

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

Book 9

Lord Efran and the
Provision for a
Wronged Husband

Robin Hardy



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Chapter 1

In the second-floor workroom of the Abbey fortress, DeWitt and Estes stood regarding Efran seated at the large work table. “Efran,” DeWitt said, and Efran looked up tentatively. “We are glad that you somehow managed to recover more things from the barge, but, your collection has been sitting here for days, and we need our work table.”

Efran again contemplated the large pile of various containers that sat on the table in front of him. “I’m afraid of what might be here.”

“Then you should probably open them quickly, don’t you think?” Estes suggested.

“Yes,” Efran said resolutely. But he didn’t move.

Estes then went over to fetch a large basket and put it on the floor beside Efran’s chair. “Here. Some of the wooden containers in front of you look to be ruined. Start with those; discard what’s useless first.”

“Yes,” Efran said. So he removed all the waterproof containers to the floor on the other side of his chair, leaving only four small wooden boxes on the table in front of him. Satisfied, Estes and DeWitt sat with their maps and ledgers at the other end of the table.

Encouraged by this progress, Efran reached over for a small wooden box that disintegrated in his hand. But what fell out among the rotted wood was an exquisite gold ring set with a large opal. He studied it a moment, then leaned forward. “Here, Estes. Kelsey needs something nice from you.” And he handed him the ring.

DeWitt glanced over as Estes looked at it. “Why—thank you, Efran.”

“You’re welcome,” Efran said. He brushed the rotted wood into the basket before reaching for the next box. This one, being lacquered, was slightly more intact, but Efran had no difficulty breaking it open around the lock. A lustrous gold necklace fell into his hand. He examined it across his spread fingers, finding it beautifully crafted and completely undamaged. “DeWitt, Tera deserves this.”

Both men looked up as Efran extended the necklace to him. “Efran, are you sure?” DeWitt said, taking it carefully. “This looks like it should go into the Treasury.”

“There’s plenty sitting in that dark room already,” Efran muttered. He dropped the broken box into the basket and reached for a third box.

“Well, thank you,” DeWitt said uncomfortably. “We’re glad you decided to bring up the cargo. Shouldn’t Minka get something?”

“She wouldn’t wear it,” Efran sighed. The third box was enameled, so he had to study it a moment to see how to open it. The enameled wood held firm, and the box was securely locked. Finally, Efran leaned back to remove the small lock pick from his belt. This was sufficient to open the box, so Efran lifted out a gold headband which was set with jewels. He had to smile: this was the only accessory Minka would ever wear, and it was far nicer than any other hair ornaments she had.

“Here’s Minka’s,” he said, laying it on the table.

The other two men looked up, smiling. Estes said, “Very good, Efran.”

Greatly encouraged, Efran dropped that box into the basket and picked up the last wooden box. While not enameled or lacquered, this one was firmly protected by iron bands, now mostly rusted. But they were still screwed into the wood securely. “What tools have you got up here, Estes?” Efran murmured.

Estes jerked his head toward the shelves. “Case on the lowest shelf there.”

“Ah.” Efran took the box over to sit with it on the floor next to the shelves. He took out the case to rummage through it, bringing out a screwdriver. Long-rusted screws yielded grudgingly, so that he was finally able to remove the bands and pry the box open. Separating the pieces, he looked in and gasped, “Keys.”

The other two turned in their seats to look as Efran held up an iron ring with two keys. DeWitt said, “Start with the third floor, where you found the Destroyer.”

“Yes,” Efran breathed, staggering up.

“Don’t run on the stairs,” Estes said.

“No,” Efran agreed, walking out of the room to the stairway nearby.

On the third floor, he paused to look at the keys he held. They were identical, fashioned in the style of other fortress keys (most of which had been found either in the door locks or in storage rooms). Starting at the south end of the corridor, Efran began trying the keys in locks. He found at once that while they were not oversized, they were the wrong shape for all these doors. They would open none of them, except—possibly—

Heart hammering, he looked over to the door at the north end of the corridor. The screen was still standing beside it. But there was something different about the door.

Efran approached uncertainly, knowing only that he could not open it. Once he had unlocked all three doors, the keys had disintegrated in his hand. Now, as he came to the first door again, he saw that the lock was gone, and in its place was a simple door handle. Shaking, Efran reached out to grasp the handle and pull the door open.

Instead of a narrow corridor, he was looking into a small anteroom with two doors sitting side by side, both of which had locks and handles. Efran regarded all this for a moment, then lifted the keys to look at them again. Going to the door on the left, he inserted one key, turned it, and opened the door outward to look into a nice, small receiving room, simply furnished, with a window.

Efran went right over to look out the window. Yes, there was the main north road vanishing into the distance, with a partial view of the western and eastern plots on either side of it. He turned back around to look at the small table with two chairs and an empty shelf unit. Also, there was a side door.

He walked over to open that door, which led into a bedroom with a small mattress bed, uncovered. He lifted a corner of the mattress to smell it, and found it fresh. There was also a wardrobe on one wall, and a curious alcove in the corner. This Efran went over to examine.

The floor of the alcove was a grill, which appeared to be for drainage. The ceiling of the alcove contained a center tile with many small holes. And hanging down from the ceiling of the alcove along its wall were two

chains with handles. Pulling the handle on the left brought a deluge of water down from the holes in the center tile; pulling the handle on the right stopped the flow.

Efran withdrew his wet arm to shake it, murmuring, “A rooftop cistern. I should have guessed”—because he had already seen the means of rainwater collection on the roof around the bell tower.

Nonetheless, he remained in a state of persistent disbelief as he went out to the receiving room with its window and then to the anteroom. From there, he went to the second door to unlock it—which either key would do, he confirmed. Then he stepped into a furnished receiving room identical to the other, also with a window which gave a view to the main north road.

The bedroom door was on the opposite wall as the other suite, which allowed their bathing alcoves to share a wall and, presumably, the same rooftop cistern above. Other than the mirror image, the suites were the same.

Leaving that suite, Efran relocked the door, locking the other suite as well. He held the keys, wondering, then exited the alcove to leave by the first door, and shut it again. He walked away three steps, then turned back to open the first door and just check again. Yes, the alcove and two locked doors were still there.

Walking away in wonderment, he stopped midstep on the stairway to breathe, “This place is alive.” He had no other way to express how it changed and even grew in places.

Down on the first floor, he exhaled, looking at the ring with two keys in his hand. If someone needed a room, where would they go? So he walked through the foyer to Doane’s cubicle.

As he entered, Doane looked up from the lists in front of him. “Good morning, Captain. What can I do for you?”

“Good morning, Doane. If . . . anyone comes to you needing a room, here are the keys to two rooms on the north end of the third floor,” Efran said, extending the keys to him.

“I will keep them right here, Captain,” Doane replied, putting them in his desk drawer. “The north end of the third floor,” he repeated.

“Yes. Thank you, Doane,” Efran said, exiting. On his way back to the second floor, he kept stopping, wondering when he would wake up. But he entered the workroom as if it were a regular day.

Both Estes and DeWitt looked up. DeWitt asked, “Did you find what the keys went to?”

“Yes,” Efran said. “Rooms. Just regular rooms.”

“What a relief!” Estes laughed, and they returned to their work while Efran sat at the chair with waterproof containers at its feet.

Because of the closeness of the Sea, August on the Abbey hilltop was mild and balmy, perfect weather for an adventurous seven-month-old Polonti boy. So this morning, Minka dispensed with the blanket that Joshua always crumpled in his wake. Instead, she took him out to the gardens with nothing but a book for her—the same one that she had been carrying out for a week now, which he had not yet allowed her to read.

As she headed for the bench under the ancient walnut tree, her favorite spot, she slowed to see it already occupied. Geneve sat quietly regarding the glorious gardens, and Minka’s heart went out to her. Geneve’s new

husband, the Polonti fight master Nares, had died only five days ago. Minka turned away, unwilling to trespass on her grief, then changed her mind and approached the bench.

Although Geneve did not look up, Minka asked, “May I sit?” Turning slightly, Geneve nodded, so Minka sat and put Joshua on the grass in front of her feet. He immediately sat up to begin looking around.

Minka whispered, “I’m so sorry. I can’t imagine what you’re feeling.”

Geneve stirred, still not looking up. “Thank you. I’m just—numb. Wallace said his heart just gave out on him. He said that many warriors who survive every battle find that their hearts can’t endure peace.”

Minka reached over to lay her hand on Geneve’s, who smiled tightly, all the while willing herself not to cry. After a moment of indecisive silence, she said, “I’m pregnant.”

Minka startled. “How can you know already?” Geneve and Nares had been married less than two weeks before he died.

“I just know. I knew right away—my body just started changing at once,” Geneve said, shaking her head.

Minka’s heart sank. Fairly or not, throughout the Southern Continent, it was a terrible stigma for an unmarried woman to have a baby. Also, once Efran knew that Geneve was pregnant, he would not allow her to fight or pull guard duty—of this Minka was sure. “We will take care of you,” Minka said.

Geneve did look up then, to smile warmly at her. “Of course you would offer, and I appreciate it. But I have Nares’ house, and he did leave a good many royals that he saved up over the years. So I should be fine.”

“Good,” Minka breathed. “We will get you Bethune as midwife—she helped Adele through a very difficult birth—Joshua’s—and brought out Kelsey’s baby with no trouble at all. I helped with both,” she said proudly. “Oh! And I will fix your teas. I found out all about the teas that help. Raspberry leaf tea is amazing for women giving birth.”

Geneve laughed lightly, squeezing her hand. “Oh, Minka. I will appreciate that.”

“You did save me from that crazy woman at Croft’s,” Minka said, her face clouding.

“That was my job,” Geneve reminded her.

“You will soldier again. I will help you with your baby. Oh, and the new nursery matron Nesse is wonderful. I have no concerns about leaving Joshua there, and he’s trying to climb out of his cribs. All of them,” Minka said darkly.

“That is good to hear,” Geneve said. Then she looked across the grounds. “There’s Nares’ lieutenant Wyeth coming this way—it looks like he wants to talk to me.” Like Nares, Wyeth was Polonti. She stood. “Thank you for your encouragement, Minka.”

“You’re welcome. You will be all right, Geneve—you and the baby,” Minka said earnestly.

Geneve smiled and walked off. Minka looked down to see Joshua stuff grass in his mouth and start choking. She leaned over to scoop out the grass, so he crawled away a short distance to pull up more grass to put in his mouth.

Geneve met Wyeth at the edge of the gardens. “Were you looking for me?” she asked, trying to smile.

“Yes, Geneve,” he said, concern in every line of his face.

“What is it?” she asked levelly.

He exhaled, glancing away, then said miserably, “Nares’ wife and children are come. They are—at his house.”

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Chapter 2

“What?” Geneve gasped. “His wife—Wyeth, Nares married me!”

“I know, Geneve,” he said, troubled. “Master Nares did not feel—bound by your customs—” At her incredulous look, he added, “Let us go see.”

He took her to the courtyard, where they went down the switchback on foot to the road that Nares’ house was on. As they passed the house Geneve had shared with another woman, she glanced at it in mild despair; her housemate had taken another lodger shortly after Geneve left.

When they approached Nares’ house, Geneve paused in shock. Children were streaming in and out of the front door, strewing various articles of her own clothing around the yard. She watched one young boy run in circles with her bloomers on his head.

Wyeth leapt forward, chiding in Polonti as he grabbed her intimate wear from small heads and hands. Bundling these, he picked up other clothes of hers while a few of the children darted inside the house in excitement. Wyeth ran up to Geneve to deposit an armload on her, then continued his sweep of the small yard until he had gathered it all.

A large Polonti woman came to the door to begin shouting at him. He shouted back at her in their language, of which Geneve understood little. Then the woman—obviously Nares’ wife—began gesturing and shouting at Geneve and her underclothes. A little girl brought Wyeth more of Geneve’s things. A crowd of neighbors began gathering to watch.

When Geneve didn’t move, Nares’ wife began stalking angrily toward her, the “other woman.” Wyeth ran over to intercept the wife, and in the exertions required to convince her that Geneve was leaving, Wyeth dropped a few personal items. These the little girl picked up to take directly to Geneve, who received them numbly, murmuring, “Thank you.” The girl smiled sweetly at her before skipping away.

Sweating, Wyeth came up to take Geneve’s elbow in one hand while grasping her underclothes in another. “Come. You stay with me and Peri until we get you a place.”

He took her down the road, backtracking once or twice for dropped articles, then steered her to a door that had his name on a stake out front. Pausing to catch his breath on the doorstep, he said, “We have a servant that we must get out, but that is easy; she does nothing anyway.”

He opened the door to almost stumble over a woman on her knees scrubbing the floor. “Peri!” he said. “What—what are you doing? Where is this servant?” Peri jumped to her feet, speechless. He exhaled, “I begin to see why her sister sold her.” Geneve didn’t have to understand the language to see what was happening.

While Peri continued to stand speechless, Wyeth went to the little kitchen for a large basket. He put his armful of lingerie in it, then handed it to Geneve to unload the clothing she clutched. Watching this brought Peri around. “What are you doing? Who is she?” she asked in Polonti.

Breathing out, Wyeth turned to explain (in the Southern Continental language, as a courtesy to Geneve), “This is Master Nares’ wife. She is going to stay with us a little ’til she finds a place. We must lose that lazy servant.”

Peri’s eyes darted back to Adele’s shut door. “Ah, no. We need her.”

“She does nothing! Get her out!” Wyeth ordered.

“No! This is my house as well as yours! Why should I agree for you to have another woman here?” Peri shouted.

“I’m leaving,” Geneve said, turning around with her basket. She went out, aware of the neighbors’ curious faces. With nowhere to go, she began walking down the road.

Wyeth caught up with her. “They will have you in the fortress. Come.”

She stopped on the road. “You’re not responsible for me. You don’t owe me anything.”

He looked at her miserably. “I am Master Nares’ lieutenant. I must not let him wrong you in death.” She lowered her head, tears finally dropping. “Come,” he ordered. To make sure she did, he took the basket.

Wyeth walked her up the switchback while the gate sentries watched in concern. When they opened the gates for her and Wyeth, Geneve couldn’t bear to raise her eyes to see who was witnessing her humiliation.

Glancing around indecisively, Wyeth took her into the foyer, then to Doane’s cubicle. Doane looked up. “You’re one of Nares’ men—Wyeth?”

“Yes,” he said, sweating. “Ah, Master Nares died, you know, and Geneve needs a place to stay. Is there a—a room anywhere?”

“I wish all requests were this easy.” Doane pulled open the drawer to hand Wyeth the ring with two keys. “Third floor, north end.”

Wyeth paused, open-mouthed, then took ring. “Third floor, north end. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Doane said, pleased.

Wyeth came out of the cubicle in a daze as Geneve turned dull eyes to him. He held up the keys. “Third floor, north end.” She blinked.

They trudged up two flights of stairs to emerge on the third floor. Looking down the corridor one way and then the other, Wyeth gestured, “This way.”

Scanning doors that they passed, Wyeth tried a key in one or two locks that did not fit. Finally they came to the

end of the corridor with the blank door. "There's no room here. Just a storage closet," Geneve said.

Wyeth said, "I—don't understand. He was clear: 'Third floor. North end.'" In frustration, he opened the door. "Oh. Look!"

She turned to the anteroom with two locked doors. "I've never seen this before," she said. "I've been up here a dozen times, and never seen this."

"Well, here it is." He went to the door on the right to unlock it and open it. They both stepped into the suite, staring. "This is nice," he said.

"I don't have bedding, or linens, or—" she began.

"Let's look in the other," he suggested. So they did that, finding it just the same.

"Which do you want?" he asked her. "I will find someone to fix it for you."

"Either. The first," she said, shrugging.

"Good. I will come right back." He paused to take one key off the ring and hand it to her. Then he hurried out. Arriving downstairs, still sweating but encouraged, he began looking for someone, anyone, and saw Minka coming up the corridor. "Lady Minka!" he said eagerly, bowing.

"Yes?" she said cautiously. Whatever had happened, she would *not* kiss him.

"I am Master Nares' lieutenant Wyeth," he began.

"Oh no," she breathed, knowing that he had agreed to take Adele. "What is it?"

"Geneve has been given a room on the third floor, but it is not—loaded. She needs the—bed drapes, and the—towels, and—"

"Oh, yes, we'll take care of her! Thank you, Wyeth!" Minka stopped a passing maid. "Please see that the room—which room?" she turned to ask Wyeth.

"On the third floor, at the very north end, past the plain door with no lock," he said firmly.

"Yes, have it made all ready, please," Minka told her.

"Yes, Lady Minka," she said, moving off.

Minka exulted, "Oh, yes, she'll need—how did you talk her into it, Wyeth?" He opened his mouth, but she went on, "Oh, that's perfect! She'll need—here, come with me." She took his fingers to make him follow her into a storage room, where she loaded him up with dishes, cutlery, soaps, and candles before ordering him up the stairs to the third floor.

Because the doors of both suites were standing open, both were soon stocked with essentials according to Minka's exhaustive requirements. She hugged Geneve repeatedly, lavishing praise on Wyeth for getting her this room—and a spare for someone who might need it later. Wyeth himself stood back in dazed disbelief at how well his blind foray into the fortress turned out.

“Oh, you need clothes, Geneve!” Minka said, looking into the empty wardrobe. “I can’t get you a uniform—Wyeth will have to do that—but I’ll have them bring up some off-duty wear for you.”

“Thank you,” Geneve whispered. “Minka, that’s so—”

“Fun! Isn’t it?” Minka grinned.

When she was done, and had swept away with her army of maids, Wyeth and Geneve looked around her abundantly furnished and adorned suite in quiet amazement. She turned to him, slightly embarrassed. “You certainly know how to get results.”

“It was Lady Minka,” he murmured.

“Thank you, Wyeth,” Geneve said.

“Whatever you need, come to me,” he urged.

“I suppose I’d better!” she laughed.

He smiled, taking a last look around, then bowed and left, closing the door behind him.

In the anteroom, he paused to look in the still-open door of the second room, all prepared as well. He thoughtfully closed the door, locked it, and took the key.

When he returned to the sparring grounds, he discovered that Commander Lyte had summoned him. Wyeth groaned in dismay—what terrible timing for him to leave the hilltop when the Commander wanted him. Bracing for a beatdown, Wyeth ran to the Commander’s temporary headquarters in the hilltop barracks, presenting himself to the guards at the door: “Wyeth responding to the Commander’s summons.”

He was allowed in, and Lyte looked up from behind a desk. “Wyeth responding to your summons, sir,” he said, saluting.

“At ease, Wyeth.” Lyte looked humorously sympathetic. “I hear you’ve been having difficulties with Lady Minka’s sister.”

Wyeth paused in consternation, not knowing what he could have heard. “It will be done, sir.”

“Well, I’d rather have you closer than a house—are you married?” Lyte asked.

“No, sir,” Wyeth responded truthfully.

“Good. Then I’d prefer your living in the fortress, if they can find a room for you. We’ve decided to split Nares’ duties between you and Nyland—you two will have to work out how you want to do that. You won’t be called ‘master’; your title will be Fight Instructor, with a rank of lieutenant. Your pay will also be increased to one [royal] and ten [silver pieces] a week, but that means we may need you after hours. And finally, you will never, ever spar with or ask to spar with Captain Efran. Are we clear on that?”

“Yes, sir!” Wyeth answered just as emphatically.

“Good. Dismissed,” Lyte said, smiling.

“Thank you, sir!” Wyeth almost cried in joy.

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Chapter 3

Wyeth ran the whole distance to the courtyard and down the switchback to his house. At the front door, he picked up the signboard with his name and broke it in two. Then he went inside. First thing, he heard female voices raised from the back room where the servant was staying, but he went right to his room to get his clothes and gear.

With all this in two bags slung over his shoulder, he paused in the main room to listen to the voices:

Peri: “—should be paying more anyway!”

Other: “Don’t be stupid! I don’t have to give you anything! I just agreed—[crosstalk]”

Peri: “—and all I have to do is—[crosstalk]”

Other: “[raucous laughter] All I have to do is tell him what *I’m* paying *you*!”

“Ah, so that’s the game,” Wyeth said, walking out.

Again, he ran all the way back up the switchback, this time with two full canvas bags. The guard who opened the gate for him said, “Heya, what do you have powering them legs?”

“Freedom,” Wyeth said, grinning, and there were answering affirmations.

Wyeth also ran up the two flights of stairs to the third floor of the fortress, although slower. With a pounding heart, he entered the anteroom, then turned to unlock the door on the left. He dumped the bags in the middle of the floor before going out to knock on the other door. “It’s Wyeth,” he said quietly.

Geneve opened the door. Before she could say anything, he said, “I must go to the grounds, but, thought to tell you that the Commander has ordered me to stay in the fortress, so, if you do not care, I am taking the other room. I am sure your lock can be fixed so that my key does not open yours, too. Can I—do things for you now?”

“No, thank you, Wyeth. I think I will enjoy having you next door,” she said, smiling slightly.

“I am glad,” he smiled. “To the grounds, then. Nyland and I are Fight Instructors,” he said with a touch of pride, then added, “I will not spar with you, either.”

“I understand,” she said. He nodded and turned away.

Minka, exuberant, flew into the second-floor workroom. “Oh, it’s so wonderful! The most wonderful thing!”

Four men—Efran, Estes, DeWitt, and Commander Wendt—raised their faces in smiling anticipation. Minka inhaled, then realized what she was about to tell them and froze with her mouth open.

“Yes?” Efran said, already laughing. The other men were still smiling, waiting.

“Never mind,” Minka said, turning out.

There was an outburst of laughter with calls to return. Minka turned back, smilingly embarrassed. “I—I’m sorry; it’s really nothing; I just realized. . . .”

“Come here,” Efran laughed, patting his leg.

“Nooo,” she said, wincing. Then her face cleared. “I’ll tell the Commander, then he’ll tell me what to tell you.”

Laughing objections followed, and Wendt said, “Minka, sweetheart, tell him now, especially if you think you’re betraying a confidence. He needs to know.”

The other men quieted in respect. Efran raised his brows at her. “Ohh,” she moaned, then sighed. “The good part is that Wyeth got Geneve a room in the fortress. It’s on the third floor where we thought the doors to the Destroyer were!”

Efran’s face went slack; DeWitt and Estes glanced at him. Then DeWitt said, “I heard that Nares’ common-law wife showed up with his children to claim his house. So it’s very good that Wyeth was able to get her a room here.”

Minka was staring at him. “Nares had a wife? He couldn’t! He married Geneve!”

Efran was still looking off, thinking, but Estes said, “Polonti in the wild don’t follow customs of the city, Minka. Nares wouldn’t have any regard for marriage.”

“Oh, but Geneve did! She’s—” Again she broke off.

“She thinks she’s pregnant,” Efran said.

Minka looked at him, nodding. “But Wyeth found her a beautiful suite on the third floor—there are two of them, two suites, actually, side by side—”

“He’ll need the other one,” DeWitt said. “Lyte wants him and Nyland in the fortress. They’re replacing Nares.”

Minka gaped at him, then. “Oh, I didn’t know all that. Well, he asked me to stock her suite, so we got both of them fixed up. They’re small but very nice. And I never knew they were there.”

“They weren’t,” Efran said. “That whole area was where the three doors, the two corridors, and the one room of the Destroyer were. But when I opened the box with the keys this morning, I found the two rooms.”

There was silence, then Minka said, “What box?”

“More from the barge,” Efran said, nodding at his feet.

She came around the table to look at the large pile beside his chair. "How did you get them?" she asked, so he had to explain about Heye bringing them up to the ledge in the cavern under the cold storage room.

She listened to that, then asked, "Can I help you look through them?"

"Yes," he said. "But it's too late today; we'll start on them tomorrow." So she went over to curl up on his lap. He reached over to pick up the headband from the table. "And that is for you from Barthelemon."

"Oh my," she breathed, and put it on, which brought out the glints of gold in her hair and some order to its disarray. "Thank you," she murmured, cuddling him. He put his arms around her, sighing.

DeWitt said, "Commander, this is when you say, 'I told you so.'"

"That would be redundant, son," Wendt said, and they laughed lightly, except Minka, who was busy cuddling Efran. But the headband got in the way, so she took it off and put it back on the table.

Efran shook his head slightly, then he had a disturbing thought. "Wyeth is the one who took Adele. Will he bring her to the fortress?"

"No," Minka said in a sleepy, derisive tone, eyes closed.

Efran glanced at the other men, smiling. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Because he's in love with Geneve," she sighed, half asleep.

The men grinned; Efran's brow furrowed. "How do you know that?" he whispered.

"Just look at the rooms," she breathed, scratching her nose.

"Look at the rooms?" he repeated.

"They're lovers' rooms," she murmured.

He sat back, thinking about that.

Suddenly she opened her eyes and sat up, looking at the Commander. "Oh!" She sprang up from Efran's lap, and he missed catching her before she was halfway to the door.

But Wendt said, "Minka, I don't need tea today; it's too close to dinner. But I would love a cup tomorrow."

"All right," she said, coming back to his chair as the men glanced at each other. "Can I walk you down to the dining hall?"

"I'll let Efran take me, and meet you there. Joshua may need you," he said.

"Oh!" she exhaled, and flew out of the room.

The men stared at Wendt. DeWitt finally said, "Commander, how did you know she was going to get you tea?"

Wendt laughed lightly, standing. "Minka's intentions flow out of her like a stream. She's completely transparent."

Now, Efran can take me to the nearest garderobe.”

“Yes sir,” he said, standing. Then he asked in some fear, “What . . . do you read from me, sir?”

Wendt paused, thinking. The others silently waited. Then he said, “Oatman.”

Efran blinked. “I don’t know who that is.”

“I remember,” Estes said. “That was before you made captain, Efran. Oatman was a member of the Red who was sentenced to seven years hard labor for the murder of a man when he was only—20 or so. That sentence breaks most men, you know. They don’t come out sane. Well, Oatman came out changed. He still wanted to serve, so they put him in the Green, then he was quickly promoted up to the Gold and the Red—”

“Where he died in a heroic stand against the brigands,” Efran said, remembering. “He wasn’t even supposed to be there, but he heard that the men were being overrun, so he went against orders. He saved—probably fifty men that day.”

DeWitt added, “He put the Cross on everything he owned. He never said a word; he just drew the Cross on his shield, his armor, his scabbard—everything. And he died under it.”

Efran’s eyes began watering. “I’m not there yet. I don’t have that—purity.”

They all looked at Wendt, who said nothing. Then Efran placed Wendt’s hand on his shoulder. “The nearest garderobe, or the easiest to find?”

“The one on the first floor,” Wendt said.

“Yes sir,” Efran said, walking out with Wendt’s hand on his shoulder.

Wyeth rushed through his duties that afternoon, agreeing with Nyland on everything he proposed about splitting up the men in two equal divisions for training. Then he doused himself with soap and water in the men’s bath house before running up two flights of stairs to change. (Only then did he discover the alcove in his bedroom and what it was for.)

With the dinner hour at hand, he nervously went over to knock on Geneve’s door. She opened it wearing a dress that Minka had given her. Wyeth’s courage almost failed him at that point, but he got out, “May I walk you to the dining hall?”

She nodded, smiling faintly, and he stepped back for her to emerge and turn again to lock her door.

Minka arrived in the hall with Joshua after Efran and Wendt were seated. Tearily, she sat beside Efran. “He fell out of his crib in the nursery because I wasn’t there,” she groaned, showing him the lump on Joshua’s forehead. “They’re going to put him in a crib on the floor from now on.”

Efran laughed, “That will work. Come here.” He took the baby, who grunted in delight, slapping him in the face. Minka nudged him with her knee, and he glanced over at Wyeth and Geneve walking in to sit at an isolated table. Noting her dress, Efran mentally withdrew her from active duty. That was the one unanswerable argument against women soldiers: men didn’t carry babies.

Carrying a plate for Tera as well as his own, DeWitt paused in between Efran and Wendt to murmur, “Wyeth did take the room next to Geneve. Adele is still at his house.”

Efran looked up. “Who with?”

“Peri, his . . . housemate. They weren’t married, and he evidently felt no compulsion to stay with her,” DeWitt said.

“Is she Polonti?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” DeWitt said.

Efran noted, “She might not have wanted to get married. Polonti women like to be free to trade up.” DeWitt snorted, moving off, and Wendt slowly nodded.

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Chapter 4

When Efran arrived at the workroom with the Commander the following morning (August 10th), they found Estes and DeWitt poring over maps. “What are you looking at now?” Efran asked, seating the Commander.

“Prospective well locations,” DeWitt said, glancing up. “Before Goadby starts constructing his plant here, he wants reassurances for a good, steady water supply.”

“The Passage?” Efran laughed.

Everyone else in the room shook his head. DeWitt explained, “It’s too much water, too fast flowing. Trenching a channel to the plots might have been possible early on, but it couldn’t be done now. And we can’t risk interfering with the mill operation.”

“Huh,” Efran said, sitting. Turning in his chair to the pile from the cavern, he said, “What—? Where are the rest of the containers? The pile’s half gone!” Estes and DeWitt looked over.

Wendt said, “Some opportunities just disappear if you don’t jump on them quickly enough.”

“Well—” Exasperated, Efran picked up a canister from the pile and twisted it open. Water gushed out, and he stood abruptly as water poured out over the table, the chair, and the floor. DeWitt and Estes had to grab up maps to prevent their getting soaked as water ran clear down the table and over all sides.

The canister finally ran out, and Efran stared at the gallons of water still streaming off the table from the 12-inch container. “What was in it?” DeWitt asked.

Looking at the empty pieces in his hands, Efran said, “Nothing. Water.” Shrugging helplessly, he tossed the empty halves of the canister into the trash basket and began moving his soaked chair out of the way for a less-wet seat.

Stites, standing sentry today, appeared at the door in restrained Polonti excitement. “Captain, prospectors have hit a gusher right off the main road—it’s still spewing water twenty feet up. They say it’ll be enough for Goadby’s and a community well, also.”

They all stared at him. “Thank you, Stites,” Efran said, then looked down. “The pile’s smaller still!” He began seizing containers to hand around to DeWitt, Estes and Wendt before taking one himself. None of them stopped to notice that the table and chairs were now dry.

The men began opening their containers all at once. Estes was the first to get his open. “It’s a fishing float—a bobber,” he said, raising it for their inspection. As no one immediately ran into the room with news about a bobber, Efran said, “Just put it on the table so we’ll remember it.” Estes nodded.

Wendt, having opened his container, said, “This is a doll.” They all looked over to see that he indeed held a child’s toy: a fine porcelain doll with a satin dress and head of rooted horsehair.

“Put it here with the bobber,” Efran nodded to DeWitt, who took it from the Commander’s outstretched hand to place on the table.

Efran and DeWitt were having a little more difficulty opening their containers. DeWitt finally unwrapped the last layer, unrolling a ball of cotton to hold up something shriveled. “It’s a rooted plant cutting,” DeWitt said.

“What?” Efran laughed. “Well, put it on the table.” When he did, Efran picked it up to scrutinize it, then shook his head: it was nothing he recognized.

While Efran was struggling with his exceptionally secure container, Estes said, “Hand me up another, Efran.”

Efran looked down beside his chair and stopped dead. “They’re gone. They’re all gone.”

There was a depressed silence as the men looked at the results of their efforts on the table. “Huh,” said DeWitt. He and Estes went back to their maps while Efran sat down beside the tool box again.

The problem was that the canister he held seemed to be all of a piece: he could see no seams nor fastenings that would indicate how it was to be opened. This alarmed him somewhat, as it reminded him of the box that held the keys to the Destroyer. Yet he was unwilling to risk breaking it.

Minka entered, then. “All right, Efran. . . . Where is he? Not here?”

“Over here,” he said, examining what might be a seam on the smooth cylinder he held.

“Oh.” She came around the table to watch. “What can I do?”

“The cutting on the table,” he nodded, and she turned to look. He went on, “I have no idea what it is, but I’d like for you to find a place to plant it. Be sure there’s room around it in case it’s something big.”

“All right,” she said, picking up the cutting to examine it. “Good thing you opened it now; it has leaves sprouting.”

The men looked up; she held it down for Efran to see. He muttered, “It didn’t have those a few minutes ago. Yes, you might want to go ahead and get it in the ground somewhere.”

“I’ll do that, then.” Pausing by Wendt’s chair, she said, “Can I talk you into coming with me, Commander?”

“I’d love to, Minka, but your new Commander is going to come drag me somewhere shortly. When he’s done with me, I’ll see if we can find you,” Wendt said.

“Well then, have fun.” She bent to kiss his cheek, then left with the sprig.

“I’m not at all upset that she kissed you but not me,” Efran said on the floor across the room.

“Good,” Wendt said.

“The drama,” breathed DeWitt.

Minka paused in the corridor. Since Joshua had fallen asleep, this might be a good time to see if Geneve wanted company. So she took a detour with her sprig upstairs to the third floor.

She opened the door of the anteroom to knock on the right-hand door. “Geneve? It’s Minka.”

The door opened, and Geneve looked at her with red eyes. Minka raised the mystery seedling. “Will you come help me?” she asked hopefully. Geneve laughed quietly at her, but nodded.

Peri rushed into Adele’s room. “Wyeth left! He took his things and left! You drove him out!”

Adele looked up from the pallet. “If you want me to stay, you’re going to have to give me a real bed.”

“What?” Peri demanded.

“You heard me,” Adele said, sitting up. “I’m not sleeping on this block of wood anymore. And if your man is gone, how exactly were you planning on paying your lease if not for me? I haven’t noticed you going to work.”

Peri gritted her teeth. “Show me how many royals you have left.”

Adele laughed derisively at her. “Get out.”

Peri stalked from the room and Adele rose to slam the door. So Peri withdrew to the main room, watching and smiling.

A few minutes later, Adele emerged from her room, dressed and primped. Since Efran had taken (most of) the royals she had lifted from Mouris, he had no reason to offer a reward for her now. Peri came out to look closely at her clothing. Adele sniffed, “I’m going out for a little while.” Pointedly, she turned to lock the door of her room and put the key in her bodice. All the while, Peri was carefully examining the drape of her clothes.

Adele swept out, and Peri watched out the window as she went down the street in the direction of Croft’s. Withdrawing from the window, Peri took a pin from her hair and quickly popped the lock of Adele’s door. A close look at Adele’s clothing had told Peri that she wasn’t carrying more than a few royals. So any more she had would be in this room.

Peri began searching with ruthless disregard of Adele’s scant possessions. What things of Adele’s that Peri liked,

she put to one side; what she didn't care for, she threw out the window. Not finding any money among Adele's adornments, Peri turned to the room itself, and found the loose floorboard within minutes.

From the hidden space under the floor, she found a small purse with five royals in it. "Is that all?" Peri cried. She ground her teeth at first, then laughed and took the purse.

She finished purging the room of everything belonging to Adele, either by taking it for herself or throwing it out the window. Then she pulled the empty wardrobe against the window to prevent entry through it. Finally, she changed clothes, adorning herself with one of Adele's scarves, and left to go shopping. She took care to lock the door behind her.

On the way to Croft's, Adele changed her mind, deciding to replenish her stock of royals before anything else. Since Mouris' plant shop was so close, she went there first. Entering, she found a couple of customers inside, so she waited, pretending to peruse the stock, until they had paid at the counter and left.

Then Adele walked up to the counter, smiling sardonically at the girl who had been asleep in Mouris' bed the first time Adele had plundered him. "Welcome to Mouris' Plant—" Dix began, then stopped, recognizing her as Loizeaux's newest courtesan, Minka, who had used Dix's chamber pot without emptying it.

"I need to see Mouris," Adele breathed at her, not threatening—yet.

"He's *dead*," Dix said, eyes narrowed and teeth clenched.

Adele laughed sarcastically at what she imagined to be a ploy, whereupon Dix screamed and climbed over the counter to pull her hair and scratch her face.

Caught unaware, Adele was unable to effectively fight back, so she covered her head and ran from the shop. The screaming little demon pursued her for forty paces or so, insuring a gathering of gawkers. Adele kept running clear to the main road where there was a crowd of men working.

Here she stopped, panting, to see that she'd lost the crazy blonde. But she still needed money. So she looked across the road at the notary shop. "Well, of course."

Straightening her clothes, Adele circumvented a bunch of men digging, some of whom leered at her. She went up the steps to open the notary's door with authority, causing the bell to tinkle stridently. Giardi, at the front counter, recognized her at once, and asked calmly, "What can I do for you?"

Adele leaned on the counter, exhaling. "I need money."

"Again?" Giardi asked with a troubled face.

Adele raised dangerous eyes. "Just get me the money box."

"I can't do that," Giardi said softly.

"Old people are so fragile. Their bones break so easily," Adele said.

"Efran would throw you off the Abbey Lands. Then where would you go?" Giardi asked gently.

Rolling her eyes, Adele went to the back room. She pulled two short ledgers off the shelves, but there was

nothing behind them. She turned impatiently to ask, “Where is the money box?”

Ryal said, “I hid it in a better place.” He was standing in the doorway between the back room and the bedroom.

Adele swished up to him. “Then you’d better find it.”

He looked down at her. “Have you really sunk to this—threatening two old people in their shop? Is this going to get you what you want?” His voice was sad and sympathetic.

Her jaw jutted out, but she didn’t have it in her to get rough with him. For one thing, she knew that although he was old—in his 80s—he was still pretty strong. So, exhaling in disgust, she walked out.

From the main road, she looked up the switchback to the fortress. Yes, that’s where she belonged.

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Chapter 5

Determinedly, Adele trudged up the switchback until she finally reached the gates at the top. The gate sentry looked at her mussed hair and scratched face skeptically. “Yes?”

Tired and sweaty, she panted, “I am Min-KA’s SISTER” in a manner promising unpleasantness if not given entry. He weighed that, then opened the gates for her.

She stalked up the fortress steps, brushing aside the door guard to cross the foyer and go down the corridor toward her old suite. But coming off the stairs right in front of her were her own sister and another woman. They turned in surprise as Adele lurched toward Minka: “Well, Sybil! Did you *really* think that you—AHHHH!” she screamed, because the woman had caught her extended finger to squeeze it in such a way that was incredibly painful.

Sinking to the floor at their knees, she continued screaming as sentries rushed up behind her, but did nothing. Finally Efran came off the stairs to look at the grouping. He gestured to Geneve, who released Adele’s finger. Adele remained on the floor, holding her hand and crying. Efran asked Geneve, “Did Wyeth bring her?”

“No,” Geneve replied. “He told Peri to get rid of her.”

“Ah,” he said, glancing down as Adele grabbed his legs to begin hoisting herself up. Tossing his hair out of his eyes, he looked over his shoulder at the two men behind him, who stepped up to take her by the arms and pull her, fiercely struggling, off him. Then he regarded Geneve. “How are you?”

“Fine, Captain. Thank you,” she said, composed despite the subtext of his question—*How are you feeling, being pregnant, and all?*

Minka said, “She’s going to help me find a spot in back for our mystery plant.” She held it up and he regarded the burgeoning leaves.

“Very good,” he said. He smiled slightly at them both, then told Geneve, “Wyeth is a good man”—the subtext being, *You need to be married.*

Her face reddened as she glanced down, nodding. His eyes turned to Minka, who looked back at him, glowing. He absorbed that for a moment, then turned to Adele hanging sullenly between the two men, loudly expressing her disgust. Efran stepped around her to whisper to one of the soldiers. The man nodded several times during the lengthy instructions, and Adele fell silent, trying to hear.

“What?” she demanded. “What do you think you’re going to do?”

Without replying, Efran went back up the stairs and the men began dragging Adele, screaming, down the corridor. (Coincidentally, these two were among the men who had glared at Minka when she had invoked the provision for Involuntary Servitude for Adele. Understanding had arrived for these two, albeit late.)

Minka’s brows shot up in alarm as she watched them take her sister into the cold storage room. But for now, Minka took Geneve’s arm. “All right, let’s go find the perfect spot. Efran said it will need room to grow.”

As they went out onto the back grounds, Geneve sighed, “You told him.”

Minka winced in guilt. “I’m sorry! I had to. I had to explain why I was furnishing the third-floor room for you. But he wasn’t mad or anything—he just felt bad about Nares.”

“Oh, I’m not blaming him for that,” Geneve said. “I just. . . .”

“He won’t tell anyone,” Minka said. “He’s got the closest mouth of anybody I know. It’s maddening sometimes.” Geneve laughed at that.

They were leaving the gardens and approaching the sparring fields near the fence. Wyeth, shirtless, was standing in front of a group of men as he explained certain techniques with the help of a volunteer. He caught sight of the women passing, and stopped dead to gaze at them (rather, at Geneve) smiling.

The women laughed to each other, which made his smile broaden, then his volunteer took advantage of the distraction to sweep Wyeth’s feet out from under him in a classic move. Wyeth shot up a hand to grab the man by the shirt and flip him onto his back. The women walked on.

They came to the southwest corner of the fence, and Minka looked around. There was nothing large growing near this corner, and only the men’s latrine and shower stalls (enclosed by a tall screen) were nearby, so it seemed a good spot. Since she had forgotten to bring either of the two new spades she had bought, she just knelt in the dirt to separate it with her hands, and work the roots gently into the soil.

“There now,” she said, standing and brushing off her hands. “Let’s see how it does here. It probably needs water.” The well was on the other side of the grounds, so she and Geneve turned leisurely toward it.

After placing the smooth canister in the center of the table with the bobber and the doll, Efran returned to his seat in the second-floor workroom. DeWitt glanced up. “Can’t get it open?”

“No, it’s open,” Efran said. Estes and DeWitt looked at him questioningly. “I just now realized that there is no container. This is it.” He gestured to the soft-edged cylinder.

All three men studied it. “What is it?” Estes asked.

“I have no idea. I guess we’ll have to wait to find out,” Efran said. “Oh, Adele’s back. Wyeth didn’t bring her; she just walked in. So I put her in the cavern below the cold storage room.”

The other two men regarded him as he swept debris off the work table into the trash basket, tossing his hair out of his eyes. He went on, “I’ll feed her breakfast and dinner; send some books down to her; check on her maybe once a day. But we’ll see if Heye can make any headway with her.”

“Heye?” DeWitt asked, squinting.

“The octopus who took Minka down for the box on the barge,” Efran said, glancing up. “She talked to Minka just fine, but I have trouble understanding her.”

“She’ll be scared down there by herself,” Estes said reluctantly.

“Heye or Adele?” Efran asked. Estes gave him a reproving look and Efran waved, “I know. That may help her.”

“Will she have a light?” Estes asked.

“Why would I send books down there without a light? Yes, she’ll have a light, and if you’re worried about her, you’re free to go down and look in on her, but if you’re not careful, she’ll be the one coming out and you’ll be stuck down there. Without a light,” Efran said. Estes waved in conciliation.

Far below them, Adele sat shivering in fear on the narrow stairway in the darkness. She listened to the gentle lapping of the water on the ledge somewhere nearby, but there was nothing else. She stilled her chattering teeth as best she could, straining to see . . . nothing.

Minutes later, the trap door above her opened, pouring such bright light down on her that she had to close her eyes and move down off the stairs. A man descended with a lantern, which he hung on a hook in the wall beside the short stairway. Then he lifted a hand, saying to someone above, “No, the plate and the ale first. Yes.”

Adele perked up as he backed down the stairway with a full plate of beef, potatoes, and greens with cutlery. This he placed on the stone floor beside the stairway, and Adele immediately sat with the plate on her lap. He reached up again, then placed a cup of custard and a bottle of Goadby’s beside her as well.

As she was eating, he went up the stairs again, then came back down with a short stack of books. These he also placed beside her. He went back up the stairs to have a short conversation with his cohort before one of them walked out of the closet. Adele paused to watch the trap door lower again, after which she resumed eating and drinking until it was all gone. Then she looked blankly at the yellow lantern light rippling on the dark water.

Some time later, the trap door opened again. Adele turned blank eyes to the short stairway to watch her sister descend in pants. Adele sneered, but Minka wasn’t looking at her; she was looking all around the cavern. Then she went up again, and Adele heard her talking to someone above. The trap door was shut again.

Shortly thereafter, light came through the opening once more. Adele, her back to the cavern wall, watched dully as another man appeared on the stairway lugging a folded mattress down behind him. This he carried off the stairs to place against the wall near her. Another man brought down bedding and pillows. A third man descended with a small folding table, but the chair was too big to fit through the opening, so it was removed while more conversation ensued.

Other things were brought down: a pitcher of water and cup, a basket of flatbread and fruit, another lantern and several candles in holders, a washbasin and ewer, filled, and cloths, towels, and extra clothing. Presently, a folding chair that did fit through the opening was brought down, as well.

Then Minka came down to survey the equipped cavern. Adele did not look at her or any of the accouterments she had provided. Apparently satisfied, Minka retreated up the stairway carrying the empty plate, custard cup, and bottle, then the trap door was replaced. Adele sat where she was to stare over the dark water.

In the workroom above, Efran sat staring at the bobber, the doll, and the cylinder in the center of the work table. Estes and DeWitt were conferring over maintenance of the garderobes, and Commander Wendt had been appropriated again by the new Commander Lyte. A messenger brought DeWitt a request for approval of the expenditure for glass and labor to replace the wall of the conservatory that had collapsed. DeWitt glanced at Efran, who continued to stare at the collection on the table, then gave his approval.

Caswall, on front door duty today, appeared at the doorway. "Captain, the fishmonger Shurtleff requests your ear."

Efran winced; Shurtleff was a contentious, abrasive, demanding man, but his fish were always fresh and good. "What does he want?" Efran asked.

"Eh, he's coming to blows with plotheolders over fishing the Passage. It's plentiful, but getting crowded and dangerous. Shurtleff had a net slit open and one leaseholder claims he robbed his son of his catch," Caswall said.

Efran's eyes shot to the bobber that had come from the barge in the cavern waters. . . . "Send him home; tell him I'm looking into his complaint and should have a solution soon." Estes and DeWitt glanced over at this bold promise.

"Yes, Captain." Caswall saluted and departed.

Efran stood to reach over and put the bobber in his pocket, leaving the room without a word. Estes and DeWitt eyed each other, then returned to the proposals for cleaning the garderobes. Efran began trotting downstairs; remembering his fall, he slowed to a walk.

He went to the front gates to request a horse and two men with fishing equipment. Mohr, the gate sentry, paused. "Fishing equipment, Captain?"

Efran glanced at him. "Yes. Rods, bait—whatever they need to catch fish," he said, knowing little about the occupation. All he'd ever done was spear fishing with arrows.

"Yes, Captain." Mohr passed along the request, and Efran toyed with the bobber in his pocket as he waited.

Presently, the horses and men, equipped as requested, came around front. Mounting, Efran asked, "Has anyone checked on the collapsed cavern recently?"

Bennard replied, "Not that I know of, Captain, since it was labeled a dangerous area." He had a rod and fishing basket attached to his saddle. Tourle, similarly equipped, nodded confirmation.

"We're going to go look at it," Efran said. They loped easily down the switchback, then turned east toward the

cavern about a mile off. Efran glanced down the main road at the well-digging operation in full force.

Before they even got close to the cavern, they saw the shimmer of water. Approaching, Efran raised a hand and they slowed about twenty feet from the edge. “Shrikey!” Bennard said. The collapse had expanded until what had once been a forty-foot opening was now a small, irregular lake, perhaps a hundred fifty feet at its widest.

“Wait here,” Efran said, then he spurred forward to the edge of the lake. He rode up to within a couple feet of the greenish water. The question was, did it still connect to the Sea? Moreover, how stable was the opening now?

He tested this by riding all along the grassy shoreline, searching the ground for cracks or signs of weakening under his horse’s hooves. The gelding left deep prints where it was muddy, but there seemed to be mostly rock under its feet.

After having completed the circuit back to where his men waited, Efran nodded in satisfaction. “Cast your lines; see if you catch anything,” Efran said, giving the bobber in his pocket to Tourle. He and Bennard dismounted immediately to pull out their rods. Efran also dismounted to look closely at the water, encouraged by the ripples and bubbles that he saw. He then wet his hair and brushed it back with a hand to keep it out of his eyes for a while.

Given little time to prepare for a fishing trip, the men had only crickets for bait, so this is what they used on their hooks. Still, minutes after casting, Tourle’s bobber vanished, and he pulled up a nice perch. He crowed over getting the first catch, but Bennard snagged a perch as well. He moved to the other side of the lake, catching a trout.

After less than an hour, the two had snagged six fish between them—two trout and four perches. Efran said, “All right, that answers our question. Take these to whoever—besides Shurtleff’s people—are trying to fish the Passage. Tell them the cavern lake is open for fishing by leaseholders only. Shurtleff gets to fish the Passage only. And make sure no one is trying to fish south of the tannery.” Besides settling the question of fishing rights, this should prevent any children from drowning in the Passage.

“Aye, Captain.” Tourle and Bennard loaded their gear and mounted with their catches. After they all got back to the plots, Efran detoured around the well-digging to arrive at Shurtleff’s shop while Bennard and Tourle rode on to the Passage.

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Chapter 6

Efran pulled up outside the fish shop, watching while Shurtleff argued with a customer about—something. After dispensing with his complainant, Shurtleff marched over to contend with the Captain. Before he could say much of anything, however, Efran leaned down from the saddle to tell him, “We are instructing all leaseholders to fish in the cavern lake east of here. You will have sole right to fish the Passage north of the mill, but you must stay away from the lake. All right?”

Shurtleff stilled in contemplation of this. “I get sole rights to the Passage?”

“Yes, but none to the cavern lake,” Efran repeated.

"I did not know there was a cavern lake," Shurtleff said, almost offended.

"That's just as well," Efran said, reining his horse around. Shurtleff turned away, satisfied.

From there, Efran went to the notary shop. After he had dismounted and tied his horse out front, he paused by the window to see Ryal watching him from the counter. Smiling, Efran entered. Ryal said, "I am writing up your portion of Barthelemon's account now, and I have questions."

"Yes?" Efran asked.

"Did the Destroyer speak to you?" Ryal asked.

"No, he had nothing to tell me; he merely opened my soul to see what was there, then left me spread out on the floor while he went on to other game," Efran said.

"Did it have a body?" Ryal asked.

"No, he merely assumed a shape that would terrify me into submission," Efran said.

"Most remarkable," Ryal murmured. Then he said, "Adele was just here, looking for my money box."

Efran said, "I hope she did not find it."

"No, I refused her, and she left," Ryal said.

"Well, I have her contained for the moment. But that's not why I'm here. I would like for you to post a notice that leaseholders are now permitted to fish in the cavern lake east of here," Efran said.

"The cavern is now a lake?" Ryal asked, astonished.

"Yes, and two of my men caught six fish in it today. So residents *only* are permitted to fish there, while Shurtleff gets sole claim to the Passage. I'd like for you to post a notice in your window to that effect," Efran repeated.

"Excellent. I'll do that," Ryal said, pulling out his writing supplies.

"Thank you. . . . How is Giardini?" Efran asked, smiling as he glanced toward the back.

"Doing well, Efran. Thank you," Ryal said, glancing up.

"Is she very tired today?" Efran asked, still smiling.

"No more than usual," Ryal said, looking over his glasses at him.

"Don't be overly demanding, Ryal," Efran advised on his way out, and Ryal turned red. Yes, Efran had the audacity to express interest in Lord Ryal's marital life, given that Ryal had recently consummated a very brief marriage with 21-year-old Adele.

Adele lay on the mattress, rolling back and forth in extreme boredom. As it was a small mattress, it took little

effort to roll onto it from the stone, roll off it on the other side, and then roll onto it again. Then she began kicking it to see how far she could make it travel.

Deciding that she didn't want to risk kicking it into the water and having to sleep on the bare stone, she desisted from that exercise to simply sprawl across it, singing, "I'm a prisoner of love, a PRISONER of that BASTAAAARD EFRAAAAAAAN—"

Her flailing hand found one of the books they had brought down for her, so she picked it up to look at the title: *The True and Certain Benefits of Demonstrating Courtly Manners in Difficulties, Whether by Accident of Nature or Fault of MisBehaviour*. Screeching in laughter, she flung the book into the water, listening to the plop in satisfaction.

She picked up another book, angling it toward the lantern to read the title, which was: *How to Impress upon Even the Most Irreligious with the Certainty of Hell in the Hereafter*. "Why wait till the hereafter for hell?" she chortled. "Efran will show it to you now." And she sent the book flying high in the cavern before landing with a splash.

Ready to fling the next book she grabbed, she glanced at the title: *An Essay on the Art of Ingeniously Tormenting; with Proper Rules for the Exercise of that Pleasant Art*. Pausing, she opened it randomly to read: "Oh the joy it is to have a good servant, cried Sophronia, who had not goodness of heart enough to be kind to any human creature, and whose joy must therefore arise from having a proper subject to torment! But with what ecstasy then, might the artful Livia cry out—Oh the joy it is to have a good husband! [p. 110] . . .

"You may complain of every hour your husband spends from you with any of his friends, as robbing you of his dear company. You may frequently repeat the following fond speech mentioned in the Spectator, 'You are all the world to me; and why should not I be all the world to you?'

"Be sure not to like or approve of any of your husband's friends; and, when in company with them, say so many half-rude things, as will keep him in a continual fright for you; and will make him hasten them away as soon after dinner as possible, to prevent your exposing yourself; and, perhaps, exposing him to a quarrel, in order to support your ill-manners." [p. 116, pub. 1753]

This book, then, she put aside for possible reading, but then flung every remaining book into the water just to hear the lovely sound of their drowning. Then she lay back on the mattress, wondering how long it was till dinner.

At that moment, there was the sudden sound of moving water, and a waterlogged book landed on her chest. Adele rose up with a cry. Then another soaked book came flying through the air toward her, at which she screamed, covering her head.

She scrambled up to the top step of the ladder, watching the arm of a giant octopus lift another book to fling it upon the ledge. Adele continued screaming, now pounding on the underside of the trap door. The creature, seeing her on the ladder, apparently aimed the next book at her there, so Adele descended the ladder to run screaming to the other end of the ledge, against the rocks.

The next two books landed against the rocks beside her, then there were no more to fling. Seeing that, Adele stepped out from the rocks to taunt, "Ha ha ha! You're all out of books!"

Whereupon one giant arm swept the ledge. Lighting upon the massy remains of a wet book, Heye picked it up to fling it at the rocks, narrowly missing the prisoner. She picked it up and threw it back in a rage, screaming,

“That’s not funny! SHUT UP!”

There was something permeating the air in the fortress on this sultry August night. Lanterns were placed all around the hall as usual, but tonight the tables were lit by the soft glow of candles. The main dish was pasta with a meat sauce, and surprisingly, wine. The music of the spheres was almost audible as children ate quietly, married couples deferred arguments, and lovers sat close together.

Efran, not caring for pasta, ate only half his plate before bending his face to Minka’s neck. She adored pasta, but adoring Efran more, she turned her face to his. He rose from the table; she got up to go with him, and he barely refrained from carrying her back to their quarters.

Across the hall, Geneve and Wyeth ate quietly. That is, Geneve ate quietly; Wyeth stirred the pasta around his plate, too much on his mind to try to figure out another strange dish that Southerners called food. A few other people around the hall kept a wary eye on them; more than one were men who felt she’d made a mistake marrying Nares and didn’t want her to repeat that mistake with Wyeth.

Her brother Gabriel was also watching, but without antagonism. He liked Wyeth, but he could see how vulnerable Geneve was right now, and he didn’t want anyone taking advantage of her. Still, Wyeth didn’t have the god complex that Nares seemed to have; he was far more humble and genuinely concerned for her well-being. Yes, Gabriel could accept Wyeth, if that’s who she really wanted. Gabriel just couldn’t see that she did, yet.

Done with her dinner, Geneve stood, and Wyeth bolted up. She looked down at his nearly full plate. “Don’t you want to finish your dinner?” she asked.

“I’m not hungry,” he said as his stomach growled.

She laughed weakly. “I’ll sit with you if you want to eat.”

“No, I don’t want to eat,” he said, breathing deeply.

She looked away from the hunger in his eyes. That’s how Nares got her into bed, with that look of hunger. Now she realized that Nares’ look was practiced to the point of testing: how subtle could he make it and still achieve his desire? But Wyeth’s hunger was raw and genuine.

“Well, I’m—pretty tired. Minka kept me pretty busy today,” she said, turning away with a candle from the table.

“I will walk you up,” he said, keeping to her side.

As they left the hall together, a few men threw down their forks in exasperation. Gabriel dropped his head, smiling. It looked like Wyeth would be the one chosen, which was fine.

In the third-floor anteroom, Geneve unlocked her door, then looked back vaguely to say, “Good night.”

“Good night,” he repeated, standing there until she closed the door gently in his face. That extinguished what little light there was. So he found the other door in the dense darkness, and had to stop and think why the handle wouldn’t turn. Then he remembered that there was a thing called a *key*, which he found, surprisingly, in his pocket, still on the ring. And he used this to make the door open.

He felt his way to his bed, nicely made up with sheets and pillow and coverlet by Minka's crew. But he preferred the room with the window, and the soft blue lights of the night. So he lay down on the wooden floor of the receiving room to suffer.

Geneve undressed for bed and climbed between the sheets, truly grateful for Minka's kindness, and Wyeth's, in finding her this very nice room when she was facing homelessness. She liked Wyeth—he was very kind and sincere—but she didn't think she was up to taming another wild Polonti. Their culture was so different. Some differences she could accept, but not multiple wives and children coming out of the background. No, she'd better look among her own people. She rolled over to pretend to go to sleep, but left the candle burning.

Wyeth lay under the starlight in agony. He couldn't endure much more of this. If she rejected him, that was one thing, but the hope that she might accept him taunted him every moment of the day.

Finally, he sat up, breathing hard. "Find out, and begin it or end it."

He stood on his feet and went to open the door to the anteroom. Then he went to the next door to knock.

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Chapter 7

From her bed, Geneve heard the light knocking. She got up with the candle to go open the door.

Wyeth stood there, looking at her with red eyes. He tried once or twice to speak, but couldn't find the words in her language to express coherently what he wanted to say. So he just looked at her.

Geneve swallowed, and asked, "Are you married?"

"No. Peri wouldn't marry me," he said.

"Do you have children with her?" she asked with difficulty.

"No," he said.

"Are there other women or children in the background? Do you have an obligation to another family?" she asked, which questions were harder still.

His brows drew down. "No. I have spent my life fighting. I—have had no women but one or two, for pay. They—do not want someone who has no rank and no money. I have only my body and my devotion to give," he said, struggling.

Tears in her eyes, she put the candle down on a side table and pulled him inside. He gasped, drawing her close, but she drew back before he could kiss her. "One more thing," she said shakily. "I . . . may be pregnant."

He stared at her for a moment. "Then I will make sure you are."

She gasped in laughter, kissing him, and he engulfed her. Before he could sweep her back to the bed, she said, “You have to marry me.”

“No,” he said, and she looked at him. “*You* have to marry *me*,” he said firmly, and she seized him around the neck, laughing again.

The following morning, August 11th, Wyeth asked for, and received, an hour off to take Geneve to the notary for a marriage license. Normally, the issuance of a marriage license after the death of a spouse required a waiting period, but since Nares had a common-law wife whom he neglected to tell Geneve about, Ryal ruled her first marriage invalid and registered the second at once. And Wyeth was achingly proud to pay him for the service out of his own pocket.

Geneve was quietly happy, but Wyeth was walking on air. At the fortress, he left her downstairs with a proprietary kiss, then took the marriage license up to Estes’ room. Entering around the door sentry, he announced, “Geneve and I are married.” He showed them the proof, without which he knew they wouldn’t believe him. All three of these men, the highest administrators at the fortress, were married, and all of them to Southern women.

Efran, Estes and DeWitt smiled and congratulated him. Efran said, “Prepare for a deluge of gifts from Minka.”

Wyeth looked at him seriously. “Lady Minka has been very kind.”

Efran nodded, eyes misting. “That’s just the way she is.”

Downstairs, Minka, unaware, had just entered the foyer when she spotted Geneve. The moment she looked at her, Minka gasped in delight. Geneve exhaled in laughter. “How do you—? Never mind; yes, we’re married.”

“Oh, Geneve, he loves you so much. I’m so glad,” Minka said, squeezing her. Then she dragged her to Doane’s cubicle. “Good morning, Doane. How much do you have down here? Efran wants Geneve and Wyeth to have a marriage gift of—fifty royals.”

“Minka!” Geneve gasped.

Aggravated, Minka said, “That’s how much *Mouris* got for being stupid, so of course I can give that to you!”

While Geneva stared at her, Doane said, straight-faced, “I’ll get it and have it down here for them next time they stop by, Lady Minka.”

“Just Minka. Thank you, Doane.” She turned out of the cubicle, thinking. “What do you need?” she asked Geneve.

“Nothing, Minka, truly,” Geneve said pleadingly, which Minka altogether disregarded.

Gabriel came down the corridor to the foyer, then. He smiled at his sister, and Geneve walked over to embrace him. He told her, “If you feel up to it, Commander Lyte has some clerical work that he needs help with.”

“Of course,” Geneve said.

Minka watched them go out the front doors together, then she went down the corridor to look in on Joshua in the nursery. He was still asleep. With a heavy heart, she glanced toward the cold storage room. Then she turned toward the stairway, contemplating the best way to get what she wanted.

When she appeared in the doorway of the second-floor workroom, the men looked up from their seats. “Geneve and Wyeth are married,” she said, making a point to be calm and adult about it.

They smiled, and Efran said, “Yes, we just heard about it from Wyeth himself.”

“Good! You . . . gave them a small gift,” she said, prevaricating only slightly.

“Which was not less than fifty royals, I’m sure.” He was raising his arms toward her, but she, perhaps guiltily, walked right over to kiss Wendt’s cheek. “Good morning, Commander. Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“A little later, Minka. Thank you,” he said.

She nodded, then looked at her husband’s expectant gaze. She went over to lean down to kiss him, but he pulled her down to his lap. Resting in his arms, she murmured, “I feel bad for Adele.”

“No,” he said. “Whatever you’re about to ask, the answer is no.”

She raised up to plead with him, “She can’t stay in the cavern all the time; that’s not good for her. She needs sunlight and fresh air. Can I just—bring her out to the gardens a little while each day?”

DeWitt raised his eyebrows at him and Estes sat back, watching. Efran smoothed back her tousled hair. “Yes. I’ll send two men to bring her out and walk with you both. But the minute she starts haranguing you, she goes back to the cavern. First thing, she’s going to learn to be civil to you. And that means calling you ‘Minka’ instead of ‘Sybil.’”

“All right. Thank you. I’ll go out to the gardens to wait for them to bring her. And . . . you can cut your hair however you like,” she conceded heavily, brushing his hair back with both hands.

“If I can find Detler, or someone to do it,” he smiled back at her.

Rising from his lap, she caught sight of the doll on the table. It was a Polonti baby girl in a sweet white smock. “Oh!” she said, as if someone had hit her in the stomach. She picked up the doll to lovingly caress its dress and hair, and Efran lowered his watering eyes.

“This is for Geneve,” she said in conviction, and carried it out. She took it up to leave it at Geneve’s door, then went down to the gardens to wait for Adele.

After she left, the workroom was silent. Then Wendt asked, “Why are you crying, Efran?”

“Ah,” he said, sitting up and wiping his eyes. “Minka wants a baby. Her own baby.”

“Then who is Joshua’s mother?” Wendt asked, brow wrinkling.

Efran put his head in his hands. “Adele,” he choked out. And he told Wendt, Estes, and DeWitt how that had come about. He finished, “It was a very difficult birth. She almost died, but Bethune saved her, and Joshua. That was after Adele had tried to abort him, by the way. She doesn’t know that he survived and we don’t want her to.”

Wendt digested that, then said, "I'd like to see her."

Efran froze for an instant, then whistled shortly, and the sentry at the door looked in. "Captain?"

"Yes, Ellor. Have Adele brought up from the cavern," Efran said.

"Captain." He saluted and moved away.

Efran sat back in his chair, looking at the cylinder all alone in the middle of the table. *Teach me what I do not see*, a voice whispered from the past. Whenever he heard those silent whispers, it was always a remnant of Scripture that Therese had tried to teach him, but he didn't remember where this bit was from or what it meant. [Job 34:32] He pulled a random parchment toward him and unfolded it.

Minutes later, two men entered the room with Adele, suspicious and sullen, between them. They saluted, and one said, "Shane and Hawk reporting with Adele, Captain."

Efran said, "Thank you, gentlemen. In a few minutes I want you to take her down to the gardens where Lady Minka is waiting for her. You're to walk with them as long as the lady wants, except, if Adele becomes abusive toward her in any way, you're to take her right back down to the cavern. If she calls her 'Sybil,' you're to take her back down. Upon any haranguing, blaming, or disrespect, take her down. But wait just a moment before you leave."

"Yes, Captain," Shane said.

Efran took up the meaningless parchment to study it, and there was silence in the room. Estes and DeWitt were genuinely occupied with their own work. Adele glanced around, seeing nothing to enlighten her. Then Wendt said, "Hello, Adele."

She looked at him, frowning, then glanced at Efran, who was deeply involved with the parchment in front of him. Looking back at Wendt, she regarded his dark glasses, and her jaw went rigid. Then she looked at Efran to say derisively, "I don't want to walk in the gardens with Sybil."

He glanced at her, then looked at Wendt. When he said nothing, Efran nodded to the men. "Take her back down, then. But let Minka know not to wait for her."

"Captain," Shane saluted, and they turned away with her.

When they were safely away, Efran leaned back and said, "There you have it, Commander. Adele in a nutshell."

"Did she recognize me?" Wendt asked.

"Not at first, but yes," Efran said.

"Interesting," Wendt murmured.

DeWitt asked, "What do you read from her, sir?"

"Anger, obviously. But there's something else deep underneath—fear, I think," Wendt said.

“She chews up anyone who tries to help her,” Efran said. “I’d say Wyeth had a narrow escape, marrying Geneve.”

“Geneve. Isn’t that Minka’s guardian who killed Clonmel?” Wendt asked.

“Yes,” Efran said, knowing the significance that would have to the Commander.

A little while later, Minka, distraught, appeared in the doorway again. “Oh, Efran, I should have known. Adele doesn’t want to walk with me. Let the men walk her around in the gardens for a while. I don’t have to be there at all.”

He hesitated, but nodded. “We’ll let her cool off in the cavern today, and then I’ll let them take her out tomorrow,” he said, looking at her through his hair.

“Thank you.” She left quickly, which peeved him. But in a little while, Routh, one of the soldiers that Detler had trained to cut hair, came up with his comb and shears to give the Captain a decent cut. While he was there, DeWitt and Estes had him cut their hair and the Commander’s as well. Routh found a broom to clean up after his work, and they paid him as Efran had stipulated.

In the cavern below them, Adele was sitting on the short stairway, saying, “I just didn’t want to go look at the stupid gardens. So? What do you know, anyway? You’re just a slimy sea slug.” So Heye raised her siphon and squirted her thoroughly.

“Stop that!” Adele screamed. Then she went silent as if listening. After a pause, she said, “What do you mean, I can get out? How?”

She turned her head in thought, then said, “Ohhh. Yes, I see. Yes, that would be easy.”

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Chapter 8

As it had been six days since the Abbey had received a letter from Justinian in Eurus, Efran was beginning to feel a twinge of concern. After all, this General Shrubsole (reputedly of kitchen experience) had attained the throne by violence following the death of Cennick. So Efran was very glad when Minka, late in the afternoon of August 11th, appeared in the second-floor workroom waving a letter from him.

“Since you’re going to demand to read it yourself, I won’t bother to ask,” she announced, laying it open on the table before Efran. “No one else read it before me.”

“Good,” he said, taking it up. He read out loud for the benefit of Estes, DeWitt, and Commander Wendt:

““My dearest little pumpkin: [Here Efran had to pause for the laughter to subside.]

““WELL. What an interesting week this has been. General Shrubsole, who had been ruling this week, was hanged for treason by declaration of the exalted Council of Eurus, who found that he was entirely mistaken in

putting Councilor Alexcenah to death for the murder of Surchatain Cennick, as letters were found by the late Councilor highly praising the late Surchatain and wishing him a long rule. SO, for the time being, the Council as a body is ruling, led by the exalted High Councilor Rounsefell, whom all agree has the acumen and impressive beard to eventually rule alone, if he can stay alive.

““Oh, Minka, my dearest little bunch of blueberries! I hope you will never shift from the adorable thing you are now.

““With many kisses and much love,

““Your Pining Justinian””

Efran almost threw down the letter as he whistled. Ellor leaned in the doorway. “Captain?”

“Get Truro up here. He’s in Towner’s unit,” Efran ordered.

“Yes, sir!” Ellor disappeared.

In restrained excitement, DeWitt said, “You think he’s sent something to Schmolck’s shifting shop for you.”

“Me or Minka. Yes,” Efran said. To Wendt, he explained, “This is a middleman for black market goods, or just something you want someone else to get without any interference. We have a man who can find him.”

Wendt nodded. “Clever.”

When Truro arrived, Efran told him, “I hope it’s not too late in the day for you to find Schmolck. Justinian in Euris sent him something to hold for me or Minka.” Estes leaned over to hand him a money pouch.

“We’ll go look, Captain,” Truro said, saluting. At Efran’s nod, he left at a run.

Then Efran looked at Minka, who had a slightly disturbed, contemplative look. “Minka?”

She looked back to him, mildly troubled. “I’m trying to decide if it’s better being a little pumpkin or a bunch of blueberries.”

“Oh, a little pumpkin,” Efran said, smiling in remembrance of actually seeing little pumpkins on the vine.

DeWitt frowned in considered objection. “Blueberries are sweeter.”

Estes thought out, “Pumpkins are more versatile. They can be served as a vegetable or a dessert.”

“I don’t think I’d care for pumpkin jam, thank you,” DeWitt said righteously.

Laughing, Efran looked over to Wendt. “Do you have an opinion in this argument, Commander?”

He frowned slightly. “If I had to compare Minka to a fruit, I would have to say a peach.”

“Yes,” Estes said.

"I can't argue with that," DeWitt admitted.

"Come here, my peach," Efran said, patting his lap.

"No. You come to dinner," she said, pulling on his hand. She turned around to take hold of the Commander with her other hand, and he did not argue.

Late that evening, Truro got Efran out of bed to receive the letter from Justinian that had been placed with Schmolck. It read: "Rounsefell intends to support his bid for rulership with the Abbey Treasury, and claim it under the Provision for Wronged Husband, wife is Lady Leila."

Taking a sconced candle, Efran went to the library to open the old book of the Law of Roman and turn pages. Under "Family Law," he found the Provision for a Wronged Husband: "A husband whose wife has been seduced may claim satisfaction from the lover, if he is positively identified in public trial. A poor lover shall be flogged 20 strokes in the public square; a rich lover shall forfeit half his wealth to the wronged husband, who shall decide which punishment is merited. The notary or ruling official of the district in which the lover resides shall provide the trial venue and the accounting. The punishment of the wife shall be entirely at the discretion of her husband."

Efran lifted his face to gaze at the array of books before him in the warm candlelight. The rule was ironclad; he was unquestionably guilty, and Leila would no doubt remember him as well as he remembered her. Because of Efran's adultery, Rounsefell was about to obtain by the Law what no one had obtained by force in hundreds of years: half the Abbey Treasury.

He went back to bed to hold Minka, but did not sleep.

In the morning, while Minka went off to tend Joshua and the chickens, Efran took Justinian's note up to the second-floor workroom. All three of the other men—Estes, DeWitt, and Wendt—were there, so Efran had no excuse for waiting to drop the load of very bad news on them.

He stood at the table where they were working, and said, "We have to begin dividing up the Treasury and the monies we have on hand. I owe half of it all to Rounsefell. He will use it to secure the throne of Euris."

The other men looked at him, stunned. Clearing his throat, he read Justinian's secret letter. Then he sat and waited, looking aside with red eyes.

DeWitt began hesitantly, "I suppose there's no doubt . . . ?"

"None at all," Efran said, not looking up.

"I don't know where to start," Estes said, turning to look at the ledgers behind him.

Efran looked at the accounting books lining the shelves. "Just—take half of everything, and inventory the Treasury. Ryal will be responsible for the final accounting."

"Is that in Roman's Law?" Estes asked.

"Yes. I looked it up," Efran said. "The trial is public, here."

Numbly, Estes rose to begin pulling ledgers from the shelves. Then he paused. "I have no idea how to value the items in the Treasury."

Efran exhaled. "Then—let's leave that for Ryal to determine. We'll just split up the monies. That alone will be enough for him to sweep aside all opposition." Dismally, Estes nodded. They were all thinking about the projects that would have to be delayed or aborted now, and the families who would lose the assistance they were receiving.

Minka appeared at the doorway. "I just stopped by to ask. . . ." She trailed off, looking at their faces.

Efran came over to take her hand. "Come walk with me, Lady." She studied him in alarm.

Walking in the gardens, he told her what was about to happen. She took it stoically. "All right," she whispered, when he had told her all.

As they were going back inside, a sentry stopped Efran. "Captain, we fed Adele breakfast, and she requested to walk the gardens with a soldier."

"Yes. Two," he stipulated; the man saluted and trotted off. Efran went back upstairs to help Estes with the accounting; Minka went to the keep to kneel in front of the crucifix.

Bennard and Tourse were assigned to walk with Adele today. (Tourse, keenly sardonic, was continually afflicted by being confused with Tourle, the mild-mannered medic, to the point that Tourse threatened to change his name to "Scourge.")

Adele, freshly bathed and demurely dressed, walked with her head down in sorrow, or looking up longingly at the sunshine and blue sky. "How I took for granted the fresh air, the color, the light . . ." she whispered.

Tourse rolled his eyes but Bennard said, "It can't be for long, lady."

She laughed sadly, a catch in her voice. "Efran has set no time. I don't know how long I will be confined to the tomb."

"Perhaps you might alleviate that by laying off the robberies, dear girl," Tourse offered.

Bennard turned on him, but Adele laughed lightly, "So I have been accused—by yet another man who used me."

"I shall endeavor to make your incarceration less dreadful, lady," Bennard vowed.

And Tourse muttered, "Sap." But Adele aimed her large blue eyes at Bennard, and he was slain.

That afternoon, Efran received the official notice from Lord Rounsefell of the accusation made against him, and that the wronged husband demanded a trial at the Abbey fortress in three days—on August 15th. At almost the same time, Efran received an urgent summons from Ryal at the notary shop.

So Efran took a horse down to the shop, and entered to be met by Ryal, waving the same notice sent to him by Rounsefell, which the notary was instructed to post for public view. "Efran! What—what is—"

"It's true," Efran sighed. "You must preside, and find me guilty, and oversee the division of the Abbey monies and Treasury."

Giardi came out from the back room at this time; Efran smiled at her, but desisted from his game of flirtation. Ryal said, “The trial is public, which means that anyone can come. Where do you propose to hold it?”

“In the dining hall of the fortress. It’s the largest single room there,” Efran said.

“Efran, I—I—” Ryal floundered.

“As I told you, I am a sinful man,” Efran said tightly, looking off. “I am deeply sorry that you and Giardini and everyone in the Abbey Lands must suffer for what I’ve done. But there is no way around the Law. It rules, and I must abide,” he shrugged.

“Efran, we are praying for mercy,” Giardi said with tears.

“Thank you, lovely lady,” Efran said, smiling again. But his eyes were dry. He turned back toward the door. “We expect them in the afternoon of the fifteenth. I will send a carriage for you.” Then he left, and Giardi fell on Ryal. But he posted the notice in his window for public view as demanded.

While Ryal was doing this, he brooded over the subtlety of the attack—Eurus did not follow Roman’s Law, but the Book of Notary Rules, which had no such provision for a wronged husband. Turning Efran’s own Law against him in his own district was devastating.

As Ryal thought on this, a sudden shock rose from his feet to his head—there was a further implication of this trial. Although it was a civil, not a criminal case, for Efran to be found guilty would cause him to be stripped of his charter and his title. Unless Minka divorced him, she would share his expulsion, and the Abbey, as it now stood, would cease to exist.

Ryal stood sweating over this likely outcome. “I must warn him,” he whispered. But—must he? Would it help Efran prepare or merely destroy him before the trial even got underway? Knowing the answer to that, Ryal decided to say nothing unless it became necessary.

As word spread about the upcoming trial, DeWitt had to assure the new Commander, Lyte, that his men and operations would be prioritized. Most all of the men in the army who heard about it considered it a sneaky legal ploy—who among them *hadn’t* bedded a married woman now and then? Therefore, they worried not at all about its effect on them. Likewise, newlyweds Wyeth and Geneve remained largely in their own untouchable world of light and promise.

But others were watching closely. Goadby held off on construction of his second plant; laborers stopped work on the well until they should be guaranteed pay, and Surchatain Webbe of Westford began making aggressive noises from his rented house.

Adele asked to be walked daily in the gardens, which Efran allowed, always with two guards. One of the guards rotated daily, but Bennard stuck with her faithfully every day. Soon, they were murmuring like lovers, and scheming like outlaws. When he reluctantly returned her to her cavern cell on August 13th, they shared a quick kiss.

Upon descending the short stairway and watching the trap door close above her, Adele turned to see a few wet boxes sitting on the edge of the ledge. Mistrustfully, she went over to look at them, then kicked them back into the water, watching in satisfaction as they sank.

During the stressful wait for the trial, Minka divided her time between Joshua, the chickens, and the keep. She knew that Efran couldn't endure any comfort from her right now.

By August 14th, Estes was able to report to Efran that their available monies totaled about 24,000 royals, half of which would guaranty Rounsefell the largest short-term fighting force on the Southern Continent. But with some overdue budget trimming, and selling off some of the remaining Treasury, Estes could pretty well insure that essential Abbey needs would be met.

Finally, the day of the trial arrived—August 15th—and Rounsefell's entourage was admitted to the Abbey fortress.

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Chapter 9

As expected, there was an overflow crowd for the trial, so DeWitt arranged the seating accordingly. The accused, Efran, was to stand on a small dais at the front left of the hall, and the primary witness against him, Lady Leila, on a like dais at the front right of the hall. Seated facing them on the front row from the center outward were Ryal as judge, then to his left Estes, DeWitt, Lyte, Coxe, Wendt and his handler tonight, Clough. Efran had asked that Minka be spared the scrutiny of front-row seating.

To Ryal's immediate right were Lord Rounsefell and members of his entourage in descending importance. In fact, he had so many attendants that they filled the entire second row as well. The rest of the hall was packed with Abbey notables and residents, the most prominent of which DeWitt endeavored to have seated close to the front. Also watching were messengers and subordinates of Rounsefell's antagonists for the throne. Justinian was not here, having his own sources of information. Minka, left to her own devices, stood on a crate to watch from the very back.

Rounsefell was admirably suited to the rôle of wronged husband, noble lord, and aspiring Surchatain all in one—he was tall and warlike, with fierce Danish features and impeccably groomed reddish brown hair and beard. His luxurious robe made Abbey wear look plebeian in comparison. His attending staff and noble friends looked with malicious satisfaction on the Abbey Lands, the fortress, the Polonti, and the outlook of the proceedings.

Efran, to distance the honorable men who served in the Abbey army from this trial, declined to wear his uniform. Instead, he wore his blue serge suit. But he disdained putting on a nice shirt and necktie, wearing instead a dark gray work shirt. He considered forgoing the jacket altogether, but decided to wear it to cover the sweat stains under the arms of the work shirt.

Standing on his dais, he looked calmly over the audience to his public humiliation and the plundering of his fortress. He turned his eyes to Leila, admiring her beauty and grace in what was to be a humiliation of her as well. She had luscious red-gold hair that flowed over her shoulders almost to her waist, fine features, and unforgettable green eyes.

She looked back at Efran, then down at Ryal. "May I have a moment to study this man closer?" The audience stilled at this unusual request.

"Yes, Lady Leila," Ryal replied. As she stepped off her dais to start toward Efran, he left his corner as well, and

they met in the middle in front of Ryal. Rounsefell stood threateningly, and Ryal half-turned to say sternly, “All parties must remain seated throughout the trial. Those who disregard the judge’s instructions will imperil their case, according to Continental-wide protocol.” Ryal was most anxious to find an excuse to nullify the proceedings. Rounsefell, however, heard and condescended to sit again.

Leila, about six feet from Ryal, turned her back to the audience in speaking to Efran. As he looked down at her, she whispered, “Now I remember why I had to make love to you.”

He almost smiled. “I never had anyone so beautiful as you.”

“Oh, Efran, I’m so sorry,” she said.

“You will be very rich after tonight,” he consoled her.

She rolled her eyes. “Actually, I’m not staying around for my husband’s punishment. How can I get out quickly?”

Hardly moving his lips—because he faced the audience—he said, “The door on my right hand goes into the kitchen. When you enter, the door to your right opens into the side grounds, and the path that the grocers take. Go left on that path; follow it to a small gate that gives out to the switchback.”

Receiving that information, she turned back to Ryal. “I request to speak to my maid.”

“Yes, Lady,” Ryal replied immediately. Turning to the audience, he said, “The lady’s maid may approach her.”

So a young woman worked her way up from midway back and trotted to Leila, who whispered instructions to her. The maid hastened around Efran to enter the kitchen, and Leila resumed her stand on her dais, as Efran did his.

Minka, watching from her crate in the back, saw exactly what had just happened: Leila gave her maid instructions for escape that Efran had just given her. There was no earthly reason for the maid to be sent to the quiet, empty kitchen—except to man the back door. So Minka began working her way to the front toward the kitchen door, intending to make sure the lady’s escape route was clear.

Apparently Rounsefell’s men thought this as well, for one of them got up to start following the maid. Minka froze. Ryal’s head shot up, and he barked, “Sit, sir! You do not have permission to roam.”

The man gestured toward the kitchen. “But, she—”

“If the lady requested a drink of water, then I will allow her maid to get it. You must sit down at once or I will have you removed from the hall,” Ryal ordered. Rounsefell beckoned his man back, and Ryal watched with flinty eyes as he returned to his seat. Minka slowly resumed her stealthy walk.

“*Harumph!*” Ryal cleared his throat in aggravation, then he stood and turned to address the audience: “We now begin the proceedings to determine the guilt or innocence of Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, who stands accused of wronging Lord Rounsefell by lying with his wife the Lady Leila in the year eighty-one forty-six from the creation of the world”—eight years ago.

“First,” Ryal said, “I am obligated to direct a welcome to the esteemed Councilors of Eurus, Uxbridge and Alverstroke. Please rise and be welcomed, sirs.” Two men in the second row wearing elegant robes with fussy

purple ribbons rose to nod to Ryal, then turned to bow to the audience so as to be recognized by everyone. Facing the front again, they smiled maliciously at Efran as they sat.

Ryal turned to reseal himself at his table on the front row, facing the defendant and primary witness. The notary then waited for the amanuensis, seated at his own small table, to indicate his readiness to transcribe the trial. When he looked up to nod, Ryal continued, "The witness and the accused shall be constrained by oaths. Lady Leila, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this trial?"

"Yes," she replied.

Ryal said, "Lord Efran, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this trial?"

"Yes," Efran replied.

"Very good," Ryal said, arranging the notes in front of him. One of those pages contained Lady Leila's written assertion that Efran had been her lover. However, the statement was neither notarized nor made under oath, so today's proceedings took precedence. Reluctantly, Ryal began: "Lady Leila, can you identify this man, Lord Efran, as the man with whom you had sexual relations in the year eighty-one forty-six?"

Efran glanced down, then steeled himself to look at her. She turned her green eyes to him. Looking at his resolute face, it dawned on her that her testimony was essential to this trial, to the ruin of her one-time lover and the enriching of her husband, whom she was leaving this very night—with the help of the man she was about to destroy. Being a woman who seized what opportunity any moment afforded, she said, "No. This isn't him at all."

This caused a mass upheaval in the hall. Efran's eyes crinkled imperceptibly at her; she looked away in satisfaction as Rounsefell leapt to his feet to begin bellowing at her. Ryal shouted at him, "Sit down and be quiet, or I will stop this trial and declare exoneration!" Rounsefell, his great chest heaving and fierce eyes glaring at his wife, slowly sat.

Ryal turned to address the hall at large: "Anyone causing a disturbance will be removed immediately!" The audience settled down on the benches to listen.

Slightly shaken, Ryal returned to his questioning. "Lady Leila, this is Lord Efran. Did you not say that you slept with Lord Efran?"

"*Edson*," she enunciated. "The name of the man I slept with is EDSON."

Every man on the second row shouted in objection to this obvious fabrication—except the two Councilors, whose eyes narrowed in private satisfaction. If Rounsefell went down, one of them would be up for consideration as Surchatain.

This time, Ryal stood when he turned. "Silence! I will order soldiers to remove anyone who speaks without permission! Commander Lyte, please bring your men into the hall to comply with my order of removal."

"Yes, Lord Ryal," Lyte said, standing on the front row and turning to gesture. Soon, Abbey soldiers began evicting audience members to work their way up to the rowdy rows. In the tumult, Minka slipped into the kitchen, unseen by anyone. She could still hear the proceedings clearly. The second row quieted down quickly.

Except for the banked fire, the kitchen was very dark. So Minka went around lighting candles. As she did, she saw that the lady's maid was not here, and the back door was unlocked. Escape was in the works.

Sitting again, Ryal paused to wipe his brow. As much as he wanted to exonerate Efran, he could not abide witnesses lying to him under oath. "Please allow me to clarify your statements, Lady Leila. Did you sleep with this man, the man on the dais to your right, Lord *Efran*?"

"No," she said, lifting her shoulders in a shrug.

Gasps of wonder, delight or astonishment resounded at her stubborn assertion, but Rounsefell's party watched like wolves. Efran silently communicated with the Abbey soldiers lining the hall, and they began advancing to the front.

Schmolck, totally unrecognized, watched smiling. He liked this Lord Efran and his Lands. Lord Bowring's daughter Trina sighed, bored by the spectacle Leila was making of herself. Of course she was lying; everyone knew that. Did she color her hair?

Trina's eyes wandered over to Neale, whom she had known when he was in the Westford army. Efran was well built, but she really didn't like those flat Polonti noses. Neale had a straight, dignified nose. He suddenly looked at her, and slightly nodded. Trina smiled at him. Why hadn't she pursued him? She turned her attention back to the trial as the notary began speaking again.

Ryal's shirt was drenched with sweat. "Lady Leila, I must remind you that you are under oath to state the truth. For the last time, did you, or did you not, have sexual relations with this man, Lord Efran?"

"No, I did not," she said loudly, defiantly, and joyfully. Efran gestured, and Abbey soldiers moved up to form a barricade between the lady and the audience. Ryal did not order *them* to sit down.

When they were in place, the hall stilled to utter silence. Ryal looked at the lord beside him. "Lord Rounsefell, do you have any other witnesses here prepared to testify?"

Rounsefell turned to glare at his men. One lurched up. "I will," he said, sweating.

"Excellent," Ryal said. "Are you prepared to swear under oath that you witnessed the accused and the lady having sexual relations? Are you aware of the penalties for giving false testimony?" At this, the man sank back to his seat.

Ryal surveyed the row of Rounsefell's men, silent, heads hanging, while their lord sat grinding his teeth. Turning back to sift through his notes, Ryal began, "In light of the testimony given here today—"

"Ask him!" one man in the middle of the crowd shouted. "Ask Lord Efran if he did!"

Ryal gritted his teeth, then asked, "Lord Efran, did you have sexual relations with this woman?" Efran looked at him and said nothing. Ryal waited for about five seconds, then turned to say, "The accused declines to answer, *which is his right under the law so everyone will now keep SILENT!*" he finished in a bellow.

After patting his forehead with his sleeve, he stood to face the audience. "Seeing that there has been no testimony sufficient to convict the accused, then I, Notary Lord Commander Ryal of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, declare Lord Efran not guilty of the charges presented against him. This hearing is concluded." And he tore up Lady Leila's previous statement.

Concurrent surges occurred all through the hall. Messengers streamed out, shoving aside anyone in their path.

Minka, hearing the verdict and the ensuing tumult, ran into the pantry off the kitchen to hide. In the hall, Efran whistled to his soldiers and pointed to Ryal. He was immediately encircled with protection.

Leila ran toward Efran, who grabbed her hand to bring her into the kitchen. He locked the connecting door while Rounsefell's men fought Abbey soldiers to reach her, then he took off his jacket to drop it onto a chair that he passed.

"Here." Efran directed Leila toward the back door as Minka, unseen, peeked out of the pantry.

Before leaving, Leila grabbed his neck. "You were the best of them all."

Smiling down at her, he said, "You were my first, and the only one I loved." He lowered his head to engage her in the deep kiss of lovers, the kiss that they remember for the rest of their lives. Then he rushed her to the back door and led her out.

Minka, having seen and heard it all, slid down the door frame to sit on the floor in shock. She listened to the fierce banging on the kitchen door, and the sounds of fighting in the dining hall that went on for a long time.

Finally, the din of fighting died away and the sounds of celebration began. Someone with a key unlocked the kitchen door, and people flowed in to light lanterns and begin raiding the cupboards and cabinets. Minka, still unnoticed, left the pantry to wander into the dining hall. She paused on the way to pick up the blue serge coat that Efran had left behind. She was fond of that suit.

Fortress residents and leaseholders were drinking, laughing, talking, and hugging in the brightly lit hall. "There you are! I've been looking all over for you!" Efran said, grabbing Minka's waist to pull her to his side.

Her face smiled up at him as she gave him the suit jacket, which he dropped onto another chair. Estes asked, "Did Leila get off all right, Efran?"

"Yes," he exhaled, "with her lover and her maid. They're on their way to Crescent Hollow, but we got off a decoy to Westford for her husband's men to chase instead."

"Oh, well done," Estes said, looking over Minka's head for someone else. "Did Ryal get home all right?" he asked in concern.

"Yes," Efran repeated. "I sent him back with ten men around his carriage, and they'll remain around his shop for the rest of the night."

"Very good," Estes said in relief. "I was afraid Rounsefell would take out his frustration on him. What a—I still can't believe it. Why did she agree to bring testimony against you only to recant?"

"Oh, I'm sure Rounsefell threatened her thoroughly. But once she had her escape laid out, I think she wanted to give him one last kick in the teeth," Efran laughed.

A kick in the teeth. Yes, that's what it feels like, Minka thought.

Two other people came up to talk to him, and a woman threw her arms around his neck, so he let go of Minka to hug her back. Without caring to see who it was, Minka slipped away into the crowd. She worked her way invisibly through them, as usual, to gain the corridor.

First, she went to the nursery to see that Joshua was sleeping soundly, so she decided not to disturb him. Then she went back to the quarters she shared with Efran, wishing she had someplace else to sleep. The keep was not hers.

Regardless, she was exhausted. So she undressed and lay down, and did not wake when Efran came to bed.

By the time Minka awoke the next morning, August 16th, Efran was gone, although she could tell he had slept beside her for some amount of time. She rose and dressed, got herself a bite to eat from the kitchen (where they were still cleaning up from the trial, the fighting, and the subsequent celebration), and went to the nursery to check on Joshua. The attendant told her that he'd had a bottle this morning after waking early. So Minka took him out to play in the grass.

In the second-floor workroom, the men were quietly rejoicing over the results of the trial. "Efran, there is some kind of magic that attends you," DeWitt said, uncharacteristically poetic. Estes was looking at the cylinder on the table. He had been glancing at it from time to time, usually seeing a somewhat pinkish hue. But now there was a faint dark wisp seemingly floating in the pink. He blinked at it, even picking it up. But there was no change while he held it.

"If there's any magic, it's in this place," Efran muttered, shaking his head. "Well, at least you got an accounting done, Estes."

"Yes, it was a lot of work, but good to have. And we found several areas that we can cut back on funding," Estes replied.

Wendt asked, "Where is Minka this morning?"

"Probably with Joshua. She'll be up here in a little while," Efran said.

Wendt did not reply, as there seemed nothing to say. But he felt . . . uneasy about her.

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Chapter 10

Outside under the walnut tree, Minka watched Joshua play in the grass while she thought, *He didn't love me, not like he loved her. Why did he marry me, then?* She lifted her face as she realized that what she had been telling everyone all along was literally true: *I made him marry me. I wouldn't let him apply for the bequest until he married me. So he did.*

She thought back to how he could hardly get the words out, and how he couldn't bring himself to sign the marriage listing until Noah shamed him into it. *He was used to having beautiful women. And I am not beautiful.*

Minka began desperately to wish she had a friend, a woman, to talk to about this, but her closest friend Kelsey, Estes' wife, was now residing in their nice house on a plot below, so Minka hardly ever saw her. Kelsey's sister had come to stay with them to help her with Malan, now almost two months old.

There was sudden movement on the bench beside Minka, and she looked over at Tess settling down. “May I talk to you?” Tess asked. She was a seventeen-year-old with short, dark hair, large brown eyes, and an intensity about everything. She had tried to join the army, but was rejected for her combativeness.

“If you like,” Minka said.

Tess exhaled, looking all around, apparently trying to figure out how to say what she wanted to say. “How did you get Efran to marry you?” she blurted.

“I made him,” Minka said, watching Joshua.

Tess laughed, “I mean, how? I’m just—crazy in love with Barr, but—he’s not—he won’t—” Barr was Polonti, a former slave who defected from the EurAsian army to fight for Efran. He looked so much like Efran that even Minka had mistaken him for her husband in the corridor once.

“Barr’s heart was broken when his wife left him. I don’t think you can make him do anything now. You probably have to wait till he’s ready,” Minka said distantly.

“Ugh!” Tess said, throwing herself back on the bench. “That’s what everyone keeps telling me!”

“Then that’s probably what you need to do. You can’t force someone to love you, and when you try, eventually, they have to show you that they don’t,” Minka said, looking into the distance.

“All right, then,” Tess said, slapping her knees. Then she got up and walked away.

“Nice talking to you,” Minka said to the air. She watched Joshua put some grass in his mouth, then take it out to look at it and touch it. “You are so special, to have lived when Adele just wanted you to die. I am so grateful you defied her,” she murmured to him.

He leaned over, yawning, to pat her leg, and Minka picked him up to lay him on her shoulder. He put his forefinger in his mouth. “You are not mine either, but I love you,” she whispered.

In the distance, she saw the Commander on the arm of his handler coming this way, so she got up quickly with Joshua to take him back to the nursery. Wendt was not the one she wanted to talk to; she wanted only comfort and not the perspective he might offer.

As she passed in a wide arc around him, his handler said, “Oh, there goes Minka. She didn’t see us coming.”

“I suppose not,” Wendt said thoughtfully. “Well, let’s walk over to the sparring grounds and watch them. You can give me a blow by blow.”

“Yes, sir,” the young man laughed.

In the second-floor workroom, Efran raised up from the accounting sheets that Estes had prepared. “Oh, thank God. Thank God, we won’t lose twelve thousand royals,” Efran muttered. “I still can’t believe it.”

DeWitt mentioned, “Efran, now that we know about this statute in the Law, please refrain from telling any more nobles that you slept with their wives.”

Efran and Estes looked up quickly, remembering Lord Gladden and Lady Vories. “Oops,” Efran murmured.

But DeWitt's eye caught the cylinder on the table. "This thing is turning black, now," DeWitt said, picking it up. Two narrow black wisps looked to be swirling around it, though they did not move.

"I noticed that," Estes said, looking over. "Wonder what it means."

Mohr came to the door. "Captain, I just took Adele's midday meal down to her, but she's gone. Her breakfast tray was still sitting untouched by her bed, and when I went over to rouse her, I found it was just pillows under the covers."

Efran looked up. "So she's not anywhere in the cavern?"

"No, sir."

"Does someone already have her out on the grounds?" Efran asked.

"No, sir, I checked," Mohr said.

"I see. Check again in a few hours, to see if someone might have brought her back," Efran said.

"Yes, sir." Mohr saluted and left.

"Adele doing what she does best," Efran murmured. "Midday meal already? I guess I need to find Minka."

"Yes, Efran," Estes began, and paused. Efran looked over, questioning. "Efran, how . . . did she feel about seeing you on trial for having relations with that . . . very beautiful woman?" he asked uncomfortably.

"We haven't talked about that yet. I suppose we'd better," Efran said. He looked at the dark swirls obscuring the healthy pink of the cylinder. "That's strange," he said, picking it up.

"That's what I thought," Estes said.

"Huh." Efran set it back down. "All right. I'm off to look for her."

At this time, Minka was waiting for a horse and a bodyguard. When both appeared, she told the man, "I have only one stop to make; I won't take up too much of your time."

"That's not a problem, Lady Minka," he said, a shade crossing his face.

They rode to Imelda's Beauty Potions, where she dismounted. Glancing around, she said, "Why don't you wait over there?"—in front of Tullar's Barber Shop.

"Thank you, Lady Minka," he said, laughing.

She spent a careful few minutes perusing the offerings, then made her purchases with the assistance of the owner and left carrying them in a discreet cloth bag. Her bodyguard escorted her back up to the courtyard, where she gave the horse to the gate sentry and ran inside with her bag.

She went to her and Efran's quarters, locking the door behind her. Then she sat in front of her little-used mirror to open her bag. First, she pulled out the jar of hair pomade. She wet her hair as instructed, then lathered on the

pomade. Guided by the mental image of the woman's hair last night, Minka smoothed her unruly hair as best she could. After looking at it from all angles, she decided that would do.

Then she took out the lip and cheek rouge. She applied that a little too heavily at first, so had to wipe most of it off. Her last purchase was a charcoal pencil. Again referencing her remembrance of the woman last night, Minka carefully outlined her eyes. Her reflection in the mirror made her wince. After rubbing it off and trying again several times, she gave up on that. No matter how she tried to apply it, the result always looked like something out of a children's book.

But the hair she liked. Standing, she twisted this way and that to see how it fell, and was pleased at the smoothness. So she unlocked the door to begin down the corridor. Almost immediately, the first person she saw coming toward her was Efran. The moment he saw her, he stopped to stare. Then he began laughing.

He had to bend over for the laughter, then gasped, "Minka—no. You don't—need that. Oh, Minka, go wash it all off."

"All right," she said, turning back to their quarters. As instructed, she rinsed off her face and her hair, though she didn't have enough water to get all the pomade out, and was disinclined to draw any more right now. Then she left the room again.

Leaving her to clean up on her own, Efran started back upstairs, then slowed until he was standing still on the stairway. Minka had never shown an interest in makeup or hair gels—actually, she had disdained them. Why did she feel the need for it all now?

But he knew why: Seeing Leila, of course. She used both hair treatments and makeup, but had beauticians apply them. It couldn't be good that Minka felt she needed them all of a sudden, and it certainly didn't help that he laughed at her.

Wincing, Efran turned back down the stairs to trot to their quarters. But she was gone.

Minka was running out onto the back grounds. She had no destination, but she liked running, and that helped dry her wet hair. Then she saw the ladder spanning the fence, and decided to climb it.

Wyeth, who was drilling his men on the sparring grounds, looked over at Minka running to the fence to begin climbing the ladder. This alarmed him, and he began trotting after her. "Minka? Lady Minka!" His men looked where he was going, and a few started running back into the fortress.

After Minka had gone down the other side of the ladder, outside of the fence, she walked to the edge of the cliff to look down where the second barracks had fallen. Behind her, Wyeth quietly climbed the ladder over the fence, then said, "Thank you, Minka. Geneve found the doll you gave, and, was very glad for it."

He risked taking a step toward her, but stopped when she abruptly sat on the edge of the cliff with her feet dangling over. A few men in Wyeth's sparring group were trying to get her attention, but he held up a hand for their silence. "Geneve asked for you to go to Croft's with her today," Wyeth said, sweating. "She likes you very much."

By this time, Wyeth's men were urgently motioning gawkers away. Toby, eyes round, went underneath them to hang on the fence. "Minka, will you come see?"

She got up immediately to return to the ladder. Wyeth collapsed, and could only lie flat on his back in relief for a

moment. Everyone backed away as she climbed back over the ladder to take Toby's hand. "What did you want to show me?" she asked.

"The squashes. They are huge and bumpy and the funniest shapes," he said, walking her away from the fence. Having climbed back over, Wyeth was folding the ladder to lie flat inside the fence. Toby added, "Some of them are green, and some are yellow, and some have stripes. We're watching them dry on the vine. They rattle when they're dry enough."

"Yes, I want to see them," she said.

At that time, Efran came running out behind a soldier. Several of Wyeth's men pointed him toward the vegetable garden, so Efran turned to see Toby leading her by the hand around the squash and gourd beds with their stakes. Efran tentatively walked over to stand behind them. "Oh, they are funny," she said. "That's what I am: a funny little squash."

Efran closed his eyes in remorse for having laughed at her. Toby said, "No, that's stupid. You're not a squash. You're our Minka."

"Sybil. Call me Sybil," she said, then changed her mind. "No, I need a new name. Kewe. That will be my name."

"What's wrong with 'Minka'?" Toby asked.

"I'm tired of it. I don't want it anymore. It's not very pretty. And I don't love it," she said.

"But I do," Efran said behind her. "It is very pretty, and I want it very much. It doesn't need anything to make it prettier."

Without looking at him, she said, "It's not the one you only loved. She left last night."

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Chapter 11

Efran stood still as Minka kissed Toby's forehead. "Thank you for showing me your squashes. They are funny. I want to see your rattles when they're ready." Confused by her flat voice, he watched her.

She turned to walk around Efran without looking at him. He nodded at Toby, who made a questioning face at him, then Efran turned to follow Minka back into the fortress. Ignoring him, she went into their quarters to begin pulling out her clothes and a travel bag.

Efran broke into a cold sweat. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"I am leaving," she said. "I am going to Marguerite's. I will just tell her you can't come yet."

"Why are you leaving?" he asked.

"There is no reason for me to stay when we are divorced," she said.

“Why should we divorce?” he asked.

“I saw you,” she admitted, looking at him. “I watched you kiss her and tell her that she was the only one you loved. How could I stay here pretending to be ‘your Minka’?”

She continued to pack quietly while his chest throbbed and his mind raced. “I kissed her good-bye last night. But that was—the twenty-year-old kissing her. I loved her then. I don’t love her now, or I wouldn’t have let her go with her lover. The kiss was—nothing but goodbye,” he struggled to explain.

She looked up, then, issuing a short laugh. “I believe you could explain it away had I caught you making love to her.”

“Please,” he said. “Please . . . don’t leave.”

“Efran, you need women. You need more than one, or more than me—”

“No! That’s not true. I’ve been faithful to you, Minka, not always wise, but I have been faithful, and I am learning—” he broke off at her downcast, disbelieving eyes.

“You would never have thought you loved me if they hadn’t made you my guardian. That made you think you were in love with me . . . when you weren’t,” she said.

He looked around as if searching, then said, “No. That’s not true. Of course I loved you, then and now.”

“You didn’t want to marry me,” she said.

He laughed. “I couldn’t believe you wanted to marry me. I told you about the women who were happy to bed me while ignoring me on the street. Minka, you broke every mold, then you broke every notion I had about women, then you destroyed my understanding of *moekolohe*—I had no choice but to love you; you left me with nothing else.”

She looked away; he was mentally on his knees begging divine help in yet another fiasco of his own making.

There was a knock on the door. Efran turned his head. “Yes.”

The door opened and a man said, “Captain, scouts report Rounsefell on his way with a large force.”

Efran’s brow wrinkled. “How many?”

“Hundreds,” the man said.

“Then give the information to Commander Lyte and do whatever he says,” Efran said.

“Yes, sir.” The man drew away.

Efran turned back to her. “I’m not going to allow a trivial attack to distract me from the important things.”

“You’re a charmer,” she observed.

“Well, I’m not very good at it if I can’t keep the only woman I love happy,” he said bitterly.

She laughed against her will; he took her in his arms and she warned, “Don’t kiss me.”

“Stop me,” he challenged. She put up her hands but he gripped her head and kissed her just as he had kissed his former lover last night, only with the love he no longer had for Leila.

When he loosened his tight hold on her, she reluctantly leaned her head on his shoulder. He whispered, “I love your hair just the way it is. The last thing I want is for you to make yourself look like the women who cheat on their husbands.” She snorted into his shirt.

“That’s good,” he said encouragingly. She allowed him to hold her, so he breathed a little easier. And it came to him again: *Teach me what I do not see*. But there was more. What was the rest of it?

“Tell me something,” she whispered.

“Yes. Anything,” he said.

“In the kitchen . . . before you told her you loved her, you said, ‘You were my first,’ and, I have trouble believing that she was your *first*, when you were twenty . . .” she trailed off. When he didn’t reply, she looked up at him.

He was searching, trying to remember. “I told her she was my first? I don’t—ohhh,” he said, his face clearing. But he didn’t say anything more.

“If you don’t want to tell me, that’s all right,” she said, pulling away.

“No,” he said, tightening his grip on her. “It took me a moment to remember. What I meant by that, was, she . . . was the first of the married women that I—had. I did love her, as much as a boy of twenty could love, but . . . she wouldn’t leave Rounsefell, and she wouldn’t even stop seeing other men, so I went on to other women, trying to find one who would love only me. It was a fool’s errand, of course, trying to find a woman who would be faithful to me among women who were unfaithful to their own husbands.”

He had to stop for a minute, then said, “I never knew what faithfulness meant until I married you, because none of the married women turned me down.”

“I suppose you can’t help being desirable,” she murmured.

“But I can help kissing women,” he said tightly. With that, the rest of the quotation came:

*I have been chastised and will not offend any more.
Teach me what I do not see;
If I have done wrong, I will do it no more. [Job 34:31-32]*

And there it was: the inner determination to not offend anymore, which was the only balm for hurting someone you loved.

But there was more she had asked, so he struggled to continue: “As far as my *very* first, when—when I was eleven, there was—a woman who—”

“No. I don’t have to hear about that,” she said, appalled, and he sagged in relief.

When she turned to stuff her traveling bag and clothes back into the wardrobe, the tension drained away. “I can’t leave with Rounsefell’s men blocking the road, so you had better go deal with them,” she said.

“And I will deal with you later,” he said, kissing her gently this time, and she lowered her eyes as he turned out.

She waited a few minutes, then left the room to turn into the corridor, where she saw Wyeth trotting up it toward the foyer. He paused, and she smiled. “Thank you for your concern, Wyeth—I wasn’t going to jump; I just wanted to see what had happened to the barracks. But I’m grateful that you cared to help me.”

He nodded uncertainly, and she continued to smile, patting his arm as she passed him to the stairway. Then she went up to the second floor, to the window at the south end of the corridor overlooking the Sea. The sun was descending to its daily burial in fiery water, and she sat in the windowseat to watch.

She looked up at the doves flitting about the fortress roof, and down at the eagles soaring around their nests on the cliffs. And more than anything, she just wanted to fly away. She didn’t exactly lie to Wyeth, but she didn’t know what would have happened if Toby hadn’t called for her.

Movement behind her made her turn, and she looked in surprise at Commander Wendt standing in the corridor alone. “Hello, Commander. Four steps will bring you to the windowseat,” she said.

Following his fourth step, she reached out to guide him to sit beside her. “We’re watching the sun set over the Sea from the south window,” she told him.

“Yes, it’s beautiful,” he said, smiling slightly.

“I thought you would enjoy it,” she said.

They were quiet for a while, then he said, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

She sighed in reluctance, then said, “I watched Efran kiss her goodbye last night, and he told her that she was the only one he loved.”

He took that in, then said, “What did he say when you told him?”

“That it was his twenty-year-old self telling her that,” she said, smiling.

“Oh, that’s original,” Wendt laughed, leaning back.

“I was almost proud of him for coming up with it,” she agreed.

“But in a way, it’s true. You have no idea how much he’s changed, Minka,” he said.

“I will take your word for it. I just don’t think that I . . . am what he wants,” she murmured.

“Efran seems to be very sure about what he wants,” Wendt observed.

“I think he feels duty-bound to keep his promises,” she said. “And I can’t endure pity.”

“Oh, no, sweetheart. Where do you get that? I don’t see any pity at all in how he treats you—just a strong

dependence on you. You are as necessary to him as air and water,” he said. She thought about that, and he added, “You should pity him.”

“Why?” she asked.

“In about a year, he’s gone from being a soldier to a manor lord, and the responsibility is overwhelming. The only assurance he has that he won’t fail hundreds of people is your adoration. If he fails you, he can’t possibly hope to sustain all these others. And if he crashes, Minka, the Abbey goes down with him. It’s all too new to go on its own.”

“Oh!” she said, leaning back on the stone.

“I’ll also tell you that if I were him, I’d ’a’ kissed her, too—not because she was beautiful, but because she put her life on the line exonerating him, and saving the Abbey from very heavy losses. And because of what? Something he did with her *eight years* ago. There should be time limits on some of these laws—hauling him to court over an eight-year-old infidelity is just wrong, and Rounsefell waited till now to do it just for the money,” Wendt said.

“You’re right,” she said, blinking. She stood, taking his hand. “Come down to dinner with me, dear Commander.”

He stood as well. “Certainly. But first I’d like to see what’s going on out front.”

“Oh! I forgot about that!” she cried. “Yes, let’s go look from the balcony. We should be able to see from there.”

“Thank you. That’s actually why I came to look for you in the first place,” he grunted.

She laughed, “You poor thing!” and kissed his cheek.

“Now, now, I’m not fighting Efran,” he cautioned. She laughed at him.

They went to the north end of the second floor, which opened out into the balcony (above and to the east of the courtyard balcony). Numerous people were already there, including Estes and DeWitt, but they made room for Minka and Commander Wendt at the front.

“What have we missed?” Minka asked Estes.

“Our men stopped Rounsefell’s company at the wall gates, then Efran invited him to come up halfway to talk. So that’s what they’re doing now,” Estes said.

Minka elaborated for Wendt: “Efran and Rounsefell are on horseback at the bottom of the switchback, talking. His men and ours are on either side of the wall gates, waiting.”

“Very good. Efran’s a smooth talker, wouldn’t you say, Minka?” Wendt said.

“Yes,” she laughed richly.

Efran suddenly turned his head to look up at the balcony where they stood. She startled. “He couldn’t have heard me,” she whispered.

DeWitt said, “Actually, it’s possible. There’s something about the way the fortress and switchback are constructed on the hillside that seems to amplify sound.”

“I noticed that,” Wendt said.

They waited in the twilight, watching. Efran appeared to gesture toward the balcony, and Rounsefell may have looked up at it—it was hard to tell at this distance.

Moments later, Rounsefell turned to lope back up the main road, waving his men back. The Abbey soldiers parted for the sentries to open the gates for him to ride out, then he led his men northward up the road. Efran remained on his dancing horse at the bottom of the switchback until they were away. Then, glancing up at the balcony again, he began loping up, and the balcony observers began coming down.

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Chapter 12

The soldiers in the courtyard whistled and cheered that the Captain had turned away the wronged husband for the second time in as many days. Efran rode into the courtyard while Minka, Estes, DeWitt and Wendt exited the foyer to wait for him on the fortress steps. After falling from the saddle in the midst of his men, who hoisted him up laughing, he ran up the steps to grab Minka in a crushing embrace. “You still love me,” he whispered.

“I can’t help it,” she laughed. “Rounsefell agrees; you’re too smooth.”

“You did that,” he said. Then he shouted over his shoulder, “To the dining hall!”

“What?” she said. “I did what?”

“Let’s go sit,” he said, looking around, then told someone, “Ask Lyte to keep at least a dozen at the wall, especially the east end. Rounsefell may think he’s clever enough to try to sneak by at night.”

“Captain.” The man ran off, and Efran pulled her with him into the hall to sit at their usual table in the back.

He looked toward the front, where the two daises sat shoved against the wall. “I still can’t believe it,” he murmured. She leaned on his arm and he kissed her head. Then he had to turn and spit over his shoulder, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “I’ll help you wash the rest of the pomade out,” he offered. She lowered her red face, nodding.

Dobell brought their plates of venison, mixed greens, and blueberry tarts, and Minka was relieved to see that she had a small portion of venison but two tarts. DeWitt said, “There, Efran, you have dinner in front of you and Minka beside you, so you can tell us what happened.” Minka looked over to make sure that the Commander was on her other side with his plate and ale.

Efran took a long swig of ale, then said, “So. Last night we traded carriages with Leila and her lover, you know—we sent them and her maid to Crescent Hollow in an emblazoned Abbey carriage and put a couple of our men in her purple carriage to ride hard to Westford, and from there toward Eviron. So when Rounsefell and his men

caught up to them and found only a couple of day laborers who had apparently taken her carriage for a joyride, he came back thinking Leila was still here.”

“He didn’t kill them?” DeWitt asked in alarm.

“He was in too much of a hurry,” Efran said, shaking his head. “He just dumped them at the side of the road while a couple of his men returned the carriage. We got our men back all right. Anyway, I helped him work out that she was probably on her way to Prie Mer, so after they rode *there* and didn’t find her, he was *sure* she was here and intended to come drag her out, along with a few bits and pieces of the Abbey Treasury.

“So he and I were out there on the road discussing whether Leila was or was not here. And we heard Minka laugh, and I said, ‘You know my wife Sybil, don’t you?’—as I am the infamous bride stealer. He said, yes, he knew Sybil. So I pointed her out on the balcony and said, ‘She sounds pretty happy, doesn’t she? Would she be happy if I had my ex-lover here?’ So he decided that Leila probably wasn’t here, and, has gone to look for her in Eurur.”

“You admitted that Leila was your ex-lover?” DeWitt asked uneasily.

“He knew it at the time, and didn’t care. It’s not like I was the only one. Besides which, he had plenty of company himself,” Efran said, turning up his ale. “But as to whether she was here or not—he believed Minka,” he grinned, turning to her.

“Well done, Minka,” Estes said, patting her shoulder.

“Hands off my wife, animal,” Efran said, looking off in satisfaction. Estes rolled his eyes.

But when Efran looked back at Minka, she raised her eyes in adoration, and he inhaled, his eyes watering. “Oh, he’s crying,” Wendt said.

“No,” Efran said, wiping his face, “just—tired and happy.”

In bed that evening, Efran buried his face in her neck. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Shh,” she said. “You’re the one who brought us through it.”

“I’m the one who caused it,” he said.

“No, the Commander is right; taking you to court over an eight-year-old charge is ridiculous,” she said.

He lifted up. “Wendt said that?”

“Yes,” she said, turning her lips to his.

“Huh. He chewed me up one side and down the other for it,” he murmured.

“But he defended you to me,” she said.

“For kissing her?” he asked dryly.

“Actually, yes,” she said, shifting to play with his new haircut. “He pointed out that she was risking her life to exonerate you and save the Abbey from ruinous losses. Since that’s true, I’m not going to hold it against you, either. Except . . . you have to kiss me like that.”

“Oh.” He leaned over her, then paused. “Do you like the haircut?”

“It’s all right,” said said, waiting.

He brought his face to hers, then said, “Not too short?”

“Is this seduction or punishment?” she whispered.

“Neither. Just pushing limits,” he grinned, so she ended that by making him kiss her—just like she made him marry her.

The following day, August 17th, the Abbey administrators were occupied reallocating funds for upcoming projects. Goadby's second plant was back on schedule; the laborers were back at work on the well, and—Adele was still missing. “So have you figured out how she broke out of the cavern?” DeWitt asked Efran.

“Tourse believes Bennard helped her slip away,” Efran said, glancing down at the cylinder on the table. “It’s back to pink.”

The men looked at it. The black was all gone. “What does it mean?” Estes whispered.

“Something is better than it was a few days ago,” Efran murmured.

“What is?” DeWitt asked.

“Minka, for sure,” Efran said.

“The health of the Abbey,” Estes offered.

“The two may be related,” DeWitt said pensively, and Efran looked momentarily stunned. DeWitt asked him, “Then are you going to punish Bennard?”

Distracted, Efran said, “No. Adele will do that.” Then he laughed, “Involuntary servitude didn’t deter her; cavern imprisonment didn’t detain her—what’s left?”

Estes mused, “If only we could harness that relentless momentum. It’s like a one-person avalanche.”

Efran nodded. “Apt comparison, considering the damage done.”

“Does Minka know?” Estes asked cautiously.

“I haven’t told her, and I’m not going to. I want Minka to not be responsible for her older sister any more at all,” Efran said. “Has anyone checked on the fishing situation? Are tenants making use of the cavern lake?”

“I’ll ask someone to go have a look,” DeWitt said. Efran nodded.

Garrett, the head gardener, appeared at the door. "Excuse me."

They all looked up. "Yes, Garrett. How is the conservatory wall coming along?" Efran asked.

"The glass is being made now. But that's not why I'm here, Lord Efran. Where did the new grapevine come from?" He held up a sprig with unripe grapes.

They all looked at it blankly, and Efran asked, "Where did you find it?"

"Growing in the southwest corner of the fence, sir—which is actually an excellent place for it, as it's probably the only structure on the grounds that will support its weight. But . . . this is an antique variety of purple table grapes which are renown for their sweetness, but, I know of no supplier who has had it for many years," Garrett explained as they stared at the sprig.

"Well," Efran said slowly, "I will ask around, but I'm very glad we have found another asset. Thank you for showing it to me."

"Yes, sir," Garrett said, and walked off unenlightened but satisfied.

"Was that from the barge?" DeWitt asked in disbelief.

"It must be. I'm fairly sure that's where Minka planted it," Efran said. They looked at the cylinder, which was a bright pink. Then they went back to work.

Some time later, Geibel, head tax assessor, came to the door. He was a very serious man who was dedicated to his job. "Excuse me. Lord Efran."

Efran glanced up. "Hello, Geibel. Are you having fun today?"

Geibel's eyes narrowed at the nonsensical question. "I don't know that I am, Lord Efran; I'm just trying to do my job well."

"And you do, Geibel. What can I do for you?" Efran asked, looking over an accounting sheet that had gotten itself misfiled.

"Lord Efran, we have reports that Schmolck has had his shifting shop on the Abbey Lands once or twice. I'd like permission to track him down," Geibel said darkly.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Geibel; I know that would be great fun, but we have to leave Schmolck alone," Efran said regretfully, looking vainly for the sheet's home.

"The loss of tax revenue due to nonintervention could be considerable," Geibel said in distress.

"It may be, but it's a sacrifice we'll have to make. Besides, I understand that he donates twenty percent of his income to charity [which would have been news to Schmolck, had he heard it]. Thank you for your dedication and understanding, Geibel," Efran said. "And you'll be sure to warn your collectors that anyone who attempts to contact him will be terminated," he added casually.

Geibel looked aghast at this drastic punitive measure, but collected himself to say, "As you wish, Lord Efran."

"I wish it. Thank you, Geibel. You're dismissed," Efran said. Geibel staggered out, and Efran raised the sheet. "This is an income sheet for the Widows Fund. Where does it go?"

"Geibel submitted that for the tax assessor-collector file," DeWitt replied.

Efran blinked, asking, "To—to collect taxes on the Widow's Fund?" DeWitt nodded. Efran wadded up the sheet. DeWitt nodded again.

Efran gazed out the east-facing window for a minute, then looked at the cylinder on the table. It was still pink, though slightly cloudy. He lowered his eyes in thought, then said, "I'm taking Minka out to look at the cavern lake."

Eyes on his numbers, DeWitt nodded, and Estes said, "Good." So Efran turned out of the room to head down the stairs.

Minka stood on the back grounds, watching the harvesters at work. In mid-August, the lettuces, kale, spinach and peas were played out for the season, so their roots were being pulled up for the compost piles. In a month or two, after the soil was replenished, more seed would be planted here for winter harvest, as the cold season was so mild on the coastal hilltop.

She walked over to see that most of her flower plantings were likewise played out and going to seed. Ivy and Cleo were collecting seeds for replanting next spring, and were eager to show her their collection of Primrose and Forget-Me-Not seeds. So Minka gave them half this bed for planting in the spring, and they carefully delineated their section of the bed with a fence of sticks.

Minka approved, then walked among the other beds, seeing how many of the flowers were spent and listless, tired of holding their heads up through sun, wind and rain. It was hard work, staying bright and beautiful all the time.

A man's broad hand slid around her waist, and she looked up into Efran's mild brown eyes. "Can you come ride with me, lady?" he asked.

"I just happen to be wearing my pants," she said. "So, yes."

He crinkled his eyes at her. "Then let's go. I want to see if they're fishing at the cavern lake."

"So do I," she said, turning to walk with him to the front courtyard.

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Chapter 13

Taking Rigdon and Barr with them, Efran and Minka rode east toward the cavern lake. When they were still half a mile off, Minka squinted and said, "Is that it? That—wide, shimmering water?"

"Yes," Efran laughed, adding, "Can you believe that started as a jagged line I crawled out of? And then you went down a rope ladder for Heye to take you under for the box on the barge." She laughed in disbelief.

As they approached, they scanned the groupings around the lake. A man on the shore nearest them raised a hand, and they rode over to see Conte and Shane with Tarrant, Toby, Noah, Hassie and Erastus, all with poles in hand.

They looked to be packing up. “Did you catch anything?” Efran asked, dismounting.

“Yes, Captain, about a dozen perch, which is plenty,” Shane said. “All of the children caught at least one each.”

“I caught three,” Tarrant said, being one of the oldest children there—10, soon to be 11. (Noah was also 10.)

“Excellent,” Efran said. Minka hugged Toby and Hassie proudly as they showed her the wire basket of fish suspended in the water.

Noah told them, “We’re going to have a feast at the hut. Ivy and Cleo are bringing down grapes and strawberries, and Erastus’ father is bringing something—I don’t remember what.”

“Barley bread,” Erastus filled in.

“Don’t forget to come see us at dinner anyway,” Efran said, and the children promised to check on them.

They waved goodbye. Then Efran and Minka walked around the lake with Rigdon and Barr a step behind them, leading all four horses. They greeted the others fishing, all who appeared to be catching something. And despite there being at least 20 at the lake after the children had left, no one seemed to be in anyone else’s way.

So Efran considered how the first warning of the Destroyer’s release—a collapse on the Abbey Lands—turned out to be ultimately beneficial in the creation of a lake, which was not as hazardous as the cavern. There would also be no problem abutting plots to the lake when it was necessary to expand out this far. Remembering the bobber, he wished he hadn’t wasted the opportunity of all the boxes they had.

After the tension of the trial, it was a blessed relief to walk in the meadowlands with his arm around Minka’s shoulders, just talking. She had washed the rest of the pomade out of her hair, but complained, “I did like the smooth look it gave. Maybe I could start wearing it pulled back?” She let go of him to comb back her hair in a high ponytail. “How’s that?”

He looked at it dubiously, then shook his head, reclaiming her shoulders under his arm. “I like it wild. I like being the one to smooth it back for you.”

“Then you have to follow me around when I’m chickening,” she said reproachfully.

“Oh no, pulling it back to work is fine. Just remember to set it free when I come in,” he said.

She laughed, then admitted, “I did envy how Lady Leila looked—so refined, and elegant, and—quite beautiful.” Seeing him wince, she said, “What?”

“Primping so heavily is all right when a woman is young, but . . . Leila is nearing forty, and it shows up close. At that age, a woman is better off letting go of some of the conceits,” he murmured.

She put a hand to her head. “At forty, my wild hair will be frightful.”

He laughed, stopping to brush her hair back with both hands. “No, no. When you’re forty, your hair will be your emblem of freedom. . . . And I will love it still.” He gathered her up for the lover’s kiss she wanted.

Barr and Rigdon, a few paces back, glanced at each other, smiling. Partially covering his mouth, Rigdon muttered, "Leila has nothing on our Minka." Barr nodded, looking over the vast meadowlands. Obviously, they overheard everything.

On the way back, Efran thought they'd better check on Ryal. "I'm afraid the trial was harder on him than me." She nodded sympathetically.

They dismounted at the notary's shop; Barr and Rigdon remained outside with the horses while Efran and Minka went in. Not finding anyone in the front, Efran called, "Ryal? Giardini?" No one answered.

Efran was at the point of opening the door to the back when Giardi came out. "Oh, Lord Efran! Lady Minka. Ryal is here, but napping right now."

"Is he all right?" Efran asked in concern. In his 80s, Ryal was a link to the glory of Westford's past that Efran did not want to lose. As son of Commander Thom and page to Surchatain Henry when Westford was at its height as the capital of Lystra, Ryal had experienced pivotal events that Efran could only read about.

Giardi began a reply in the affirmative when Ryal emerged from the back. "I'm doing well, thank you. So, congratulations on your acquittal, Efran."

Efran laughed, "Can you say that without scowling, Lord Ryal?"

Ryal shook his head. "I am glad beyond measure that you prevailed, Efran, especially given the conduct of your adversaries. I fear to think what would have happened had your army not been in the hall. Did the lady make it away all right?"

"As far as I know, yes. We should hear from her in a day or two," Efran said. "You, however, were exemplary, and if I am ever on trial for my life—which is likely—I want you presiding again."

Minka added, "I never knew you could be that loud, Ryal. You had Rounsefell's blackguards quaking like schoolchildren." ["Not ours," Efran snorted under his breath.]

"Only because Efran's men were there to back me up," Ryal said. "Oh, you might need to know that leaseholder Novello has filed a criminal complaint against Adele for theft."

"She's out of the cavern?" Minka exclaimed at the same time that Efran said, "Who is that?"

"Yes," Ryal said to Minka, then told Efran, "He's the brother of Bennard, whom I understand to be one of your soldiers. Bennard brought her to his brother's house for temporary lodging several nights ago, and he awoke this morning to find her gone and his life's savings of thirty-six royals missing from his broken lock box. Her whereabouts are still unknown."

"That is bad for Bennard," Efran said heavily.

"And not good for Adele whenever she is found. For with a legal complaint filed, we must use legal measures with her," Ryal said.

"What does that mean?" Minka asked Efran.

He exhaled, “Restitution and eviction from the Abbey Lands.”

Minka snorted, “She’ll never be able to repay that; it will fall to you, again.”

“Or Bennard, except that he will be discharged from the army, if he’s not already. So whatever employment he gets after that will be menial, and it will take him years to repay,” Efran said. “Well—” he began, but they were interrupted by the entrance of someone else who brushed past him to put a bag on the counter. Judging from the sound of the coins inside, it was filled with royals.

And Adele said, “There’s his money. It’s all there. I’m ready to go back now.”

Four people stared at her without speaking. Efran suddenly looked outside where Barr and Rigdon were standing with a third soldier between them: Tourse. All three were smiling; Barr was pointing to Tourse.

Efran leaned back, beckoning them in. Tourse entered the shop, saluting, with Barr and Rigdon on his heels. “Captain,” Tourse said. “They’d best count it.”

As Ryal opened the bag to begin silently counting the royals with Giardi’s assistance, Efran said to Tourse, “You pulled guard duty with Bennard. What happened?”

“Well, sir, after observing the lady’s operations on my comrade in duty, and fearing that they were effective, I sat in the cold storage room during your trial—congratulations on your acquittal, sir—which seemed to be the most obvious time for a prison break. And, he did effect it at that time, sir, with much gratitude from the lady, which account I’ll spare you, but, nonetheless, I followed them down to his brother’s house, where I observed the handover.”

During this time, Ryal was counting and Adele listening with jutted jaw. As Tourse paused, seeing the notary done with the counting, Ryal said, “There are only thirty-two here, which means that four are missing.”

Leaning on the counter, Efran looked back at Adele. “Produce the missing royals, or I’ll have one of the men search you.”

“That’s obscene,” she bristled.

“Then you should be familiar with it,” Efran said.

Exhaling in aggravation, she reached into her bodice, withdrawing three royals which she slapped onto the counter. While Ryal put them in the bag, Efran looked back at her with expectant brows. She protested, “That’s all! I had to eat!”

As Efran reached into his pocket for the last royal, he said, “Rigdon, will you tell Novello that he can come pick up his money? Go on, Tourse.” Saluting, Rigdon stepped out.

Tourse resumed, “Yes, sir. Well, I had duty yesterday, but requested today off so I could check up on the lady. Unfortunately, by the time I got to the house this morning, she had already done the deed and departed. So I checked around some places she seemed likely to be, aaaannnd, here we are.”

Efran laughed, “And she happened to be carrying around a bag of royals.”

Tourse winced. “I had hoped to skip that part. I’m afraid I made some pretty nice threats—”

“You said you’d string me up naked over the new well!” Adele cried. Which was conveniently situated just north of Ryal’s shop, between it and the new Goadby’s going up.

“Did I? I don’t remember that one,” Tourse said. “Anyway, yes, I convinced her to show me her hiding place—a statuette in the backyard of number twenty-two, which I found curious.”

“Wyeth’s house, which had previously been Colfox’s,” Efran said, glancing at her. “She’s familiar with all its hiding places. Well,” he said, lifting up, “Who’s your unit commander?—I mean, captain?”

“Captain Younge, sir,” Tourse said.

“Is he Bennard’s, as well?” Efran asked.

“Yes, sir,” Tourse said.

“All right.” Efran thought for a minute, then said, “Barr, please escort Tourse and Adele to the fortress. You may return her to the cavern for the time being. Accompany Tourse to Captain Younge; please tell him that I want a commendation for Tourse, and. . . . What do you think should happen with Bennard, Tourse?”

Tourse sighed. “Captain, there are precious few men besides myself who could stand up to Adele’s operations. I’d prefer to see him given a second chance.”

Efran smiled. “Then tell Captain Younge that is my request, as well. I’d like to pull as many bodies as possible out from under this avalanche.”

There were some questioning looks, but Efran said, “You’re dismissed.” Barr and Tourse saluted and turned out; Adele hesitated, then consented to walk with them voluntarily.

Efran asked Ryal, “Once Novello receives restitution, can you drop the complaint?”

“Yes, with his consent,” Ryal said.

“Good,” Efran said, glancing down at Minka, whose blue eyes conveyed not just adoration, but gratitude.

He was smiling down at her when a customer entered. He was a tall man with long hair and generous beard, a distinctive striped robe, and a curious round hat. His piercing eyes took in Efran for a moment, then he turned to Ryal to say with an unidentifiable accent, “I would like to lease a plot in the new section, please.”

“Certainly,” Ryal said, reaching under the counter for an application and his quill set. “Your name?”

“Schmolck,” the man said. Efran’s eyes went to the wall.

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Chapter 14

Without looking up, Ryal asked Schmolck, “And what is your business?”

“I am a reseller of diverse goods,” Schmolck said. Barely turning his eyes to Efran, he added, “And I contribute twenty percent of my income to charity.”

Studying the wall, Efran observed, “Thirty percent to the Widow’s Fund would exempt you from taxes altogether and earn you a title as Lord Member of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”

“Is that so?” Schmolck asked, raising massive eyebrows in interest.

“Yes,” Efran said, barely smiling at him.

“It shall be done,” Schmolck said, then observed, “I am too old to be continually shifting.”

“Then with a record of your first contribution, we will welcome you to the Abbey Lands as Lord Schmolck,” Efran said.

“Ah.” Schmolck reached into a large pouch at his side and withdrew massive fistfuls of royals. “Here is my initial contribution of . . . twenty, twenty-five, thirty royals to the Widow’s Fund.” He shoved the thirty toward Ryal, replacing his pouch.

“Along with his plot assignment, draw him up an ennoblement as Lord Member, Ryal,” Efran said.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Ryal said, admirably composed. Giardi put the royals in a pouch labeled, “Widow’s Fund,” and filled out a receipt which she extended to Schmolck. Then she took the pouch to the back room.

Taking Minka’s hand, Efran said, “Welcome to the Abbey Lands, Lord Schmolck.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Schmolck said, inclining his head.

As Minka and Efran went down the steps from Ryal’s shop, she cuddled his arm. “I’m having so much fun, I don’t want to go back to the fortress yet.”

“Would you like to stop at Croft’s to eat?” he asked, kissing her head.

“Yes,” she grinned up at him. Watching her tousled curls blow lightly over her uplifted face, he thought, *At least she hasn’t asked to cut it all off.* With that, he paused at the fact that he did have his hair shaved to spikes. Accidentally.

So they walked across the main road, leading their horses around the well construction to reach Croft’s before the midday rush had quite gotten underway. Croft gave them a corner booth in front of a window, where they agreed on the stew of the day and ale. Then they sat with heads close together to whisper and smile.

Efran had put the trial of two days ago completely out of his mind, but several patrons who came into the tavern today had attended the hearing, and recognized him.

One man, an acquaintance of the observer who had successfully challenged the notary to question Lord Efran,

sat drinking his ale as he watched the Polonti lord sitting close to his very young wife. Something outside caught their attention, and they turned inward, toward each other, to look out the window.

The ale drinker, disliking this show of affection, asked loudly, “Hiya, Lord Efran, why didn’t you answer the question?” But Efran was focused on something Minka was telling him with emphatic gestures, and either didn’t hear or chose not to hear. So the patron leaned forward to repeat it, louder: “Lord Efran! Why didn’t you answer the question?”

The talk around them stilled and heads swiveled to the lord’s booth. But only when Minka turned to the questioner did Efran look at him. Evaluating him, Efran leaned back slightly. “If I had said ‘no,’” Efran began, “agreeing with the lady, it would have changed nothing in the outcome of the trial. But I would have earned the hatred of the man most likely to become the next Surchatain of Eurus, and thus endangered everyone in the Abbey Lands.

“If I had said ‘yes,’ I would have ensured the lady’s death, when her thoughts were to protect me. I judged that the safety of the most people was best served by my silence,” Efran said.

The other sneered, “What a bunch of malarkey. You tell the simple truth!”

“The truth is not always simple. We could have done everything leading up to it but the final act—is that really ‘no’? I could have taken her when she was unwilling, or reluctant, or drunk; should she then say ‘yes’? One or both of us could have been so inebriated that we didn’t know what, if anything, happened. One or both of us could have had so many lovers in the intervening eight years that we didn’t remember that night,” Efran said.

“So which of those was the truth?” he demanded.

“For the lady’s sake, I’m not going to tell you,” Efran said. “Think what you will, but the trial has ended.”

By that time, the man’s friends were encouraging him to desist, so he shrugged and turned back to the bar. Minka raised her smiling eyes to Efran, whispering, “I told you.”

“Told me what?” Efran asked.

“That had I caught you making love to her, you could explain it away,” she said in the barest whisper.

He winced, smiling, then whispered back, “In this case—is that wrong?” And they turned to watch the well construction to hide their laughing faces.

Someone cleared his throat, and they quickly looked around to see Rigdon standing by the table, saluting. “Sit,” Minka instructed, patting the seat beside her.

Rigdon looked at Efran, who nodded. “Thank you,” Rigdon said, sliding to the outer seat beside her. Minka raised a finger for him to receive stew and ale.

Then Rigdon said, “Novello got his money back from Ryal, who asked him if he would like to withdraw the complaint against Adele. He didn’t want to at first, until Ryal explained the time he’d have to take off from work to give testimony, so he decided it wasn’t worth it.”

“Smart man,” Efran smiled, and Rigdon sat back as his meal was placed in front of him.

Not too much later, Barr appeared. He was likewise seated and given stew. Before eating, he reported, “Adele is back in the cavern and Captain Younge is drawing up a commendation for Tourse. The Captain agreed to retain Bennard, but hadn’t decided on his punishment by the time I left.”

“That is entirely appropriate. Bennard bears some responsibility for being stupid,” Efran said. The other men laughed and choked.

They made small talk while the bodyguards ate, then Efran tossed a few royals on the table to cover their tab and tip excessively. Upon leaving Croft’s, Minka sighed, holding Efran’s arm. “I’ve had so much fun, I almost don’t want to go back in. But I’m anxious to see Joshua. He’s doing something new every day.” She looked up as Croft’s hostler brought their horses around.

“Bring him up to the workroom for a while,” Efran said, throwing a leg over his saddle.

“Really?” she asked, still standing beside her mare.

“Why not? He’s not crawling yet, is he?” he asked, reining around beside her. Rigdon and Barr were patiently waiting on their horses, as Minka would *not* be assisted into the saddle, thank you.

“No, but close. I’ll bring him up, then,” she said, and hopped up on her little mare, feeling confident in her pants.

Arriving in the fortress foyer, Minka reached up to Efran’s neck. “Thank you. It was great fun—especially hearing your explanation for why you didn’t answer the question.”

“So I’ll never hear the end of that,” he groaned, squeezing her gently.

“Not for another hour or so; you have repeat it for the Commander. I’ll go get Joshua,” she said, breaking away, and he smiled watching her go.

When Efran got up to the second-floor workroom where Estes and DeWitt were conferring over the configuration of the east wall, the first thing he did was look at the cylinder on the table. It was bright pink, but more than that; there were shaded variations of color. The edges were bright orange-pink, then the colors blended from a warm peach into deep reddish shades in the very center. “Like a peach,” he murmured.

“That’s Efran,” Wendt said. “Did Minka enjoy the lake?”

“Very much, Commander,” Efran said. “She enjoyed the whole trip. Tourse found Adele, and recovered the money she had stolen from Bennard’s brother, and Schmolck is taking a plot in the new section. Since he contributed thirty royals to the Widow’s Fund, he’ll open his shop as Lord Schmolck.”

The others listened incredulously. “Will he operate openly?” DeWitt asked.

“He could; he’s not liable for taxes with thirty percent to the Widow’s Fund,” Efran said.

Minka then swept in with the black-headed seven-month-old. “Here’s Joshua! Let’s put you on the Commander’s lap, first. Oh no! I have to change his wraps.” And she swept out again.

The men laughed. “That was a narrow escape, Commander,” DeWitt observed.

Wendt asked, “Does she take care of him like that all the time?”

Efran looked up. “Yes. She makes it—him—a priority.”

“Even though she’s not his mother,” Wendt said.

“That’s correct,” Efran said, lowering his head again.

A few hours later, two levels below them in the cavern, Adele lolled on the disordered sheets of the bed, which she had never bothered to make. Then she looked over at a rising swell in the water. “Oh, you finally decided to show your lumpy head. I’d be ashamed if I were you; that plan worked *so wonderfully*,” she spat. Heye’s bulbous head could be seen, eyes barely above the water.

Adele said as if responding, “I needed travel money. The only problem was, I got greedy and took it all. I should have taken only a little. Or—just not as much. Ohh, I’m going to *die* if I have to stay down here much longer.”

A moment later she sat up. “How?” She sat still as if listening, then said, “I’ll drown.” She was silent again, then said, “I think you’d drown me just to get rid of me.” Whatever she next heard, or thought she heard, made her laugh.

“All right,” she said, getting up off the mattress. “I’ll do it. I’d rather drown than stay in this stupid hole another hour.” Nervously, she sat on the edge of the ledge, then lowered herself into the water as Heye coiled an arm around her.

A few minutes later, the last fishermen at the cavern lake were packing up their gear in the late afternoon. As they raised their traps from the golden water, they were deeply startled to see a woman break the surface about 30 feet away and pull herself up onto the edge. She stood, shaking water from her hair and her dress. With a disparaging glance at their open mouths, she turned to begin walking toward the lowering sun.

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Chapter 15

After Joshua had spent an energetic half-hour capturing in his mouth whatever he found on the floor of the workroom, Minka took him down for his bottle and playtime in the nursery. She had just returned to the workroom when a sentry handed her a sealed letter from Eurus. “It’s from Justinian!” she said, opening it eagerly.

Efran was opening another letter that had just been delivered to him by a messenger from Surchatain Auber of Crescent Hollow. Unfolding it, he smiled. “All it says is, ‘Safely arrived.’ That’s Leila’s hand,” he added in a murmur.

“How do you know her hand so well, after all these years?” Minka asked lightly.

He began unguardedly, “Oh, I got—” He broke off, looking quickly at her inquiring smile. “—one letter, maybe two. She has a distinctive hand,” he said, giving her the letter.

"I'm glad they made it," she said, glancing at the two-word letter before handing it to Estes, who passed it on to DeWitt, who tossed it into the low-burning fire. The Commander had been appropriated by Lyte an hour ago.

DeWitt asked, "That came from Auber's messenger?" Efran looked up to nod. "So he's taking sides in a EurAsian conflict?"

"Only against the loser. Auber will have had a messenger at the trial," Efran said. Holding out his hand to Minka, he hinted, "Now, Justinian's letter?"

"Let me just glance through it first," she murmured.

DeWitt, exhausted of drama, said, "Just read it, Minka. Please."

So she began, "Dear Minka—"

"That's the redacted version," Efran noted.

"Shut up, Efran. Go on, Minka," DeWitt said.

"When was it written?" Estes asked.

She looked. "It's dated today, August seventeenth. He says, 'Such excitement here that you would not believe after the Polonti Captain pulled off another unlikely victory. Rounsefell returned from searching for his runaway wife only to be charged with misappropriation of Council funds and is being held in an undisclosed location. Several of his officers have been hanged for insubordination; names unknown. Councilors Uxbridge and Alverstroke are jointly heading the Council of Eurus, striving to provide security and continuity in the midst of tumult.

"Finally, the exalted Council has declared the criminal Schmolck of the shifting shop an enemy of Eurus and placed a bounty of one hundred royals on his head.'" She looked up at Efran in alarm.

He tilted his head in consideration, then whistled. The sentry at the door saluted. "Captain?"

"Ask Towner and Barr to step up here, please," Efran said. The man saluted and ran off. Efran looked up to ask Minka, "Is there any more?"

She shook her head. "Just his usual effusive sign-off. I'm now a peach," she noted, adding, "The peaches are beginning to ripen on our hilltop." He nodded, directing a curious smile to her, then leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head to look up at the ceiling.

Shortly, Towner and Barr arrived, saluting. Estes and DeWitt paused to watch. Efran leaned forward. "Thank you for your quick response, gentlemen. Schmolck has brought his shop down to us, and having made a large contribution to the Widow's Fund, has been entitled as Lord Member. We now hear that the Council of Eurus has placed a bounty of one hundred royals on his head. This won't do," he said with a malicious smile.

"Captain Towner, I would appreciate your lending me Barr in the temporary capacity of Captain, to give him broad authority in protecting an Abbey lord from aggression by a ruling entity. Barr, we will make it known that bounty hunters are under a death edict in the Abbey Lands. Schmolck may be in the process of moving, which will make it more difficult to protect him, so he needs to know the reason for our interest in his welfare."

Efran paused, looking off for a moment. "I think the Council knows that Schmolck is down here, and are using him as an excuse to take a veiled shot at us. We will answer it aggressively. Captain Towner, please inform Commander Lyte of this development; ask him to consider making Barr's captaincy permanent. For the time being, Barr, I'm going to ask you to report on this to both your commander and me. Questions?"

Barr said, "Thank you for your confidence, Captain. Does this mean we will be searching for weapons at the gate?"

"Yes," Efran said.

Towner and Barr glanced at each other, then Towner nodded. "We'll take care of it, Captain."

"Thank you. You're dismissed," Efran said.

The men in the workroom sat pondering this, and Minka asked, "What if someone here tries to use Schmolck to send a message to Euris?"

DeWitt's brows arched; Efran said, "Interesting question. I would hope, after all his years of staying one step ahead of everyone, he'd know not to." Estes nodded. Agreeing, Minka left to check on Joshua before dinner. (None of them knew that a far more efficient means of getting messages to unfriendly interests in Euris had been in place for a month now.)

Shortly thereafter, another sentry came up to the workroom. "Captain, we just took a plate down to the cavern for Adele. She's gone." The administrators looked at each other in astonishment; Efran threw a couple of parchments in the air over his head.

In the growing darkness, Adele slipped to the rear of house number 22 and waited for a long time, watching through a crack in the back window curtains until all the lights were extinguished and everything was quiet inside. Then she waited a while longer, but it was clear that Peri was the only one there.

Adele then opened the back door to slip inside. Peri habitually locked the front door while believing that the inconvenience of going around to the back was sufficient to prevent anyone entering by that door. Adele then soundlessly made her way to her old room, where she quickly discovered her possessions plundered and the hiding place under the floorboard empty.

Undeterred, Adele took what little she found, then slipped to the back room where Peri was sleeping. Adele quietly opened her wardrobe to remove her purse, a traveling bag, and whatever of Peri's that Adele liked, including her own clothes which Peri had appropriated. (Whatever Adele could not see in the darkness, she simply took by feel.) Then she crept out with a great armload, carrying it all to the rear of Mouris' plant shop to pack everything securely. Checking Peri's purse, she found that it contained only seven royals.

Leaving everything outside, she went around the building to pick the front door lock and go in to rummage among Mouris' old hiding places. Finding nothing of interest there, she had to settle for the silver pieces she found in the top drawer of the front counter. She exited again to pick up her stuffed travel bag and wrap a scarf around her head.

From there she went to the small gate in the wall at the mill which opened to a road that curved around the north wall to the main road. Making sure that she was out of sight of the gate sentries, Adele began walking up the road north.

The following morning, August 18th, Peri came screeching to the courtyard gate sentries that Adele had robbed her. Efran refused to see her, but Minka came to the foyer to talk to her. Minka had heard by now that Adele was gone again. No soldier admitted letting her out, and none had been seen with her.

It took a few minutes for Minka to calm Peri enough to get a coherent story out of her. The first thing Minka asked was, “How do you know it was Adele?”

“She took her clothes! She took *my* clothes! She took my pouch and my money!” Peri screeched.

“Did you see her?” Minka asked.

“No! She waited until I was asleep to come in!” Peri said.

“How did she get in?” Minka asked.

“The back door, probably,” Peri said.

“Probably? Was it open?” Minka asked.

“It may have been. I don’t know,” Peri said cautiously.

“Who is living there with you now?” Minka asked.

“No one,” Peri said.

“Who is visiting?” Minka asked.

Peri shrugged. “Friends, sometimes.”

“Well,” Minka said helplessly, “I don’t know what we can do for you—”

“I want to see Wyeth,” Peri demanded.

“What does he have to do with it?” Minka asked.

“He is my man. He left because of Adele, but now he must come back home,” Peri said.

Minka said, “Wyeth’s job requires that he live here. I’m afraid you’re on your own.”

As Peri unleashed a stream of Polonti pidgin on her, Minka motioned for the door sentry. “You may escort her out.” He did, with her kicking and screaming all the way.

As Minka turned away, Doane came limping out of his cubicle. “Lady Minka.”

“Yes, Doane? Just Minka. What is it? Come sit down,” she said, taking his arm to walk with him back to his cubicle.

“That’s all right, Minka; I need the exercise,” he said. “But—one of the leaseholders came in earlier with the

strangest tale I ever heard. He swore that late yesterday, a blonde woman came up out of the cavern lake and started walking toward the plots.”

“Really,” she said, enlightened.

“Yes,” he laughed. “I still don’t believe it, but, there it is.”

“Thank you, Doane. I’ll see to it,” she said, patting his arm.

From there, she went straight to the cold storage room and opened the trap door to descend to the cavern where one lantern still burned. She glanced around at the disarray and ruined books left behind, then walked to the ledge to look down at the dark water. “Heye,” she said softly. “Come talk to me, Heye. Heye.”

The water swelled, and Heye’s purplish head appeared. Minka crossed her arms. “What have you been doing?”

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Chapter 16

In the second-floor workroom, Connor came in and saluted. “Captain, they caught a professional bounty hunter, Weeden, trying to slip in around the unfinished east wall.”

“How did they identify him?” Efran asked.

“He was carrying this.” Connor handed him a paper which read, “AUTHORIZATION. The bearer (named below) is hereby authorized to effect the demise of one Schmolck of the shifting shop, and having brought back the head of the deceased for identification, shall be paid the amount of one hundred authentic Southern Continental royals, and shall be exempt from any usual punishment for bloodshed.

“SIGNED this date of August the 16th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world

“BY Honorable Councilor Uxbridge of Eurus

“AUTHORIZED BEARER: Weeden”

Efran read the authorization, then looked up with glassy eyes. “Where is he?”

“Being held by the men below,” Connor said.

“Kill him,” Efran said, extending the paper back to him. “And take this to Ryal to post in his window with the additional note that Weeden has been executed, as will be any others who attempt to act on this authorization.”

“Yes, sir,” Connor said with a tight smile. Saluting, he ran out with the paper.

Efran, still glassy-eyed, turned to Estes beside him. “Would you pen a gracious letter for me, Estes? To the Honorable Councilor Uxbridge of Eurus. Please tell him that we have executed his agent Weeden for intent to murder an Abbey lord, and will take the same preventive action on anyone else he sends down to us with his little authorization.”

“Yes, Efran,” Estes said, shaking his head as he reached for his quill and ink.

About that time, a young boy fishing in the cavern lake said, “Pa, I think I got a bite.”

“I’m sure you do, Bode,” his father said sleepily. He was lying on his back, eyes closed in the sunlight, waiting for his son to catch his first fish ever, which he had been working at for about three hours now.

Bode’s rod jerked repeatedly in his small hands. “I really think I got one, Pa.”

“Uh huh. That’s good,” his dad muttered.

“Pa,” Bode said as his rod was torn from his hands while a wash of water soaked the father’s lower half. He bolted upright to see a girl in pants hoist herself up onto the shore out of the lake.

“Ow! Watch where you cast!” she said, gingerly removing the hook from her shirt sleeve. “Oh, now it’s torn. Oh, well.” Dripping, she got to her feet and began walking away.

“Then don’t go bathing in a fishing hole!” the father shouted at her. She waved back at him dismissively as she walked off.

“Pa, I caught my first one,” Bode maintained.

Numerous soldiers were active in the eastern section at this time, carrying out the Captain’s instructions and watching for other interlopers. Barr, whose captaincy had been confirmed by Commander Lyte, was surveying the whole area on horseback.

Spotting someone striding toward them from the direction of the cavern lake, he paused, squinting. At first he thought he was seeing things. But to make sure, he rode out to have a closer look. Truro rode with him.

Drawing up to the walker, Barr said, “May I give you a lift, Lady Minka?”

“Yes,” she said, lifting her hands as he reached down to haul her up behind his saddle. Truro watched, open-mouthed.

“May I ask why you’re all wet, Lady Minka?” Barr asked.

“I just came out of the lake,” she explained.

Barr nodded to Truro. “Go tell the Captain that she is all right and I am bringing her.”

“Yes, Captain,” Truro said with a look of deep confusion. But he rode off. Minutes later, he ascended the switchback at a fast lope and ran up to the second-floor workroom.

Winded, he saluted and said, “Captain Efran, Captain Barr is bringing Lady Minka back from the lake. She’s all right. Just all wet.”

Efran, Estes and DeWitt stared at him, then the second two looked at the first, who said, “Back from the lake. All wet.”

“Yes, Captain,” Truro confirmed.

“Why . . . ?” Efran began.

“That’s unknown at this time, sir,” Truro said carefully. “But she’s all right, and he’s bringing her on his horse.”

“On his horse. Back from the lake. All . . . wet,” Efran repeated slowly.

“Yes, sir,” Truro said.

“Go down and meet them, Efran,” DeWitt suggested. “Walk. Don’t run.”

So Efran turned out with Truro following and went down the stairs. In the courtyard, he watched Barr, carrying Minka behind his saddle, ascend the switchback at a walk. As they entered the gates and Barr lowered her from his horse, he said, “Your instructions regarding Weeden have been carried out, Captain, and we are monitoring the area for others.”

Efran nodded to him; Barr saluted and turned his horse down the switchback again, followed by Truro. Then Efran gazed down at his wife, still somewhat wet. “I found out how Adele got out,” she said. He blinked at her.

So she took his fingers to lead him back into the foyer, and from there to their quarters. “Come with me while I change, and I’ll tell you.”

As Minka stripped off her wet clothes, Efran sat on the bed and watched. Possibly for the first time in his life in such circumstances, he did nothing but watch. She explained, “This morning, Peri came complaining that Adele had stolen a bunch of things out of her house while she was asleep. But she didn’t see her. Then Doane told me about a fisherman at the cavern lake who saw a blonde woman come out of the lake and walk away. That was yesterday.”

She paused to dry herself off. “So I went down to the cavern to talk to Heye. Sure enough, she had carried Adele underwater like she had carried me down to get the box off the barge. Actually, most of the connecting cavern has air space; there’s only a part of the middle that’s completely underwater. I didn’t have to hold my breath for nearly as long coming up out of the cavern lake.”

She stopped talking to rub her hair briskly with a towel. Efran slowly stood to put his arms around her. “Why . . . would Heye help Adele get out?”

“That’s what I wanted to know,” she said vehemently, pulling out of his arms to put on underclothes. “As it turns out, Heye didn’t want her down there at all. She said Adele was—what did she call her? A ‘blot.’ Also, Heye is finding more boxes, but Adele was just throwing them back into the water.” She threw on a favorite riding dress.

“More boxes,” Efran repeated.

“Yes. So I need to check down there more often,” Minka said, wiping her nose on the towel.

At that point, Efran finally had his collapse. “Minka—take a man with you! Why didn’t you tell me before you went on this—this—”

“Because it was fun,” she said, joyfully defiant. “And I knew that if Adele did it, I could do it. And you trusted Heye to take me down to the barge, which was harder.”

Now that she was all dressed, he took her firmly in his arms to begin pulling up her dress. There was a knock on the outer door. “Captain, they caught another one,” Connor shouted through the door.

“Wha—another bounty hunter?” Efran called.

But Minka had already left the bedroom. “I’m coming with you.”

Efran went around her to open the door. “Who have they caught now?”

“Man by the name of Slade, Captain,” Connor said.

Efran froze. “Have they killed him?”

“No, Captain; he claims to know you, so they’re holding him,” Connor said.

Efran exhaled in relief. “Good. Yes, just hold him. I’ll be right down.”

“Captain.” Connor saluted and ran out.

Efran and Minka went out to wait for horses in the courtyard, where he watched her mistrustfully, as if she might start running down on foot. But Minka was exultant in her accomplishment, her curls waving in freedom. Efran didn’t like what she had done, but he respected it. And there were also her curls.

When their horses were brought, they loped down to the front of Ryal’s shop, where a group of soldiers encircled the bounty hunter Slade. He straightened to see Efran approach. “Captain Efran. I don’t understand why I’m fearing for my life here.”

Efran turned to ask Stites, who was closest to him, “Did he have an authorization from Uxbridge?” Stites looked at another man, who handed it to Efran.

He glanced down at it, noting that it was identical to Weeden’s except for the name of the authorized agent. “I’m glad they caught me,” Efran said, ripping up the paper.

“Slade, I’m letting you go. You’re to ride back to Eurus and tell everyone you meet that Uxbridge has *no authority* in the Abbey Lands to order road closings, much less murder. My order had been that any bounty hunters bearing this authorization were to die, but that was wrong, since I’ve used you and others in the past. But I may change my mind again, to prevent anyone acting on this—” His fist crumpled the remains of the authorization. Minka watched silently.

“I understand, Captain,” Slade said, grim.

“Go,” Efran said. His men backed off so that Slade could mount and ride up the main road north. Efran looked to Barr. “Give the same warning to any other bounty hunters you catch. But there will be no second warnings—anyone who comes back after the first warning dies.”

“Yes, Captain,” Barr said. He turned to give instructions to the men before they dispersed.

Efran paused to look at the authorization and warning notice posted in Ryal’s window. Ryal had blacked out Schmolck’s name before posting, which was wise.

Ryal came out of his shop to stand on the top step. “Efran.”

“Yes, Ryal,” Efran said, breathing to calm himself.

“Peri is here to press a claim against Wyeth for abandoning their common-law marriage,” Ryal said. Efran’s mouth dropped open and Minka gasped. “Frankly,” Ryal continued, “I doubt her claim, but she is entitled to a hearing. Please send to Wyeth to have him come at once to answer this.”

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Chapter 17

“I’ll go get Wyeth, Efran,” Minka said, turning to mount.

“Yes, thank you. Go to Commander Lyte in his barracks headquarters first. Do you know where that is?” Efran asked.

“Yes,” she said. He nodded, so she turned her horse up the switchback. When she gave up her horse to the courtyard sentry, she told him, “I will need it again shortly. Also—two more horses.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said.

“Thank you.” She turned to run down the well-worn path outside the gates to the barracks in the woods. Lyte’s temporary office was obvious, given the activity around it.

She paused at the door to tell the sentries, “Efran has sent me to see Commander Lyte.”

“Yes, Lady Minka.”

One man opened the door and preceded her to Lyte’s office to announce her. She heard Lyte say, “Send her in.”

She entered smiling; she couldn’t help it, as he was smiling at her. “What can I do for you, Lady Minka?”

“Oh, Lyte, I’m just Minka.” She glanced aside at Geneve, who looked up from a desk nearby. Minka went on, “Ryal has sent for Wyeth, because Peri is claiming that he—abandoned their common-law marriage.” She and Lyte looked at Geneve, whose face had drained white. “Ryal says he doubts her claim, but she is entitled to a hearing, and Wyeth must come now.”

Lyte looked around her to the sentry at the door. “Go get Wyeth. See that he assigns someone to continue the men’s training while he’s gone.”

“Commander.” The man saluted and left.

Geneve stood unsteadily. “Commander, may I . . . ?”

“Of course, Geneve. I’m confident it will be resolved quickly,” he said.

“Thank you, sir,” she said. Minka went to her side.

Minutes later, Wyeth appeared, panting. “Wyeth reporting, Commander,” he said, saluting.

Lyte said, “Wyeth, you’re summoned to the notary shop to answer Peri’s complaint of abandoning your common-law marriage with her.”

“What?” Wyeth said, aghast. “That is a lie!” He wheeled to Geneve. “She lies, Geneve!”

She nodded, but Minka said, “Ryal thinks so, too. But you have to come and dispute it.”

Calmer, Wyeth said, “Requesting permission to answer this—this—”

“Permission granted,” Lyte nodded.

“Wyeth, I want to come,” Minka said.

“Yes.” He smiled grimly, holding his hand out to Geneve, who came around the desk to take it.

At the courtyard gates, their horses were waiting for them, so they made it down quickly to Ryal’s shop. They entered to see Peri standing stiffly at one end of the counter and Efran leaning on the other end. He raised up as Wyeth saluted him. “Captain, this is a lie.”

“At ease, Wyeth,” Efran said, stepping back to put an arm around Minka.

Ryal said, “Thank you for coming so quickly, Wyeth. As you’ve evidently heard, Peri claims that you abandoned her in your common-law marriage. She wants dissolution of your marriage to Geneve and restoration of her rights as your common-law wife.” During this opening, Geneve hung back and Minka fiercely gripped her hand. Giardi came out from the back room to stand beside Ryal.

“I deny that,” Wyeth said calmly for a Polonti.

“We’ll get to that. First, we require oaths. Wyeth, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?” Ryal asked.

“Yes,” Wyeth hissed.

Ryal then asked, “Peri, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this hearing?”

Peri screwed up her face. “What is this soul? I don’t swear on something I don’t know.” Wyeth looked up at the wall in exasperation.

Ryal considered that. “What do you value most in your life?”

“Money,” she answered, and Wyeth nodded.

Ryal opened a drawer in the counter to bring out a silver piece. “Peri, do you swear on this money to tell the truth in this hearing?”

“On a silver piece?” she said, scowling. “No. I swear on nothing less than a royal.”

Ryal began looking in the drawer again, but Efran brought a royal out of his pocket and laid it on the counter. Nodding at him, Ryal said, “Peri, do you swear on this royal to tell the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” she said, then picked up the royal to put it in her pocket.

Efran held out his hand to her and Ryal said, “Peri, return the royal to Lord Efran.”

“If I swear on it, it’s mine. Besides, he is rich and doesn’t need it like I do,” she sniffed.

Ryal said evenly, “Peri, the law says that if you do not obey my instructions in this hearing, I can rule for Wyeth without listening to anything you have to say. My instructions are for you to return this royal to Lord Efran.” Huffing, she took it out of her pocket and threw it on the floor. Ryal began, “Peri,—”

Efran said, “Forget it for now, Ryal.”

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” Ryal said. “Now, Peri, why do you believe you have a common-law marriage with Wyeth?”

“Because we have been living together for years and have much good sex together,” she leered at Geneve, who wasn’t looking at her. Wyeth admirably constrained his breathing.

“And what other reasons?” Ryal asked.

“He was always asking me to marry him,” she sneered.

“Why didn’t you?” Ryal asked.

“I didn’t want to,” she shrugged. “Living together was enough.”

“Do you have children together?” Ryal asked her.

“No,” she said, looking aside.

Ryal considered that, then said, “Wyeth, why do say you did not have a common-law marriage?”

“She refused to commit to me at all. She went out with other men whenever she wanted. We have not have sex for months, and yet she required that I give her all my pay,” he said tensely.

“I see. Peri, do you have anything else to say?” Ryal asked.

“That is enough,” Peri said peremptorily.

Ryal inhaled. “Well, Peri, the main requirement to prove a common-law marriage is that both parties wish to present themselves as married when it is difficult or impossible to get to a notary. Your partner Wyeth desired to be married, and my shop is a short walk from your house. As you refused his repeated request to get married when it was easy to do so, it’s reasonable that he would infer you did not want a permanent relationship, and that he was free to look elsewhere for companionship, as you did. Therefore, I must rule in favor of Wyeth: there is no marriage of any kind between you.”

She opened her mouth to begin screeching at him. Efran said, “Peri, do you have any idea how many high-ranking Polonti are in the army now?”

She went silent, then abruptly walked out. Everyone still inside the shop let down with light laughter. Wyeth turned to Geneve. “I am so—so sorry that she—”

“No,” she interrupted him. “It was a good thing. I got to see that you told me the truth about everything.”

They smiled at each other; Efran muttered, “That’s a good reason for a trial.”

“Of all kinds,” Ryal said. Minka hugged Efran, and he smiled down at her.

Wyeth began digging in his pockets. “I—have no money in my work clothes—”

“Ryal’s got a royal on the floor somewhere,” Efran observed. Minka stepped away from him to scan the floor, then bent to pick up the royal and put it on the counter. Ryal looked at Efran in exasperation at the overpayment, again, but Efran just shook his head at him.

“Thank you, Captain. I must return to work,” Wyeth said, saluting happily. Efran nodded.

“I as well,” Geneve smiled, and they went out together.

“I have to go see what surprises Estes has for me and will you *please* take a man with you down to the cavern?” He rounded on Minka.

“Of course. Whenever you’re free,” she said, turning her eyes up at him.

Walking her out the door, Efran glanced up to the heavens. Ryal turned to smile at Giardi, who twinkled at him.

At the fortress, Minka went to the nursery while Efran went upstairs to the workroom. He told Estes and DeWitt, “Wyeth’s housemate went to Ryal claiming they had a common-law marriage. They just had a hearing on it and Ryal shot her down.”

“Good,” DeWitt said.

“Peri is a shrew. Wyeth got a vastly better partner in Geneve,” Estes said.

“He knows. There’s nothing more pathetic than a grateful Polonti,” Efran added, and Estes snorted.

Efran’s gaze idly settled on the cylinder in the center of the worktable. He leaned his elbows on the table to study it. “It’s changed again,” he murmured. Estes looked over but DeWitt pointed out something on the sheet he was holding. The more Efran looked at the cylinder, the less he understood what he was seeing.

First, it seemed to have changed shape: it was taller, and bulging slightly in the center. The predominant color was no longer pink, but a lusty kind of red orange, with more variations in intensity, especially in the center. There was also a sense of movement, although Efran could see no specific changes. He reached over to pick it up, and found that he couldn’t—it was either too heavy or, as seemed more likely, attached to the table.

DeWitt suddenly looked up. “What is that pulsing?”

Estes looked around. “I feel it, too.”

Efran glanced around, then lifted up from the table. Only then did he feel it. Leaning on the table so close to the source of the pulse had disguised it as his own bodily rhythm. Given this clue to the biological nature of the cylinder, Efran gasped, “It’s a *seed*. It’s a seed that’s about to sprout—in the fortress—!”

The cylinder then exploded, and the men fell away from it.

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Chapter 18

Lying flat on his back beside the table, Efran watched something shoot up from the cylinder to intersect the ceiling and spread along it. Meanwhile, shoots—roots?—were descending through the tabletop to the floor, then through it.

The pulsing continued, but the main alterations to the cylinder appeared to have been accomplished. The external case lay broken in brown pieces around an unmistakable trunk about six inches in diameter reaching from the table to the ceiling. Its covering, or bark, was smooth and light brown, though almost imperceptibly changing by the moment to a darker, rougher appearance.

Disoriented, Efran got up to descend the stairs and look around the first floor. Here, especially in the foyer, he saw roots filling in the gaps between the arches of the ceiling, descending down the walls to (and probably through) the stone floor. Everyone in the foyer was staring up as the roots nestled in place, growing darker and rougher, contrasting pleasantly with the light, smooth stone. The irresistible impression was that of sinews, muscles and skin growing over a skeleton—that the arches were designed to accommodate this growth.

From deep within, Efran heard, *I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and will cover you with skin*. [Ezek. 37:6] “Therese, not everything has to do with Scripture,” he gasped. But this place was alive and—holy. (Because she is the one who taught him Scripture, he heard these reminders in her voice.)

Squinting, Efran bolted for the stairway again. Staggering out on the third floor, he looked down the corridor to see a portion of the trunk ascending against the wall through the ceiling. Careening to the stairway that led up, he ran all the way up to the bell tower on the roof—the highest point of the fortress. Emerging from the stairway, he looked up at a canopy of branches. The leaves were heart-shaped, copper colored on the bottom, green on the top. Efran walked around in a daze under this gently flitting covering. Then he looked over the crenelation at lower branches curling around the upper twenty feet of the fortress exterior. Again, it gave the impression of filling gaps in the structure. It was growing where it was intended to.

Again, the conviction washed over him: *This place is alive*. How many hundreds of years had this fortress stood as a bare skeleton waiting to be covered?

Teeth chattering, he descended all the way down the fortress stairway to the cavern beneath the cold storage room. Here, he joined Estes, who was aiming a directional lantern at the foundation of the fortress that had been sunk to the rock. The light illumined the roots growing down alongside the footings like braces. “We could have an earthquake under the hill and the fortress would stand,” Estes whispered.

I shall not be shaken, Efran heard. More completely, it went:

“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.”

And the reason he knew it so well was because it was inscribed on the wall of the keep across from the crucifix. It all went together; it was planned that way.

Efran staggered over to sit in the folding chair surrounded by soggy books. “How did I ever come to this place?” he whispered. *It was planned that way*. And in the presence of the ineffable, Efran was afraid.

He and Estes had come up from the cavern to begin walking down the corridor, heads upraised, when Minka came toward them. Lips parted, eyes wide, she took Efran’s fingers to lead him down to the nursery. There, he looked in to see roots growing down from the ceiling in a few places as a swing, or a climber, or a hammock. Joshua was attempting to hoist himself to a stand beside the root that formed a swing.

“Where did it all come from?” she whispered.

“The cylinder from the barge that we put on the table,” he murmured.

People were coming into the foyer babbling, so Efran took Minka to walk down the switchback halfway and look up at the fortress. It had become something of a treehouse, topped with copper and green, supported by slender brown sinews that snaked between windows and undergirded balconies. The effect was unique, beautiful, and strangely natural, as if it had been . . . planned that way.

“Whenever you want to go look for more boxes, I’ll go with you,” he muttered.

“All right,” she said.

The sudden appearance of a tree sprouting from the fortress rooftop caused a great influx of visitors and sightseers. Since Barr’s soldiers searched all likely men for weapons or Uxbridge’s authorization, the line to enter the Abbey Lands grew to a quarter mile long.

By mid-afternoon, the Lands were so crammed that residents started complaining, so Efran put a stop to all visitors for the day; only those engaged in business were permitted to enter now. (No one attempted to go around the unfinished wall, as they were all apparently unaware that it was unfinished.) At dusk, soldiers went through the Lands gently evicting sightseers, with Croft’s inn being full. And wall construction on the east end was continuing almost nonstop, as workers were out with lanterns and torches after dark.

Given the extraordinary threat to Schmolck, Captain Barr received authorization from Commander Lyte to post men around his house and shop that night. As it happened, they did catch an intruder in the act of climbing through a window. But he convinced them that he only wanted to steal from, not kill, Schmolck. So they merely evicted him in the dead of night, with a superficial slash on his right hand for identification, in case he tried to re-enter the next day.

That was August 19th, upon which morning the soldiers again restricted entry into the Abbey Lands. Many of those barred were pleased to merely sit in the meadowlands just north of the walls and make disparaging

comments because they had discovered yesterday that admittance to the Lands did not necessarily permit entrance to the fortress to see the strange tree, and what was the use of seeing the copper leaves from a distance if one couldn't pick them?

As it was, many people who did have access to the fortress were picking the leaves. This made Efran afraid that the tree would be denuded and die, so he posted guards at the top of the stairs to prevent almost everyone from exiting onto the rooftop. One maid very nearly fell to her death leaning out a window trying to pick the leaves, but a sentry heard her cries as she was hanging onto a branch sixty feet up and rescued her. It did help the tree's survival that the leaves were extraordinarily hard to pick, and withered to almost nothing when separated from the branch.

On the third floor, Wyeth and Geneve were thrilled to find branches growing around the windows of both their suites, so they were able to reach out and touch the leaves—fortunately, neither cared to pick them. Wyeth, however, left the window of his suite open so that the branch began to grow inside, curving around the room and filling it with a scent like nutmeg from small white flowers clustered among the leaves.

Garrett and Tourjee both looked at the tree, the leaves and the flowers, but neither could identify it, having never seen anything like it. Garrett took small cuttings to see if he could propagate it, but was not optimistic about success.

Efran and Minka's suite on the first floor was too low for branches or flowers, but a root skirted their bedroom window, so that leaving it open resulted in an infusion of that heady nutmeg aroma. Efran had to close the window when he needed to get up, however, because the fragrance was soporific.

Gradually, visitors adopted the idea that the tree was some kind of trick with mirrors and lenses, because no one was able to produce leaves apart from it. They had a good laugh at their own gullibility and went about their business. (Fortress residents, however, discovered that the small white flowers were not only edible, but delicious.) As far as Uxbridge's authorization, besides the first bounty hunter who was put to death, the Abbey soldiers caught four more, whom they released with blood-curdling warnings.

Barr received his captain's insigne in a nice ceremony which Efran and Minka attended, and two days later, Tess came to see Minka again.

Tess caught her as she was finishing up her chickening duties that morning. "Minka, help me!" she wailed as Minka stared at her. "I want Barr!"

"Tess, he just made captain. He's going to be busier than ever," Minka said, irritated.

"I don't care. I just want to sleep with him at night," she said miserably.

That resonated, and Minka looked on her in pity. To Minka, the most wonderful thing about being married was curling up in Efran's side to sleep, protected from both evil in the world and terrors in her dreams.

Sighing, she looked at the fence nearby which demarcated the fortress grounds from the woods outside. Pia was out here somewhere with Goss and Krall; the new barracks was also out here.

Minka went to the fence to grasp the balusters and look around. Conte, one of the Polonti soldiers, saw her and came over to bow. "Can I help you, Lady Minka?"

"Possibly. Is Barr back there anywhere? Is is available right now?" Minka asked.

“I will check and send him to you,” Conte said.

“Thank you,” Minka said. Tess came up behind her, head down.

In a few minutes, Barr strode over. “Yes, Minka. What can I do for you?” Either he didn’t see Tess or was ignoring her.

“If you have a minute, Tess wants to talk to you,” Minka said, then turned her back and walked away a little bit—but stayed close enough to hear.

Tess went to the fence while Barr stood unmoving. She hung her head as if ashamed to look up. “I’m glad you made Captain. I know you earned it, and you’ll do it well. I don’t want to interfere with your duty, I just want to . . . be there if you need someone to hold.”

She started dropping silent tears. “I won’t make demands on you; I won’t make life difficult for you. I just—want to be close to you at night. I’ve always fought to get what I wanted because I’m too proud to ask. But I’m begging you to . . . give me a chance. If I turn out to be not what you want, you can always kick me out. Minka will let me stay in her henhouse,” she feebly laughed. She closed her eyes and said, “Please marry me.”

Blinking back tears, Minka looked at Barr. Tess raised her eyes to him listlessly. “As you wish,” he said. “I have to get permission to leave the grounds but will meet you in the courtyard in a few minutes.”

“Really?” Tess gasped.

“Yes,” he said. She leapt up to try to kiss him through the fence, which the balusters didn’t permit. So he reached through them to lift her high enough over the railing so she could throw her arms around his neck and kiss him. Then he set her down again and turned to Minka to bow. That done, he walked off. Tess embraced Minka, crying, while Minka stood in apprehension. Why was he bowing to her?

“Come with me, please,” Tess said shakily, taking her hand. “I don’t think I believe it.”

“Of course,” Minka murmured. Entirely forgetting that she was in her chickening clothes—pants, shirt and apron painted all over with chickens—she walked with Tess to the front courtyard to request three horses.

They stood waiting while the guards discreetly smiled at Minka’s choice of town wear. Shortly, Barr came striding to the front, and Tess straightened in an effort to appear composed and mature. She was Minka’s age, 17, and they shared certain characteristics of the age and the gender, such as transparent passions.

With a nod to them, Barr lifted Tess onto one horse. (He was probably unaware that she was helping to train horses now, but she was not going to refuse his gesture.) Meanwhile, Minka quickly mounted her own mare herself. Barr hopped up on his horse with characteristic Polonti grace, and they began trotting down the switchback. Tess rode very well, erect and balanced; Minka looked down in surprise to see her chickening apron spread upon her saddle.

They arrived at the notary shop where Minka entered first, but stood back against the wall in a clear signal that she was merely observing. Tess went to Ryal, who was standing at the counter this morning. “Barr and I would like to be married,” Tess said loftily, and Ryal smiled at her.

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Chapter 19

“Very good,” Ryal said. “Congratulations on your promotion, Captain Barr. It was well merited.”

“Thank you, Lord Ryal,” Barr said with a short bow.

“Now, then.” Ryal turned to bring out his marriage ledger from an accessible shelf. Opening it to today’s date, August 21st, he asked Tess, “And your name is . . . ?”

“Tess of Eurus,” she said as if it were a royal line.

“Are you of age?” Ryal asked, looking at her through his spectacles. Sixteen was the age of majority for women throughout the Southern Continent.

“I’m seventeen,” Tess said, eyes widening in fear at this unexpected obstacle.

“She’s seventeen, Ryal,” Minka confirmed, and was astonished that he took her word for it, writing in his ledger.

“And you wish to marry Captain Barr of the Abbey Lands Army,” Ryal noted in his ledger.

“Yes,” Tess said, affecting a casual air.

Before writing further, Ryal turned to retrieve the ledger of divorces from the shelf. He remembered Barr’s first marriage and divorce, and needed to determine that the waiting period of thirty days had been satisfied before a new marriage license could be issued. Tess looked increasingly uneasy at this delay, but Ryal soon confirmed silently that Barr was divorced about six weeks ago. So he closed that ledger, returning it to the shelf, then turned back to the counter.

“Captain Barr, is it your wish to marry Tess?” Ryal asked, looking up at him.

Tess did not trust herself to look at Barr behind her, who said, “Yes, Lord Ryal.” She closed her eyes, but the tears came anyway. Minka had to turn her face away to hide her tears, not wanting to attract attention to herself.

Ryal wrote in his ledger, then turned it toward them. “Please sign here and here,” he said, extending the quill to Tess. She signed, then handed the quill to Barr, who redipped it and signed on the line below her name.

While Ryal made finishing notations, Barr reached into his pocket for the fee, five silver pieces, which he laid on the counter. “Thank you, Captain Barr,” Ryal said, scooping them into the drawer. “If you will wait a moment, I will complete your marriage license. If you are pressed for time, I will have it sent to you.”

Tess said quickly, “Barr has to get back to work, but I’ll wait.” Barr nodded, and she turned to him, aching to kiss him. He obliged, leaning down to take her in his arms for a satisfactory newlywed kiss.

Glowing, she released him, and he turned to bow to Minka with a slight smile. Minka’s face drained, but he left the shop to remount and ride toward the switchback.

“I can’t believe it,” Tess sighed, leaning on the wall beside Minka, who nodded vaguely, thinking hard. Unless

she were mistaken, which Minka didn't think she was, Barr had just communicated to her that he had completed her request—or her command.

"I'm very happy for you," Minka whispered, then turned to say sternly, "If you break his heart again, I'll break your neck."

Tess laughed, hugging her tightly. "Oh, Minka, you're so cute." Minka looked disturbed and Ryal kept his lips firmly closed as he filled out the marriage certificate.

Shortly, Tess and Minka left the shop to remount, Tess exultantly waving the license to dry in the breeze. "Thank you, Minka."

"I didn't do anything," Minka said almost fiercely.

"Of course you did; he cares what you think, and you think enough of me to make him marry me," Tess argued, as 17-year-olds do.

"I did not!" Minka cried, horrified.

Tess laughed again. "I don't care how he was convinced; I was at the point of considering torture," she said giddily.

As they arrived at the courtyard and gave up their horses, Tess said, "I want a dress. I don't have any dresses. I don't have any money. How can I get a dress?" She looked anxiously to Minka again.

"Come with me," Minka said distractedly. She took Tess to a room on the third floor that Minka had designated for storing clothes, and had her pick out several dresses, underclothes and nightwear, which Minka packed in a leftover grain sack for her.

"Thank you. Thank you." Tess kissed her cheek, then ran out with her clothes and her marriage license.

"You're welcome," Minka groaned after Tess was gone. Not knowing what else to do, Minka went down to the second-floor workroom. There, three men looked at her around the tree trunk rising from the table in the middle of the room. It had now expanded to a ten-inch diameter. Three days after its explosive appearance, everyone in the fortress had adjusted to the reality that a strange tree had miraculously sprung up inside, and what of it?

Minka, distraught, stood in the doorway of the workroom in her disheveled chickening clothes. Commander Wendt turned his face to her, and Efran rose halfway. "Minka! What's wrong?" he said, struggling against the laughter.

"It's nothing," she said, waving him down. "Oh, good morning, Commander. It's nice to see you up here again. Would you like some tea?"

"Perhaps later, Minka, thank you," Wendt said carefully. "I'm more interested in why you're distressed but Efran is laughing. Am I smelling chickens?"

"No, no," Efran said quickly. "I'm just—glad that she's enjoying her Christmas present."

"It's nothing," Minka repeated, her voice breaking. "Barr and Tess got married."

The men paused. DeWitt asked carefully, "And the problem with that is . . . ?"

"They both think I made him do it!" she cried. "Tess loves him so much, but he was reluctant to get married again, so she came to me, and I asked him to come talk to her, and it was so heartbreaking, so he said yes, and now she's so happy," she choked out.

That elicited open-mouthed silence, then Efran patted his knee. "Come here."

She flung herself into his lap. "Am I a busybody?" she asked miserably.

"No," he said. "But men have to be told what to do sometimes, and they won't listen to just anyone." He wrapped his arms around her, smoothing her hair while she considered that.

"Wait and see," he went on. "He'll be very happy that you made him marry her. Aren't I glad that you made me marry you?" he asked. She straightened to look suspiciously at his smiling face.

"You're the best thing that ever happened to him, Minka," Wendt said.

"Amen," DeWitt breathed. Estes nodded.

She was still regarding her husband darkly when he stood, lifting her. "Come with me to the cavern. We'll see if Adele decided to swim back."

She narrowed her eyes at him while he straightened her chickening apron for her. "Of all the nightmare scenarios, Efran," DeWitt groaned.

"Just a possibility," Efran waved, escorting Minka out.

"So Adele swam out of the cavern," Wendt said thoughtfully. Estes and DeWitt then explained to him how Minka had discovered the means whereby Adele had made her latest escape.

On the first floor, Minka said dully, "Let me change out of these clothes and check on Joshua. I spent all morning arranging Barr and Tess' future instead of playing with him."

"You change and I'll check on him," he said. She looked dubious and he said, "What? I know where the nursery is." So she nodded, turning into their quarters.

She put on a work dress with a wide skirt suitable for riding, and was despondently regarding her hair in the mirror when Efran returned. "Look at this mess," she said of her windblown curls. Secretly, she was still afflicted by the memory of Lady Leila's sleek hair. "Where is Joshua?"

"Sleeping," he said, brushing her hair back to kiss her neck. "Nesse said he spent the last hour trying to climb up on the roots. I love your hair. I love that it's touchable, and not a helmet."

She paused to think about that. Still caressing her hair, he whispered, "Come to bed. It's been weeks."

"Day before yesterday," she corrected him.

"Feels like weeks," he said, urgently turning her toward him.

But she had a lot to think about, so she pulled away slightly. "After you take me down to the cavern like you promised."

"Ohh," he groaned on her neck. "Did I swear to it or merely suggest it?"

She crossed her arms definitively and he sighed, "All right. I keep my promises."

Straightening, he took her hand to stop by the kitchen and procure a fresh lantern before descending to the cavern below the cold storage room. There, they looked around at the disorder left in Adele's living arrangement, and Minka picked up the dirty dishes. Then she said, "What's that on the ledge?"

Efran angled the lantern to look where she pointed. "It's another box! Good Heye, good girl." He hastened over to pick up the dripping box, a cube about ten inches on every side. "Something loose is in it," he said as she dropped the dishes to rush over and look.

"This appears to be the lid," he added, prying on one side.

"Shouldn't we take it upstairs before we open it?" she asked.

"Yes," he agreed, so she picked up the dishes again while he brought the lantern and box up the short stairway.

He waited outside the kitchen for her to return the dishes and the lantern, then they paused in the corridor. "Let's take it to our quarters," she suggested.

"Yes," he agreed again. They were both thinking to contain the contents of the box in a reasonable space without creating undue excitement.

So he opened the door to their quarters and placed the box on the small table. As he kicked the door shut haphazardly, it closed only part way, caught on a corner of the rug. Morning light from the receiving-room window amply illumined the box, and they studied the sodden wood. "There's writing on this side," Minka said.

Efran turned the side with the writing up. The letters looked as though they had been burned into the wood, and they read: "Drye oot Box beefor OPEN."

"We have captured a child," Efran quipped.

"I suppose we had better let it dry, then," she said.

"What can we do while we wait?" he breathed, pressing her to him.

"I don't know. What do married people do?" she whispered.

"I'll figure it out," he said, sweeping her up to the bedroom.

While they were preoccupied, something moved inside the box. It shifted a little this way and that, then something cracked. Scrabbling could have been heard by someone in the room, but the people in the adjoining room were inattentive to it.

A few minutes later, the lid began popping up bit by bit until it was sufficiently open to allow something to slip

out. It descended to the floor along a table leg, then pushed open the cracked door to the corridor just enough to creep out.

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Chapter 20

An hour later, Minka raised up, and Efran breathed, “I’m not through with you.”

“I want to see what’s in the box,” she murmured.

“In a little while. I want to play with your hair,” he said, twining his fingers in the curls.

“Ow!” she said when his fingers got caught in the tangles. “I’m thinking about cutting it,” she added, recalling Tess’ short hair.

“You wouldn’t,” he gasped. “You would take away my reason for living?”

She sat up to scowl down at him. “You cut your hair all the time.”

“Mine isn’t curly. It doesn’t do anything but get in my eyes,” he protested.

She looked over her shoulder. “Did you hear something?”

“No,” he said, stroking her.

But she got up to look out the bedroom door. Gasping, she slammed the door shut. “The door to the corridor is wide open.”

“Captain?” someone called.

“I’ll be out in just a moment,” Efran called, reaching over the bed for his clothes while Minka was scrambling into hers.

Minutes later, they emerged from the bedroom. As Efran went out to talk to someone in the corridor, Minka looked at the box with the skewed lid. She lifted the lid, then began looking around on the floor.

When Efran returned to the receiving room, he found Minka on her hands and knees looking under furniture. Then he tilted the box to pick up large fragments of eggshell. “Uh oh,” he said.

“I don’t think it’s in here anymore,” she said, raising up on her knees.

“Yeesh,” he muttered, going into the bedroom. He made a cursory search before coming out. “Well, maybe. . . .” He went to the door again, and Minka heard him say, “Ask Goss or Krall to bring Pia here, please. Yes, she’s in the woods somewhere, probably away from the barracks.”

Re-entering the receiving room, he said, “Maybe Pia can help us find it.” This was the *aina*, the Polonti child

who could communicate with animals. She was one of the first children that Efran brought to the Abbey over a year ago, but she would not be confined inside for any length of time.

Minka searched the bedroom more thoroughly while Efran looked around the receiving room again. They met in the connecting doorway. "It's not here," she said.

"Then we might as well get back in bed," he said, leaning down to her.

"You have your men bringing Pia," she reminded him.

"They can wait," he said, crushing her curls and watching them spring back. "Your hair's just like you," he murmured. "Defiant. Indomitable."

"Uncooperative?" she asked.

He frowned hazily. "No. . . . Challenging," he ended, smiling.

Krall brought in Pia at that time. "Here she is, Cap'n. Wouldn't come in for anyone but you, I'd say."

"Because all her friends are outside." He knelt to be eye to eye with her. "Are the barracks a problem for your friends?"

She frowned slightly. "They stink."

"Do they need cleaning?" he asked, smiling.

"No, they cook meat. It stinks," she said sourly.

"Oh, I guess so," Efran said, looking up at Krall. "I don't know what to do about that."

"Neither do I," Krall admitted. "They've got to eat, but the smell carries a long way."

Efran promised, "We'll think about that. Are you still doing your lessons?" he asked her. She nodded; Efran looked up at Krall for confirmation.

"Yes, Captain. Not as thoroughly as the children in the schoolroom are, no doubt, but then they're not learning as many outdoor skills, either."

"True. Pia, I need you to help us find a new small friend, if you can." He reached over to take the box off the table and hand it to her. "Something just a few hours old is wandering around the fortress."

Minka, Efran and Krall watched her pick up a fragment of shell and study it. The oval egg had been about six inches long, which would make for a good-sized animal when fully grown. The shell was brown with large purple flecks.

Pia studied it intently, then put it down, shaking her head. "Do you sense it anywhere in the fortress?" Efran asked.

She raised her face as if listening, and searched for several minutes. Then she reluctantly shook her head again. "That means it's something . . . unusual," Krall offered.

"I expect so," Efran said, standing. He picked up Pia to ask, "May I walk you out to the woods? I'll look at the barracks and see what we can do about the smell." She nodded, holding his neck, so Efran looked back to Minka. "I'll be back shortly. Don't do anything while I'm out."

She laughed, but made no promises, and watched him and Krall walk away with Pia. Minka had her own concerns, because she just now realized that with Barr's promotion and marriage, he and Tess would be needing rooms in the fortress. But she knew there weren't any; with the new pair of suites given to Wyeth and Geneve, there were no other available rooms.

Minka walked down the corridor, thinking. Justinian's suite was unoccupied, but they had to hold it for him when he did come back, which he deserved. "What can I do?" she pleaded. It really wasn't her responsibility to find Barr and Tess a room, but she felt obligated, having made him marry her and all.

From the corner of her eye, she saw something sitting on top of a partly open door. She looked quickly, but it was gone. Still, there had been something, and she was fairly sure it was purple and had . . . wings.

That evening, Efran was in good humor at dinner. He seemed to have forgotten all about the box; at this point, anything that did not show itself to be a threat or a benefit was to be ignored. He had too much else to worry over. Minka had glimpsed purple again in the corridor, but the act of looking toward it seemed to make it vanish.

They sat with their plates of fresh trout and peach cobbler, which Minka devoured. Seeing Barr and Tess enter the hall, she tentatively turned, then saw Wyeth and Geneve enter right behind them. Tess, still glowing, ran over to hug Minka's shoulders, knocking the fork from her hand. Efran and Barr turned to watch from different directions.

"Oh, Minka!" Tess cried. "The best thing! Geneve and Wyeth are letting us have his suite on the third floor, and since you already stocked it, we don't need to bring up anything but clothes! I feel like I'm living in a dream."

Efran smiled, glancing over at Barr. Minka breathed in relief, "I'm so glad, Tess. I'm so glad to see you so happy."

Tess squealed, squeezing her again, and Efran quickly righted his bottle of ale. Then Tess rushed back to her new husband and their friends, and even Barr was smiling. Whatever he thought of getting married again, it was not a bad feeling to make someone else happy by your mere presence.

Watching them get their plates and sit together to talk, Minka felt greatly relieved and a little envious. She loved Efran deeply, but his position made it difficult for her to have friends. She had no women friends to talk to, only passersby she could help on their way. She had no one to help her bumble through her own difficulties.

She raised her eyes from the group across the hall to a spot of purple on a ceiling beam above their heads. Since it was so far away, it continued to sit while she looked at it, and she sensed being studied in return. She also saw the faint flutter of wings. Sighing, she returned to her dinner.

The following day, August 22nd, Minka took Joshua out to enjoy the sunshine before she did anything with the chickens or directed anyone else's life choices. Approaching eight months old, he was pushing himself up to his hands and knees to rock, and she could see that any moment now, he would begin propelling himself forward. From there, the world was open to him.

After he'd had his bottle and some mashed-up ripe peach (which he stuffed in his mouth with eyes wide), he began yawning, so she put him down in his nursery crib surrounded by the fragrance of nutmeg. Then she returned to her quarters to sit before her mirror and look despondently at her messy hair.

A spot of purple appeared right in front of her, and she looked up at a white-haired woman about eight inches tall sitting on the top of her mirror. She wore a flowing purple dress and balanced herself on the narrow mirror frame by means of large dragonfly wings. She and Minka studied each other for a moment, then Minka said, "You came out of the box."

"Yes," the woman answered in a tiny, musical voice. "Did you like the packaging? I thought it quite clever."

"The writing?" Minka smiled.

"Oh, I know I didn't get all the words exactly right, as your language is very inconsistent," the woman excused herself. "But it was sufficient to make you leave the box alone so that I could come out in private."

"Why was that necessary?" Minka asked.

"Humans have such strange ideas about faerie; I had to make sure to approach the right person," she sniffed. "Did I correctly arrange my appearance?" She held up a corner of her dress and drew a hand along one wing.

"You're lovely," Minka said. "What is your name?"

"You may call me Kele," she said as if deciding. "You are Minka."

"Yes," Minka said, then frowned. "Did you come out of an egg?"

Kele said in delight, "Did you like that touch? Was it an interesting clue?"

"A clue?" Minka blinked.

"Humans like clues when they find something they don't understand," she said a trifle smugly.

"But you didn't come out of that egg, did you?" Minka asked.

"Oh, no. I'm very old," Kele said.

"Then . . . what did your clue do?" Minka asked.

"It told you that *something* came out of the box, so you would not be alarmed at seeing me," Kele said.

Minka thought about that, then said, "I see. Well, Kele, welcome to the Abbey Fortress."

"*Thankia* is given to Minka," Kele said, as if Minka's welcome was significant. "What may I do for you?"

Minka sighed, "Nothing. I just wish I could do something with my hair. I'm tired of looking like a child, but Efran doesn't want me looking like a woman, because the only women he's known are those who cheat on their husbands. And he doesn't want me to cut it, either."

Kele said, "Brush your hair well, then wet it slightly."

Minka eyed her, but picked up her brush to give her hair a good going-over. Then she reached over to dip her fingers in the wash basin and stroke her hair. “A little more,” Kele instructed, so Minka applied a little more water. “Brush it through your hair,” Kele said, and Minka did.

“Now get you a ribbon and tie your hair back loosely,” Kele said. Minka stood to dig a hair ribbon from her chest, then sat to tie her hair back with it.

“Too close to your head,” Kele objected. “Pull it down just a little.” Minka did. “Loosen a strand of hair around your face,” Kele said. It took a while for Minka to accomplish this, as she had to rebrush and retie her hair.

But when she had done this, she studied the effect in the mirror and said, “That’s better. I like it. What do you think?”

“Better,” Kele agreed. “See what your Efran says.”

“Oh, yes,” Minka said apprehensively. She got up to exit their quarters and stand indecisively in the corridor. She had no idea where Efran was right now.

But then he turned into the corridor from the foyer, flanked by Lyte and Barr. Efran was saying, “I don’t want it so far away as to—” then broke off upon seeing her. Minka paused, folding her hands to wait for his reaction. Barr and Lyte glanced at her, then watched him, waiting.

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Chapter 21

Efran was frozen with an evaluative look on his face. He approached to hold her in his right arm while stroking her hair with his left hand, toying with the curl next to her face. Smiling slightly, he took her up to kiss her, then walked on, resuming, “At any rate, it’s got to be accessible upon summons—” and his men followed him again.

“It worked!” Minka breathed. “Kele, it—” But the faerie was gone. After looking around for her, Minka gave up and went out to the back grounds to see the latest ripening pumpkins and Toby’s rattles.

As she walked among the pumpkins and squash, she caught sight of a spot of purple on a pumpkin down the row, so she ran over to plop down in the dirt beside it. “Kele, it worked! Did you see his reaction?”

“Yes,” Kele said. “But why are you surprised?” Arranging herself on the pumpkin, she spotted a squash bug and incinerated it with a glance.

“Because . . . he’s hard to please about some things,” Minka murmured. “Kele, can anyone else see you?”

“Not yet,” she said.

“Why not?” Minka asked.

“I have to allow it, and am careful in selecting my *companiono*,” Kele said. “Most humans are not open to us.”

Minka absorbed that, then said, “I feel honored, Kele.”

Kele looked at her sharply, then casually mentioned, “You have a faerie tree on top of your fortress.”

“Is that what it is?” Minka asked in interest.

“Yes, but it is not inhabited,” Kele noted.

“You mean, by faeries?” Minka asked.

“Yes,” Kele said, watching her.

“Well—how do we get them to come to it?” Minka asked.

“Permission must be given by the owner,” Kele said.

“I am co-owner of the Abbey Fortress and Lands,” Minka said. “Is that sufficient?”

“Yes!” Kele sprang into the air. “But you must come up to the tree.”

Minka jumped up to begin running into the fortress. Tourjee raised his eyebrows in consideration of her animated conversation with a pumpkin.

Minka ran, then trotted, then walked, then pulled herself up all the stairways to reach the roof where the faerie tree grew. It was still beautiful, but alarmingly bare in a few places. While Minka stood beside the tree to look at it, Kele flew over to perch on her shoulder. “How long have you been up here?” Minka panted.

“Hours,” Kele joked.

“With those wings?” Minka asked sardonically.

“Oh, these are just for show. We can fly as fast as a thought,” Kele assured her.

“All right, what do I do?” Minka exhaled.

“You issue an invitation to faeries however you like. It can be as simple as, ‘Faeries, come to my tree.’ Though you do need to mention the tree,” Kele said critically.

“Or what?” Minka asked, smiling.

“Or they may make themselves comfortable wherever they like in your fortress, which could be disconcerting to humans who can’t see them,” Kele admitted.

“I see.” But Minka hesitated. “Kele, are there bad faeries?”

“Of course,” Kele said.

“I don’t want to invite them. How do I invite only good faeries?” Minka asked.

Kele considered that, flying over to alight on a nearby branch. Minka noticed how the leaves around the faerie seemed to perk up. Kele said, "It depends on what you consider 'good.'" Her statement may have been as evaluative as Efran's look upon his seeing Minka's new hair.

Minka thought about that. "What do faeries know of God?"

"That differs according to the kind of faerie. There are faeries of light and faeries of darkness. We were all created by God the Maker in ages long ago, but have divided into different streams. Some streams acknowledge Him, and others do not," Kele said.

"What stream are you, Kele?" Minka asked. This sounded very similar to the streams of power undergirding the Polonti race.

"I am a faerie of light," Kele asserted, then admitted, "though I do fall into darkness on rare occasions, upon which I pick myself up most hastily."

Minka laughed. "I like that description. Well then, I want to invite only faeries of light to the Abbey tree."

"That you may do." Kele swept her purple-sleeved arm in an invitation.

Minka inhaled nervously, then said, "Faeries of light who acknowledge God our Maker, please come to the Abbey Fortress tree. I would welcome you most heartily." She looked at Kele, who nodded.

As Minka began to ask how long it would take and whether she could see the arriving faeries, several flew up practically in her face to bow before zipping into the tree. First there was a trickle of them, then a stream. Minka watched in wonder as all different colors and types of faeries arrived, bowing—some dressed in human-style clothing, some in leaves, some all hairy, some black as night and some solid silver, copper, bronze, or gold. A few appeared to be made of wood, grass or flowers themselves.

Some faeries looked like miniature animals and some looked to be made of clouds or water. They picked out their preferred places in the tree and virtually disappeared. Some seemed to sink into the trunk while others spread themselves gleefully across the leaves. Some tiny faeries darted into the little white flowers. Some wrapped themselves around limbs, while others extended themselves across the branches from trunk to leaf tips. Minka watched a few altercations in which two or more faeries claimed the exact same cubic centimeter of space, whereupon the tree shifted, enlarging itself to make room for them all.

Then Minka looked on a great faerie, almost as large as the bell tower behind the tree, who drifted up on the wind to bow before Minka before spreading himself upon the roots. And the tree rustled, spreading, growing another three feet in all directions while Minka watched in awe.

Finally, the stream died down to a trickle, then stopped. Minka looked up as the tree lifted itself in joy at fulfilling its purpose. Its branches grew out farther, the roots below plunged deeper, the flowers bloomed in profusion. And the leaves began to gesture and talk to one another.

Minka, overwhelmed, turned to stagger down the stairs to go check on Joshua.

When she got down to the first floor, however, a man said, "Here she is!" and brought her to the door of the small dining room, now crowded.

She looked around, disconcerted, as Efran said, "There you are! Where have you been?"

“Looking at the tree,” she said, blinking. “Hello, Commander,” she said, seeing him among those seated around the table.

Wendt did not reply, for he could see her—not all of her, not fully, but he clearly saw an outline of her moving and talking.

In fact, all of the men—Estes, DeWitt, Commander Lyte, his Second Cutch, and the captains were studying her. She was Minka, but there was something different about her. “Justinian!” she cried, seeing him. “You’re here in person! Did you bring a letter?”

There was laughter, and Justinian reached over to hug her shoulders lightly. Several of the men glanced at Efran upon Justinian’s spontaneous gesture, but he was preoccupied trying to discern what was different about her. Justinian said, “Dear Minka, you’ve grown into a faerie queene while I was gone.” He drew out a chair for her before sitting himself.

“Then I need a crown,” she said absently, but her normally disordered hair was curling nicely without pomade or pins. As she sat, she said, “Do you need tea, Commander?”

He said slowly, “When Efran dismisses us, that would be nice. Thank you, Minka.”

“All right,” she said, and he watched her outline nod.

“Well then.” Efran shook his head slightly, trying to remember what they were there for. Then he looked at the out-of-town arrival. “Lord Justinian has apparently come into information that won’t fit in a letter. The floor is yours, Justinian.”

“Thank you, Efran.” Having draped his blue silk jacket across the back of his chair, Justinian leaned on his elbows in his shirt sleeves, his blue silk top hat on the table beside him. “The power struggle in Euris has become a circus of bloodletting. Marguerite is fine, and will continue to be fine, as she has survived many such power struggles over the years. But the Abbey Lands is now at risk.

“Let me back up. After your vindication at trial, Efran, Rounsefell was imprisoned, but his friends can no longer locate him, so he is probably dead. And your slapdown of Uxbridge over his authorization of bounty hunters resulted in his murder several days ago—I cannot even determine the exact date.

“Given these recent developments—along with your defeating Loizeaux several times—the most astute among the remaining contenders have realized that the crown lies in the rubble of the Abbey Fortress. Whoever defeats you will certainly become Surchatain of Euris,” Justinian said to Efran, who nodded in understanding.

“Now,” Justinian said, “the newest aspirant to the throne, one DeVenter, is apparently a powerful Pharmakon who has—”

“Excuse me. A what?” DeWitt asked.

“Pharmakon,” Justinian replied. “This is an elite group of Eurisians who combine pharmaceuticals with magic. To give you some perspective on the group, Arenado, who produced the fireballs, aspired to be in the group. DeVenter is its head.”

“What . . . has he got planned?” Lyte asked.

"I have no idea. I couldn't begin to guess. But it will be something that we have not seen before, and it will be soon," Justinian said.

There was a long silence, then Wendt said, "Tell me about the tree, Minka."

She startled, looking at him. Then she looked at Efran, who smiled and nodded. "Have you seen it, Commander?" she asked. "I mean, felt it?"

"Yes, I was taken up to it. But what is different about it today?" Wendt asked.

"Different?" she murmured, lowering her head.

He laughed. "You don't want to say. But I'll tell you why you should. Hold up a certain number of fingers, Minka, but don't say how many."

"All right." Facing him, she held up three fingers.

"You are holding up three fingers," Wendt said.

"Commander!" "Can you see?" "What?" the men were standing; Efran had started around the table to him.

"No, everyone sit down," Wendt instructed. Reluctantly, they did. Wendt then explained, "I can see Minka in outline. Whatever she did up there at the tree has left an aura around her that I can detect without eyes."

They all stared at her, and she inhaled deeply. Looking at Efran, she began, "The box that you found contained a . . . faerie." And she told them all about Kele, and her hair, and the faeries she invited to the tree.

When she was done, Efran stood. "Let's go up and have a look at it."

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Chapter 22

Eleven men and Minka went up to look at the tree on the roof of the fortress. As soon as they stood before it, Minka started smiling. For many of the faeries poked their heads out to greet her, and a few emerged from the tree altogether to sit on her shoulder or one of the men.

She watched a great many of them cluster around the Commander, discussing (as far as she could tell) if there were anything they could do for him.

"What do you see, Minka?" Efran asked.

"Oh!" she laughed. "So many faeries coming out to see us. There's one on your shoulder, Efran. And many are looking over the Commander in great concern."

The men turned to him. "What do you see, Commander?" Efran asked.

“Flashes of light. Sparks. Some branches outlined, as well as the trunk. Groups of leaves. And Minka’s outline with numerous sparks around her,” Wendt said.

“Are you seeing any of this, Efran?” Minka asked. He shook his head.

He turned to his men with the silent query, and they uniformly shook their heads or said, “No.” “Nothing.”

DeWitt sighed, “So the Commander is seeing more of this phenomenon than we are.”

“But Minka is seeing it all,” Wendt said. “My point, Efran, is that the influx of faerie when we are facing a paranormal attack seems to me not coincidental. I don’t know how it will work out, but, I recognize tactical maneuvering when I see it.”

Efran nodded. “Thank you, Commander. That’s encouraging.”

The following day, August 23rd, the men were on high alert, but as they didn’t know what they were watching for, they soon exhausted themselves to no benefit. Efran and his officers debated what proactive measures they could take against attack, but again, with no inkling of what form it would take, all they could agree on was to finish the east portion of the wall as soon as possible. They also agreed that it probably wouldn’t make any difference.

Minka brought the children up to the tree so she could quietly observe whether they were aware of the new arrivals. Having seen the tree before, they were only mildly interested in it today, and Minka found no indication that they saw the faeries who emerged to study them in great curiosity. However, when Minka brought up Joshua, he clearly smiled and waved at them. He tracked their movements, and squealed with delight when they landed on him.

Only one faerie scared him, and that was a solemn little fellow all decked out in dead leaves. He liked to stretch out and float softly to the ground. Watching him, Joshua screwed up his face and put his head on Minka’s shoulder.

Minka walked often with the Commander during those days of waiting. It was a delight for him to see the darkness pierced by her approaching outline, and she would walk him on the grounds or in the dining hall to determine whether anyone else displayed that bright aura on his dead retinas, but no one did.

The seedling that Minka had planted at the southwest corner of the fenced grounds had been growing rapidly, putting out green clusters, but now they exploded urgently into ripeness all along the fence—hundreds of clusters. The children went wild among them, eating them and smashing them in each other’s mouths until they were all walking around with purple faces. Tourjee finally banished them from the grapes altogether so that no more would be wasted.

That first night, when Efran and Minka went to bed, he touched her in fascination and slight awe. “Do I feel different?” she asked apprehensively.

“There’s a tingle—very slight,” he murmured, running his hand down her body. When he lay on her to kiss her, he gasped quietly.

“What?” she asked in alarm.

"I just got shocked," he grinned, and he gathered her up, greedy for more.

On the second day of waiting, Efran told Justinian, "You might want to get back up to Marguerite's pretty soon."

"And miss what happens here?" Justinian replied in horror. "Oh, I'm not afraid at all. You'll pull us through. You have the faeries. And their Queene."

On August 25th—three days after Minka found the faerie—a disturbing rash of fires began appearing around the outside of the fortress. They were put out quickly, as water was readily available, but they kept popping up for no apparent reason. More troubling, they seemed to be concentrated on the faerie tree roots and branches.

Then there were shudders as if something had begun pounding on the fortress walls. Worse, branches along the walls were shredded by an unknown force. Fortress residents looked out of windows to see branches separating before their eyes with great violence but no cause. There was always a fierce blast of wind accompanying it, however—hot and sulfurous wind.

Peering out a window as the branch beneath it exploded in flames, Justinian shook his head in distress. Unknown to him, Kele hovered at his ear. "You need to see what is happening, don't you?" she suggested.

"Yes, I really do," he replied.

So she sat on his head to lean down and spread her hands across his eyes as if parting a curtain. When he saw what was happening, he gasped and fell back against the wall to cover his eyes.

Dozens of residents came out to look where the damage seem to be concentrated, but no one could see what did it. The faeries were greatly excited, however, and came to cluster around Minka in the vegetable garden. When she didn't understand them, she went inside to look for a window that gave view to the problem.

At that time, great blasts of fire struck the tree on the roof. As Efran was trotting to the stairway to ascend, Wendt stopped him. "It's a dragon."

"Yes, sir, thank you," Efran said, discounting it at once. Arriving on the roof, Efran called for buckets of water to be brought up. Unheard and unseen, faeries were screaming and swarming through the fortress, seeking help. Minka, looking out a third-floor window to see one blast of fire, cried out and ran to Efran on the roof.

"Efran! It's a dragon! A great, monstrous dragon is attacking the fortress!" she cried.

He stared at her, then called for archers to the rooftop. When he turned to question her, she cried out, pulling him down flat on the roof as a blast of fire shot over their heads to hit the tree. Branches exploded in flames; leaves by the hundreds withered to black ash.

Efran lurched up again to look over the crenelation. "Where is it?" he cried. "Where?"

"There!" she pointed, her finger moving in an arc. "It's coming around again!"

She pulled him down against the crenelation, and another fierce blast hit the tree, at its root this time. Estes and DeWitt had come up in time to throw themselves down to the rooftop to avoid the stream of fire.

Efran lifted up again to study the sky. “I don’t see it. I can’t see anything.”

Archers came pouring onto the rooftop, bows and quivers ready. A few brought swords as well. One man brought Efran his gear; he threw the quiver across his shoulder and nocked an arrow, raising the bow. Then they scanned the sky, searching, as Minka cried, “Here it comes again!”

“Where is it?” “I can’t see it!” “WHERE?” the archers shouted.

She screamed, “Get down!” As they ducked behind the crenelation, another blast rocked the tree, almost separating the trunk. A few men had to pat out patches of fire on their clothing, and they shouted for more water. It was being brought up as fast as frightened helpers could bring it.

When they lifted up again, looking, Minka breathed, “It’s cloaked. It’s invisible to you.”

Efran looked around, searching for a solution to an invisible antagonist. “God of heaven,” he whispered, “how do we fight something we can’t see?”

Another blast hit the tree, which began to sag. “The dragon is aiming at the tree,” Minka said.

Estes, beside them, said, “If it kills the tree, the fortress will collapse. The roots are embedded in the foundation.”

“God of heaven,” Efran croaked.

Wyeth then ran up to them. “I see it! I can see it! Give me something to throw at it!”

A half-dozen men thrust their bows at him, but he cried, “I’m not trained to shoot! I cannot—dive!” As he and Minka fell flat, another blast hit the tree, and a large bough crashed to the rooftop, burning.

Raising up on his knees, Wyeth gasped, “I can’t shoot. But if you give me something to throw at it, to mark it, then you can see it to shoot it.”

“What . . . ?” Efran began.

“Mud! Paint! What thing I can throw that will make it seen to you!” Wyeth shouted.

“How do we package something up in time?” Efran gasped. He turned to a helper with a bucket. “Bring us up mud. A bucket of mud.” He nodded shakily and ran to the stairs.

But Minka turned to the faeries, who were clustering around her in great excitement. She heard them, then turned to Efran. “The faeries want to help you.”

Panting, he looked at her. “The faeries—want to—help.”

“Yes,” she said. “But they need your permission.”

“My permission,” he repeated. They all fell as another blast rocked the whole tree. And there was no more water.

Raising up, Efran cried, “Yes! You have my permission to help us!” Then he sagged on his knees, breathing.

Minka watched the faeries dart off in rapid flight, then she looked back at the dragon laughing. It was a great, ugly thing, dark gray and crimson red, with warts covering its head and upper body. It was at least 30 feet long from its snout to the tip of its spiked tail. Its wingspan was a good ten feet longer than its body, and its phalanges alone longer than the height of any man. But she observed that while it was making sport of them, it was not attacking.

“What is it doing now?” Efran gasped.

“Laughing at us,” she said. Wyeth groaned, slapping his hands together in frustration. Seeing a dropped sword, he picked it up in case the monster got close enough to strike.

Minka asked Wyeth, “What gave you faerie sight?”

“I—” he shrugged, then said, “I used to play with them when I was small. I found a hurt faerie on the ground, and put it in a tree. After that, I could see them.”

Soon the faeries began returning, each laden with something. Some of them bit or clawed whatever it was they held, then swarmed the dragon to pelt it with their small burdens. The dragon rolled over, laughing at this ridiculous attack, but they continued to pelt it with the balls they held.

“Grapes,” Minka said. “They’re throwing grapes at it.”

The men turned to look. They could not see the faeries, but what they saw were small purple dots beginning to appear in the air. As each faerie unleashed its burden, it flew back for more, and soon hundreds of small dots began to be seen and connect in the sky, yet the dragon seemed unaware.

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Chapter 23

“Wait,” Efran told his archers in a low voice. “Wait until we can discern the center.” They watched the manifesting pattern as they quietly nocked their bows.

Encouraged by the results, more faeries flew in to the marking. The large faerie that had been driven out of the roots by the flames brought up great handfuls of grape clusters which he squeezed and then flung mightily at the dragon’s uplifted belly.

That aroused it to retaliate, but its reserve was nearly exhausted, as it had wasted a great deal spewing flames for show only. Now, its fiery streams were growing shorter and weaker. And it appeared to be unaware that its underbelly was marked. Efran lifted his bow and released, hitting the splotch dead center.

Faeries scattered as arrows flew to the markings and the dragon reared, roaring. With its flames spent, it attacked the archers instead, flying into them to knock them left and right. Being unable to see the tail, the wings or the feet, a few men came perilously close to falling over the crenelation, and would have been tossed to their death were it not for Efran’s persistent firing.

Staying by the half-demolished tree out of reach of the sweeping tail, he loosed one arrow after another at the splotches, hitting anywhere just to distract the dragon from his men. Having enough of that, the dragon scooped him out from under the tree to pin him to the rooftop, opening its invisible jaws.

But Wyeth, seeing, lunged at it with the sword, plunging it into the dragon's neck. A gush of visible blood poured down on Efran, who writhed at its burning. The dragon raised up, bellowing in pain and shaking the sword point out of its neck. Now marked with blood as well as grape juice, it was an easy target for the archers.

But having landed on the rooftop, the dragon went after the tree with teeth and claws. The men could only see the splotches moving furiously at the tree, and the resultant destruction of living wood. "Get it away from the tree!" Efran shouted, staggering up. "Sword!"

Efran and Wyeth were thrown the first swords found. They inserted themselves among broken branches, where the outline of the dragon showed in the shadows. While they were camouflaged by what remained of the tree, they drove their swords with both hands through the serpent's leathery skin. Meanwhile, the archers fired up at the obvious location of the wings, given the wind flattening the treetop. As arrows ripped unseen holes in the membranes, the faeries pelted the dragon's eyes with grapes, dirt, and sticks.

The dragon had enough, and began unsteadily lifting off. Wyeth raised his sword to jam it into the most vulnerable part of the underbelly. Issuing a cry now—and becoming faintly visible—the dragon flew over the crenelation to promptly begin dropping because of the holes in its wings. With each passing moment, it grew more visible.

Leaning over the crenelation, the men watched as the holes in the wing membranes widened so that the dragon flapped harder and fell faster. When it hit the northeastern reaches of the hill with a resounding *boom*, the earth shuddered for a quarter mile in all directions and the water in the cavern lake surged. The hill hiccuped, then resettled. By the time the tremors from the impact subsided, the lake had been depleted by a third. Fully visible, the dragon writhed for a moment, then stiffened in death.

"Thank God. Thank the God of heaven," Efran gasped. Weaving, he blinked at the small shapes around him cheering and hugging. But he looked back at the broken tree in heartbreak. "Can it be saved?" he whispered.

The faeries flocked back to the tree, though one paused to pat Efran consolingly on the cheek. He watched as they reentered its shattered boughs and burned branches to begin the healing. Broken joints were repaired; cracked limbs smoothed together, and new buds and leaves coaxed out of twigs. The great faerie who had brought fistfuls of grapes to mark the dragon now laid himself back down in the roots, which swelled with new life.

At Efran's side, Minka brushed his sweaty, blood-smeared hair from his face. "The tree's not that easy to kill. It has hidden strength in the fortress," she murmured.

He exhaled, "Thank God. And thank your faerie friends for us."

"Can you see them now?" she asked.

He looked at the tree, where scores of strange little faces looked back at him grinning, baring their teeth, or waving their appendages, according to their makeup. "Thank you," he whispered. Several flew over to him to begin cleaning the dragon blood off him and soothing the worst of the burns from it. He stood still for them, closing his eyes.

When they had finished their ministrations on him and he finally turned toward the stairway, he stumbled over something. Minka caught his arm, and they looked down at a bucket of mud at his feet.

After Efran had washed up and checked on his men's injuries (which were minor), he called a meeting of the same group that had met three days ago, with the addition of Wyeth. Taking his seat across from the Commander, Efran told him, "I didn't quite believe you when you told me it was a dragon."

"I know," Wendt said, smiling tightly.

"Did you see it in outline?" Efran asked.

"Yes, as well as the flames, which I thought interesting," Wendt said.

"Huh," Efran uttered, but no one had any insight into that, so he went on, "I wish I could award a commendation to Justinian, but since I've already entitled you, I don't know what more I can give you."

He regarded Justinian, who replied, "I have my life. What more could I want?"

Several of the men nodded; Efran exhaled, "That is a point. Well. I want commendations for all archers who were on the roof, and a Meritorious Cross for Wyeth." This was the highest honor the Abbey had to offer its soldiers.

The men turned in smiling approval to Wyeth, who shook his head, murmuring, "No, no."

"Shut up," Efran said. The men laughed lightly, and Wyeth reddened.

Efran sat back, crossing his arms over his chest, then uncrossed them from the tender skin and twined his fingers on top of his head. "Having failed once, DeVenter will try again. He must be stopped. So I am going to Euruss—"

Two men simultaneously interrupted him: "No, Efran," said Wendt. "No!" said DeWitt.

And Estes said, "Efran, why would you give them this gift when they have been unable to defeat you here?"

Efran was silent, eyes downcast. Everyone watched him, waiting. Then he cleared his throat and said, "I am willing to listen to suggestions for how to prevent another attack from DeVenter."

Justinian shrugged. "I have to go back to Euruss anyway, and since I'm not associated with the Abbey, I'm not in danger." He toyed with the brim of his hat on the table as he said this.

Efran leveled a hard gaze at him. "And what is your plan for neutralizing DeVenter?"

Justinian grimaced. "Well, I can get in to see him, and then wing it from there."

"That's how we operate all the time," DeWitt observed to light laughter.

"You need a bodyguard," Efran said.

"Of Abbey soldiers? In Euruss? Oh, that will help," Justinian said sarcastically.

Minka asked, “How about small, unobtrusive, devastatingly clever bodyguards?”

The men looked at her, but she nodded, smiling, to Justinian’s hat. On the crown stood two faeries: one was a little man dressed in a suit much like Justinian’s, and the other was a squirrel sitting on its haunches, wearing a plaid vest and a monocle.

Justinian lowered his face to be eye to eye with them, so to speak, and they turned to him. He said, “Good afternoon, gentlemen. I’ve not had the pleasure of an introduction.” He spoke tentatively, as if unsure whether he was addressing the air or something real.

“You can see them! How can you see them?” Minka asked in delight.

Justinian paused. “When the dragon was beating on the fortress, I heard someone asking if I needed to see that. I said yes, and—saw it.” Minka then realized that a faerie in the fortress—probably Kele—had given Justinian sight. In fact, any of the faeries on the rooftop could have given the archers sight, but that required a receptive frame of mind, which they did not have in the midst of the crisis.

So Minka said, “Allow me to introduce you. Justinian, on your left is Sir Ditson, and on your right is Sir Nutbin.” The man and the squirrel bowed to him. Minka continued, “They have both been knighted for heroism by Queene Mab the twenty-seventh.”

“I am honored to have your company and your counsel, gentleman. I suggest we leave early in the morning. I’ll have the carriage made ready. What may we pack for your provisions?” Justinian asked.

Sir Ditson replied, “Our preference, sir, is for apricots, blackberries, purple grapes, green figs, mulberries, honey, and, of course, nuts. But we shall make do with whatever we are given. Does that sum it up, Nutbin?”

“Why, yes, Ditson; that sounds entirely adequate,” Nutbin replied.

“How very accommodating. I shall expect great things from our association,” Justinian said. Straightening, he told Efran, “I think this will work rather well.” Efran blinked at him.

Minka grinned; the other men looked at his top hat in bewilderment, and Efran said blankly, “We’ll have provisions ready for your departure tomorrow morning. Mulberries. Do we have mulberries?” he asked around. Minka looked dubious.

“They’re not essential, Lord Efran,” Sir Ditson said. “Are they, Nutbin?”

“No, no, not at all. Don’t trouble yourself, Lord Efran; we are quite able to improvise. Is that not the case, Ditson?” Nutbin replied.

“Unquestionably, Nutbin,” Ditson said.

“As you wish. God speed,” Efran said, then looked at Minka as if asking, *Am I insane?*

The following morning, August 26th, Justinian’s carriage was packed with provisions for the trip to Eurys, and Minka handed him a letter for dear Auntie Marguerite. Justinian placed it in his waistcoat pocket without hugging her because Efran, awake and alert, was standing right behind her.

Although the day was pleasant, Justinian had the driver put up the top of the carriage to insure that Sirs Ditson and Nutbin were not blown out on the way. Then goodbyes were said, and those in the courtyard waved to the carriage as it descended the switchback.

Once on the road, Justinian removed his hat and leaned back on the cushioned seat. “Well, gentlemen, you may want to rest on the way. We’ll arrive at Marguerite’s late in the afternoon, and entrust her with arranging our interview with DeVenter hopefully for tomorrow. Then we’ll play it from there.” With that, he closed his eyes and began melodiously snoring.

Ditson and Nutbin regarded their companion, and Ditson said, “Interesting how motion knocks them right out, isn’t it, Nutbin?”

“You have stated the case exactly, dear Ditson,” replied Nutbin. “Though I believe his exertions in the night deprived him of approximately three and a quarter hours of sleep.”

“I must concur with your calculations, dear Nutbin,” said Ditson. “The young woman was similarly affected, in that she was unable to regain consciousness for our departure this morning.” According to protocol for top hats in closed carriages, he sat with his purple hat on his knee, frequently smoothing his copper-colored hair. Aside from the color—Justinian’s being dark brown—Ditson’s hair looked very much like his, both in the cut and the curl.

“Your observation entirely coincides with mine, Ditson,” said Nutbin. “Since our travel host requires to address his deficit of rest on the way up, shall we use our time to scout out our destination?” He removed his monocle to clean it with a wee hankie from the pocket of his vest.

“The plan you propose is an admirable one, Nutbin,” said Ditson. “But are you speaking of the Lady Marguerite’s Featherstone or the Lord DeVenter’s Cotterill?”

“Featherstone has already been reviewed by *Faerie Flight Guide* with a four-star rating, dear Ditson,” said Nutbin. “It’s Cotterill that requires our immediate attention, I would say.” He critically screwed the monocle back onto his furry face.

“Worthy Nutbin, your research is a credit to our profession!” exclaimed Ditson, almost losing hold of his hat in his excitement.

“No, no, Ditson; you would have noted the rating in the *Guide* had not Batfin accidentally used it to set the troll’s hair on fire. However, I am intrigued by the Meritorious Cross which this Wyeth has obtained,” Nutbin admitted.

“I also would like to study this man’s style, Nutbin. Do you suppose it was the clapping of hands that clenched it for him?” Ditson asked. Over his hat, he reproduced Wyeth’s powerful gesture.

“That’s hard to say, Ditson, though it was unquestionably admirable,” Nutbin said thoughtfully.

“Then we should defer this conversation until we can obtain an opinion from others at the club, don’t you think, Nutbin?” Ditson asked.

“I agree wholeheartedly, Ditson. Shall we be on our way, then?” Nutbin inquired.

“Indubitably. After you, my good Nutbin.” Ditson placed his hat on his head and extended his hand.

“You are too kind, Ditson,” Nutbin said. And they vanished out of the carriage window.

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Chapter 24

When Justinian arrived at Featherstone that afternoon, he was unperturbed that his traveling companions were nowhere in sight. Marguerite greeted him with her usual hugs and kisses and cries of “Hartshough!” But when Justinian produced the letter from Minka, Marguerite cried tears, and had to sit at the table to read it while he enjoyed the efforts of her superlative kitchen.

Sipping his digestif, Justinian said, “Dearest Marguerite, you make a poor man feel that life is worth living again after enduring the trackless wastes of the Abbey Lands.”

“Oh, you dear boy,” Marguerite said, patting him. “I’m very glad to see you. But my darling Sybil alarms me to no end with this letter. What is this about a faerie tree and invisible dragon?”

“Now, dear, I won’t say that Sybil is exaggerating, but they did have to get out their pointy sticks to beat flying things out of the trees. And they probably won’t have much of a grape harvest this year,” he said regretfully.

“Oh dear, that is aggravating,” Marguerite said.

“Now, kind lady, please tell me about the Lord DeVenter. He’s the talk of the town in Westford,” Justinian said.

“I know very little about him; he sprang up so quickly in the Surchatain sweepstakes,” Marguerite said. “He wears these dark velvet robes covered with silver stars and emblems and such, and has such a habit of peering at one out of the corner of his eye. I don’t think I would trust him with a bag of faggots, much less the throne,” she said pensively.

“I see. Would you mind terribly arranging an interview with him for me? At his residence, preferably,” Justinian said.

“Are you sure you want it?” she asked dubiously.

“Others are counting on my getting it, dearest lady,” he said.

“All right, then.” As she turned, he discreetly covered his ears while the call was sounded: “HARTSHOUGH!” When she turned back to Justinian, he was pretending to smooth his hair.

“Yes, my lady?” The unflappable Hartshough materialized beside her chair.

“Hartshough, Justinian wants to see DeVenter tomorrow at his house,” Marguerite said.

“Very good, my lady,” Hartshough said, disappearing again, and Justinian smiled lovingly on Marguerite.

A few hours later, Justinian and Marguerite were relaxing in the music room while an ensemble played. When

they took a break, Hartshough appeared with the engraved invitation from Lord DeVenter to Lord Justinian to visit him at his residence Cotterill. "Thank you, Hartshough," Justinian said, idly regarding the card. "Eight of the candle? That's just in time for dinner."

"I believe he means in the morning, Lord Justinian," Hartshough said.

"In the morning?" Justinian gasped. "Oh, the sacrifices one makes for duty."

"True, Lord Justinian," Hartshough said sympathetically.

Before leaving Marguerite's house that evening, Justinian addressed his associates in his second-floor room. "I'll be back later, gentlemen—I have some private business to attend elsewhere tonight. But do kindly make sure that I am awake tomorrow morning by seven of the candle. We are to be admitted to Lord DeVenter's at eight."

Ditson said, "We will certainly accede to your request, Lord Justinian."

Nutbin said, "You may count on us, sir."

"Thank you." Justinian tipped his hat to them and departed.

The following morning, August 27th, Justinian was shocked awake by what felt like a thousand volts surging through his body. He elevated a foot off the bed and came to rest on his feet in the center of the room. Eyes starting almost out of his head, he observed two small persons sitting on the washstand, regarding him attentively.

"The time is approximately one minute past seven of the candle, sir," Ditson said.

"As you requested," Nutbin added.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Justinian said, then turned to look in the mirror at his hair sticking straight out from his head. Without bending, he reached for the ewer above the washbasin.

In another half hour, he was riding in one of Marguerite's liveried carriages to Cotterill, the residence of the newest aspirant to the throne of Eurus. Justinian, not yet recovered from the shock of awaking, was alert to every noise and color that surrounded the carriage. His co-conspirators were docilely riding in the seat opposite him.

The carriage drew up to the residence (probably rented, Justinian thought) which was suitable for a noble, but not really for a Surchatain-to-be. Withholding further judgment, Justinian stepped out of the carriage and turned his back to the house for his companions to slip into his pockets, one on either side (unseen by the driver or the footman). "I should be out within an hour or two," Justinian told the driver, who tipped his hat.

Justinian then advanced up the steps to the double doors to be admitted by a butler, who requested he wait in a side room. While there, Justinian looked in one pocket, then the other, to see his traveling companions look up and salute him. Having obtained much benefit from yesterday's reconnaissance, they were content to remain in hiding for now.

Minutes later, the same butler escorted him to a nice drawing room, where his host turned to greet him. "Thank you, Smyth. Lord Justinian, welcome to my humble house," DeVenter said.

"I am honored to meet you, Lord DeVenter," Justinian said, bowing. He accepted a breakfast aperitif and the invitation to sit.

DeVenter was a lanky man of medium height with a sharp nose and black eyes. His curly black hair fell around his shoulders, and he had one dangly earring of silver depicting a quarter moon and stars in cutout. His most notable feature was his heavy eyelids. Regardless where he looked, he seemed incapable of opening his eyes more than halfway. At this moment, DeVenter was studying his guest with sideways glances.

Sitting himself, DeVenter said, "I felt compelled to issue an invitation after apprehending that it is difficult, if not unwise, to deny a request of Lady Marguerite. I just must wonder why you wished to see me." His superior manner indicated his own belief that he already knew why.

"She is a gem of the first order," Justinian admitted. Upon sipping the mediocre liqueur offered as aperitif, he thought, *This man will never be Surchatain of Eurys*. But he said, "To be frank with you, the nobles in Westford and Crescent Hollow are all agog over your appearing as a possible Surchatain, and I've been asked to provide your curriculum vitae for their elucidation. What would you like for me to tell them about you, Lord DeVenter?"

"Oh, well, the first thing they should know is that I am invincible. By my arts, I have made myself incapable of suffering pain or injury," DeVenter said, lifting his chin to view his guest from under his heavy lids.

"An admirable achievement. And by what arts were you able to do that?" Justinian asked, placing the half-finished aperitif on the table.

"Due to my skill in pharmacia," DeVenter said.

"Please explain that to me; it is a field with which I am unfamiliar," Justinian said.

"I can do better than words; let me show you. Breakfast will be ready shortly," DeVenter said, putting down his glass as he stood.

"Excellent," Justinian said, standing as well.

DeVenter led Justinian down a corridor to the back of the house, and from there to a freestanding building on the lawn. "I have my shop out here because the smells can be disagreeable," the Pharmakon explained.

"Oh?" Justinian said vaguely, now on alert.

DeVenter opened the door into what was certainly a laboratory. Justinian glanced around at tables with bowls and flasks and cylinders of various liquids and powders, all neatly labeled. "It doesn't look like much, but I've done some of my best work here," DeVenter said. He turned to lock the door behind him. "I don't like to be interrupted while I'm working."

"Oh, I wouldn't dream of requiring a demonstration from you or anything like that," Justinian said idly, not thrilled to be locked in by new acquaintances.

"But I love to show off my work, Lord Justinian," DeVenter said, adding, "ennobled by Lord Efran of the Abbey Lands."

"Yes. From time to time, I wonder how he's doing," Justinian murmured, catching sight of a dish of white powder. It was sitting on a table by itself, with a glass cover and the label: "DANGER: P₄"

“Ah,” said DeVenter, noting his glance. “If you follow the science, you should be able to tell how far ahead of my peers I am.”

“Certainly,” Justinian said with a whiff of boredom.

DeVenter laughed, “And please tell me how Lord Efran enjoyed his visit from Sivalik.”

Justinian looked mildly inquiring. “Who is that?”

“It is a dragon that has a special hatred of faerie. And I made him invisible,” DeVenter smiled. For the first time, he opened his eyes fully, which made him look crazy, in Justinian’s view. Which was likely, he thought.

“Oh. That’s interesting,” Justinian said.

“You are neither shocked nor alarmed,” DeVenter observed.

“Well, it’s been a while since I talked to Efran,” Justinian admitted.

“Do you not believe that I can do this?” DeVenter challenged him.

“I’m not inclined to doubt you, Lord DeVenter,” Justinian said. Putting his hands in his pockets, he discovered them to be empty, and looked around in some concern.

“Ah, now you are worried—possibly because you realize that I will have an army of these dragons to do my will,” DeVenter said.

“That would be impressive,” Justinian admitted, “except, I don’t know how many faeries will be competing with you for the throne.”

DeVenter laughed. “I can instill in my dragons a hatred for anyone I choose. Even you, Lord Justinian.” His eyes were back to half-closed. He turned to raise a window shade, filling the room with morning light by which he surveyed Justinian sideways again.

“I’m not worth hating,” Justinian waved. He then glimpsed his faerie companions on the table behind DeVenter, walking among the dishes and pointing.

“Anyone who gets in my way earns my hatred,” DeVenter said in a low voice. “As does anyone who criticizes my butler’s choice of liqueurs.”

Justinian raised his hands. “You’re fine in my book, sir.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sir Nutbin’s tail brush a dish of powder, moving it dangerously close to the edge of the table, and Justinian winced.

“Ah,” said DeVenter. “The fear is taking hold of you now.”

“Well, to be honest, do you *really* need an army of dragons, sir? It seems to me that the field is pretty wide open for you even without them,” Justinian said. He tried not to watch Sir Nutbin turn to relocate the dish only for his tail to knock a nearby flask off balance. Justinian swayed as the flask rocked, but Sir Ditson righted it. Justinian breathed out.

“But I do not do anything halfway, Lord Justinian,” DeVenter said in a low voice. “And I intend to publicize what my dragons can do. For I sense that Sivalik has finished his task and gone to rest. When word gets out what he has done to the Abbey Fortress, I will be feared and revered. But there will be more,” he said, his voice dropping to a gravelly whisper. Justinian grimaced as Sir Ditson backed into another flask, which began rolling on its round bottom.

DeVenter seized on his guest’s apparent unease: “Ah, do you sense it? Can you guess what I have in mind for you, Lord Officer of the Abbey Fortress and Lands? For I perceive that you have not only talked with Lord Efran recently, but that he has charged you to ‘neutralize’ me. And with the stink of faerie heavy upon you, shall I let you go back to him? Or shall I cut out your heart and feed it to my dragons?”

Illumined by the morning light, DeVenter turned to open a large freestanding cabinet. It contained dozens of beakers, each with an embryonic dragon free-floating in liquid.

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Chapter 25

Justinian glanced at the cabinet, but remarked, “If you have plans for me, you might want to get right on them.” He finally apprehended that while DeVenter had been lecturing him, Justinian’s cohorts had been rearranging dishes and flasks on the table right behind the Pharmakon. The glass top with the DANGER warning was now sitting on the small table alone, orphaned of the dish with the white powder.

DeVenter turned around to see what Justinian was looking at, and zeroed in on the small trespassers. Irritated, he reached a hand to swat at them. “Pests! Get out!”

Justinian was never sure how it happened, but as DeVenter leaned over the table, the dish of white powder directly under him exploded with a blinding white flash.

Raising his fists, DeVenter cried, “That’s why I hate faeries!” But the powder in the dish was continuing to burn, releasing a white smoke. Ditson and Nutbin flew to the door, blowing it open, and Justinian grabbed DeVenter to drag him out onto the lawn. The Pharmakon insisted, “You may fear for yourself, but I am uninjured.”

“Excellent!” Justinian ran him to the back door of his house, calling, “Smyth! Smyth!” The butler hurried up, and Justinian said, “He had a small accident in his laboratory out there.”

“Oh, dear,” Smyth said, watching in concern as DeVenter patted his burning face, thinking he was putting out the flames.

He was not. “There. You see? I am fine. Open the shutters; it’s very dark in here,” DeVenter said as the yellow flames on his face consumed his flesh and spread to his clothes. “Though you donnnnn. . . .” His lips having melted away, he had trouble speaking. Smyth threw a rug over him in an attempt to smother the flames. Also, neither he nor Justinian wanted to see any more of this.

A rumbling *kaboom* from the grounds made Justinian instinctively duck, then he looked out to see that the workshop was now a pile of burning debris. The cook and his assistant ran out of the house, as did a maid. And Justinian.

With flames spreading through the back rooms from the human candle, Smyth went to a side room, then emerged with his hat on his head and his travel bag in hand. In the courtyard, where Justinian was climbing into Marguerite's carriage, Smyth paused to bow, raising his hat. "Good day, Lord Justinian. Please tell Lady Marguerite that I am no longer in Lord DeVenter's service. The lord is going to be off his feet for a while."

"Understandable," Justinian said. "May we give you a lift?"

"Thank you, sir, but Mr. Spitta's carriage is coming around front even as we speak," Smyth nodded.

"Ah. Very good." Justinian shut the carriage door against the acrid smoke as the driver exited to the road.

Justinian looked at Ditson and Nutbin on the seat across from him. "What a terrible accident. Wasn't it, Nutbin?" Ditson asked.

"You are so right, Ditson; it was appalling," Nutbin said firmly.

"One must always be careful around dangerous chemicals, shouldn't one, Nutbin?" Ditson asked.

"So true, Ditson! Special care must be taken around white phosphorus, which can explode into flames simply sitting in a dish," Nutbin said.

"And that is a lesson for us all, dear Nutbin," Ditson said.

"Indeed it is, Ditson! So what we will do, Lord Justinian, is take this tragic news back to Lord Efran, while you console Lady Marguerite and other friends of your acquaintance. Would you agree with that plan, Ditson?" asked Nutbin.

"Yes, indeed, Nutbin; that sounds just the ticket," Ditson said firmly.

"Goodbye, Lord Justinian; it was a pleasure working with you. Was it not, Ditson?" Nutbin asked.

"Indeed it was, Nutbin, and we hope to do so again very soon," Ditson said.

"Well done, good fellows," Justinian said quietly, and they vanished out the carriage window.

In bed, Efran pressed his lips into Minka's neck. "Efran," she said.

"Am I hurting you?" he breathed.

"No, but—"

He stopped her with a lingering kiss, then drew back, smiling. "Yes, my faerie queene?"

"We have company," she whispered.

He stilled, and his brow wrinkled. Then he looked back over his shoulder and raised up. Minka grasped the dislodged bed clothes to cover herself, lifting on an elbow to see Sir Ditson and Sir Nutbin standing on the footboard.

“Greetings, Lord Efran and Lady Minka,” Ditson said as both he and Nutbin bowed.

“Hello,” Efran said mechanically.

“We’ve come to report tragic news,” Nutbin said.

“Justinian! Is he all right?” Minka cried, sitting up with the sheet clutched to her chest.

“Oh, yes, Lady Minka; he performed his part with rare form, and has now returned to Lady Marguerite’s Featherstone to celebrate the tragedy,” Ditson explained.

Efran squinted. “What happened?”

Nutbin said, “We arrived at Lord DeVenter’s Cotterill, Lord Efran, and the lord was explaining to our compatriot his plan to deploy an army of invisible dragons to attain the throne, but a dish of white phosphorus spontaneously ignited to destroy his workshop.”

“Is DeVenter dead?” Efran asked.

Ditson said, “Not yet, Lord Efran, only off his feet for a while. Worse, his butler quit. Was that not the greater tragedy, Nutbin?”

“Yes, Ditson, that was unquestionably the worst part of the whole day for him,” Nutbin said firmly.

Efran hesitantly repeated, “DeVenter was knocked off his feet by an explosion of white phosphorus and his workshop destroyed?”

“Regrettably, yes, Lord Efran,” Ditson said. “The shop is nothing but splinters now. Is that how you would describe it, Nutbin?”

“Definitely, Ditson. Splinters and toxic debris. The gaffer shall be able to make nothing of the broken glass, I fear,” Nutbin said.

“A terrible waste, Nutbin,” Ditson agreed.

“But Justinian is whole?” Minka pressed.

“As well as ever, Lady Minka, and a great pleasure to work with. Was he not, Ditson?” Nutbin asked.

“Indubitably, Nutbin; a fine actor, and a gentleman to assist his host from the workshop even as DeVenter was on fire,” Ditson said.

“Heroic, really, though no one could have stopped the butler from leaving,” Nutbin said sadly.

“True, Nutbin, and I would not have tried,” Ditson said.

“Nor I, Ditson,” Nutbin agreed, and they stood there with heads hanging.

Efran cleared his throat. “Still, you accomplished your mission well and quickly. I’m deeply grateful for it.”

This perked them up to bow in gratification. Ditson said, “We are honored to have been useful to you, Lord Efran, and beg to be considered for future tasks. Do we not, Nutbin?”

“We do indeed, Ditson!” Nutbin cried.

“Very good. You are dismissed,” Efran said cautiously, and they vanished.

Efran and Minka sat there for a moment, then when she started to get out of bed, he reached an arm around her. “I’m not through with you, O Queene.” She sank back down and he moved over her again.

The ceremony honoring the soldiers who defended the fortress from the invisible enemy was longer than usual, as fourteen archers received commendations before Wyeth was awarded his Meritorious Cross. Upon Barr’s receipt of yet another commendation (his fourth or fifth—no one was sure because he refused to say), Tess was brimming with pride, and he had to concede that it was nice having a partner who appreciated his work.

Likewise, long-timers such as Towner, Younge, Neale, Cutch, Gabriel, Shane, Truro and Connor (fully recovered from his knifing) declined to specify how many commendations this made for them, privately thinking that the Captain was too free with them. But the boost in pay upon receiving one was nice.

Geneve walked around wrapped in a glow at Wyeth’s Meritorious Cross, as only a handful of the hundreds in the Abbey army had received it, either here or at Westford. Moreover, Commander Wendt stood at the front of the hall to shake the hand of every man receiving recognition, which brought some of them to tears, especially those who had served under him.

Afterward, Minka got off a letter to Justinian asking for confirmation of the faeries’ report, and another letter to Marguerite, this one to tell her about Joshua and the children, the gardens, the cavern lake, and the second Goadby’s plant going up on a large plot.

Then Minka walked the gardens with Kele, just talking. A mature faerie’s perspective was refreshing, and Kele always had time for her. Also, Kele showed Minka several different ways she could control her hair that nonetheless pleased Efran.

Later, he and Minka took Joshua up to the roof to look at the tree. While bare in spots, and not as tall as it had been, it was thriving under the faeries’ care. Glad to see the baby again, many of them came out to greet him or touch him. His black hair fascinated them, so several stood or sat on his head to investigate it. This made him laugh and shake his head, until one simple faerie, genuinely unaware how the hair was attached, began pulling out strands to make a blanket. This Joshua stopped with a cry and a fierce swipe.

Estes, meanwhile, inspected the tree’s roots on the outside walls and along the foundation footings, and found them sound. Even badly damaged roots and branches on the walls survived, the scars giving them character and rough beauty.

On August 29th, Minka received a reply from Justinian confirming Ditson and Nutbin’s account. The Pharmakon DeVenter had disappeared, and was presumed dead, as well. His failure, coming on top of all the others, had thrown the Council of Eurys (or what was left of it) into such turmoil that they were discussing the previously unfathomable strategy of making peace with the Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.

Justinian’s postscript read, “By the way, Adele is still down there with you somewhere, isn’t she? I saw a well-

dressed woman who looked like her step out of a gilded carriage into the palace, where several of the High Councilors are residing. But it couldn't be her, could it? Please tell me that it's not possibly Adele.

"Much love and kisses to the Faerie Queene,

"Your Own Justinian"

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on August 29th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

NOTES: The acoustics of the Abbey hill are due to the hill's [plentiful limestone](#) with which the switchback was constructed:

"Mystery of Greek Amphitheater's Amazing Sound Finally Solved

"Cut the chatter! The ancient mystery surrounding the great acoustics of the theater at Epidaurus in Greece has been solved.

"The theater, dating to the 4th century B.C. and arranged in 55 semi-circular rows, remains the great masterwork of Polykleitos the Younger. Audiences of up to an estimated 14,000 have long been able to hear actors and musicians—unamplified—from even the back row of the architectural masterpiece. . . .

"[R]esearchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology have discovered that the limestone material of the seats provide a filtering effect, suppressing low frequencies of voices, thus minimizing background crowd noise. Further, the rows of limestone seats reflect high-frequencies back towards the audience, enhancing the effect."

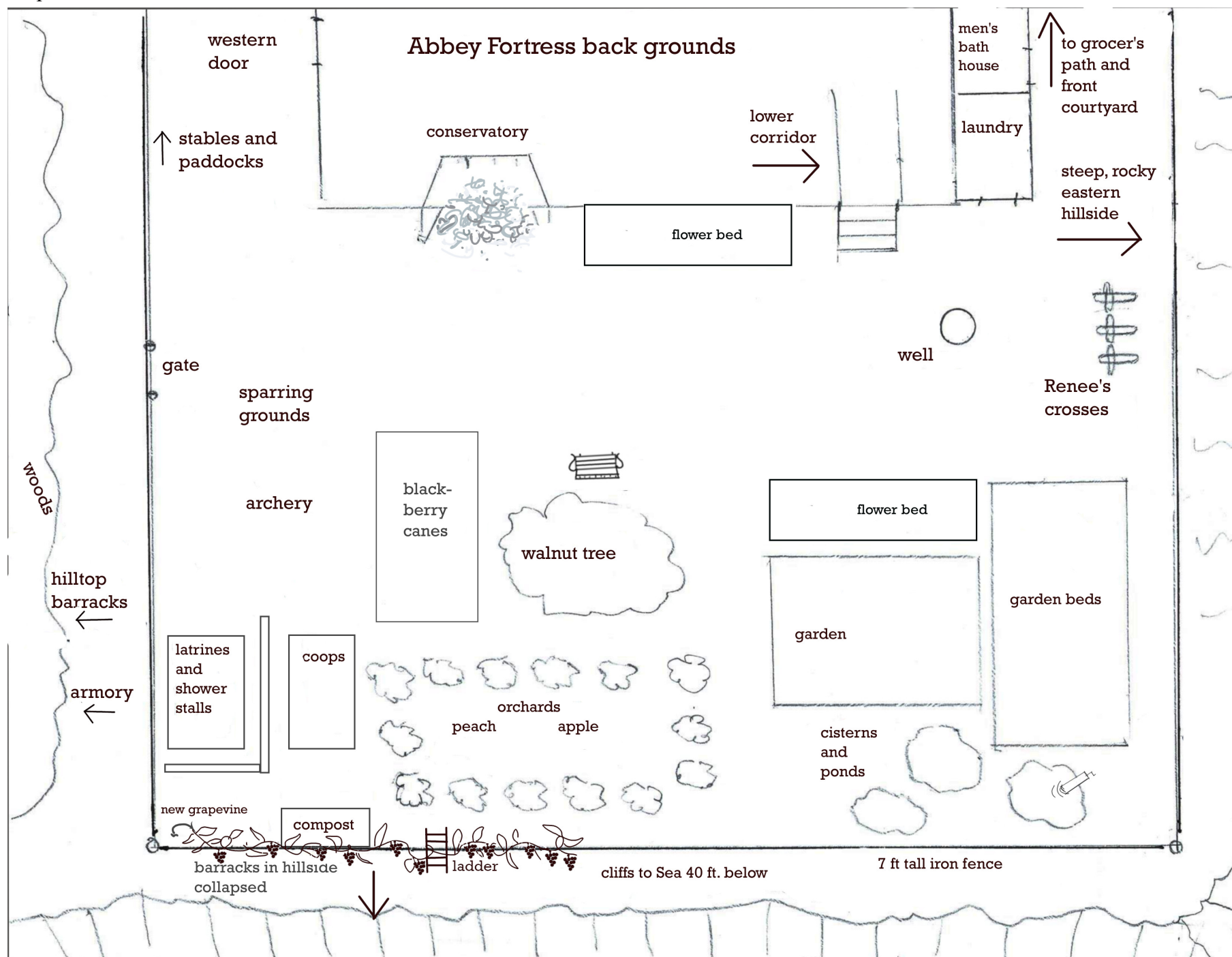
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Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Provision for a Wronged Husband*
(Book 9)

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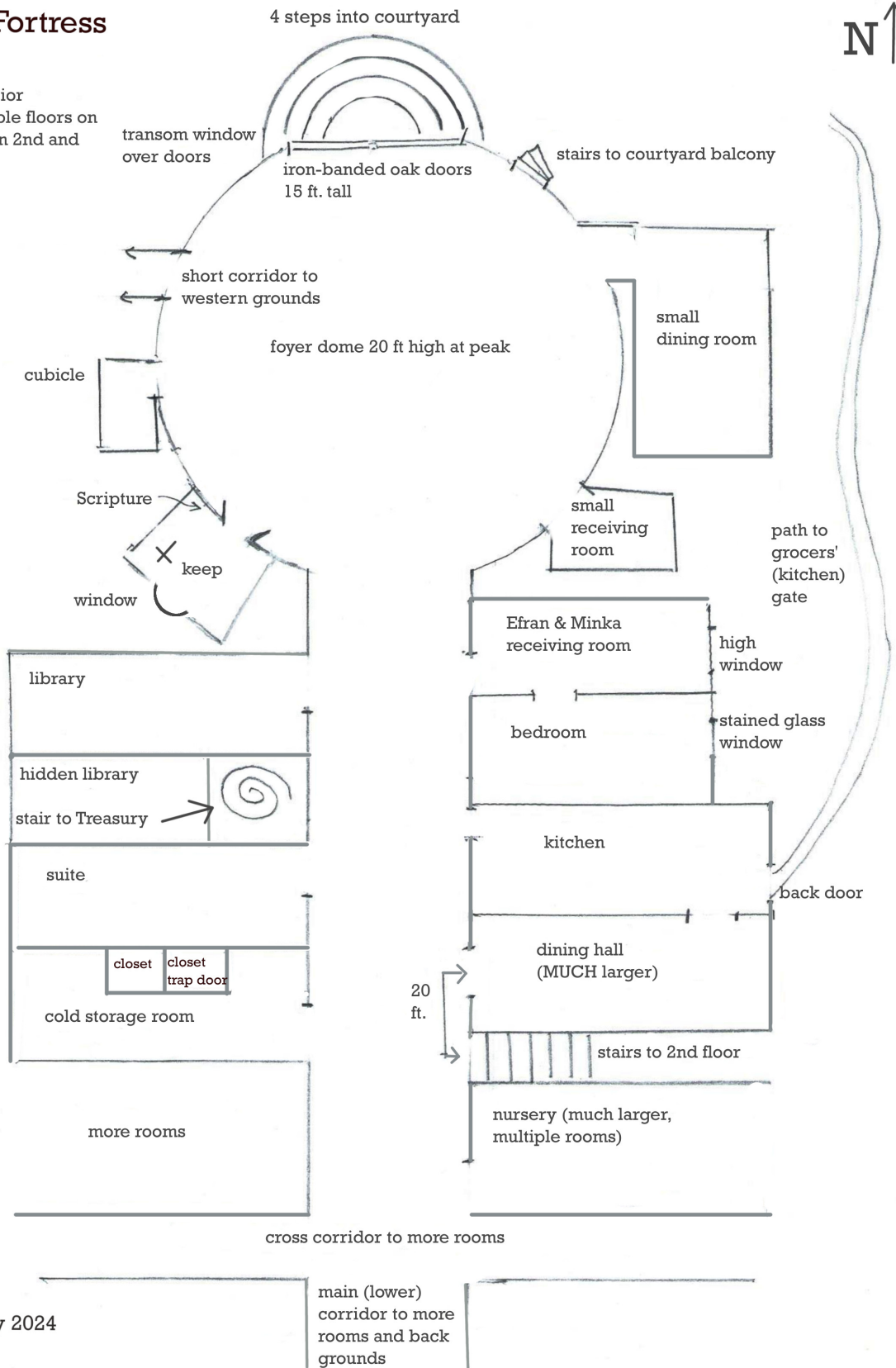
Adele—ah DELL
aina—AY nah
Alexcenah—al eh SEEN ah
Alverstroke—AL ver stroke
amanuensis—uh man you EN sis (plural: -ses, -seez)
aperitif—ah PAIR eh teef
Arenado—air en AH doh
Auber—aw BER
Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon
Bennard—beh NARD
Bethune—beh THUNE
Bowring—BOWE ring
Clonmel—KLON mell
Clough—chloh
companiono—com PAH nee oh (companions)
Conte—cahnt
Cotterill—KOT er uhl
courtesan—KOR tuh zahn
DeVenter—deh VEN tur
digestif—die JES tuhf
Doane—rhymes with *loan*
Dobell—DOH bull
Efran—EFF run
Erastus—eh RAS tis
Estes—ESS tis
Eurus—YOUR us
Eurussian—your uh SEE un
Eviron—ee VIRE un
ewer—YOU ehr
garderobe—GAR de robe
Geibel—GUY bull
Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
Goadby—GOAD bee
Goss—gahs
Hartshough—HART soh
Heye—HAY yuh
Imelda—eh MEL dah
insigne—en SIN yeh
Justinian—jus TIN ee un
Kele—kay lay
Kelsey—KELL see
Kewe—CUE ee
Leila—LYE la
liqueur—leh KUR
Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
Lystra—LIS trah
Marguerite—mar ger EET
meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs

Minka—MINK ah
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
Mouris—MORE iss
Nares—NAIR es
Nesse—ness
Peri—PARE ee
phalanges—fah LAN jeez (fingers)
pharmacia—far mah SEE a
Pharmakon—FAR mah kahn
Pia—PEE ah
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
Prie Mer—pre MARE
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
Sivalik—SIV ah lick
Smyth—smith
Sophronia—soh FROH nee ah
soporific—sah puh RIFF ick (inducing sleep)
Spitta—SPEH tah
Stites—stights
Surchatain—SUR cha tan
Surchataine—sur cha TANE
Sybil—SEH bull
Tera—TEE rah
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tourjee—TUR jee
Trina—TREE nah
vitae—VEE tay
Webbe—web

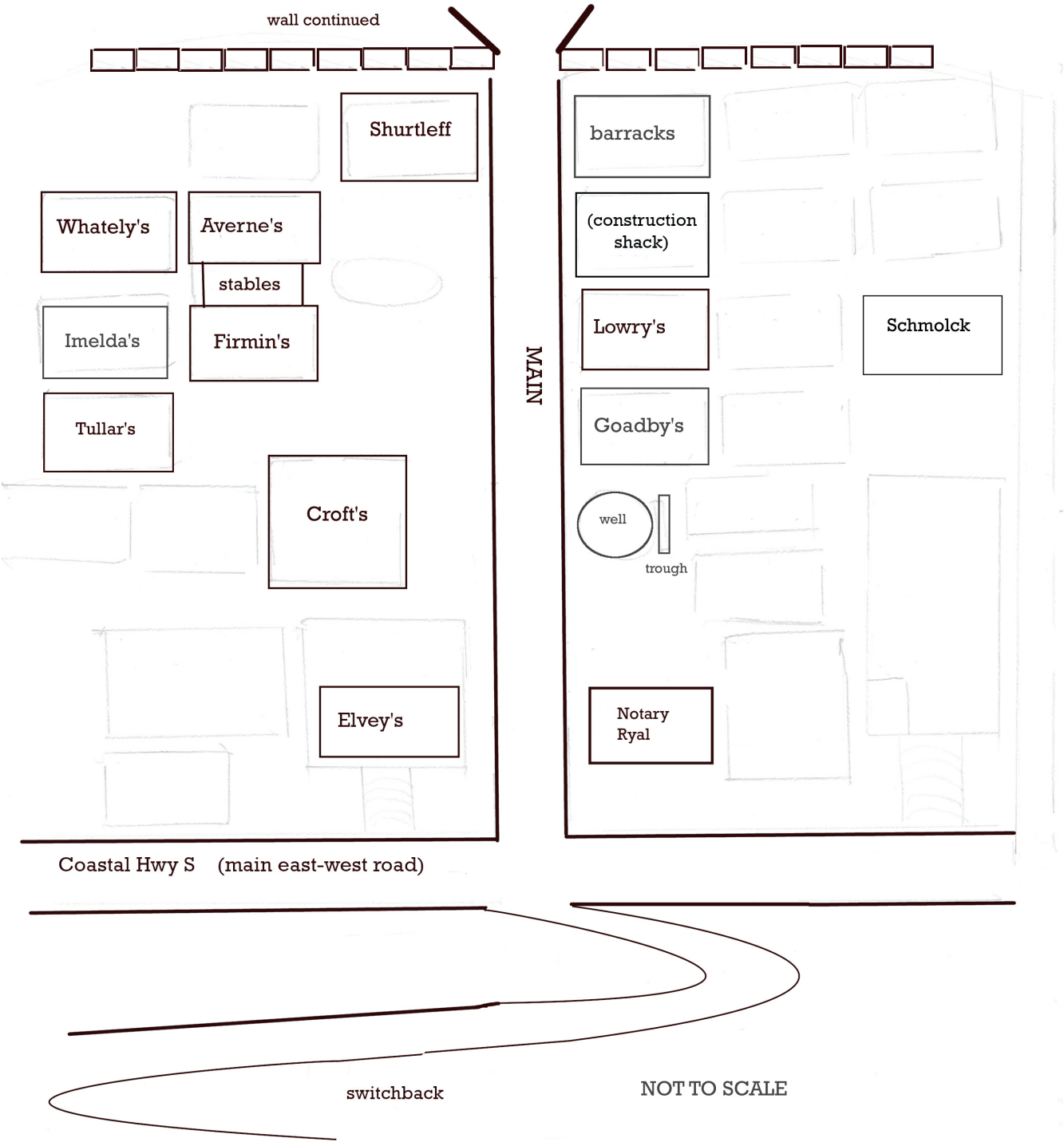


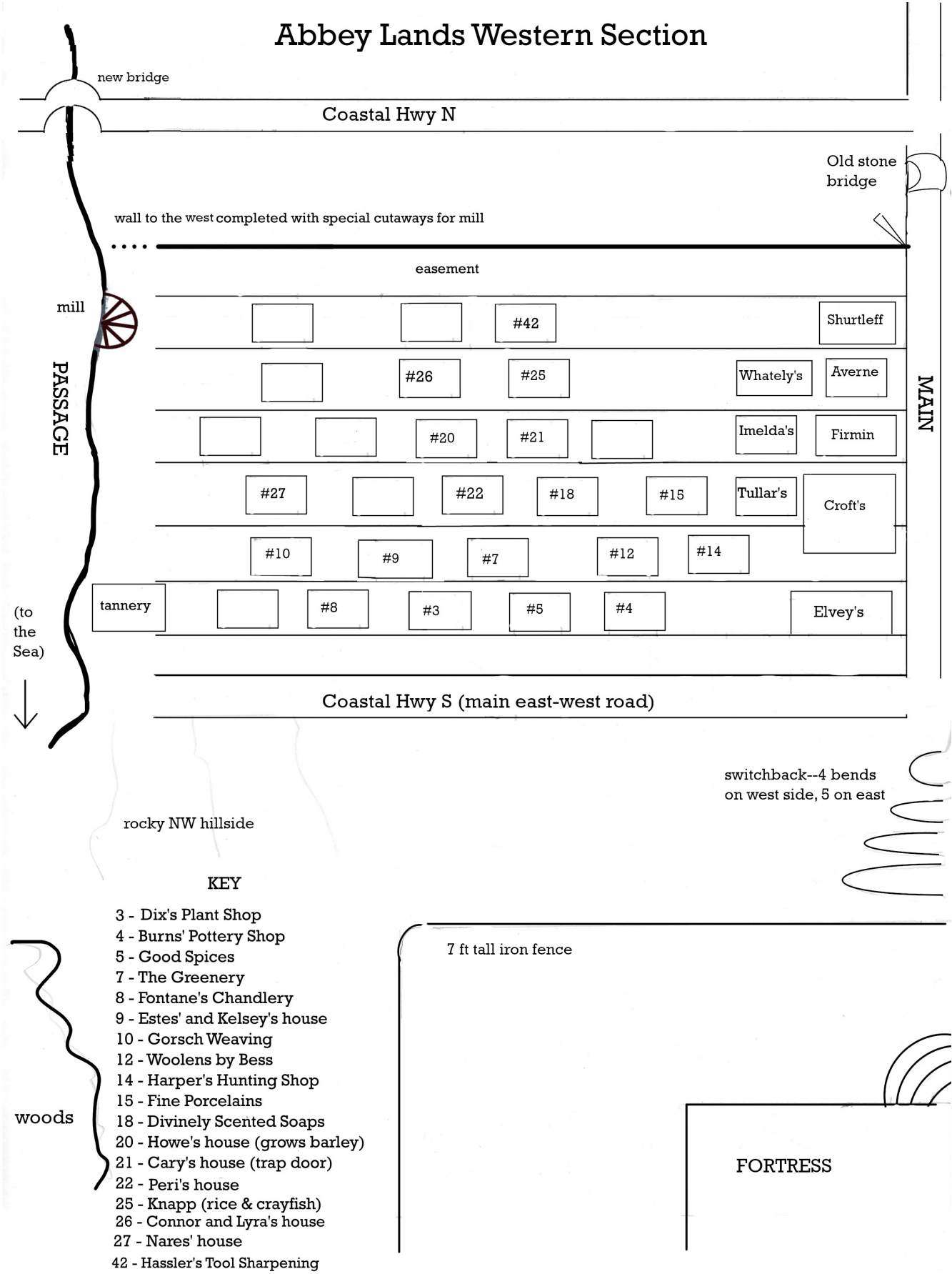
Abbey Fortress
Interior

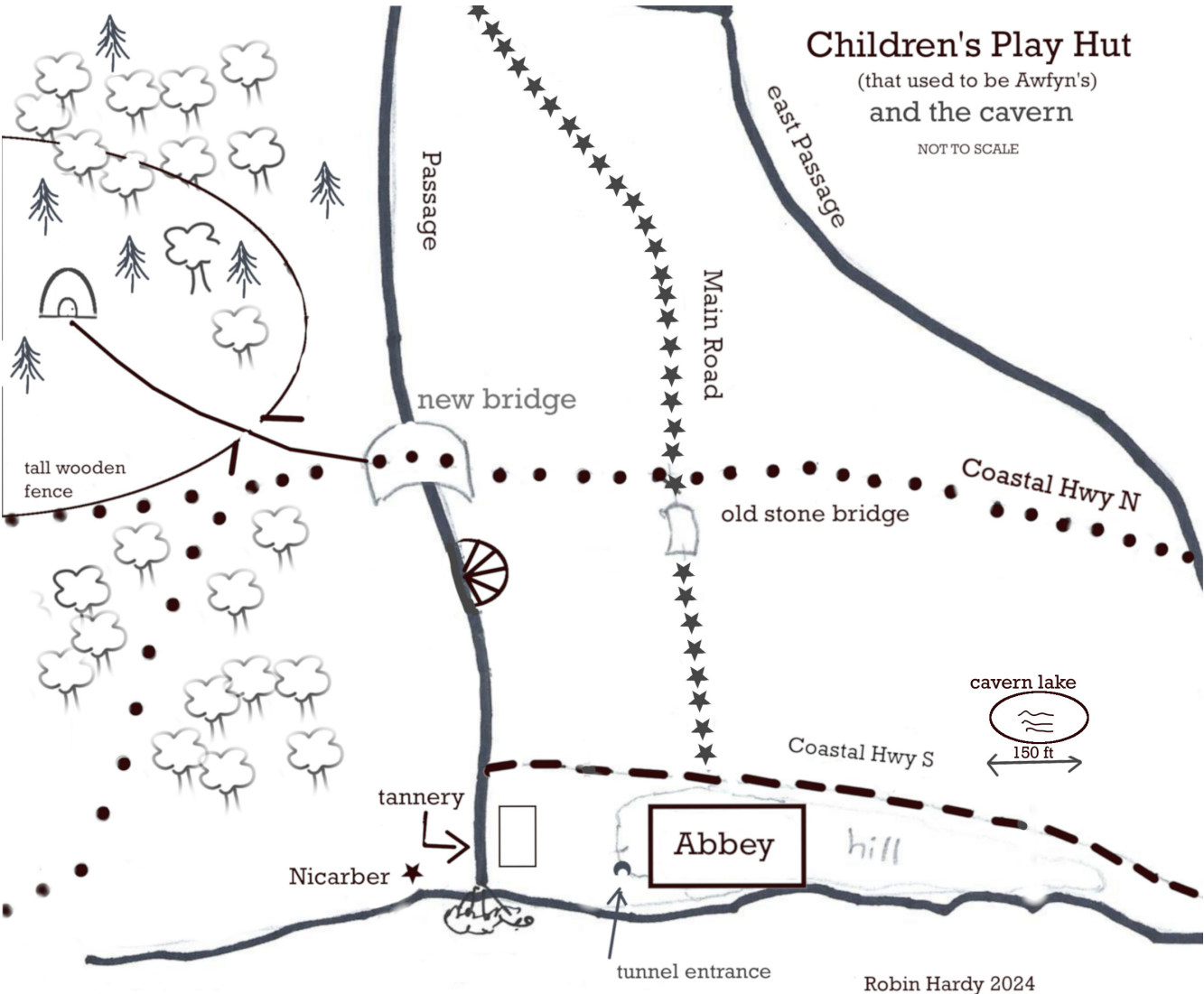
white stone interior
throughout; marble floors on
1st floor; wood on 2nd and
3rd floors

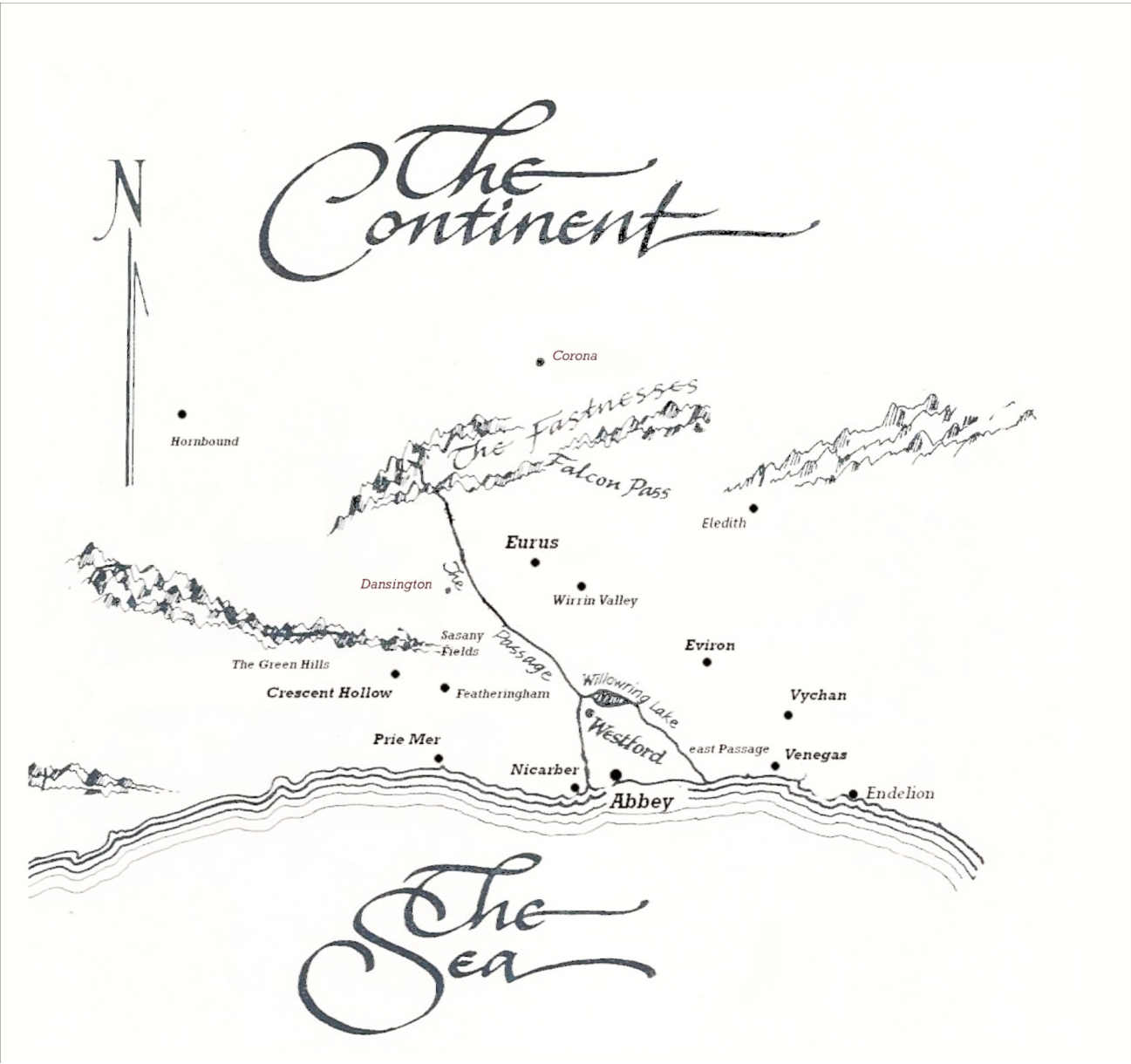


Abbey Lands Main Road







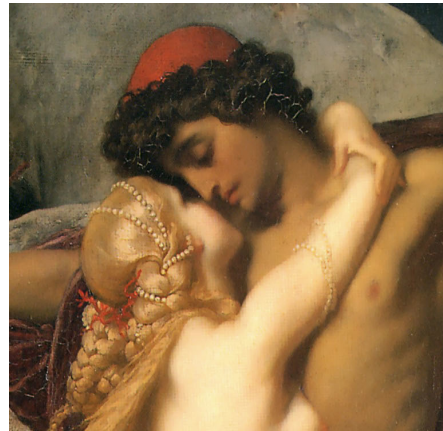


Seeing the Kiss (Book 9:
Lord Efran and the Provision for a Wronged Husband)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



The first problem I had with this illustration was deciding whether to show the kissing scene in the kitchen or the invisible dragon attack on the faerie tree. While elements for the dragon scene were abundant, I decided to go with the kitchen drama. Minka deserves that much.

Still, it was just about the hardest thing I've ever done on this series, and I'm not sure how well I did it. I attempted to do a mash-up of two couples kissing—or about to. First is the couple from [this photo](#)¹. Then there is [*The Fisherman and the Syren*](#), depicted in the famous painting by Frederic Leighton².



Besides the similar poses of the couples, the theme of Leighton's painting speaks directly to Leila's effect on Efran: "According to Jones, *et al.*, Leighton's literary pictures 'suggest a preoccupation with women as destroyers,' and *The Fisherman and the Syren* represents that theme 'quite unequivocally'" (from the Wikipedia link above).

Watching from the pantry is poor Minka, depicted by [this photo](#)³. The kitchen setting is from [here](#).⁴ According to [Wikimedia](#), this is the Pena Palace in Sintra, just about an hour from Lisbon. So no one will feel cheated at missing out on a dragon, however, below is the [one](#)⁵ I intended to use for Sivalik, spitting [bonus fire](#).⁶



Robin Hardy
April 27, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed by [Nathan Dumlao](#) on Unsplash
2. Leighton painted the Condottiere referenced in Watching The Flood, the illustration for book 3, *Lord Efran at the Flood*.
3. Photographed by [ian dooley](#) on Unsplash
4. Photographed by [Oleksandr Kurchev](#) on Unsplash
5. Created by [ractapopulous](#) on Pixabay
6. Compiled by [Placidplace](#) on Pixabay