep on Bastard’s back and Toby was asleep on Efran’s shoulder, who was holding the bag of carrots in the same hand because both had threatened to fall off the horse.

Efran opened the iron gates and led Bastard through, then closed them again. He sighed in exhaustion, not knowing what they’d have here. When he remembered the garden in back, he was encouraged, however.

He looked up at the silvery glow of the moon on the white stone of the fortress. First, he lay Toby and the carrots on the top step by the door, then made it back to Bastard in time to catch Minka slipping off him. He carried her to the great doors, slipping a hand underneath her to grasp the iron handle.

He almost couldn’t believe it when the door opened to him again, and he brought her in to lay her down on the foyer floor. Although it was dark, glimmers of moonlight shone through the transom windows. He brought in Toby to lie beside her, then took Bastard around to a shed in back that had a partial roof. Here, he took off the bridle and Bastard shook his head.

Efran reentered the fortress to go from room to room, some that had windows. He found several cubicles that had a pallet and a blanket, so he brought one out for Minka, one for Toby, and one for himself. Then he threw himself down and passed out.

In the morning, he was wakened by light streaming in through the transom windows. He shifted, finding himself very crowded on his pallet. He looked down at Toby asleep on his left shoulder and Minka curled up in his right side. Their pallets sat empty on either side of his. He sighed, “It’s not . . . unpleasant.” He lay there waiting for them to wake up, then fell back asleep himself.

He was awakened a second time by distant screaming. He shot straight up off the pallet, seeing that both children were gone. He followed the screams down a long corridor to the open back door of the fortress. Flinging himself out to leap over the steps, he stopped dead to see them doubled over . . . laughing. What he assumed to be screaming was laughter. His heart started beating again as he watched them.

They were cramming something into their mouths, and around their mouths, it looked like, because they

were pointing at each other and laughing. Minka finally saw him and came running over. “Blackberries, Efran! Acres and acres of blackberries! Look!” She held out her hands, dripping with the deep purple juice. She licked it off her fingers, smearing it around her mouth.

“I . . . see,” he said.

“Is it all over my face?” she cried.

“Mostly,” he said.

Hooting, she leapt on him and planted her mouth on his. His knees gave out and he staggered forward. “Now it’s all over you, too!” she cried. “Look at Toby! He’s covered in blackberry juice!” Efran nodded as best he could, dragging himself to a rough-hewn bench to sit down. Then Toby called her over to see something else.

She doesn’t mean anything by it, Efran thought, willing himself to stop trembling. She doesn’t understand what she does to me. Were his natural reactions her fault? Or wasn’t it up to him to control them?

He drew in a quick breath of illumination. That’s what Captain Reedry meant. I can control my natural reactions. I can learn to stop crying. He watched her and Toby move on to abuse other plants, and he thought, It’s her privilege as my charge to love on me all she wants, safely, because I control myself first, then whatever else is in her environment. A guardian without self-control is useless. Dangerous.

He stopped trembling. But he was still very hungry, so he went to the closest garden to start eating whatever was growing in front of him: broccoli, kale, and chard, to start with. He got down on his knees to pick and eat all three. A moment later, he got up to look around.

Bastard was kicking at the railing of the pen, so Efran went over to open the gate and let him out. Seeing an empty water trough, he went around the back grounds of the fortress to find a well hung with a wooden bucket. Glancing at the two children engrossed with something new, he went over to crank the bucket down by means of a wheel pulley. It unmistakably hit water, and Efran cranked it up full.

He made several trips to fill the trough. Pensively, he watched Bastard browse in the asparagus. Wiping blackberry juice from his face, he grimaced at Pindar’s blood splattered on his jacket and shirt, then he regarded Minka’s purple-speckled dress. He looked out to the unseen road descending from the fortress, plagued by wolves.

“We need so much,” he muttered. “I must have the bow and quiver.” His hunting knife was insufficient by itself against wolves. Thinking on this, he went over to the children. They looked up at him with purple-streaked faces and shining eyes.

“If you wanted,” he proposed, “you could pick some chard, here, or artichokes, here, and wash them in the well water. I . . . I have to go back to Westford for some things we need—”

“Oh, bring Minka! My kitty!” she pleaded.

“If I can find her,” he hedged. “You both—stay here; don’t go around front; don’t go out of the fence. I will return as soon as I can,” he stressed.

“We’ll be fine,” she said in unconcern. Toby was already wandering away to another part of the garden. Efran washed his hands and face in well water, then went through the garden to pause at trestles heavy with pea pods. He snapped them open and scarfed them down for quite a while, watching the children roam over to an orchard, still within the fence.

Retrieving the bridle and the rope he’d taken from the henhouse well, Efran snared Bastard before he was even aware of it. Then he led him out the front gates and threw a leg over his back. Bastard bucked half-heartedly, but with a bit in his teeth, did not fight as they headed down the switchback. Also, Efran had brought along the bag of carrots. “I would almost have loved to see you pull a carriage,” he snorted.

No wolves challenged them this morning, and before they reached the environs of Westford, Efran turned Bastard’s head toward the henhouse in the meadow. Here, he drew Bastard right up to the open henhouse door (so that he could not turn right or left) and pulled the handcart up to his flanks.

It took some time for Efran to devise tack out of mere rope for Bastard to reliably pull a two-wheeled cart, but he managed. It would help that Efran would be sitting on his back. Once set, he turned Bastard away from the henhouse and hopped up to ride him across the meadow, watching the cart roll behind. It was too low for Bastard to get a good kick in, and not heavy enough to bother him—yet—so Efran successfully brought him to the stables by a circuitous route.

Warily, Efran slid off his back, but all was eerily quiet and he saw no one. Still, he couldn’t afford to lose Bastard now. “God in heaven,” he breathed. “Cover us.” He emptied the bag of carrots in front of Bastard’s face, saving only a few for his pocket. Then he turned to the back walkway.

He trotted down the walkway the entire distance to the southernmost back stairway, noting only the blackened bonfire debris still in the yard. He ran up the back stairs, opening the door a crack to check the corridor before he emerged. Then he padded to Minka’s room and slipped inside.

The moment he turned, he was met by a distraught, mewling kitten, which he scooped up to put in his right-hand jacket pocket. The tarp with his weapons and kitchen equipment still lay on the floor, so to this he added his own clothes. Pacing back to the bedchamber, he rifled it for anything of Minka’s he could find without sorting through it all to determine what kind of clothing he was packing up.

He stood over the pile to breathe and think. While the kitten was quiet in his pocket, he bent to arrange his tarp into a conveyable bundle. With weapons and cookware, it was unwieldy, so he shifted it to carry along his left side.

He used his shoulder to open doors, then walked swiftly back down the rear walkway. Approaching the portico with the drooping corner, he heard oncoming voices which made him step quickly inside the back kitchen door. This was perhaps 30 feet from the dungeon entrance, separated by a row of cubicles and two walls.

Here, he looked down in astonishment at the inch of water in which he stood. Raising his eyes to the stone walls, he saw cracks running up the mortar between the stones.

The voices passed; Efran slipped out again to run his bundle back to the stables. There, he exhaled in relief at the sight of Bastard, unmoved. But as he came around to the cart, he almost jumped upon seeing

two scrawny children, a boy and a girl, standing beside it. He paused as they all eyed each other. The boy gulped and said in a shaky voice, “Toby said he was going with you.”

Efran’s face changed. He put the bundle into the cart and whispered, “Yes, he’s waiting for me at a safe place. Do you want to come?” The boy nodded, so Efran lifted him into the cart, tentatively pushing aside the bundle to make sure he wasn’t sitting on the hatchet. But when Efran turned to the little girl, she backed away in fear of the big Polonti man.

Efran knelt, crinkling his eyes at her, and reached into his right-hand pocket. “I need someone to help me with this.” He drew out the yawning kitten. “Will you hold it for me?” When she reached for it, he lifted her to the cart as well. Bastard looked back, swishing his tail in displeasure. The two children and the bundle filled up the small cart, so Efran had to do a considerable amount of arranging for them to ride safely.

But when Efran got them all settled, a sense of fullness expanded his chest. Then he led Bastard out of the stables toward the front of the palace. Here he paused: with the cart so fully laden, he could not take the inconspicuous roundabout way; he had to drive it right down the main road that ran in front of the palace.

Eyes narrowing, Efran accepted the challenge. He hopped up on the bare back, taking the carriage reins and leaning forward to utter, “Carrots, Bastard.”

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Chapter 21

Bastard started forward. Finding the weight he drew considerably heavier than before, he attempted to kick, which only served to accelerate him. The more he tried to kick, the faster they went, until they were streaking down the road in front of the palace.

Efran glanced back anxiously at the children. The girl had curled up almost invisibly against the front of the cart with the kitten, but the boy was leaning against the back, laughing. Neither they nor the cargo looked in danger of falling out. Fortunately, the road was smooth and dry.

Efran turned to face forward as they passed the palace, and he glimpsed unidentifiable faces in the windows. He exhaled in resignation. It was pointless to worry about meeting opposition on the road; he doubted whether he could stop Bastard even if he had to.

As they emerged from the environs of Westford, Bastard began to slow by his own choice. He had discovered that trying to kick only made him hit his fetlocks against the cart, which hurt. So he slowed to an ambling walk. Efran kept a wary eye behind them, but saw no sign of pursuit. Yet.

When they drew into wolf territory, Efran pulled out his knife. This was one aspect of carrying children that he hadn’t thought about: they were more vulnerable to wolf attack in the cart than he was on the horse. He began scanning the grassland for the telltale gray fur.

A flash of gray in the cart caught his eye as the little girl cried out. Knife raised, Efran turned full around

on Bastard, then almost collapsed. Cassius, tale wagging, was standing astride the tarp as if he were lord of the hill. “Cassius, down! Get out!” Efran ordered.

Agreeably, the dog jumped down to begin trotting alongside Bastard. The boy sat up on his knees to watch. The girl shifted with the kitten, turning to look at Efran.

When they approached the switchback, at which Bastard balked, Efran slid down to give him the last two carrots. Then he went back to the cart, holding his hands out to the little girl. “May I carry you? The horse has worked hard today.” She held up one arm to grant permission; the other held the kitten close to her chest.

“I can walk,” the boy said, scrambling out of the cart. He bent to pet Cassius, who thought that was only proper.

“Excellent. My name is Efran. Who are you?”

“I’m Noah. That’s my sister Ivy,” he replied, preoccupied with Cassius.

Nestling her, Efran watched her evaluate him, then lay her head on his shoulder with the kitten tucked under her chin. With a twinge of anxiety, he asked, “Won’t your parents be worried about you?”

“Uh uh. They died of the fever,” Noah said indifferently.

“Oh,” Efran said. “Well, we have to go up this switchback,” he said, turning. Noah and Cassius followed readily; Bastard snorted, bringing up the rear. Efran was ashamed for his lack of sympathy at their loss, but the truth was, he wanted these children, too. Both of them. Ivy snuggled up to his neck and he almost melted.

At the upper end of the switchback, Efran opened the gates for two gaping children. Cassius and Bastard following, he led them around the rocky east side of the fortress toward the back. Awed at the size of their new home, Noah whispered, “You must be a great lord!”

“No,” Efran said. “I serve a great Lord.” Upon their arrival at the garden, Toby and Minka saw them at once, and came running. Noah ran toward Toby with a shout.

Efran put Ivy on her feet. She pressed back against his legs as the bigger girl came running up, eyes on the kitten. “Oh, you found her! Thank you, Efran!” Minka reached out, but Ivy turned away with a cry, clutching the kitten.

Minka’s eyes shot up to his face. Seeing him anxiously focused on her, she hesitated. “Well. That’s— that’s fine for you to hold her. Her name is Minka, the same as mine!” Without replying, Ivy continued to press her face into Efran’s leg. He continued silent, watching his charge. Bastard, still harnessed to the cart, nudged him from behind.

Swallowing, Minka looked at him again. Then she lifted her chin to say, “I’m happy to share her with you. Only—won’t she need something to eat?” This she addressed to Ethan.

He smiled. “I saw some catnip at the back of the garden. Do you want to help me find it again?”

“Yes!” Minka clapped. Then she bent to the little girl. “It’s fine for you to have her.” Minka turned her blue eyes up to Efran, who looked as though she had just declared him Surchatain. Tossing her head, she added, “But you should know that your guardian is really just a big tabby himself.”

Ivy looked up at him to issue a chuckle. Efran threw back his head, smiling up at the sky, and whispered, “Females are cruel.” And they both laughed at him.

The five of them spent the next several hours ranging over the garden, eating. Efran would not allow Bastard to despoil it further, so he was confined to his pen with enormous amounts of grass. And when Cassius brought a rabbit to share, the girls screeched and shooed him away. So the kitten was free to stalk butterflies, caterpillars, and the occasional grasshopper.

Toby pulled on Efran’s hand to show him the peach trees sporting baby fruit and the apple trees in blossom. Efran nodded, looking over to the massive old black walnut tree growing alone, and he wondered how long this fortress had been standing.

Walking through the fruit trees brought him to the rear of the estate, and the iron fence. Here, his senses were on alert. There was something more. A large wooded area filled the hilltop outside the fence on the west, but there was something on the south that Efran wanted to see. However, there was no gate back here.

He gripped the fence and began to climb. It was very difficult: the balusters were slippery and the railheads, set on rails about seven feet high, were sharply pointed. After suffering another tear in his pants and scratch on his thigh, he finally got over. From here he set out to see what was south of the fortress grounds. Approximately ten yards past the fence, he found it.

He stopped on the abrupt edge of a 20-foot drop-off to a ledge of uneven, rocky ground. Past another 35 feet of descending land was the Sea. Even from here, the white cliffs of the coastline to his left, to the east, were visible. White-tailed eagles soared from their nests in the rocks between him and the water. It was a staggering sight.

And then he realized that, at one point in the not-too-distant past when the apple and peach trees were small, the Sea would have been visible from the garden. He turned back to the fortress grounds. Declining to climb the fence again, he went around to the front gate. From there, he went in the front doors to walk down the long corridor to the back grounds.

After looking to see that the children, eating and talking, were sitting in the shade of the fruit trees, Efran turned back to explore the fortress. He opened a door at the head of the main first-floor corridor to glimpse furniture under a high glass window. Colors from the inner room drew his eye, and he stepped to the door to see a large bed, stripped, and a stained-glass window high above. This room made his heart beat hard, so he backed out quickly to look elsewhere.

Efran found more rooms with beds, sporting mattresses and pillows, even. Lifting a mattress to sniff it, he found it only stale, needing nothing but a good airing. This discovery spurred him to locate bed clothes, so that he began to think this must have been the residence of a lord.

He rearranged the beds, putting two in one room and two in another, then stood the mattresses against the

iron fence in the breeze. Continuing his explorations, he opened dusty trunks to discover children's clothes in all sizes, for both sexes. The boys' clothes were such as had been worn for generations; the girls' dresses were so simple as to be timeless. But they were certainly not new. Finding trunk after trunk of such clothes, it finally dawned on him: this had been a place for children. He looked up as chills ran down his spine.

He went to other rooms: A laundry room that doubled as a bath house, a library that contained many instructional books, especially in the faith, with several versions of the Holy Canon, and—

Across the corridor, Efran opened a pair of double doors into a kitchen off a cavernous dining hall with rows of tables and benches. There was a large fireplace appointed with cooking tools, and even stacked with firewood! He threw open cabinets of pottery and utensils, pots and pans and kettles. Efran staggered back into a pantry with sacks of grain remaining on the shelves. Opening one, he discovered it unspoiled.

He turned around to shelves of confits, smoked meats and crocks of fish in brine. Almost everything he smelled or tasted was good; he had to throw out only a few crocks that had been cracked. On a high shelf were dried apple rings wrapped in cloth. Efran ate one, finding it crunchy and sweet.

He backed out of the room, disoriented. "I don't understand. Who would leave all this? When? Why?"

Returning to the foyer, he opened another door into a central room of the fortress, what should have been the keep. But it was filled with simple benches leading up to the front, where there was a lectern standing slightly to the side of a commanding crucifix.

Then he understood. "This is a holy place," he whispered. "This is a holy place for children that have been appointed to my charge."

He fell to his knees in awe, breathing, "Therese, you always prayed for me. I never believed there was anything to it until today."

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Chapter 22

There was one more discovery of import he made that day. Emerging from the keep into the foyer, he glanced into a small side room and paused. It was a room of authority, containing only a desk and a chair. Lying on the desk was a large iron key on a chain. Efran raised his eyes in comprehension.

Taking up the key, he turned to go out the front doors, and from there to the gates. He inserted the key in the lock, feeling the ancient tumblers click into place. He rattled the gates, seeing that they were secure, and studied the key. "Left for me," he whispered. He draped the chain around his neck as he returned to the fortress.

Shortly, he called the children in for baths. They came in wonder, for the most part; Minka's red face was lowered in embarrassment. Toby asked, "Are you really going to bathe us?"

“No, you’re going to do that yourselves,” Efran said, handing him and Noah a bucket each. “First, the men will draw the water for the ladies.” The boys took the buckets blankly. “From the well,” Efran prompted. “Now.”

They turned out, leaving Efran and the girls standing outside the laundry/bath room. “Minka,” Efran said, and she looked up in alarm. He pointed across the corridor. “In that room are trunks of clothes that should fit you and Ivy. Please go pick out something for you both. Ivy will probably want to go with you.”

“Oh. Yes,” Minka said, blinking. “Come, Ivy.” As they went, Efran opened cabinet doors, totally unsurprised to find towels and washcloths. He picked up a cake of soap to smell it. “Lavender,” he murmured. “Nice.”

Toby and Noah came in hauling buckets, which they set on the floor. Efran nodded at the tub. Groaning, they lifted their buckets to dump the water into the tub. And they all looked in to see the bottom of the tub barely covered. “Looks like you need more water,” Efran observed. They trudged back out.

They made two more trips to the well, which raised the water level to about one-quarter of the tub’s capacity. The boys looked at Efran in despair, and he walked out. In a little while, he returned carrying two huge buckets that had evidently been for garden use. When he dumped the water from those, it looked like a forest waterfall. He went back out, returning with a second infusion which raised the level to over half the tub, certainly sufficient for children.

As Minka and Ivy returned with their chosen clothes, Noah and Toby were staring at Efran. “Will I ever be that strong?” Noah blurted.

“Yes, if you carry water everyday,” Efran replied. Turning to the girls, he said, “Minka, you and Ivy get first use of the tub. Please help her; you know what to do. Oh—” he went to another closet to pull out a chamber pot. Use that; I’ll empty it.” As a side note to the boys, he said, “Men empty their own. Come out now.” The boys followed him out and the girls looked at each other.

Beyond the closed door, the men heard explosive, high-pitched laughter from within. The short men looked quickly at the big one, who murmured, “I must have said something funny.”

When all children were clean, Efran showed them their new rooms. First, the girls looked into their room with two matted beds, covered with blankets and pillows. Ivy ran forward to jump on one bed in delight. “We’ll move your clothes in here tomorrow,” Efran said.

Ivy looked up pleadingly. “Kitty Minka?”

“I’ll go look for her,” Efran nodded. “Men,” he said to Noah and Toby, “you’re across the hall here. You can move your beds however you like, but everyone sleeps in their own room. The guardian sleeps alone.” He was careful to keep his eyes off Minka when he said this. “Good night, all.” He turned down the corridor as four children looked after him.

A few minutes later, a mewling kitten ran into the girls’ room, and they shut the door after it.

Efran emptied the very dirty water from the tub, then refilled it. He stripped and sank into the cool water with a sigh, leaning against the padded rim. This he thought almost too luxurious for a religious house.

“You give them drink from the river of your delights,” came a whisper from the deep recesses of his mind.

With a cake of soap suddenly idle in his hands, Efran stared at the opposite wall (which was covered with a decorative plaster), searching his memory for the context of that whisper. It had to have been something that Therese taught him; she was relentless in making him memorize Scripture—

“How precious is your steadfast love, O God;
The children of men find shelter in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
And you give them drink from the river of your delights
For with you is the fountain of life;
In your light do we see light.” [Ps. 36:7-9]

Agape, he held his breath at the obvious application of those words to himself here. Then he blinked at the walls: why were so many interior rooms in this fortress plastered or paneled? With so many glass windows, some stained glass? Elegant, scrolled door handles. Marble flooring on the first floor and polished wood on the upper floors. Garderobes scattered about. These were all touches of luxury, incongruous in a fortress or religious house, especially one for children. He had also noticed the number of rooms with fireplaces, which he’d move the children to when the weather turned cold.

His hands began moving belatedly over the soap, and he leaned his head back in the water. “Urgh!” he groaned at the heaviness of his hair. He hated letting his hair grow because then it blew in his eyes when he needed to see, but he could never find anything to tie it back with. He shut his eyes tightly and began soaping up the black masses.

Once clean and dry, wearing clean breeches, he fell onto his pallet with a sigh. He was almost asleep when he heard the light footfalls and muffled whispers pass his open door. “Go back to bed, men,” he said. He heard the footfalls stop suddenly before running in the other direction.

He adjusted his shoulders on the pallet, then drifted off. But he was immediately reawakened by a small body crawling onto his stomach. Little arms reached around his neck, and Ivy nestled her face into his shoulder. Laying a light hand on her back, he waited until her regular breathing indicated that she was asleep. Then he raised up, holding her against his shoulder, and carried her back to her bed.

Laying her down and covering her with the blanket, he glanced over to Minka’s bed. Moonlight filtering through the closed shutters enabled him to see her still form. He tiptoed out and softly closed the door. Passing by the boys’ room, he glanced in to see them jerk to sudden stillness in a pretense of sleep. Their door he also closed; the creak of the hinges when it opened should wake him again, which they probably knew.

He dropped onto his pallet to fall instantly asleep. Unknown minutes later he was awake again, on high alert in the dense blackness. There were hands on his chest that he knew to be Minka’s. One hand brushed his hair; she leaned on him to kiss his cheek, then the corner of his mouth. Tense, he held himself still. She brought up both hands to hold his head and press her forehead to his. Then she got up and went out, leaving the door open, as it had been.

He sighed in relief. It was good to know that he could trust her.

In the morning, Efran's eyes cracked open at the music. Knowing what it was, he groaned and smiled at the same time. Hefting himself off the pallet, he felt around for his pants and shirt. After getting them on, he got sidetracked exploring corridors until he found a back-facing room with a window. From there, he looked out at four children laughing musically in the garden. They were destroying the blackberry canes again, but at least eating a great deal in the process as well. A pair of goldfinches were feasting on the leftovers.

Minka was the first to spot him hanging in the window, his forearms on the stool. As she came running toward him, he raised up to get his mouth out of range, just in case. But her face was relatively clean, and she was not looking at his lips. "Oh, Efran, we found the nicest little mushrooms in the grass by the fence."

He was not smiling as he drew back to grasp the head jamb, lift his feet, and vault out of the window. "Show me," he said tensely.

She skipped to the outer boundary of the fortress grounds. Following her, he looked back to see if any of the children seemed to be ill. But they had a basket and were arguing about how to tell whether blackberries were ripe.

"Here." Minka pointed.

Efran looked down at a patch of common white mushrooms. He nodded, "We should gather some for breakfast; they're good with chard." He thought, *There is nothing evil in this place*. And he turned to forage in the garden for his own breakfast. Glancing around, he noted that Cassius was outside the gates in the woods again, which is where he preferred to hunt, as he was denied a kitten dinner.

Toby came running up to him, then. "I forgot," he said earnestly.

"What?" Efran smiled down at him, picking out the tenderest chard leaves.

"There's a girl who looks like you, and, she's being kept in a box," Toby said.

Efran blinked, then knelt in front of him. "A little girl is being kept in a box?"

"Yes. She has dark skin like you, and a mean man keeps her in a box and brings her out to do tricks with animals or something," Toby said.

"Where is she being kept, Toby?" Efran asked levelly.

The boy screwed up his face thoughtfully. "You know the big building at the corner of the main road and the one that goes down to ratholes? I saw them there."

Efran patted his shoulder. "Thank you, Toby. I'll go see if I can find her."

Toby smiled. "And bring her here. With us."

“Yes,” Efran confirmed. Standing, he looked over at Bastard’s pen, where the horse was finishing off yesterday’s grass—a mighty feat. Then Efran returned to his room for his socks and boots, debating his choice of weapons. Again, he settled on the knife. And he picked up the chain with the gate key to drape it around his neck.

He went out to bridle Bastard. In the process, he stared at the grooming instruments—hoof pick, mane and tail combs, body brushes, curry comb—that he had not noticed in the stall earlier. Bringing Bastard out, he gestured to Minka when he finally caught her eye. She came to him warily. “What are you doing?”

“Come.” He walked Bastard around to the front gates, Minka at his side. “I need to go back to Westford today, so I need you to watch the young ones for me.”

“Of course, Efran,” she said.

He drew the chain off over his head to hand her the key. “Lock the gates after me. I will call for you when I get back.” Looking between him and the heavy key in her hands, she nodded.

He opened the gates to draw Bastard out; closing them, he said, “Lock it now.” It took her a few moments to get the bit settled correctly in the lock so that she could turn it, but she managed. He tested the latch, finding it secure. “All right, go back with them now. Don’t let yourself or them be seen in the front until I call for you.”

She leaned on the gate to whisper anxiously, “They will know you took me. They’ll be looking for you.”

“Probably,” he agreed. “Go on back.” He swung up on Bastard and she backed away from the gates, watching.

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Chapter 23

After seeing Minka go, Efran paused to regard the gates. This fortress was turning out to be rather a lifesaver for them. Who had it belonged to? Had they not left the gate unlocked, he never would have thought to try to get in—would not have found the herbs for Minka. But it was such an act of faith for someone to leave it unlocked with so much of value stored here. Thinking on this, Efran jumped up on Bastard’s back and turned his head.

Bastard did not buck descending the switchback, although he was clearly disgruntled about it. On the way down, Efran finally turned to consider Minka’s observation. She had reason for concern, but it was not “they” he had to worry about, it was Adele alone. She was the mind in control. Lightfoot was a fool. A figurehead.

Emerging from the switchback, Efran scanned for wolves. There were more, he knew; they’d regroup and reassert their control over this territory. But he did not see them now.

When he tapped Bastard's sides with his heels, the horse bucked joyfully—it was so much easier without the saddle. But he never seemed to be able to unseat his rider. They rode over the old stone bridge, then steadily through miles of meadowgrass with occasional stands of oak, hickory, beech and juniper along the way. Passing the meadow where the henhouse was located, Efran glanced aside toward the well. He was anxious to retrieve the books, but he could not afford to stop for them now.

Riding up the main thoroughfare into Westford, Efran scanned in all directions. There was a heavy air of desolation around the palace, which made it all the more dangerous. The only ones left would be the most desperate. Then he stopped to consider, why should Adele and Lightfoot stay when the palace was rapidly becoming uninhabitable? Wouldn't they go back to Eurus?

That's wishful thinking, Efran decided. They still had Westford to rule, and nice enough estates from which to do it, once they were confiscated from the nobles who owned them. He trotted Bastard on down the street, seeing no one, and no further indication of turmoil.

Toward the end of the street, he slowed, approaching the corner building that Toby had described. Efran knew it well for the criminals that had to be periodically dug from it. "Rathole" was an apt description.

Efran dismounted to lead Bastard around the corner to a narrow, stinking street with adjoining houses leaning so low as to make riding hazardous. Trusting him to kick at anyone approaching, Efran left him in the street as he eased open a side door to look in. It was too early in the morning for the usual crowd to gather; they'd still be sleeping in their private holes.

The large room he entered was cluttered but empty. After scanning it for a box that might hold a child and finding nothing, he went around quietly opening side doors.

It was past the third door that he saw a wooden box about three feet tall, two feet wide, and two feet deep. Its top was secured with a simple pin through a hasp. Efran walked over, took out the pin, and lifted the lid. He looked down on a small head of dirty black hair. The child shuddered, face down.

Efran reached in and lifted her out. She was a scrawny thing, dressed in a rough, dirty bag with a rope for a belt. She smelled very bad. And she was certainly Polonti. Despite the thinness of her limbs, her stocky frame was evident, as were her broad face and deep brown eyes.

Those eyes were fixed on him, and she reached up a hand to touch his face. He smiled at her. "Would you like to leave now?" he whispered, and she nodded. He turned to carry her out through the main room toward the side door.

"Hold up, friend," a voice rasped, and the child convulsively pressed her face into Efran's shoulder. "You gotta pay before you use her. Put 'er right down there and show me your silver."

Efran looked over his free shoulder to see her apparent owner at his back with a knife, its point piercing his skin just enough to hurt. Without turning, Efran slammed the back of his left fist into his face, and he landed with a reverberating thud on the floor.

After glancing at his bloody face and closed eyes, Efran carried his prize out to Bastard, still waiting where he'd been left. Efran sat her on his broad back, then took the reins to walk him back out of the

stinking alley. He barely noticed Bastard's high stepping.

He had walked the horse and its rider ten paces up the main road when he heard running steps behind him. He turned to see the owner, nose bleeding profusely, with two associates, one on each side.

They paused at his turning, but Efran had already drawn his knife, flipping it to grasp the blade. This he flung into the owner's gut. His accomplice to the left was in the process of drawing his own knife when Efran stepped forward to kick him solidly in the groin. The ground shuddered when he hit it.

Efran yanked his knife free of the owner and turned to see the second accomplice attempting to grab the little girl off Bastard's back. Bastard twisted, rearing mightily to bring both feet down on him, pawing in fury. By the time Bastard was done trampling him, the man was a puddle in the road.

Efran was aghast. He had seen Bastard display temper, but never like this. Absently wiping his knife to sheathe it, he looked anxiously at the child still on the horse's back, holding on to his mane. Hand outstretched, Efran advanced slowly, murmuring, "Easy. Easy, Bastard. Carrots at home. . . . Little girl, are you all right?"

"Uh huh," she said in the affirmative, unconcerned.

Efran edged gingerly to Bastard's side, who now stood still. Frowning, Efran pulled back to look at him. Bastard's neck was arched; his tail uplifted. His left rear hoof was cocked and his bloody right front foot raised high. Efran stared; he'd never seen such aggression in this animal.

Efran turned his attention to the child astride him. Her legs were splayed as though she were sitting on a tabletop. "You—you held on very well. Did my horse scare you?"

"Unh uh," she said in the negative.

No, she looked in perfect control. "Well—I am Efran. What is your name?"

"Pia," she said.

"Hello, Pia. Do you think you can stay on while I lead him?" Efran asked.

"Uh huh," she repeated, showing no fear at all.

Efran began leading Bastard down the street, walking backwards at first to watch him. Bastard allowed himself to be led—prancing. He was high-stepping as if he were leading a royal procession. Efran, who knew horses, had seldom seen any do this, and never Bastard.

Efran turned around to walk straight on as they passed the palace, but saw no one in the windows and no one else in the street. What he did see were mongrel dogs that came out from dark corners to stand or sit at attention as they passed. Efran felt for his knife, but didn't draw it again because the dogs did not attack—they just watched attentively. On either side of the road, they were standing as if showing respect.

Momentarily, he noticed that there were not just dogs, but cats with swaying tails sitting and watching Bastard as well. Efran glanced back at Pia, who was looking all around as if enjoying the ride. Disjointed

flashes streaked across his mind as he tried to make sense of this.

They walked on while dogs, cats—and a goat—lined up along the road as Bastard passed. Far behind, Efran could see the lines of animals dispersing again. Squinting at the lines that formed upon their approach, Efran saw a rat or two. And one was sitting next to a cat.

His eyes darted to the rooftops, where crows and swallows perched to attend their passing. He looked down at chickens flapping up onto railings and geese aligning on doorsteps. It was all over the same: as Bastard approached, the lines formed; as he passed on, the lines dissolved.

Long-dead Polonti legends began percolating up from the accumulated debris of once-learned knowledge, and Efran's head snapped back to Bastard again, still high-stepping. In a flash of intuition, he realized that Bastard, and all the animals, were acting in accordance with the same imperative. It had nothing to do with the horse except who was on his back. And Toby had said she did tricks with the animals.

Breathing deeply as he led Bastard with Pia out of Westford, Efran sorted through pieces of ancient legends handed down from the Old Tongue, and—

He paused in the road. The *aina* children. Efran stood there a moment, then he threw the reins back over Bastard's head and leapt up on his haunches behind Pia. She turned to climb up on his leg and grasp his neck. Taking up the reins, he deliberately kicked his heels into Bastard's sides. Not only did he not buck, he broke into a gentle, even lope.

“What was his name, Pia? The man who held you.”

“Dunnan,” she said hesitantly.

“Did he use the box to get you from place to place?” Efran asked.

“Uh huh,” she said.

He nodded. She was *aina*.

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Chapter 24

The *aina* were children who, from birth, had an unconscious connection to animals of all kinds. It was unconscious in that the *aina* were unable to command them, simply—draw their attention and respect. If the children nurtured this innate ability, they were then supposedly able to communicate with and command certain animals. Because it was a difficult skill to master, however, most *aina* grew out of the connection by the time they became adults.

The catch to the gift, however, was that the animals had to be able to see or smell the *aina*—preferably both—for the attraction to work. Once the attraction was established, the animals acted to protect the children, regardless of their ability to communicate.

So when Dunnan had discovered this feature of the child, he obviously exploited it. All he had to do was place her in the vicinity of a wild animal, who would then protect her and anyone close to her from harm. Such a bodyguard would command a high price.

But it was tricky: should someone around her be detected as a threat to her, the animal bodyguard would turn on him at once. For safety's sake—Dunnan's, that is—he had to lock her out of sight when they moved from place to place, because the most domesticated animals could become dangerous in the presence of the *aina*, as Bastard showed.

While Bastard was loping, it was hard for Efran to keep Pia secure on his leg without a saddle, so he had Bastard slow to a dignified walk. On the way, he saw field mice stand at the edge of the grass along the road, and red kites circle above.

Efran was troubled, though; there was more to the *aina*, and . . . it involved Therese. “Why couldn't I pay more attention to what she tried to teach me?” he grouched. He narrowed his eyes, wrenching his mind back twelve years ago, to a time he was uninterested in learning.

Though not Polonti herself, Therese was expert on all things having to do with his race. She considered them privileged because of the antiquity of their line. Second only to the Jews, they were a link, she said, to the earliest interactions of God with man, along the lines of Melchizedek. “How?” he sighed.

Dominion. The *aina* had dominion over the animals. Efran's eyes sprang open as he remembered: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing.’” [Gen.1:26] In the very beginning, God had given all people the gift of *aina*, but most of humankind forgot it. Therese had said that the Polonti were the only race to remember it.

Seeing a wolf appear at the edge of the road, Efran reined Bastard around, feeling for his knife. But as all the other worshipers had done, the wolf sat still and attentive, eyes locked on Pia in adoration. Efran hesitated with his hand gripping the knife. This wolf was an alpha who would rip Efran's throat out the moment he passed on this road without Pia. But to kill the wolf in the act of obeying his divinely ordained purpose was . . . obscene. Profane. Unholy and ungrateful.

Efran dropped his head, removed his hand from the knife handle, and gently kicked Bastard on. He did not balk carrying both Efran and Pia up the switchback. Coming to the gates, Efran pushed on them, then remembered that they were locked. “Minka!” he called.

An eagle swooped down to sit on the top of the gates and pay his respects to Pia. “Minka!” Efran called louder. But she probably couldn't hear him if she were still in the garden. He was inhaling to call again when Pia stood on his leg and leaned on one gate to pull on a chain which rang a large, loud bell. Efran slumped, muttering, “Who is the smart one here?”

When all the children came running around in response to the bell, he grew tense. The animals would read them aright in Pia's presence, wouldn't they? He glanced up in particular concern at the great eagle perched attentively on the gate.

The children clamored at the gates as Minka struggled with the key. Efran relaxed, seeing Bastard and the

eagle unruffled. Minka got them unlocked, and Bastard nudged his way in, careful of all the little feet around him.

Efran hopped down, then lifted Pia from Bastard's back. "I have brought another friend," he said. "This is Pia. She is going to stay with us, too." He set her on her feet in front of him.

The children surveyed her doubtfully—she was in much worse shape than any of them had been on arrival. But Toby nodded in recognition. Ivy, holding the kitten, edged up to have a closer look.

And then Kitty Minka leapt off Ivy, scratching her, to climb up Pia's sack dress and nestle on her shoulder. Ivy, still the youngest of the group, collapsed to sob on the ground. Efran exhaled, closing his eyes. He wished now he hadn't bothered to save the kitten.

Pia looked up at him, then took the kitten off her shoulder and told it, "You go to her," tossing it down in Ivy's direction. Kitty Minka obediently ran back to sit on Ivy's arm. The child stopped crying, looking up. All the children stared at Pia. Efran felt his hair stand on end: *She has the power to command.*

After a moment of profound silence, he cleared his throat and said, "Noah, Toby—take Bastard back to his pen. Take off his bridle and brush him down well. See that he has plenty of fresh water and grass. The rest of you—let's go in." He picked up Pia again, and they all did as he instructed.

Efran took her straight back to the laundry room. Turning, he said, "Minka, please—find a dress for Pia, and—bathe her. I will draw water straightway."

"Yes, Efran," she nodded, seeing that he was trembling (which she misunderstood). She offered a hand to the child. "Pia, would you like to come pick something?" With a glance at Efran, Pia indifferently took the proffered hand, and Efran lifted the large water buckets.

At that time in Westford, Adele and her father were sitting in the luxurious dining hall of a Westfordian nobleman, now deceased. They were eating roasted pheasant and vegetable stew with the lord's silverware, attended by servants from Eurus. And they were discussing Efran.

Lightfoot said indignantly, "I will have him hanged for the murder of Captain Pindar."

She glanced at him. "We have to get him out of that little hilltop fortress first, Father. He is so irritating," she muttered. "He's gathered street urchins to wait on him and his lady," she added sardonically.

"I will have him hanged for lying with her," he said. "Has he married her, do you think?"

"Perhaps," she shrugged. "But they haven't been to a town notary—if there are any left—and I doubt he has a priest in his little palace." She raised a goblet to her lips, thinking. "It would be highly inconvenient for her to turn up pregnant. That would enhance his claim to the throne."

"I don't want to hang Sybil," he said reluctantly.

"Not to worry, Father." She patted his hand. "We will take care of Efran, then our dearest little Sybil will be tractable. It is disappointing how the army here has proved so uncooperative. Our spies ferreted out a

few small groups in hiding, but then they simply disappeared again. So we're going to have to bring down troops from Eurus to pry him out."

On a brighter note, she said, "Surchatain Loizeaux is being wonderfully cooperative—he only wants half the Abbey Treasury in exchange for his troops. Messengers are on the way, so. . . Here, have some stew. It's really wonderful. The kitchen mistress created it using *cream*, of all things."

"Hmph," he grunted.

In the fortress, Minka emerged from the laundry/wash room. "Efran?"

He quickly came in. "Here she is!" Minka presented Pia, clean and dressed. "I had to cut her hair to get the tangles out," Minka explained, watching him. It disturbed her to see the . . . fondness and . . . even love in his eyes as he looked at the little Polonti girl.

When Pia put her arms up to Efran and he knelt to hold her, Minka's lips flushed red. Pia kissed his cheek, and tears came to Minka's eyes. *He won't let me kiss him.* Then he stood, patting the little girl on the back. "If you go out this door here, you'll run right into a wonderful garden with many good things to eat. Ivy, Noah and Toby are back there already; they will show you the best of it."

Pia ran to the door he opened for her. He stood there to watch her a moment, then turned back to Minka. "Thank you for—" He stopped upon seeing her angry, tearful face. "What . . . ?"

"How could you?" she whispered, tears filling her eyes. "Just because she looks like you—she is one of your own kind—you—you fall in love with her, and I mean nothing to you anymore!"

He stared at her in shock that devolved into anger. He lowered his head, fighting to contain the pent-up desires that were about to break him apart. Again misunderstanding, she drew back slightly in fear. He whispered, "You think so little of me, that I would forget everything that has happened? How you defied your father to save me from the gallows? How you trusted me to ward you and not—use you?"

He inhaled to control his trembling. "I find a desperately needy child who happens to have my skin, and you think I do it out of—pride? A—a need to rise above being a—dirty Polonti?"

"Oh, no, Efran," she whispered in distress.

"Of course I love her! She needs it so badly! But how could I love anyone more than I love you?" he cried.

"Efran, I'm so sorry!" she cried, running to him.

He gathered her up, kissing her hair. She pressed her lips to his ear; he turned his face toward hers, and for an agonizing moment their lips were barely touching. Then she ducked her head to bury her face in his shirt.

"Thank you," he breathed, closing his eyes in relief.

“I didn’t understand,” she said brokenly. “I don’t know anything about love.”

“You are quite wrong there,” he whispered. Then he grunted, “I will learn not to cry.”

She looked up to see the tear tracks on his face, and she laughed in remorse. “This time it’s not your fault. It was mine.”

He drew back a little to hold her hands between his, and she was momentarily piqued that he did not disagree. Then he said, “I have something to share with you about . . . old Polonti legends. It involves Pia.”

“I want to know everything,” she said.

He nodded. “Let’s go out to the garden.” Then he paused. “Can you cut my hair, too?”

She looked distressed. “Oh, no, Efran. Your hair is so beautiful.”

“I hate it. I want it out of my eyes so I can see what I’m doing,” he vented.

She sighed, “Let me get the shears.”

He took a chair out to the garden; Minka brought the shears, and she cut over six inches of glossy black hair. As she cut, he would put a hand up to feel and say, “More off here.” After the third demand of “more,” she stopped and said “no more.”

Toby and Noah, watching in fascination, decided they wanted their hair to look like his, so Minka had to cut theirs. Then Ivy decided she liked Pia’s short cut, and wanted the same. Minka accommodated her. By the time she was finished, there were piles of lovely hair blowing all over the grounds for the birds’ nests.

Toby, swaggering like a man with his newly shorn head, suddenly remembered: “Minka, did you see the coop we found?”

“A coop? For chickens?” she said.

“Yes! Right back here behind the pens. Come look!”

They all went to look. And there was a lovely, sturdy henhouse. It was not as large as the one in Westford, but it was clean and roomy. And empty, of course.

“Oh, I miss my chickens,” Minka mourned.

“I miss the eggs,” Efran admitted.

“Eggs would be wonderful,” Toby sighed. “Would you make them with potatoes and onions again?” he asked Efran wistfully, who smiled. There hadn’t been room in the cart to bring sacks of potatoes and onions with Noah, Ivy, and a load of weapons.

Pia began walking in circles, head down. They all watched as she made three or four circuits, then looked

up to the sky. She raised her hands, calling, “Minka’s chickens! Minka’s chickens!”

When Noah snorted, Efran’s head snapped toward him with a reproving look, and no one laughed. Pia closed her eyes, turning her face full up to the sky, arms extended. After a few moments, she put her hands down and headed for the blackberry canes. Ivy followed.

The others resumed their individual foraging, and Efran went back to the pea vines. He was snapping and eating when something in the grass beyond caught his eye. With a handful of pea pods, he wandered over to have a look.

There was a row of marble crosses, three of them, standing about four feet high. Since they looked to be grave markers, he glanced up in concern at the location of the well, but it was quite a safe distance away. He moved aside the grass to see what was inscribed on them.

The first read, “Nicklos, nephew of Lieterstad and beloved husband of Renée of Westford”; the second read, “Carmine, Counselor to Surchatain Ares and beloved husband of Renée of Westford”; the third read, “Hauffe, faithful servant of Carmine and Renée of Westford.”

He pondered the inscriptions a moment, then murmured, “I would like to have met you, Renée of Westford, but I think I would have been very wary of you.”

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Chapter 25

From the gravestones, Efran turned back toward the fortress and whistled the children to follow. He took them to the library, sat them on the floor, and pulled out a chair for Minka. Then he took a random book from the shelves to place in her hands. “I’m going to get you all something for dinner; please read to them while you wait.”

“Of course, Efran,” she said warmly, and he paused to crinkle his eyes at her. She sighed watching him go, but when she looked at the book he had pulled out—*The True and Certain Benefits of Demonstrating Courtly Manners in Difficulties, Whether by Accident of Nature or Fault of Misbehaviour*—her brows arched in derision. She replaced it on the shelves, scanning the titles to select a book of poetry instead.

Having decided to start using the stored stocks of food, Efran brought down a crock of dried venison to taste, and found it quite good. So he set several of those on one large table, with tinware. He got down a basket of apple rings and a pot of jam, then took a clean bucket out to the well for water to make barley porridge.

On the way back outside for more water, he paused, frowning. He was hearing something . . . not distant, but indistinct. He stood there a moment, then shook his head and refilled the bucket.

Having set out a remarkably easy dinner, he returned to the library to find all the children asleep in one position or another. All who had been sitting on the floor were now lying down except Pia, who was

sitting against one bookshelf. She had put up a mighty struggle against sleep, but her eyes were closed as well. Minka's head was bobbing over the book on her lap.

Efran said, "Can we all agree to sleep at night?" They looked up drowsily, and he added, "Come eat." This got them up.

They found it all wonderful (except Pia, who shuddered at the meat), and all of them except Minka were astonished at his suggestion to eat all they wanted. While they were doing this, several of them paused. Efran looked over his shoulder toward the back grounds. When Pia got up to trot to the back door of the kitchen, he went with her, and the rest came after them.

They followed the path to pass the southeastern corner of the fortress into the yard, looking around. "Is that . . . ?" Toby suddenly looked at Pia. Efran backed up to look high on the fortress walls, then he ran into the back door. The others were jumping up, trying to get high enough to see what he saw.

Shortly, he came out with a sack of grain. He opened it to bring up a handful which he let stream back into the sack. "Come down, ladies!" he called, scattering grain in the grass. Pia stood beside him to look up at the fluttering bodies that descended from a tower.

"My chickens!" Minka cried. The others watched in disbelief as five hens fluttered down to scratch in the grass where Efran tossed the grain.

"How did you do that?" Noah whispered to Pia. She looked at him complacently.

Efran replied. "It's a special skill that some Polonti children have. Pia seems to be very advanced in it."

"Is that how she was able to make the kitty go to Ivy?" Minka asked.

"Yes," Efran said to her.

Minka turned to Pia earnestly. "That was very kind of you."

Pia considered that, then motioned to one chicken, which flapped up to perch on Minka's shoulder.

After helping the children equip the coop for its new residents, Efran brought a third bed into the girls' room for Pia. The children were all exhausted, so had no objection to crawling into bed at sundown.

Efran, however, paced between their rooms, the kitchen, and the great hall, feeling the tension build in him. He went to his pallet to lie down, but found himself watching the door. Against his will, he wanted her to come back tonight. He wanted Minka's hands on his chest and her lips on his face.

"No." He turned onto his side—an uncomfortable position on a pallet—and closed his eyes firmly, but all he could think about was the feel of her hands on his skin.

"No!" He sat up. "That is not what I want." But deep inside, that is very much what he wanted. He badly wanted her to come to him tonight.

"No," he gasped. "God in heaven, I am not strong enough to fight this." He sprang up to leave the room.

The pull toward the girls' room was strong, but he made his feet walk the other way, into the foyer. Immediately he was standing at the open door of the keep. He entered, walking the length to stand before the large crucifix, illuminated by moonlight streaming from the window above it. Eyeing the One suffering on it, he sank to its foot, and lay down there.

The oppression was gone. He closed his eyes and went directly to sleep.

The following day, Efran started the children on a schedule of chores, reading, meals and playtime. As much as possible, he replicated his training under Therese, because that was all he knew. Somehow, he felt they weren't ready for army training.

The children's schooling was precipitated by Efran's discovery of another room that he had not seen before. Entering, he found small chairs pulled up to low tables. One wall in front was faced with smooth slate. There were windows, but they were high in the wall, for light and ventilation only.

He paced around the room with furrowed brow, trying to discern its purpose. He looked into a side niche, which contained a number of slate squares and . . . cylinders of chalk. Seeing these, Efran was instantly transported to lessons under Therese. She had been adamant about his learning letters and numbers—

He brought out the slate squares to put four on the table in front of four chairs, each with its piece of chalk. Then he went to call the children in from the garden. When they ran to him, he waved at them to follow. Directing them into the new room, he pointed to the places set with slates and chalk. "Sit."

Minka, recognizing the set-up, paused at the insufficient number of slates on the table. Efran turned to her, gesturing with a piece of chalk. "I am going to teach them what you already know, Minka. You may stay or go—do whatever you like for a while." She nodded, unsure how she should feel about this exclusion.

"What is this?" Noah asked, picking up the chalk. Toby was already doodling with it on his slate. Minka went to the niche to find erasing rags, and put one before each child.

"You are going to learn letters and numbers," Efran said, turning to write on the wall of slate at the front:
A B C D

"Why?" Noah scowled. "That's boring."

Efran paused, turning. "Do you want to be a slave?" The children looked in astonishment at him. Minka brought him extra chalk and an erasing rag.

"If you don't know how to read words and do numbers, you enslave yourself to anyone who does know. They will use your ignorance to keep you under their feet," Efran said.

"But you don't need all that to fight," Noah argued.

"No, you don't need it to die," Efran said. "But if you ever hope to command, you must read and write. I had to read my Commander's orders and write reports for him; I kept records and sent messages—not only written, but in code. This is basic knowledge you must have to live and be free."

He turned back to the board. “You will repeat the alphabet after me.” He read off the letters which all the children repeated, except Pia.

Then he said, “First, you will learn your own name. Noah.” And he wrote the letters on the slate wall. “N-O-A-H. Copy it.”

Intently holding his chalk, Noah did. “Toby,” Efran said, writing. “T-O-B-Y.” The boy quickly copied the letters.

“Ivy. I-V-Y,” Efran went on. Minka sat beside her to help her hold the thick bit of chalk. “Pia. P-I-A,” Efran said.

She did nothing at first, and the others turned around to look at her. Seeing that she balked, Efran added, “You must never let anyone lock you in a box again, of any kind.” Pia consented to pick up the chalk.

Then Efran’s eyes landed on the last child. “Minka,” he said, holding the chalk out to her. She rose from her seat beside Ivy and came to the front to take the chalk. While they all watched, she turned to write her name in pretty, scrolled letters, reading them off: “M-I-N-K-A.” Then she handed the chalk back to him.

They stood close, looking at each other, then Efran said, “Show-off,” and the children fell over themselves laughing. She smiled, looking at his lips, and his heart rate escalated.

“Do your name, Efran,” Noah demanded. Efran turned back to the slate wall. “E-F-R-A-N. Efran.” They all copied it.

During those days, Minka’s birthday came and went. She wasn’t sure which day it fell on, because they had no calendar here. And she didn’t mention it to Efran, as it was such a sensitive topic. She did not want to do anything more to upset the very delicate balance they had achieved in living together while staying strictly apart.

Mid-May, Efran was helping the children weed the garden when they heard the bell clanging at the gate. They looked at each other blankly, then Efran ordered, “Everyone stay back here. Do not show yourselves. I will see to it.” As he strode off, they stood in shock, then rushed to peek around the corner of the fortress.

Advancing to the gates, Efran peered at the figure on horseback, who stopped ringing when he saw him approach. “Estes!” Efran said in surprise. This was a fellow Polonti soldier, one of a handful in the Westfordian army.

“Captain Efran, I just came to warn you—”

“Wait, let me open the gates.” Efran was feeling in his clothes for the key.

“No, I can’t stay; I only came to warn you. Lightfoot and his daughter have brought thousands of soldiers down from Eurus. They know you are here with the Chataine Sybil, so they intend to get her back, and . . . bring you out to be hanged.”

Efran absorbed this. “I see. Do you know when they will march?”

“Within days,” Estes said. “This has been planned for some time. Some of us want to support you—”

Efran laughed dryly. “Against thousands of Eurussians? No, I’d rather you stay alive. I will handle it from here.”

Estes hesitated, unwilling to leave it at that. Finally, he uttered, “May you be covered from on high.” It was an ancient Polonti warrior’s blessing.

“Thank you, Estes. You as well.” He watched the messenger turn down the switchback.

After a moment of contemplation, he turned to see five faces peeking around the corner at him. He gestured to the front door: “Everyone to the kitchen.” They trooped in behind him and sat around the big table where they ate. He leaned back, thinking, and Ivy slipped off her chair to crawl up on his lap. This he permitted.

“The rider at the gate was a friend who told me that Surchatain Lightfoot and Adele are bringing an army here soon. They want me,” he said, looking around at them. “I am going out to meet them when they come. I do not know . . . how long it will take. But I want you to stay here. You are safe here. As long as you keep the gates shut, I know they will not be able to get to you. This is a holy place; this is a place for children. So stay here and don’t be afraid. All right?”

“W-when, Efran?” Noah asked. “When are they coming?”

“Any day now. We will do our work, and I will watch for them down the road. I don’t want you to be afraid,” he stressed. Ivy rolled over to hold his neck tightly and cry. “No,” he whispered. “It will be all right. I promise.”

Minka looked toward the front of the fortress, calculating. Efran looked at her. “No matter what, don’t open the gates.”

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Chapter 26

From there, Efran and the children settled into uneasy waiting. He insisted on continuing the routine of chores, reading, and meals, but no one much wanted to play.

Pia alone refused to be bound to this, or any, schedule. She had her own work to do. The others watched as she paced in large circles with her hands clasped behind her back. Sometimes she would pace around the entire fortress, though Efran did not permit her to go out of the gates.

She would sometimes stop and raise her hands, or spread them to her sides. Sometimes she made circles

or patterns in the air, as if she were drawing on a large canvas. She seldom spoke, but occasionally sang bits of song. Listening, Efran felt reverberations from long ago: they were Polonti songs, in the Old Tongue.

Remembering the chickens, the other children drew encouragement from this activity, but Efran put no stock in it. Flying chickens and prancing horses were one thing; answering an army of thousands was another. He went to his room to look through his poor stock of weaponry, shaking his head. Against three, or five, or even ten men, they would be effective. Against what was coming, they were laughable.

He went to the keep, where he usually slept now, to look at the depiction of the Crucified. Efran knew that it was simply painted wood, and not an embodiment of the Presence, but it still helped him focus his thoughts. "I am not afraid to die," he whispered. "I have always known that to be my lot. And I am not afraid for the children, because You are here with them. I am . . . unspeakably grateful for Your keeping me from—dishonoring myself, and You, with Minka."

He looked aside, commanding his eyes to stay dry. "I ask that You . . . give her a husband who will treasure her, and children of her own to love. I will die in gratitude for having received her—affection for these few weeks . . . and not having degraded it. I am most grateful." He turned out, settled and contemplative.

Three days after Estes' warning, Efran spotted a large mass on the far end of the road leading from Westford. He unlocked the gates to walk down the switchback a few steps to confirm the sighting, then went to bridle Bastard and bring him around to the front. There was no saddle for him, but he was already high-stepping.

Unarmed, Efran was met by all the children as he brought Bastard forward. Pia ran up to him. "When you go down, go on," she said earnestly. He drew his brows together, uncomprehending. She tried again: "When you go down, *move on*." He nodded in reassurance, still having no idea what she was trying to tell him.

He looked at Minka as he drew the key chain off over his head, handing it to her. "Don't open the gates. No matter what you see, no matter what you hear, don't—open—the gates," he whispered emphatically. She nodded. Her face was pale, but she did not look afraid.

He knelt to open his arms to the children, and they clustered around him, hugging whatever part of him they could grab (except for Pia, who was standing off).

"Stand your ground in the fortress," he reminded them. His voice was steady, and he smiled. "I know that you will make me proud." He got up to throw a leg over Bastard and turn his head.

Cassius ran up to accompany him, but Pia ordered, "No! You stay."

He whined, crouching. Efran looked down at him. "You must be guardian of the children in my absence." Cassius stood again.

Minka pushed the gates open; once Efran was out, he stopped to watch until she had locked them again. Then he turned Bastard down the switchback. Behind him, Pia threw up her arms in exultation. The signal was clear: *Now*.

He rode easily as Bastard high-stepped with authority from one bend of the switchback to the next. At each descending level, Efran appraised the oncoming army. Yes, there were thousands, and it was clearly Adele at their head. *She wants to see me die herself*, Efran smiled. That was rather flattering.

As he came off the switchback, they drew within hailing range. Adele held up a hand in a signal to stop, but Efran continued to ride forward. As he did, he became aware of a loud droning. He looked up, and Adele's army looked up, at a large mass far above their heads. What it was composed of was unclear; it sounded like a great many insects.

But when he stopped, they paused. He looked back to Adele, a mere six feet away. Bastard attempted to move on, but Efran held him back. She said, "However you trained him to prance, it's very impressive, Efran. It suits you, coming to die so courageously now that Sybil is not here to rescue you."

"I had hoped you would," he said. Bastard attempted to move again, but Efran again held him back. The mass above remained paused.

She laughed. "Oh, vain hope. I care nothing for a filthy Polonti," she said savagely.

At this point Bastard lunged forward. When he did, the mass descended in a cloud. As Bastard ran between Adele and the soldier at her right, the man drew his sword. But before he could use it, the vanguard of the mass reached him, and he dropped his sword, crying out. Other soldiers were flailing, batting the air, turning their horses in circles to escape.

Giant hornets, thousands of them, were landing in concert to sting exposed flesh. Horses reared in blind panic and riders fell off to roll in the dirt, seeking relief.

But when Bastard's way forward was blocked, the assault paused, and the men began to regroup, converging on Efran. He had to start ducking sword swipes, and Bastard got nicked. The only reason they did not skewer him was that there were so many, they got in each other's way. But since Bastard did not go forward, the hornets also hovered above without attacking.

Move on. Suddenly comprehending, Efran kicked Bastard hard, then merely held on for the subsequent bucking and biting that opened a hole for them. And the cloud surged again.

Efran risked glancing back to see that Adele had escaped the onslaught to lope toward the switchback, but even the small action of turning his attention away from the battle made the swarm pause again. Efran wheeled back around, guiding Bastard to weave through the panicked soldiers. In the dim recesses of his mind, Efran was processing this new knowledge: he was the pointer, the guide for the attack. His defenders must see where to strike, and he must remain focused for them to read him.

In minutes, however, the hornet assault was spent, and Efran had not penetrated one-tenth of the way into the oncoming army. Horses and riders formed a solid front ahead of him, swords drawn and extended. Wrapping the reins around his fist, Efran leaned into Bastard's neck to kick again for whatever it was worth, and he responded with a furious charge.

At first it seemed that Bastard would simply impale them both on the extended blades, but then the horses began leaping, twisting, bucking, and the ranks ahead of him dissolved. Efran could not see what was

causing it until one of the culprits was flung up into his shirt from a kicking hoof.

It was a field mouse, dead, with bits of horse hair in its mouth. So there were evidently hundreds of them biting the horses' bulbs and pasterns, being trampled in the subsequent panic. (Unknown to him, there were also shrews, voles, and red foxes in the mix.) Efran leaned down again, releasing the reins to let Bastard find his own way through the melee. Again, the assault played out; the riders he had left behind turned to pursue him while those ahead waited for him to be crushed between their ranks.

Above, Adele had exited the switchback to arrive at the gates. "Sybil! Darling Sybil!" she cried, looking through the balusters.

Hesitantly, Minka came out from the fortress to meet her. "Adele." Leery, the other children followed her out.

"Oh my darling, I'm so sorry. Efran is dead," Adele said, tears in her eyes. "I was too late to help him. So there is no reason for you to stay here."

Minka leaned her head against the rails as sorrow welled up from her core. Before she could speak, however, there was a loud raspberry at her side, and she looked down at Pia, armed crossed, eyes flashing. There was no grief in her defiant little face.

Minka looked back at Adele to see something—inconsistent, duplicitous. So Minka brought up the key and turned it in the lock. She opened the gates to step out and look down the switchback. The rest of the children hesitantly came out after her, except for Pia, who remained in the courtyard in accordance with Efran's instructions. Cassius, bound by her order, stayed as well, barking and whining at the children who left the gates.

Looking over the panorama below, Minka caught her breath. "There he is! He's not dead! He's—making chaos in your army!" Adele sidled up behind her.

"Minka!" Toby cried.

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Chapter 27

Down on the road, Efran was just holding on as Bastard took this new challenge in hand. Since this part of the road was becoming too crowded, Bastard darted into the field. Galloping in grassland was extremely hazardous because of the gopher holes that horses broke their legs in.

But Bastard wasn't galloping, he was—dancing. He was bobbing and weaving, turning in circles, even pawing the earth here and there. Efran had given up trying to interpret his new repertoire. But the next attack, when it came, was the worst yet.

Again the sky was darkened; riders warily looked up at an enormous murder of crows massing above

Bastard's antics. In the grassland, the pointer's horse was easily seen and distinguished from the those of the enemy. And Bastard's exuberant directions were clear. The crows began diving. Their targets were the eyes of the riders.

Adele had grabbed Minka's arm as she stood on the edge of the switchback. "Be careful, darling! I want to get you home safely," Adele breathed.

Minka jerked her arm free, tottering on the switchback. "I have no home with you!" she spat. The children inched forward to watch.

"But surely you want to see Auntie Marguerite," Adele wheedled.

Minka stilled. "Did she write back?"

"We got a letter from her, yes!" Adele said. "She says you must come to Eurus."

Minka demanded, "Show me the letter."

"I happen to have brought it!" Adele cried in delight. She withdrew a folded parchment from her belt, seal broken, to hand it over.

Minka grabbed it. "Yes, she says I must come," she breathed, looking up. "Yes, I will do that. I want to leave right away. Today." The children looked at her in mingled disappointment and horror.

Minka knelt before them, beaming. "I have to leave for a little while, but I'll be back. Oh, this is going to be so much fun!" She jumped up to begin running down the switchback. Adele grabbed for her own horse in order to remount. Breathlessly exiting the switchback, Minka encountered one of the soldiers' horses that had lost its rider, and scrambled up onto it.

Far down the road, Bastard was wheeling and dancing among screaming men who fell from their horses, covering their eyes. The great crows, whose wingspans exceeded the width of two men's shoulders, dove into their faces with deep, guttural calls. The mobbing would have been effective enough had the crows exhibited their normal behavior of massing upon one predator. But they extended their range far down the mounted ranks, so that soldiers who watched the diving attacks from a presumably safe distance looked up to see the black bodies bearing down on themselves.

And then the wolves came. Hidden in the grass, they stalked the unseated riders, the blinded and the wounded. Under the confusion of the panicked horses and the floundering men, there was no way to tell how many wolves there were, nor where they were. They were invisible and inexorable.

Riders began peeling away from the carnage, fleeing north in panic. But there was a further surprise: Westfordian soldiers under Estes, about forty of them, appeared from nowhere to cut short their escape via the road. After fleeing bloodthirsty crows, meeting an armed man on horseback might seem a trivial matter, except that any delay in escaping left them vulnerable to attack from behind. A stabbing beak in the back brought a man down as well as anything.

Whether because of the Polonti among the Westfordians, or simple intuition on the part of the animals,

none of them went after any of Estes' men—not even the hornets that had regrouped to resume their attack.

Other, even smaller, aggressors were also effective. Biting flies lit on the horses in swarms, causing them to buck or bolt wildly. The sheer number of the flies, in the tens of thousands, meant that the only horses that were not bitten were those that managed to escape the meadows. So regardless of their riders' wishes, horses began running north, east and west to get away. To the west lay the Passage, the fast-moving river where many were swept to the Sea; to the east lay more meadows riddled with holes and hidden obstructions.

Adele's army splintered in blind retreat, galloping pell-mell in every direction, but especially north. Then another force emerged: high over the diving crows, white-tailed eagles rose from the cliffs bounding the Sea to monitor the chaos below—and to plunge into it where they chose.

Men covered their heads with their shields or ran far off the road, but those who evaded the crows were set upon by the eagles. Horses dropped heavily upon landing a foot in a hole, and random mice quietly brought down others who were trapped on the crowded road. And the wolves were upon them all.

None of the invading Eurussians were after Efran any longer, much less a supposed treasury—they were all trying to get away, as it had become apparent that those closest to him were being targeted by bloodthirsty animals. There was an ever-widening space around him because of those fallen and those fleeing.

Surveying the tail end of a frantic, fractured retreat, the horses screaming and crows thrashing and the snarling of the wolves, Efran held up his hands and said, "Enough."

The crows, the hornets, and the flies lifted and dispersed; the wolves slipped away; the eagles circled back to the cliffs, and Bastard relaxed his posture. In the comparative quiet, Efran looked around, heart hammering, as the fragmented attack force disappeared to the north.

His men rode up to surround him joyfully, beating on his back and shaking his arms. The only remaining Eurussians lay moaning or dead all around them.

Then Efran looked over as Minka paused on a horse beyond them. "I'm going to Eurus for a little while. I'll be back," she said, and spurred off at a fast lope. Adele followed her, pressed to keep up. Farther up the road, the retreating army surrounded them as escort. Efran gaped after them: *They got her anyway. She's going with them to be married.*

Guided by Adele, Minka barely managed to stay on the horse until their arrival at the nobleman's house in Westford where Adele and Lightfoot had been staying. Falling from the horse in the stableyard, Minka grabbed a soldier to demand, "Outfit a carriage to take me to Eurus immediately."

"Yes, Lady," he said, running off for the hostler.

Dismounting, Adele staggered over. "Father wants to see you, then we'll ride up to Surchatain Loizeaux. He'll be glad to see you, at least, before you marry Graduliere's son." Badly shaken, she was determined to wrest one little victory from the incomprehensible debacle.

Minka eyed her in iron-willed defiance. “I’m going to Marguerite’s. No one will stop me.”

“Oh, well, of course; we’ll stop there first. I’ll be happy to ride with you. We can see Father when he comes up,” Adele blathered.

Minka turned to wait, and did not move from the place she stood until a driver arrived with the one-horse carriage. Climbing in, she firmly instructed, “Go directly to Lady Marguerite’s Featherstone in Eurús.”

“Yes, Lady,” he said, waiting only long enough for Adele to jump into the carriage with Minka. When they set out, Eurúsian soldiers surrounded them as bodyguard. And as Minka demanded, they rode almost nonstop until reaching Featherstone late that night.

After watching Minka ride off with Adele, Efran continued to sit on Bastard, insensible to the jubilant men around him. “She left,” he whispered. “It was all for nothing.”

He heard children calling, and turned back to see them coming off the switchback in the distance. “They must not see this,” he gasped. The gore was as bad, or worse, as any battle he had ever fought in.

His men rode with him to meet the children at the lower end of the switchback. One by one, he put a child on a horse with a soldier—Toby, Noah, and little Ivy bringing up the rear. Efran stepped back to look at Pia high above, who had disdained to come down when they were all coming back up anyway.

Noah leaned forward to tell him, “Minka left, Efran! She said she’s coming back. The other lady showed her a letter.” Efran nodded, tentatively feeling in the emptiness inside him for any sign of his vital organs. But they appeared to be gone.

For the next several hours, Estes’ men carried the wounded Eurúsians to the overwhelmed physicians in Westford, collected the horses to take them up to the fortress, and scavenged the gear scattered across the meadows. They left the rest to the wolves and the carrion birds.

When all that was done, and they were tired and hungry, Efran pointed Estes to the kitchen storage cabinets groaning with supplies. Following, Efran told all of the forty to find a place to bed down in the fortress, as there was plenty of room. Then he himself went to the keep where he had been sleeping and laid himself at the foot of the Crucified.

Over the days following the battle, during the third week of May, the men got to work constructing a corral and stables for the new horses, besides harvesting in the garden, hunting in the surrounding woods, tending the chickens, cooking and cleaning and watching over the children. Having found the library, Estes got Connor, Detler and Stephanos to help him bring all the books that Efran had saved from the bonfire. Shelving these in the dim, dusty library, Estes admired what was there, but grieved that, of all the books they could use, Efran hadn’t been able to save a copy of the Law.

Meanwhile, Noah and Toby were in heaven with all this manly company, while Pia and Ivy found themselves the center of attention from fawning men. Cassius made himself useful guarding the open gates against wolves coming in or children going out.

Efran hung back in unrelieved shock. He could process neither the events of the battle nor Minka's leaving. Frequently, Pia came to sit beside him, and Ivy to climb upon his lap, but they did not speak. He was glad that the boys were busy, because he could not have answered any of their questions. He had trouble hearing what anyone said to him; he looked at food blankly and shivered when he wasn't cold. Fortunately, no one demanded anything of him.

Auntie Marguerite sat beside Minka to hand her a document. "I'm sorry it took so long to find, but here it is."

Minka took the paper to study it intently. "Yes! This is it!" She began rolling it up carefully to tie it with a ribbon.

"Here is its carrying pouch." Marguerite handed her a custom leather pouch with strap.

Minka hugged her tightly. "You wonderful, dearest thing. I can't tell you how happy you've made me. And the historical information will be so helpful! I know just where to go to find out more."

The old woman patted her arm. "I'm so glad, darling. Will you write and tell me everything?"

"Of course! Do you mind if I take this beautiful dress you lent me? I've got to be off, now; there's still so much to do," Minka exhaled.

"I'd love for you to have the dress; it looks adorable on you. But—you're leaving now? Oh, you can't, darling; it's so late in the day, and Adele took my carriage to go see Surchatain Loizeaux," Marguerite said. "Besides, he wanted to see you. He'll be coming tomorrow."

Minka stilled. "Oh, Auntie, I must go now. I can ride a horse. Can you send an escort with me?"

"Yes, if you insist. Shall I alert Adele that you're leaving?" Marguerite asked.

Minka pretended to think it over. "Oh, no, Auntie. She'd feel obligated to come with me, then, and that's so unfair to her when she can hardly ever get up here to see you. Please just let her stay as long as she wants."

"All right, darling. Let me summon your bodyguard." Marguerite reached for a bell.

Minka smiled hazily. "Bodyguard. Yes." She was definitely thinking of someone special. "That will give me time to get into travel clothes and pack." She jumped up to kiss her auntie and run off.

Unknown to her, lookouts for a group of EurAsian survivors were keeping watch at Featherstone, and alerted their fellows of Minka's departure with a pair of bodyguards that afternoon. So all of them, about fifty, saddled up quickly to follow, dressed in plain work clothes.

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Chapter 28

At that time, Efran's soldiers were constructing another outbuilding to store hay for the horses. Unknown to him, they had found seasoned lumber stacked behind the broken-down pen, which they tore down to build sturdier stalls. In the midst of this work, they paused at a distant, mighty rumbling which produced tremors at their feet. They looked at each other in astonishment, then dropped their tools to run to the front of the fortress.

They found the gates open and Efran at the head of the switchback, staring hard down the northern road. Estes came to his side. "Captain, what the hell was that?"

"We're going to find out," Efran said. "Have Bastard saddled; bring yourself and four volunteers to go down with me." Suddenly remembering something, he added, "And—bring rope."

"Yes, Captain." Estes ran to the rear of the fortress. Soon, he reappeared with Bastard and the volunteers.

Efran swung up in the saddle and nodded to the switchback. This they descended, then broke into a lope up the northbound road. In the three days since the battle, it had been mostly cleared of obstructions, though fragments of Eurasian uniforms and armor dotted the meadows on either side. Scanning the grassland, Efran was glad that the wolves were sated for now. It would not last.

A half-hour later, the riders approached the outskirts of Westford and stopped as a group. "What—is it a mirage?" Estes muttered.

"It's water," Efran breathed. The men were looking at a vast, glittering pond that filled the horizon ahead. Kicking Bastard lightly, who bucked in response, Efran said, "Forward. Be careful to stay to the road." For at points here and there, streams crossed the road to begin filling depressions on the other side. But since the road was passable, the riders went on.

One man behind Estes said, "Something's . . . missing."

They all looked to the right. The houses along the road came to an abrupt halt at the pond's edge, and then the water stretched for hundreds of feet.

"The palace," Efran said. They all looked again. In the spot where the palace of Westford had stood for hundreds of years, there was now a small lake.

"The flooding from underground," Estes whispered.

"Yes," Efran said, thinking hard. Once the palace had crumbled upon its collapsed foundations into the limestone caverns below, everything had been swallowed up by a tranquil body of water—the grounds, the practice fields, the stables and pens and barracks. "Let's ride up and see if the city has flooded." Efran kicked gently, and Bastard kicked up a gentle spray of water along his back.

The ground rose slightly here, so when they came to the parts of the city closest to the palace, they found the roads clear. Efran trotted up one street just to make sure that the flooding had not spread this way. The

Porterhouse Inn on his right, fortunately open and operating, was completely unobstructed.

Efran looked across the street at the notary's shop, likewise unimpaired. As he looked, the old notary himself came out to stand on the upper step. Drawing his hands behind his back in an attitude of satisfaction, the old man nodded at Efran. Out of courtesy, Efran saluted him in response. Then he turned Bastard back to the partly submerged main road.

He looked over his shoulder at the road extending north, to Eurus, and knew that he would not see her again. It never crossed his mind to go hunt for her, not when she had left so quickly and willingly . . . with Adele. *I am still and forever a filthy Polonti.* Then he turned Bastard's head.

As their horses splashed southbound on the main road, Efran paused to look one last time over the rippled covering, now colored red-gold in the late sun. Nothing of the palace remained to be seen. Nothing. "Blake, you are avenged," he whispered.

Then he inhaled, looking over the meadow toward an unseen henhouse and well. "We have one more task, and I pray I'm not too late."

There was about a foot of water coursing over the meadow as they started out from the palace road, but it lessened the farther they went until the grass was dry. Arriving at the well, Efran promptly sat on the ground to strip off his boots and socks. "I stored something very valuable here. Bring the rope."

Standing at the wellside, Efran tied one end of the rope loosely around his wrist as he explained, "There is a bundle of heavy old books down there. I will fasten this end; you tie that end to the saddle. When I whip the rope, have him draw out the books. Carefully."

"Yes, Captain," Estes nodded. They watched as he began scaling down the inside of the well while Connor tied off his end of the rope to his saddle. In a few minutes, the rope was shaken, and Connor began walking the horse away.

Guided by Efran, a black bundle appeared, which Fiacco and Shane lifted off the edge of the well while Efran climbed up beside it. "Open it," he nodded, reaching for his socks.

Setting the bundle on the ground, they removed the rope to get it open quickly, and spread the books apart. "They are dry and clean, Captain," Estes said, glancing up at Efran watching. "They are—the Book of the Law! You salvaged the book of Roman's Law! And the Holy Canon!"

Efran exhaled. "Let's get them all home."

That evening, when he had said goodnight to Ivy and Pia in their room, and Noah and Toby in theirs, Efran retreated to the keep as always. Tonight, it was illumined by the rising moon which shone through a high window. He lay down to await the inevitable piercing sorrow that stalked him in his unguarded moments.

Looking up at the shadowy crucifix, he silently pleaded for it to fall on him and crush his empty chest. "I cannot bear it," he said. "I cannot bear . . . that she left."

Lying where he was, he saw a carved panel in the wall that he had not noticed before. There were lines of

text uniformly indented from left to right—that is, each succeeding line was a few spaces to the right of the one above it. The first line read, *For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him*. It was Scripture—a Psalm, he thought, but he didn't know which one.

He lunged up, a splinter on the lower beam scraping his neck. “*Hope?* What hope is there? Why didn't You let me die in battle?”

He hoisted himself up and went to his room to look for his hunting knife. As it was lying in plain sight, he couldn't find it, so he threw himself down to his pallet.

But it was uncomfortable, so he got up to return to the keep and lie down in the more uncomfortable place under the crucifix. He carefully kept his eyes off the carved panel until he looked at it again. The next line said, *He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall not be shaken*.

“But I am shaken, and broken, and drowned,” he breathed. He sat up to see more of the panel to argue with. It insisted, *On God rests my deliverance and credibility, my mighty rock, my refuge is God*. “What refuge? What rock? There is nothing but emptiness under my feet.”

Trust in him at all times, O people. Pour out your heart before him. Efran fell forward on his knees and poured out, “The only women who will have a filthy Polonti are the whores and the bored matrons who turn away when they see me on the street. I have no standing, no worth to keep anyone I love by my side.”

Men of low estate are but a breath; men of high estate are a delusion. In the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath. “Then what am I?” he asked, laughing in anguish.

Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this: That power belongs to God, and that to You, O Lord, belongs steadfast love, for you requite a man according to his work. “My work. The children,” Efran whispered. “She is gone, but they are still here. They are my charges now.” In exhausted grief, he lay back and closed his eyes.

On fast horses, Minka and her two attendants made Westford a few hours after moonrise. “There must have been days of heavy rain, Lady,” one said as their horses splashed through shallow water.

Focused on finding shelter after a long, exhausting ride, she gasped, “There should be an inn down this street.” Minka peered at the shops on either hand. She looked back a little anxiously for the Eurasian soldiers that had followed her and her escorts, but saw nothing of them.

The other escort pointed. “There is the inn. The windows are lit yet.”

“Oh, thank God,” she breathed. For the hundredth time, she patted the pouch on her hip. Momentarily distracted by the lights in a shop across the street, she said, “Oh, look! The notary's shop is right there! How strange that it's lit up so late.” One escort offered a hand to help her dismount at the steps of the inn, so she did not see the old notary looking out the window.

Early the following morning, May 22nd, Minka's escorts accompanied her across the street to the notary's

shop. “He can’t possibly be open this early when he was working so late last night,” she fretted. Nonetheless, the door was unlocked, and she entered to the tinkle of a bell. A stooped old man in spectacles came out of the back room. “What may I help you with, Lady?” He had a kind, knowing face.

She gazed over the rows of old ledgers behind him. “I want to learn all about that old fortress on the road south of Westford. My Auntie Marguerite said it has a very interesting history. Can you tell me about it?”

“Certainly, Lady. Let me find the right volume here.” And he turned to put his hand directly on a large old book which he withdrew from the shelves while she bounced in anticipation.

That visit took less than an hour, then her bodyguard accompanied her down the road south of Westford. And a group of wary Eurusians followed on horseback at a distance.

“Captain. Captain?” One of the soldiers, Doudney, leaned over him as he lay under the crucifix. Blinking awake, Efran turned bleary eyes up at him. “Captain, there’s a lady coming up the road with a pair of bodyguards in livery. I—I’m not sure, but I think it’s Chataine Sybil.”

Efran struggled up to a sit, then muttered, “Open the gates. I will . . . wash my face and come see if it is,” he said with absolutely no hope it was.

“Yes, sir,” Doudney said, turning out.

Efran staggered to the laundry room to bathe his face in cold water. As he was wiping himself dry, Toby ran in. “Efran, Minka’s coming up the switchback!”

“Of course.” Efran nodded as if it were just a sorry practical joke. Most likely, he thought, it was Adele, with another surprise attack. And Minka wasn’t with her because she was not coming back.

He went out to sit on the top fortress step to await their guests. All the children came running, and soon all the soldiers were in the courtyard, too.

They listened to the *clop-clop* of hoofbeats ascending the switchback, then the lady and her guardians came into view. Two of Efran’s soldiers opened the gates wide.

As Efran stood to greet his guests, his eyes took on an awareness that had been missing over the last few days. He saw that it was not Minka, but Sybil. He regarded her luxurious dress and the outfitting and weaponry of the men attending her.

When they trotted into the courtyard, Estes stepped forward to bow to her and offer assistance to dismount. She accepted. Her bodyguard dismounted as well, but stayed by their horses. Efran came down off the steps to stand in the courtyard, hands clasped lightly before him.

With glowing, mischievous eyes, Minka approached him to curtsy. He barely inclined his head. “Hello, Efran,” she said. “Would you like to know what I’ve been up to?”

Her bantering tone was almost brutal, considering his present state. He moistened his lips to say, “If you care to tell me.”

“Oh, I do,” she said, with something of Adele’s sardonic tone. Perspiration appeared on Efran’s upper lip, which she did not see. “First, let’s talk about the fortress behind you. Would you like to know who owns it?”

The question set off a chain reaction among the Westfordians: they looked at each other in dismay, given all the improvements they had recently built. Efran’s jaw dropped slightly and he closed his eyes. “I had not considered the owner. I assumed it had been abandoned.”

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Chapter 29

“No, actually,” Minka said crisply. “It belongs to an abbey associated with the Order of St. Benedict, and was used as an orphanage. When the order in the area declined and the orphanage was closed, it was placed in trust as a bequest. Would you like to know to whom it was bequeathed?”

He studied her. “You are smiling. But you are not cruel, so the answer is good, somehow.” His mind was racing—*Could it be someone I know? Someone I once helped?* For some reason, he thought of the old notary.

Her face was radiant. “The bequest was very specific, though without a name. It must go to a worthy person for the care of homeless children.”

There was a moment of stricken silence. “That’s us!” Noah cried.

“Of course it is!” she exclaimed. She turned back to Efran to say softly, “And I know no worthier man.”

As they took this in, one of the men said bitterly, “Then we don’t belong here. We’re soldiers, not children.”

Minka looked at him sharply. “What use is an orphanage that cannot defend itself or provide for itself? You are essential.”

As she looked back at him, Efran seemed to come partway out of his trance. He exhaled, “How do we—claim the bequest?”

“Finally, an intelligent question,” she said. “You have to take the children to the notary in town. Let him question them, then record your name in his book as owner of the fortress. That’s it.”

Efran came alive. “Connor, saddle us horses and—”

“Not yet, sir,” Minka interrupted him. “I have other news to share.”

They all lapsed back into silence as Minka, relishing the moment, paced before Efran, eyeing him. “Do you remember the day I found you in the henhouse and told you I was older than you thought?”

He uttered a dry laugh. “You said you were twenty.”

She frowned. “I forgot that. True, that was a silly lie. But then I corrected myself.”

He shook his head impatiently. “Adele said you were thirteen. You will have had a birthday since then, which makes you fourteen.”

“So the question becomes: Would Adele lie?” she asked bitterly. He squinted slightly, shaking his head. “What if,” she continued with clenched teeth, “what if Adele wanted to hold me back for a marriage suitable to her designs, and lied about my age to prevent my accepting someone contrary to her purpose?”

“Unless you can prove this, it means nothing,” he countered.

“True,” she said. Reaching into the pouch on her hip, she withdrew a rolled scroll tied with a ribbon. She toyed with this a moment, tapping her chin with it, then said, “My great-aunt Marguerite is the most wonderful woman you can imagine. I’ve just been up to Eurus to see her. She lent me the dress. And the bodyguard.” She pointed with the scroll to the escorts, who bowed.

Playing with the scroll while she swished in front of Efran, she said, “Auntie Marguerite has known me my whole life. In fact, she attended my birth. And being the conscientious woman that she is, she recorded the date—”

Efran grabbed the scroll from her hand and stripped off the ribbon. Jaw tight, he unrolled it and concentrated on the ornate lettering. He drew a sudden breath, looking up to the sky to whisper, “You are sixteen.”

“Yes,” she said almost viciously. “I am of legal age. I can handle my own money, buy my own property, and . . . marry whomever I wish.” Lowering her voice, she came up to him to utter, “And because of the integrity of my guardian, I can offer myself in my virginity to the man I desire.”

He stood dumb, stricken. The only thing he could think was, *You understand that I’m Polonti, don’t you?* She waited a few heartbeats while a man behind him hissed, “Kiss her, Captain!”

Taking matters into her own hands, she flung her arms around his neck to press her mouth to his. That woke him, and he lifted her off the ground with one arm, clutching her head. The children jumped up laughing and clapping, and some of the soldiers were wiping their eyes (while others shook their heads at the Captain’s denseness). One man thought to pick up the birth scroll Efran had dropped. Pia flung up her arms, and a flock of white and gray doves descended from the crenelation above them.

Releasing her, Efran gasped, “I will learn not to cry” as he wiped his face.

“We can go to the notary now,” Minka breathed, “because he has a book for recording marriages, too.” The man who had picked up the scroll returned it to her, and she glowed at him.

Helplessly, Efran looked to the side to utter, “Horses.” After some discussion, they harnessed a four-wheeled cart to carry the children, then Estes selected ten men to ride along with Efran, Minka, and her bodyguard.

About a half hour after they had passed over the old stone bridge en route to Westford, the men looked aside at the henhouse and the well. Both were flooded—the henhouse halfway to the roof, and the well within inches of its edge—partly because the Passage had risen, as well. It was overdue to flood.

Estes said, “You got the books out just in time, Captain!”

Efran nodded. “Just a coincidence, I’m sure,” he muttered.

Arriving at the notary’s shop, everyone crowded in as though they had come for a fest. The old man emerged from the back room, and Efran said, “I want to claim the bequest—”

“In a moment!” Minka interrupted. “First, I want to marry this man,” she said firmly.

Efran stared at her as if she spoke gibberish; the old man twinkled, “Let me get my book of marriages.” He brought out a large ledger, noted the date—May 22nd—then said, “And the lady is . . . ?”

“I am Chataine Sybil, though I go by Minka now,” she said breathlessly, drawing out her birth scroll. “I am sixteen, as this proves.”

“Hm hmm.” He carefully perused the scroll through his spectacles, then wrote everything in his book. Turning to Efran, he said, “And the man is . . . ?”

Efran slowly opened his mouth as if waiting on information to come. “I am . . . am. . . .”

“This is Captain Efran of the Red Regiment,” Estes said vehemently. “He was awarded citations of bravery in the Battle of the West Bank and the Assault on Brier Ridge.”

Another soldier, Arne, said bitterly, “And he would’ve received commendation and extra pay for his service to the flood victims of Prie Mer, but the clerk lost the Commander’s recommendation.” Others grunted in agreement over the injustice.

“Captain Efran,” the notary wrote down. “And this is your desire?” He looked up at Efran, who stared at him without comprehension. “Do you wish to marry Chataine Sybil?” the notary clarified.

Growing wide-eyed, Minka looked at Efran as he turned to her. It took a moment for him to get the words out. “More than anything I . . . could—do today,” he said haltingly. The soldiers regarded him in pity.

The notary took that as assent, finishing his notations in the ledger. “Now you must sign here and here,” he instructed, pointing with the quill. To make up for his denseness, Efran took the quill first. He held it over the line in the ledger, pausing in intense concentration.

Noah came to his side to whisper, “E-F-R-A-N.”

“Yes. Thank you, Noah,” Efran exhaled, writing.

“He hasn’t done this much,” Noah explained, patting him on the back. Minka, eyeing them both, took the quill to write her own name unassisted.

“Very good.” The old man closed that ledger and brought out another while Efran looked at Minka pensively, as though questioning her mental balance. “Now, I understand that you are interested in obtaining the bequest of the Abbey of Saint Benedict on the Sea,” the notary said, opening the ledger.

“Yes,” Efran said, wiping his mouth as his own mental processes gradually resumed.

“Are these children in residence at the Abbey now?” the notary asked, scanning them over his spectacles.

“Yes,” Ethan said. “This is Noah and his sister Ivy; Toby and Pia,” he said, pointing.

The old man looked them over carefully. “I note that they appear to be healthy, and are clean and well-dressed. So let us start with your compassionate friend,” the notary said, settling faded blue eyes on Noah. “Where are your parents, Noah?”

“They died of the fever, sir,” Noah said. “Me and Ivy lived on the street for a while, then Toby told us he was going to live with Efran, and so we found Efran at the stables and he just put us right in the cart and took us there.”

“I see,” the notary said. “How do you like it there?”

Noah’s face opened. “Oh, it’s the most wonderful place ever. There is so much food you won’t believe it. And me and Toby help the soldiers with their building and the horses and I am getting so strong from hauling water.” He pushed up a sleeve to flex his bicep as proof.

The notary regarded the small bump on his arm and said, “I see. And Ivy? Are you happy there?”

She pressed back against Efran’s leg shyly, murmuring, “He gave me a kitty.”

“I understand that would answer most little girls’ wants,” the notary said gravely, and a few standing around chuckled.

“Toby, am I correct in assuming that you were the first child to come to the Abbey?” The old man leveled his spectacles at him.

“Yes, sir,” Toby said proudly. “Efran gave me all his eggs and potatoes, so I showed him where they had taken Minka, and so he just put me on that big ol’ horse and brought me there with her. And I told him where to find Pia, and he went and got her, too.” Noah and Ivy earnestly confirmed this.

So the notary turned to Pia, but Toby warned him, “She doesn’t talk much.”

The old man nodded. “Let us give her the opportunity to reply as she will. Pia, do you like the Abbey?”

When everyone looked at her, she turned to hide on Efran, who picked her up. Then she spread her fingers on her chin and the crickets in the shop began chirping.

“I believe that is sufficient answer,” the notary said. Efran quickly looked at him. How did he know about the *aina*? [Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 30

Everyone in the shop was still as the notary turned a page in the ledger and dipped his quill. “We find, then, that you, Efran, satisfy the conditions of the bequest, and are hereby declared owner of the Abbey of Saint Benedict on the Sea with license to house homeless children within. Chataine Sybil, or Minka, as Efran’s wife, you are declared co-owner of the Abbey, with like license. We now require your signatures as owners of this structure.”

Turning the great book toward them, he handed the quill to Efran, who bent to sign without difficulty. He handed the quill to his co-owner, who did likewise. As Efran moved to embrace her, the notary said tranquilly, “Now we must address the dispensation of the land belonging to the Abbey.”

Efran turned abruptly, gasping, “Land?”

“Land!” cried a few men behind him. Owning land was a privilege afforded only to nobles and royalty.

“Yes,” said the notary, turning to withdraw another ledger from the shelves, a very large one. While they watched breathlessly, he flipped through several loose pages to withdraw a large plat. This he rotated to face Efran, who leaned over it.

The children crowded around him and the men looked over their heads. Minka had to exercise extreme restraint, having been inadvertently blocked from sight of it. But Estes looked up suddenly to yank aside a few of his fellows and clear a path for her to Efran’s side. She smiled, glittering, and he looked abashed.

Efran noticed none of this, as the notary was pointing with his quill while he explained, “Here is the hill and the fortress. The boundary of the adjoining land extends from the base of the hill approximately two miles to the north, six miles to the east, and a half-mile west. Coincidentally, the stone bridge constructed over the now-dry fork of the Passage by Surchatain Ares sits at the northern boundary of the Abbey land. I doubt he knew that.”

“Six miles,” Efran breathed in disbelief. Then he murmured, “Ares was the father of Henry the Great.”

“Yes. Henry was Ares’ son,” the notary said. “You and the co-owner here must sign on this copy of the plat, then I will have another made for your keeping, along with a copy of the bequest. You must keep them in a safe place to prove your ownership of the land and the fortress.”

Still in shock, Efran took the quill as one of the men behind him asked, “Will you lease land to us? Then we could bring our families, plant and raise stock.”

“Of course,” Efran said, signing the plat.

The notary observed, “Decisions regarding the use of the land require the consent of the co-owner.”

The men stared at him, then all looked to Minka. She edged up to Efran to curl her fingers under his collar. “The co-owner consents to whatever the master decides about the land.”

Breaths were exhaled all around as he looked down at her, lips parted. Then she lifted her hand. “May I have the quill?” Flustered, he handed it to her to sign.

Another man reluctantly observed, “The whole area is territory of a large wolf pack.”

Anxiety crossed Efran’s face. “True.” He glanced down at Pia, then said, “We will think on what to do.”

“The last order of business is your charter,” the notary said, pulling out yet another parchment. “The bequest of the Abbey and its lands confers upon the beneficiary the title of Lord Sovereign. Your complete title is ‘Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.’” He looked at Efran through his spectacles, who could only stare at him.

So the notary continued, “This confers upon your wife Minka the title of Lady, as well—‘Lady Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.’ For the duration of your charter, you are required to take in unwanted children, to shelter and provide for them. Here is the charter which you and your lady need to sign. Read it, please; it is brief. It must remain here, but I will make a copy for you which will be sent to you along with the other documents.”

“What is the duration of the charter?” Minka asked.

“Unless you are found to be in violation of it by refusing abandoned children, or being convicted of a serious crime, it is lifelong. Speaking of which, possibly the most important provision of the charter is that the Abbey Lands be ruled according to the Law of Roman—which provision was enacted by Surchatain Roman himself. At any rate, the charter may be bequeathed to anyone of your choosing. These simple conditions are spelled out in the charter itself,” the notary replied.

Everyone was speechless. Blinking, Efran signed the charter, then handed the quill to Minka for her to dip it in the ink and sign.

Looking over the signatures, the notary said, “Our business here is concluded. You should expect to receive your copies of the title, the charter, and the plat within five days—as well as your marriage license,” he added, smiling.

Efran said, “Thank you.” Apprehending that he owed a fee for services rendered, he looked down at his empty pockets, then turned to Minka. “Did your aunt give you any money?”

“Oh! Did she,” Minka snorted, pulling up the purse hanging from her embroidered belt. She opened it to pull out a royal to place on the counter. “Is that enough?”

“Enough,” the notary said in mild shock. “I—don’t think I have enough to give you change—”

“Then keep it as our wedding gift to you,” she said, leaning over to kiss his cheek.

“Thank you,” he said, still shocked.

The men filed out, sweeping up children as they went, but Efran paused before the notary to whisper, “None of this was a surprise to you—except the payment. Who are you?”

“No one special,” he replied with a glint in his eye. “Just someone who reads the old books.”

Efran glanced over the shelves behind him, then said, “Send for me if I can ever do service for you.”

The old man’s acknowledging bow was almost that of a superior accepting tribute. “I will remember your offer.”

Nodding, Efran gripped Minka’s hand to lead her out, still looking overwhelmed.

They loaded the children into the cart, most of them chattering happily at the mourning doves alighting on the rims. Minka peered at Efran and asked in concern, “How did you cut your neck?”

He blinked. “I don’t know.”

“Oh.” Pouting, she kissed it, and he closed his eyes. It was fine for her to kiss him now.

When they began to set off, they heard behind them, “Captain Efran.” He turned to look at a group of men on horseback that far outnumbered his own party. The one who had spoken said, “My name is Lyte, and, we are all part of the army that you just routed practically all by yourself. We would like to serve under you, if you will allow.”

“Well, yes,” Efran said. “But—”

“There you are!” Minka cried. “You rode up with me to Eurus, and then back again!”

“Yes, Lady. That road is plagued by robbers at night,” Lyte said, and the men behind him nodded.

Efran looked mildly distraught. “Yes, you may serve, but, we don’t have much right now in the way of—provisions, or—”

Minka pulled her purse out again. “So what you have to do,” she told Lyte, “is rampage through Westford and buy us everything you can for a wedding dinner.” And she handed him two fistfuls of royals. “Hurry.”

He grinned in astonished relief. “Yes, Lady!” Then he turned to instruct half the group to follow Captain Efran south and the other half to help him transport banquet victuals. Minka swept forward, victorious.

But others had concerns, and not about the Eurusians or provisions. As the wedding party left Westford and rode in formation down the south road, Connor edged his horse as near to Bastard as he dared. “The wolves will make it impossible to use this land, Captain. They are entrenched in the area. No one would be safe.”

“I know,” Efran sighed, looking over the vast acreage of meadow. If they couldn’t use the land, then owning the fortress was pointless. They would have no means of sustenance or defense. And with wolves controlling the only road to Westford, they would have no reliable communication with the rest of the world. Even the notary’s messengers might not make it through with the documents certifying his marriage and entitlement.

Once God has spoken; twice I have heard this: That power belongs to God. Efran looked up at the vast

blue sky and admitted, *It is true. You have been my rock and my deliverance. But now—*

Pia, riding in the cart, shouted, “Stop!” The men turned to stare at her but the horses all stopped dead at her command.

“There are wolves around us now,” Connor uttered as Efran watched Pia climb out of the cart.

A man behind them drew his bow from his shoulder, at which Efran turned to order, “No weapons!” He himself dismounted to follow Pia as she ran to the front of the procession.

She stopped in the middle of the road to slowly turn in a circle, extending her arms to the sides. She walked a few steps, crouching, then lifted her arms, and a score of wolves emerged from the grass on either side of the road.

A few men cried out, but Estes twisted in his saddle to eye them, and everyone was still.

One massive wolf advanced on Efran, who looked down at him. This was the wolf who had come to the road in adoration of Pia. He sat before Efran, and for several minutes the lord of the wolves and the lord of the fortress regarded each other.

During this tense interlude, while the men’s hands twitched over their weapons, Pia was making awkward little steps to the left and to the right, with frequent hops and twists of the elbows. Watching her, Estes’ eyes grew wet. It was a happy dance that she was clearly not accustomed to doing.

Whining softly, a young wolf crawled on its belly toward her to lick her toes and flop onto its back. Another wolf, barely past being a pup, hopped over to bounce playfully with her. But the rest of the pack were disciplined enough to remain still while their leader engaged with the man.

Then all at once Efran turned to pick up Pia as the wolf disappeared into the grass, the pack following.

Carrying her, Efran paused among the riders to tell them, “We have arranged for peace. If no one molests the wolves, they will leave us alone. They will not attack any human, but animals that roam outside of their enclosures will be fair game, so make your fences sturdy.” He looked specifically at Estes to add, “Anyone who wants land must swear not to harm any wolf, for if they do, the peace is voided.”

“They will swear on their lives to this,” Estes said.

Efran smiled at Pia in his arms, who grasped his face to kiss him on the lips. He laughed in response, “She doesn’t care.” Whereupon Pia glanced mischievously at Minka, who gaped upon the realization that she was having a joke played on her. When Minka burst out in laughter, Pia leaned her head on Efran’s shoulder to grin back.

He placed her in the cart, then remounted Bastard with an exhalation of wonder. On a horse beside him, Minka whispered, “You are *aina*.”

He blinked, kicking Bastard, who amiably bucked. “Not entirely,” Efran grunted.

An hour later, a train of carts began coming from Westford filled with live food—chickens, geese, ducks, pheasants, lambs, piglets—and everything necessary to cook them with: oil, vinegar, spices, honey, grains, vegetables, cheeses. Then there were crates of wine, beer, and ale; necessities such as candles and candle holders, glassware and cutlery.

And after having delivered a dozen carts of such goods, Lyte presented Minka with change from her royals. Then the newest members of the Abbey got to work as wood cutters, water bearers, butchers and menial labor until dinner was ready.

While everyone else was doing this, Estes and Connor looked in the room in which Efran had been sleeping (when not in the keep), and found it inadequate for a bridal suite. Checking other rooms on the ground floor, they opened the door of the first room at the head of the corridor across from the library—and discovered why all the men shied away from it.

It was the lord's suite, large, with windows in both the receiving room and bedroom—that in the latter being stained glass. Below that window rested an ornately carved double bed which needed only fresh coverings on its feathered mattress. There was also a garderobe, wardrobes, and furniture. "This is the Captain's quarters," Connor said definitively.

"And I know where the linens are," Estes said. They shut the door behind them as they left—and returned again shortly.

When the dinner was ready, everyone ate and drank heartily, including Marguerite's bodyguard. And they all toasted and teased the newlyweds until Minka was hiding her face in Efran's arms.

When the children, stuffed and half-asleep, were taken to their rooms, Efran rose from the table, transparently thinking about where to take his bride. Estes paused beside him to whisper in his ear. Efran nodded, patting his shoulder in thanks.

Then he leaned down to Minka to whisper, "Are you . . . all right?"—meaning, *are you ready?*

"Oh, yes," she said, reaching up to him. "For some time now," she smiled impishly.

Later that evening, the husband and wife lay quietly in their marriage bed. He was looking up at the ancient ceiling beams while she lay with her head on his shoulder.

As he stared at the solid support over him, his thoughts ran, *I have been so willing to face death bravely, but . . . it takes more courage to live, when the rewards can be so great.* He also realized, *Deep down, I knew that she was of age; I knew that she was ready, but I didn't know what I knew.*

Almost asleep—but not quite—his young wife sighed in satisfaction on his shoulder. He turned his head to kiss her again. Laying a hand on her bare abdomen, he murmured, "Your babies will be mongrel Polonti, you know."

She considered this with half-closed eyes, then sprang up. "Oh, Efran! Could they be *aina*?"

He smiled. "Maybe. I don't know."

She snuggled down to look closely in his face. “You have cushy lips.”

“So you told me.”

She looked over his unevenly cut hair. “You have to grow out your hair again.”

“No,” he said, still smiling.

“I will win on this,” she promised.

He lifted his head. “Am I not lord of the fortress?”

“Yes,” she said. “But your body belongs to me.”

“Yes,” he breathed, rolling onto her again.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on May 22nd of the year 8153 from the creation of the world.

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my credibility;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

Trust in him at all times, O people;
pour out your heart before him;
God is a refuge for us.

Men of low estate are but a breath,
men of high estate are a delusion;
in the balances they go up;
they are together lighter than a breath.
Put no confidence in extortion,
set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase, set not your heart on them.

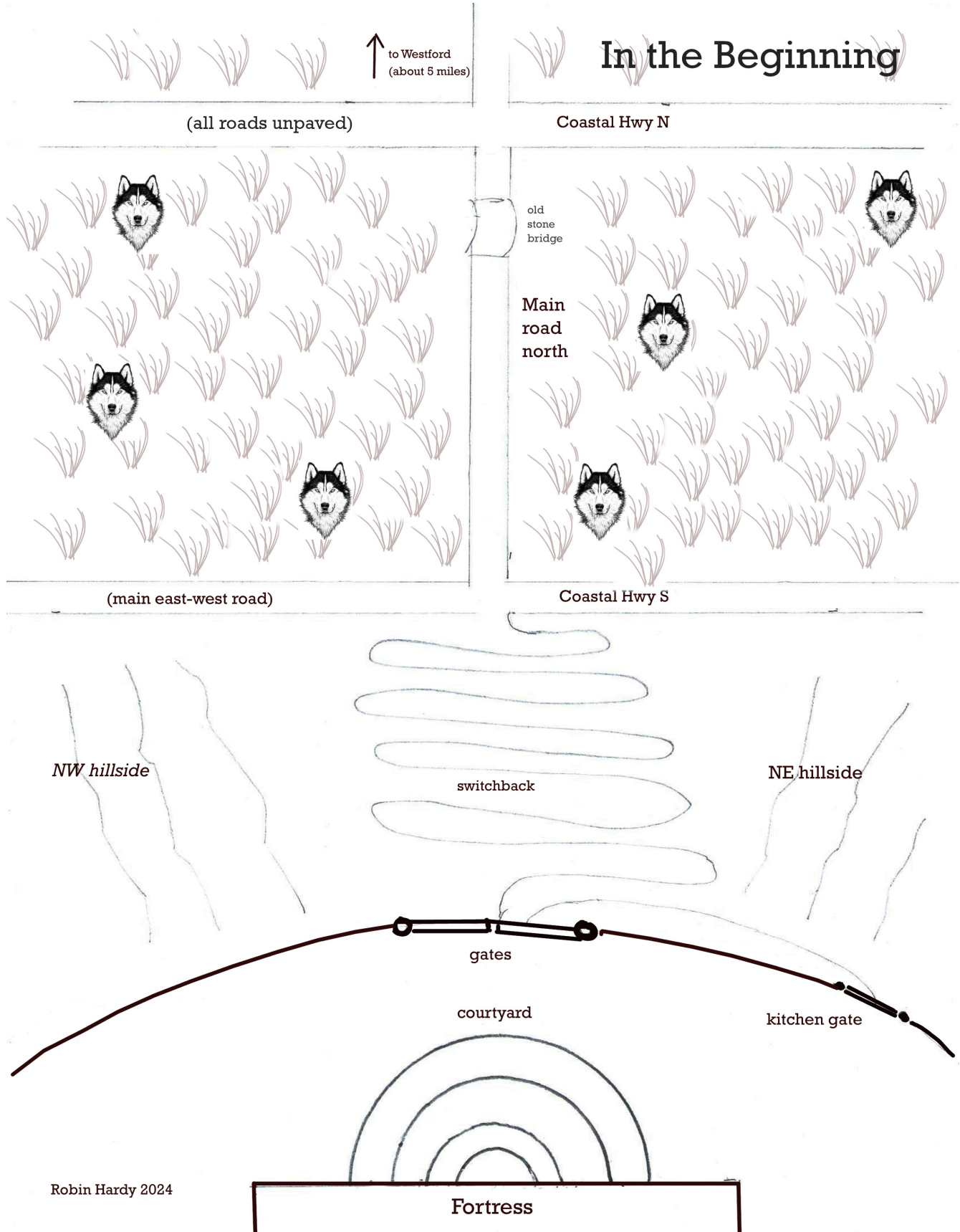
Once God has spoken;
twice I have heard this:
that power belongs to God;
and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love.
For you requite a man according to his work.

Psalm 62

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran: In the Beginning* (Book 1)

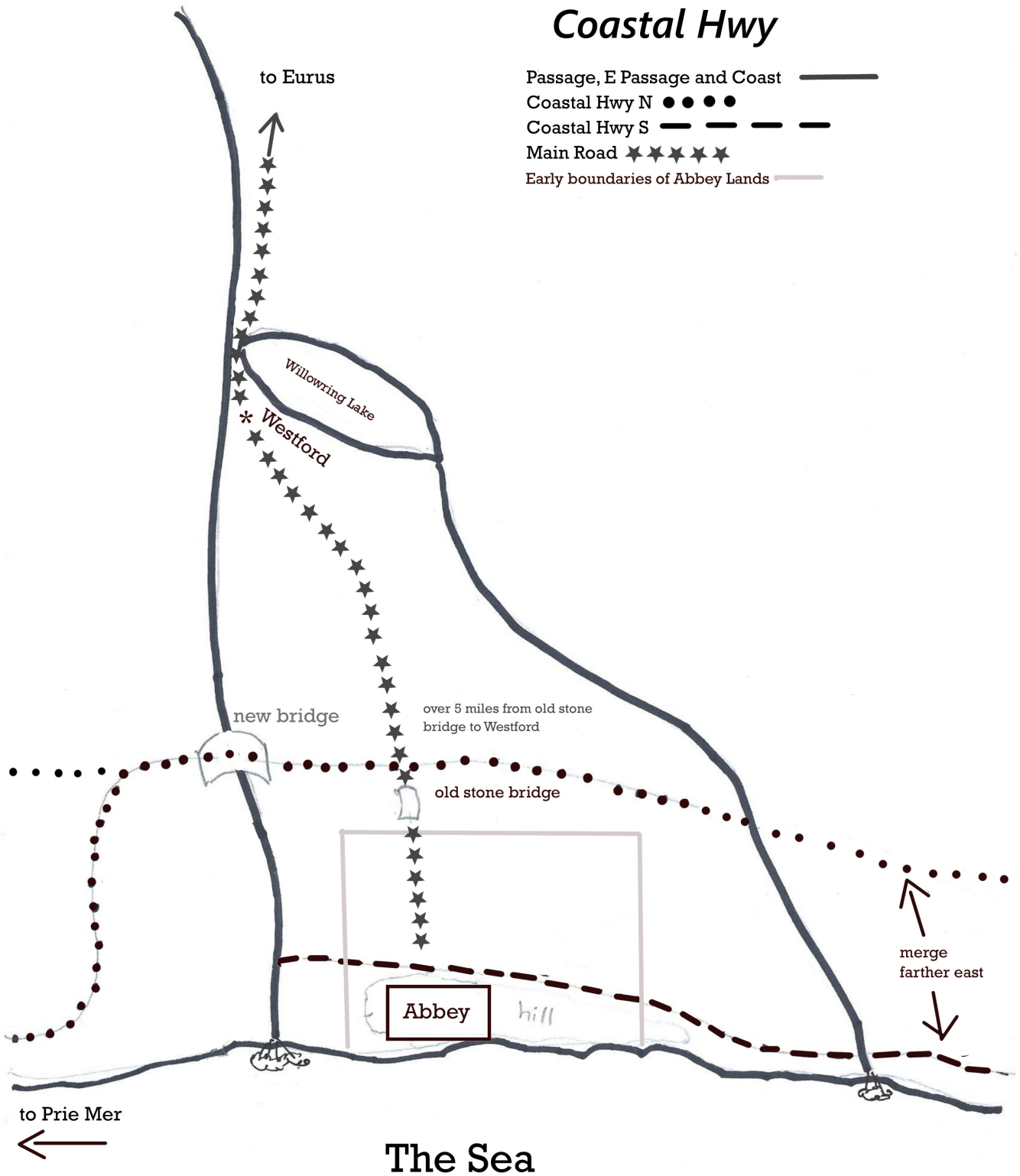
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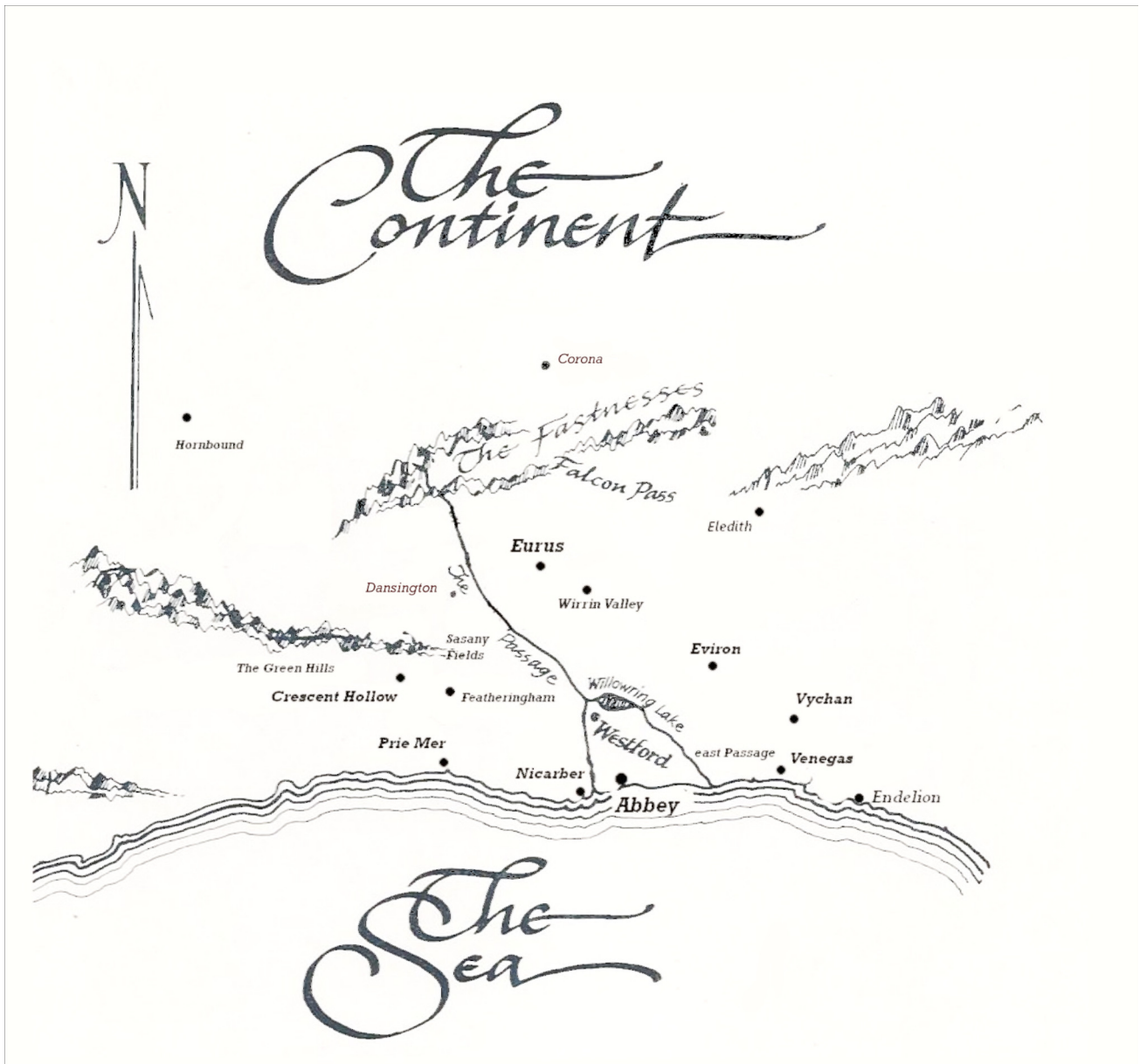
Adele—ah DELL
aina—AY nah
 Ares—AIR eez
 Arne--arn
 Brengleigh—BRING lee
 Carmine—CAR men
 Cassius—KAH shush
 Chanticleer—CHAN tuh kleeer
 Chataine—sha TANE
 circuitous—sur KYOO eh tuhs (roundabout)
 Edie—EE dee
 Efran—EFF run
 Eledith—ELL eh dith
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eurus--YOUR us
 Eurussian--your uh SEE un
 Fiacco—fee AH koh
 garderobe—GAR de robe
 Graduliere--gra DUE lee air
 Hauffe--hauf
 insigne—en SIN yeh
 Lieterstad—LEE ter stad
 Lietes—lie EE teez
 Loizeaux--lwah ZOH
 Lystra—LIS trah
 Marguerite—mar ger EET (hard g)
 Melchizedek-- mel kuh ZEH duhk
 melee—MAY lay
 Minka—MINK ah
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
 Nicarber—neh CAR bur
 Nicklos—NICK lohs
 onus—OH nus (obligation)
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pindar—PIN dhur
 pique--peek
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 Prie Mer—pre MARE
 Qarqar—KAR kar; Qarqarian—kar KAR ee an
 Renée—ren AYE
 repertoire—REH puh twaar
 Stephanos—steh FAHN os
 Surchatain—SUR cha tan
 Surchataine—sur cha TANE
 Sybil—SEH bull
 Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
 Thucius—THU see us
 trough—troff
 verbena—vuhr BEE nah
 victuals—vittles
 Wedderburn—WEH dur burn



Coastal Hwy

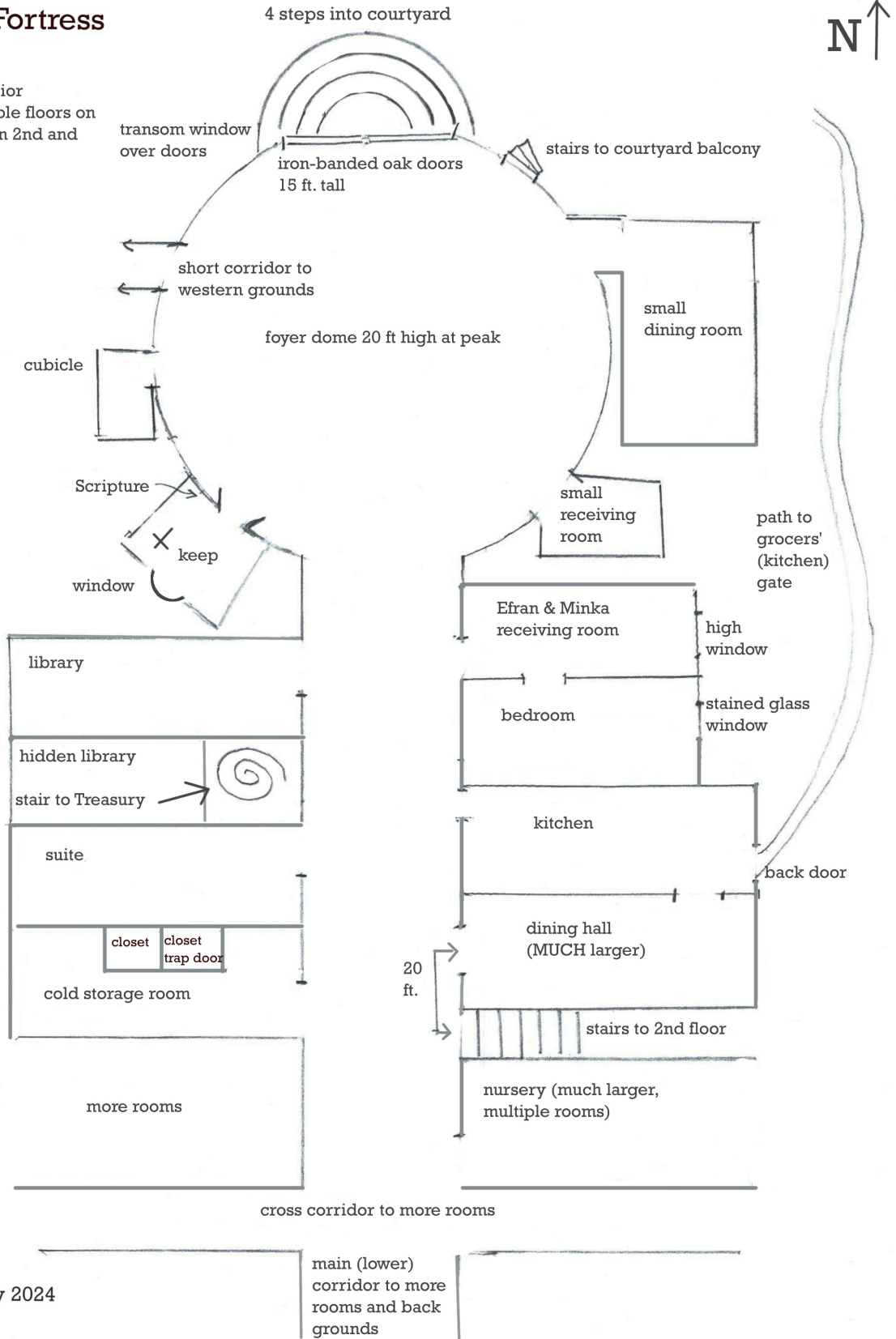
- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ———





Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024

main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

By The Well (Book 1:
Lord Efran in the Beginning)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



For some time I've been trying to acquire the services of a professional artist to produce at least one sketch of Efran and Minka for my Abbey Lands chapters. Failing in this, but equipped with Google and Gimp, I decided to do it myself.

This resulted in 12-hour workdays over the last week, punctuated with mild profanity and a lot of self-castigation. I also used no professional-quality images. Since I don't know what I'm doing, I decided to start simple with a grayscale illustration.

So for Efran's face, I used Michelangelo's Christ in *The Last Judgment*. I had to flatten Christ's perfect European nose and broaden the tip a bit, as well as procure a black wig from online. For Minka, I used Pierre Olivier Joseph Coomans' *Portrait of a Young Woman*. Minka's curls came from a sales site as well. (Thumbnails of both paintings are below.) I looked at images of hundreds of dresses before finding one whose model was correctly posed, and then cartoonized it to match Efran's uniform, created from sketches overlaid with numerous paint layers, as well as denim and linen.

The well was built from a stone wall at my apartment complex, and the meadow and trees came from a field across from the local high school. The result is FAR from professional, and I keep finding things that need correcting. (I repeatedly edit my writing, too). But now that I have something I'm satisfied with, I'm trying to figure out how to do another.

Robin Hardy
April 3, 2024

