

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

*Book 23*

*Lord Efran on*  
*the Game Board*

*Robin Hardy*



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

Book 23

## Lord Efran on the Game Board

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Chapter 25
Chapter 2	Pronunciations
Chapter 3	Map 1 Back Grounds
Chapter 4	Map 2 First Floor
Chapter 5	Map 3 Main Road
Chapter 6	Map 4 Switchbacks
Chapter 7	Map 5 Chapel Interior
Chapter 8	Map 6 Western Section
Chapter 9	Map 7 East Central
Chapter 10	Map 8 Playhut/Hillside
Chapter 11	Map 9 Bird's-Eye View
Chapter 12	Map 10 Continent
Chapter 13	Lues
Chapter 14	Notes on Lues
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Chapter 24	

## Chapter 1

Minka leaned into the second-floor workroom where Efran, Estes, DeWitt, Captains Rigdon and Chee, and numerous soldiers were collected. She remained at the doorway, unwilling to enter this official hubbub, but her husband saw her and came over.

He brushed back her curls to kiss her forehead as she said, “I’m going down to Auntie’s. She’s still grieving Larisse.” It had been three days since Marguerite’s daughter had died saving the life of a child. Today was June 14th.

Efran said, “All right, apologize to her that I can’t make it today. The new Surchatain of Crescent Hollow—ah, Sughrue—will be arriving for a visit in a few days, and how we receive him may determine whether he decides to attack us or not.” His tone was humorously petulant, as Crescent Hollow was the only major city within a day’s ride that had not yet made war on the Abbey Lands.

“You work too much,” she murmured.

“I’ll be down for dinner,” he promised, nuzzling her. So she turned with a sigh to go downstairs and out to the courtyard.

The guards opened the gates for her, and she pointed down the switchback to the chapel. “I’m just walking down to Marguerite’s. I already told Efran.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Doudney said. Coxe looked over, nodding.

When she got to the third easternmost bend of the old switchback, she looked down in surprise at a tarantula fighting with a slightly larger leopard gecko. “Oh my goodness, what are you doing? Stop that,” she said in dismay. She leaned over to see what they were fighting about.

Then she heard dimly, “Lady Minka!”

“Yes, I’m right here,” she said, lifting her face.

A moment later someone grabbed her to begin running with her in his arms up the switchback. “I have her!” he shouted. The courtyard gate alarm bell began clanging.

“What? Oh, stop. Put me down,” she protested.

“Sorry, Lady Minka,” he panted, running. “Not after this long a search.”

Other voices answered him. She murmured, “This long?”

“We’ve been looking for you for three days now,” he exhaled.

*THREE DAYS?* She couldn’t believe it. At the same time, she vaguely remembered mediating between the tarantulas and the geckos over the available insects, especially the crickets and mealworms. Somehow, this was a faerie duty that had been neglected to the point of open warfare between the two predator groups.



She was set down in the courtyard as Efran came staggering down the steps. She gasped at his haggard look when he came over to engulf her in his arms. “I didn’t panic,” he breathed. “Marguerite said they’d find you; that you just slipped into a faerie hole somewhere. Who found her?” He lifted his face to look around.

The one who had carried her up did not speak, but others said, “Seagrave, Cap’n.”

“Seagrave,” Efran said, looking. As Seagrave saluted, Efran went on, “Oh, yes, you’re sensitive to faerie. How—how did you—?”

“Since we knew she disappeared on the switchback, I just walked slowly down it, feeling and calling. When she answered me, I leaned in as far as I dared and pulled her out, Captain,” Seagrave said.

Efran turned to DeWitt behind him. “Get him a commendation, please.”

“Naturally,” DeWitt said, adding, “Hello, Minka. Good to see you.” She gazed at him in dismay, and Estes behind him.

“Ho, here they come,” a gate sentry said. The whole group of them looked down Main Street as the wall gates alarm bell rang. A stream of buff-colored uniforms was pouring down the northbound road (which intersected the coastal highway just north of the old stone bridge).

DeWitt said tightly, “There’s at least a hundred. Were you expecting that many, Efran?”

“No,” Efran said darkly, “and we’re not accommodating that many.” He looked around at the men, then summoned, “Stephanos, Leneghan, Cyneheard—ride down and tell them we’ll admit three up to talk. Quennel? Yes, take down twenty archers for show. Martyn, go report to the Commander, then come tell me what he thinks. DeWitt, Estes and I’ll be waiting in the small dining room.”

As the summoned men surged in response, Efran bent down to Minka. “Will you wait in our quarters, please?”

“Of course. Efran, I’m so sorry—”

“Not your fault,” he said with a last sweeping glance below. Then he turned to escort her up the fortress steps. In the foyer, he paused to ask that refreshments be brought to the small dining room. From there, he walked her to their door.

He kissed her head again in relief, and she winced at the dark circles under his eyes. He opened the door to nudge her in, murmuring, “Lock it.” She nodded, and he waited until he heard the lock turn before he went back to the small dining room, thinking.

Minka threw herself down to the small table in the outer room, bracing her head in her hands. “I can’t believe I did that, at such a terrible time. And I didn’t even realize—and I don’t know—” Abruptly, she sat up to say, “Queene Kele, may I have a word with you?”

It took a moment for Kele to appear, but when she did, she said, “Oh, Minka, we’re so appreciative of your efforts with the Gecko Conniption and the Tarantula Troops. But theirs is a longstanding quarrel that you needn’t bother about.”

“It was accidental, and had I known how long I was taking, I would never have stopped. But I just fell into it,”

Minka complained, holding her head. “Kele, how can I avoid that? I can’t believe how much trouble I caused Efran, and at such a bad time!”

“Well,” Kele said hesitantly, “you just have to watch where you’re stepping, I suppose.”

“I never saw it! Wait, I did see, but by that time, I was in the midst of it. Oh, Kele, they couldn’t find me! The men couldn’t find me and even Marguerite didn’t know where I was! Kele, what can I do? I have to be able to go down to the Lands without falling into holes,” Minka pleaded.

Kele considered that, then said, “We can put a beacon on you.”

“A beacon? How will that work?” Minka asked.

“Some kind of jewelry is best, because it needs to be metal, and especially something of emotional significance,” Kele said. “If you’re wearing it when you go out and accidentally fall into a faerie ripple, or hole, then the person who is attached to the piece you’re wearing will know where you are.”

Minka blinked, then turned to look at the copper bracelet that Efran had bought for her in Crescent Hollow. She picked it up to read the inscription: *I will love you forever*. “How about this?” she asked Kele. “Efran bought it for my birthday.”

“Oh, yes, that would work beautifully, as long as you’re actually wearing it,” Kele said.

And that was the problem: it kept falling off. After losing it three times on the back grounds, she had just left it on the table. “Once I put it on, what do we need to do to make it work as a beacon?” she asked.

Kele shrugged. “Nothing. It will call to Efran itself.”

“Good,” Minka said, smiling at the bracelet. “Thank you for your help, Kele.”

“You’re welcome, Minka,” she said, and disappeared.

Minka went to the door to cautiously unlock it and look out. She scanned the bustling activity in the foyer until finding a man she recognized. “Detler?”

He turned, coming to her door. “Yes, Lady Minka?”

“Detler, I need someone from Whately’s with cutting tools for copper. Please send them here, to my quarters,” she said.

He looked mildly confused, but said, “Yes, Lady Minka.” She shut the door to sit and wait.

At that time, the kitchen assistant Loghry rolled a cart into the small dining room to unload plates of ham, fresh greens, twisty rolls, custard, and ales. “Is that all you need, Captain?” he asked Efran, who was sitting at the far end of the table.

“I think so; thank you, Loghry,” Efran said, looking over to Estes in the doorway. “Who’s coming up?”

Turning, Estes said, “From what I understand, the Commander’s Second and two Captains.”



So, neither Sughrue nor even his Commander had bothered to come. This was all for show; there'd be no substantive discussions. Efran snorted, "Ah. They want us to see how scared they are. Are the rest outside the gates?"

"Oh, yes," Estes said, then watched Efran lean back wearily with his fingers twined on his head. Sitting, Estes added, "If Sughrue's not here, I don't know why you have to be. Do you want to go lie down with Minka?"

"Very much. But I want to hear what our second-rank visitors have to say," Efran said.

DeWitt entered the room, followed by three men in buff-colored uniforms. "Here we are. Captain Efran, Steward Estes, this is the Second in Command Zouch, Captain Shytles and Captain Bonefat. If you gentlemen would have a seat here and help yourselves, we'll chat." DeWitt then sat across the table from Estes, who was on Efran's right. The three Hollowans took their seats at the other end of the table and removed their hats to begin filling their plates.

Efran sat up, folding his hands on the table. "I appreciate Surchatain Sughrue sending you, as we hope to continue the warm relations we've had with Crescent Hollow. My wife very much enjoyed our visit to your Autumn Faire last November."

When the Second Zouch merely nodded, Efran asked, "Do you have a message for me?"

After a pause, Zouch said, "The men at your gates, Captain Efran."

Efran glanced off, then leaned forward. "What are they telling me?"

"To be wary, Captain," Zouch said.

The Abbey administrators just looked at Zouch for a moment, then Efran leaned back with, "Ohh, yes, quite so. We just had a visit by a Sandgolem that plowed up Main Street. It was a mess. But is there nothing else?"

The visitors glanced at each other but said nothing. At that point, the door opened slightly for Krall to beckon Efran. He stood to go out and shut the door behind him. So DeWitt amiably asked their guests, "You haven't had any difficulties with bogs over your way, have you?"

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 2

At this time, Whately's journeyman Cyrillo was sitting with Minka at the small table in her quarters. Handing him the copper bracelet, she said, "I need you to cut this down so it will fit snugly on my wrist and not fall off my hand."

"Ah. Yes, it is rather large on your arm," he observed, sliding it practically up to her armpit. "First, let's cut it on the backside of the legend." Minka nodded, watching as he used heavy shears to cut the bracelet along the back, then cut away the excess on either side of the original cut. He rounded the ends and used a bur tool to smooth and mold the bracelet into a cuff.

He put this on her wrist, where it dangled. “That’s a good start, but cut it down more, please. I want it to fit snugly,” she said.

He balked, “That will make it difficult to take off, Lady.”

“It’s not ever coming off,” she said.

So he did as she asked, cutting it down further until it fit almost tightly. Trying it on again, she said, “That’s good; thank you. Stop by Doane’s cubicle for your pay.” She was twisting and shaking her wrist energetically, but the cuff didn’t budge.

“Very good.” He stood to gather his tools, then paused. “May I take the copper scraps?”

“Yes,” she said with a bare glance. Then she added, “Oh! Make me some earrings from it and I’ll pay you for those as well.” She pulled back her hair to show him the gold loops.

“Ah.” He studied her earrings. “Do you want loops or something a little more—expressive?” Cyrillo asked.

“Let’s get expressive,” she grinned.

“Very good, Lady Minka.” He gathered up the scraps in a small leather bag, bowed to her, and left.

Minka ran her hand over the lettering on the cuff and murmured, “I’m never going to do that to you again, Efran.” Then she exhaled. This faerie business was complicated.

Efran returned to stand in the doorway of the small dining room, where DeWitt, Estes and the Hollowans looked up. “Ah . . .” he began tentatively, “there’s a small group of wolves outside the gates that are making your men nervous.”

The Second Zouch said, “Then let them in.”

Efran hesitated. His administrators knew how tired he was, and why, but Zouch apparently thought this lethargy was his normal state. Shaking his head vaguely, Efran said, “I don’t see how that solves anything. You’re still here, and have to get out somehow, and if the wolves decide to sit at the foot of the switchbacks until you come down, then what are you going to do?”

Brows drawing down, Zouch asked, “Are you an idiot?” It would never cross his mind that Efran understood *them* to refer to the wolves instead of the soldiers.

“Sometimes,” Efran sighed, raising an arm to lean against the door jamb. He looked around the group to say, “If you marry a faerie, be prepared for the floor to upend under you on a regular basis.” The men paused to absorb this; DeWitt laughed lightly and Captain Bonifat nodded thoughtfully. Zouch sat back, trying to interpret what the Captain meant by *faerie*.

At that time, Minka peeked out of her quarters to see the door to the small dining room open, and Efran standing just within. Mistakenly thinking that the meeting was done, she left their quarters to slip up behind him and slide an arm around his waist.

When he turned, she showed him the copper cuff snug on her wrist. “Kele said it will act as a beacon, so no matter what hole I fall into, you’ll know where I am.” Eyes watering, he smiled down at her, and she looked



benignly at the seated visitors. “You poor men, it’s hard enough without us disappearing for days at a time.”

“Come to Crescent Hollow,” Captain Bonefat said abruptly.

“Oh, I had such a wonderful time at your Autumn Faire last year! Will you have another this year?” she pleaded.

“Yes, of course,” Bonefat said.

His compatriots looked at him, so he demanded, “Why not? The merchants are all agitating for it.”

“You wouldn’t believe how much I spent there,” she said dreamily. “We’ll go again if they have it, won’t we?” She squeezed Efran’s waist.

“Of course, only I’ll take twice as much money,” he promised.

“Thank you.” She cuddled him.

DeWitt told the visitors, “That’s how you conquer: with toffee, and fire jugglers and musicians—”

“Pork on a stick,” Estes observed. “The men really liked that.”

The Hollowans dubiously eyed each other. “You’ll commit to coming?” Zouch asked Efran.

“Oh, I couldn’t get out of it, now,” Efran said.

“I think we’ve heard enough,” Zouch said, standing. His subordinates stood as well, and they all shook Efran’s hand upon leaving. Bonefat told Minka, “See you in November.” She smiled warmly at him.

After they had left the fortress, DeWitt eyed Minka lolling on Efran and murmured, “Faeries are unaccountable.” Efran groan-laughed.

Minka tried to lure him to bed, then, but it was too close to dinner, and the children hadn’t seen Minka for days. So he and she sat at the back table as usual, and the children thronged around her, wanting to know what had happened. Efran, cutting his perch with a fork, didn’t even try to answer. Joshua, on his father’s leg, paused over his rice pudding to see who all was there.

So Minka said, “It was my fault for not paying attention, but, what happened was, I stumbled onto the leopard geckos and the tarantulas fighting over dinner, so I thought I should help make peace, which was foolish. As far as I know, they’re still fighting.”

“Dinner!” Almund said. “Do they eat each other?”

“No, they eat the same bugs,” Minka said. “I think there are plenty to go around, but neither group wants to share.”

Noah said pensively, “I’d think the tarantulas would win.”

Minka said, “Well, except the grown-up geckos are larger, and they can bite off a tarantula leg just like that.” She snapped her fingers.

“Can we watch?” Toby asked. He patted Joshua on the back.

“I don’t know,” Minka said cautiously. “Are you still carrying around frogs? I’m afraid they’d eat both the tarantulas and the geckos.” By this time, Efran was holding his head to laugh quietly.

“I’ve noticed they do like the crickets,” Alcmund said, drawing a green frog from his pocket.

Hassie said, “Oh, do be careful! The last thing we want is for them to get loose near the kitchen—!” But the frog leapt out of Alcmund’s hand to land on the floor and lose himself among all the feet under the tables. Joshua almost fell off Efran’s leg to look.

Screeching, the children dropped to their hands and knees to pursue it from table to table. They called directions to each other and warned diners to keep their feet still. A table of Polonti soldiers watched in amusement as Chorro raised up victorious with the frog in hand, which squirmed out of his grasp to land on their table. “Don’t eat it!” he cried, knocking over dinnerware in his efforts to catch it again.

Meanwhile, Minka had her right arm around Efran’s waist to lean behind him and show Ella the cuff on her left wrist. “It’s so Efran won’t lose me again,” she explained.

“Oh, I’m so glad,” Ella exhaled, holding onto Efran’s shoulder. “He went insane for a while. Oh, and it’s so pretty, too.”

Minka gasped, “You’re wearing more new earrings!”

“Yes, what do think? I like the beads, but everyone else seems to like the dangly silver.” She toyed with the delicate silver bells in her ear.

“I love both,” Minka said. “Oh! Cyrillo is going to make me earrings from the copper scraps. He said they’ll be ‘expressive.’”

“You know, I think he designs prettier pieces than Whately, even,” Ella said critically.

“We’ll have to go look at their shop again,” Minka said in determination. She abruptly lifted up to ask Efran, “Oh! Has Auntie gotten her badge?” (He had ennobled Marguerite as Lady Commander of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.) Efran shrugged helplessly, so she said, “Ella and I will check.”

He swallowed his mouthful and said, “You need to eat.” Quennel, standing, had just taken the yawning toddler off Efran’s knee to return him to the nursery.

“I’m too excited,” she said, glancing around. When Efran leaned over to begin cutting her fish into bites, she hastily took up her fork. “I’ll eat.”

When they finally got back to their quarters and to bed, Efran fell on her in relief and went right to sleep.

The following day, June 18th, Efran directed a bodyguard of four to accompany Minka and Ella to Whately’s Jewelry. It was easily accessible, behind Imelda’s Beauty Potions on the north and Averno’s Bakery & Eatery on the west. Although reassured by Minka’s copper beacon, Efran personally selected Connor, Martyn, Seagrave, and Tourse to accompany the women.



Upon seeing this formidable group awaiting them in the courtyard, Minka cried, "Hazard pay for everyone!"

The men laughed, and Ella said, "You know, I'm kind of hoping to see something exciting happen. It was amazing to see you disappear in that faerie tree outside Flodie's."

"That was fun! Maybe we should ride out there when we're done at Whately's," Minka said, climbing up on the dun mare.

"Double hazard pay coming up," Tourse said.

Martyn objected, "Now, you mustn't discount our entertainment." He rode out of the courtyard gates before the women. Tourse and Seagrave rode on either side of them with Connor bringing up the rear.

Seagrave laughed, "Yes, talk to Elowen about accompanying Lady Minka through the Hall of Memories. It took him a few days to recover from that entertainment."

Minka turned to him to gasp, "That was *amazing*. I can't remember hardly any of it except how vast and wonderful it was."

Connor shouted up to Martyn, "You want entertainment? Wasn't there some brouhaha about you and the Lady and Leviathan eggs?"

"OH," Martyn groaned, looking heavenward. "And the Captain way off, calling out to her while she's inside it unsticking the egg."

"What did you tell him?" Seagrave asked in wonder.

"She's busy," Martyn said ruefully.

They all laughed. "That would satisfy him," Seagrave noted ironically. They ambled down Main, eyes flicking watchfully despite the banter.

Tourse glanced back. "Everyone who got stabbed warding her, raise your hand."

Minka almost stopped her horse to turn around to Connor. "Oh, that was horrible! I was so upset!"

"Eh, it was worth it," Connor said dismissively.

"How did that happen?" Ella asked.

Minka said, "Oh, that was when Cennick's men tried to kidnap me, and Connor was the only one standing in their way. That was—last year, a year ago, wasn't it?" She looked back to Connor, who nodded. She went on, "But I didn't see how it happened. Tell her, Connor."

So, reluctantly, Connor had to recount his efforts on her behalf, but noted, "The defensive improvements after that made it all worthwhile. That's when they installed the bell at the wall gates. Oh, and, that may have been the first time we realized Minka was a force to be reckoned with all by herself."

"True," she said in smug satisfaction.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

### Chapter 3

“I wish I were that brave,” Ella said.

Minka turned to her in near outrage. “What are you talking about? You **COMMANDEERED JUSTINIAN’S CARRIAGE** to get you out of a wedding set for **THAT DAY**.”

Ella laughed, and Tourse agreed, “That *was* fun. She took control and just happened to have her birth certificate to prove she was sixteen as of *that day*. The Captain was pretty well flummoxed, but she got her way.”

“Efran listens,” Minka sighed, and they all nodded.

At that time, they pulled up to the jeweler’s shop. Connor and Martyn went in with the women while Seagrave and Tourse stood outside the doors. As Whately and Cyrillo were both attending customers, Minka and Ella hung back to look at the earrings on display, murmuring to each other. Their bodyguards were keeping their eyes moving between the three doorways into this showroom.

Cyrillo finished with his customer, then beckoned to Minka. “Would you like to see some sketches of what I’m thinking for the copper earrings, Lady?”

“Oh, yes!” Minka said. “But first, do you have Marguerite’s badge and certificate? Efran named her Lady Commander.”

“I think so. Let me check the back room. Meanwhile, have a look.” Cyrillo placed several sketches before her, which she and Ella bent to study.

“Oh, I like the leaves. I like the way they curl,” Minka said.

“The feather design is very pretty. Wouldn’t that be interesting to see in copper?” Ella said.

“Yes,” Minka said definitively.

Shortly, Cyrillo returned to the counter with a parchment and a box. “Here you are, Lady Minka.”

She opened the small box, and Ella leaned over to look at the beribboned badge. She nodded, and Minka said, “Yes, that’s nice. Now, for the earrings, I like all your designs. But if there’s enough copper, I’d like to see the leaves and the feathers.”

“Yes, certainly. Can you give me about a week on those?” he asked.

“Of course. Now, let me pay for Auntie’s badge,” Minka said, pulling out her pouch.

“That’s seven royals,” Cyrillo said.

“All right.” Shocked at the price, Minka handed them over, and Cyrillo wrote out a receipt. “Thank you.”

Minka took the parcel with the receipt, the badge and the certificate, then paused to ask Ella, “Do you want to look at the jewelry?”

“Not right now, thank you,” Ella said quickly. Minka nodded, and they exited with their bodyguards.

Outside the shop, Ella leaned over to hiss, “They want *ten royals* for plain earrings!”

“If that’s what you want, Efran would pay it,” Minka told her.

“I know, but Dallarosa and the other jewelry makers charge two or three royals for the same thing. I just can’t see it,” Ella said.

Minka exhaled. “I understand. Actually—I feel the same. I was never able to buy anything before coming here with Efran, and, I don’t want to get greedy, or careless.”

“I don’t want to get entitled,” Ella said firmly, mounting her horse.

“But you are. Don’t you have one of these?” Minka said, raising the parcel. Martyn helped her climb up on the dun mare, then took her parcel to carry it.

Ella pretended to scowl at her. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I know.” Minka smiled, turning her horse. “I want to go give Auntie her badge,” she informed her bodyguards. They smiled or nodded.

They walked their horses leisurely up the side street to Main, where they turned south. Minka glanced back up the street at Neale, head down, grimly rolling the wheels of his chair on the street next to the sidewalk. She quickly turned around to face front, blinking.

She had not forgotten right after the insurrection about three months ago, when Wendt asked Efran to talk to Neale. He did, and—reluctantly, surprisingly, Neale had expressed deep remorse for his part in it, and his betrayal of Efran. Remembering his bitter grief, Minka lowered her head while the tears ran down her face. Ella and the men beside her watched quietly.

Minka raised her head, struggling with something. Then she abruptly pulled up on the reins and slid down from the saddle. Connor and Tourse promptly dismounted to follow when she walked swiftly back to Neale. The others of their party watched.

Neale lifted his face in surprise as she came up to his chair. He saw the two bodyguards behind her, but they were watching only her and her surroundings. Traffic paused while passersby looked on. Trembling slightly, she knelt to look him in the face. “How are you, Neale?”

He bit his lip and stiffly replied, “Doing well, Lady Minka. Thank you.”

She nodded, glancing around. “I hear you’re working.”

He collected himself to say, “Trying to make myself useful.”

She was shaking visibly now, so that Tourse and Connor watched in concern. “I’m glad,” she gasped, attempting

to smile. She reached out to lightly stroke his hair and pat his shoulder, then his arm. With that, she hopped up to begin walking back to the others.

Tourse lifted her to her saddle, but before mounting himself, he glanced back. “Wait,” he whispered. The rest of them looked back at Neale.

Head lowered, he hesitantly reached down to set the brake on his chair. Pedestrians, riders, and cart drivers were moving in slow motion around him. He wiped his mouth as he stepped off the foot rests, then braced himself on the arms of the chair. And slowly, he stood.

He let go of the chair, raising his eyes to Minka, who was watching with flushed, parted lips. Then he carefully bent down to release the brake on the wheels. Gripping the handles, he turned the chair to begin pushing it back down Main toward the barracks.

Soft cries and muted exclamations followed him, then a whole street full of people swiveled to stare at Minka. Tourse leapt up on his saddle and quietly instructed, “Connor, walk us to Lady Marguerite’s. Seagrave, Martin, close in. Go.”

With the women tightly encased in a cage of bodyguards, the six of them walked their horses sedately down Main, turning off the main east-west road toward the chapel. A few riders en route to the fortress passed them, including a pair of soldiers, who paused beside Connor. “Is Lady Minka all right?” Routh quietly asked.

“Yes. Go tell the Captain we’re at Lady Marguerite’s,” Connor said. Nodding, Routh loped off with Finn.

“D-d-did I do that?” Minka asked Martyn.

“It looks like it, Minka. We’re going on to Marguerite’s,” he said.

“Yes. Oh! Do you have her badge?” she asked.

“Yes, Minka,” Martyn said.

“It’s the hill,” she told him firmly, then turned to tell the others. “Efran explained this to me. It’s not me; it’s the power in the hill.”

“Yes, Minka, that makes sense,” Connor said. She nodded, lips pressed together.

As they approached the chapel doors, two of the men stationed out front hustled over to hold their reins. Martyn and Connor assisted the women down from the saddles and up the steps to the open doors. Other men took their horses around back to the newly completed stables and paddock.

Entering the chapel, they were met by Hartshough holding a tray of cool waters with lime wedges. “Good afternoon, all. Will you kindly be seated at the dining table while I summon Lady Marguerite?”

“Yes, Hartshough, thank you,” Minka said, patting his arm. Then she backed off in alarm at what might happen after she touched him. But he merely led them to the table to begin placing glasses of lime water in front of them. They all sat, and Minka turned to Martyn beside her. “Do you have—the—Auntie’s—?”

“Right here, Minka,” he smiled, placing the parcel in front of her.

“Thank you,” she said, playing with it nervously. “Are people going to start—expecting me to—to heal them again?”

“Nooo,” Tourse said, leaning back with his water. “It was obviously a spontaneous healing due to his vigorous exercise and his humble, repentant attitude. That kind of thing is practically to be expected here,” he lectured.

She relaxed a little, smiling. “Thank you, Tourse.”

“You’re welcome, Lady Minka,” he said, sipping his water.

The men suddenly stood as Marguerite approached, and Seagrave sat her in the chair next to Minka, who hugged her tightly a moment. Then she put her parcel in front of her: “We picked up your badge from Whately’s. And I’m having Cyrillo make earrings from the copper scraps. Oh! Kele told me to use jewelry as a beacon, and Cyrillo cut down the bracelet Efran got me.” She showed Marguerite the cuff. “Do you think that will work? So that he’ll know where I am if I fall in another hole?”

“Yes, certainly, dear,” Marguerite said with a glance at it. “How are you, Ella?”

“Fiiiine, thank you,” Ella said, wide-eyed. “If I can ever get used to—things happening.” She looked pointedly at Minka.

So Minka told Marguerite, “We saw Neale, and, I got all wound up inside, so I went over to talk to him, and I patted him, and he got up and s-started walking.” Silently waiting for an explanation, she studied her auntie.

Marguerite said, “What happens sometimes in places like this, is that the power searches for a path of least resistance to its end. But to have any effect, it must meet a prepared heart.”

Tourse looked off with an exaggerated expression of vindication, and Minka grinned at him. “That’s what Tourse said, and that’s what Efran told me earlier. But I’m very glad to hear you say the same thing.” She looked toward the front doors then. “Someone send a message to Efran, please.”

Connor said, “Yes, Minka; Routh rode up to the fortress while we were on our way here. He’ll be down shortly.”

“All right,” Minka said, blinking.

Hartshough and Eryk began bringing in trays of finger food and fresh fruit, which the men gladly ate. When Marguerite asked Ella about the horses that she and Tess were training now, Ella told her, “Cloud was doing so wonderfully well, then all of a sudden started bucking again! Tess was beside herself; we couldn’t imagine what had gone wrong. Then we found out that one of the stablehands had been trying to ride her bareback, just for fun! Jasque put him out of the stables, but now Tess has to start all over with her. She’s so angry and frustrated.”

Listening to her, Minka began to calm down, seeing that she herself was no longer the focus of attention. Connor asked Ella warily, “That wasn’t Shanko, was it?”

“Oh, no, Lorient keeps him in line. He’s been very helpful,” Ella insisted, but the men were smiling at her.

Seagrave volunteered his own experience with horses: “I was never good training ’em; the best I could do was find one that would tolerate me around, and make friends with him. That usually involved bribery.”

“The all-purpose method of advancement,” Tourse confirmed.



At that time, Efran came in with Joshua. The men around the table stood to salute; Efran nodded for them to be seated. He bent to kiss Marguerite on her head, and Joshua fell directly into her lap. There was some laughter as he pointed to the snacks he wanted, and Marguerite said, “Of course, darling; you may have whatever you like.”

Martyn moved down a seat so that Efran could take his chair next to Minka. She watched him, waiting. He said, “I stopped by the barracks to talk with the Commander just a moment. He’s—conferring with the Seconds and the Captains about what to do with Neale. But he’s going to talk to him, as well.” He inhaled, looking at Minka. She nodded slightly. He added, “I’m very glad that’s not a decision I have to make.”

There was a moment of silence, then Connor asked, “Does he even want to stay here, Captain?”

“I don’t know,” Efran said. “I haven’t talked to him—recently. It’s just a development no one foresaw.” He looked again to Minka with a bemused smile.

“I didn’t do it,” she whispered.

“I know,” he said, placing his arm around her shoulders.

They stayed for a little while longer, enough to placate Marguerite and Joshua, then Efran stood to take him, Minka, Ella, and their bodyguards back up to the fortress. Joshua proposed to throw a tantrum, but Efran just carried him on out.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 4

The next few days were a period of quiet work and waiting. Summer harvests were at their peak now—mid-June—though Tourjee and Garrett were frustrated to see that the unique grapevine growing from the southwestern corner of the back grounds produced nothing but leaves at this time. After careful fertilizing, watering, and pruning, the two head gardeners decided that the vine would bear when it was ready. It had already produced several unexpected and lifesaving harvests, once when DeVenter’s invisible dragon attacked the fortress ten months ago. So they let it be.

Efran and Minka walked the back grounds with Joshua, Nakam, and Kraken without perceiving that there were more children than usual out here. Windry, now divorced from her abusive husband and remarried to Eryk, had moved all her spinning and weaving supplies from her little house near Westford to one on the Lands she now shared with Eryk. As he was still working for Marguerite, and Windry was very busy with her weaving, she let her children Lilou, 12, and Calix, 10, play in the streets.

They saw the fortress children come down the switchback with their guardians to go to their play hut outside the walls, and joined them. The guardians did not notice the new arrivals until, counting heads on their return to the fortress, discovered the additions. Assuming there was an arrangement of which they were unaware, the men let them play. They had dinner with the children in the dining hall, then went out in the twilight to return home. Windry had no questions for them.

Following, Lilou and Calix began coming up to the fortress once they knew that the resident children were out of

class. The courtyard gate guards gave the two unquestioned access, given the Abbey's charter to care for children. But Lilou, perceiving that she was the oldest of this group, began ordering the other children around.

This quickly became a problem, as Toby was the unquestioned leader of the group, although he was only nine. Noah was older (being 10) but he was less observant of the rules and less inclined to leadership. The undergardener Tourjee was the first grownup to notice the arguments between Toby and the new girl. After intervening in one such argument, Tourjee advised Toby to talk to Efran.

So, during dinner on June 21st, Toby led a group of complainants to the back table: "Efran, the new girl is making trouble. She thinks that because she's the oldest, she can tell everyone what to do."

Efran glanced at him and Hassie, Jera, Almund and Chorro behind him. "The new girl," he repeated, cutting into his chicken. Minka paled slightly, eyes on Toby. Joshua waved to them from Efran's lap.

"Yes, her name's Lilou, and she's twelve, but she's picking things from the garden we're not supposed to touch," Toby said, offended.

Efran's eyes shot to him. Hassie, behind him, said, "She said it's allowed because you're her mother's lover. What's a lover?"

Forks around the dining hall (within range of her voice) went still. Efran raised up, wiping his mouth. "It's when grown-ups are special friends, but Lilou is mistaken, Hassie. Where is she?" he asked, scanning the hall.

Toby replied, "They didn't stay for dinner tonight because I told her I was going to talk to you."

"All right, Toby, I'll take care of it," Efran said. He dropped his napkin beside his unfinished dinner and stood to put Joshua on Quennel's lap. Then Efran murmured down to Minka, "I'll be right back." Ella and Quennel kept their eyes down, but everyone else in the hall watched Efran walk up to the head tables.

He leaned down beside Estes to whisper, "Where is Windry living?"

Estes turned to him thoughtfully. "In a house that Marguerite bought, but I don't know which one."

Efran looked over to DeWitt, who was attending, and asked them both, "Is it in the ledger upstairs?"

Estes and DeWitt studied each other, then DeWitt shook his head. "I don't think so, not with all the new plot assignments we're trying to record."

"All right." Efran straightened to think, looking sightlessly over the hall. All of those in his line of sight kept their heads down. He wanted to go talk to Windry immediately, but finding her house on a dark street might be just the first obstacle, assuming he knew the number.

So he went back to his table, whispering to Minka, "If Lilou and Calix come back tomorrow, we'll walk them down to their mother's house to have a talk. All right?" She nodded.

The following morning, June 22nd, Efran left word with the back door guards to notify him if the two new children showed up. Then he went up to the workroom to go over the new plots for Choules' group with Estes and DeWitt. There was no evidence of the bog except for residual surface patterns that could be swept away with a foot or a good gust of wind.

Minka was up here with them for a little while, but got restless with the waiting, and went out to the courtyard to look down the switchback. The gate guard, Willis, asked, “Going down to the chapel, Lady Minka?”

“I wish,” she sighed. “But I’ve got to wait for Efran.”

“That’s good, then,” he acknowledged.

Minka stood out of the way as Lowry drove his cart of morning meat deliveries in through the grocer’s gate to be unloaded at the back kitchen door. Then she went around to the pens to watch the horse trainers. When she didn’t see Ella, she remembered with a start that Law lessons would be in progress now. So she hurried in through the western door to the library, finding herself only a little late.

She listened attentively while Soames discussed the conditions under which children could be taken from their parents. And she was surprised to discover that a lack of supervision was one such condition—children under 8 were not to be turned out onto the street without supervision for any length of time. Also, all children were required to be taught reading, writing, numbers, and a trade.

Besides the above, children 12 and older were expected to work, either helping their parents or for others, for pay. Children 8 and older were permitted to play in public areas as long as they could do it safely. Parents would be liable for their children’s acts of vandalism, theft, or creating safety hazards. Parents would also be called to account for children who appeared neglected or idle. And Minka realized that, after Efran’s restoring Windry’s children to her, she could now be held in neglect of them.

Following Law class, Minka went out with Ella to watch her and Tess work with the horses. Minka envied them, wondering if she could learn to train horses. But then, she knew she wasn’t strong enough for such a physically demanding job. While watching them, she unconsciously played with the copper cuff, tugging on an end.

A while later, she saw Efran coming from the back grounds with Lilou and Calix. He was not carrying either of them; he was just walking with them. As the three of them approached the stables where he asked for horses, Minka heard him explain to them, “We’re going to take you to your mother’s house to see what she wants you to do during the day.”

Lilou patiently explained, “She doesn’t care, Efran; she’s busy.”

“Well then, we have to talk over what you’re to do while she works,” he replied.

Calix protested, “But we want to stay and play, Efran.”

That was a problem, because the Fortress couldn’t operate a babysitting service; their charter was for abandoned children only. Efran said, “I don’t blame you, but we still have to talk to your mother.”

“She’s married now,” Lilou informed him.

Efran looked at her quickly to ask, “She married Eryk?” Both children nodded.

“All right,” he said, watching as Gaunter and Kraken, both saddled and bridled, were brought to them.

Efran helped Minka mount, then lifted Lilou to sit behind the saddle. “I want to ride with you, Efran!” she protested.

“It’s Calix’s turn,” Efran said blankly, swinging up to the saddle. Willis lifted Calix to sit behind him. As they walked down the switchback, Efran said, “Tell us where to go.”

Pouting, Lilou looked around Minka. “Go down to the last street right before the barracks and turn right—it’s Orchid Row. Past the new northbound road, it’s the third house on the left.”

“Very good,” Efran said. Minka didn’t bother trying to guide Gaunter, seeing that he followed Kraken. She kept fingering the copper cuff.

After they had crossed the new northbound road, Lilou pointed. “That one there.”

“This one?” Efran asked, pausing Kraken. There was no name nor number, as there was supposed to be.

“Yes,” Lilou said. She slid down off Gaunter to begin running up the walk to the door. Minka stayed on the horse.

Efran let Calix down, then dismounted. Looking back at her in mild alarm, he said, “I need you, please.”

She dismounted then, and Efran paused, raising his hands to Kraken. “No water. We’ll stop somewhere on the way back.” Kraken snorted.

Efran led Minka up to the door that stood open. He paused at the doorway to knock on the jamb. “Windry?”

She came out from a back room with an expression of pleased surprise. When she saw Minka, her face fell. With an air of formality, she asked, “What is it, Efran?”

He glanced around the small front room, in which there was nothing to sit on. So he began, “Windry, we—”

But she turned to her unseen children. “Leave that alone! Run out and play!”

“Windry, that’s the problem,” he said. “You or Eryk need to supervise the children. Let them help you, or find them a place they can work—”

“Why can’t they play with all the children you have up there on the hill?” she asked as though offended.

“Windry, we’re not a substitute for parents. We’re allowed only to care for orphans,” he said.

“Then we’ll find a way to pay you,” she said archly.

“No, Windry, that’s not the issue. If we took part-time care of your children, then we’d have to take in everyone’s. We can’t; there are hundreds of children on the Lands—”

“You can’t just let them play up there?” she asked, mildly disbelieving.

“To make sure they don’t get hurt, Windry,” he said tensely. “Besides which, you’re responsible for educating your children, teaching them to read and write so they can get good work.”

“So you don’t have to bother with them,” she said coldly.

He lowered his head, aware that the children were listening. “I’m not their father.”

“And you owe me nothing,” she said, a hand on her hip, “after almost a year of sleeping with me.”

Pale, Efran did not reply. Minka said, “No, he doesn’t.”

Windry’s eyes shot to her; Efran looked down. Minka continued, “You were not only willing, but the aggressor. And when he told you he couldn’t marry you, you wanted to continue the relationship anyway. You were a grown woman then, older than he is. And you’re married to someone else now. Let your new husband do his duty to you and your children.”

As Windry stared at her, Minka turned to walk out. Efran followed.

They walked their horses up Main, then dismounted to water them at the community well. Efran said, “You see why I wanted you to come.” She nodded, and he half-groaned, “Watch Surley sue me for Provision for a Wronged Husband now.”

“He can’t,” she said, and he looked quickly at her. “An abuser can’t bring suit for anything, and she just divorced him for abuse.”

“That’s right,” he said, remembering that he’d told Surley just that. He inhaled deeply, and began, “Minka, again, I’m . . . sorry—”

“Let’s skip that part,” she said, climbing up on Gaunter. Efran swung up on Kraken, turning his head to follow.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 5

Arriving at the road that intersected the switchbacks, Minka looked east. “I want to see Auntie.”

“Of course,” Efran said. As they walked their horses toward the chapel, they slowed at the activity around it. There were mounted men in livery and a gorgeous carriage. The step was lowered for a woman with luxurious, curling red hair to disembark. Seeing Efran, she paused to lower her chin at him, then allowed Justinian to escort her up the chapel steps. While the diva Arbaiza entered, Justinian turned to them to raise his hands in a helpless gesture.

“We’ll do that later,” Minka decided, turning Gaunter around to the switchback. Efran followed, reeling from yet another blow.

When Minka gave up Gaunter at the courtyard gates and turned away, Efran said, “Come with me, please.” She went with him as he took Kraken back to the stables to unsaddle and groom him. Then he walked her to the back grounds, Kraken following. She ran her fingers lightly over the inscription on the copper cuff, then pulled up on the edge again.

Arm around her shoulders, he murmured, “So I *am* pushing you toward the cliffs, only, with what I did four, six years ago.”



“That’s not fair, Efran,” she said, shaking her head. “You can’t do anything about what’s in the past, except not do it again. It would be unfair to punish you for the same thing over and over again.”

He lifted her hand to kiss her fingers. “And you wonder why I can’t let you out of my sight.”

She studied him. “Let’s go look at the baby pumpkins.”

He caught his breath. “Are there pumpkins already?”

“I think so,” she said, taking his fingers to lead him over to the large new beds on what had been the infertile fringes of the eastern hillside. Not far from the roses climbing the stone markers commemorating Renée of Westford, there sprouted not only pumpkin plants, but corn, beans, oregano, marjoram, marigolds, licorice mint, and more. Kraken’s hauling numerous loads of compost and soil is what enabled Tourjee to transform this otherwise unusable ground into abundance. And the Archimedes screw that Tourjee and Toby built was in constant use. From here, Efran glanced over to see Tiras put Joshua on Kraken’s back and begin walking him to the compost bins.

As Efran and Minka were admiring the new beds, Toby ran up behind them. “Efran,” he said.

Efran turned to him, and Toby jerked his thumb over his shoulder. Looking up, Efran saw Lilou and Calix standing expectantly behind Toby, with the other children looking on. Efran looked back to Minka, whispering, “What should I do?”

“You can’t turn them away,” she whispered back.

Sucking in a deep breath, Efran went over to kneel before the visitors, and all the children clustered around him. “Lilou and Calix. If you want to play here, you have to mind Toby and Tourjee. If you come while the children are in class, you have to go to class with them. When it starts getting dark, we’ll have a couple of men see you home.” He asked Minka, “What am I forgetting?”

She said, “Toby, does that sound good to you?”

“If she starts arguing with me, she has to leave,” Toby said. “And you have to stop talking about your mother and Efran. That’s disrespectful.”

“Thank you, Toby,” Minka said. “So, can you do that, Lilou? Calix?”

“I sure can,” Calix said. Lilou lowered her eyes, nodding.

“All right, that was easy. Carry on.” Efran stood, looking down at Minka. Having achieved détente, the children ran off to their games. And when Minka looked up, she saw—not exactly adoration, but appreciation in Efran’s eyes.

He alerted the men on duty that Lilou and Calix had to be taken home before dark every day, then he and Minka went inside to begin up the stairs to the second floor. But the door sentry, Clough, caught them to say, “Captain, Commander Wendt requests your presence at Barracks A.”

“Ohhh. About Neale?” Efran asked warily.

“Sorry, Captain; I don’t know,” Clough replied.

“I’ll be right there,” Efran said. “And you get to rescue me again,” he said, taking Minka’s arm.

“No, if this is about Neale, I don’t want to be anywhere around,” she said adamantly. She did not want to be associated with his sudden ability to walk.

So he went out to saddle Kraken alone.

Minka watched from the foyer as Efran rode Kraken down the switchback, then up Main to the barracks at the far north end of the street. While she watched, she saw the wall gates open to *another* luxurious carriage. The sight of them was beginning to make her retch. She went out to the courtyard to get a better look at the new threat.

From the top of the switchback, she watched the carriage stop in front of Croft’s for a portly, well-dressed man to step out. Although wrinkled from travel, he was wearing a very fine suit. He appeared to be both weary and highly excited as he stood talking on the sidewalk to someone still in the carriage. When he kept batting his combover, holding it down against the wind, Minka recognized him as Lord Gladden, lately of Westford.

He and his wife Lady Vories had come to the fortress almost a year ago, shortly after Efran had stolen Commander Wendt from Surchatain Clonmel of Venegas. Lady Vories was yet another woman whom Efran had slept with. Angry that he had left early from their last tryst, she had filed a complaint on him with the Commander. Wendt had merely dragged him for sleeping with a married woman, and that was it.

Curious, Minka watched Lord Gladden enter Croft’s, then the carriage proceed up Main to the switchback. As the carriage was ascending, the gate guard, Willis, asked, “You know ’em, Lady Minka? Should I let ’em up?”

On a wild hunch, she said, “Yes.” Then she retreated to the foyer, telling Capur at the door, “Leave the doors open.”

“Yes, Lady,” he said, then looked to see who might be arriving in the carriage. Minka also watched.

Soon, a beautiful woman in a décolleté dress arrived in the foyer in some distress. She was fanning herself with a lace handkerchief as she looked all around. Minka approached with a brief curtsy. “May I help you?” she asked cautiously. This was certainly Lady Vories.

The woman appeared to take her as a greeter or lobby maid, for she gasped, “I must see Efran.”

“He’s not here, but I see that you’re in great distress. What is the problem?” Minka asked quietly.

“My husband is about to bring suit against him for Provision for a Wronged Husband. I must warn him,” she said, bosom heaving. This part of Roman’s Law allowed the husband of an unfaithful wife to exact payment from her seducer of half his worldly wealth.

“You are so good and kind to do that,” Minka said smoothly. “But first, we must protect you. Your husband beats you, does he not?” This was a safe bet; all nobles took out their frustrations on their wives to some degree—which is why so many of them had lovers.

“Brutally,” the woman gasped, closing her eyes.

“Come, then. We must go down to the notary’s for your own protection.” Minka gently took her arm to steer her back into the carriage. To the footman, she said, “The Lady must go to the notary, right at the bottom of the switchback here. I will attend her.”

“Right,” he said, closing the door after Minka had settled onto the seat next to Lady Vories.

Putting an arm around Vories’ shoulders, Minka said, “You are so brave. We’ll get through this. Hold on.” Lady Vories nodded, exhaling.

Seconds later, the carriage pulled up to Ryal’s shop, and the footman opened the door. Minka assisted the distraught lady down herself, and up the steps into the notary’s shop. As the little bell tinkled, it fell loose, narrowly missing the lady’s coiffed head before hitting the floor.

She startled, looking down at it, but Minka assisted her to the counter where Ryal was waiting, alert. Giardi came out from the back room to watch. Minka began, “Lord Ryal, this is Lady Vories. She wants to swear out a complaint against her husband Lord Gladden for abuse.” The couple need not be Abbey Land residents for her to do this, seeing that it was a universal complaint.

“I see. I’m sorry to hear that, Lady Vories,” Ryal said as Giardi pushed parchments and quill over to him. “First, we must put you under oath. Do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

“Yes,” she said courageously.

“Very well. Please tell me when the abuse occurred.” Ryal dipped a quill to begin taking notes.

“Over the last ten years, constantly,” she said tightly.

“And where?” he asked.

“Wherever we were staying, usually at our house in Westford, before we had to leave because of the Goulven. But we’ve been staying in Crescent Hollow, and he beats me there, as well,” she said. A line of prospective leaseholders in Choules’ group began forming behind her. They needed plots registered, but they didn’t mind waiting as long as they could listen. And they could, because Vories’ complaint was public.

“And this is the form that the abuse takes? He beats you?” Ryal asked carefully. He was studying her for obvious bruises, and not seeing any.

“Relentlessly,” she gasped.

“I am very sorry to hear that. Pardon me for asking, but, do you have bruises or other marks to show for it?” Ryal asked.

“Yes,” she said, turning her face. She pointed to a light scratch on her jaw. “See that?”

Ryal squinted at it, but Minka cried, “Oh! The beast!”

“And this,” Vories said, spreading the fingers of her right hand. Minka, Ryal and Giardi looked at her spotless white hand. “He grabbed my fingers and broke my nail.” They saw that the fingernail of her ring finger was shorter than the other nails.

“Ruining a perfect manicure!” Minka said in outrage.

“Oh, that’s not the worst. Look at this,” Vories said, turning her head to point behind her ear. The three observers were silent, looking, so she said, “He pulled out *six strands* of hair.”

“Oh!” Minka cried in horror.

“And then he made excuses that his signet ring had gotten caught in it,” Vories sneered.

“That’s weak,” Minka said judgmentally.

Glancing between them, Ryal said, “Well, as I see that it’s important to lodge this complaint, we’ll go with the testimony we have. Let me read the notes I’ve made, and you tell me if they’re accurate.” Giardi handed him a prewritten form on which he could just fill in the details.

“Get on with it, then,” Vories said, closing her eyes with the trauma of reliving it.

Ryal read back to her, “‘I, Lady Vories, do solemnly swear that my husband, Lord Gladden, has abused me constantly over the last ten years in the form of beatings at our homes in both Westford and Crescent Hollow. He has left me bruised, with light scars, broken fingernails, and hair pulled out.’ Now, Lady Vories, is that a true and accurate statement?”

“Yes,” she said, “and I want Efran to hear it. I want him to know that I hold no ill will toward him, regardless of what Gladden is about to do.” She then felt compelled to explain, “We need the money. We lost so much when we had to leave Westford and our house burned down.”

“I’m sure you did,” Ryal said compassionately, guessing what Lord Gladden was about to do. Giardi, catching on, looked at Minka with widened eyes. He transferred all the information to the new form, made some notations as to date and such, then said, “Please read it over and sign above your printed name, Lady Vories.”

She took the quill and signed with a dramatic flourish. Ryal signed, then pushed the parchment toward his wife. “Will you please sign as witness, dear?”—which was not technically required, but a good safeguard for documents that might be questioned.

“Yes.” She took the quill and did so, then Ryal pulled out his seal to stamp the document.

“It’s all official. I will keep this form on file,” he told Minka, and Giardi raised her eyebrows, repressing a smile.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 6

“Thank you, Ryal,” Minka said, then turned Vories gently to the door. “You’re free to go now, dear. It will be all right.” The waiting customers parted like the Red Sea for them.

“You’ve been very kind. What is your name?” Vories asked her.

“Minka,” she said, smiling. As she surmised, Vories showed no recognition of the name, but merely leaned forward to kiss her cheek. Minka opened the door for her, and the footman assisted her down the steps and back into the carriage. From there, they went practically across the street to Croft’s.

Glancing back to Ryal and Giardi, Minka murmured, “I’ll send a man down with your pay. And, we may need your services shortly.”

“Very good, Minka,” Ryal said dryly. The next man standing in line glanced at her astutely as he pushed a form over the counter toward the notary.

Minka left his shop to walk back up the switchback. Arriving at the fortress, she promptly sent a man down to the notary with five royals (in extreme overpayment). Then she decided to just sit in Doane’s cubicle and chat with him for a while.

About a half hour later, the same carriage appeared in the courtyard. Only this time, a fat man with an extensive combover debarked, assisting the same lady down, who was now wearing a different dress—a more modest one. With the fortress doors still standing open, the two entered the foyer to look around.

At the same time that Minka came out of Doane’s cubicle into the foyer, Efran entered from the courtyard, returning from the Commander’s summons. He glimpsed Minka, but turned his attention to Lord Gladden and Lady Vories.

She was looking off in genuine distress as her husband stepped toward him with a malicious smile. “Well there, young man, you remember me, don’t you? Lord Gladden? Whose wife you slept with numerous times? Well, I’m here to sue you under the Provision for a Wronged Husband.”

Efran just looked at him stonily, but Minka could see him crumble inside. In a matter of days, here had appeared Woman #3 with the most ruinous effects yet. Wiping his lip, he glanced around for Minka, but she was at the door quietly telling the guard to send for Ryal to take depositions from Lord Gladden and Lady Vories—quickly, please.

Efran glanced up to heaven, not daring to pray, and quietly instructed a sentry to fetch Estes and DeWitt to hear another accusation under the Provision for a Wronged Husband.

No one moved while they waited for the fortress administrators, nor could Efran bring himself to look at his wife. Lady Vories was regarding him in genuine heartache. The door guards watched blankly; Doane emerged from his cubicle to look. They all knew what this meant: handing over half the Abbey Treasury. None of them but Ryal knew that a successful suit against Efran would nullify his charter, revoking his title of Lord Sovereign.

When Efran finally turned to Minka, begging forgiveness with his eyes, he saw her looking back at him with a frank, untroubled expression. He squinted, trying to read her aright, because this couldn’t possibly be her devious face.

Estes and DeWitt came heavily off the stairs, DeWitt bearing a sheaf of blank papers, quill and ink bottle. He said, “Lord Gladden, Lady Vories, please step into the small dining room. Has Ryal been summoned?” he asked, looking around. He and Estes also knew the financial implications of the suit, having sat through the previous trial. Not only that, but they were present when Efran had blurted out to Gladden the fact of his having slept with Vories. (It’s a long story.)

“Yes, the notary should be here shortly,” Minka said.



DeWitt looked at her intently while the visiting lord and lady bustled into the small dining room to sit at one end of the large oval table. By this time, Estes was also regarding her, and she smiled back at him benignly. "She's taking this rather well, isn't she?" DeWitt whispered. All three men studied her.

Lord Gladden leaned out of the doorway to inquire, "Aren't you supposed to take our statements now?"

Turning to enter the room, DeWitt said, "We're waiting for the notary, Lord Gladden. Please make yourself comfortable." Gladden returned to his seat to pat his wife lovingly, who now remembered that she was supposed to look outraged at Efran instead of sympathetic to him. He did not request any refreshments brought to them.

DeWitt, Estes, Efran and Minka sat at the other end of the table from the Wronged Husband and his wife. The Abbey men kept stealing glances at their Lady Sovereign, whose tranquility was as the dawn spreading over a foggy mountain lake.

Ryal finally appeared with a remarkably slender sheath and no writing instruments. "Good afternoon," he said, taking note of everyone in the room. "I am the Abbey Lands Notary Ryal. What can I do for you today?" He sat at the table near the door.

Efran opened his mouth, but couldn't actually produce the necessary words. So his guest stepped up to the task. "Notary Ryal, I am Lord Gladden of Crescent Hollow, and this is my wife Lady Vories. We are here to sue Lord Efran under the Provision for a Wronged Husband." He sat back after proclaiming this unassailable fact.

Glancing around the table again, Ryal opened his sheath and said, "I'm sorry that you've made a wasted trip, Lord Gladden. I'm afraid that, under Roman's Law, no man credibly accused of a serious crime can bring suit against anyone until he is cleared of that accusation. You have been credibly accused of spousal abuse, over which trial I would preside, given that you are here. With the evidence I have heard, I would have no choice but to find you guilty. Therefore, you are ineligible to sue Lord Efran for anything."

He laid the notarized document before Gladden that his wife had just sworn out an hour ago, so that the ink was barely dry. The ponderous man gaped at it, uncomprehending; his wife stared at it as if never having seen it before. Meanwhile, the Abbey leadership fixedly regarded the innocent-looking girl with curly hair. Strangely, Vories did not seem to recognize her.

"What? What?" Gladden blurted at the offending document. "Abused you constantly? . . . Beatings? . . . Bruises, scars, broken fingernails, and hair pulled out?" he cried to his wife. Her mouth hung open. Looking down again, he cried, "And this is your signature! Vorey, how could you do this, when we're on the brink of ruin?"

"I don't knoooooww!" Vories wailed. Gladden leaned over to embrace her in his vast arms, and they cried on each other.

DeWitt got up and gently urged Gladden to a stand, then nudged them out of the room together, clinging to each other. The foyer men, whose number had increased, were gaping at them with frozen smiles.

DeWitt waved to the carriage footman, who took charge of the grieving couple to load them up and drive them down the switchback. DeWitt gestured to Doane, "Have them sent twenty royals for their immediate expenses."

"Yes, Administrator," Doane said, restraining tears of relief. Then DeWitt returned to the small dining room to regard the little blue-eyed vixen.

Ryal studied her as well. “It genuinely appeared to be Lady Vories’ idea. Minka was just very . . . supportive and sympathetic,” he said grimly. Her innocent face was unchanged.

Efran slid off his chair to put his head in her lap. “I have no idea what I could have done to deserve you,” he murmured.

“You told me I did the best I could,” she replied, stroking his hair. He raised his wet face to sit again, hauling her onto his lap.

“Efran,” Estes said, sagging, “how many more women are there?”

“God only knows,” Efran said, tightening his arms around Minka.

She turned to ask him, “What did the Commander want?”

“The Commander,” he exhaled, thinking. “Yes. Since Neale’s walking again”—he eyed her—“he asked to go up and scout Eurus, alone. The Commander had no objections, so Neale will set out tomorrow morning”—June 23rd.

Ryal squinted. “Is the Commander sure about that? Neale was a major player in the insurrection.”

DeWitt acknowledged that, but Estes said, “Wendt knows what to do with broken men.” Efran looked off with full eyes.

Clough came to the door, saluting. “Pardon, sirs, but Lady Marguerite has asked the Captain to come down; the diva Arbaiza has asked to see him, and the Lady wants to know his mind.”

Writhing, Efran fell back in his chair so that Minka almost slid off his lap. Ryal asked, “Arbaiza’s not married, is she?”

Estes rose. “No, we’re safe on that one. I’m going back to work. Efran will be right down,” he told Clough, who saluted and returned to his post.

DeWitt, who was still standing, said, “Ploense has the right idea, doesn’t he?—locking himself in a third-floor room to work.”

“I’m almost there,” Estes admitted. Rounding the table, he patted Efran’s shoulder. “If we lock you out, we’ll make sure Minka has the key.”

Efran looked glumly after his administrators as they left. Ryal stood, reclaiming Lady Vories’ statement. “I’m off, as well. Good job, Minka,” he said before departing. She smiled at him.

Minka stood from Efran’s lap while he sat there a moment longer. He muttered, “Who said, ‘Your sins will find you out’? Therese usually tells me things like that, but she’s not speaking to me today.” Minka raised her shoulders in ignorance. (NB: It wasn’t really his old tutor reminding him of Scriptures he should know, but since she’s the one who taught them to him, he heard them in her voice. Also, that was Moses: Num. 32:23.)

Fortifying himself, Efran stood to take her arm. “Joshua’s in back, and I’m not going to take him to Marguerite’s while Arbaiza’s there anyway, which had better not be for long.” He didn’t give Minka any opportunity to get out of going with him.

In the courtyard, he requested the dun mare, unsaddled, so she was soon brought out. Efran lifted Minka to sit on her with both legs to one side, then he held her bridle to walk alongside as they descended the new switchback.

Eryk met them at the front of the chapel to take the mare to the new stables in back, then the Abbey guards opened the doors for them. Efran sighed in mild relief to see Hartshough advance. “Good afternoon, Lord Efran, Lady Minka. May I get you refreshments?”

“No, thank you, Hartshough; we’re just responding to Marguerite’s summons,” Efran said with dry humor, leading Minka to the sitting area. “We can’t stay long,” he emphasized.

“Very good, Lord Efran,” Hartshough said, bowing. The two watched him retreat to the back of the chapel—not upstairs. Taking Minka’s hand, Efran slouched down on the divan to rest his head on the cushion and look up at the ceiling. Then he squinted. “The ceiling beams,” he murmured. “What am I seeing?”

Minka laid her head back on the cushion beside him to look up. “There’s—” she broke off.

Marguerite was coming toward them—with Arbaiza. Efran lowered his eyes and sat up. Minka, still scrutinizing the ceiling, didn’t look over as the two women sat in the plush chairs across from the divan. Efran stood, leaning down to kiss Marguerite’s head. She had begun to say something when Arbaiza said, “I’ve been talking with your auntie, and she has no objection to my using this chapel as my primary performance hall.”

Surprisingly, Minka didn’t react, as she was still studying the ceiling. But Efran sat back down on the edge of the divan. He glanced first at Marguerite’s placid face, then looked to Arbaiza to say, “She may not object, but I do. The performances have already caused a great deal of damage to the chapel, besides tremendous inconvenience to Marguerite and Hartshough.”

Arbaiza lifted an eyebrow in mocking pity. “That’s just a sacrifice to Music. If Lady Marguerite allows it, who are you to say no?”

Efran studied her as the sweat broke out on his temples. She was not married, and he had not been married when he knew her, but the threat of blackmail hung heavy in the air. How could she hurt him? What could she do to him, or to the Lands, if he refused this appropriation?

Sweating, he looked over at Minka, who returned an indecipherable look to him. It was not devious, or self-assured, or smiling, but—cautious? Anticipatory?

In this silence, one of the door guards said, “Bozzelli requesting entrance, Captain.”

Efran looked over his shoulder but Arbaiza stood. “Yes, let him in.” Efran swiveled to Marguerite, whose eyes were downcast. He looked at Minka again, whose eyes were widened. She knew something.

“Arbaiza, my dear!” Bozzelli came striding over to greet her with a warm but chaste kiss on her cheek. “This is such wonderful news, better than I had ever hoped to hear.” As victor over the vanquished, Bozzelli gloated, “So, Efran, your chapel will be used in service to the arts after all, eh? And with such a glorious high priestess as this.” He looked adoringly at the mezzo-soprano.

Minka sucked in a cautious breath. “Oh, don’t count on it,” she murmured.

“And why not?” Bozzelli asked almost contemptuously.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 7

Minka narrowed her eyes in thought. “I seem to remember, about six months ago, hearing complaints about your cutting faerie tree limbs to use in the chapel construction. You never asked permission of the faeries, and you destroyed a lot of faerie homes doing it.”

Arbaiza snorted at the assertion, but Bozzelli sobered a little. “Ah, that may have been the case, and I do apologize to any faeries who were inconvenienced by my insensitivity.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Minka said, “but there remains faerie tree wood in the ceiling beams.” Efran looked up again—the only one to do so. But Marguerite was watching Minka with a half-smile.

Bozzelli hastened to explain, “Yes, you see, I discovered in my research that the faerie tree wood provides a richness of sound that is unique. I would have loved to have used it all the way around the hall here, and not just in the ceiling.”

“But once you knew that the faeries were upset, you should have returned the wood,” she said.

“Why? It was sawn into planks by then. Would they have wanted to build their own performance hall with it?” he asked in mild sarcasm.

Lowering her chin, Minka said, “That’s not your concern. It was still theirs, and, still alive.”

“Well, it may have been then, but by now. . . .” Bozzelli faltered, seeing Efran scan the ceiling. Arbaiza cautiously looked up. With a hesitant scowl, Bozzelli raised his face to look.

Efran said, “I’ve seen that before.” All of a sudden, they were watching sinewy brown roots descend from the height of the ceiling to cascade down the walls. In a very short time, more roots began dropping straight to the floor in the middle of the hall.

Bozzelli gasped as one root descended beside him to (apparently) drill into the marble at his feet. Others dropped around the hall here and there, but they did not invade the seating area nor dining area. They did fall along the curved stairway as a continuation of the balusters both above and below the stairs. They dropped alongside the loft as well, which would have precluded Calix’s falling from the railing, had they been there.

By the time the roots stopped descending, the performance hall had become a faerie wood, as slender green shoots spiraled up from the roots here and there. But that meant there was no longer room for auditorium seating, nor an unobstructed view to the platform at the front. Arbaiza, wide-eyed, was staring a hole through Bozzelli. He, rooted to the spot (so to speak), couldn’t find anything to say.

Finally, Minka said, “The Meeting Hall of the inn is actually a very nice venue. And it’s available now.”

Chest heaving, Arbaiza told Bozzelli, “Go reserve time slots at once.”

His lips flapped soundlessly. Marguerite said, “Hartshough will provide funds for reserving the Hall.” Rather

than bellow for him, she merely turned, and he seemed to materialize from behind a tree.

“Yes, Lady Marguerite?” Hartshough said, bowing.

“Yes, Hartshough, Bozzelli needs to reserve the Meeting Hall for Arbaiza, please,” Marguerite said.

“Ah. I happen to have filled a pouch to pay our construction laborers, but will get another for them. Here you are, Bozzelli. Thirty royals.” Hartshough presented him the pouch with a slight bow, then returned through the forest to the stairs. Though gazing off sightlessly, Bozzelli took the pouch. Its weight seemed to bring him around, and he turned to weave his way through the woods to the doors.

When Arbaiza turned to Efran, he stood. Kissing Marguerite’s head, he murmured, “We’ll be back later with Joshua.”

“Thank you,” she said. Then he gripped Minka’s hand to lead her out. The Abbey men at the door saluted in mild shock. He nodded to them.

Efran stopped with her on the front walk to wait for the mare to be brought around. She looked down at the tightness of his grip. He turned to her, breathing, “Don’t leave me.” She was forming a question when he said, “You’re looking more faerie all the time. You don’t look anything like the girl I married two years ago.”

“No, Efran,” she said, leaning on him. “I was barely sixteen when we married; I’m eighteen now. My face is still maturing. Didn’t I have the bracelet you gave me made into a beacon?” She lifted the wrist with the copper cuff.

He seemed to calm a little, looking at it. Then he wiped his mouth and whispered, “I don’t know how many other women will come, making demands. If I knew then—but I didn’t; I was just stupid,” he said through gritted teeth.

“They don’t scare me. You’re still Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and whatever threatens the Abbey will draw out our defenses. Won’t it?” she asked, chastising.

He blinked. “That’s a good way to look at it.”

“My horse is here,” she said. He glanced over, then lifted her to the mare’s back.

He walked the mare up three bends of the switchback, then she said, “Oh, look!” He turned to see that she was looking back at the chapel—specifically, its baffled oyster-shell roof. (Despite all references to “oyster,” it was more of a scallop or cockle shape.)

“Oh ho,” he laughed. They could see trailing greenery of some kind pouring itself down the grooves of the roof over the edges almost to the ground. It was not only beautiful, but fitting, giving the distinct impression, like the faerie tree on the fortress roof, that it was filling space which had been allotted to it. And it had something of the look of seaweed.

“But it’s not—a tree,” Efran said. “It sprang from the faerie tree wood, but that’s more like a vine.”

“It must grow according to its setting,” she guessed.

“Yes, I can see that,” he murmured, turning to continue leading the mare up the switchback. “I see that adaptability all over the Lands.”

When they came up hilltop, they went to the back grounds to see how the children were doing. Efran and Minka watched from a distance before approaching them. Efran looked once, then again—"I see Calix with the boys, but I don't see Lilou with any of the children."

"She's over by the archery lines," Minka said.

"What?" Efran turned to look, and saw her talking to two soldiers. They were paying minimal attention to her while trying to practice their shooting.

"She looks like me trying to flirt with you in the henhouse," Minka observed.

"No, oh no," Efran muttered.

"She seems older than the other girls—Hassie, and Jera. She's more developed," Minka observed.

"She's twelve. Calix is ten, a little older than Toby, even. But he doesn't seem to resent Toby's authority," Efran mused.

One of the soldiers that had been on the archery lines began walking over. Efran watched him draw up and salute. "Ure reporting, Captain." He was another new Polonti, and, looked very uncomfortable, glancing repeatedly at Minka, who was looking elsewhere.

So Efran told her, "Go check on Joshua, please—see if he needs to be taken in."

"Yes," she said, moving off.

Then Efran returned his attention to Ure, who said hesitantly, "The new girl, Lilou, is a . . . task, Captain. She acts like grownup, and—" he inhaled with difficulty— "talks of seeing you in bed with her mother."

Efran looked up to the heavens. "Why didn't I know that?" he whispered. "All right. Dismissed." Then he looked up quickly. "Unless there's more you need to tell me."

"No, sir," Ure said in relief.

"Dismissed," Efran nodded. Ure saluted and returned to the line.

Efran looked over to see Salk carrying Joshua inside, and Minka coming back over to him. She glanced at Ure walking away, then murmured, "Joshua is getting his wraps changed. What did your man not want to say in front of me?"

Woodenly, Efran said, "That not only is Lilou flirting, but she's telling the men about me and her mother." Her eyes widened, and he whispered, "What do I do?"

Minka looked over at the girl thoughtfully. "If she's twelve, she needs to be working. Among women. At Elvey's, or Dix's. Imelda's. Besiana's." Efran nodded. Minka glanced skyward, and said, "It's only about an hour till dinner. I can get a boxed dinner from the kitchen for her, and take her on home. Then I'll talk to her mother about letting her work."

"You'd do that?" he asked.

“It’s better than letting her get in trouble here,” she said.

He briefly closed his eyes and said, “Yes, do that. I’ll get you two men out front.”

While he went around to the front courtyard, Minka walked over to the archery line with a friendly smile. “Hello, Lilou. We have an idea that we think you’ll enjoy. Come with me, and we’ll go present it to your mother.”

Lilou regarded her reluctantly, but came to her side. “What is it?”

“I’ll tell you on the way,” Minka said, nodding toward the back door of the fortress.

Walking with her, Lilou glanced back at the boys working in the garden. “What about Calix?”

“He can stay there, because, he’s too young for what you’ll be doing. Lilou, all these children are so much younger than you, they can’t be very much fun to play with. You’re easily old enough and smart enough to work, and there are many shops that could use your help,” Minka said. Lilou looked thoughtful.

They entered the lower corridor to walk up to the kitchen, where Minka got a (free) boxed dinner for Lilou. Emerging into the front courtyard, Minka told her, “We’re going to ask your mother what she thinks of the idea.” Lilou did not reply, looking in her box to see what all was there.

Jehan and Coish were waiting with their horses and Gaunter. “Hello, Lady Minka. Lilou,” Coish said courteously, having been alerted to their mission.

“Hello, Coish, Jehan,” Minka said. She climbed into Gaunter’s saddle herself, then said, “Help Lilou up behind me, please. She’s going to direct us to her house.”

“Very good, Lady Minka,” Jehan said. While Lilou clung to the box, he lifted her to sit behind Minka’s saddle. The boys mounted to walk with them down the new switchback and up the new northbound road.

As they rode, Minka said to Lilou, “Do we turn down this next street? I don’t quite remember.”

“Yes,” Lilou said. Otherwise, she was very quiet until adding, “This house.”

“Oh, yes,” Minka said. They all dismounted, and she told her bodyguards, “You may wait out here.” They looked conflicted, but did as she instructed.

She and Lilou entered the house. They paused at the unmanned spinning wheel in the front room, then passed into the main room of the house, where the loom with a half-woven rug waited. Windry was not here, either. “Mum?” Lilou called. She went to a closed door off this room, which was locked. “Mum?” Lilou called again, knocking on the door.

Windry then emerged, slightly frazzled. “Lilou! What are you doing here? And you’re—” She peered at Minka.

The front door burst open for Jehan and Coish to rush in. “Lady Minka! Are you—?” “We saw—” They stopped upon seeing the slightly winded, disheveled woman firmly closing the door behind her.

“What is all this?” Windry asked, aggravated. Lilou sat at the table in this room to begin devouring her dinner.

Minka said brightly, “Windry, Lilou is so much more advanced than the other children, we thought it would be a better use of her time to work during the day instead of playing. There are a number of shops close by who would gladly pay a bright twelve-year-old for her help. Perhaps you could take her around to ask? Averno’s and Firmin’s are right here on Main, and Besiana’s is right behind them.”

Windry plopped onto her weaving stool. “I’m much too busy.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 8

Lilou glanced up, having finished off a very nice dinner. Jehan and Coish looked on silently as Minka paused, then asked, “May I take her around?”

“If you like,” Windry said, still flustered. She began working her loom, then had to stop upon a tangled yarn.

“Then I will. Lilou?” Minka said. The girl agreeably rose from the table, and Minka paused. “Go wash your face and hands. Have you got a brush?”

“Yes,” Lilou said. Minka helped her clean up a bit, then they and the bodyguards went back out to their horses.

They had to ride only a short distance over to Main, where Minka stopped in front of Averno’s. He was a good man who ran an excellent bakery and eatery, but, he was highly particular about the way things were done. Then Minka looked next door at Firmin’s, where his popular server Ionadi was preparing the outdoor dining area for the dinner rush all by herself.

“Jehan, help her down,” Minka said, nodding to Lilou behind her saddle. He did, and Minka dismounted to take Lilou’s hand and walk her over to the old woman. She looked up as Minka said, “Hello, Ionadi. This is Lilou. She is a very bright girl who wants to work. Will you give her a chance to help you?”

“I could use the help,” Ionadi said, studying the girl.

“She’ll do *exactly* what you say, Ionadi,” Minka promised, eyes on Lilou. She nodded quickly.

“Then let’s get you into an apron,” Ionadi said, gesturing.

Lilou took her hand and looked back at Minka, who said, “You’ll do well here.”

Minka returned to the street to mount her horse again, but she and her bodyguard stayed to watch Lilou come out in a Firmin’s apron with Ionadi. The old woman put a basket of flatware and linen napkins on a table to instruct, “Set all the tables.”

Lilou glanced in the basket, then looked around at the thirty or forty tables. She lowered her head to weakly confess, “I don’t know how.”

“Oh, what a wonderful girl!” Ionadi said, and Lilou looked at her with wide eyes. “To ask right away for



instruction so that we don't waste time and don't get angry with each other. I shall enjoy working with you very much. Here's what you do."

With a dazed smile, Lilou watched as Ionadi rolled the flatware in the napkins and set them around four to each table, and two to the small tables. Smiling, Lilou finished the job just as Ionadi had shown her, then they went on to the next task.

With a hopeful sigh, Minka turned Gaunter south on Main. She flicked her eyes at Coish to ask, "Why did you rush in like that?"

Coish pressed his lips together, glancing at his partner, and said, "A half-dressed man ran out from the back of the house." Minka exhaled.

They got back to the fortress in plenty of time for dinner. While Minka quietly told Efran about Lilou's new job, she watched Calix eat with the other children. He showed no curiosity about his missing sister, and after dinner, an Abbey sentry took him home.

The next morning, June 23rd, Efran took refuge on the back grounds with Joshua. Minka was in Law class with Soames, Ella, and the Librarian, and the children were at their studies, so the area was relatively quiet. Kraken was rolling in the dirt practically at Efran's feet while he sat on the bench under the walnut tree. Joshua wanted to get down in the dirt as well, which Efran disallowed until the beast would stop rolling.

Efran looked around at the expanded gardens and the burgeoning fruit trees. The Gers—black fowl that were prodigious breeders and good eating—had escaped their pens again, preferring to range over the entire hilltop. Good luck to anyone trying to catch them.

When Kraken finally came to rest on his side, Efran sat Joshua on him. The toddler gleefully slapped his back, raising dust clouds. This Kraken accepted. Efran sat again to rest his elbows on his knees, clasping his hands. He glanced up at Justinian walking Arbaiza around the northwestern corner of the fortress toward the back grounds. She veered toward Efran upon seeing him, and he dropped his head, muttering to himself. Where was *his* safe place?

Any men on the training grounds who glanced at her found themselves flattened by their sparring partners, but the archers never paused in their rhythmic *aike* shooting. Even the Southerner Earnshaw was getting proficient at it, despite a slow start.

"Ho, Efran," Justinian said, drawing up to him. Efran raised his head to look only at him. Justinian added, "The new interior of the chapel is quite the design twist."

"That was Bozzelli's doing, although he didn't realize at the time," Efran said lazily. "Stealing from faeries is a risky proposition."

"I'm sure, but he—and Arbaiza—want to cut it all down," Justinian said with an admirably blank face.

Efran laughed, "Surely they know it would just spring up again twice as thick. Besides, Hartshough gave him—what?—thirty royals to rent the Meeting Hall."

"The acoustics are not good enough," Arbaiza said.

Efran leaned back on the bench, crossing his arms over his chest. “I don’t see anything that I can do.”

“Then I’ll just perform among the trees,” Arbaiza said archly. “Yes, that would be unique—‘A Singing Walk in the Woods.’ The audience would sit in chairs arranged around the trees.”

Watching Joshua urge Kraken to get up and walk, which the Monster declined to do, Efran said, “I wouldn’t try it. Having been cheated once out of their wood, the faeries are not going to be accommodating. At least ask their permission, and if you don’t get it, don’t try it.”

“So do they rule, or do you?” she asked, lip curled.

“I don’t condone theft,” Efran said in disinterest.

“Would you like to come watch me rehearse?” she asked.

“No,” he said, looking off.

“Come, Justin; you’ll watch,” she ordered, turning in a swirl of red curls. Justinian made a short bow, peeved at being second to Efran, again.

Once they had disappeared around the corner of the fortress, however, Efran stood to lift Joshua. Whistling lightly at Kraken, Efran ordered, “Up.” The monster got to his feet, shaking himself, and Efran beckoned to the nearest man. When Ley ran over, Efran handed Joshua to him. “Hold him until I get up.”

“Captain,” Ley said, saluting with his free arm.

Once on Kraken’s bare back with Joshua squealing on his leg, Efran lightly drew in his heels. “All right, we’re going to see what happens. Down to the chapel, but you don’t come in,” he told his horse.

So Kraken ambled around to the front courtyard. Here, Efran made him wait while they watched Arbaiza’s carriage depart the switchback to stop at the chapel steps, where she and Justinian disembarked to approach the doors. There appeared to be a momentary lapse in the Abbey guards’ opening them, but the diva and her attendant were finally allowed in. Then Efran let Kraken walk down the switchback to the chapel steps.

With Joshua, Efran slipped quietly inside, standing unseen in the woods while Arbaiza ordered Justinian and Hartshough to do this or that. From the seating area, Marguerite looked over to Efran. He smiled at her, but declined to come in farther.

Still, he felt uncomfortable with his own pettiness. Didn’t he have anything more important to do? Or was the Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands justified in sneaking in, hoping to see his old paramour humiliated? But she was a diva in every sense of the word, and Efran didn’t want her running over Marguerite and Hartshough any more.

Suddenly he wondered—the stolen faerie wood had been built into the chapel from the beginning, and Arbaiza had already sung here once without incident. Why did it now rise up? What had happened? All he remembered was Bozzelli calling her a “high priestess” to the arts—in a chapel. Did the faeries find this objectionable? Or did someone else, such as Nakham? The guardian angel of the hill might act on any number of levels. But since Efran didn’t know, he just waited. Joshua yawned on his shoulder, with the faerie roots around them lulling him to drowsiness—maybe because they reminded him of the roots in the nursery.

At this time, Arbaiza decided to start singing at the front of the hall, perhaps walking around the roots later in the song. As she began singing scales, Hartshough stepped to the side to presumably allow Marguerite to see her. But he stepped into Joshua's line of sight, who raised abruptly from Efran's shoulder to call, "HAWSO!"

His call took on a life of its own, being replicated in numerous voices, at varying pitches, resounding through the hall as from a company of lusty-voiced toddlers: "haaaAHHsohhh!" "HAhaHAhaSoohh!" "haaawwwSOHH!" "haaaAWWWWsoh!"

Efran gazed around at the reverberating roots, and one of the Abbey men at the doors began laughing. Since it was songlike, it was also broadcast in various musical iterations: "BWAhahahahaHAAA!" "HAAAhaHAA!" "HahaHEEhaowee!" "heh heh heh heh HAAA!"

"Stop that!" Arbaiza cried. Her unerringly musical voice was likewise strung out in tonal variations of the original wording: "Stah stah stah PAH PAH PAH thaaaaat!" "STAH ah AH ah AHHH! POT tot tot tot THAahhhht!"

The irrepressible Justinian, from his unseen position in the hall, began singing the hit vaudeville song, "Just One More Kiss," which lyrics went:

"Just one more kiss before we part,  
To soothe a loving, aching heart;  
For all the world is still asleep,  
As you and I our secret keep,  
Just one more smile ere I arise,  
Just one more look into your eyes,  
For that to me were paradise,  
Just—One—More—Kiss!" [Archie Bell, 1923]

The resultant cacophony was indescribable using mere words on paper, regardless how nonsensical. But it filled the hall for a solid half hour, as every possible iteration of every word had to be fully rendered into songlike surround sound. Worse, Joshua was uncontrollably laughing.

Efran quickly took him back out the front doors before Kraken could come in, although he did manage to stick his nose in with a raucous bray, which was immediately enfolded into the mayhem. Shoving his head back out, Efran gave Joshua to one door guard to hold while he jumped up on Kraken's back. Efran instructed the soldier, "You never saw me." Taking Joshua on his leg, he prompted Kraken to turn, telling another man, "I was not here."

"Yes, Captain," the man said, saluting. Then Efran had to work his way through a crowd of laborers and passersby who were drawn by the babel, blare and clamor that were nonetheless melded into a purposeful musical composition.

"All right, I'm not responsible for any of that," Efran disavowed on his way up the switchback.

Upon arriving in the courtyard, he found Minka among a number of soldiers looking down to the chapel from which the sounds continued to emanate. "What is going on down there?" she asked in bewilderment.

"The faeries taking revenge," he said, handing off Joshua to a gate guard so that he could swing down off Kraken.

“Is Auntie all right?” she asked, still peering below.

“Oh, certainly, because Arbaiza will be leaving soon,” Efran assured her. Then he looked down to see Minka tugging at one end of the copper cuff as if it bothered her. And he studied her in concern.

Efran’s assertion about Arbaiza was only half right, for although she did move out of Marguerite’s, she then secured a room at Firmin’s. He was so thrilled to have such a notable guest that he arranged for her to stay without charge if she would sing in his private dining area for patrons who paid a premium for their dinner. Also, she would receive a cut of the enhanced dinner charges. To this Arbaiza agreed, so that Marguerite’s home was restored to sanity, albeit forested.

Speaking of unwanted guests, Lord Gladden and Lady Vories, after resigning themselves to their failure to acquire half of Efran’s wealth, had to figure out what to do next. Their debts in Crescent Hollow were insupportable, and all they had right now (besides a few trunks of very nice clothes) was the twenty royals that the Administrator had sent down for their having been inconvenienced.

First, they unwillingly paid the carriage driver and footman the five royals which were owed them and sent them away. Taking that, the two men looked at each other. The driver said, “D’yer notice the Wade’s Carriage for Hire here?”

The footman replied, “Aye.”

The driver said, “Crescent Hollow is gettin’ troublesome.”

“Aye,” said Footman. “Too many thieves and gamblin’ debts.”

“And these shiny blue uniforms are so bright as to burn yer eyes out,” said Driver—identifying them as employees of a prominent carriage-for-hire company in Crescent Hollow.

“Second-hand clothes shop in the corner of the Lands, there,” said Footman.

“And a place what sells paint right off Main,” said Driver—in case they wished to cover the owner’s highly visible silver and blue color scheme on the carriage.

And they eyed each other.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 9

So Driver and Footman drove their empty carriage to Flodie’s Oddities and Articles of Worth to trade in their gaudy blue satin uniforms for others that were more subdued and workmanlike, then drove to Wade’s to attach themselves, their carriage and their horses to his service.

Having made their horses comfortable in their own stalls, Driver and Footman then went to Froggatt’s Indispensable Everyday Needs to buy black and gold paints with which they covered up the blue and silver painted areas on the carriage. Later that evening, they bought the high-priced dinner meal at Firmin’s which

allowed them to listen to the diva sing as they ate salmon cakes and drank mild ale.

Unfortunately for Gladden and Vories, they didn't have occupational equipment such as a carriage and horses on hand. Nor did they have any ready skills with which to earn a living, having been born to wealthy families and lived in abundance in Westford—until the Goulven crisis struck. This terrified them into collecting all the wealth they could carry and fleeing to Crescent Hollow. There, they continued to live in relative luxury on dwindling means, until they finally awoke to the need of replenishing their wealth.

Then, by utter coincidence, they had run into Lord Whelpton. When Vories inquired after Challinor, he told her about their aborted attempt to claim damages against Lord Efran under the Provision for a Wronged Husband. This seemed to Gladden and Vories a sure thing. So they hired the carriage to make the journey, but—alas! Only for naught. So here they were, without sustenance in any form.

As they were walking down Main that afternoon, discussing the situation, Gladden glanced aside at the streetside tables of Firmin's outdoor dining area. In the lull between the midday and dinner hours, it was mostly deserted. He paused to pick up a royal from a table. "Why, Vory, look here! People in the Abbey Lands just leave money on the tables for anyone who needs to buy a meal!"

In reality, of course, that was payment left for the meals. It was a matter of pride to the Landers that they were so honest, payment could be safely left in the open like this for the restaurateurs to collect as they would.

At that time, Lilou came out of the indoor dining area of Firmin's to see Gladden pick up the royal from the table and put it in his pocket. Eyes widening, she dropped the water jar she was carrying and ran back inside.

"Why, Gladdie, there's another right here!" Vories said in pleased surprise. "Two of them!" She put them in the little purse hanging from her belt. Then as Gladden leaned over another table for the royals on it, Lilou appeared from the main restaurant flanked by two large men in aprons. She pointed to Gladden scooping up the royals from the table and bouncing them in his hand in satisfaction.

Vories watched the two aproned men advance on her husband as he pocketed the coins, looking around for more. She demurely turned to walk innocently down the street while the men hauled Gladdie, expostulating, over to the notary's office across the street.

At that time, Efran had just deposited a happy, sleepy toddler in the nursery for a nap. Then he went to the back door to look out on the grounds, and saw Minka in the midst of the children. They were showing her their personal garden areas, which she was touring with interest.

Efran had stepped out when Nee said behind him, "Pardon, Captain." Efran turned, and Nee saluted. "The Steward Estes requests your presence upstairs, Captain."

"Ah. All right," Efran said. Before leaving the doorway, he glanced back at Minka again. He didn't like the way she looked; there was something wrong, somehow. And she was tugging at the copper cuff again. Not a good sign. Mulling over this, he withdrew from the doorway to follow Nee upstairs.

As he entered the workroom, Estes and DeWitt both looked up from their ledgers and worksheets. Koschat, concentrating on the counting board, noted the Captain's entry but did not stop to salute. Efran was looking at Estes to ask, "What is it?" Another man, Stourt, was waiting at Estes' elbow.

"Efran, Ryal says that Firmin has lodged a complaint against Gladden for stealing dinner payments off their tables," Estes said in mild exasperation. As Efran looked at him blankly, Estes went on, "Gladden insists he

thought the money was for indigents, and repaid what he says he took, but Firmin says there is more missing.”

Efran asked, “Where is Vories?”

“Ah, apparently, she was not on the scene,” Estes said.

“Apparently,” DeWitt emphasized without looking up from his work.

Estes went on, “At any rate, Ryal wants to know your preference, if any, for dealing with them. The usual penalty for a resident would be to work it off; for a visitor would be expulsion. But he seems to be penniless after having been prominent in Westford at one time. He was a member of their Benevolence Committee, and did contribute hundreds of royals in care of the poor.”

Efran shook his head slowly. “I suppose . . . ask Firmin if he’s willing to put Gladden to work in some capacity.”

DeWitt agreed, “That seems a long shot, but if he can make use of a songstress, then there’s no harm asking.”

So Estes nodded to Stourt, “Go tell Ryal that.”

“Yes, Steward. Administrator. Captain,” Stourt saluted and briskly left. (The upshot was, in reluctantly interviewing Gladden, Firmin discovered that he was something of an expert in wines. Since Gladden had brought some good clothes with him, Firmin gave him a room in his complex and appointed him sommelier. This task Gladden performed with enthusiasm, to the delight of patrons and profit to Firmin.)

Below, Minka was walking listlessly up the lower corridor. She felt increasingly restless and sad without knowing why. This time it was not grief for a baby, as she had finally accepted that was not to be. No, it had to do with her faerie nature. There was a drawing, a yearning that she didn’t understand.

She paused in the foyer to work on the cuff again. Why was she wanting to get rid of it now? If she took it off, and fell into another faerie hole, Efran might not find her again for a long time. That’s not what she wanted. Was it?

A gate sentry came to the doors to tell the door sentry, “There’s a messenger here from a Lady Leila. She’s staying at Croft’s, and wants the Captain to come see her.”

With a snort, the door sentry said, “I’ll tell him, but good luck to her.” He trotted around Minka toward the stairway while she stood in shock. Leila. The one who lied to save Efran when her husband brought suit against him under the Provision for a Wronged Husband. The one whom Efran had told, “*You’re the only one I loved.*” Minka pulled the cuff off her wrist, dropping it to the floor. Then she went out the front doors.

Upstairs, the door sentry had just given Leila’s message to Efran. His breathing went shallow as he stared at him; DeWitt and Estes looked up in shock. Wiping his mouth, Efran said, “Tell him no.”

“Captain.” The man saluted in satisfaction, then trotted off. The workroom was quiet for a moment, then DeWitt said, “Another woman.”

Estes sat back. “Windry. Arbaiza. Vories. And now Leila. Efran, this is—”

“I know,” Efran groaned, sinking down to brace his head on his hands at the long worktable.

“No, Efran,” Estes said. “It’s not coincidental. There is a pattern here, that all these women are showing up at once.”

Efran raised his head, and DeWitt looked over, squinting. He said, “What better way to get control of the Abbey than to incapacitate its lord? What would incapacitate Efran more than losing Minka?”

Estes said, “It’s the most subtle attack yet.” Koschat was watching intently.

Efran’s gut coiled. “It’s her faerie nature. If she’s being attacked through faerie, that’s the one thing I can’t do anything about.” He wiped his face on his sleeve, gasping, “I have to talk to Marguerite.” He lurched up to run down the stairs.

Koschat turned to DeWitt. “Administrator, I request to assist the Captain.”

“Go,” DeWitt ordered. Koschat darted out.

Efran careened off the stairs into the corridor, sprinting to the foyer. Here, he skidded to a stop, staring down at the crushed copper cuff at his feet. *The hole. The faerie hole.* He swept up the cuff to put it in his pocket.

He leapt over the fortress steps into the courtyard, running out to the gates to look. But he did not see her, and didn’t remember where the hole was. Carts were coming up the old switchback, so he ran out to the new one. Without hesitation, he leapt down from the first level to the next one—a rapid but risky method of descent that he had used only twice before. It was harder on the new switchback, as the retaining walls on the outside edges were higher. But Efran continued running and leaping for all his worth, landing to roll, scramble up, and run across the switchback road to the edge where he leapt again.

Koschat ran out to the courtyard gates, and the guards turned on him. “What is the Captain doing?” “What’s wrong?”

He said, “Watch for Lady Minka.” A half-dozen men looked down both switchbacks.

At the bottom of the switchback, Efran picked himself up to run to the chapel doors. The guards had the doors open so that he blew into the forested hall, grasping a root to keep from colliding with it. “Marguerite!” he called. “MARGUERITE!”

She came toward him, calm but wasting no time. “You will have sight of her on the old switchback for only a few minutes. Hold onto her and don’t let go, Efran.”

“Right,” he gasped, turning out again. He ran out of the chapel to the old switchback, peering up. And he saw Minka leaning down at the easternmost end of the third bend, the carts having passed her. There was no time to go up the long way, so he began scrabbling up the rough, rocky incline between levels.

As there was nothing stable to grasp, he dug the toe of his boots into the loose ground, clinging to sharp rocks and brier shoots to ascend. He watched her intently all the while. She sat on the ground, and her legs disappeared up to her knees. Before she could shove herself into the invisible hole, he gained the third level and fell on her, gripping her around her waist from the back.

When something pulled on her legs, he was pulled with her partially into the hole. But his legs were still on solid ground, so he planted his knees on the road and reared back with her solidly in his arms. She cried out, and something unseen began flailing his head, arms and shoulders. It stung fiercely, but he clung to her, gasping,

“Minka. Minka, don’t leave me. I love you, Minka; I love you.”

“She’s the only one you ever loved,” she said, straining against his arms.

“No, Minka,” he sobbed. “You’re the only one I love, because you’re the only one who loved me.”

In the courtyard above them, the men were watching in horror as the lady disappeared completely, taking half the Captain with her. They could see only his legs and hips as he struggled to keep hold of her. Then one man’s head shot up. “Carriage coming up!” he shouted.

The other men looked at a lady’s carriage ascending at a trot, minutes away from running over the Captain on the curve. “Stop that carriage!” Koschat shouted.

The men began pouring down the switchback, most of them falling on the way. In passing the Captain, a few of them looked to see how they might help him. But pulling on him might destabilize his balance, so they wisely went around to warn off the carriage driver instead.

The first man to reach the carriage horses head-on held up his hands as they turned onto the second bend. They balked as he commanded, “STOP!” But the driver, not seeing the problem, directed them around him. Leila was looking out the window, not seeing anything wrong either, except for the idiots trying to stop the horses. So the driver, jaw jutting, whipped them to a fast trot, and the men fell away.

Kraken thudded fiercely out of the gates, taking the short cut to jump over the first level to the next, and then the next, where his human was straining to drag his other human back from the faerie realm. As the carriage turned onto this level, heading directly toward the battle at the eastern end, the driver finally saw the body sprawled on the road ahead, and began pulling back on the reins.

Too late. Kraken landed before the carriage horses, turning to strike at them with his hooves.

The panicked pair attempted to back up, then veer away, causing the two right-hand wheels to lift. The carriage hung tilted a moment, then crashed heavily on the outer edge of the switchback. The driver and footman were thrown clear to the level below, while the horses were trapped under the tack and center pole. As the carriage settled on its side, wheels spinning, the door was thrust open from the inside, and Leila pulled herself out. Holding her full skirts, she climbed down the carriage to begin walking up the switchback.

Minka was still fighting Efran. “Let me go!”

“No! I will not let go! You’re the only one who ever loved me, Minka. I will not let go,” he gasped.

She remembered then—*I will not let go*. Those were the very words she had said to him on the gallows. As her mind cleared, her eyes cleared to see his wracked face. “Efran,” she whispered, reaching up to his neck. “I will not let go, either.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)



Chapter 10

With that, Efran was able to pull Minka fully out of the hole. She landed on him in the middle of the switchback road with Kraken standing over them and the overturned carriage fifteen feet away, the horses struggling to rise. Efran, tears pouring, held her with one arm while brushing her hair back with a shaky hand. Kraken snuffled them, and she lifted up to pet his nose.

Efran sat up to breathe and wipe his face with his sleeve. Kraken almost knocked him over, snuffling him. A number of men paused to see that they were all right, then went on to the carriage. They unfastened the traces so that they could right the carriage and let the horses stagger up by themselves.

While the Abbey men were reattaching the tack, they watched the driver and footman crawl back up to the road, venting their anger. The driver shouted, "Why did you attack a lady's carriage? You could have killed us—!"

Koschat roared back, "You were told to stop! And you didn't stop!" The footman wiped his bleeding face, glancing at the driver, now silent.

Leila stood between the overturned carriage and the couple still sitting in the middle of the road at the bend. Minka was leaning into Efran as he held her, eyes closed. "I don't know what happened," she whispered.

"We'll talk about it in a little while," he said shakily. He barely glanced at Leila, who was watching them. With gritted teeth, he got up and pulled Minka to her feet to wrap her up tightly, pressing his face into her hair.

Seeing this, Leila glanced aside. Meanwhile, Abbey soldiers with hard faces passed her on their way back up to the courtyard. Then she looked over to the men turning the horses and carriage back downhill. The driver climbed up to his seat while the footman stood at the open carriage door, hanging slightly askew. So Leila returned to the carriage. After she had climbed in, it took several tries for the footman to get the door to stay shut.

The driver clucked to the horses, and the conveyance began uncertainly wobbling down the switchback. She looked out the window one last time, where Efran was walking the girl back up to the white fortress at the top of the hill, men patting his back or shoulders all along the way. Estes and DeWitt, watching from the second-floor balcony, withdrew into the fortress.

Before going to the stairs, Efran stopped Minka at the door of the kitchen. "Do you need anything to eat?" he asked.

She laughed quietly. "No, but I bet you do."

"No, I'm good," he exhaled.

Then he began walking her carefully up the stairs. "Are you hurt?" she asked, noting his halting steps.

"No, I'm—making up for having run down the stairs," he said.

She laughed again, holding him, then segued into crying. "Efran, I don't understand what I just did."

"No, it's all right. Hush. Let's get to the workroom," he said, glancing down at someone else trying to ascend.

When they entered, they found Estes and DeWitt seated and waiting. While Efran sat in his usual chair, pulling her down to his lap, DeWitt said, "That was scary."

Efran laughed, "You should have seen it from my end."

Minka wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Efran keeps telling me he'll explain what happened, but he hasn't."

Estes said, "It was an attack, Minka. Someone drew all these women here in order to drive you two apart."

She slowly sat up. "You mean, to make me want to go away?"

"Yes, we think so," Estes said, as DeWitt nodded.

"Why?" she asked, baffled. "I don't do that much."

"You hold Efran together," DeWitt said. "Were you to leave, he'd fall apart, and the Abbey with him."

She looked wide-eyed at Efran, who had his head back on the chair. He raised his eyebrows at her. Stricken, she began, "How do I—I—stop it from—making me want to leave?"

Estes said, "The influence was strong, but I believe only temporary, Minka. From here on out, we'll all be more aware of what may be playing on our minds."

"I'm going to find out who's behind it," Efran said, looking up to the faerie branches. "And I know how." He lifted her from his lap to stand. "Let's go get Joshua. Marguerite will want to see him."

"Marguerite knows . . . ?" she began.

"Something. She told me what to do with you," he said.

"What? What did she tell you?" she asked quickly as his administrators watched.

"She told me to hold on to you," Efran said. She still looked confused, but he took her hand to lead her out and down the stairs, at a walk.

At that time, the carriage driver had just dropped Leila back at Croft's. He told her, "We'll take the carriage to the wheelwright for repairs, which you'll be charged for." She opened her mouth in protest, then sagged. Yes, the customer was always charged for any damages, but she was practically penniless. She had been strongly counting on Efran's help.

She sat in the outdoor dining area to wait. If she was hoping to be able to sit without ordering anything, that notion was crushed when a server came over to bow and ask, "What will you have, Lady?"

"Just a lager, please," she said.

"Nothing to eat, ma'am?" he asked pointedly.

"Ah, the fried scallops," she murmured.

“Very good, Lady.” When he brought the ale, she poured a little into the tavern-style goblet he had provided. She’d have to allow the next interested man to sit with her, in order to pay for that and the scallops.

As she took a sip, waiting, a shadow fell on her, and she looked up at a young man in very good clothes. He tipped his tall hat to her. “Lord Justinian at your service, Lady. Could I prevail upon you to allow me to order a bite from this establishment to go with your drink?”

“I have scallops coming, but you’re welcome to sit and share them,” she purred, turning her green eyes up at him.

“Thank you.” He sat, placing his hat, walking stick, and gloves in an opposite chair. “You almost look familiar to me, but I rarely encounter women of such beauty.”

She smiled demurely. “I am Lady Leila, once of Eurus. I came to see Efran, but, he apparently had an accident on the road going up to the fortress. With a little girl.”

Receiving their fried scallops, Justinian paid for the order, as well as her lager and a mild ale for himself. Then he requested of her, “Tell me what happened.”

So she related what she had seen. Listening, he silently filled in the gaps from what he knew. She finished, “A wild horse frightened the carriage horses so that it was overturned, almost plunging down the hill. But now I am responsible for repairs, which I cannot pay.”

“We shall not let you suffer, Lady,” he said. “You will take me to the repair shop, then we shall return for dinner.”

“Oh, no, you can’t—” In her emoting, she accidentally brushed her lager, which fell over to empty itself into his lap. “Oh!” She rose in horror as he stood to let the beverage drip off his pants.

Justinian said smoothly, “Don’t trouble yourself, dear; it’s time for me to change into evening wear. Stay, order yourself another lager, and I will return like lightning.” He placed two royals on the table, bowed, and walked off, twirling his stick. She sat again, exhaling in victory.

Meanwhile, Efran and Minka had gone down from the workroom to check the nursery, but Joshua was not there, so they went to the back grounds to look. They finally spotted him on Kraken’s back on the western edge of the grounds. Fresh from crashing the carriage, Kraken was being harnessed to a large cartload of dark earth and forest debris for the expanding gardens. Joshua was even holding on to the tack by himself.

Efran exhaled at the sight. Minka, looking around a little more, said, “There’s Calix, with Noah, Toby and Alcmund. But I don’t see Lilou. I hope that means she’s doing well at Firmin’s.”

“I hope so, too,” Efran nodded. “Joshua’s fine; we’ll take him down another time.”

“All right,” she said, turning. They went through the fortress to the courtyard, where Efran asked for Rose.

“Do you want a horse, Captain?” Routh asked.

He shook his head. “It’s not worth upsetting Kraken. I’ll walk the lady’s horse.” Minka grinned at him.

“Yes, Captain,” Routh said. He whistled, calling, “Rose for the lady!”

When she was brought, Efran allowed Minka to mount by herself, because she wanted to. Conte and Leneghan approached on foot to offer themselves as bodyguards, saluting. Minka observed, “We made them worry, Efran; they sent the big ones to stand over us.”

Leneghan smiled and Conte said gravely, “Yes, Lady Minka.” Efran looked resigned.

As they set off down the new switchback with the men walking beside her saddle, she looked over to the west. “Do I need to be careful at that spot on the old switchback? I lost the copper cuff,” she said.

Efran felt in his pocket, then tossed the flattened piece of copper onto her lap. She gasped, “Oh, no!”

“Don’t worry; I’m going to replace it with something better,” he said.

“In case I fall into another hole?” she asked.

“We’ll ask Marguerite about that,” he said. He wanted all holes filled, faerie or otherwise.

Hartshough answered their ring at the chapel door and led them through Forest Hall to the back patio, where Marguerite was sitting under the grape arbor. Turning to see them, she sighed, “You got her.”

“Which you already knew,” Efran said as an accusation, kissing her head.

He threw himself to a chair while Minka hugged her auntie. She instructed the bodyguards, “Sit here with us.” They bowed to her and obeyed, although it was a familiarity which they were not comfortable with.

Efran added, “I’m sorry we left Joshua, but I want him to forget about your singing wood.”

Sitting, Minka paused on a question, and he promised, “I’ll show you when we leave, if I remember.”

Hartshough came over with a plate of fruit bread and tall glasses of raspberry punch. Minka sighed, “Thank you, Hartshough.”

While they helped themselves, Efran said, “All right, Marguerite, tell us what you know, please, because I wouldn’t have her now if you hadn’t told me what to do.”

Marguerite nodded thoughtfully. “I talked to Kele about the lurker I had been sensing—a foreign presence, not a faerie, who had hidden in the faerie realm. I only became aware of him when he started reaching out to Minka with suggestions of unhappiness or jealousy. He’s gone for now, and Kele has promised to alert us if he appears again. Oh, and she has closed up the faerie holes so that Minka won’t accidentally step into another. If she does visit one, you’ll know where to find her, Efran.”

“Thank you,” he said. “But how is this lurker getting in?”

“It would be easier to know that if we knew who or what he is. But now that we’ve been alerted to him, he won’t slip by us so easily again,” Marguerite said.

“How do I keep him out of my mind?” Minka asked warily, head down.

Marguerite looked at her with something of a devious face. “Question every thought you have, especially one that appeals to your worst instincts.”

“Jealousy?” Minka murmured. Efran looked up, smiling. “Stop that!” she snapped.

“Sorry, it’s just wonderful to hear that you’re the jealous one, for a change,” he said.

“I guess so,” she admitted.

They talked a while longer, but that was all Marguerite knew, and Minka was exhausted after her narrow rescue. So they rose to leave with more hugs and kisses. As they were passing through the forested hall, Minka asked, “Now, what about this ‘singing wood’?”

Efran stopped in his stride. “Ah. Sing something.”

“I’m not a good singer,” she balked. Various Abbey men were standing around, listening.

“It doesn’t matter. Just sing,” Efran insisted.

Rolling her eyes, she glanced off self-consciously. “I don’t know anything current, just the old songs.” He extended an insistent hand for her to sing. So she shrugged and sang,

“It may be at morn, when the day is awaking,  
When sunlight through darkness and shadow is breaking,  
That Jesus will come in the fullness of glory,  
To receive from the world His own.”

She stopped and looked at them—Efran, Hartshough, Marguerite, Conte and Leneghan. But her song was sweet and clear, with faint echoes of accompaniment as from a flute or lyre. “More,” Efran whispered.

Shrugging again, she sang:

“It may be at midday, it may be at twilight,  
It may be, perchance that the blackness of midnight  
Will burst into light in the blaze of His glory  
When Jesus receives His own.” [“Christ Returneth,” H.L. Turner, 1906]

This time her song was enveloped by a soft chorus not just of instruments, but sweet faerie voices that blended with hers. Leneghan whispered, “I could listen to that all day long, Lady Minka.”

“Well, if it makes me sound good, I can’t imagine how splendid Arbaiza sounded,” Minka said.

“Like a shrieking banshee, Minka,” Justinian said, emerging from the wood to shake out the sleeves of his flawless dove-gray evening suit. “Nonetheless, Firmin’s has a brilliant new sommelier and I know of a beautiful, unattached woman who is in need of an escort tonight.” He paused to look piercingly at Efran, who blinked at him.

“At any rate, don’t wait up, dear heart,” Justinian said, kissing Marguerite. “And I’ll report anything the Gargoyle may need to hear. Oh! Congratulations on your adroit save, Efran. All of us would be lost without Minka.” Leaning toward her as if to kiss her cheek, he bowed instead, before Efran could intervene. Then

Justinian placed his tall hat correctly on his head and departed, twirling his walking stick with the silver knob.

His audience was silent a moment, then Efran looked questioningly to Marguerite. “Why is the wood not—screaming?”

She smiled, “The faeries are discerning, Efran.”

“Of course,” he acknowledged. Then he draped his arm over Minka’s shoulders to tell her, “We should put you in a performance hall.”

“To get tomatoes pitched at me? That’s crazy!” she said, scowling.

“KRAA AAY AAY YYYYY zeezeezeeeee EEEEE!” She startled at the surrounding intonations and ran out. Efran followed, laughing.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 11

Early the following morning—June 24th—Efran let Minka sleep in while he went upstairs to the workroom. Estes was not there yet, but DeWitt was, so Efran said, “Find the key to the Treasury and come with me, please.”

DeWitt dubiously stood over his ledgers. “May I ask why, Efran?”

“Yes. I want Minka to wear a better token from me than a cheap copper bracelet,” Efran said impatiently, as if the cheap copper bracelet had been DeWitt’s idea.

“That’s a good reason,” DeWitt admitted. “But why do you need me?”

“To help me pick something out,” Efran said a little brusquely.

DeWitt paused, wondering, “So, you’re not used to giving women gifts?” Efran shrugged self-consciously, glossing over the fact that he had been a soldier, thus, poor. DeWitt narrowed his eyes at him. “*Did* you give any of your lady friends gifts?”

“Why should I? They had me,” Efran scowled. As DeWitt tottered on the brink of a rejoinder, Efran said, “Will you please just get the key?”

So DeWitt went over to study the shelving behind Estes’ chair. Efran came to stand at his side. “You don’t know where it is?”

“Haven’t the foggiest idea,” DeWitt said placidly.

“So Estes is the only one who knows,” Efran said.

“Yes. But I’m fairly sure it’s in here somewhere,” DeWitt said.

Efran dropped into his chair to wait, leaning back to study the faerie tree in the middle of the table. Since there had been no important meetings recently, the tree had spread itself comfortably to send branches up through every corner of the ceiling. Eyes ranging over it, Efran said, "I'm wondering why Nakham didn't help us with the Sandgolem."

DeWitt resumed sitting as well. "I get the impression that the guardian of the hill acts when we're confronted with something we can't handle on our own."

"Symphorien crumbling the fortress," Efran said.

"Yes. And the magician's tricks—ah, Showalter, making himself a hundred feet tall. We had nothing to answer that, so Nakham went out to meet him without our asking," DeWitt said, opening his ledger.

"Yes," Efran murmured.

"Then our discovering the authority that both you and Minka have as Lord and Lady Sovereigns," DeWitt said, dipping his quill.

"That's right," Efran said, sitting up.

"All that's aside from the resources we do know about, like the Librarian and the Atticitian. The Librarian appears to wait to be consulted, but, the Atticitian—I'm still not clear about what he does," DeWitt mused.

"Much what the Librarian does, providing knowledge so that we can fight effectively, it seems," Efran said, remembering the trolls. He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, to study his hands.

Estes entered the workroom at that time. "Efran! How is Minka?" He laid a satchel of papers on the worktable at his usual place.

"Sleeping," Efran said, leaning back to slap his knees. "I need you to come open the Treasury for me, please."

"Very well." Estes picked up the signet from a shelf behind him and dropped it in his pocket.

Efran and DeWitt watched in shock. Then Efran asked, "Do you think you could hide the signet a little better?"

Estes looked blank. "Why? Did either of you find it?"

"No, but we know generally where you keep it," Efran argued. He stood, and then paused over his own argument.

"Master of logic, there," DeWitt said, turning a page in his ledger. Then he looked up. "I wonder if we have a Fortress Logician?"

"That's Minka," Estes said, going to the door. As Efran stood there, studying the shelves, Estes glanced back at him. "Are you coming, or should I just pull out something?"

Efran snapped out of his contemplation to join him. They went down to get a lantern from the kitchen, which they took to the library. As they entered, the Librarian bowed. "Lord Efran, Steward Estes. How may I help you?"

Glancing at the wall lanterns lightening the morning dimness, Efran said, "It must be too early for Law class."

"Yes, Lord Efran, that will commence in another hour," the Librarian said.

Efran hesitantly began, "Marguerite told us about a lurker that was working underground, through the faerie realm, to discourage Minka and draw other women here—" He broke off, thinking. Did the lurker act only on women? Or were they just more susceptible to it?

"I have no books that address it, Lord Efran, but that might be something which the Atticitian has noted," the Librarian said.

"Ah. I'll check with him. Thank you," Efran said. Meanwhile, Estes had opened the door to the hidden library, and now stood at the second door to the winding staircase. Efran closed the door to the main library and joined Estes on the winding stair.

At the top, which terminated at the heavy steel door of the Treasury, Efran took the lantern to hold it while Estes used the key. "What are you looking for?" Estes asked, swinging the door open.

Efran lifted the lantern to glance around the small room packed with gold, silver, and precious jewels. "I want to give Minka something better than that cheap copper bracelet I got in Crescent Hollow."

"Noble desire, but would she wear it?" Estes asked, poking around here and there.

"Probably not, but that's no excuse. I want her to have something nice from me," Efran said. "I want it engraved, too, and not with a stock phrase, but with her name, and my name. Something she can hold and look at that's from me to her."

"Oh, look at these," Estes said, opening a small box. "Wasn't she talking about dangly earrings? Flowers of diamonds with gold chains of leaves." He presented the box to Efran.

"Oh, those are very nice," Efran breathed. "Yes, she'd like them, but I still want something—something with our names on it. Something I can engrave." He put the box of earrings in his pocket, looking hesitantly at the piles of gold around them.

"Well, like—" Estes began, picking up a small gold cuff edged with diamonds. He stared at it silently while Efran lifted large pieces here and there in dissatisfaction.

He was about to complain about the organization of the treasures when Estes asked, "Didn't you just order a gold bracelet engraved with your and Minka's names?"

"Order?" Efran laughed, turning with the lantern.

"Yes," Estes said, handing him the cuff.

Efran took the delicately thatched gold bangle to look at it. On it was engraved, "Efran ♡ Minka." Efran's jaw worked while he studied it, then he looked up at Estes in mild fear. Estes raised his eyebrows. Efran wet his lips and said, "That's perfect. Thank you."

He and Estes quietly left the Treasury and tiptoed down the staircase.



Emerging from the library, Estes returned to the second-floor workroom while Efran went to his and Minka's quarters. Finding the door ajar, he opened it fully in alarm, then saw the great black lump taking up all the floor space in the bedroom. Minka was still in bed, only now stirring. "How's she supposed to get dressed around you?" Efran muttered, prodding Kraken with the toe of his boot (with the eelfish bite holes).

Kraken lumbered up. *Then go get the boy out.*

"All right, come on," Efran exhaled. He went out of his quarters and down the lower corridor with Kraken following. Efran leaned into the nursery to find that Joshua had been fed and changed, so Efran carried him out on his arm. Joshua patted his shoulder and reached back for Kraken, expressing his preference. Nakam (the hairless dog) followed them outside.

Coming off the back steps, Efran looked around. Before he could even whistle, Tourjee came up. "Ah, there you go, Lord Efran; we need yer beast to do some more dirt hauling. Whaddyer think, Joshua?"

"Anh," Joshua said, reaching out, so Tourjee took him to put him on Kraken's back. Efran nodded, pausing to see that he was properly settled, then watched Tourjee lead them off to the other end of the grounds. Then Efran returned to his quarters.

Back in the bedroom, he found Minka awake but not up. She raised despondent eyes to him. "I'm so foolish, Efran, to have let myself get lured down to the faerie hole. Had you not found me, and held onto me—" She closed her eyes in self-condemnation.

Efran lay across the bed to pull out the small box and hand it to her. Blinking, she sat up against the headboard and hesitantly took the box to open it. As she lifted one glittering, dangly earring, she gasped, "Did you go to Whately's?"

"No, they're from the Treasury, and I want you to wear them," he said.

She stared at him a moment, then flung aside the bedcovers. "I have to get dressed, first."

So he sat at the table out of her way while she pulled on one of her regular riding/work dresses, then stood before the mirror. "Oh, my hair," she fretted, wetting it down. "If you get to shave your head to spikes, I don't see why I can't, as well."

He smiled vaguely, knowing that this was not a serious threat. She carefully removed the gold hoops and cleaned her ears before nervously inserting the latchback hooks of the new earrings. She shook her head lightly, watching them dance and glitter, then turned to him hesitantly. "Oh, don't I look like a child playing grownup?"

"No, they look perfect on you," he said, withdrawing the cuff from his pocket. "This is what you have to wear with them."

She took it; seeing the inscription, she gasped, "You did go to Whately's!"

He shook his head firmly. "It's from the Treasury."

"But—but it's—" she stammered as she put it on her wrist. "It fits," she said suspiciously.

"It's from the Treasury," he repeated. "I watched Estes just pick it up after I told him I wanted a better bracelet for you, engraved with our names."

She lowered her head with that look of cautious wonder. “Thank you.”

She slid her arms around him and he held her, stroking her curls. “I need to go talk to the Atticitian, then I’ll come find you on the back grounds,” he said. She nodded, pulling away, and they left their quarters. He watched her walk down the corridor, tentatively feeling her earlobes.

Efran looked aside to see Sir Nomus standing in front of the door to the cold storage room. Exhaling, Efran walked over and Nomus opened the door, revealing the Firmament with its raging waters above and its celestial view below, extending out in all directions forever.

Efran entered the doorway, walking in space to experience the light-headedness this view always induced in him until he acclimated to the unfathomable vastness. He looked aside at the portals on his left and right, one showing Arbaiza singing in the chapel, and the other with Minka touching Neale, followed by his standing from the chair.

When Efran came upon a portal showing his struggle to get Minka out of the faerie hole on the switchback, he stopped to watch intently. Focusing on Minka’s legs, he saw indistinct flashes of red. So he turned to the Atticitian beside him to ask, “Sir Nomus, what is the lurker? This—this influence that affected Minka.”

Nomus replied, “It is not an entity; it is a condition.”

“A condition? What’s causing it?” Efran asked.

“Poison, Lord Efran,” Nomus said.

“Poison!” Efran looked stupefied. “From what? Where?”

“That I do not know yet. It requires further study,” Nomus said, his nose twitching as though smelling something rotten.

“Sir Nomus, whenever you learn something, anything, will you summon me?” Efran asked.

Nomus drew up attentively. “Yes, Lord Efran.”

“Thank you,” Efran breathed. He turned to walk out the way he had come, and found himself back in the lower corridor.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 12

Efran left Kraken to help Tourjee, but decided to take Minka and Joshua down to the chapel to visit Marguerite. He just set Joshua in front of Minka on Rose and walked alongside them. Because he was walking, the bodyguards Graeme and Dango walked as well. From the top of the switchback, the oyster house had what looked like a luxurious head of curly green hair. Minka said, “All it needs now are eyes and a nose. Maybe ears that stick up on top.”

“Shh!” Efran laughed. He was suddenly wary of voicing thoughtless demands or even suggestions.

Hartshough let them in, and might have been disappointed that Joshua didn’t bellow his name. But he was almost asleep on Efran’s shoulder, which meant they made it through the Hall of Trees without incident, as well. Marguerite was waiting for them on the back patio.

Minka hugged her tightly, then marveled at the growth of all the new plantings back here. Rose was content in the stables, having her own stash of hay while being able to see them from the paddock. Efran let Minka show Auntie her new earrings and bracelet from the Treasury. These she had been reluctant to wear, but Efran had convinced her that she should, and weren’t they lovely?

Joshua woke up for sweet melon balls, with which he stuffed his mouth until he almost choked. And then he wanted to see the fountain in the middle of the yard, so Dango carried him out there with Minka to have a look. She was unwilling to let Joshua sit in it until Marguerite waved permission from the patio. Dango put him in the copper basin, where he screeched with laughter under the waterfall.

Efran took that opportunity to tell Marguerite about his visit with the Atticitian regarding the lurker. “He called it a ‘condition,’” Efran told her, “caused by poison. But he didn’t know where it came from.”

Marguerite considered this, her eyes growing sharp. “A condition . . . a *poison*. That’s an interesting perspective,” she murmured.

“What does it tell you?” Efran asked, lost.

“That there will be more than one way to attack it,” she said thoughtfully.

He leaned forward. “Now you’re speaking to me. How?”

“Let me think, and, feel around,” she murmured.

“Is it still here?” he asked.

“It’s safer to assume that it is, yes,” she said.

At that time Leila, wearing a *négligée*, came out of the chapel to lean over Marguerite and kiss her cheek. Efran’s jaw almost seized shut, but he looked mildly toward Minka and Joshua in the yard. Searching for something to put in his mouth, the toddler had abandoned the fountain to crawl in the lush grass.

“Good morning, Auntie,” Leila said. Efran’s eyes hardened at her appropriating Minka’s pet name for her great-grandmother, but he made himself deaf to it.

“Good afternoon, Leila,” Marguerite said.

When Leila dropped into the chair beside Efran, he looked at her to say, “That’s Minka’s seat.”

“I’ll get up when she comes,” Leila said. Extending her hand toward him, she asked, “Do you like it?” Without reacting, he glanced down at the emerald ring she was wearing. “I’m Lady Leila here in the Lands, by the way. Justinian and I are married.”

Efran said nothing as he remembered almost nine years ago when he came close to killing himself because she would not leave her husband for him. He didn't die because he had a vivid dream about a girl with curly hair who told him she was in love with him.

Efran stood to kiss Marguerite's head. "We'll come back by when you're free. And—let me know what you think."

"I will, Efran," she said, patting his hand. Graeme bowed to her and accompanied Efran out to the yard, where he picked up Joshua and said something to Minka, a hand at her back. She swiftly glanced toward the patio and nodded. Then they, with the bodyguards, went back to the paddock to retrieve Rose and take her out the back way.

This put them on Main Street. On Rose with Joshua (still a little damp from fountain play), Minka looked down the street at the eateries. She said, "You haven't eaten, have you, Efran? Let's stop somewhere. Oh, Averde's looks very crowded. Do we dare stop at Firmin's? Lilou started here the day before yesterday."

Efran had no opinion, so they began hesitantly heading that way. Lilou, emerging from the restaurant to the outdoor dining area, glanced up to see them. She put down her basket to run to them, demanding, "Sit here! I'll have a boy take your horse around! What do you want? I'll bring it to you!"

She was so insistent that the party sat, and, as indicated, she had a stablehand come get Rose and had their table set with waters, ales, and flatware. She brought the requested meat pies and custards promptly, talking excitedly the whole time. "I've been promoted to a server! Can you believe it? You will not believe how much money I'm making. And I can wash up and change in Ionadi's room whenever I need to. Isn't she an angel?"

The men were smiling at her, and Joshua was watching in fascination, trying to understand all the excited girl-talk. Minka said, "I'm so glad, Lilou! I knew you could do it."

She brought everything quickly and in good order, although she had other tables to wait on. Efran's party watched her for a little while, then Minka murmured, "So Leila and Justinian are married." Her brows drew down, and she asked, "Didn't she just come yesterday?"

Efran shrugged. "That's when she came up the hill, but she may have gotten to the Lands days before."

Then they all went very still as (the erstwhile Lady) Vories traipsed down the sidewalk before them in a dress that looked suspiciously like one of Elvey's new designs. Vories paused before Minka to say, "You'll note the embroidery on the hems, and the new, no-fade color. Also, openings are along the front, for quick and easy removal." She flicked her eyes in Efran's direction without actually looking at him, but his head was down in his plate.

From there, Vories continued to sashay conspicuously up the sidewalk. Minka suddenly looked around. "I haven't seen Trina out advertising her dresses lately."

Graeme cleared his throat. "Pardon, Lady Minka, but what I've heard is that she's run alarmingly low on her funds, and has to start conserving."

Minka peered at him. "You listen to gossip. What is your name?"

Efran bit back a smile as the man winced, confessing, "Graeme, Lady Minka."

She looked away pensively. "I have to take you with me more often, then."

Dango shot a look at Graeme, who smiled, "At your service, Lady."

As they got up to leave, Efran found Lilou to put three royals in her hand and close her fingers over them—enough to cover their food and a very generous tip. She threw her arms around his waist, whispering, "I'm so happy."

"I'm glad, Lilou." He patted her back, then turned as Dango put Joshua in Minka's lap on Rose. And they began walking up Main toward the switchback.

They were all quiet until Minka said, "Can I ask you something?" Efran looked up in surprise to see her blue eyes on him, and he supposed she asked because they weren't alone. He nodded, and she went on, "What did you think when you found out Leila had married Justinian?"

He raised his face. "I thanked God I didn't kill myself, so that I could wait for you to come along."

She reached for him, and he placed his hand on the back of her saddle. Then she exhaled, "I don't want her living at Marguerite's."

"It won't be for long," Efran predicted. "Arbaiza didn't last long, either."

Minka looked over to Graeme to ask, "Why do you think Arbaiza didn't stay?"

"She found out she couldn't sing there, Lady. She's singing at Firmin's, now," he said easily. Efran nodded.

Minka said, "I see. Thank you for the warning." A little peeved by the show-off, Dango glanced at Graeme, who shrugged, smiling.

At dinner that evening in the fortress dining hall, Efran settled on the back bench with venison in front of him, Minka at his side, and Joshua on his knee. Efran scanned the hall for strangers or anything that did not look quite right. What he saw was Toby coming toward him with a serious face. Efran straightened, watching. "What is it, Toby?"

"Efran, Calix wants to stay here tonight," Toby said. Minka looked over at Lilou's younger brother, who was trying to hide behind another boy.

"Is he getting along? Minding the rules?" Efran said.

"Yes, but he's doesn't want to go home," Toby said.

Efran said, "All right; take him to the children's matron Dorey for a bed assignment and a change of clothes. Let me know if there are any problems."

"Yes, Efran," Toby said.

Toby glanced at Minka with a tentative smile, and she said, "You're such a good friend, Toby." He raised his brows in acknowledgment of that, then returned to his seat to give Calix the good news.

Efran looked down at his plate, but he wasn't eating—just poking the venison with his fork a little vindictively.

Minka bent her head to his downcast face. “Efran? What’s wrong with Calix staying?” she whispered.

He glanced around, then whispered, “Nothing. I’m just now seeing how Windry used her children to play me. She saw the attention I gave them, so she endlessly complained about how much they needed a kind father. But they’re not really that important to her; she was only looking to get a new husband. And I came *this close* to giving in.”

“Oh,” Minka exhaled.

He gave Joshua a bite of squash which he spat back out on the plate. Efran laid down his fork to continue, “I thought she really loved me because she greeted me on the street. But that also was just a play to make me commit to her. Had we married, she wouldn’t have been any more faithful to me than she was to Surley—which is probably what made him so angry.” Listening, Minka nodded.

Efran acknowledged someone who spoke to him, then bent to her ear again. “I’m sorry for the distress that all these women showing up has caused you, but—it’s been good to see how they were lying to me as much as to their husbands. And how—” he paused, searching for the words.

“Like Leila,” he said, and she quickly looked up. He breathed in subdued anger, “I put her on a pedestal as my own personal goddess. But she also was just angling for what she could get out of me, and that was my worship. I worshiped her, and she liked that. But I was beneath her, not worthy of a commitment. That’s what made me want to kill myself—that my goddess was false to me. Oh, merciful God, to get me out of that alive.”

Minka was very still at his side. “But I used you, too, Efran,” she whispered, head down. “I made you marry me.”

Chortling, he grabbed her with his free arm so that her lager wobbled dangerously until she caught it. He pressed his head against hers to utter, “*I didn’t believe* that you were offering me what I had been looking for all that while. You *made me* take what I had been wanting.”

“Oh,” she said.

Ella, on Efran’s left, leaned forward in concern. “Is Minka all right?”

Efran turned with a haphazard comment on his lips, but Minka leaned behind him to tell her, “He’s just explaining why it’s good that all his old lovers are showing up.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 13

Quennel, on Ella’s left, choked on his mouthful, but Ella held Efran’s shoulder to lean behind his back and gasp, “What are you wearing? Did you get those at Whately’s? They’re *gorgeous*.”

“Oh! My earrings?” Minka said, touching the diamond flowers with trailing gold leaves. “They’re from the Treasury. And this!” With her right arm around Efran’s waist, she was able to show Ella the engraved gold cuff on her left wrist. Ella drew in a long breath.

Efran looked around Ella to Quennel, who was recovering his wind, eyes watering. Efran told him, “Tomorrow you’re to get Estes to open the Treasury so that Ella can pick out what she likes.”

Quennel nodded, which was the best acknowledgment he could make at the moment. Ella said, “Oh! I couldn’t—!”

“Oh, but you will,” Efran said. “You’re my daughter, entitled to it as much as my wife.”

Ella protested, “But—I couldn’t wear anything like that in the pens—”

“I can’t wear mine cleaning the coops. So?” Minka said.

Ella was speechless as Minka raised a devious face to Efran, asking, “Can I help her pick something?”

Appraising her, Efran said, “Yes.”

Minka grinned around him at Ella. “After Law class. You’ll just have to be late to work.”

“I’ll tell Jasque,” Ella said. Quennel resumed eating.

The following morning, June 25th, Minka sat patiently through Law class as Soames went on and on about sanitation in a heavily populated area, as the Lands were on the brink of becoming. It was a crucially important topic, to be sure, but Minka was obsessing over what kind of ornaments Ella needed. Gold, no silver, absolutely. That dark Polonti hair and brown skin cried out to be draped in gold.

When they were finally free to raid the Treasury, Estes accompanied them so that Minka could pick out five items—two sets of earrings, a bracelet, and two necklaces—while Ella stood in the doorway, overwhelmed. When they were done, Minka departed in victory, but Ella made Estes take everything but the earrings back to the workroom. It was all just too much, she told him. However, later that day, she came back asking for one of the necklaces. He gave it to her, making sure she knew that the other pieces were locked in the cabinet, waiting for her.

At that time, Efran saddled Kraken preparatory to riding down to the Lands. When Kraken balked at the girth, Efran told him, “I don’t know where all I’m riding, so you need a saddle. If it’s too uncomfortable, I’ll take another horse.”

*I’ll bite you*, Kraken promised.

“I’ll make you into a rug,” Efran countered. Kraken accepted the saddle and bridle.

As Efran was loping him down the old switchback, he drew up the reins to watch the children gather on the western road at the foot of Jonguitud’s hill. Having the day off from classes, they had come out with their bodyguards to talk to the hydra. Today, for a change, he was in the process of secreting his second skin that he had used as a disguise, minimally effective.

Seeing it somehow different, Efran rode west past the faerie trees at the termination of the switchback (whose limbs Kraken snapped at, because they liked to tap him). Efran rode Kraken up behind the children and their guardians to watch.

Instead of the three kings apparel, Jonguitud had produced red Abbey uniforms and caps to cover his three black heads and long necks. They were no more convincing as a disguise than the three kings, but the hydra had attempted a realistic portrayal by making the face and hands of his center head a Polonti brown, while the other two were beige Southerners.

The children fell over themselves laughing as the three soldiers attempted to salute Efran. One did hit his hat with his hand, which stuck on the still-tacky skin. The other two failed to swing their hands high enough to reach their hats, although one did rotate its “arm” over its “shoulder” to make a complete circuit, resulting in a twisted limb. “Reporting as dutied, Captain,” the heads said.

When the real bodyguards realized that the Captain was sitting on his horse behind them, they swiftly saluted as well. Efran waved them down to watch. But he asked the hydra men, “What have you found to report?”

The right-hand man clacked his jaws to reply, “Eelfish is back.”

“Are they a problem for you?” Efran asked.

“They are yuck,” the jaws clacked out. The children fell down, laughing.

“But do they bite you?” Efran asked.

“Good luck with that,” another set of jaws snarked. (The hydra was quick at picking up talk from the children and the soldiers.)

“Will they make you leave?” Efran asked seriously. That would be a problem, as the hydra ate the recurring snobbles.

“Ha ha,” Jonguitud replied. And the children had to lean on each other to laugh again.

“As you were,” Efran waved, turning Kraken. Before riding off, however, he paused to watch Calix talk to another boy, Chorro. Calix was wearing Abbey orphan clothes that were just a little big for him. But they were clean.

Efran rode on down the main east-west road toward Marguerite’s. Passing the intersection with Main Street, he slowed at a new road sign. Someone had decided that the east-west road needed a name, which was henceforth “Chapel Road.” As the greenery-adorned oyster house was certainly the most unique building on the Lands to date, the road name was appropriate. Rimbault’s new inn under construction on this same road would have to stand out to compete with it. Efran was afraid that Rimbault would see that it did.

Efran drew up to the chapel door for an Abbey man to take the reins, saluting. Dismounting, Efran clapped him on the shoulder, then two more Abbey men opened the double doors for him.

Entering, he stopped to see Justinian and Leila sitting at the large dining table, being waited on by Hartshough. Efran barely repressed a sneer; Cudmore saluted, whispering, “They’re already arguing, Captain.”

Raising his face in acknowledgment, Efran asked, “Where is Marguerite?”

“On the back patio, sir,” Cudmore said.



Nodding, Efran started in that direction, noting that the roots had somehow effaced themselves to leave the hall mostly unobstructed. But if Bozzelli or Arbaiza attempted to appropriate it again, he was sure the roots would expand again.

As he passed the table, Leila said, "Good morning, Efran."

He glanced aside to say, "Hello, Justinian." The one greeted sat back with a veiled smile.

Efran let himself out onto the back patio, leaning over to kiss Marguerite's head before pulling up a chair beside her. "How are you, Marguerite?" he asked.

"Doing well, Efran. And you?" she asked with a placid smile.

"Having fun," he admitted. Hartshough came up to bow, but Efran shook his head. "Nothing for me, thank you."

"Very good, Lord Efran, but I was asked to give you this." Hartshough presented a bit of parchment on a salver.

Frowning, Efran picked up the scrap to unfold it and read, "'Come upstairs.' Well, it's not Justinian's handwriting. Dare I ask who this is from?"

"The lady, Lord Efran," Hartshough said.

Efran looked off to begin tearing the scrap in small pieces. "I'm sorry; I must have misplaced it," he said.

"Very good, Lord Efran. Would you care for an ale instead?" Hartshough inquired.

"That I'll take; thank you," Efran said. He wadded up the torn pieces individually to toss them into the grass. Over the next few minutes, he continued to tear off tiny bits which he rolled into balls to throw into the yard. "What do you know?" he asked Marguerite.

She inhaled, thinking, and said, "I'm afraid we may be dealing with a shape-shifter, Efran, which would explain why Sir Nomus and I saw it differently."

He stopped wadding balls to look at her in alarm. "Oh, that's bad."

"Not as bad as it could be, because this one seems to be unable to assume human form without tells," she said.

"Tails?" Efran asked.

"Tells. Signs that what you are seeing is not what it appears to be," she said.

"What do the tells look like?" he asked.

She frowned. "Visual clues, ah, aberrations, such as six fingers on a hand, or eyes that don't work together. They will be subtler than that, however."

Efran sat back, crossing his arms over his chest. "Oh, this is very bad. Can they be killed?"

Marguerite said slowly, "From what I understand, yes, they are vulnerable when in assumed shapes. But then you have to be certain that you're not killing the real person."

Efran rose, groaning, “I’ve got to run this by Estes and DeWitt. Let me know what else you find out, please.” She nodded, and he went back into the chapel toward the front doors again. Hartshough approached with his ale, but Efran just patted him and went on.

In the hall, he stopped to look up to the ceiling directly above, swathed in green. His need was too urgent to wait until he got to the keep in the fortress. So he unburdened himself where he stood. *Lord God, please, please give me discernment with this enemy. Please enable me to perceive the reality behind the lies. I beg, for the sake of the Fortress, the children, the lives you’ve given me to protect—*

“Efran.” He broke off, looking down at the woman who spoke to him. While she began to talk, he ruminated: Yes, she had the same red-gold hair and green eyes he had once worshiped, but, they were not the same. Without the charcoal to accentuate her eyes, they looked unremarkable, even—middle-aged, with new bags underneath. And the famous red-gold hair, which had enslaved him before he had even kissed her, was now interspersed with one or two gray hairs that her beautician had missed plucking.

“But Imelda is probably not as thorough as your beautician in Westford—certainly not as experienced,” he mused. She broke off whatever she was saying, and he continued, “What was her name? . . . Elhemy? I think so.”

“Elhemina,” she corrected him. “Efran, are you listening to me?”

“No,” he confessed, with brows lifted apologetically. He looked up, then, at Justinian coming down the stairs in an impeccable afternoon suit. Hair moderately slicked back, hat and stick in hand, he was glancing between the two who were watching him descend. As he gained the first floor, Efran asked him, “What do you know about shape-shifters?”

Justinian drew up to him. “Very rare, very dangerous. Thank God I’ve never encountered one, that I know of.”

“Certain friends think one may be lurking about, but there will be tells that it hasn’t gotten the shape exactly right. Stay alert,” Efran said, patting his shoulder. Then he walked out without another glance at Leila. Visibly frustrated, she watched him go.

Justinian looked at her and said softly, brutally, “He’s not interested in you anymore.”

She turned to him with a slow, equally brutal smile. “No? I know just how to get his attention. It has to do with an obscure little law called the Provision for a Wronged Husband.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 14

Justinian watched Leila go upstairs. He lounged downstairs with a tall, cool glass of Hartshough’s raspberry tea until he spotted her coming back down, dressed to go out. He slipped behind the staircase to remain unseen while she went out the front doors. After gulping the remainder of his tea and setting the glass on the dining table, Justinian quietly followed her until ascertaining that she was headed for the notary’s shop next door.

Once she had entered, he went unobtrusively to the front of the shop outside, glancing through the window to see her approach the counter. When the man ahead of her finished his business and exited, Justinian entered on the same swing of the door. Several observant soldiers then sidled up to listen from the outside.

Justinian stood quietly against the wall directly behind Leila while she made a complaint to Ryal. Giardi, standing next to him, looked inquiringly to Justinian, but he raised a forefinger to his lips and she looked attentively at the complainant instead.

She was saying, "I am Lady Leila, who testified in Efran's trial under the Provision for a Wronged Husband almost a year ago. My conscience will not let me rest until I confess that I lied in that trial. Efran was in fact guilty."

Ryal, not seeing Justinian, said heavily, "I'm very sorry to hear that, Lady Leila. You are confessing to perjury, which carries a very heavy penalty." That she had lied was no surprise to him, as he knew it at the time.

"Then I will just have to bear it to cleanse my conscience," she said. She was not overly troubled because she had virtually no resources of her own left—after having fled her husband Rounsefell, she had lived with various men in the past year. Her confession, however, would impact Justinian greatly. As her new husband, he would be fully liable for whatever penalty was assigned her.

She went on, "Despite the penalty, I demand a retrial of Efran, so that I may make the truth known." At this time, Soames entered the house from the back door, coming as far as the back room. Hearing Ryal mention perjury, and Leila's demand for a retrial, Soames stopped where he was to listen. He was training under Ryal to eventually take over as Abbey Lands notary.

There was a space of about ten seconds during which Ryal was silent. Her demand must be met under the Law, but it was an abhorrent course to him. Regardless of any monetary damages that might be awarded her, the conviction would nullify Efran's charter, and make him ineligible to be Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.

Clearing his throat, Ryal asked, "Are you still with your husband Lord Rounsefell, Lady Leila?"

"No, he disappeared after that trial, to be declared dead *in absentia*. I have since remarried," she said.

In great discomfort, Ryal said, "Then, frankly, I don't know what damages can be awarded you after the fact. Because of your perjury, whatever you were awarded must then be returned to the Abbey Fortress."

"But Efran would no longer be Lord of the Fortress, would he?" she asked.

"No, he would not," Ryal said heavily. "If you testified thus in a retrial, he would be convicted and stripped of his title and charter."

Any other human would have pitied the old man's brokenness as he said this. But Leila smiled. "Then I wish to refile the charge under the Provision for a Wronged Husband on behalf of my dead husband, Lord Rounsefell."

Ryal was trembling as he withdrew a blank parchment from under the counter to begin taking notes. His wife Giardi watched quietly. He had to clear his throat several times to ask, "Lady Leila, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in *this* interview?"

"Yes," she said luxuriously.

“Unfortunately,” said a voice behind her, causing her to start, “the lady is lying.” Justinian looked at her in husbandly grief.

Ryal asked sharply, “Do you know anything of this, Lord Justinian?”

“Sadly, yes,” Justinian said, coming up to the counter to place his hat and walking stick thereupon. His eyes looked heavenward as though seeking absolution. Leila stared at him suspiciously.

In a stronger voice, Ryal asked, “Lord Justinian, do you swear on your soul to tell the truth in this interview?”

“Yes,” he said convincingly.

“Then explain what you know of this, please,” Ryal said, dipping his quill.

Justinian looked off as though gathering strength to air the truth. “You know that the Lady and I were married but yesterday, and only today I discovered the hatred she has for the Lord of the Abbey Fortress because he refused her advances—”

“You’re insane!” Leila shouted.

Ryal admonished, “You will have the opportunity to rebut him, Lady Leila, but you must be quiet while he testifies. If you insist on interrupting, I will discard your complaint.”

“You can’t do that,” she gasped.

“Yes, dear lady, I can and I will. Do not interrupt again,” Ryal said with the force of a new hope. She paled and shut her mouth. “Please continue, Lord Justinian,” Ryal instructed.

“Yes,” Justinian said. With sorrowful tremors in his voice, he confessed, “She attempted to seduce him just today, slipping a note to him which he discarded. Then as he was leaving the chapel after visiting his wife’s auntie, my wife approached him again. He coldly mentioned her need of a beautician, and turned away.” That he had heard all this was astounding, but the acoustics in the hall were truly wonderful.

Leila barely kept her temper, and Ryal asked, “But what do you know of her lying in the previous trial?”

“It’s balderdash!” Justinian said, striking the counter with his hand, since his stick was six inches too far away. “Because of her humiliation at being rejected by him once again, she swore in my presence to have revenge on him, and revisit his trial with a lie.”

“That’s a lie!” she cried.

“Silence!” Ryal shouted. Another customer had entered, but the bell had not been reattached, and he was so quiet that no one noticed him. “Lord Justinian, do you know for a fact that Lady Leila is lying about having lied in the first trial?”

With firm conviction, Justinian said, “Yes. It is purely for revenge, with not a stick of truth therein.”

“Well,” exhaled Ryal, knowing who was lying and very grateful for it. “Lady Leila, what is your response to this accusation?”

“He’s lying!” she cried, outraged. “He’s spewing lies all over!”

Looking at her in pity, Justinian said, “It’s all over now, dearest. Never fear, I will continue to support you in everything but this vengeful slander.” So, his motivation appeared to be not only rescuing Efran, but saving a great deal of royals that he would otherwise be forced to pay.

“You beast!” she shouted, lunging at his face with her fingernails.

There was bedlam for a few minutes as Justinian covered his face, being thrown back against the wall while Leila pressed her attack and Ryal shouted at her to stop. No eavesdropping soldiers intervened, however; they were too busy running messages up to the fortress. Soames poked his head through the back door to look, but by that time, the waiting customer got Leila’s arms pinned behind her back so that order was restored.

“Well,” Ryal exhaled, then peered at Justinian. “Do you need to see the doctor?” There were certainly a few bleeding scratches on his face.

“No, no,” Justinian said, whipping out his blindingly white handkerchief to pat his face. “Such is my punishment for not stopping her sooner.” The customer finally released Leila’s arms, but only Giardi (and Soames) noticed him.

Ryal stood breathing behind the counter. “Well,” he repeated, wiping his forehead with his own kerchief. “This is a classic case of he said/she said, and in such circumstances, if the truth cannot be verified by independent means, the status quo stands. There will be no retrial.”

“Ask Efran!” Leila shouted. “Put him under oath, and ask him if I lied!”

“My dear lady,” Ryal said in an ice-cold tone, “as someone who committed assault in front of my very eyes, you are not entitled to demand anyone be interrogated according to your whims. In fact, if Lord Justinian were to press charges, I would immediately declare you guilty and have you evicted from the Lands.”

She stared at him, and Justinian said righteously, “I shall not press charges, Lord Ryal, but I shall request an emergency divorce on the basis of abuse.”

Leila turned to stare at Justinian as Ryal said, “That is entirely reasonable, Lord Justinian. The Book of Divorces, Giardi, if you will.” She turned to withdraw the bulging ledger from its accessible slot, as the one most frequently used, with the exception of the Book of Marriages.

While Giardi filled out the form, Justinian told Leila in wounded tones, “I fear you must vacate my house—”

“That’s Marguerite’s house,” Leila snapped.

“Of which I am an approved resident, and dear Auntie strongly disapproves of violence,” he returned coolly.

Ryal glanced up at her. “His request is reasonable. If you refuse to leave the house, I shall prepare an order of eviction. This will also result in your eviction from the Lands.”

“This is insane,” she breathed, glassy-eyed.

“Here is your Petition for Divorce, Lord Justinian. Sign both copies here, please,” Ryal said. Justinian signed

with a flourish, then Ryal signed and stamped both copies. He blotted them carefully while Giardi recorded the information in the ledger. Then Ryal handed one copy to Justinian and one to Leila. Her signature was not necessary. “Good day and good luck to both of you,” Ryal said.

“Thank you, Lord Ryal,” Justinian said, tucking the Petition in his breast pocket and placing his hat on his head. He also remembered to place a royal on the counter as payment (which Ryal failed to notice).

Turning stiffly to his now ex-wife, Justinian said, “I shall have your personal effects packed and placed on the front steps for you to pick up at once. Good day.” He bowed to her, then exited the shop, his wounded face held high. The soldiers stepped aside for him.

Leila emitted a howl of rage as she rushed out behind him, and a few soldiers fell off the steps. Fortunately, she went straight to the chapel without inflicting further damage on him or anyone.

Ryal then looked at the waiting customer. “May I help you?”

He gaped at the notary for a minute, then said, “I forgot what I came for.” And he rushed out.

Soames came out of the back room then, but the other two were facing forward and did not see him. Ryal closed his eyes with a deep sigh. “I’m retiring as of today, Giardi. I have betrayed my profession. Leila’s demand for a retrial was justified.”

She was shaking her head. “What is the purpose of the Law? Is it to establish peace and order, or to be used as a weapon of revenge, inflicting wholesale damage?”

Ryal said hopelessly, “I endorsed a lie.”

“No,” she said. “Lady Leila lied, after swearing to tell the truth. Her coming now to take back her testimony out of spite would greatly harm many innocent people. In fact, the original trial was a travesty—holding Efran accountable for an eight-year-old infidelity with a willing woman. Rounsefell would never have called him to trial had he remained a soldier. It was only when he attained standing by courage and sacrifice that Rounsefell exploited the Law against its purpose.”

Ryal hung his head. “Whether you are right strictly according to the Law, I don’t know. But my heart tells me I must listen to you.”

At that time, the door opened for Efran to walk in. He looked stricken, deathly pale as he glanced around. When he opened his mouth, Ryal said tightly, “Justinian has divorced Leila, and that is all that has happened. If you want to know anything more, go talk to him but *do not say a word about anything here in this shop. DON’T SAY A WORD.*”

Efran shut his mouth, nodded shakily, and backed out of the shop.

Finally, Ryal turned, exhaling, so that both he and Giardi saw Soames. The young expert in Roman’s Law said, “Lord Ryal, perjury in such a momentous trial is a serious crime. Lady Leila is not eligible to bring suit against the Captain or anyone.”

Upon being reminded of a simple fundamental that he already knew, Ryal flung the papers he was holding into the air and turned to begin banging his forehead on the nearest wall. Giardi fell on him, laughing, and Soames shook his head.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 15

Efran went directly to the chapel from Ryal's shop. Entering the front doors, he ran straight into Leila, who dropped her loosely packed belongings to shove him into the wall and begin shouting at him. With unblinking eyes, he endured her venting her spleen for three solid minutes until she finally elbowed him in the stomach in collecting her bags to storm out.

Efran paused in the silence, then looked up to see Justinian gesturing at him from the stairway. Efran took the stairs two at a time to close them both in Justinian's private suite, where Hartshough resumed doctoring his face. A half-hour later, Efran returned to the fortress to take Minka up to the second-floor workroom. He shut the door and flung himself into his chair to recount to his administrators the near-miss with disaster—or what they all assumed it to be.

Estes, DeWitt and Minka listened quietly to this convoluted narrative, though Minka had to get up to let Koschat in. But as he took up his counting board to resume his budget calculations, the Abbey administrators continued talking about Leila, poison, and lurkers.

After a quiet moment, DeWitt observed, "I hardly believed it when you named Justinian Lord Officer, but he's consistently come through for you."

Minka nodded firmly; Efran asked, "We're still paying him, aren't we?" At Estes' affirmation, Efran said, "Give him a raise, or bonus, or something."

"I suppose so," DeWitt laughed.

Efran shook his head in wonder. "I can't get over how she could come back, *now*, to—to—"

"There it is again," Estes said. "The women attacking you. Or almost—something attacking you through the women."

DeWitt sat up. "You're right. This is another part of the pattern. I wonder if . . . we're dealing with something that is both a condition and a shape-shifter."

"What do you mean?" Efran asked.

DeWitt looked up in searching thought. "These women are not shape-shifters; they are themselves. But the coincidental timing of their coming, and the uniformity of their demands—which are to take Efran away from his duty—indicate an influence which they are unaware of themselves."

Minka said, "Yes, like the desire I had to lose myself in the faerie realm. It came over me so quietly that I didn't even know it wasn't me until Efran pulled me out of the hole."

"Almost," Efran said. "The only reason I could pull you out was because you let me."

Minka suddenly sat up. "Marguerite told me how to fight it. She said something like, question every thought that

comes into your mind, especially one that appeals to your worst instincts. Remember her saying that?" she asked Efran.

"Now I do, yes," Efran said.

Estes said, "And before then, how Nomus told you to act according to your conscience."

"But, that was in response to the test Larisse created for me," Efran said hesitantly.

"There it is again," DeWitt said. "Why did she choose to show up here, at that time? And why devise a test for you at all? It was another—possibly the first—of the attacks."

Efran leaned back to twine his fingers on top of his head. "A lurking influence, a poisonous frame of mind, that still shows . . . purpose. Direction. If it's not a being, it still has will, and its intent is to get rid of me."

Estes said, "Unless I'm missing something, it's operated only on women so far."

Efran threw up his hands. "Well, that's been the great weakness of my life. It's not that *they're* weak, necessarily, but *I'm* weak regarding them."

"But look at how well you've resisted," Minka said, almost offended.

"Up till now," Efran said. "The next attack may do the job, if it looks innocent enough."

And there they were stuck. No one knew where to go from there. So Efran took Minka out to the back grounds to see how the children were getting along. Joshua was riding Kraken as he hauled more dirt to newly marked beds. Other beds, newly planted, were protected by a low picket fence that one worker was whitewashing.

Alcmond came over with Calix to say, "Efran, Calix wants to stay here all the time."

Efran looked down at the hopeful face, sweaty from play. "What does your mother say, Calix?" The boy raised his shoulders in ignorance. So Efran said, "That's all right as long as she doesn't mind, but if she wants you back, you have to go home."

Calix looked down in momentary despondence, but Noah called them to another game, so they ran over to him. Toby paused beside Efran and Minka to tell them, "We haven't heard from her."

"I see," Efran murmured. Minka looked troubled.

A sentry ran up, saluting. "Captain, Lady Minka. Messenger from Cyrillo at Whately's is here, asking the Lady to come down to see the copper earrings."

Efran blinked at him, but Minka said, "Oh, I forgot about those. Cyrillo said he'd make earrings from the copper scraps from the bracelet. Can I go down to Whately's?" she asked Efran.

He was scowling at the sentry. "Wait, now—the messenger came up from Whately's to ask Minka to come down to look at earrings? Why didn't he just bring them up?"

"I don't know, Captain," the man said tentatively. He was new.



Efran said, "Send him back here."

"Yes, sir." The new man saluted and trotted off.

Minka shrugged, "I don't mind—"

"I do," Efran said. "That's not only a wasted trip for the messenger, but an imposition on us, outfitting horses and a bodyguard for you to go look at something they should've sent up here to begin with. What's more valuable, you or the earrings?" he asked irately.

Minka mutely agreed, and he shook his head again. "No, I won't have that."

In a while, the sentry came trotting back, alone. He saluted to Efran to say, "Quoid reporting, sir. The messenger from Whately's left. I asked around a bit; none of the other men recognized him."

Efran's face smoothed. "I see. If he shows up again, bring him to me—him or any other messengers for the lady."

"Yes, sir." Quoid said, and left at Efran's nodded dismissal.

Efran continued pondering the affront, growing more disturbed. So Minka took him over to the bench under the walnut tree. She sat on one end, pulling him down to put his head on her lap. She stroked his hair, and he relaxed almost immediately, inhaling. "This is heaven."

She laid her hand on his chest; he held it in both of his hands, blinking sleepily at the sunlit leaves flitting over her head, ringed in gold. Without looking at it, he fingered the gold bracelet on her wrist in satisfaction, feeling the rim of diamonds and the fine etching. Then he turned his head to lazily watch Elwell, wearing a blindfold, lunge here and there, arms outstretched, as the other children screeched and taunted him, "Catch me!" "You can't catch me!" "Nah nah nah nah NAH!"

Suddenly he locked his arms around something in midair. "I've got you now!" he shouted. The other children stilled, watching, and Efran's eyes shot open as Elwell's arms—his whole upper body—bobbed with his invisible captive's efforts to free himself.

Efran sprang off the bench to throw himself onto whatever Elwell was holding from the other side. It began writhing mightily, and Elwell fell back, pulling off the blindfold. "Show yourself!" Efran ordered.

Nothing happened, except that his feet and lower legs began disappearing, evidently under whatever he had grabbed. Minka had opened her mouth to scream when Efran issued a piercing whistle. Men began rushing to him. "Rope!" he shouted.

The garden worker who had been whitewashing the fence ran over with his bucket to throw a stream of white paint onto whatever the Captain was wrestling with. Efran, arms and hands splattered with white, let go of it to step away, and they all watched silently as the paint spread on something that first tried to shake it off, which only spread it further. Then the blob tried to sink into the ground, but the paint would neither separate from the invisible mass nor be forced underground.

Men ran up with rope. This they held idle while watching the thing, thoroughly whitewashed, twist itself, rubbing on the grass, trying to efface its unwanted coloration. Efran said, "Queene Kele, may I have a word with you?"

She appeared at once on Minka's shoulder, wearing gardening clothes. "Yes, Lord Efran?"

As she merely looked at him expectantly, he gestured to the white blob. "Kele—what is this?"

She looked down. "Why, it appears that someone has spilled a great deal of paint, Lord Efran," she said, flummoxed.

He sputtered, "Kele—can't you see it move? The paint is covering something invisible that's moving."

"Well, if it's invisible, then I can hardly see it, can I?" she asked almost indignantly.

Minka said, "Kele, you don't discern anything under the paint?" Efran felt as though they were trying to reason with a toddler.

"Minka, are you quite well?" Kele asked in concern.

Efran turned to Suco nearby. "Go down to Marguerite; tell her what we have; ask her what she knows."

"Captain." Suco saluted, turning to run to the western side of the fortress. Kele vanished in exasperation.

Efran gestured over another man. "Fennig, go ask DeWitt and Estes to come have a look."

"Captain." Fennig saluted and ran to the lower corridor. The children went back to playing and Efran had Tomer take Joshua in for a change of wraps.

Meanwhile, Efran listened to the men argue about what they were seeing. Some insisted there was a nebulous form underneath the paint; others said it was paint, period. But as Efran watched it, he could see it gradually getting out from under the paint, either by rolling it off or scraping it off, somehow.

DeWitt and Estes came out to look at the blob. They were silent a moment, then DeWitt said, "There's something moving under the whitewash."

"Yes," Efran said. "It's gone down considerably, but one of the children captured it playing blind man's bluff, then I struggled with it before the gardener doused it." He looked at splashes of whitewash on his hands and clothes, then raised his face at Suco, who came walking a horse around the western side of the fortress with Lady Marguerite in the saddle.

Efran exhaled a breath of relief, going over to lift her down. Minka came to her side to hold her arm as Estes and DeWitt greeted her. Efran said, "Marguerite, if you tell me there's nothing here, I'm going to throw a tantrum." He brought her over to the mostly deflated bubble of whitewash.

Marguerite half-laughed, half-moaned, "Oh, no." She glanced around. "What are your men saying?"

Efran replied, "They're arguing about whether there's anything there or not."

Marguerite leaned down to the barely bubbling skin of paint. "Well, that explains a great deal. You seem to have had a cloud of Miasmata blow in. That particular one is Denial."

## Chapter 16

“A cloud,” Efran repeated. “But—I held it. It had form and substance, at least for a little while.”

“Exactly, which is why Sir Nomus and I described two different forms. They can solidify for a little while, but not long,” she said. Estes and DeWitt were silent, listening.

“And this particular Miasma gives off a . . . sense of denial?” Efran hazarded.

“Yes, that’s a good description. It can be quite overwhelming, even though short-lived,” Marguerite said. The paint was now just a dried white patch on the ground. The garden worker had long ago refilled his bucket to resume painting the fence.

Efran looked up at the sky. “What other kind of Miasmata blow in?”

Marguerite also looked up as though listening. “It’s hard to tell until they get close, but Denial usually floats along with other passive negatives, like Depression, Loneliness, Boredom, Listlessness—that kind of thing.”

“Are there more aggressive Miasmata?” Efran asked. “Anger? Hatred? Fear?”

“Jealousy,” Minka murmured.

“All of the above, anything you can name,” Marguerite said.

“How do we defend ourselves from them?” Efran asked.

Marguerite smiled. “Ah. How do you fight any bad attitude? Mental discipline; assertion of the positive; the refusal to let your mind be played upon by outside influences. . . . Prayer.”

Minka asked, “Are there no good Miasmata?”

“Yes, but then they are not Miasmata, they are Ruach: Love, Patience, Kindness, Honesty, Compassion, Generosity, Restraint. They are more powerful than the Miasmata, but also harder to come by,” Marguerite said.

Efran looked dissatisfied. “But—the women, who all came, one after another, all about the same time. . . .”

“Weak minds are greatly affected by Miasmata, and tend to cluster,” Marguerite explained. “There may be more at work here; I don’t know.”

After a moment of reflection, DeWitt said, “That is all interesting and helpful, Lady Marguerite. I hope that the chapel is a little quieter for you these days.”

“Yes, thank you, DeWitt,” Marguerite laughed lightly. “But I’ll confess I don’t mind the hubbub, especially if it spares you trouble here.”

With feeling, Estes said, “*That* is appreciated, Lady Marguerite.”

“Yes, and if Efran will stop stirring up evil winds, we’ll get back to work,” DeWitt said.

“Do that,” Efran said flatly.

As the administrators reentered the fortress, DeWitt muttered, “I believe Lady Marguerite, but I will never believe that all those women showing up at once was coincidental, nor simply drawn by these Miasmata.”

Estes agreed, “Oh, no, there’s something behind it all, for sure. However, her warning to ‘test the spirits,’ so to speak, was good advice.”

DeWitt concurred, and they trotted up the stairs to the workroom.

While Minka took her auntie around to introduce her to all her favorite people, Efran went out to the courtyard. He turned to see Kraken following, who nosed him. *You’re not slipping away without me again.*

“Tourjee needs you,” Efran said absently, stroking his face.

*I’ll go help when we get back. Where are we going?*

“Let me think,” Efran said. “Meanwhile, I’m going to saddle you.” Kraken snorted, but went with him to the stables to get geared up.

As Efran slipped the bridle over Kraken’s nose, he thought, *Whatever was pulling Minka down into the faerie hole was not a wind or an attitude; it was something that could exert physical force. I don’t doubt at all that he used the Miasmata to attack her, and I won’t let it happen again. Now, how can I draw him out to meet him on level ground?*

While engrossed in this question, he was inattentive to the activity around him. But when he began leading Kraken out, he looked back in surprise at Connor, Goss and Shane leading out horses behind him. Connor saluted, expressionless. “Permission to accompany you, Captain.”

Efran paused. These three were members of the Forty, who had ridden out to support him in his hopeless stand against Loizeaux’s first attack with thousands. “I’m not carrying anything. What have you got?” Efran asked, looking them over. He had not thought to go to his weapons cabinet.

“I have a sword, Captain,” Shane said, preparing to offer it to him.

“I do, as well,” Connor said, placing a hand on his belt buckle.

Goss said, “I’ve got a toothed blade along with a sword, sir.”

“Give me your knife, then,” Efran said, extending his hand. Goss unbuckled the belt with the sheathed knife to extend it to him.

“Excellent. Come, then,” Efran said, buckling the knife onto his hip. Then he swung up on Kraken.

Walking him out of the gates onto the old switchback, Efran told his volunteers, “I’m looking for an enemy that’s hiding under my nose. I don’t know what he looks like or how to meet him, but I intend to find out.”

“Yes, Captain,” Connor said placidly.

Astride their horses, they walked north on Main. This was the center of the business district of the Lands, with the longest-established shops and eateries. Once past Chapel Road, the men passed Elvey’s, Ryal’s, Croft’s, the community well, Firmin’s and Delano’s, their eyes tracking west to east and back again. They stopped at the crosswalks while their gaze swept everything—the ladies in their dresses, the messengers making deliveries, the housewives with their shopping baskets, the children playing with friends.

In front of Lowry’s, close to the barracks at the gates, Efran idly murmured, “Come out, come out, wherever you are.” This was the old children’s refrain that summoned those still hiding at the end of a game of hide-and-seek. His eyes shot to Commander Wendt, who abruptly came out of Barracks A with the Second Gabriel at his side.

At the same moment, there was a sudden upheaval in front of Kraken, who reared straight up. Efran, unprepared, fell backwards over the horse’s haunches, but managed to yank both feet free of the stirrups before he hit the ground. Kraken stumbled, barely keeping to his feet. There were shouts around him, and Efran raised his head to look.

Directly in front of him, looming over him, was a giant Goulven parasite, a hundred times larger than those that had infected a great many people seven months ago. The ribbon body of the parasite was at least thirty feet long and three feet wide, curving from a hole in the pavement before him up to twenty feet above him.

The flat white body waved unsteadily, especially with the weight of the fangs, two feet long, at the upper end. Even from the height at which they hung over him, Efran could see the egg sac at the end of the ribbon pumping eggs into the hollow fangs. The eggs were forced out through the fangs to splatter around him. Efran covered his head, twisting from one side to the other while the eggs, coated in a viscous slime, split open upon landing around him. Then the larvae began crawling out.

Efran’s men, meanwhile, had leapt off their horses to draw their swords and charge the ribbon body. But it was like leather; striking it just caused it to give at the point of impact, while the egg-dropping fangs above remained unaffected. Goss stepped on the ribbon, pinning it to the ground. He raised his sword with both hands to plunge the point down on the body. But the sword recoiled with such force that Goss was thrown backward off his feet. Meanwhile, the little dimple left in the body from the sword thrust soon smoothed itself out.

While this desperate battle was ongoing, the Landers had to drive their carts, horses and carriages around the Captain’s group in the middle of the street, who looked to be engaged in performance art. A few riders paused to admire the realistic sword thrusts into the air, and the Captain rolling on the pavement among them. Firmin came to the streetside railing of his outdoor eating area to call, “Captain Efran, do you mind taking your calisthenics to another location? I would deeply appreciate it.”

Others decided among themselves that this was an advertisement for an upcoming performance in the chapel, and several ran to Bozzelli’s house to ask what entertainment was scheduled and how much it would cost to attend.

But the men of the lower barracks were clustered around Commander Wendt, who was intently watching the aura of the giant Goulven spit eggs at someone—presumably Efran—below it. “What do we do, Commander?” Barr breathed at his side.

“What do you see?” Wendt asked.

Gabriel said, “The Captain rolling on the ground; Goss, Connor, and—who’s the other man? I can’t tell. They’re

striking at something with their swords, but we can't see what, Commander.”

“Stand by,” Wendt said grimly.

So they helplessly watched. Efran swept away the larvae that tried to crawl up on him, but then a portion of the ribbon body pinned him to the ground as the fangs plunged down toward him, eggs dripping from their hollow cores. Since the parasite had no eyes with which to aim, Efran minutely adjusted his head and shoulders so that when the fangs struck, they pierced the pavement on either side of his head.

As he had hoped, they hit so hard as to sink eight inches into the paving, so Efran was able to scoot out from between them and slide out from under the ribbon body. Glancing at the upper body jerking in the attempt to free the fangs, Efran knelt on the ribbon about six feet below them. He spread his knees, drawing the sawtooth knife, and held it in both hands to jam it into the body.

The serrated edge pierced the ribbon, which Efran began sawing. He cut clear through it, from one edge to the other. The greater portion of the body, suddenly disengaged from the fangs, began flapping wildly. It struck Shane, knocking him to the pavement, where he lay still. Connor and Goss rushed over to drag him away from the heavy ribbon as it continued to flail. Kraken charged over to begin trampling it.

Meanwhile, Efran knelt on the upper six feet of ribbon that was ineffectively thrashing. He plunged the knife into the egg sac at the base of each fang, then pierced every egg that oozed out. Finally, he stood to stomp on all remaining eggs and larvae. Residents watching this dance from the sidewalks applauded.

Standing in the midst of the slime, Efran looked around as both pieces of the parasite stilled. Then it seemed to dissolve away. When it had disappeared, the men noted no holes in the ground, no slime, no indication that anything had ever attacked. But Efran reached up to touch the abrasion on his shoulder under his ripped shirt.

Seeing Shane still unconscious, Efran gestured, “Take him into Coghill’s.” They were practically at the doorstep of the new Lands doctor. (Wallace and his wife Leese tended mostly fortress residents now.)

As Connor and Goss carried Shane into the doctor’s house, Efran looked down at the dusty but otherwise clean knife in his hands. He sheathed it, then raised his face as Barr came up. “Captain, if you’re free now, the Commander would like a word with you.”

“Yes,” Efran exhaled, walking with him to the front of the barracks where Wendt stood. Efran saluted him with, “Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander.”

Wendt nodded. “At ease. Efran, do you know what you’re fighting?”

“No, sir,” he said, breathing hard.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 17

“I see. Do you know where it came from?” Wendt asked.

Efran squinted. “We only have theories right now.”

“Did you call it up? Issue an invitation?” Wendt asked—as Efran had inadvertently done by naming the Sandgolem.

“I don’t think so—” Efran paused. *Come out, come out, wherever you are.* “Did you see it, sir?”

“I saw the aura. It looked to be a very large Goulven,” Wendt said.

“But—it wasn’t really, was it? That was just—the form it took, wasn’t it?” Efran asked, thinking about shape-shifters.

“Apparently so,” Wendt said.

“Then, what do you think it is, Commander?” Efran asked.

Wendt hesitated. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’s something very old and very bad.”

Efran looked aside at Goss running up to salute. “Commander. Captain.”

“How is Shane?” Efran demanded.

“Still out; Coghill says it looks like a concussion. He’s trying to wake him now, Captain,” Goss said.

“All right. Stay with him unless you have duty, then get someone to stay with him and send the Commander and me word,” Efran said, tentatively moving his abraded shoulder. It stung.

“Yes, Captain. With your leave, Connor will ride up to report to the Steward and Administrator,” Goss said.

“Yes, and Captain Rigdon or Captain Chee,” Efran said. “Dismissed.”

“Captain. Commander.” Goss saluted.

Wendt nodded to Goss, who ran back to Coghill’s. Then Wendt said, “I don’t have any guidance for you, Efran, but you need it from somewhere.”

Efran swallowed. “Yes. I need to go ask—” He abruptly looked aside at Nomus standing in front of a door between Firmin’s and Averno’s, where Efran knew there was no door.

Efran said, “Excuse me, Commander; I’ll be right back.”

Wendt nodded dismissal and Efran walked over to the little man in his parchment-paper suit, who opened the door. Looking in at the waters raging above and the stars shining in the endless blackness below, Efran stepped into the Firmament. Nomus followed to close the door behind them.

“Sir Nomus, I’ve . . . done something, and, I need to know what that was,” Efran began. Nomus pointed to the portal on Efran’s right, and he turned to look.

There he saw five people in old ceremonial garb standing in the courtyard of the fortress. From what he had seen before, Efran believed this to be a scene from the beginning, when the fortress was first built about 4700 years ago. And the prominent figure of this group wore an emblem on his robe similar to the lock on the Treasury door.

“Is that Alessandrini? The first Lord of the Abbey Fortress?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Lord Efran,” Nomus said.

Efran watched the group of four men and one woman look at each other in shocked dismay. Finally, Alessandrini said, “I cannot fathom it. Now we find that on *the first day* of our great endeavor, unlike any other, the Lues—this plague, this malevolence—has buried itself in the Abbey Lands. It will spring up time and again in different guises to cause heartache, disruptions, and death on the Lands until the Earth itself ends.”

“Good lords will keep it down, Lord Alessandrini,” one man assured him.

Alessandrini replied, “But it will continue to arise as it wishes to wreak havoc. Because of it, the Abbey will remain vacant and useless for hundreds of years.”

Another man said, “I have seen that one lord will remove it, Lord Alessandrini. True, it will be thousands of years hence, but he will do it.”

Alessandrini exhaled, “At the cost of his own life.”

“No,” the woman said. “Not necessarily. If he plays the piece well, with knowledge, he will drive out the Lues and keep himself whole.”

Alessandrini said, “That is a rare chance, Perrodin.”

“You never know,” she said with a devious face. At that moment, Efran was struck by how much she looked like Minka.

The scene in the portal misted over. Efran leaned back, closing his eyes. “What is the piece? What is the knowledge?”

Nomus said, “That is revealed to the Lord of the Fortress only. But if you call up the Lues again without the knowledge, you may succeed in banishing it, but you will die.”

Where he stood on the Firmament, Efran looked up to the unseen Heavens beyond the bright waters. “Lord God, if I die, I die, but it would be nice to have a fighting chance. Give me the knowledge; show me how to play the piece. But at all costs, Lord God, let me evict this old plague.”

When he looked down again, there was a door in front of him. Efran opened it to walk out to the sidewalk where Kraken was waiting. Patting his neck, Efran glanced around, then looked up at the sun. It did not appear to have moved much since he stepped through the doorway, but . . . the activity on the street was not the same. Different people were out here, doing different things. Confused, Efran muttered, “How long was I gone?”

*A day*, Kraken said.

“What? It’s been a whole day?” Efran demanded, shocked. Then he looked at Kraken’s back, which had no saddle. Nor was there a bridle on his head. “You’ve been standing here for a night and a day?”

A street cleaner came up, deeply wounded. “Lord Efran, would you consider stabling your horse proper when you’re going to be in a house for all of twenty-four hours?”



"I apologize; we're on our way," Efran said.

But as he moved out into the street, soldiers were shouting: "Captain's back!" "Ho, there he is!" And Efran was mobbed where he stood. Riders galloped up Main toward the switchback to pass along the word.

To not obstruct traffic any more than he already had, Efran led Kraken across the street to the barracks. First, however, he stuck his head in Coghill's house. "Doctor? How is Shane?" Efran called from the door.

Coghill's wife Delio came out from a back room, peering at him uncertainly. "Lord Efran?"

"Yes, how is Shane?" Efran asked anxiously.

"He hasn't been here since yesterday," she said warily.

"He's better? Or—" Efran's throat seized shut. She just looked at him, so Efran turned out to grab the first man he saw to shake him by the jacket. "What happened to Shane?"

The man raised placating hands. "He was taken back up to his barracks hilltop, Cap'n; his Captain, Chee, has 'im down, says he's not fit for duty yet."

"All right, I'll go check him," Efran exhaled, patting the wrinkled jacket.

Captain Barr's scribe Numan ran up to salute, then. "Captain, Commander Wendt would appreciate a word with you, if you're available."

"Yes, I'm coming," Efran said, disoriented, and now sleepy and hungry. "Will you—" But Numan had run back to Barracks A to relay the message. So Efran grabbed another man. "Mohr, please take my beast around to the stables; get him hay and water."

"Sure, Captain. C'mon, Kraken; we'll make sure the Captain doesn't go anywhere without you," Mohr said, patting the black neck. So Kraken condescended to follow him.

Feeling strongly disoriented from having lost a day, Efran turned back to Barracks A, receiving pats on his back and greetings along the way. When he entered the barracks, Captain Towner pointed him back to the conference room. Efran entered to see Wendt seated at the head of the table in his usual chair with his Seconds Barr and Gabriel to either side of him. Numan had just seated himself with writing supplies to take notes.

Efran saluted. "Ah, Captain Efran reporting, Commander."

"Good. Have a seat," Wendt said. When Efran took a chair, Wendt said, "So, what've you got—uh oh."

For they all heard the outer door slam open and a young female cry, "Efran?"

The men around the table smiled sympathetically as he said, "In here." He had started to stand when she rushed into the room to throw herself on him with a cry, forcing him back down to the chair.

She was babbling, "You didn't send word or anything! Hello, Commander. How are you? Oh, Efran, what happened? Oh, Barr. And Gabriel. Geneve looks very happy. Is she going to have a baby? Oh, Numan—I know you, too. [Back to Efran] After you got me out of the faerie hole and everything why didn't you tell me you were here?" she demanded, crying on Efran's neck.

After trying several times to interrupt, he finally had to catch his breath and laugh. “I wasn’t able, but I’ll tell you now. Hush. Yes, I’m just about to report to the Commander as well, so—no, I just got here; I haven’t had a chance to tell him anything. Yes, your earrings look very nice, still. Oh, did you sleep in them? All right, well—shh, let me tell you. Yes, I’m all right.”

Once she was calm and quiet, he told them all about his accidentally summoning the Lues, which came in the form of a giant Goulven parasite that only he and his men could see. He told them how he had disabled it, but how it snapped back on Shane. Then he related what he’d seen in the portal, and what Nomus had told him. He finished, “The upshot is, I have to learn about this piece I’m supposed to play, and the knowledge that goes along with it before I can get rid of this plague and stay alive.”

“Ah,” Wendt said, “Interesting. Then Marguerite and Nomus were both right about it.”

“Yes, they saw different aspects of the same thing,” Efran agreed. “It’s a shape-shifter, in that it comes in different forms, but it also uses the Miasmata and who knows what else.”

“But neither Nomus nor Marguerite can help you with the knowledge you need?” Wendt asked.

“Nomus said that it would be revealed only to me,” Efran said.

Minka wiped her nose and sniffled, “That sounds like something you should ask the Librarian about.”

He looked down at her. “There are some very old books in the library, aren’t there?”

“Yes,” she said. “The Librarian and I catalogued the books in the hidden library after we found the tower, you know, and few of those books touch on the founding of the fortress.”

“Ohh, then that’s where I need to start,” he said, smiling down at her. Comforted, she wiped her face on his shirt.

He lifted her to a stand. “If you’ll excuse us, Commander, Minka will show me the books I need to start on.”

“Dismissed,” Wendt said. “Thank you for your input, Minka.”

“Thank you for listening,” she said, drained.

Efran took her out to put her on Rose, then walked them around to the stables to reclaim Kraken.

When they arrived back at the fortress, the first thing he wanted to do was go find Shane in Captain Chee’s regiment. Minka wouldn’t let him go by himself, and thought they should stop by the kitchen for an ale and plate of ham for the patient. (So Efran got a plate himself, feeling as though he hadn’t eaten for a whole day.) Then they took Shane’s portion to him.

A sentry directed them to the infirmary, where Efran made her stand outside until he had determined that all the injured men were sufficiently covered. At the same time, he had to stop by each bedside as well, to check on their injuries. Fortunately, none was serious, and almost all 12 of them were from sparring practice.

When Efran let Minka in, she insisted on speaking to or patting all the injured before greeting Shane. She never knew when her touch might heal anyone or not, but she was determined to try, especially after what happened with Neale.

Shane was lying down with an ineffective cold compress on his head. He squinted up at them as they stood on either side of his cot. “Captain. Lady Minka,” he murmured.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 18

“Oh, dear,” Minka said, lightly caressing Shane’s head. “Does it hurt?”

“Not badly, Lady Minka, thank you. I just—can’t focus well; am seeing double. Wallace says I just have to lie still for a while.” Minka laid her hand on the side of his face, and he seemed to relax. “Appreciate the grub, Captain,” he added, referencing the plate and ale Efran had put on his bedside table. “But what was that thing? It wasn’t a real Goulven, was it?”

“Ah, no, it was just dressed up as a great big Goulven. But it was real,” Efran said, without mentioning the scrape on his shoulder from the fang. He gave Shane the short version of what he had found out so far, and told him, “You’ve got a commendation coming, so rest up. We’ll ask Wallace to keep us updated on you.”

“Yes, Captain; thank you, sir. Thank you, Lady Minka,” Shane said.

“You’ll be better,” she said, patting his arm. Then he looked up, able to focus on her.

“All right, let’s go,” she said, growing anxious over the possibility that other men she touched hadn’t been healed.

“Yes.” Efran put his hand at her back to walk her out.

From there, they returned to the fortress and went up to the second-floor workroom. Estes and DeWitt put down their quills and closed the door for Efran to tell them everything he knew, again.

They listened quietly, then DeWitt muttered, “*Lues*. That’s an old word for ‘pestilence,’ if I’m remembering right.”

“Yes, I heard them call it ‘plague’ in the portal,” Efran said.

Estes said thoughtfully, “The fortress was vacant for—how long? Ever since Surchatain Henry’s murder in eighty-one eighteen until you got the bequest in eighty-one fifty-three—thirty-five years. But I believe there was another, longer period of vacancy before Surchatain Roman came to the throne of Lystra.”

“The several hundred years of its vacancy had better be in the past, is all I can say,” Efran said dully.

“There are books; the Librarian will find them,” Minka said in quiet confidence.

“And that’s our next stop. Oh—except we have to stop by Wallace’s quarters to make sure he checks on Shane. I want a commendation for him. He took a pretty bad hit so that I wouldn’t,” he told DeWitt. In relating this, Efran was indifferent as to whether that was exactly how it played out.

“We’ll get that to him,” DeWitt said, reaching for another folder of forms.

Efran did leave word with Leese to make sure that Shane received daily checks until he was up and around, then he and Minka went downstairs to the library.

The Librarian greeted them bowing, as he always did. Minka said, “Librarian, you and I catalogued several books about the early history of the Abbey. Can you find those for us now?”

“Yes, Lady Minka. I must check the hidden library,” he said.

As Efran closed the door to the corridor, he asked, “Would there be any books out here in the main library that mention Lues?”

“Lues”? No, Lord Efran, that is an ancient concept. Let me step back here and see what I may discover,” the Librarian said, turning to the hidden swivel door.

“Thank you,” Minka said. Efran nodded, looking at the books on the high shelves.

Efran suddenly jumped. “Do I need to be careful about saying the name? Will that summon it?”—as he had accidentally summoned the Sandgolem by speaking its name.

Minka looked wide-eyed at the Librarian, who turned back from the doorway. “Apparently not, Lord Efran, else it would have already. For one as powerful as Lues, the intent must be there, evidently.”

“Ah. Yes,” Efran said. *Come out, come out, wherever you are.*

While the Librarian searched the hidden library, Minka found a book titled, *Verses to Make One Smile*. “Oh! This looks interesting. I will take this out to read,” she murmured.

After a few minutes, the Librarian returned to the main library, closing the rotating shelf door after him. “Here, Lord Efran. I hope this book will have something of help to you.”

“Thank you.” Efran took the compact brown book the Librarian held out. Opening it carefully, Efran said, “Oh, this is very old. . . . Only, I—can’t read the language.”

“Oh, dear. I overlooked that,” the Librarian said, taking the book again. “I shall translate it for you, Lord Efran.” And he held it, looking down at it.

Efran winced. “That would be appreciated, Librarian, only—I may need whatever information is there quickly.”

“Here you are.” The Librarian handed it back to him.

“What.” Efran took the book dubiously, then opened it again. His head shot up. “How did you do that?”

“Speed translating, Lord Efran. I took a course in it some years ago,” he said with modest pride.

Minka leaned over to look at the pages, then turned her wide blue eyes to the Librarian. “Oh my goodness, you are altogether a treasure, Librarian.”

“You honor me, Lady Minka,” he said, bowing.

Efran squinted. “You made him blush.”

“Really? Let me see,” she said in delight, leaning over to look at the face modestly turned aside. “Oh, dear Librarian, we’ll have you loosening your tie and reciting your favorite poems for us in no time.”

“I must brush up on them, Lady Minka,” he said, a prim Librarian smile peeking through.

“You are too cute. He is too cute, Efran,” she insisted, turning out with her husband. The Librarian hummed a little ditty, pertly dusting the stand of the sword of Ares with a cuff.

Efran and Minka emerged onto the back grounds to be greeted by the children, who had been troubled by the Captain’s absence yesterday. As they crowded around him, he told them, “I had some research to do yesterday, and have got a reading assignment today.”

When he showed them the book, Ivy said critically, “That doesn’t look very interesting.”

“It may or may not be. I have to read it to find out,” he said, taking it to the bench under the walnut tree. He looked over at Kraken lolling in the grass and Joshua trying hard to climb up on him.

Sitting with Efran on the bench, Minka said, “Well, *I* found a book that is definitely interesting. It is *Verses to Make One Smile*.”

Ivy cuddled up to her on the bench. “I will hear it, and see if I smile,” Queene Ivy decreed.

“Challenge accepted,” Minka said, opening the book. Besides Ivy, there were also Jera, Acy, Pim and Calix sitting around her to judge as to whether the book was amusing. The other children paused to skeptically listen as Minka began reading (and a few off-duty men came over amiably as well):

“When I am grown to man’s estate  
I shall be very proud and great,  
And tell the other girls and boys  
Not to meddle with my toys.”  
[“Looking Forward,” *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, Robert Louis Stevenson, 1909]

Minka looked up expectantly at the panel of judges. “Is that it?” Almund asked. “That seems more a statement of fact than a poem.”

Hassie said, “I don’t let other children meddle with my toys *now*; I don’t need to be grown up or a man to do that.”

“But it would be wonderful to be big like Efran, to make people not meddle with more important things,” Elwell said earnestly, and Efran’s smiling eyes flicked up to him.

“All right, we’ll count that one as having some merit,” Minka said. “Here’s another—

“When upon the boat I rest  
Doughnut crumbs across my breast,  
Could there be a more divine  
Way in which to pass the time  
Than squishing little balls?

“Worms may slither off the hooks,  
Minnows give you dirty looks,  
But doughnuts deeply fatted fried  
Will make those fishes satisfied  
With every little bite.

“So chuck that pail of stinky bait,  
Throw out them lures all reprobate;  
Invest instead for peace of mind  
And guaranteed results each time  
In doughnuts firmly packed.” [*Sammy: On Vacation*]

The children studied her, and even Efran raised his eyes from his book to dubiously evaluate this poem. “Wait, now,” Toby said as though quelling a riot. “Doughnuts. Is that the sugar bread that’s fried? Crispels?”

“Yes, it sounds like it,” Minka said.

Toby continued, “And the poet is saying that little balls of crispels make good fish bait?”

Minka looked down at the poem again. “Yes, that is what he maintains.”

“We should try that,” Noah said. “Except, we’d need a lot of crispels, or doughnuts.”

“A lot. Buckets,” Calix agreed. “Buckets and buckets.”

Elwell said, “Efran, could we take buckets of crispels to Cavern Lake to see if we can catch perch with them?”

“Oh, yes, let’s!” Hassie cried.

“That sounds like wonderful fishing,” Jera admitted.

“Let me . . . think on that,” Efran said warily, returning to his book.

“That poem was good,” Ivy ruled. “Read us another.” She tucked her play dress around her knees to wait.

“All right,” Minka said. Without reading ahead, she started on the next poem:

“You have bound me with your thighs,  
I am captive to your wiles;  
Your jeers rend my heart,  
You are such a tart to me,  
My dove, my love.

“If I loved you on a bet,  
Would you love me better yet?  
For that love of mine  
Was bought as it is  
Now, my dove, my love.

“What then shall I do  
To get such a maid as you?  
Is there hope for me  
To ever touch your  
Parts, my dove, my love?” [*Games of God and Men*]

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 19

Upon the ending of the last line, there was a momentary silence as the men standing around swallowed their laughter and Efran looked up in shock. “What? No, no,” he laughed, reaching for the book. At the same time, he was trying to remember where he had read that before.

Mildly censorious, Toby said, “I don’t think that’s for children, Minka.”

“Well, now, wait,” she said, desiring to justify the poem. “The parts he’s wanting to touch could simply be her hands or her hair, couldn’t they? Efran’s always got his hands in my hair.” The men standing around could hardly keep straight faces.

“No, no more poems from that book,” Efran said, reaching for it again.

But Doudney leaned down to Minka to say, “No worries, Lady Minka, I’ll put it up for you,” as he adroitly slipped the book out of her fingers. She watched in some disappointment as Doudney took the book, followed by three or four other men who wanted to hear more poetry.

The children then ran off to play. Slipping down from the bench, Ivy said, “I’m sorry; that one was a bust.”

“I suppose so,” Minka said sadly.

“Still, I think I’d like to be a tart,” Ivy said before skipping away, and Efran looked after her in alarm.

A soldier, Melott, came up to salute. “Captain, a messenger from Whately’s is here, asking that Lady Minka come down to see the earrings she ordered made.”

Efran scowled, “Again? No. Send a man down with him to pick up the earrings and bring them here. If she likes them, we’ll send payment; if not, we’ll send them back.”

“Yes, Captain.” Melott saluted again and turned away at a trot. Efran looked after him darkly.

Shortly thereafter, a kitchen worker came out to ring the dinner bell by the back steps. This was an innovation which Kitchen Administrator Goyne had devised after the Kitchen Mistress Madea complained for the fortieth time that it was difficult making people understand when they needed to wash up and come to the dining hall. After the bell had been installed, everyone asked each other why it took so long to figure out that such a thing was needed.

With the ringing of the bell, Efran stood to jam the book in his back pocket and lift Joshua off Kraken. As they joined the flow entering the back door of the fortress, Efran shook his head at Kraken. "Go to your stall for your hay. I'll have someone bring you an apple."

Kraken's head drooped, and he turned away. Joshua reached out to him: "Kakan." The horse's ears stood up as he looked back. *Good boy, you're learning.* And he went on around to his stall.

While Efran dropped Joshua off at the nursery for a change of wraps, Minka asked, "Are you learning anything?" She glanced toward the bulge in his back pocket.

"Not yet," he sighed. "It's old-style writing—I suppose we need to get the Librarian an updated course on speed translating. Anyway, lots of verbiage. I'm trying to pay attention so I don't miss anything important in all the modifiers and whatnot."

She laughed lightly, taking his arm. "You'll get it down. You always do."

"I'd better, then," he said, kissing her head. He hadn't told anyone about the consequences of his challenging Lues unprepared.

During dinner, Efran left the book in his pocket. Concentrating on verbiage was impossible with food in front of him, Joshua on his leg, and other people stopping by for a word. As he was eating, the sentry that Melott had sent down to Whately's returned to salute, "Eustace reporting, Captain. The messenger from Whately's said he's not authorized to send up the earrings; the lady needs to come down to see them." They wanted her *in their shop* to see their other offerings.

Efran gaped at him, then looked at Minka to ask, "How determined are you to see these earrings?"

She looked pensive. "Not terribly, if I can have another peek at the Treasury."

"That's what it's there for," he told her. To Eustace, he said, "We're going to ignore demands that the lady come down to look at anything. Dismissed."

"Yes, Captain." He saluted, then went on in for his dinner. And Efran remembered to send an apple to Kraken.

After dinner, while Minka was washing up for bed, Efran took a candle and kissed her head. "I'll be in the keep."

"What? Why?" she asked in disapproval, toweling water from her face and chest.

He watched her. "Reading," he said, patting his back pocket.

"No, bring the candle and read in bed," she said.

"It keeps you awake," he reminded her.



“I don’t care. You read beside me in bed,” she ordered, pulling her nightdress on over her head.

He sighed, “Yes, O Queene.”

Grimly satisfied, she took his fingers to lead him to the bedroom. First, they took care of a physical need which had nothing to do with the book. Then when he sat up against the headboard, she scrunched up to his hip, her left arm draped around his abdomen, to fall right to sleep. He contemplatively brushed the curls away from her face, then opened the book where he had left off.

This section was a dry, methodical recounting of the design and construction of the Abbey Fortress according to its divinely ordained purpose. Having lived here for two years now, Efran did appreciate the explanation for some of its features, such as the unexpected placement of rooms. DeWitt had mapped out the interior more than once, but they were still discovering rooms that no one knew about. It was all to accommodate unforeseen needs.

Gradually, Efran began to see this as a theme: the fortress was elastic, in a way; it was intended to be adjustable to new demands. Efran had certainly seen its self-renewal after Symphorien’s nest building, which would account for its incredible longevity. It was astounding how even impermanent structures of wood and stone could be made to last as long as they were needed.

But as he turned the pages, Efran grew restless. He was not finding anything that remotely addressed the piece that must be played or the knowledge necessary to purge the Lues. But he kept reading, and on the next-to-last page, he found: “The knowledge is from the King of kings and Lord of lords, who appoints times and seasons to answer the supplications of His people.” And with another paragraph, the book ended.

Efran leaned his head back, sighing, “What does that mean? I have to pray for the knowledge, which God will give at the right time, according to His greater wisdom. But I can’t call up the Lues until I have the knowledge. Do I have the knowledge already, and just don’t know it? That would be a risky assumption. No, I just have to ask, and keep asking, and wait.”

He was tired and frustrated, but something else nagged at him. *Knowledge* was just that: something he needed to know. But *piece* could mean several things. First, the woman in the portal, Perrodin, might have been saying *peace*. But no, that made no sense; he couldn’t “play the peace well.” So the word must be *piece*. But what pieces could be played? The first thing he thought of was a musical score. But he knew nothing of music.

Another meaning of *piece* could be that of a play, a script, or a narrative. That made more sense, in a way: when the time came to act, he could very well be called upon to play his part.

Still unenlightened, Efran put the book on the bedside table, snuffed the candle, and scooted down on the bed. In her sleep, Minka readjusted to scrunch into his side.

Over the next several days, Efran waited for enlightenment, praying the best he knew how without much expectation that it was doing any good. But on June 28th, Commander Wendt sent a man to tell him that Neale had returned from scouting Eurus.

In the courtyard, Pleyel told Efran, “Captain, Commander Wendt wished you to know that Neale arrived about an hour ago pretty well spent, since he wasn’t in the best condition when he left. But he said that a great number of trolls were raging through Eurus, and the city is in a state of siege. They chased him as well, so he had to run his horse hard to keep ahead of them on his way back here. The bottom line is, they’ll reach us soon. But he said that fire seemed to work against them—the trolls are covered with hair, you know, that blazes like the devil, and

once they're alight, there's nothing much they can do but burn."

"Yes," Efran said, thinking.

Pleyel paused. "Neale also said he heard reports of something called a 'Trollbrunnen.' It's some weapon of the trolls', something that helps or—refills them. He wasn't clear on it, so we're less clear. But the Commander thought you should hear it. At any rate, he wished to know if you want to talk to Neale."

Efran looked off, thinking. "Perhaps later; let him rest up. Thank the Commander for the information."

"Yes, sir." Pleyel saluted and remounted his horse to ride back down.

Efran mulled this over. Trollbrunnen? This fantastic bit he dismissed out of hand. But, the tactic of sounding the war drums to drive the trolls mad might not work if they attacked in sufficient numbers. They had to hear the drumming to be affected by it, but people who were running or fighting for their lives couldn't stop to drum.

Turning back into the fortress, Efran considered that Neale must have ridden through the night to get back, as it was now mid-morning. Efran went down the corridor to pause at the door of the library without being seen. Hearing Soames talk, he knew that both Ella and Minka were in Law class right now, and he was reluctant to take her out. Having already seen Joshua out back with the children, he returned to the courtyard to whistle for Kraken, to take him bareback down to the chapel.

Upon his arrival, the guards on duty opened the doors for him, ringing the doorbell, and one led Kraken around back to the paddock. Efran went in to look around the forested hall. It was not badly obstructed, and the greenery above did not block the light from the windows. So that was good.

Efran watched Hartshough approach and bow. "Good morning, Lord Efran. May I interest you in a morning bracer with Lady Marguerite on the patio?"

"That would be nice, thank you, Hartshough. Is Justinian here?" Efran asked.

"Yes, but still in bed, Lord Efran," Hartshough said.

"Take him up a bracer and send him down to us, please," Efran said. Hartshough bowed, and Efran went back through the kitchen to the patio.

Marguerite turned in her seat at the patio table as Efran bent to kiss her head. "I'm sorry, dear lady, but it's just me today. Minka's in Law class and Joshua's with the big kids, but I need to talk to you and Justinian both. Did I tell you about our encounter with Lues?"

"I heard something of it," Marguerite said warily, so Efran filled her in on that experience, and what he had learned from Nomus. Hartshough brought three cool glasses of cider, setting one before an empty chair.

In a little while, Justinian, eyes barely open, staggered out to sit blindly at the vacant place, taking up the glass by feel. "Hullo, brother of mine. I'm honored and privileged by your visit at the break of dawn, but would be even more grateful for a few more hours in bed."

"Apologies, brother of mine, but it's good to see you healing up from your brush with Leila," Efran said, eyeing the scabbed-over scratches on his face. Justinian's eyes crossed as he closed them again, faintly moaning.

Efran explained, “At any rate, I need to hear about your experience with the trolls at Featherstone.” Justinian opened his eyes, lifting his glass for a long swig. Efran went on, “The Commander sent word that Neale has returned from Eurus to report that the trolls were taking over, and are on their way here.”

“Lovely,” Justinian uttered in a dead voice.

“Neale also said that fire appeared to be effective against them, in that they’re covered with hair that goes up in a flash. What do you think?” Efran asked, looking between them.

Justinian almost spewed his bracer and Marguerite sadly shook her head. “It’s true that they burn like torches, Efran, but once they know they’re alight, they run into buildings or houses just to set them on fire. They don’t seem to mind burning alive if they can take a whole town with them.”

“They love watching each other burn,” Justinian muttered.

“I was afraid of that,” Efran said. “What, then? If they attack with hundreds, or a thousand, what can we use against them?”

Justinian compressed his lips, looking at Marguerite. Efran looked to her. She was gazing north, thinking. “Misdirection is most effective on creatures of simple mind,” she mused. “First, Efran, get you the men who have real Polonti drums, and set them on the roofs close to the walls. They should start drumming the instant the trolls are spotted.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Efran said. “And . . . misdirection? How?”

“Let me think on that. I may need—help,” she said, without specifying whose help.

The doorbell rang the same moment that a man appeared at the door from the kitchen to the patio. He saluted, “Tiras reporting, Captain. Commander Wendt requests your presence at Barracks A.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 20

Efran stood, reading the urgency in the message from Wendt. “I’ll be there immediately.” Looking toward the stables, he whistled, and Kraken wheeled toward the gate. “Thank you, Marguerite. Justinian. Don’t go back to bed right yet.” Efran turned to trot to the front door.

Kraken met him at the chapel steps, and Efran leapt up on him to lope him down Main to Barracks A. The man at the barracks door opened it as Efran dropped off Kraken’s back. Then he trotted to the conference room where Wendt, Barr, Gabriel, Towner and Stites were waiting for him. Efran saluted, “Captain Efran reporting as summoned, Commander Wendt.”

While he was at Barracks A, Minka had Martyn carry Joshua out to Rose in the fortress courtyard. She mounted, then he placed the toddler in her lap. “Are you sure you’ve got him, Minka? I can ride down with him.”

“No, I know you’ve got duty, Martyn. I just can’t believe Efran couldn’t wait for me to get out of Law class to

go down to Marguerite's! Anyway, there are plenty of men down there to take him in for me," she said.

"True. Give the lady my best," Martyn said.

"Of course." She flashed a smile at him and Joshua waved before she turned Rose down the new switchback.

In the conference room of Barracks A, Wendt said, "Thank you for your quick response, Captain Efran. Have a seat." As Efran sat, he looked down the long table at two scouts who were eating and drinking, obviously newly returned. Efran was forming a question when Wendt said, "Allyr and Clough here are just now back from scouting Crescent Hollow, Efran. Sughrue's Commander Swauger is leading a force of several hundred this way."

"That's inconvenient," Efran said.

"Very much so, in that they are also hauling a barge. Apparently, they intend to cross the Passage somewhere to the north of us so as not to rely exclusively on our bridge. We've got teams of men blocking the bridge with construction debris, which will only slow them a bit. We're also putting archers around the mill gate," Wendt said. Efran concurred.

Wendt continued, "The trolls are a couple of hours north of us. Our scouts haven't been able to pin a number to them, but there are a lot."

Efran said, "Marguerite recommends war drums—real Polonti drums—on the roofs close to the gates."

"Ah. Interesting. Captain Stites, will you see to that?" Wendt inquired.

"Yes, Commander." Stites rose from the table and stalked out almost smiling.

Wendt said, "We're also preparing fire arrows with pitch, Efran."

He winced. "Marguerite and Justinian both noted how the trolls use themselves as weapons when they catch fire."

"Yes, I haven't forgotten the battle with the trolls in Wirrin Valley," Wendt replied. "The fire arrows are for use no closer than forty feet from the gates. If they're hampered with burning, they can be prevented from entering."

"Yes, Commander," Efran cautiously agreed. "Request to be dismissed to gear up."

"Granted, Efran. Pass along word to the administrators while you're hilltop," Wendt said.

"Yes, Commander." Efran rose with a salute, then trotted out to scramble up on Kraken. "Let's go. You need to be saddled and I have to weapon up."

*Yay*, Kraken said.

"It's going to get noisy," Efran warned, but he was not alarmed. Sughrue didn't have the wide-open space to advance, and drums close to the gates could affect trolls far up the road.

When they reached the courtyard, Efran handed Kraken over to Squirt before running into the foyer. He looked around for the senior soldier on guard duty, then went over to pat Arne's chest. "We've got trolls coming from

the north and Sughrue's farmboys from the west. The Commander will be using fire arrows at the gates only."

"Yes, Captain; I'll notify Captains Rigdon and Chee to mobilize," Arne said blankly. A call to arms transformed Arne from a sentimental whistler to a military automaton.

"Good." Efran ran upstairs to lean into the workroom doorway. Estes and DeWitt looked up, immediately alert, as Efran told them, "The Commander's scouts have come back with word that we'll have trolls at the gates at the same time that Sughrue's trying to cross the Passage. Don't let any civilians down to the Lands for a little while."

"All right, Efran. We'll find Minka," DeWitt said.

"Thank you; I'm going back down," Efran said, and turned out again.

Downstairs in his quarters, he considered his weapons. The breastplate and helmet were essential, given the trolls, and his bow and quiver second nature. But he passed over the long sword for the partly serrated knife, which had proven unexpectedly useful. He mulled over a defense for the trolls' stone touch, but if they were carrying clubs, it meant they didn't intend to use it. At any rate, trolls preferred breaking heads.

Outside his quarters, he looked down the corridor to see if he might spot Minka. Not seeing her, he left it to DeWitt to find her.

Efran went out to the courtyard as Squirt was bringing Kraken over, saddled and bridled. Efran leapt up into the saddle, then paused to watch drums being handed out to the drum corps. Captain Chee had called up the younger, smaller boys—Javier, Chilcott, Enon, Eymor, Salk, Telo, Tomer, and the Southerners MacCaa and Dirkes—who were at a disadvantage fighting but still tireless drummers. The Eurasian Henris, too inexperienced yet for troll warfare, managed to insert himself in the drum line because he couldn't bear to be left out.

After the renewed interest in the war drums at the defense of the barricade two months ago, Pia's Polonti, under Conte's direction, had crafted genuine Polonti drums from hollowed-out hickory stumps with goatskin drumheads. Arriving at the courtyard beating out a practice cadence, the drummers carried their drums on straps along with large, padded mallets that produced a robust sound. When Efran saluted them in approval, they snapped to attention, barking, "Captain!" Smiling, he rode on down ahead of them.

Efran rode up to the wall gates to look over the preparations. Scores of arrows were point-down in buckets of pitch while torches burned on either side of the gates. The faerie trees, sensing trouble and disliking the flames intensely, shed many old leaves and twisted their branches together tightly to hold them up out of harm's way. These reinforced branches were also good at pummeling invaders.

The alarms were not ringing yet, and would not be rung until the enemy came into view. Efran took off his helmet and dismounted at the steps of Barracks A to talk with the Commander. They discussed the feasibility of having men ride up the east banks of the Passage to see if they could spot where Sughrue's troops might be attempting to cross, but however many Wendt sent would then be vulnerable to troll attacks.

So Wendt decided to let Commander Swauger waste time, effort and possibly men trying to cross the roiling Passage. Then the Landers could meet them at the wall if they succeeded in getting over.

"How are the men at the mill gate going to communicate with you?" Efran asked, looking toward the unseen small gate in the wall practically at the Passage.

“They have an alarm bell at that gate as well,” Wendt said. Efran relaxed a little; Wendt always saw to the details.

Efran watched half the drum corps climb onto the roof of the barracks east of Main, and the other half ascend to the roof of Shurtleff’s Fish Market on the west, five on each side. When they were all settled, Efran went to the middle of the street to give the signal to start.

It took the individual drummers a minute to get in rhythm with each other, so Efran signaled a stop and called up, “Eymor is the pacesetter! Follow him!” He pointed to the boy closest to the gates on Shurtleff’s roof, who raised his mallet.

Shurtleff came out wondering what was going on, so Efran walked over to assure him, “You won’t have to listen to it unless your business and your life are in danger from trolls. But I’m going to have them practice for just a minute to make sure they can drum together. All right?”

“Yes, Captain,” Shurtleff acceded, unusually docile.

So Efran returned to the middle of the street to point at Eymor. “Go!”

Eymor began pounding: *bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM! bom bom BOM!* The others picked it up at once, falling into a clean, powerful rhythm. Efran let them drum a minute just for the pleasure of it, then made them stop. He called up, “Eymor, the moment you see the trolls, start drumming. Don’t wait for any other signal. The rest of you help him watch.”

“Yes, Captain!” Eymor called, and they all saluted.

On the patio behind the chapel, Minka and Marguerite fell silent at the sound of the drums. Joshua, playing in the grass nearby, sat up to clap in rhythm with them. The two women looked at each other, holding their breath. When the drums ceased, they both breathed out. “Just a test,” Minka said. “They must be expecting a troll attack.”

“Yes, Efran was afraid of that,” Marguerite said, settling back.

“Where is Justinian?” Minka asked in mild anxiety.

“Checking businesses that have contacts outside the Lands. He gets a lot of useful information from them. They’re hearing about the troll army,” Marguerite said.

“Auntie, what of Verlice? His family and his brewery?” Minka asked fearfully.

Marguerite hesitated, then explained, “When his father was killed in a troll attack several years ago, Verlice and his men set defenses against them. He didn’t describe it all to me except for the crossbows. They pierce not only troll skin, but armor.”

“Oh.” This conversation was making Minka nervous. She looked toward the unseen wall gates. If there were an attack coming, Efran would be right out front to meet it.

Marguerite noted, “Efran asked if there were anything I could do to help, and I might have mentioned some faerie misdirection.” She directed a sly glance to Minka, who sat up. “The problem is,” Marguerite went on, “I’m not comfortable doing it by myself. But, if I had help. . . .”

Minka drew a quick breath. “Oh, Auntie! Do you mean that *I* could help you?”

“If you wanted to,” Marguerite said airily. “Last I heard, you *are* faerie.”

Minka almost squealed. “Tell me what to do!”

Meanwhile, the men waited. After another hour in the sunny afternoon, they started getting drowsy. Thinking, Efran walked Kraken over to the community well to dismount and get a drink. Why would Sughrue attack at all, much less in concert with the trolls? No one joined forces with trolls—they were treacherous, undisciplined, aimless but to satisfy their appetites.

So if the Hollowans weren’t coordinating with the trolls, were the trolls timing their attack with the Hollowans? Thinking on this, Efran remounted Kraken to walk him up the middle of Main, now deserted but for soldiers. No one wanted to be out when the trolls came.

Turning Kraken to face the wall gates again, Efran looked west to the unseen mill gate and then north past the old stone bridge. No, the trolls wouldn’t coordinate with anyone else. They could hardly coordinate with each other, having not enough reasoning ability to see the benefit. Unless the two forces came at exactly the same time, he could be assured that it was coincidental.

A bell began clanging in the west, and all heads jerked toward it. That was the mill gate alarm bell. At the same time, Eymor began banging his drum, and his drummers joined in. The men spun north, where a mighty mass of roaring trolls was pounding down the main road toward the old stone bridge. The archers at the wall gates began pulling out tarred arrows, lighting them in the torches, and then aiming at the surging horde.

From the middle of Main, Efran breathed, “So you are together. Come, then.”

As the archers let off their volley of flaming arrows, the ground beneath their feet rose lightly like a swell of the sea all down Main. The men startled, some falling down, but most of them darting off the street onto the sidewalk. Meanwhile, the fire arrows hit a fair number of trolls, who burst into flames.

At the same time, the swells caused the buckets of tar to fall over, and tar poured out of them in wide, deep currents down Main. Men watched, stupefied, as a river of tar engulfed a few men’s boots, and Kraken’s hooves. He tried to step out of the flow, but all four feet were quickly, solidly tarred onto the street.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 21

The amount of tar filling the street was obviously many times as that contained in the buckets. Efran’s stomach dropped at the apprehension that, again, he had unwittingly summoned Lues. And Efran was not ready. He had no knowledge. As for the piece—

Removing his helmet to drop it, Efran looked up at the stretch of black street on which his immobile horse stood. *This is a game board, and I am the piece that must be played. But I cannot move.*

Without the necessary knowledge, he would die. Regardless, he would evict Lues. That was his duty. Ultimately, that's all he needed to know.

As the fiery trolls reeled toward the gates, Efran shouted, "Douse the torches! Douse the trolls! Keep them back from the tar!"

Men on the east side of the road ran back to the barracks for water; those on the west ran into Shurtleff's. They easily drenched the torches, but the flaming trolls were a different matter. The men couldn't get in front of the gates, because anyone who stepped into the street was stuck. And going outside the gates, in the midst of the trolls, was suicidal.

A few men brought over construction boards to lay in the tar so that those who were trapped in the street could step out of their boots and run over the boards to the sidewalk. Six were able to get free this way. But the boards lasted for only a few minutes before sinking into the tar.

As everyone nervously watched the flaming trolls stagger toward the gates, several men began laying boards from the sidewalk to Kraken. "Captain! We're almost to you!" one man shouted. Kraken's ears twitched.

And Efran thought, *How many times has this horse saved my life? Well, he was the one to find me in De'Ath's darkness. And then he dragged me and Truro out of the bog, where we both would have died. And he stopped Leila's carriage from running over me when I was trying to get Minka out of the faerie hole. And those are just the recent times.*

So Efran turned to shout, "No, use the boards to get men across to the mill gate! If the few there now don't get backup, Sughrue's army will overrun them!"

The men froze in dismay, and Efran roared, "That's an order!"

"Yes, Captain!" Mathurin shouted, gesturing. And they started placing a wide line of boards to the barracks, where hundreds of men were waiting to cross. As they began running over the boards which then began sinking, more men began laying boards to allow the men to stream across.

An Abbey soldier attempted to climb the gate with a water bucket, which he tossed onto the nearest burning troll. That did partially extinguish him, but the climber lost his balance so that one foot slipped into the tar, which crept up over the top of his boot. Now he was stuck right at the gates, where the trolls were swarming. The only reason they hadn't come over the gates was the war drums that drove them mad. And the young drummers fiercely kept it up.

Efran leaned down to stroke Kraken's neck. "We will get out together."

Kraken nodded. *You are my human.*

"That I am," Efran said. The still-burning troll, weaving erratically, had a few feet left between him and the gates. Then all he had to do was drop a burning lock of hair, or a fragment of clothing into the tar for the resultant conflagration to engulf Efran and his horse.

Then he heard Marguerite's voice: *How can we help you, Efran?*

"Can you move a burning troll away from the street full of tar?" he asked blandly.



*Let me see*, she said.

A moment later, the lurching, fiery troll fell down backwards. The other trolls fell away from him. Flat on his back, he began flopping back north on the road in an involuntary manner, as though he were being kicked. Efran peered; the men gaped at the dead but nonetheless ambulatory troll. He came to rest in the center of the road, where he would not ignite anything else.

The next-closest burning troll was likewise knocked over and scooted in fits and starts to lie atop the first, which was just about burned out by now. Efran heard, *Oh, nasty things!*

“Minka? Is that you?” he asked, stupefied.

*No*, she said.

“That sounds like you,” he argued.

*Shut up*, she said.

Meanwhile, Estes and DeWitt were watching all this from the second-floor balcony of the fortress. The hilltop regiments were stymied in their effort to reach the walls, for the tar blocked both switchbacks. The only way down appeared to be via the northwestern hillside, which was riddled with weak spots and camouflaged holes opening to the caverns below, home of the snobbles and now the eelfish, again.

Sensing the weakness in the ground, the horses shied away from the rocky hillside, so the men descended on foot. Once reaching Chapel Road West, they ran down back roads to join the defense of the mill gate.

They were just in time to intercept the Hollowan soldiers swarming over the walls. The Lands’ defenders were busy fighting for their lives, so new arrivals took a few seconds to ring the bell before drawing their swords.

The occasional clang of the mill gate alarm told the Abbey officers that their situation was desperate. But it was worsening on Main, for while the burning trolls had been put out of play, there were hundreds more at the gates. The drums had kept them back for hours now, but the boys were weakening, and there were not nearly enough drummers to stave off this many trolls.

They climbed over the gates to be immediately trapped in the tar. But the first ones were promptly knocked down and walked over by those following, so each wave of incoming trolls provided stepping stones for the next. And the Abbey men could see no way to fight them.

The first troll who reached the sidewalk on his feet was kicked back into the tar by an Abbey defender. But another troll caught his foot to pull him in. The defenders on either side of him grabbed his arms to pull him out. They succeeded, but he lost his boots and almost his pants in the rescue.

Aceto, one of the new Polonti, a large and powerful man, tore the club out of the hand of a troll flailing in the tar. Aceto bashed in his skull with it, then began hammering all other trolls within reach. He did a lot of damage from the sidewalk. Troll bones shattered under the blows of the club just as readily as a man’s would. So other large Abbey men began using the trolls’ weapons against them.

But there were so many pouring over the gates and walls that they were already running wild through the Lands. A few Abbey defenders found spears or javelins effective, but they had to make sure they killed with the first toss, or they saw their spears come hurtling back at them.

All this while, Wendt was not idle. As he received reports from Barr or Gabriel, he visualized the situation in his head to deploy units to weak areas via routes hidden from trolls and Hollowans. So the trolls that did manage entry into the Lands found themselves stalked by their prey. And the defenders at the mill gates began to push the Hollowan invaders back.

Efran, seeing only the endless wave of trolls drown the Lands' defenses, said, "Minka, can you and Marguerite lure the trolls to Sughrue's men coming over the Passage?"

*We'll try*, he heard.

A few minutes later, there was the strong scent of jasmine rising from the gates and the walls. The trolls fell down, covering their faces or clutching their throats. They were gagging and retching, crawling away from the noxious fumes. Many of those closest to the gates died hanging onto them.

Those who were caught in the bottleneck behind them began using their clubs on any troll that wouldn't go forward. But as a result, they simply spread out farther in the meadows around the wall. Until—

Trolls' sensitive noses began twitching, and their wiry-haired heads snapped to the west. "Men," they said to each other. "Men, and horse flesh. Oooh, horse flesh." And they abandoned the stinky gates and walls to begin trotting west on the road toward the new bridge over the Passage.

The trolls approaching from the north began cutting through the meadow to get ahead of their kin in pursuit of the delicious horse and man flesh, not skinny but muscled with good meat. Yes, much good meat and even some fat, too, which was a delicacy all by itself. Umm, good fat globules, much altogether.

The vanguard of the trolls that had survived the fire arrows and the stinky jasmine resented the intrusion of these latecomers, so began bashing any that overtook them. Those fought back as necessary, but the lure of the flesh ahead was too strong to be put off, even by fighting. So they arrived at the partly unblocked bridge to surprise fancy soldiers on sleek horses, and then there was fun.

The horses panicked and bolted; the men in natty buff-colored uniforms drew back on cute little bows. And the bleeding, exhausted Abbey defenders caught their breath, edging up to the jasmine-scented wall to watch ravenous trolls attack the bridge in such an uncontrollable rush that most of them fell into the Passage on either side to drown. Unbelievable as it was, as far as the defenders could see, the trolls were keeping to the road (or north of it) as they stampeded westward. The assault on the Abbey walls slacked off.

Within a half hour, the northbound road past the old stone bridge was clear; the fighting had completely relocated to the west. So all the men on the west side of the tar ran in that direction. In fact, the remainder of the trolls that had gotten into the east Lands came running back west as well, plunging into the tar in their efforts to reach the delicious-smelling flesh.

Shortly, Wendt was receiving reports confirming that the trolls had completely evacuated the Lands. He was also perceiving the undercurrent from the chapel that had helped push them away. So, all the intruders were gone, except. . . .

The old one. The very bad one that had drawn the vindictive women, the Miasmata, the trolls, the Hollowans, and the giant Goulven that did real harm. That old one was still here, underground.

Efran, sitting on Kraken, sensed it, too. The master gamesman below was just getting started. As Efran waited,

he looked to the crucifix in the keep. *I'm just a piece on a game board, but all of the boards on Earth are just a bauble in Your hand. I have no knowledge, so You have to enable me to evict this plague as I'm supposed to. I don't mind dying, but I can't bear failing.*

At that time, the tar dissolved from the street. Dead and injured trolls remained, as did the scrap boards that the men had used as bridges. But Kraken picked up each foot, all four of them, in relief. "Shh. Stay," Efran whispered, drawing back on the reins. He was waiting, watching, listening.

Slender red tentacles came up out of the street underneath Kraken to encircle Efran's leg and hip. They pulled him off the saddle and down into the ground. Kraken hopped to one side, rearing, then stretched his nose down to smell the ground, and paw at it.

Efran hit something hard face down. He waited for his head to clear, then hoisted himself to stand on a ledge in a black cavern. The ledge was dry, but he heard dripping water not far off. There was also a blue bioluminescence in the water about ten feet below him that dimly illuminated his surroundings. A fog drifted up from the depths of the cavern to engulf him, and he immediately felt sleepy, confused, disoriented. He stiffened against it, knowing that it was a preliminary attack, but it continued to seep into him.

He felt something else close by, and slowly turned to look. There was a pair of eyes outlined in red that hovered in the air a few feet from his shoulder. They were large eyes, together about four feet across. All that was visible were the rim of the lids and a suggestion of eyebrows. There were no irises. They communicated, *Welcome to my abode, Efran.*

"You are Lues," Efran said, straining against the drowsiness.

*I am many things, the eyes said, gliding to face him. I dwell many places.*

"You have to leave the Abbey Lands," Efran said.

*You are not able to banish me.*

"No, I'm just the messenger. The banishing has been done by someone better," Efran said. He looked down at the water below his feet, but looked away again quickly. It was trying to draw him down, and after his experience with the water giant, he would not be lured that way again.

*If I am banished, then you must take my place.*

"How so?" Efran asked. He avoided looking at the eyes.

*This is the Realm of the Dead. None who enter here leave. You are dead, Efran.*

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 22

Was he dead? Efran couldn't tell, being impeded by the Miasma of Stupidity. But he didn't know that, either. Nonetheless, he said, "All right, I stay and you leave. That's what you just said, so that's what you have to do."

The eyes came up closer, so that Efran turned his face away. There was a horrible odor of decay. Efran winced, “You stink.”

*That is your body decomposing.*

“Fine, let me do it peace. Get out,” he said.

*Think of being trapped here for all eternity.*

“And that whole time, I’ll be gloating over the fact that I saw you go,” Efran said.

*Minka will remarry, and Joshua will grow up without you.*

“But they’ll be free of you, which means more,” Efran said. Unable to think clearly, he responded according to the one imperative he knew.

The eyes drew away, and Efran was left in the darkness, with only the blue bioluminescence below him. He waited, knowing that there was more to come. Lues had not left yet.

An undetermined length of time passed. Efran took off his heavy breastplate, then reached down to touch the ledge beneath him, which felt solid. So he sat, finding that he could lean back against the wall of the cavern. There was no chittering; there were no snobbles. So Efran concentrated on clearing his mind.

He succeeded a little, perceiving how Lues had orchestrated many attacks on the Abbey. He had enticed Showalter with the possibility of ruling the Lands, and Showalter was the one who sent the snobbles. Before then, Lues had infected Loizeaux and Adele with lust for the Abbey Treasury; Lues had also stirred up the water giant and empowered Mounoussamy.

De’Ath had been drawn to the Lands by Lues (through the evil books that the Librarian had destroyed, though Efran did not know about them). Lues had reached east to Venegas to infect them with slavery through De’Ath. Then Lues had looked west to Crescent Hollow to suggest conquest. And from the very beginning of Efran’s charter, Lues had directed Wyse in his months’ long charade before he finally made his move.

*Now, because of my lack of knowledge, Lues has brought me down,* Efran thought. Is this what death felt like? This wasn’t heaven; was it hell? Had he been deluded that there even was a heaven? Had Therese likewise been deluded, or was he simply unredeemed?

That was entirely possible—in fact, it was the most likely explanation. Efran could not see Therese as having been so entirely wrong; she was too consistent. Of course, the insane could construct worlds of extreme consistency, but Therese was not insane. She was grounded in the practical, the consequential, and the merciful. And nothing that she taught him had ever been proven wrong.

Lues whispered, *Nothing? Not even what you’re experiencing now?*

Efran didn’t bother looking for the eyes. “No, nothing. She would know nothing of hell or life without God.” He had to speak; he had to answer Lues without knowing why, except—this was a requisite of the game.

*She prayed for you, which was an exercise in futility.*

“Not all prayers are answered as we wish,” Efran said with vague regret. “I can easily believe myself unfit for

heaven. You have no idea,” he began, shaking his head. Then he decided that this old malevolence probably did have an idea of how badly Efran had behaved. “At any rate, I’m here to take your place, so you have to leave.” It was hard work, keeping the mental fog out. It keep creeping back in.

*I can make you live again. To have Minka again. To be Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands again.*

“I will miss Minka,” Efran said, a piece of him crumbling. “But she’s young; she’ll marry again. And she is a better Lady Sovereign than I was its lord.” Belatedly noticing Lues’ omission, he added, “And my last act as Lord Sovereign is to order you to leave.”

*And if I refuse?*

“I’ll wait. I seem to have all the time in the world now,” Efran said. Perhaps it was the Miasma at work, but he saw nothing else to do. And the only way he found to resist the drowsiness was to talk.

*Are you not hungry? You don’t want a nice medium-rare steak, still in its juices?*

Efran laughed, “Are you trying to tempt me with food? Maybe that would work better if I were hungry. But I’m dead, so I’m not.” Here, he did notice the incongruity of Lues’ trying to interest him in sex and food after having told him he was dead. But he couldn’t exert the mental effort to examine this.

The eyes departed again, and Efran leaned his head back to wait. How long had he been down here? He didn’t know. . . . He jerked up from the compulsion to sleep and blurted, “Interesting how Time becomes irrelevant when you’re dead. But that makes sense: dying puts you outside of Time. So of course it doesn’t matter.”

*Then neither does it matter that I am here.* With that reply from Lues, Efran became vaguely aware of the strange nature of this give-and-take. Lues had the power to destroy him—didn’t he? But here they were simply talking. And Lues’ replies were not those of a gamesman who controlled the field; he spoke as though Efran were an opponent who must be overcome by mere words. *So that’s the game. Is it?* Efran thought.

He sat up to look at the dark water again. Where were Lues’ tentacles? Why hadn’t he used them to drag Efran underwater? Then he focused on the blue bioluminescence. It had formed lines that made a rectangle. And there were lines within the rectangle that made it look like a game board. Efran laughed to himself, *The tentacles don’t fit on the game board.* So what did fit?

Words. Again, it was a matter of words. So Efran replied, “Oh, no, it matters that you’re here, because that was my last assignment. I failed some of the jobs the Commander gave me, but I never walked away from any of them. This is my last duty, and I’ll see it done. You have to leave.”

*You are lonely.*

Efran looked down to see the red eyes reflected in the blue game board below him. Since there was no use denying how he felt, he acknowledged, “I miss the laughter.”

Watching the board as he said this, he saw that the interior blue lines seemed to mark out a pattern of blocks and open spaces. Their conversation was being recorded on the game board, and Efran’s replies either blocked the open spaces or let Lues through. His last comment had allowed Lues to advance a space.

What? Efran leaned farther out to look at the board again: Yes, something essential of Lues was there in his words—and Efran was in his words as well. As he struggled to understand this, the Miasma fell heavily on him.

He sank back on the rock.

Lues was telling him, *You can laugh again. Leave me be, and I will return you above to sunlight, and fresh air, to the friends who stood by you in the insurrection and the usurpation by De'Ath. I alone can return you to life.*

Efran was silent for a while, noting that Lues had hit on the battles that had wounded him the most. He murmured his deepest regret: "I won't see Joshua grow up."

*You could be there for him.* Lues advanced again through the blue lines.

"Toby, Noah, Ivy, and Pia," Efran said. "They were the first children I brought to the Abbey. I won't see them grown, either. And I was just getting to know Ella." He wasn't talking to Lues anymore; he was just expressing his thoughts. He couldn't concentrate enough to speak strategically.

*They need you as their father.* That was another step forward for Lues, but Efran wasn't watching the board anymore, either.

"Minka," Efran whispered, looking up to the unseen light. He let the tears come now. "She was the only one who loved me. She was faithful, even when I hurt her. She believed in me when I was crippled; she took me back after I abandoned her and rode alone to Crescent Hollow. That will be the hardest part: never seeing her again."

*I can give you back to her.* Two more lines, two more open spaces would bring Lues to his desired end.

Efran closed his eyes, sighing. "But that's an empty gift. I want to give her something better: the Abbey Lands cleansed of your stink. That's worth her living the rest of her life without me." With that, Efran unknowingly laid a whole row of blocks before Lues. There was no further avenue of advance.

Efran was suddenly pinned by a terrible soul-crushing pressure. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced, as if he were being torn apart from the inside out. From somewhere deep beyond his conscious hearing, Lues informed him that this pressure would not be lifted until he said, "*You may stay.*" Efran could not think; he could not reason; he could only blurt out the primary thought of his brain.

And the thought he blurted was, "I'm not going to make it."

This may have been true, but it was not what would relieve the crushing weight. So he continued to writhe as he heard, *You may stay. You may stay. You may stay. You may stay. You may stay.* To which he could only gasp, "I'm not going to make it."

He did not know how long this went on; he was only peripherally aware of the red eyes over him and the blue lines flickering erratically below him. Nor did he know why all he could say was, "I'm not going to make it." But this was his soul's confession forced out by the suffocating weight, and it was directed to the Unseen One above. It was his final prayer.

Unknown hours later, the pressure suddenly ceased. Efran barely opened his eyes—yes, it was gone. He could breathe; he could think. The relief was almost overwhelming. He lay there bathing in the quiet, gentle air, with the soothing sound of gently lapping water below him. And his next thoughts were of getting out.

As he started to sit up, the crushing weight descended again, and Efran fell, writhing. Lues laughed at his naiveté, to think that the Old One would let go of him when he was so close to his goal. And Efran heard the unspoken assurance that repeating "*You may stay*" was the only means of release for him.

Noxious fumes billowed up from the black water below, choking him. He hung suspended in the torment, unable to voice anything.

Suddenly Lues vanished, as did the pressure and the game board. Only broken pieces of the bioluminescence remained. Tense, Efran listened to the lapping of the cavern waters. It was not over; he knew it was not over; the evil remained.

He hung waiting for so long that he unconsciously relaxed, seeking the release of sleep. When he had almost drifted away, the crushing, wrenching weight fell hard on him again. He involuntarily cried out, so he and Lues knew that he had his voice again.

The imperative to say “*You may stay*” returned, but this time it was different. Efran saw it now as a liberator, a grace, a merciful release. Behind the words were freedom, light, and love, Minka and Joshua. He could see them anxiously waiting for him to say the words that would restore him to them. Minka was pleading, “Say it, Efran, say it, please!” Joshua was crying, reaching out to him.

Efran believed it. He believed that those three words would restore him to everything above, everything worth having. He barely opened his eyes to see tears streaming down her sweet face as she whispered, “Please, Efran, come back to us. Just say it!” Frayed to the core, utterly spent, Efran opened his mouth and said,

“No.”

He couldn’t help it. He was a soldier, and his Commander had drilled into him that duty overrode everything—his desires, his hopes, even his life. Even in failure and despair, he had to be ready to die at any time, including now.

The red eyes filled the cavern around him as Lues roared, *Die, and die; I will rule here forever!* The cavern walls cracked and began crumbling around Efran, half burying him, and the black cavern waters cascaded over him while he was trapped in the rubble. He could not see, or speak, or breathe.

The blue iridescence was obliterated; the game was over. And Efran lost consciousness.

He woke when Nakham took his arm to help him up. “Here, you’re in the middle of Main. Let’s get you out of everyone’s way,” Nakham said. In fact, he was lying in the same spot where he had been dragged under.

“Oh.” Efran looked around hazily as carts and riders passed without seeming to see him. “I . . . wait.” Disoriented, he stopped in the crosswalk, but Nakham urged him on to the sidewalk.

Efran staggered on, still dizzy. “There was something . . . important. . . . Wait. Did I—? Ohhh.” He remembered, then, falling to his knees. “Nakham, I failed.”

“Why do you say that?” Nakham asked in mild curiosity, hoisting him again.

“Lues is still there. He said he would rule there forever. Why am I even on this street?” Efran muttered.

“Actually, he’s gone. You did it, Efran,” Nakham said, pulling him up to the sidewalk. They began walking south toward the entrance to the old switchback.

“No, he said—said. . . .” Efran had trouble remembering what he said.

“I’m afraid he lied to you, Efran. Hard to believe that an ancient evil power would do that, but, there you are,” Nakham said.

Efran stopped walking as clarity gradually came to him. “He lied. And, he was forced to leave. But how? I didn’t have the knowledge. I still don’t know anything,” Efran rambled.

Nakham replied, “What knowledge did you need, but that this was your duty?” Nakham prompted him on, but Efran was having trouble placing one foot in front of the other when he couldn’t feel them.

“That’s all I needed to know?” Efran asked, confused.

“Yes, that you had the authority to evict him. He could argue, bargain with you, torment you, or try to trick you into letting him stay. But when he had tried everything and you held fast, he could do nothing but leave,” Nakham said.

“So he’s gone? Really gone?” Efran asked, waking.

“Yes. He’s gone,” Nakham patiently repeated, guiding him across Chapel Road out of the way of oncoming riders.

They entered the switchback under the faerie trees, which did not react. Nakham drew Efran to the side of the road to let a cart pass whose driver did not see them.

“That’s good, then, isn’t it?” Efran asked.

“Very good, Efran,” Nakham said.

“I feel strange,” Efran said, holding his head.

“It was pretty stressful and, prolonged. It will take a little while to get your feet back underneath you,” Nakham said. They progressed up the switchback while Efran tried to shake off the sense of unreality.

As they passed through the courtyard gates, none of the men standing around acknowledged him. *I am dead, then*, Efran thought. He looked up at the white fortress with tears in his eyes. “Is there something more I need to do here?”

“Yes, I would think so,” Nakham replied. He guided Efran into the foyer and to the door of the keep.

There were a lot people in here, and they were not all soldiers. They were sitting in chairs—not benches—that were on either side of the keep, separated by a white runner that extended from the door to a podium in front of the crucifix. Wearing a very nice suit, Ryal was standing behind the podium. His face had a look of blank shock. And on the steps in front of him—

Efran was momentarily distracted by a man in a suit brushing by him to walk out angrily. The people in the audience had their heads down. And sprawled on the steps was a girl in a cream-colored gown. Face down, she was bitterly crying, “I can’t. I can’t. I can’t do it. I just can’t.” It took him a while to recognize her, but it was Minka.



Efran said, “Well then, maybe you shouldn’t.”

Something happened when he spoke to her—suddenly he was there, physically present. People in the audience swiveled in their chairs toward him. Minka slowly raised herself on shaking arms, then turned to look at him over her shoulder. After a full minute, she whispered, “Efran.”

He bent dubiously. “Are you wearing makeup?” he asked in mild indignation.

With a cry, she lunged toward him, promptly falling over her long dress. Melchior caught her and set her back on her feet so that she could leap onto Efran, gripping him tightly around the neck. There, she cried like a lost child who’d been found.

Estes came over to place a hand on his shoulder. “Efran?”

“Yes?” Efran said, blinking at him. “Nakham says I did it.”

“Father?” a shaky voice inquired at his side.

Shifting Minka in his arms, he said, “Hello, Ella. You look very nice. What’s the occasion?”

Everyone was crowding the aisle, so Efran half-carried Minka out into the foyer where there was more room. He was only vaguely aware of the courtyard alarm bell ringing. DeWitt came up with an evaluative face. “Hello, Efran. Nakham said you did it? You got rid of the Lues?”

“Yes. He didn’t want to leave. I guess it took me a little while. How long has it been?” Efran asked. There was an indefinable sense of the passage of time. He looked around for Nakham, who seemed to have disappeared.

Minka raised her pale face, her eyeliner streaked all down it. Efran exhaled, “There, that’s why you shouldn’t wear it,” he grouched. He pulled out an almost-clean handkerchief (that he didn’t know he had) to wipe her face. “That’s a little better.”

“It’s been a month, as of yesterday,” Minka said, trembling. “Ryal declared you dead yesterday, and I was to be remarried today.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 23

“Ohh,” Efran said sympathetically. “Well, I—” Then he paused, looking dark. “Who were you marrying?”

Everyone who was standing around looked at each other, but he was waiting for Minka to answer. She raised her shoulders, laughing, “I don’t know. Does it matter?”

“Efran! You’re back! I just knew it!” Madea cried, running out of the kitchen. People were thronging through the front doors to see him. She went on, “Well, then! We have a marriage dinner waiting! Are you hungry?” The rooftop bells were ringing jubilantly.

“Yes, actually. Yes, I am,” he said, looking down at his bride. Everyone felt free, then, to pound him on the back or the shoulder and press into the dining hall with the newly remarried. Toby saw him, but instead of greeting him, he caught his breath and ran out the front doors.

The men were thronging around him, many with tears in their eyes. Arne, Martyn, Jehan and Coish, Connor, Krall, Stephanos, Tourse, Hawk, Detler—all the many men who had served under him for years, and some who had only served for a few months. Exuberant and vindicated, they crowded around him. “Shane! Are you healed up?” Efran demanded.

“All good, Captain,” he grinned.

Meanwhile, Joshua was brought to him. As they studied each other, Efran was momentarily shaken by how different he looked after only a month. Joshua evidently felt the same, so Efran did not try to hold him right off. Ashen, Ryal gripped Efran’s arm and then had to sit down. Marguerite came up to hold Efran in one arm and Minka in the other. “Seeing you is such a relief I’ve never felt in my whole life,” she said quietly.

Minka, crying again, said, “She kept telling me you were alive, Efran, but couldn’t tell me when you would be coming back.”

“I thought I was dead the whole time,” he said. Then he said, “Oh, no. Kraken. Where is he?”

Those around him went quiet. DeWitt was the one who finally said, “He wouldn’t leave the street where you disappeared, and bit or kicked anyone who tried to take him away. So he was finally taken to Weber’s about two weeks ago.” Weber was the tanner.

Efran nodded shakily. “I’m sure it couldn’t be helped.” Looking down at Minka, he laughed in his pain, “I barely made it in time to keep you.”

She cried, “Did you happen to notice what I was not doing?” He paused to interpret that, and she pounded on his chest with her little fists. “I wouldn’t say the vows!”

“Oh, he would have kept after you,” Efran said, holding her hands against his chest. He liked them there. Then his head jerked toward the door. He heard distinctive clapping in the foyer.

Going out into the corridor, Efran drew a long breath to see Toby and Tarrant—Weber the tanner’s son—triumphantly leading Kraken toward the dining hall. Efran went up to grasp his neck, and Kraken laid his head on his human’s shoulder. “Next time I disappear, you go with them and wait for me, Stupid,” Efran gasped, not crying.

Kraken was unrepentant. *I let them take me. I got hungry.*

“Toby, Tarrant—thank you. You are good friends,” Efran said, reaching down to grip their shoulders.

Toby said, “He wouldn’t leave the street because he knew you were alive, Efran. So Weber let us keep him in their yard until you got back.”

“I must thank your father, Tarrant,” Efran said.

“He was fine with it,” Tarrant shrugged. He was already a hero for finding the Lady Minka after she had gone missing.

Justinian came up to pat Efran's shoulder. "Minka wanted to marry me, of course, but I told her, 'No, no—the old man will show up again, and I wish to keep my facial bones in their original elegant configuration.'" Justinian was two years younger than Efran.

"Good call, Justinian," Efran said. He was stiffly trying to ignore the woman at his side.

"Oh, do you know Lady Vories? We've been seen about town together a few times," Justinian added.

Efran tried to sound normal. "Hello, Vories."

"Efran." She puckered at him. He veered back toward the dining hall.

When he was finally able to sit with Minka beside him and Estes and DeWitt across from him, he said quietly, "Now, a month ago—the trolls? And Sughrue's army?"

Wardly put plates of suckling pig, rice, greens, crayfish, and custard in front of him. Efran sighed over the feast, but mostly over Minka pressing into his arm. Then he looked up in devastation. "Madea was going to feed your new husband her suckling pig?"

Minka sat up. "No, Efran, she knew all along you'd come back!"

"Oh," he said guiltily, picking up his fork. Minka raised her eyebrows innocently. Not that she was *lying*, because if anyone did believe, it would be Madea.

Gabriel approached, saluting. Efran turned as if to stand, but Gabriel said, "As you were, Captain. Commander Wendt sends his congratulations on the successful completion of your assignment, and requests that you come down to the barracks at your earliest convenience tomorrow."

Efran could hardly keep the tears back. Wendt's praise was like a commendation from heaven. "Thank the Commander for me. I will be down—" Minka nudged him and he corrected himself: "The Lady and I will be down tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, sir." Gabriel saluted, though it was unnecessary, and turned to take the Captain's response to the Commander in the lower barracks.

Felice brought Joshua fresh from having his wraps changed to set him on Efran's leg. Joshua leaned toward the custard with his mouth open, so Efran fed him a bite as he looked to his administrators for an answer to the question he had asked several minutes ago.

"The trolls," Estes said. "Yes, they practically wiped out Sughrue's army, so we gave the survivors sanctuary while we took care of the remaining trolls. We put fresh men on the war drums, and once the tar disappeared from Main Street, the men refilled the tar buckets and resumed the fire arrow barrage. All that, and falling into the Passage, took out about three quarters of them. The rest of the trolls ran back north. We think they'll forget what happened and attack us again shortly."

"What kind of explanation did Sughrue have for that attack, after inviting us to their Autumn Faire?" Efran asked bitterly. He put his fork down. Either Madea was cooking the suckling pig differently, or he just didn't care for it any more. Ryal had quietly sat beside DeWitt. Giardi had refused to come watch Minka be remarried, as she also knew that Efran was alive. Ryal had just sent a message down to her, asking her to come on up.

DeWitt said wryly, “After the survivors, about fifty, returned to Crescent Hollow, we received a terse invitation from his administrators to peaceful relations, which we accepted just as tersely. But I have to tell you, Efran, that your coming back has probably saved us. Everyone—even little hamlets here and there—were harrumphing and posturing. That’s one reason we felt Minka should go ahead and remarry.”

“To whom? Who was it?” Efran asked, eating crayfish now. Joshua looked over, so Efran picked out a little meat for him. The toddler chomped down so that Efran had to quickly withdraw his fingers.

“Surchatain Sewell’s Commander Tuiren,” Estes said. Minka sighed deeply in relief, holding Efran’s arm.

Efran looked down at her. “Did you like him at all?”

“For an uncle, he’d be fine,” she murmured.

Efran studied DeWitt. “When Tuiren gets back to Venegas without her, will that make Sewell mad at us again?”

DeWitt shook his head. “Sewell is probably thanking whatever god he worships. Once Tuiren married Minka, it’s possible he’d start looking at Venegas as a vassal state.”

Efran wiped his hands fiercely on his napkin. “You would make a Venegasan Lord Sovereign? What about all the Polonti here? Or the Southerners? There are many good men!”

Twining her hand in his shirt, Minka said miserably, “I couldn’t marry any of my pets, Efran.”

Estes then admitted, “Ah, Tuiren wouldn’t have been Lord Sovereign, exactly.”

“What exactly, then?” Efran demanded.

Since his administrators hesitated, Ryal offered, “We drew up a unique agreement that Tuiren would be ‘Lord Commander Otiose of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.’ This he signed.”

Efran blinked. “‘Otiose.’ What does that mean?”

“Ahhh,” DeWitt said, “you could translate it as, ‘in name only.’”

“He agreed to that?” Efran said in surprise.

“We explained it as an honorific,” Estes admitted. They hadn’t exactly *lied* to Tuiren, but—

“But he was expecting to sleep with her,” Efran said through gritted teeth.

“Not for the first month,” Minka said, and he looked down at her. “Something to do with a ritual of cleansing, because I told them—everyone but him—that I wouldn’t sleep with him,” she shrugged. Then she sighed, “Auntie was sure you would be back, Efran. We just needed a figurehead until you came back.”

“You’re about to make me feel sorry for him,” Efran grunted.

Estes said, “Eh, hold off. He divorced his wife to marry Minka.” Efran almost spat out his rice, laughing. Joshua, watching, spat out his mouthful, too.

There was much more Efran needed to catch up on, but he was beginning to feel the effects of this drawn-out battle. So he listened to the children, who clustered around him to air a lengthy list of complaints which mostly had to do with their energetic new tutor.

Oh, and, he did see that Calix was still with them. Upon asking, he found that Lilou was still working at Firmin's. Those updates were both reassuring and discouraging. Following, he commissioned Toby to guide the new tutor as to the best ways to get the children to cooperate.

That evening, when Efran climbed over Kraken to get into bed with Minka, she lay on him to start crying again. "I've hardly slept for a month. It's been such a nightmare. I know it's worth it, though I don't know how, yet. I only hope you never have to do anything like that again."

"Don't worry; we're all done," he murmured, gathering her up. He paused at an obstruction between them, then pulled up the striped coat he had worn as a 13-year-old walking from Eledith to Westford. "What . . . ?"

Holding him, she murmured, "I slept in it every night that you were gone. It was the only way I could get to sleep."

"Oh, my poor Minka," he said, dropping it to the floor as he tucked her into his side again. Then he suddenly sat straight up. She sat up, staring, as he demanded, "What were you and Marguerite doing with the trolls?"

"Oh." She lay back down to make him lie down so that she could cuddle him. "Just a little faerie misdirection. We didn't try anything extreme. It was nothing."

He groaned, wanting to make an issue of it, but fell asleep instead.

The following morning, July 30th, Efran awoke as though coming out of a nightmare. As he lay there looking up at the ceiling of his own bedroom, with Minka scrunched tightly in his side, he realized that the constant sense of oppression that he had been feeling from the beginning was gone.

He looked aside, concentrating. From his very first days as Lord Sovereign, after every victory, every deliverance, he'd felt only the briefest relief before the sense set in that there was something else coming, another attack at hand. He never understood it, but it had always proved true: the assaults were almost relentless. Now, that foreboding had evaporated.

That did not mean there would be no more attacks—there would always be enemies watching for an opening. But there was no longer one right underneath them, wreaking havoc from directly under the Lands. Thinking on this, Efran got up to inform the sentries that he and the Lady would be going down to Barracks A in about an hour, so needed Kraken and Rose saddled. Then he got a bite from the kitchen and went to bathe in the men's bath house out back.

When Minka woke to find him gone, she dressed hastily to go look for him. Having been informed by the back-door sentry of his whereabouts, she had barely been restrained by Gaul from going into the men's bath house. Nonetheless, Efran got word to hurry it up, which he did.

He apologized to Soames for taking her out of Law class that morning, but Soames told him the administrators had declared a holiday in honor of his homecoming. Efran laughed, "Wonderful. Does that mean we won't get laundry done or meals cooked?"

Soames assured him, "If the workers take a holiday, the men will step in, Captain. We were crying like babies to see you yesterday."

Efran sighed, "I was just as grateful. Thank you, Soames."

Soames saluted, and Efran stepped out back to see that Joshua was happily attending the children in their play. Since Kraken would be carrying Efran this morning, Gaunter was drafted to pull loads of soil and compost to the new garden areas. This he did willingly, for apples.

With Minka clinging to his hand, Efran went out to the courtyard to see Kraken and Rose being brought, and eight men leading their horses: Connor, Martyn, Truro, Krall, Jehan, Coish, Hawk, and Teschner.

They saluted him nicely in unison, but Efran scowled, "*Eight* of you? To get me and the lady down to the barracks? Don't tell me you're all on holiday as well."

Connor replied not at all smugly, "Yes sir, by order of Administrator DeWitt, Captain."

"Well, we'll have a talk with him," Efran grunted, but Minka was grinning at her favorite men.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 24

Because Minka had missed Efran so much, she allowed him to hoist her onto Rose without complaining. Then the ten of them rode out of the gates and down the old switchback in formation.

While Minka chatted with the men riding behind her on the switchback, Efran was looking down Main. There *was* a change; he could feel it. The rooftop bells were tolling beautifully, quietly; the air seemed purer, the shops cleaner, the people happier. There was just a different spirit in the air.

As the group of them came through the faerie trees at the end of the switchback, Efran looked up at the profusion of small white flowers with the heady nutmeg scent that settled around them. Kraken was high-stepping so that Rose had to pick up her hooves a little as well.

Once off the switchback, they had to stop at the first crosswalk for a pair of ladies to take their time crossing. Wearing new dresses from Elvey's, they nodded at Lord Efran and Lady Minka. He nodded back, smiling, but Minka was busy talking to Coish at her right.

Then, somehow, there seemed to be a page turning above them. A great page turned in the air, and the new spread of pages revealed the Firmament. Efran, Minka, and their bodyguards, all on their horses, stood in the center of the universe with the brilliant stars in the blackness of space spreading below them forever. The sun blazed on their left; the moon shone on their right, and the planets whirled in their appointed orbits around them. Above were the foaming waters, pouring endlessly down the far reaches of the spheres. And in the midst of the waters high above were windows lit with a glorious golden light (all rendered in phenomenological language, of course).

But the party's attention was drawn to a group of people standing on the Firmament before them. In the center were Alessandrini, the very first Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and Perrodin. Next to them were the other three men Efran had seen in the portal, whom he now recognized as the Fortress' first administrators. This group was regarding the current Landers with glad satisfaction.

But there were more standing with them: Nakham, Nonesuch, Asmuch, Aleph, Captain Younge, Second Cutch, Captain Gores, Cassel, and many other soldiers Efran had known who had died in duty. With a gasp, Efran saw Blake, who had been hanged for disavowing his loyalty oath to Lightfoot. Blake now returned a smile of shared vindication to his Captain. Larisse was there, with her arms around Kewe. Behind them all, Ino spread in the form of a sun shower.

The Landers on horseback had only a moment to gape at this group before Lord Alessandrini said, "Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, we have come to recognize the service you performed in evicting that old curse, the Lues, from the Abbey Lands. Your victory was achieved with humility and perseverance. And I will acknowledge that my wife, the Lady Sovereign Perrodin, believed in you when everyone else doubted. Such is the great benefit of our Ladies."

He looked at Minka wryly as he said this, and Perrodin smiled at her in kinship. Minka, and all the bodyguard, were watching in stunned silence.

Alessandrini went on to say, "The Father of lights has granted us to give you what you shall request for your service, Lord Efran. What would you have done for you?"

All eyes looked to Efran. His heart lurched up in immediate, wordless response. Alessandrini said, "This request is granted you. Peace be upon you all." He raised his hand in a benediction; the others with him lifted their hands in farewell, and the page turned back.

The party found themselves waiting at the yellow crosswalk while the nicely dressed ladies finished crossing and stepped onto the eastern sidewalk. Wiping his mouth, Efran glanced around and nudged Kraken forward. His party followed, but Minka had stopped chatting.

They walked their horses silently down Main until arriving at Barracks A. The ten of them dismounted for their horses to be taken to the stables in back. Pausing at the steps, Efran took Minka's hand to lead her through the open doorway.

Commander Wendt and Gabriel were standing at his desk when the party entered. Efran saluted and said, "Captain Efran, Lady Minka and a bunch of men reporting as summoned, Commander."

Gabriel nodded, opening the door to the conference room behind them. Wendt said, "At ease, Captain. Come have a seat; your bunch of men may sit as well, if there's room." He picked up a sheaf of handwritten notes to carry as he felt his way into the conference room.

"Thank you, Commander," Efran said quietly, with downcast eyes. He looked momentarily devastated.

Wendt turned into the conference room to feel for the chair at the head of the table. He minutely adjusted the dark glasses over the white orbs of his eyes as he sat. There was a window on the opposite wall, facing south. As it was a pleasant morning, the window stood open, including the glass panes.

Efran took the chair to Wendt's right, but pulled out Minka's chair next to his before sitting himself. Gabriel and Barr sat to Wendt's left. The eight bodyguards then took places around the table as they had been invited to do.

Efran glanced up as Viglian, Captain Towner, and Captain Stites entered the room. The bodyguards immediately jumped up to offer their seats to the officers, who declined, standing along the wall instead.

Evaluating this behavior, Efran looked to Wendt, who began, "I had expected to give you an update on everything that's happened over the last month, Efran, but—"

"Commander!" Minka cried. "Oh, Commander!" She burst into tears, slamming her hands to the table. The bodyguards startled, looking from her to him. Efran watched him, waiting.

"Well, Lieutenant Commander Minka. How did you know?" Wendt asked, turning his face to her.

She sobbed, "Commander, I can see the glints in your eyes!"

The men at the table wheeled to him, but those along the wall already knew. In fact, they had known for several hours now. They were just here to watch the others find out.

Wendt removed the dark glasses he had worn ever since being blinded by acid a little over two years ago. He folded them, then looked around the table with clear blue eyes. "Well, Efran," he said, "your hair's not white anymore, but I see a few honest grays. So, what do you know about this?" He gestured with the glasses to his face. At that time, a few men noticed what they had been seeing all along: the ink stains on his fingers from writing out notes for today's meeting.

Efran didn't answer, watching him. But Minka breathed, "That's what you asked for!" Then she told the Commander, "We were stopped on the way here by a group of—everyone, and, the first Lord Sovereign, Allessandrini. He congratulated Efran for getting rid of Lues, and told him that God had granted him a request for his service. And, Efran made a request, but none of us heard it, but—this is what Efran asked for." Minka could hardly get the words out for crying.

Wendt looked at Efran in gentle disdain. "Are you serious? Of all the things in the world you could ask for, that's the best you could do?" At least half of the men in the room were trying to hide their tears.

Efran's eyebrows merely drew down as he said, "You are my father."

Wendt pressed his lips together for something deep inside, and he said, "God help me, you were my son the minute I saw you clomping to the barracks for the first time in boots that were too big."

He reached out to grasp the back of Efran's neck, and the Polonti Captain lowered his head to cry on the arm of the one who taught him a sense of duty.

It took a few minutes for everyone to calm down enough to stop crying. Wiping his face for the fourth time on the same sleeve, Efran looked at Minka to say, "This is your fault."

"I regret nothing," she replied, falling on his arm. She then lifted up to find a dry spot on his sleeve to wipe her eyes.

Following, they all tried to regain their focus for this meeting. Wendt's officers went in and out to address inquiries or messages. Wendt said, "The—sensation of seeing everything all at once is a little overwhelming. I may have to close my eyes to even think. But, I did need to tell you what happened after the troll attack. First, I need introductions to some of your men. Connor, Truro, Krall, Hawk, and Teschner I know; you other three, please introduce yourselves."



Those three quickly stood. The one closest to him, Martyn, saluted. "I am Martyn, Commander. I was the runaway slave of a Eurussian Councilor. The Captain bought my freedom and accepted me as a soldier."

Efran smiled. "Long story, there, but Martyn kept me out of the way while Minka unstuck Symphorien's eggs. That, in turn, led to her saving us from Mounoussamy."

"Yes, I do remember something about that," Wendt mused. "Wish I could've seen that beastie."

"Shh, sir," Efran said. "We don't want her back; Minka made a pet of her."

Minka looked hurt, but Wendt said, "Ah. And you, son?" he asked, pointing.

Jehan saluted. "Jehan, Commander! That's my partner Coish, and the Captain took us with him as his personal escort to the palace at Eurus to tell them that if they didn't honor the treaty to leave Lady Marguerite's mansion alone, he'd burn their palace down, and we got to watch it start burning," he said happily.

"Ah. Efran, Junior, I see," Wendt said. Jehan glowed, but Coish looked disgruntled, so Wendt pointed to him. "What is your name, again?"

Surprised, Coish saluted. "Coish, Commander. And—" He blanked out for a moment, trying to find an area of service to brag about, but all he could think of was, "I'm excellent at running Madgwick's counter."

The men laughed and Coish turned red until Wendt waved them down. "Considering that family's contribution to the Lands, that's important."

"Thank you, sir," Coish said, lowering his head to sit.

"You have good men here, Efran," Wendt said.

"They're all good men," Efran observed, looking off. "And if anything happens to me, I know the defense of the Lands is secure." The men agreed, then he told Minka, "And if anything happens to me, you're to marry Wendt."

"Oh, no, I have someone better for him," she murmured, tapping her fingertips together.

The men's eyes widened, and they looked smilingly to Wendt. He and Efran studied her, then Wendt asked, "Is that her devious face?"

"Yes, Commander," Efran said, and every man around the table catalogued her devious face for future reference.

"All right," Wendt said, returning to his notes on the table. "Efran, we have scouts in Eurus right now, if the trolls haven't found them. I suspect there's enough trolls remaining to make life difficult for the population wherever they land. They just seem to—miraculously replenish. Anyway, after that last battle in which you disappeared, our men estimated that fifty to seventy trolls escaped to form another troop. They haven't returned to us yet, but when they forget how many of them we killed, they will." Efran mutely agreed.

Wendt said, "Even though the drums gave out, that was the most effective defense, as long as it was ongoing. We're having more drums made, and we're paying Shurtleff a stipend to have a retractable ladder, something permanent, built on the side of his shop for drills and emergency use. The drums and mallets will be kept in secure compartments on top of his shop and above us here [Barracks A]. We have a dedicated drum corps of

twenty right now, and are looking to expand that. We do expect the trolls to reemerge unless they're wiped out elsewhere," he reiterated.

"They won't be wiped out anywhere," Efran said.

"Correct," Wendt said, then continued, "And, Choules' group in the east Lands wants to coordinate with the army as far as defense, which makes sense. We've had preliminary meetings with them, and they're to be notified immediately upon the presentation of any threat. We've begun extending the northern wall to encompass their area, but DeWitt wants to make sure that the last five miles of the Lands to the east Passage is respected as wolf territory. So he's added a buffer zone of a mile to that."

"That's good," Efran said, nodding.

They discussed a few more incidentals, then Wendt said, "There are other matters I intended to cover today with you, but now I find that I have to look at them first." He pressed his lips together, and a few of the younger men looked teary again.

"Then you'll summon me when you need me," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain. Dismissed," Wendt said, standing and stretching.

Efran and his men stood to salute. "Yes, Commander. We'll be available . . . to. . . ." Efran trailed off, watching Minka go to the southern-facing window to look out.

Apparently she was satisfied with what she saw, for she came back to tell Efran, "Your meeting lasted through the midday rush. And now we're all hungry and we need to go to Firmin's." With that, she took Wendt's fingers to begin leading him out.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

## Chapter 25

Efran watched open-mouthed, then collected himself to follow Minka and Wendt out. When Efran and his men got to the street, they saw Wendt walking with Minka on his arm to Firmin's outdoor dining area, just a few shops down on the other side of the street. So the husband and bodyguard followed.

By the time they arrived, Minka had commandeered four tables with a good view of the street, seating herself and Wendt at the table most exposed. Lilou greeted them happily, especially when Minka began giving orders for food and drink at all the tables.

Efran stood at Minka's table to inquire, "May I sit?"

"Of course. Over here," she directed. Whether it was her intent to leave the Commander open to the view of all passersby, that's what happened. Sphinxlike, Wendt cooperated with her stage directions.

Efran sat to her left, between her and the Commander, facing the street. Jehan, at a neighboring table, pulled his chair closer to Minka's, blocking anyone who might approach her. She looked over to him, smiling, and patted his hands folded on his knees. He bent over her hand.

Efran, observing this forward show of affection, muttered in explanation, “They’re her pets, Commander.”

“I believe I am now, too,” Wendt said.

As they began receiving their food and drinks—and word spread of the Commander’s healing—men began running up to their table to salute and introduce themselves. They avoided staring, for the most part, but they tended to tremble as they stood before the Commander to receive his acknowledgment. Clough, Cudmore, Mohr, Mathurin, Melott, Nee, Skalbeck, Quoid, Routh, Verrin and Tiras were among the first of these.

In a scene strongly reminiscent of yesterday’s welcome of Efran, nonmilitary residents of the Lands came over for the Commander to see their faces, including Delano and Madgwick, Shurtleff, Firmin, Averno, Lemmerz, and Croft. The crowd around Wendt parted for Ryal and Giardi to shake his hand. The two men were long-time acquaintances from Westford, having seen many crises from different perspectives. Studying him, Ryal murmured, “I can hardly believe that I should live long enough to see such wonderful things. God has truly blessed this place.”

“Apparently so, Lord Ryal, and I’m incredibly grateful to see it as well,” Wendt said.

Others who had been under Wendt’s command at Westford came to see him, many streaming down the switchbacks from the upper barracks. Tourse, Arne, Detler, Ellor, Gaul, Goss, and Shane were among the quickest of this group. Wendt found that he had to stand to shake hands with some of these, or accept their arms on his shoulders. No one was surprised that Arne cried, but a few were moved by Tourse’s tears. (Others of the Forty who were on distant duty trekked in over the next several days and weeks to see him: Whobrey, Mumme, Nyarko, Kaas, Fiacco, Ori, and Beardall.)

Captains Rigdon and Chee rode down from the hilltop to salute the Commander, as did DeWitt and Estes, who had to fight their way through the crowded street to congratulate him. Estes had served in Efran’s Red Regiment, while DeWitt had been Wendt’s Aide.

All the men stood back in silent respect as DeWitt gripped Wendt’s hand to look him in the eye. DeWitt said tightly, “Of all the answers to prayer I’ve seen here, this is the most deserved and the least believable.”

“I agree with one of those, but it means the pressure’s on. I’ve got no excuse for screw-ups now,” Wendt said.

Still seated, Efran said complacently, “Oh, you still have me, Commander.”

“Thank you, Captain Efran,” Wendt said, reseating himself.

But he had to stand again as the fortress doctor Wallace and his wife Leese approached. Wallace stood before him staring hard as Wendt smiled slightly at him. Leese was studying the Commander in amazement. Wallace held up his hands to demand, “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“You’re cheating, Doctor; none,” Wendt said, as Wallace had held up two closed fists.

Wallace breathed, “How did this happen?”

Wendt looked down to Efran. Vaguely, he said, “We don’t understand it.”

Which was true enough. Exhaling, Wallace patted Wendt’s shoulder, then walked off, shaking his head.

After another hour, the street had cleared to allow the regular flow of traffic on Main to resume. Wendt was finally able to eat his braised veal while the men talked quietly and Minka sat victorious.

Efran was thinking, *How could this be? How did this come about? I am not dead; the ancient evil is gone; Wendt has his eyes back. I don't understand how God does all this. I don't understand why—*

At that moment, Wystan trotted up to him, extending a folded bit of parchment. “Good to see you back, Lord Efran. Mum had a word for you, but she can’t leave the baby right now.”

“I see. Thank you,” Efran said, taking the parchment. As Wystan left again, Efran unfolded the paper to read, “Efran, the Lord gave me John 15:16-17 for you—‘I chose you and appointed you to go and produce fruit that should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, He will give it to you.’ Will explain later.”

Blankly, Efran stuffed the paper in his pocket and continued his ruminations: *That's good. Anyway, now I can finally relax.*

With the lessening of the men blocking the sidewalk in front of Firmin’s, the women were able to resume their promenades to be seen in their new dresses. They glanced curiously at the soldiers filling the outdoor dining area, but didn’t see the reason for the hubbub. In front was the handsome Captain Efran, of course, looking dazed. So he had obviously been lovestruck by the sight of one of them. Which one?

A woman stopped in front of the group. Many men’s heads swiveled toward her, because she was very beautiful. She said, “Commander Wendt! What a surprise to see you. I heard you were here, but there was some ridiculous prattle about your being blind.”

“Hello, Leila,” Wendt said mildly, leaning back. He had been here when her husband Lord Rounsefell brought suit against Efran under the Provision for a Wronged Husband almost a year ago. And Leila lied in that trial to save Efran, or didn’t, depending on who was to be believed.

“So, we should have dinner sometime. Catch up,” she invited Wendt.

“No,” Efran said, rigid. He looked at Minka, but her wide eyes disclaimed any involvement here.

“No,” Efran repeated tensely to his Commander, who was inscrutable.

Efran raised his eyes to Leila to say with finality, “No.” She laughed at him.

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on July 30th of the year 8155 from the creation of the world.

Old Lystran Love Song  
(original, uncorrupted version)

You have bound me with your eyes;  
I am captive to your smiles;

Your tears rend my heart  
You are such a part of  
Of me, my dove, my love.

If I loved you when we met,  
I will love you ever yet,  
For that love of mine  
Was naught as it is  
Now, my dove, my love.

What then shall I do  
To win such a maid as you?  
Is there hope for me  
To ever touch your  
Heart, my dove, my love?

From [Chataine's Guardian](#)

NOTES:

Phenomenological language is that which is descriptive from a human point of view, not intended to state scientific fact. For a more complete definition, see the Notes for *Lord Efran in the Hall of Memories* (Book # 21).

*Sammy: On Vacation* is [here](#).

*Games of God and Men* is [here](#).

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran on the Game Board*  
(Book 23)

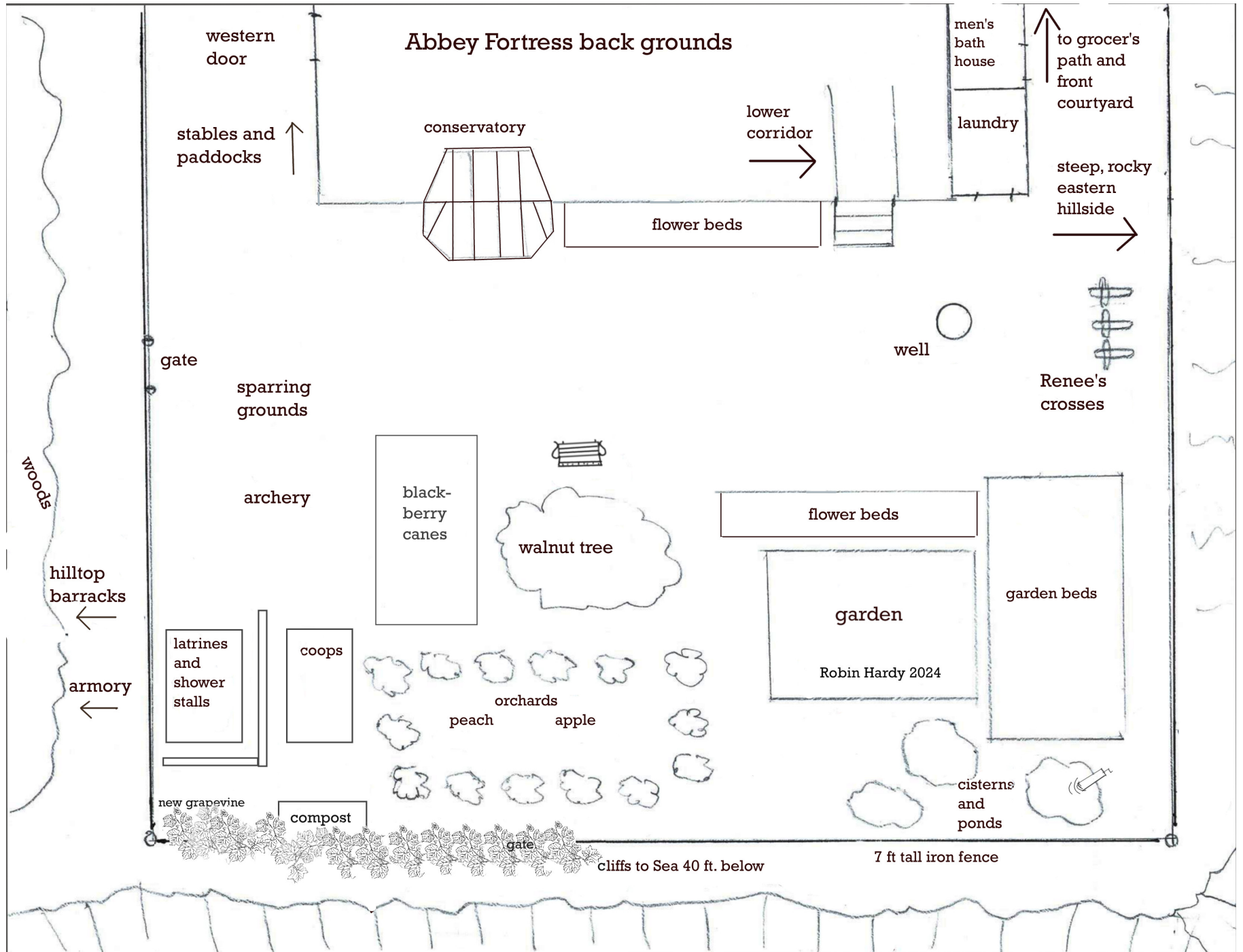
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Aceto—ah SEE tow	Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
Adele—ah DELL	Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
<i>aike</i> —AY kay	Gores—GORE ez
Allessandrini—AL ess an DREE nee	Goss—gahs
Allyr—AL er	Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)
Arbaiza—are BAZE ah	Goyne—goyn (hard g)
Archimedes—are kuh MEE deez	Graeme—GRAY em
Arne—arn	Hartshough—HART soh
Atticitian—at eh SISH un	Imelda—eh MEL dah
Averne—ah VURN	Ino—EE no
Beardall—BARE duhl	Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
Besiana—BES ee an ah	Jasque—JAS kee
bioluminescence—by oh loo muh NEH sens	Javier—JAY vee er
Bonefat—BON eff at	Jehan—JAY han
Bozzelli—bo ZELL ee	Justinian—jus TIN ee un
cacophony—kuh KAH fuh nee (harsh sounds)	Kaas—kahs
Calix—KAY lix	Kele—kay lay
Capur—KAH pir	Kewe—CUE ee
Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)	Koschat—KOS chat
Challinor—CHAL en or	Kraken—KRAY ken
Clonmel—KLON mell	Larisse—la REESE
Clough—chloh	Leila—LYE la
Conte—cahnt	Lemmerz—leh MERZ
Cyneheard—SIGN herd	Leneghan—LEN eh gan
Cyrillo—seh RILL oh	Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
Dallarosa—dal ah ROW sa	Ley—lay
De’Ath—dyath	Lilou—LEE loo
décolleté—day kahl TAY	Loghry—LOW gree
Delano—deh LAN oh	logician—luh JIH shun
Delio—DEE lee oh	Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
détente—day TAHNT (cessation of hostilities)	Lowry—LAHW ree
DeVenter—deh VEN tur	Lues—LOO es
diva—DEE vah	Lystra—LIS tra
Doane—rhymes with <i>own</i>	MacCaa—mak KAY
Efran—EFF run	Madea—mah DAY ah
Eledith—ELL eh dith	Marguerite—mar ger EET
Elhemina—el eh ME nah	Mathurin—mah THUR in
Elowen—EL oh win	Melchior—MEL key or
Elvey—ELL vee	Melott—meh LOT
Enon—EE nun	mezzo—MET soh
Estes—ESS tis	Miasma—me AZ mah
Eurus—YOUR us	Miasmata—me AZ mah tah
Eurusian—your uh SEE un	Minka—MINK ah
Eustace—YOUS tis	Mounoussamy—mawn AH sam ee
Eymor—EE more	Mumme—mum
Felice—feh LEESE	naiveté—NAI eve tay
Fiacco—fee AH koh	négligée—NEH glih zhay
Flodie—FLOW dee	Nomus—NO mis
Gers—gares (hard g)	Nyarko—nuh YAR koh

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran on the Game Board*  
(Book 23)

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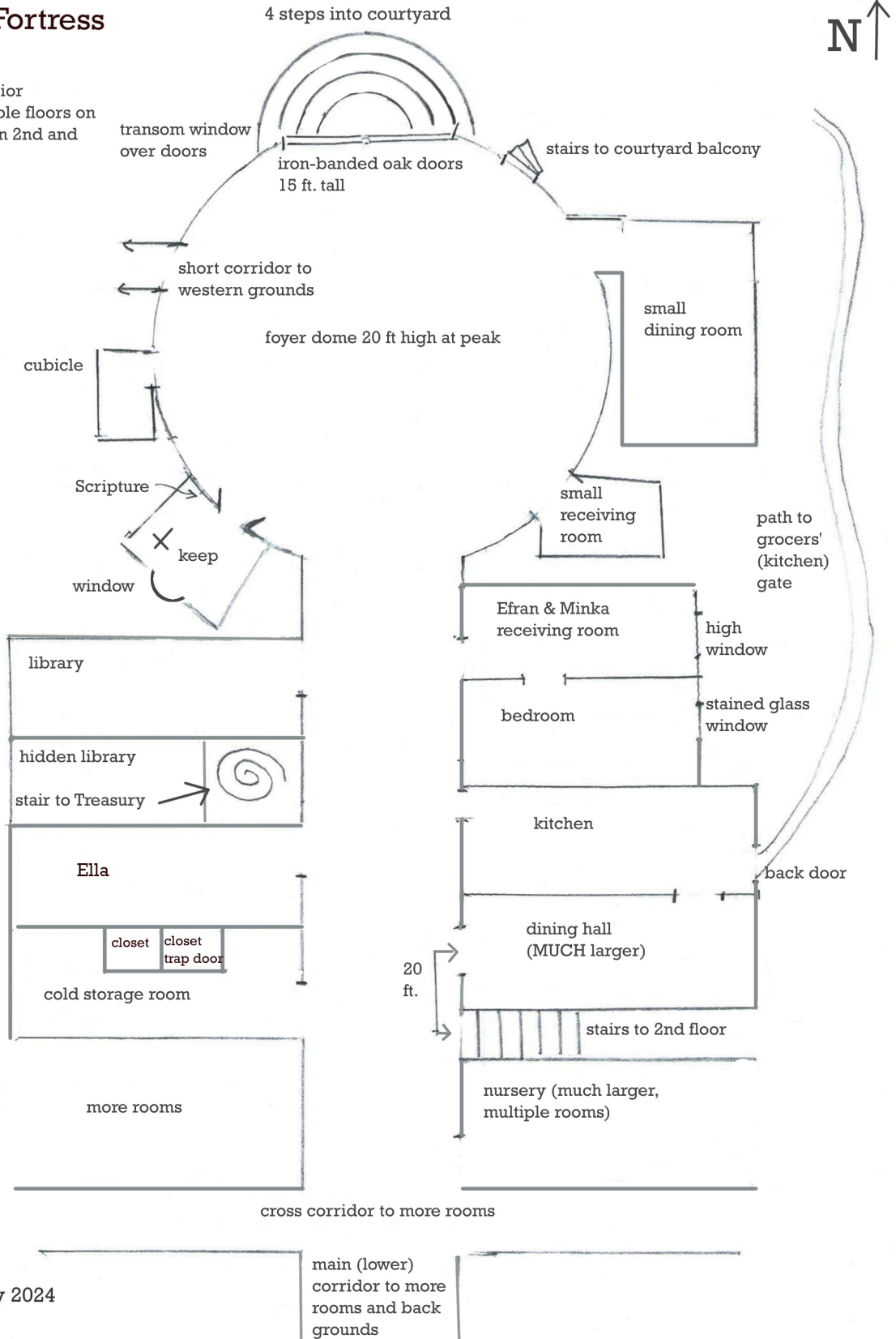
Ori—OR ee  
Otiose—OH shee ohs  
Perrodin—PARE uh din  
phenomenological—feh nah muh nuh LAH juh kuhl  
Pia—PEE ah  
Pleyel—PLAY el  
Ploense—plonse  
Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)  
Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)  
Renée—ren AY  
Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)  
Ruach—RU akh  
Sasany—SASS an ee  
segued—SEH gwayd  
sommelier—soh muh LEE eh  
status quo—STAY tuhs KWOH  
Stephanos—steh FAHN os  
Stites—stights  
Suco—SUE coh  
Sughrue—SUE grew  
Surchatain—SUR cha tan  
Surchataine—sur cha TANE  
Symphorien—sim FOR ee in  
Telo—TEE low  
Teschner—TESH nur  
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE  
Tiras—TEER us  
Tomer—TOH mur  
Tourjee—TUR jee  
Tuiren—TOUR en  
Ure—YOUR ay  
Venegas—VEN eh gus  
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un  
Verlice—ver LEESE  
Viglian—VIG lee en  
Vories—VORE eez  
Weber—WE bur  
Whately—WOT lee  
Whobery—WAH bry  
Windry—WIN dree  
Wirrin—WEER en  
Wyse—rhymes with *vice*  
Wystan—WIS tan





# Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



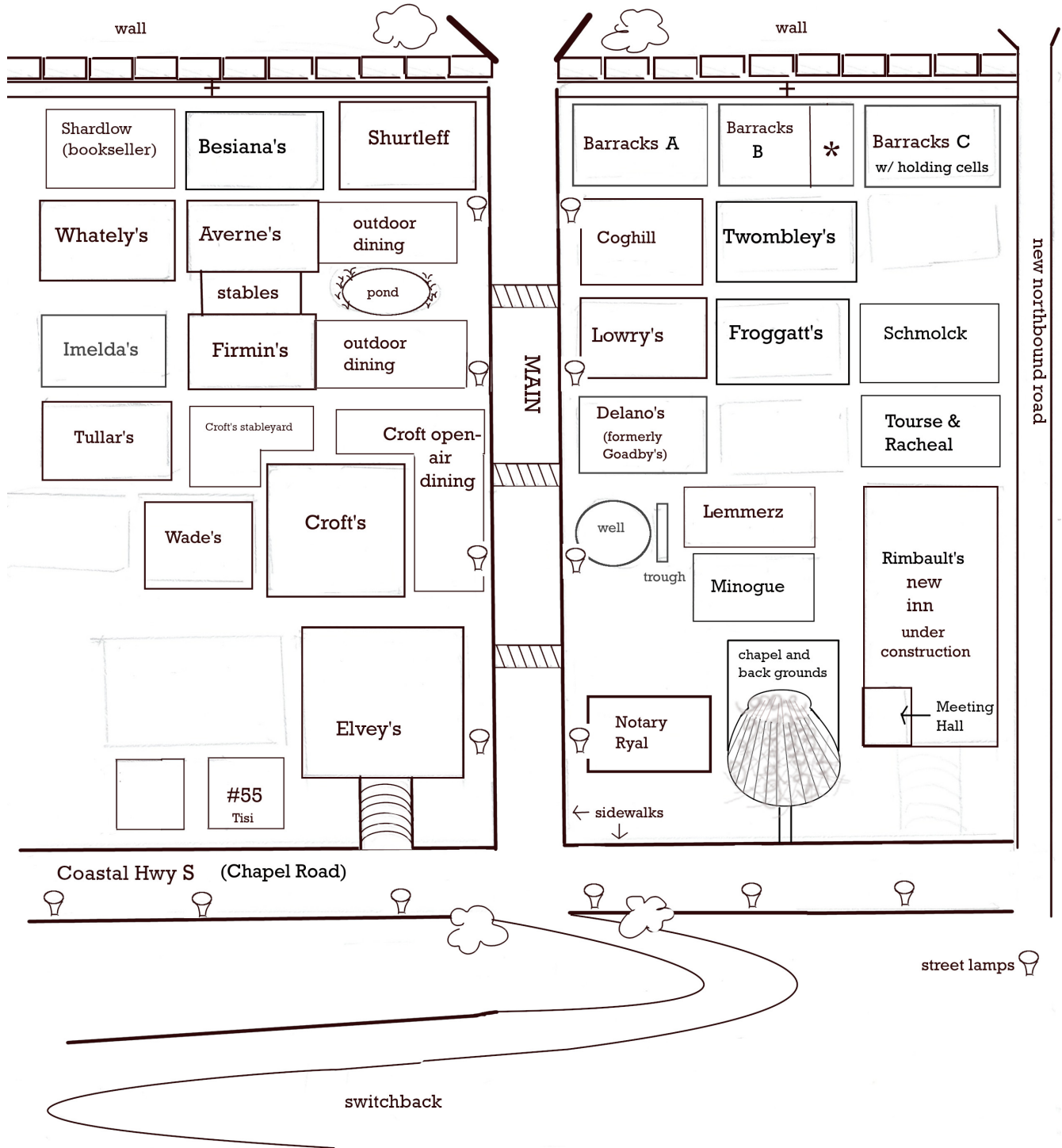
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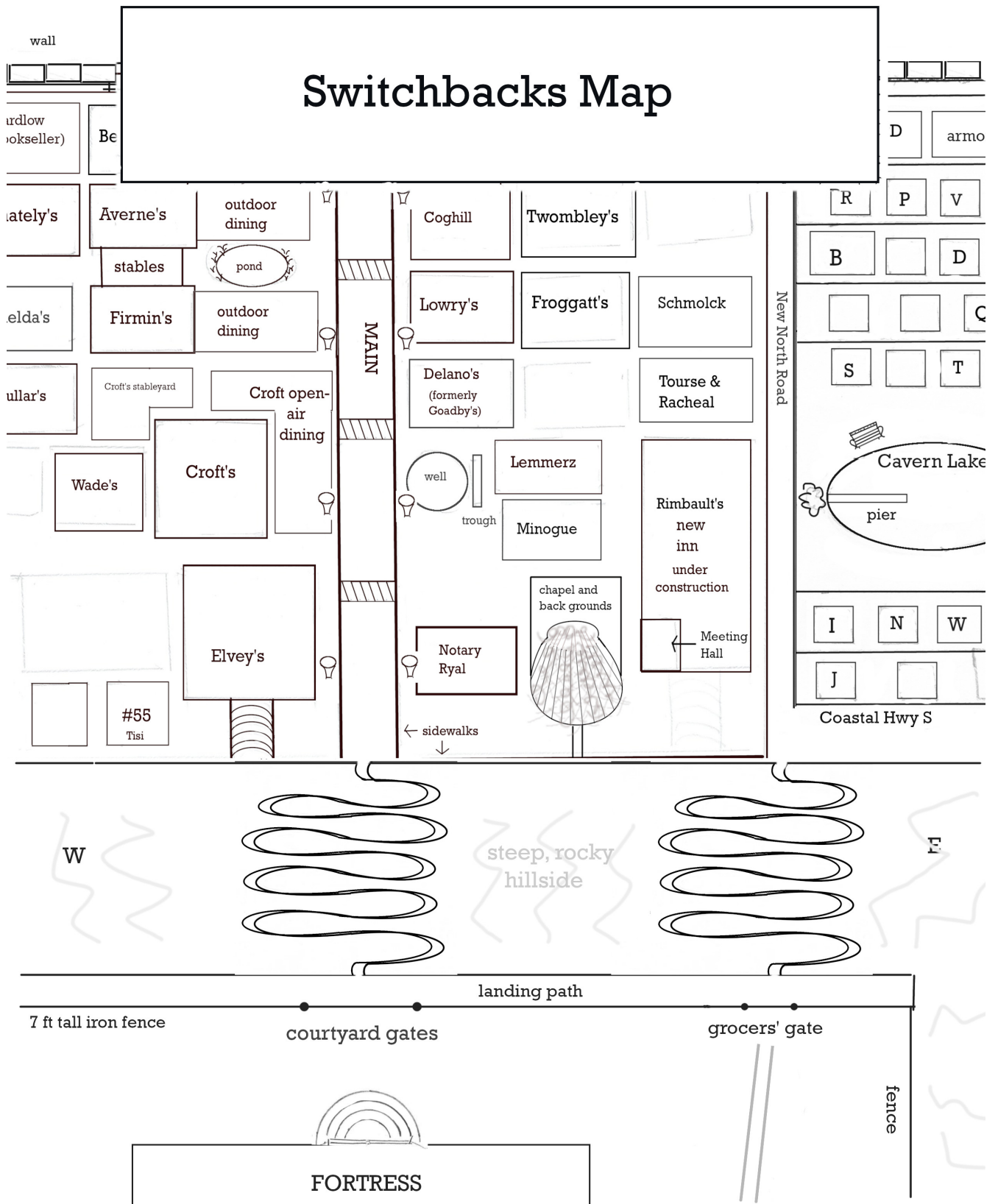
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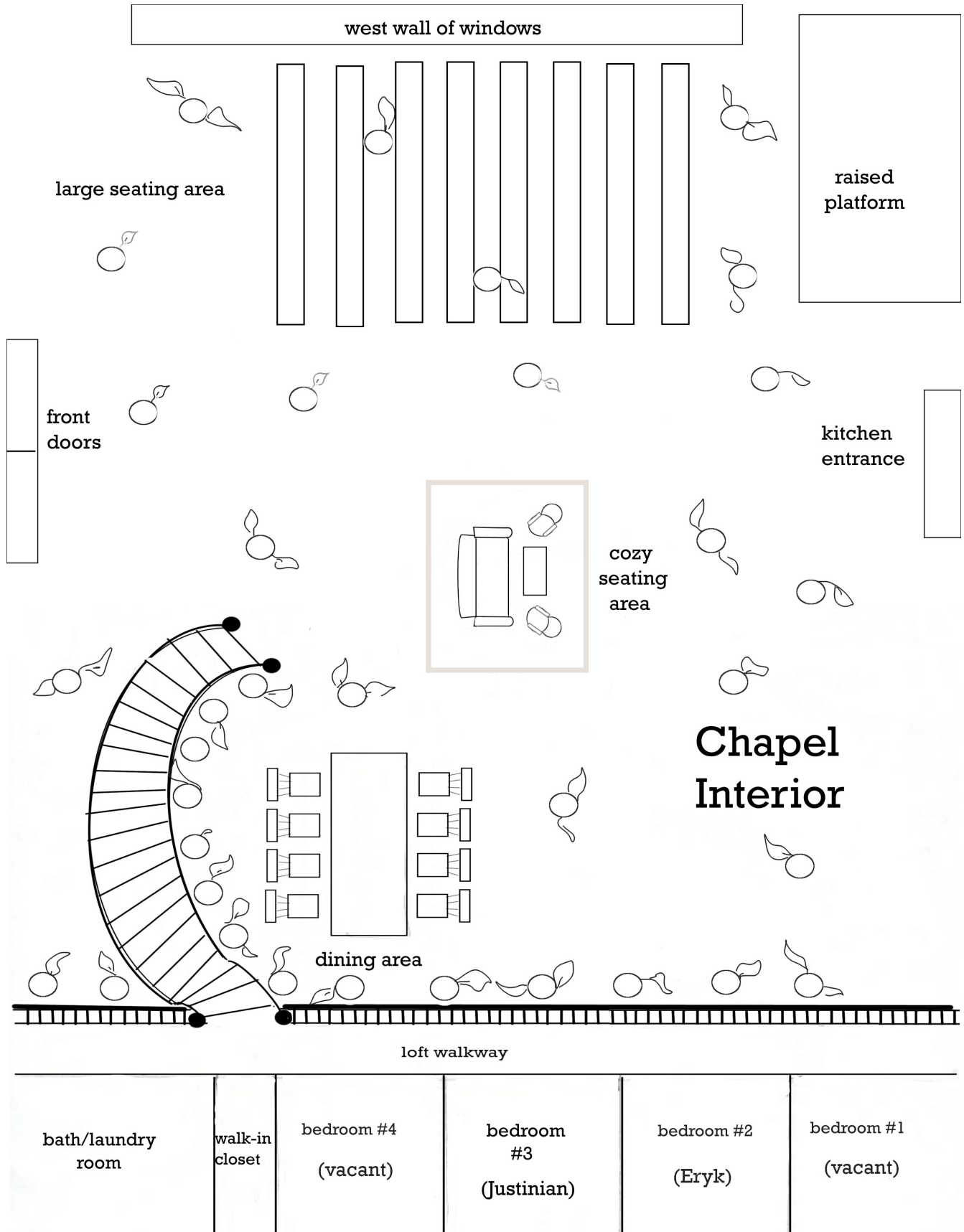
# Abbey Lands Main Road

\* infirmary and mess kitchen

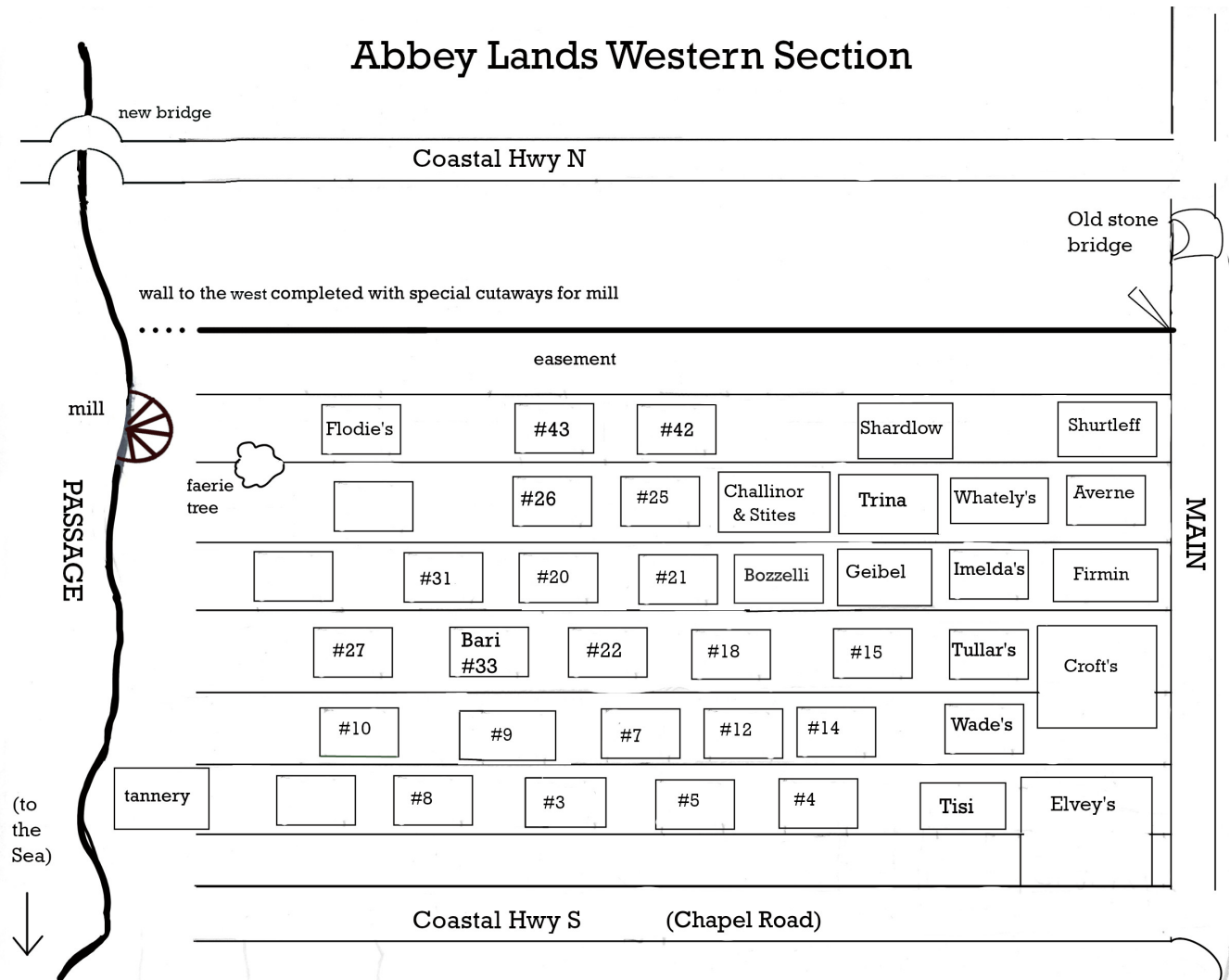
+ easements







# Abbey Lands Western Section



rocky NW hillside



**KEY**

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening
- 43 - Dallarosa & Enon



woods

7 ft tall iron fence

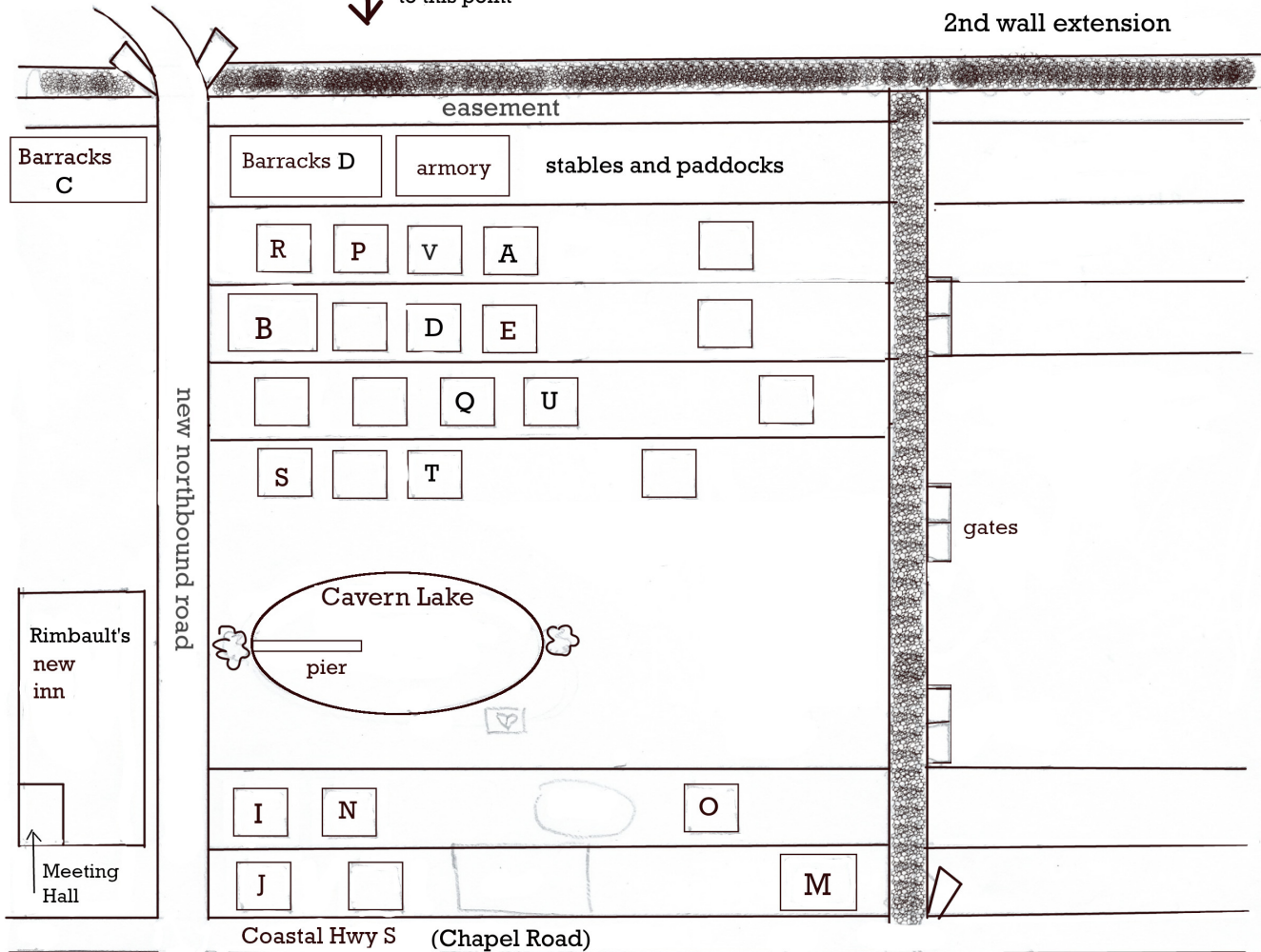
FORTRESS



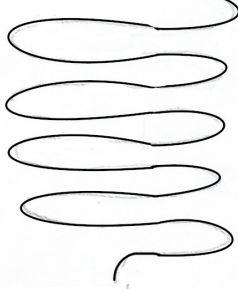
road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

# East Central Abbey Lands

↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point



new switchback

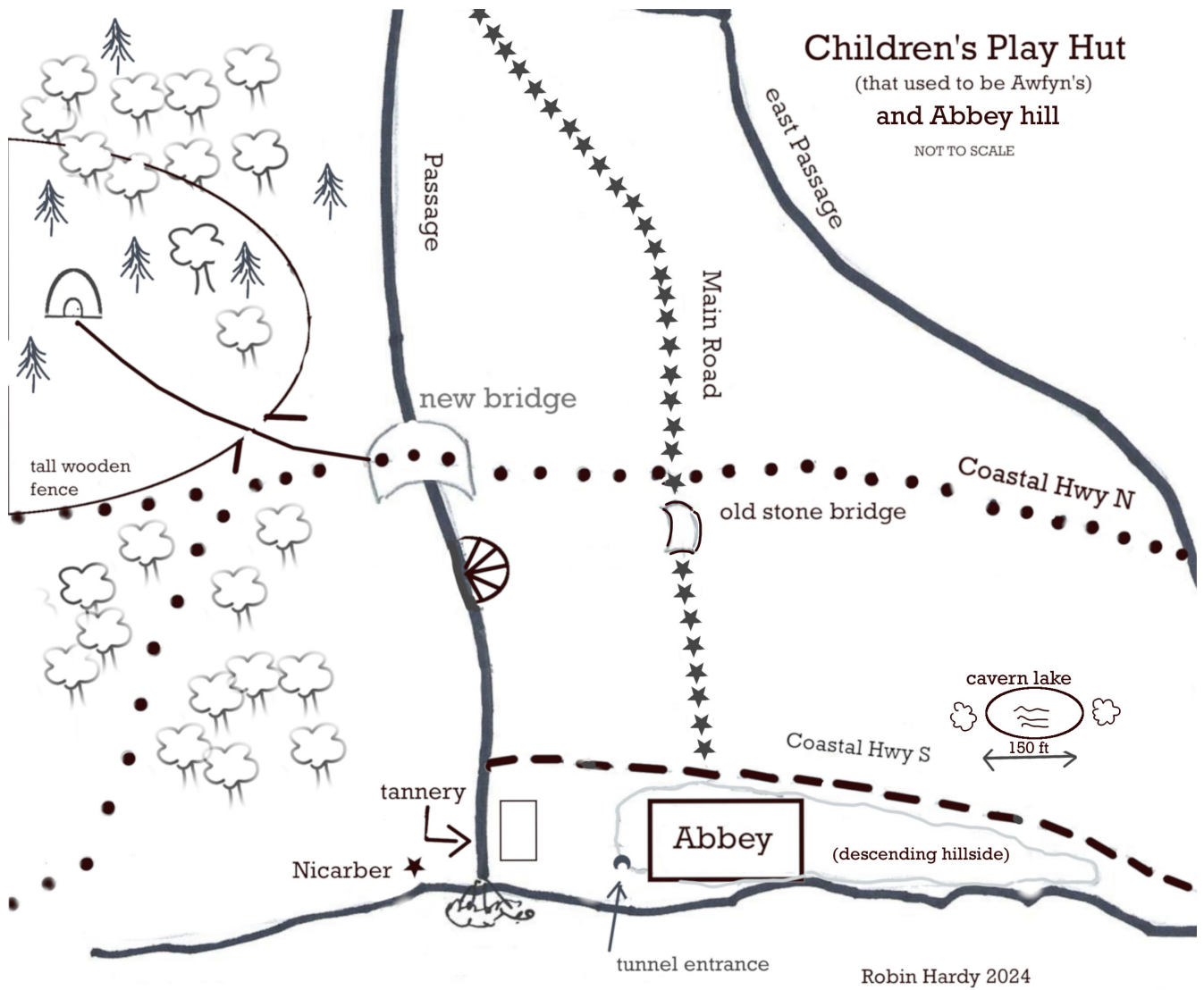


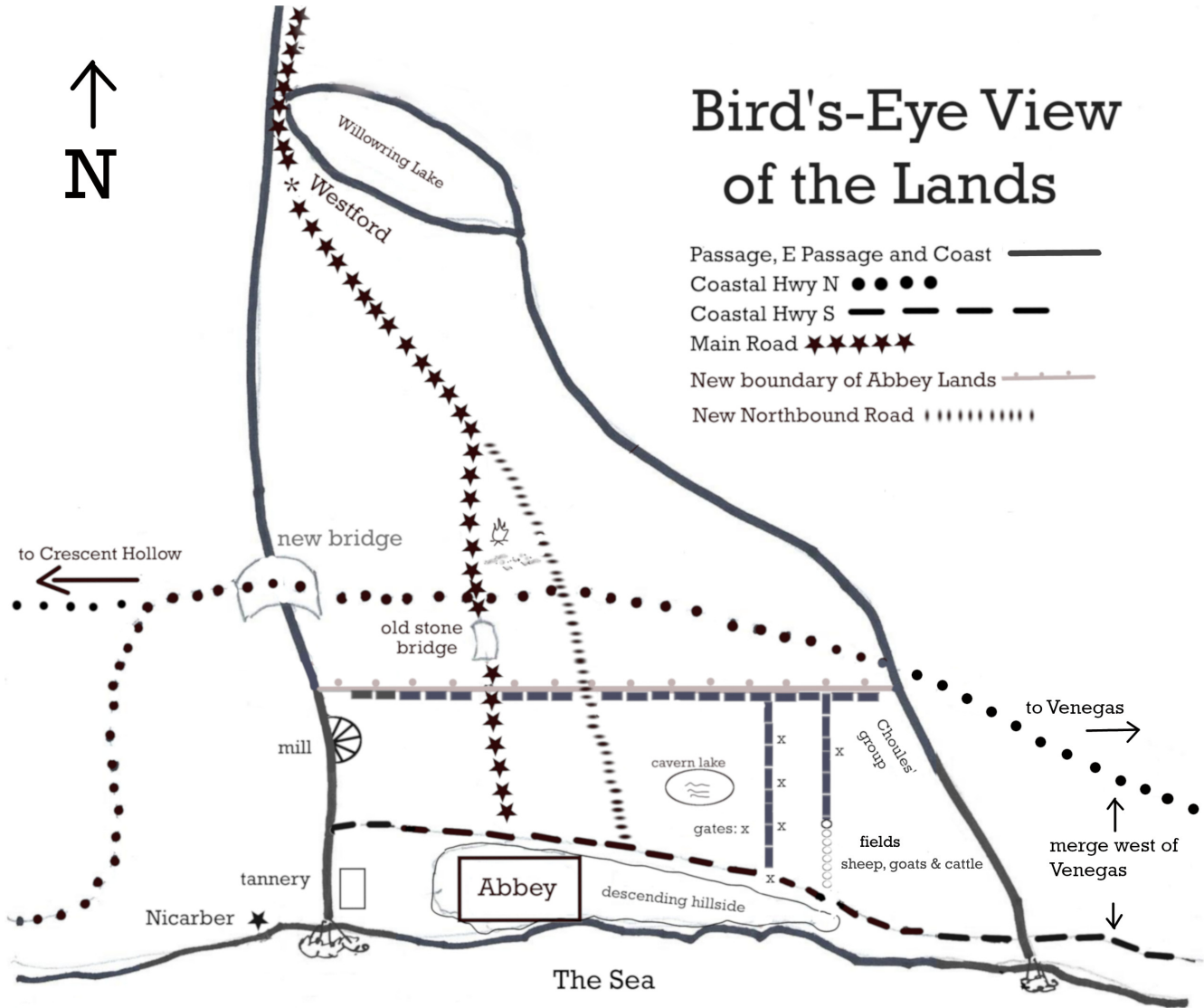
to courtyard gates

Coastal Hwy S (Chapel Road)

- A - Reinagle's House
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D - The Lands Clothing Shop (#62)
- E - Foliott's house (#61)
- F
- G
- H
- I - Plunkett's house
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- N - Dufton's
- O - Koschat & Felice
- P - Walford's Ready Furniture
- Q - Bowring's House
- R - Delano's office
- S - Rimbault's housing office

- T - DeGrado Windows
- U - Chetwode Woodworking
- V - Windry & Eryk

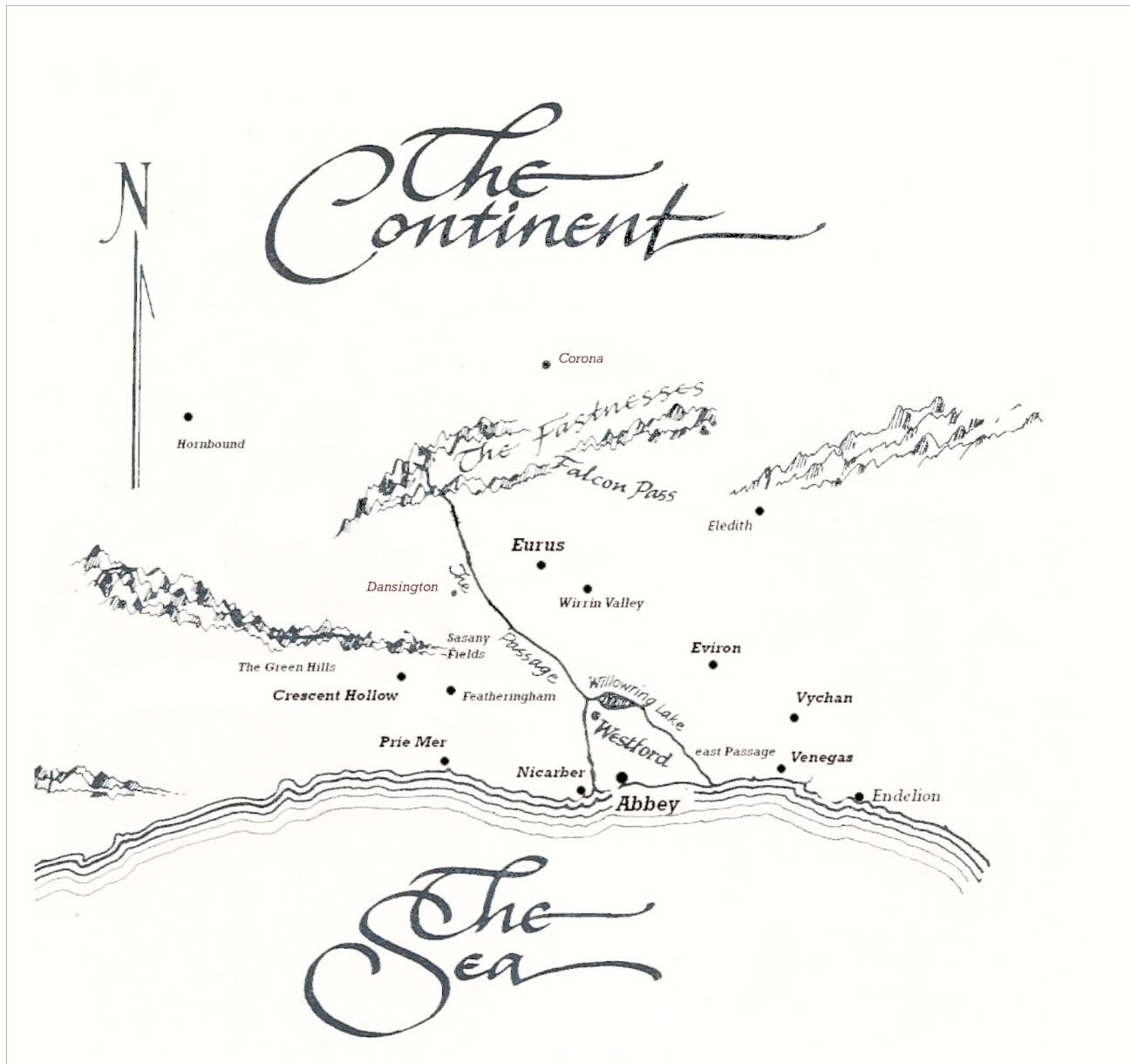




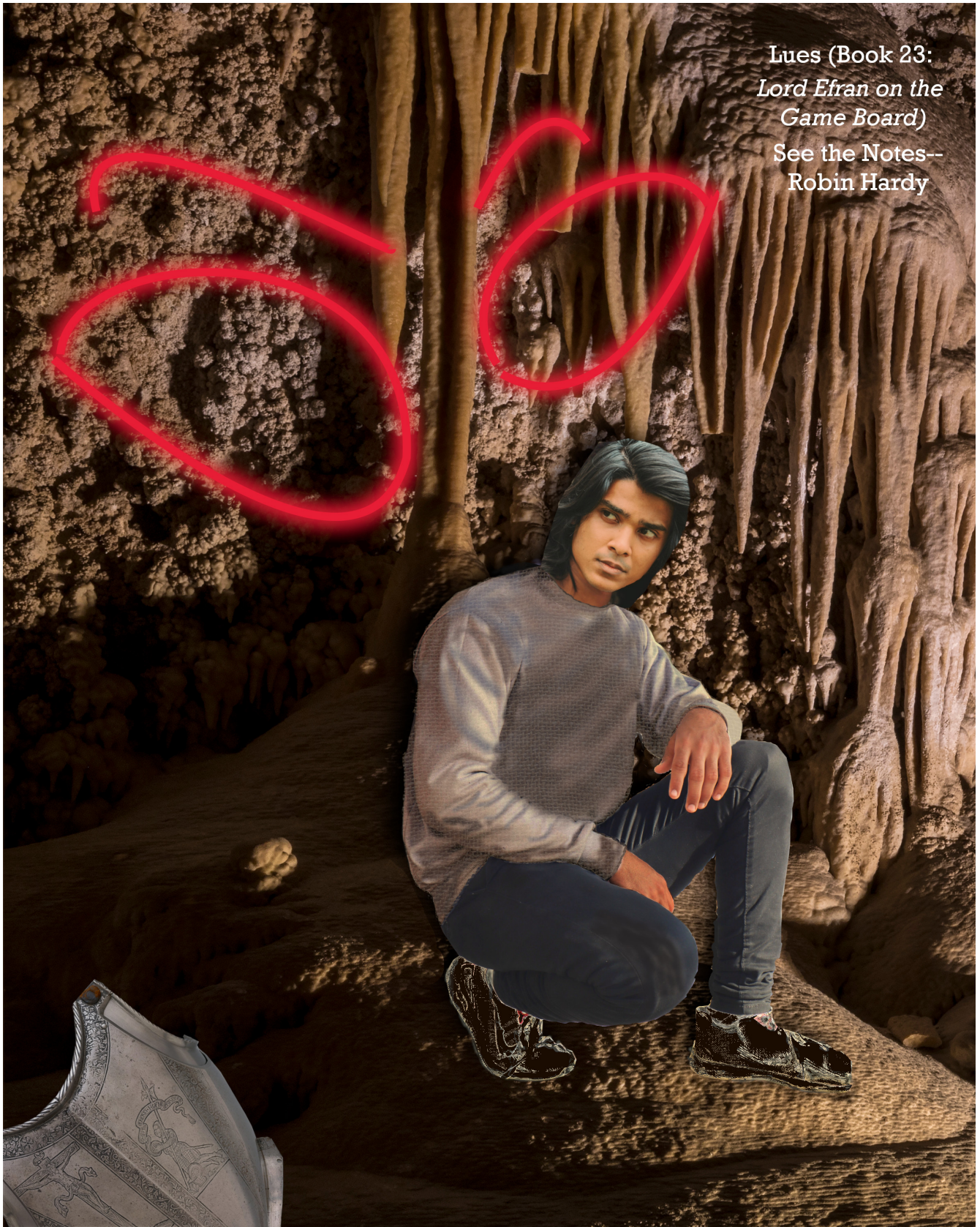
NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024









Lues (Book 23:  
*Lord Efran on the  
Game Board*)  
See the Notes--  
Robin Hardy



This one was difficult because it seemed so simple: Efran stuck in a cave with a manifestation of evil. But how do you draw a nightmare?—especially as I am no artist. But here it is.

The cave he's stuck in is the Big Room of [Carlsbad Caverns](#).<sup>1</sup> Efran himself is the compilation of two guys, [here](#)<sup>2</sup> and [here](#)<sup>3</sup> (and also below). The breastplate he took off, in the corner there, is from Wikimedia Commons, [here](#).<sup>4</sup> I especially like this piece of armor because of its [engravings](#).



And, yes, the eyes are the best part of the whole thing.

Robin Hardy  
May 27, 2024

PS. I am claiming no copyright on this illustration.

1. Photographed on Wikimedia Commons by [Carlsbad Caverns National Park Service](#)
2. Photographed by [Ahmed Aziz](#) on Pexels
3. Photographed by [Brandan Saviour](#) on Pexels
4. Photographed by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bashford Dean Memorial Collection