

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

Book 13

Lord Efran and
the Goulven

Robin Hardy

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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 Western Section
Chapter 7	Map 5 East Central
Chapter 8	Map 6 Coastal Highway
Chapter 9	Map 7 Continent
Chapter 10	Illustration: What Adele Saw
Chapter 11	Notes on What Adele Saw
Chapter 12	
Chapter 13	
Chapter 14	
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Chapter 24	

Chapter 1

Minka climbed the fortress stairs to the second floor, fighting down the mild nausea and lightheadedness that dogged her on her way to the workroom. She didn't want to do this, but she should have known that it would be inevitable.

Her sister Adele had been blinded two days ago, November 20th. Since her new husband Lorient had duty during the day, he had to leave her in a safe place, which seemed to be the Abbey fortress. But it was also a busy place; there were not many areas in which she could simply sit and listen—except, perhaps, Estes' workroom.

So she had sat in the workroom for most of the day yesterday, and as a result, the men got almost nothing done. While Adele couldn't see, her hearing was unimpaired, and the men were reluctant to discuss anything of consequence—or anything trivial—in front of her. They did not know what she might, or could, do with what she heard. For none of them believed that sudden blindness would alter her conniving character.

Also, the child Adele had borne to Efran, now almost 11 months old, spent most of his time with his father, and if Efran needed to be in the workroom, Joshua was there, too. And now, so was Adele.

Efran couldn't abide it. Upon her implicit promise to save his life, he had slept with her the night before his scheduled hanging 19 months ago. Then when she had become pregnant, she had tormented his wife Minka with the fact before attempting to abort the baby. And after he was safely born—which entailed great suffering on Adele's part—she had tried to kidnap him before proposing to blackmail Efran to get him. With a history such as this between them, he didn't want her anywhere around his son for any length of time.

So, for the time being, it was up to Minka, again, to see to her abusive older sister. Before entering the workroom, Minka sucked in a fortifying breath, clutching the mug of hot tea for Commander Wendt. Then she turned into the doorway with a cheery, "Good morning! Oh, no!"

Efran, Estes, and DeWitt looked up, either smiling or sympathetic. She cried, "Did Commander Lyte come get him already?"

"I'm afraid so," Efran said. Joshua peered up at her from under the table. "With all the new men, and the new buildings, and another new unit, he's being torn apart by men wanting his help," Efran added.

"A new unit?" Minka asked, and Efran nodded. "Who's the new Captain?" she demanded.

"Melchior," Efran said with a half-smile. "To remind him—"

Adele said, "Lorient is more qualified. He was the senior-most lieutenant of Master Crowe's."

There was a brief silence, then Minka put the mug down on the table. "Good morning, Adele. Would you like to walk outside for a while?" Joshua patted Minka's foot, so she got down on her hands and knees to join him under the table, and he chortled.

"No, I need clothes," Adele said. "And money. At least twenty royals."

"Oh, dear!" Minka laughed, looking out from under the table. "Efran, may we have ten royals to get Adele a complete new wardrobe?"—although it was nowhere near his responsibility.

“Yes,” he said, reaching a lazy hand toward Estes, who went to unlock the cabinet to put ten royals in a money pouch, which he handed to Efran. He, in turn, gave it to Minka as she emerged from under the table at his knees. “Have fun. Buy something for yourself,” he added.

“Thank you,” she said, kissing him lightly on the lips. “I already have more than I can wear.” He shook his head, smiling, then rested a disgruntled gaze on his sister-in-law.

“Are you ready to go, Adele?” Minka asked with forced brightness. Adele stood, so Minka took her hand to begin leading her to the doorway as the men watched. When they were out of the room, Efran leaned back in his chair, looking up to the ceiling to cross his arms over his chest and shake his head, again.

As Minka led Adele out of the foyer into the courtyard, she said, “Elvey’s has expanded so much since you were last here. She has a wonderful fall and winter collection that’s suitable for the Abbey Lands climate.”

Adele didn’t respond. At the gate, Minka told the sentries, “We’ll need two bodyguards and horses, please. Get me—”

“You expect me to ride a horse in this?” Adele said, lifting her skirt.

Although Minka considered it suitable for riding, she was willing to make allowances for Adele’s inability to see that. So she said, “Oh. All right, then, we need two bodyguards.”

“Yes, Lady Minka,” Tourle said, gesturing.

“And a carriage,” Adele said.

Tourle looked quickly at Minka. Carriages required considerably more setup and takedown than horses or carts, so fortress residents who needed only to get down to the Lands almost always took a horse. Even walking down and back up on short errands took less time than waiting on a carriage.

“We’ll walk,” said Minka.

Shortly, two soldiers, both Southerners, came around from the back. “Lady Minka! Allyr at your service,” one said, bowing.

“We’re very happy to attend you. I am Routh,” the other said, bowing as well.

“Oh, excellent,” Minka said. “We’ll have fun. This is my sister Adele; we’re going to walk down to Elvey’s and do a little shopping.” Both had been told about her, as had all the men.

“May I lead you, Lady Adele?” Allyr said. He lifted his right forearm to place her left hand on it, which was appropriate and compassionate. She accepted with a slight nod. (Adele was not titled on the Lands; the men just found it safer to act as though she were.)

Minka and Routh departed the gates before them. Minka said, “When we’re done, please go up to the workroom and give Efran a haircut. He can’t ever remember to get it done, even though it bothers him.”

“Oh, he’s a good one. He doesn’t care what it looks like as long as it’s out of his eyes,” Routh said.

“Yes, well, don’t let him talk you into spikes. That’s an unapproved cut,” Minka said sternly, and he laughed. Behind them, Allyr wisely did not attempt to make conversation with Adele.

Although Adele grumbled about the walk, they made it down to Elvey’s vast shop easily. One of the first businesses to relocate from Westford to the Abbey Lands, her textile empire had expanded to four plots, with another shop newly opened in the eastern section for the convenience of the newest residents.

“Feel free to wait here,” Minka told the men as she took Adele’s arm to pass over the threshold into the showrooms.

“Thank you, Lady Minka,” Allyr said, and they took up their positions on either side of the double doors. This gave them the appearance of doormen, which part they played with good humor for pleased customers.

Minka, being instantly recognized, was whisked to the back room with Adele for personal attention. “What can we help you with, Lady Minka?” asked Ghislain.

“Oh, Adele needs—”

“Dresses. Silk only,” Adele said.

Minka addressed an informative look to Ghislain, who nodded and replied, “Oh, for such a slender shape as yours, we have a number that are complete but for alterations. And for your lovely complexion, I’d recommend a peach or light pink.” Ghislain had a silky voice that mollified customers who aspired to the upper crust.

“Bring them out,” Adele instructed.

“She’ll need at least one that’s suitable for riding,” Minka added.

“Of course. All Crescent Hollow nobility consider riding an essential activity,” Ghislain sniffed.

“Adele is actually an accomplished horsewoman,” Minka noted. If she could be persuaded to ride, then the overworked stablemen wouldn’t have to outfit carriages all the time.

“Oh, how wonderful!” Ghislain said admiringly.

She left to make selections while Minka chatted to Adele about the new fall outfits on display. “Oh, here’s a perfectly lovely cloak. You won’t need anything heavy here,” she said, holding up a creamy white lambswool cloak.

“Nothing off the rack,” Adele sniffed.

“Very well,” Minka said, putting it on the counter for purchase.

Ghislain returned with three sample riding dresses that could be custom fit with sashes and belts. She showed Minka the labels, indicating they were made of polished cotton, which had the look and feel of silk at a fraction of the price. Minka nodded, holding up the first to Adele’s shoulders.

“Oh, this is lovely. It’s a solid, delicate pink with lace trim on the skirt and the sleeves,” Minka noted, knowing what Adele preferred.

“It’s Eurussian lace by Herzogl,” Ghislain informed them.

Minka and Ghislain held their breath while Adele felt the material. “I need to try it on. It must be custom fit,” Adele said.

“Of course,” Ghislain purred, as she and Minka exchanged congratulatory glances.

All three dresses were dispatched with quick, painless fittings, as Adele was no longer able to object to what she saw. At the front counter, Minka quietly paid for the clothes with eight of the ten royals, with a few silver pieces in change. “When these are ready, please deliver them to the fortress to my attention,” she told the attendant, who nodded.

Guiding her sister, Minka exited in victory. The bodyguard turned to them attentively, and Adele said, “I need gold jewelry.”

The men looked to Minka as she paused. “Oh, dear,” she said, “how can I ever face Loriot if we buy for you what he’ll want to buy?”

Adele pursed her lips, but there was hardly any argument she could make to this. So she said, “Take me to Croft’s.”

“Certainly,” Minka said. It was close by, and at this time of the morning, not very crowded. “Would you rather sit inside or out?” Minka asked.

“Inside,” Adele said. So they found a nice corner booth with a nearby table for the bodyguard. Minka got sardines and flatbread for the men, apple cobbler for herself and Adele, and Delano’s Mild Ale for them all.

Adele immediately rejected the ale, so Minka handed it over to Allyr and got her a Goadby’s instead. Tasting it, Adele rejected it as well: “This isn’t Goadby’s.”

“It is. I’m afraid he changed it up,” Minka said. Adele put it firmly away, so Minka gave it to Routh. He raised it to her, smiling, but she didn’t notice that neither he nor Allyr drank the extra ale. They didn’t dare invite impairment.

Adele took a bite of the cobbler, uttered, “Ugh,” and put it aside. Minka ate it along with her own. Adele paused to listen, then muttered, “Who is nearby?”

“Almost no one,” Minka said without looking.

A little while later, Adele stood abruptly, upon which the bodyguard snapped up the remainder of their sardines and flatbread, and Minka gulped down the cobbler. “What do you—?” she began.

“I want to walk around the lake,” Adele announced.

“Very well,” Minka sighed. It was about a mile away, which was nothing on horseback, but a tedious walk.

They set out from Croft’s, using the closest crosswalk on Main, then took side streets to the new northbound road. Adele was on Allyr’s arm as before. Passing over this road brought the shimmering lake in view. Minka was a little surprised to find herself enjoying the walk. The day was sunny, pleasantly cool, and the smoothly paved road allowed easy walking, even for the blind.

Minka and Routh chatted as they walked slightly ahead of Adele and Allyr. Passing Lyte and Melchior on their way to the barracks north of them, Minka waved. The Commander and Captain squinted at the group's passing, but seeing the women in the company of bodyguards, merely nodded.

"How far is it?" Adele blurted in displeasure.

"We're about halfway there," Minka said. "You couldn't have picked a nicer day for a walk." Adele exhaled in a mutter, but Minka was looking up as the rooftop bells pealed morning worship.

Finally arriving at the lake, Minka led to the north shore without thinking. They paused to look over the tranquil green water. A few families were fishing off the southern banks, and Minka noticed with pleasure a new pier built out over the water for their convenience. "I might need to take up fishing," she murmured.

"Lady, come back from the water, please," Allyr said. Minka and Routh turned to see Adele at the water's edge, reaching down to feel what was at her feet.

"I want to feel the water," she said.

Coming over, Minka objected, "No, Adele, it's best not to, because—"

But Adele had spread her arms and lifted her face to the sky to fall forward into the water.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 2

Allyr plunged in after Adele to lift her bodily and begin carrying her back up to shore. However, neither realized that the water was occupied, and the largest baby Leviathan interpreted this incursion as an invitation to play. Grabbing the trailing edge of Adele's dress in its teeth, it pulled happily. Allyr fell, finding himself playing tug-of-war with a 250-pound water dragon.

Routh leapt into the water to help pull on Adele, thus ripping her dress. The baby, finding itself with nothing but cloth, grabbed onto Routh's boot instead, and he was dragged down to his shoulders, treading water with a dragon hanging onto his foot.

Minka splashed the water, inducing the baby to let go of Routh and come get a head-scratching from her. Meanwhile, Allyr had Adele safely up on the shore, so turned back to help Routh out. Minka glanced up to the courtyard in concern. "Don't let them ring the bell," she murmured.

Routh was climbing out when Adele attempted to throw herself back into the water. He grabbed at her but missed, so Allyr caught her from the shallows where he stood. As she resisted, the first baby leapt joyfully onto his back, knocking him face down into the water. Desiring to join the fun, the second-oldest baby grabbed Minka's skirts to pull her in. Routh dove after her, hauling her up with the second baby clinging to her. Allyr surfaced as Adele doggedly threw herself into the water. The littlest dragon happily grabbed her foot, and she screamed. Routh was now fighting the two oldest for possession of Minka.

Soldiers on duty along the new northbound road had spotted the fracas and were running toward them. Routh had Minka mostly out of the water when the second-oldest objected, biting his arm. He grunted in pain, but Minka bopped her between the eyes, ordering, “Stop that!” Adele was fighting Allyr. The first baby knocked Routh down, and Minka went under.

A half-dozen men flung themselves toward the water. But then Symphorien’s head surfaced, deluging them all. She flung Minka and Routh onto the shore, then flipped the first and second babies onto her back. The littlest swam over to her, and she dipped her head for it to crawl up onto her snout and over her head. Then she rose up out of the water, flooding the shore all the way around. The fishermen scattered.

With her three babies clinging to her back, Symphorien spread her mighty wings and flapped, creating great waves that inundated the shore and spooked horses along the new north road. She rose into the air, pivoted south toward the Sea, and mounted to disappear over the fortress into the distant sky.

Sorrowfully, Minka raised her head from the shallows to watch them go. Lwoff, who had quietly gone down to the lake several times to see the babies, watched from the hilltop as Symphorien flew with them out of sight over the horizon. “G’bye, girl,” he whispered. “Come see us again in a hundred years.”

Minka looked back as strong arms lifted her from the silt. “Melchior,” she murmured. He stood to begin carrying her to his horse. She twisted in his arms to see that Lriot had Adele. Routh and Allyr were being helped out by other men, Routh with a bleeding arm.

“Melchior, don’t punish them—Adele kept getting into the water, and wouldn’t come out. Please don’t let them be punished,” she gasped.

“All right, Minka. I’ll see to it,” he said, walking with her.

“Don’t let them ring the bell,” she breathed.

“I’m afraid he already knows,” Melchior said. She looked back to the courtyard. Even at this distance, she could see Efran waiting at the open gates, hands on his hips. She whimpered, and Melchior squeezed her gently in reassurance as she dripped all over him. But he was already all wet anyway.

He set her on her feet beside his horse while he mounted. “I’m all right,” she insisted, tottering, but another man hoisted her up to sit in front of Melchior on his saddle. “How is your head?” she asked, twisting to scrutinize his face for signs of pain.

“It is good.” He smiled like Efran for her, which made her gasp out a laugh.

“Oh! Congratulations on being named captain!” she remembered.

“Thank you, Minka,” he acknowledged, and the man below them chuckled. But they sat without moving, as Efran was riding down the eastbound road toward them.

Shortly, Efran reined up beside Melchior’s horse, reaching over for her. She spilled out, “It’s not their fault, Efran; don’t punish them. We didn’t come out here to play with the babies. Adele asked to walk around the lake, but then she jumped in, and she wouldn’t let them get her out, so the babies thought—”

“It’s all right; no one will be punished,” Efran said, lifting her from Melchior’s saddle to sit on his, in front of him. She draped her knee over the pommel. Melchior saluted, turning his horse back toward the barracks.

“Routh needs to see Wallace. One of the babies got excited and bit him,” Minka gasped, looking around anxiously for him.

“We’ll get him up there. Don’t worry,” Efran said, turning his horse to walk west.

“He was going to come up to cut your hair!” she almost wailed.

“I’ll get another man to do it,” he said.

“Symphorien left, Efran,” she mourned, as if he hadn’t seen it.

“Well, of course, this is just her nesting ground. There’s not room for all of them to live here,” he said, watching the road ahead. He noted Routh and Allyr doubled up on other men’s horses to ascend the switchback. Lorient was carrying Adele up the steps into the fortress.

“It was Adele’s fault,” Minka muttered as they entered the switchback under the waving faerie trees. “They kept pulling her out of the water and she kept getting back in, so the babies thought it was a game. Routh and Allyr deserve commendations,” she added firmly.

“I will see that they’re commended,” he said, placating.

“I have dresses for her coming from Elvey’s,” she muttered, laying her wet head on his shoulder. “I have a royal left over—” she futilely searched her pocket for it. Then she groaned, “I need to bathe again.”

“The tub is being filled,” he said.

In the courtyard, Efran dismounted before lifting her down, but she refused to be carried. “I’m all right; I can walk,” she insisted, and staggered up the fortress steps with his hand hovering at her back.

They paused at the open door of their quarters as the soldier with the last bucket left, saluting Efran. “Let me know how Routh is,” Minka said, looking around for him. “I don’t know how badly he was bitten.”

“I’ll check,” he said, nudging her into their quarters.

“Where is Joshua?” she asked in sudden anxiety.

“In the nursery. I’ll pick him up shortly. You go ahead and bathe. I’ll get Joshua and check on Routh. Lock the door,” he said, watching her go in.

Before closing the door, she said, “Tell Lorient that she wasn’t going to drown herself; she was trying to get attention. She didn’t know about the Leviathan babies,” Minka said, annoyed. At this, he merely nodded, closing the door. He waited to hear the lock turn, then exhaled, heading down the corridor to the nursery.

Looking in at the half-door, he saw the assistant with her back to him, changing a baby’s wraps who was not Joshua. Efran looked around, growing alarmed when he didn’t see him—

At the banging below, he looked down. Joshua was standing at the door, leaning against it to bang on it. He grinned at his success in getting his father’s attention. Efran laughed, leaning down to pick him up. The nursery worker turned around as he said, “I have him, Cordelia.”

“Yes, Lord Efran,” she said, smiling.

Efran carried his son on his arm upstairs. Upon the upheaval at the lake, he had left the sling somewhere when he dropped off Joshua to run out to the courtyard. Stopping first at the doctor’s door, he asked Leese, “Has Wallace looked at Routh yet?”

“Yes, Efran, the bites aren’t bad. Wallace told him to pour ale on them several times a day; avoid getting them dirty. He’s in some pain, but they should heal all right,” she said.

“That’s good. Thank you,” he said. Then he went on down the corridor to the workroom.

Estes and DeWitt looked up. “How is she?” Estes asked.

“Fine. Just a little shook up. Routh was bitten, but Leese says he’ll be fine,” Efran exhaled, releasing Joshua to roam the floor. “The problem was Adele jumping into the lake when she didn’t know that baby Leviathans were wanting to play.” Efran flopped into a chair.

“Why . . . did she do that?” DeWitt asked.

“To get attention, Minka said,” Efran replied. Crossing his arms over his chest, he leaned his head on the chair back to study the faerie tree branches growing through the ceiling. “And here we are again; Adele is back to torment my wife, even blind, and I don’t know what to do about it.” He inhaled in despondence. “I don’t know what to do.”

Estes said, “I think it’s out of your hands, Efran. Lorient has married her, and he is not a fool.” Efran looked over at him, considering this.

At this time, a soldier entered the workroom to salute. “Earnshaw requesting a moment of your time, Captain.”

Efran sat up. “Earnshaw. Yes, at ease. Quennel says you’re actually learning *aikē* shooting”—that is, the Polonti method of shooting by instinct rather than sight. Earnshaw was a Southerner who had entered the army as a scribe, being highly literate.

“Thank you, Captain. Yes, ‘learning’ is the operative word; I’ve never done anything like it in my life, but it’s taking hold. So Quennel says,” Earnshaw demurred.

“He should know. What can I do for you?” Efran asked.

“Captain, I . . . see the keep, with the Cross, and the benches, usually empty, and the book of Scriptures in the library, usually untouched. With your permission, sir, I would like to hold readings of Scripture in the keep once a week, on Dominica [the Lord’s day] for anyone who wants to come hear it. And prayers, as well, for any who feel they need it.”

“Oh, excellent,” DeWitt murmured under his breath.

“Yes, certainly,” Efran said. “Why have I not done that already?”

Earnshaw said, “Captain, in your position, you pretty well have your hands full. I have more time. But if you allow, sir, it would require moving the Holy Canon to the keep.”

“Where it belongs. Do it, Earnshaw, with my gratitude,” Efran said. “You’re dismissed.”

“Thank you, Captain. Administrator. Steward,” Earnshaw said, saluting. Then he left.

“Keep an eye on that man,” Estes murmured.

Efran agreed, thinking, *Something else of great importance will now be put to use in the fortress . . . by those other than me.*

A messenger brought the package from Elvey’s clear up to the third-floor room. Since Wyeth had put his and Cyr’s names on his door, Lorient labeled his door likewise. He took the package into the bedroom as Adele stood shivering in the water stall after the cistern above had been emptied.

Taking a large towel, Lorient wrapped her up and guided her to sit on the bed. “You have new clothes,” he said, opening the package.

“That Minka picked out,” she grumbled.

Lorient looked through the dresses and cloak, observing, “I have not seen anyone at the fortress dressed as finely. Minka does not wear clothing like this except for very special occasions.”

Her face took on a derisive smile as her brows drew down over white orbs. “How do you know?”

“I have seen her,” he said. “She does not wear elegant clothes.”

Taking her hands, he lifted her to walk her over to the chest where her lingerie was stored. He held her hand to open it and feel the items stored there. She picked out the underclothes she needed, and he let her put them on herself. Then he led her back to the bed. “Choose one,” he said.

“Where is the pink?” she asked.

“There is a light pink, a darker pink, and a . . . light red,” he said.

“The light pink,” she specified. This he handed to her, then stood back to let her dress herself.

This she did, as the scoop neck allowed her to pull it on without buttons or fasteners. She wrapped the sash around her waist, tying it in front. “I need a mirror,” she muttered, then asked, “How does that look?”

“Very nice,” he said thoughtfully.

She turned aside, uttering, “Shoes.”

The slippers she had put on this morning were now somewhere in or around the lake, so Lorient went to the wardrobe to take out the leather boots. “Here,” he said, putting them at her feet.

She felt the leather, frowning, and asked, “What color are they?”

Regarding the brown, he said, “A light color.” So she pulled them on.

Standing, she demanded, “Where is my brush?”

This he handed to her, and waited for her to brush her hair and attach a clip to an uneven clump. “How is that?” she asked tensely.

“Very nice,” he said.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 3

“You keep saying ‘very nice,’” Adele observed suspiciously.

“It is hard for you to look anything other than beautiful,” Lorient noted.

“Oh. Well, I need dark glasses.”

He said, “We will go down to ask Wallace for another pair.”

This they did. Wallace managed to scrounge up another pair for her, though they were clunky men’s glasses, large and ugly. Leaving his suite wearing these, Adele grumbled, “We were at Elvey’s this morning, and Minka said nothing about getting me another pair.”

“What good would it have done?” Lorient asked—because whoever carried them would have lost them in the cavern lake. She did not reply as he walked her down the stairs.

They stopped by the kitchen for a Delano’s ale and a plate of flatbread. Then Lorient walked her out to the back grounds to sit her on the bench under the walnut tree. “Is this Goadby’s? I want the old Goadby’s,” she said.

“They don’t have it. They have Delano’s Mild Ale and Lager, cider, wine, milk, tea, and well water. Shall I get you water?” he asked.

“No,” she said grumpily.

He put the plate of flatbread beside her, moving her hand to feel it. Then he said, “I must return to duty. You may sit here until I come back.”

“No! Lorient, stay with me!” she insisted.

“I cannot; I have duty. Sit and listen, then you will find what to do,” he said.

“Lorient!” she cried, but he walked off. Workers around them glanced over, saying nothing.

At that time, Loseby entered the second-floor workroom to salute and say, “Captain, Lorient has left Adele on the bench on the back grounds and returned to the barracks below.”

The three men in the room absorbed that, then Efran said, "Thank you. You're dismissed." Loseby saluted again and left.

Efran, DeWitt, and Estes looked at each other. Efran said, "So there is no reason for me to do anything."

"Correct," DeWitt said crisply, then turned to Estes for his opinion on something more important.

In a little while, Minka came up to the workroom. Efran, having found the sling, had just put Joshua in it and draped it across his back. Seeing that, she came over to make sure the upper edge of the sling supported Joshua's head. "Where are you boys off to?" she asked.

"Archery practice and then scaling the hillside. We're seeing some interesting things out there," Efran said, leaning down to kiss her.

She received his kiss, then looked despondently at the mug of tea. "Did I hear correctly that there's a mess kitchen at the lower barracks?" she asked.

"Yes, in Barracks Two," Efran said. "There are far too many men for them all to eat up here," he said, shrugging the sling to rest between his shoulder blades.

"Then I'll be down there for a little while," she said, picking up the mug of cold tea.

"The Commander will have his tea," Efran grinned.

She flashed him a smile, then looked with pity at Estes and DeWitt. "What shall you do in all the silence, without us or Adele?"

They laughed wryly; Estes said, "You're the only one we'll miss, Minka." Efran narrowed his eyes at him. She smiled, drinking the tea.

Minka stopped by the kitchen for a bag of dried mint leaves, then went out to the courtyard to request her favorite horse, Rose. She told the gate sentry, Hawk, "I don't need a bodyguard; I'm going down to the barracks."

He nodded, "Yes, Lady Minka," barely avoiding the reply, *Oh then, you certainly do need a bodyguard.*

With the Commander's mug and a bag of tea in her saddle pouch, she walked Rose down the switchback and up Main into the organized mayhem of men getting the new barracks in order. They stopped to stare at Lady Minka in their midst, who was demanding to be shown to the kitchen.

By the time Captain Barr found her, she was exiting the kitchen with a nice hot mug of mint tea. "Barr!" she said, throwing an arm around his neck before remembering not to. "I've missed you! I need to find Commander Wendt."

"Who must have his tea," Barr grinned. "I will escort you, Minka."

"Thank you," she said happily.

He took her to Barracks #3, mostly finished except for interior details. There, they saw Wendt in conference with

Commander Lyte and the new Captain, Melchior. They both turned at her approach, Melchior saying, “Commander, I hope you’re ready for your tea.”

Wendt threw his head back to laugh. “Minka didn’t trust ham-handed men, so brought it down herself, I see.” Despite his blindness, he could see the aura around her—and Wyeth, as well, for both knew faerie.

Forgetting about her aura, Minka stopped, open-mouthed. “How did you know?”

“Sweetheart, your scented soap wouldn’t be found in the barracks otherwise,” Wendt said, taking the mug to sip from it. “And it’s hot.”

“Very good. I’ll leave you to it,” she said, turning.

But Wendt murmured, “Stay a moment, Minka.”

She turned attentively back to him; Lyte said, “We’ll go check on the progress of Number Four, Commander.”

“Good. I’ll be out there shortly,” Wendt said. Barr, Melchior, and Lyte left with salutes, regardless of the fact that he could not see them.

“Can we speak privately?” Wendt whispered to her.

“Yes,” she said, glancing around.

“Is there a man in a cloak at the far end of the room?” he whispered, mouth at the brim of the mug.

She glanced up. “Not a cloak, but a minstrel’s costume, it appears. Only it’s not motley, just brown.” This costume consisted of a short cloak with a pointed hood that draped down the back. Some had bells; this one didn’t.

“Ah,” he said. “What is he doing?”

“He appears to be folding blankets and putting them into cubicles,” she whispered. “Why?”

“Let’s go out and I’ll tell you,” he said.

She turned toward the exit, leading him by the hand, and brought him to stand out of the way of the bustle but in sight to anyone who might need him. “All right, we’re outside; he’s still inside. What is it?” she asked.

“He calls himself Gedney; claims to be a refugee from Eurus. He definitely speaks like a EurAsian. He does little jobs around the barracks in exchange for food and a place to sleep. But I can see his aura, and from the shape of it, I believe he’s the one who offered me second sight. That was back in early October.”

“Yes, I remember your telling me about that. Was it down here?” she asked.

“Yes,” Wendt said. “He didn’t identify himself, and tried to disguise his voice. Nor has he spoken to me as Gedney. But his body odor is distinctive,” he added.

“How strange. Why did he come to you in particular?” she asked, bewildered.

“Because of my blindness, I believe. He was looking for easy targets. But a gift like that is bound to be a Trojan horse.”

“Are you sure? Could he have thought to help you?” she asked, anxious for him to have *some* ability to see.

Wendt shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. You know, Jesus gave sight to the man born blind, straight up. The offer of a substitute is deceptive. I actually knew a man who had a form of second sight—he came to me offering to help me with battle plans. I tested him on one or two points, then brushed him off.”

“Why?” she asked.

Wendt said, “It was actually not an advantage to him. He could perceive things about particular people close to him—attitudes or emotions, often their direct thoughts. But it was no help to me in looking at the big picture. And it became bondage to him, in that he tried to make everything he did conform to what he thought this sight was showing him. It made him narrow, weird, erratic. It’s hard to describe, but, it stripped him of the ability to make decisions based on what was right or even best for himself.”

“Oh, dear. That’s disturbing. I’ll tell Efran.”

“Yes, you’d better. And thank you for the tea, Minka.” He handed her the empty cup, smiling.

Meanwhile, getting the gist of this whispered conversation that they took outside, Gedney left the barracks from a side door, stripping off his jester’s hood. He casually dropped it alongside the dirt road leading from the barracks as he approached Main. Walking south, he saw the miller in his cart heading toward the switchback with five or six large bags of flour.

Hailing him, Gedney said, “Ho! If you’ll give me a ride up, I’ll be pleased to bring in your bags. I’m late for my shift!”

Kane, the miller, hauled up on the reins, nodding. “Hop up, then.”

“Thankee, friend.” Gedney climbed into the cart to sit, looking up to the fortress.

At this time, Efran was descending the northwest face of the hilltop with Joshua on his back. Having seen Minka go down the switchback on Rose, he was watching for her at the barracks when he saw the scruffy character exit, strip off his hood, drop it, and catch the miller going south on Main. Efran also noted the faerie trees’ batting at him as the cart turned onto the switchback—the trees were actually good sentries if anyone noticed their reactions to strangers on the Lands.

Efran paused in contemplation of this, then saw Minka on Rose, turning up Main toward the switchback. So he walked over to meet her on the first bend. “Efran!” she said in surprise. “Oh, will you walk up with me?”

“Naturally,” he said. “Joshua says hello.” He turned his shoulder toward her.

“No, he doesn’t, he’s asleep. You’ve worn him out again,” she said warmly.

“Good,” he said.

“Oh, I just had a conversation with the Commander you need to hear. He has concerns about this hanger-on at the barracks named Gedney,” she said, angling Rose away from Efran’s feet.

“Yes?” he said, and she repeated what Wendt had told her.

“Second sight,” he mused. “It would be unfortunate if he found Adele.”

“Oh, he shouldn’t. The Commander said he’s working at the barracks,” she said.

“Is he,” Efran muttered, glancing up the switchback.

When they arrived in the courtyard, and Minka went in, Efran paused to tell Hawk, “Send a man down to Commander Wendt—ask him to tell Loriot about Gedney, and have Loriot warn Adele that a huckster may approach her with promises of second sight. If I find him on the grounds, he’ll regret having the sight he’s got.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 4

Adele sat on the bench glumly, listening to what she could hear in her relatively isolated spot. There were disjointed bits of conversation flowing by her, shouts without context, jokes without punch lines. She felt abandoned, alone, and empty.

Having unloaded the sacks of flour in the kitchen as he had promised, Gedney came out the back kitchen door onto the east side grounds. Coming around the southeastern corner of the fortress, he scanned the area. There was so much going on back here, he felt certain of being able to scrounge up a profitable job or two. He had many gifts to offer, but that of “second sight” seemed to attract the most takers, even those with good eyesight. Then he spotted the well-dressed woman in dark glasses sitting on the bench alone. He squinted, hardly able to believe an opportunity such as this falling directly into his lap.

Avoiding the soldiers, he caught a passing laborer to ask, “Is the woman on the bench blind?”

The fellow looked at him dubiously, but said, “Yes, and her husband is Lieutenant Loriot, so watch yourself.” Then he resumed his errand.

A lieutenant’s wife! The Abbey paid its officers well, Gedney knew. Yes, this was a golden opportunity. Literally.

First, he looked for a possible escape route, if needed, and his speculative gaze rested on a worn path that curved around the west side of the fortress. That ascertained, he sidled over to the bench to casually sit, careful not to get too close. The woman turned her head minutely toward him. She said nothing, for his acrid body odor had registered with her as it had the Commander. She had been around him before, but was not remembering where. So she waited to hear him speak.

“Such a beautiful lady to be blind,” he murmured. “But I have something to offer you as consolation.”

Her eyes widened slightly behind the glasses as she recognized his speech, knowing who it was from her brief time as Surchataine of Eurus. But he had not recognized her, so she whispered, “Who are you? And what do you propose to give me?”

“My name is Lord Acton, Lady, and I have been a Councilor in Eurus,” he said with his most refined diction. While the name he gave was false, the information was true, and her brows raised slightly.

“How in the world am I supposed to believe that?” she asked, which was a legitimate question.

“I can give you facts of which no one else is aware,” he said in a low voice. “After Rounsefell lost his suit for half the Abbey Treasury, Lord Alverstroke murdered Lord Uxbridge to advance his claim to the throne.”

“Then why didn’t Alverstroke become Surchatain?” Adele asked in a like voice.

“Because High Councilor Blairgowrie ascended at that time,” he said.

“Not DeVenter?” she asked.

“Oh no. That was just a ploy by that scheming woman to worm her way into the rulership,” Gedney said—in fact, referencing Adele herself, who had been successful in the effort.

“Well, you have convinced me,” she said, returning to the matter at hand. “So what can you give me?”

“Second sight, my lady,” he said reverently.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The ability to perceive what no one else can see,” he said, projecting awe.

“Not regular sight?” she asked plaintively.

“Oh, no one can give that. But once you try second sight, you won’t feel the need for regular eyes,” he said. “And not only that, but I can teach you to make yourself invisible for brief periods of time.” This was true, except that it was a highly specialized art which he practiced ineptly, so that his invisibility was unreliable.

This did not much appeal to her, as one needed sight to see it deployed. “Just give me the second sight,” she said.

“I will, upon which you will owe me—ten royals,” he said, spontaneously doubling his asking price.

“What if I cannot pay you?” she asked dubiously.

“Then I will take it away again,” he said airily.

She frowned. “How?”

“I will simply perform the giving in reverse,” he said—although he had never actually figured out how to do that.

“Agreed, then,” she said firmly. “Ten royals.”

After glancing around in caution, he placed his hand on her forehead and muttered words of power. And then all at once, she was flooded with impressions, the force of which caused her head to jerk back slightly. Looking around from the bench under the walnut tree, she murmured, “Oh, my!”

Although she couldn't see them, she perceived that Tourjee the undergardener and four helpers were planting winter kale and spinach. Tourjee was vexed over his painful knees, while the deaf girl, Cyr, was thinking about her husband Wyeth. Another helper was lusting after her.

Turning her attention to another part of the grounds, Adele was almost overwhelmed by the combined thoughts and mental energy of the archers and the men sparring. She separated out the thoughts of the sparring leaders, Nyland and Wyeth. Nyland was thinking about a pretty serving girl, while Wyeth was consumed with thoughts of Minka in a pure, devoted kind of way. "Oh, I can use that," Adele laughed to herself.

"I trust that the application was successful?" Gedney said lightly.

"Oh, yes!" she exulted. Turning to him, she said, "And now I will pay you, Alverstroke. I will give you five seconds to depart these grounds before I start screaming that you murdered your co-councilor. One. Two. Three—"

In blind panic, Alverstroke leapt off the bench to run like a hare for the west side of the fortress. Workers paused to watch suspiciously, but since he wasn't carrying anything and was definitely departing, they let him do so. Adele laughed in satisfaction.

She spent the next half hour directing her new sense of "sight" all around her. Then her attention was diverted to someone approaching, and she murmured, "Loriot."

When the bench rocked slightly from his sitting, she startled. "Who is there?"

"Me, Adele. How are you doing?" he asked.

"Very well, actually. It's quite pleasant out here, with so much to listen to," she said.

"I'm glad," he said, and she discerned how troubled and tentative he was. "Adele, Commander Wendt wanted me to warn you about someone who may approach you offering second sight," he said.

He's leaving Efran out of it, she noted. "Second sight? What is that?" she asked.

"It seems to be the ability to see things without sight," he said.

He hasn't a clue, she thought. "Is that even possible?" she asked.

"In a way, but the Commander believes it is a trap. He refused it for himself," Loriot said.

Idiot, she laughed inwardly. "Then I will certainly be on guard against it," she said righteously.

"Good," Loriot said, knowing that it was not. He perceived her inward laughter, and the fact that she had already obtained what he was attempting to warn her about. But she had turned her attention away from him to scan other people around the grounds.

They sat in silence for a few minutes as Adele collected information from the thoughts flowing around her and Loriot thought about how his accommodation of his prescient dreams had misled him. He had not gotten the wife he wanted in her; he had embraced a shrew. And his dreams gave him no clue what to do with her now. So he inwardly turned them off and looked elsewhere for direction.

That afternoon, Efran discovered what major changes Estes was asking for when Efran had been too distracted to pay attention. From now on, off-duty soldiers would assist with food production. Feeding the influx of new men had put a strain on the Fortress budget as well as their suppliers in Westford of grains and meat. So all soldiers (except officers) who were not training or on guard duty would be building livestock pens and preparing a few acres of eastern Abbey meadowland for planting wheat, oats, and rye (not barley, which Bethune's husband Howe supplied, nor rice, which Knapp grew). When the pens were ready, Estes planned on purchasing beef cattle, dairy cows, sheep, and possibly pigs from Westford-area farmers. After the shock of discovering what he had agreed to, Efran conceded that it was prudent and overdue.

At dinner that evening, Efran and Minka were surrounded by children. Besides Efran's daughter Ella and his son Joshua, their adopted children Toby, Noah, and Ivy sat around them to eat, along with Cleo, Erastus, Almund, Hassie, Tarrant, and others who greeted them in passing, such as Ella's half-brother Cyneheard. Formerly at university in Eurus, Cyneheard was pursuing a career in the Abbey army with gusto, and his captain, Towner, admitted that his enthusiasm went a long way in making up for his inexperience.

Tonight they were devouring salmon cakes and rice pudding, drinking mild ale or lager (ginger beer for the children), and talking about Tess breaking her arm after getting thrown by Cloud again. Tess, who appeared in the dining hall waving a hard bandage, insisted it was all in fun and Cloud would be broken within a month.

Minka cast glances across the hall at Adele and Loriot sitting with Wyeth and Cyr. Adele was alarmingly happy and chatty; Wyeth had his head down in his plate and Cyr was looking off vacantly. Efran turned his lips to Minka's ear to breathe, "Do you think you can talk to Adele tomorrow? I've had the men search the fortress and grounds for Gedney, but no one's found him yet."

"I see I'd better," she whispered back. Adele's being happy was a bad sign for everyone.

So the following morning, November 23rd, Minka went about her chickening duties, cleaning henhouse #4 (out of 5) and taking a basket of 21 eggs from all of them to the kitchen. Then she changed out of her chickening clothes into her favorite pants and went out to look for Adele. As he had yesterday, Loriot left her on the bench under the walnut tree. Before going over to her, Minka stood back for a while just to watch her.

Adele was turning her head as if listening, but there was no one within speaking range of her. Yet she was clearly paying attention to something around her. Then Adele's head swiveled toward Minka sharply before casually turning away. And that was when Minka began to fear that Gedney had already endowed her with second sight.

Since Adele had discerned her presence, Minka walked over. "Hello, Adele. Would you like to walk around a bit?"

Adele paused, and Minka felt herself being read. Or was it her imagination? "That would be lovely," Adele said, standing.

"Good. Would you like to take my hand, or hold my arm? The Commander prefers to put his hand on his guide's shoulder," Minka said.

"I'll just walk beside you," Adele said.

"Oh, good," Minka said, turning to walk along the trees to her left with Adele on her right. "Do you smell the apples? I'm afraid the ones that didn't get picked up are starting to ferment."

“Yes, it’s intoxicating,” Adele said humorously.

“Some of the men swear they’ve seen rabbits or squirrels staggering about, but I don’t know that I believe them,” Minka laughed.

“How men lie,” Adele said.

“Too true,” Minka agreed.

They walked for a little while in silence, as Minka cast about for safe subjects. She glanced at Adele’s dress—one that Minka had bought for her at Elvey’s—and started to mention how pretty it was on her, but stifled the comment. She knew how Adele despised compliments from her.

“I do like the dresses; they’re comfortable and Lorient says very pretty,” Adele said.

“I’m so glad!” Minka said, almost certain now that her thoughts were being scanned. Also, Adele was trying to put her at ease by being agreeable. That was suspicious in itself, being so unlike her. As cover, Minka chatted about everything she saw. This was easy to do without much thought. Noting Efran at the archery line with Joshua, she quickly walked past them.

Then she turned before getting too close to the sparring grounds. “Oh, let’s go over to watch Ella and Tess train the horses. I hope she can work with a broken arm! Sometimes Jasque comes out to help her with the stubborn ones,” she chatted.

“But wouldn’t you rather watch the men spar?” Adele asked silkily.

“No. Why?” Minka asked.

“They adore you,” Adele purred.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 5

Minka laughed, “Yes, the men who are looking to Efran for advancement pay homage to me, just in case.”

But Adele turned her head toward Wyeth, who had paused to watch them. Minka observed, “Oh, they’ve got Cloud out to work with her. I hope they get her trained to the saddle soon; she’s so pretty, and just the right size.” Ignoring the men, she led determinedly to the training pens. Adele would soon learn to focus her second sight without having to turn her head toward her target, but for now, Minka was enlightened by seeing how, and from whom, Adele gleaned information.

Minka leaned on the railing. “Tess is training her to the bridle—oh, she’s taken to it very well. Now Tess is going up on her bare back!—oops, no, Cloud is having none of it,” she relayed. “Her poor arm! It will never heal if she keeps doing that. Oh, she looks hurt.”

Adele turned her head toward Minka when someone else leaned on the railing beside her. Minka looked over at Lorient, who nodded to her. “Lorient! I’m so glad you were able to take off work for a little while.” Patting his arm, Minka left the railing to go back inside the fortress.

“How are you, Adele?” Lorient asked. They both stood leaning on the top rail of the horse training pen.

She shrugged. “Bored. But I can’t do anything about it,” she added quickly.

He nodded. “I am sorry that I must work.”

She turned to him as he looked contemplatively over the training pen. “Tess is fairly good in her technique, but she’s too small to handle the big animals,” he noted.

Adele’s brows gathered. “You’re—you’re thinking of killing me!”

“That’s ridiculous,” he said mildly.

“You are! You’re imagining choking me to death!” she cried.

He shook his head. “Whoever gave you second sight should have warned you that it’s often wrong. Your own fears and desires intermingle with what you receive. What are you desiring me to do to you?” he asked. She was breathing rapidly, looking confused and disturbed. Lorient smiled vaguely.

Efran, at the archery range with Joshua on his back, glanced toward Adele and Lorient occasionally as he practiced *aïke* shooting. It was getting to be ridiculously easy—the more he shot, and the less he concentrated on it, the more reliably his arrows grouped in the center. He practiced only to make sure he remained in the river, the flow, as Quennel called it.

But when he started splintering arrows again by grouping them too closely, he gave it up and went to collect his arrows from the target. Lwoff’s young armory assistant intervened: “Allow me, Captain.”

“Thank you, Evrard,” he said, patting his shoulder.

From there, Efran went to find his wild child, Pia, in the woods. As soon as he left the fenced fortress grounds and began walking in the woods to look for her, she came to him. “Pia! You didn’t make me search an hour for you this time.” He knelt so that she could stroke Joshua’s head in welcome.

“Efran, a smelly Southerner came into the woods last night. My men chased him out, but I think he’s still on the hillside,” she told him. The hillside was not searched yesterday, as far as he knew.

“Ah. Thank you, Pia. How many men do you have out here?” he asked, standing.

“Eight or ten. It changes,” she said, looking over her shoulder tentatively.

“Well, call over four of them to search for him,” he said.

She turned to point and wave until four young Polonti soldiers stood around them. Efran said, “Excellent. You’re to help me find a smelly Southerner who may be stranded on the hillside below us.” As he turned away to lead north, they saluted and followed. Several of them greeted Joshua with a pat on his back, and he waved at them.

Efran had them spread out as they began descending the steep, rocky hillside to search. But after a few minutes, they spotted a figure standing in the midst of a mass of briars. The men stared in wonder; it looked as though he had collected brier to wrap around himself on his way down the hillside. For there was more encompassing him than in most of the rest of the hill.

The stinky man was groaning as Efran approached. “How did you do that?” he asked curiously, studying his fortress of brier.

“It’s alive! It followed me!” Gedney wailed. “This place is cursed. I’m sorry that I ever—” He suddenly shut his mouth, realizing that he was talking too much.

“Pull it away from him. Carefully,” Efran gestured. Two of the men went over to take hold of the brier around the needle-like thorns, and it opened like barn doors for the prisoner to stagger out.

“Well, then. Come with me,” Efran instructed Gedney, turning toward the courtyard gates. “You’re all dismissed; thank you.” The four saluted to begin trotting back up the hillside. Meanwhile, Gedney didn’t dare do anything but go with the Captain, for every time he looked back, the mass of briars seemed to be following him, still.

Efran took him through the front doors into the fortress, then up to the second-floor workroom. As they entered, DeWitt and Estes looked up. “Sit,” Efran instructed their visitor. Shying away from the faerie tree growing up through the middle of the table, he sat as far away from it as he could.

Efran relocated Joshua to his front, then lifted him out of the sling to hand him to the door sentry. “Wraps, please.” Efran tossed the sling over the man’s arm as well.

“Aye, bugger, the ladies’ll get yer cleaned up,” he said, whisking him off so that Joshua laughed.

Smiling, Efran turned back to Gedney, who was miserably inspecting his multitude of scratches. Minka came to the door from the corridor to see what was going on, then left again.

As Efran was seating himself with an ale, he gave one to Gedney. The poor man accepted it with a gasp. Then Minka entered with several cool wet rags to hand him. Sighing in relief, he applied them to all the bloody lines on his arms and legs while Minka sat next to Efran, declining his lap. Although he understood why, he still looked peeved.

Minka nodded toward their unhappy guest. “Yes, that’s him. Gedney.” The Steward and Administrator continued their work, glancing up as necessary to keep tabs on the proceedings.

Taking a drink, Efran studied Gedney. “He looks familiar.” The man’s eyes widened in innocence.

“From the barracks?” she asked.

“No,” Efran said, evaluative. “He’s not your standard army hanger-on; his speech is too refined. Definitely EurAsian, and EurAsian court speech.” He took another drink, then asked, “What’s your real name?”

Eyebrows arching as he considered the question, Gedney said, “Acton.”

“Acton,” Efran repeated, scoffing. “No, no. Good try, but, no.” He went silent, then asked DeWitt, “Why am I thinking of Uxbridge?—the EurAsian Councilor. He’s dead, isn’t he?” On hearing this, Gedney/Acton froze.

“Aren’t they all?” DeWitt said absently, transferring numbers.

“Uxbridge. Who issued a death warrant on Lord Schmolck. No, there’s something else. Someone else. Uxbridge and. . . .” Efran’s eyes turned back to Gedney/Acton’s sweating face, and he finished the thought: “Alverstroke. Councilor Alverstroke. Of course. You came to my trial. That was very kind of you.”

As Efran smiled on him, Alverstroke began trembling. “Whatever happened to Uxbridge, who thought to issue death warrants for Abbey Lands nobility?” Efran asked him. DeWitt and Estes were now watching as fixedly as Minka was.

Alverstroke raised his shaking shoulders. “I—lost track of him.”

“Obviously. Off a cliff, in the Passage, or maybe at the end of a rope,” Efran mused, then said, “Well, what do you think, Lady? Does Adele have second sight now?”

“Adele?” Alverstroke gasped.

“Yes,” Minka replied to Efran while observing Alverstroke’s reaction with interest.

“You gave her second sight without even recognizing her? Oh, that’s sloppy, sloppy work,” Efran chided him. Alverstroke’s face was frozen. “Well. Undo it, then,” Efran instructed, finishing off the bottle.

Alverstroke revived to assume a tutorial air. “Well, you see, what occurs in the giving of a gift such as second sight, is, the one who has attained the highest rank, as it were—”

Minka said, “He can’t. Of the two of them, she’s definitely stronger.” In concession of this, Alverstroke collapsed like an empty bladder.

“As we all feared,” Efran said in resignation. “Well, you’re no use to us now, Alverstroke.” The man stilled, waiting to see what would follow upon his declaration of uselessness.

The sentry returned bearing a fresh and clean baby, whom he deposited on his father. Efran put him back down on the floor as he wanted. “Thank you, Corwyn. Now please escort Alverstroke, or Gedney, off the Lands. He comes back on pain of death.”

“Yes, Cap’n.” Corwyn saluted, then turned to the ex-Councilor, who quickly stood to take the rags and the bottle of ale with him.

After they had left the room, Efran scooted away from the table, resting his elbows on his thighs as he watched Joshua roll around on the floor. “Does Lorient know she has second sight?” he asked Minka.

“He must; he was just now talking to her,” Minka said.

He raised his head to ask her, “Which of *them* is stronger?”

“Oh, Adele is a juniper on fire that blazes hot for a few minutes, but Lorient is a canyon that you can’t even see the bottom of,” she murmured.

He nodded slowly. “Very descriptive. And . . . unsettling.”

She shook her curls. "If you forced me to trust one or the other, I'd take him over her any day."

"You would," he said flatly, the jealousy flickering to life.

"Stop that," she said, coming over to drop onto his lap. "He's scary because you're not sure what he'll do, except that he's very deliberate about it. But I know what Adele does, and it's never good."

"I understand," he conceded, hugging her. Then he laughed, "The briars on the hillside had Alverstroke trapped."

"What?" Her eyebrows scrunched together.

"Almost all the briars from the hillside had collected around him. Pia's Polonti opened them up to get him out."

DeWitt and Estes looked up in amusement. Minka said, "We still don't know the half about this place."

"True," DeWitt said; Estes nodded.

At that moment, the young Polonti Salk appeared at the door, bearing a letter. He started to hand it to Efran, but paused at the sight of Minka in his lap. So he froze in indecision about who should receive the letter.

Efran smiled sympathetically. "If the letter is addressed to the Lady Minka, you may give it to her."

"Captain," Salk acknowledged, handing Minka the letter and saluting him.

When the boy returned to the doorway to stand at attention, Efran nodded, "You are dismissed." Salk saluted again and ran out. "Me at fourteen," Efran murmured. That was fourteen years ago.

Minka said, "They're adorable," as she opened the letter. "We finally have a letter from Justinian! Shall I read it, or do you want to tell us what's in it?"

"Is that the one he starts off, 'To my blue-eyed vixen'?" Efran asked, his face in her hair.

"Almost," Minka said, and held the letter up for him to see as she began reading.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 6

Minka began reading Justinian's latest letter:

"My most adorable blue-eyed vixen:

"I have received your letter of the 18th, and while I appreciate your lamenting the carelessness which led to the inadvertent spread of the Letter, that concerns me less than the reappearance of your sister on your home grounds. This Lorient must have the brute strength of a gorilla, the cunning of a weasel, and the farsightedness of an eagle to contain the malevolent force within that surprisingly resilient exterior. [DeWitt barked out a laugh.]

“In other matters, the Council of Eurus has unanimously elected Quilicus as Surchatain as of November the 22nd.’ Yesterday,” Minka noted in an aside. “Astonishingly, his first act was to roll back taxes on the nobility and businesses. This action is so unprecedented, so brilliant, that I find myself quaking as we await what comes next. He is now so entrenched in their favor, he may chop off heads with impunity. I shall be as obsequious as possible, hoping it won’t be mine that gets dispatched.

“He has also attached to his service one Wedderburn, whose name sticks in my head like a bur, but I cannot definitively place him. He’s a supercilious fellow, but wears robes as if unaccustomed to them. He has fine diction, but more of a Westfordian accent than Eurussian, which he is trying hard to correct. His duties are undefined, which means he can do as he wishes. And he strikes me as one who bears grudges.

“More later; please keep me apprised of the lovely adder’s victims. On an unrelated note, I am wondering if your Gargoyle will reconsider the lack of a prison in the fortress and rectify the handicap.’

“Yours, Justinian,” she finished airily.

Whereupon Efran took the parchment in order to see the closing for himself. “In the purest flame of devotion as one of your many acolytes, Your Own Justinian,” he read.

She exhaled, “He does that to afflict you; the cult of *moiwahine* is over.”

“On the contrary, there are more acolytes than ever, but the fire burns on the inside,” Efran said, only half-joking. “Wedderburn,” he breathed. This was the informant whom Webbe paid for purportedly damaging information on Minka in order to bring her to trial on charges of public immorality. “So now we must be prepared to find one or more of his lackeys nosing around the Lands.”

DeWitt asked, “Does Justinian not know about Adele’s blinding?”

Minka thought about that, taking the letter from Efran’s hand to look over it again. Then she said, “No. The last I wrote him was the eighteenth, and her blinding happened a few days later.” The men considered this quietly.

“Apprise him of that, please, as well as her second sight—oh, and about Wedderburn, as well,” Efran told her. Minka nodded, rising from his lap to sit beside him, and Estes pushed the writing implements toward her.

After Minka had left Loriot and Adele at the fence of the training pen, they continued to watch Tess work with Cloud despite the heavy bandage on her arm. Aware of their presence, she grew self-conscious and flustered, but they weren’t really paying attention to her or Ella, who was having considerably more success halter training a foal in another pasture.

Adele, breathing heavily, told Loriot, “Take me up to Efran, please.”

Loriot looked past the training pens. “He is out on the hillside somewhere.”

“I want a divorce,” she said stiffly.

“Already?” he asked, with a good pretense of pain. “Then who will take care of you?”

“I can take care of myself,” she asserted.

He shook his head. "I hope you are not relying on the second sight. It is deceitful. There is no way to tell whether what you are seeing exists outside of your mind."

"AYIEH!" she screamed. Both Tess and Ella looked toward them as Adele ducked, covering her head. "Oh! It tore you! You're covered in blood!" she cried.

"What? No," he said. "Feel me." He leaned toward her as she felt his head and shoulders. "I am fine. What did you think happened?"

"The—the dragon that dropped Eadgifu—the claws—" she gasped.

"No, you feel me? I am fine. The second sight plays tricks on you; it may make you remember something as though you are experiencing it again in a different way," he said.

"Oh, no," she murmured, leaning on him. "What—what do I do now?" she groaned.

"I can remove it, if you want," he said casually.

"You can?" she asked dubiously.

"Yes, it was common training under Master Crowe. Men who were deceived into accepting it were desperate to get rid of it again," he said, his arm around her lightly.

"But, it's wonderful to see into other people's minds," she balked.

"Until stronger minds become aware that you are looking. Then they look back, and the illusions are very bad," he said.

"You don't have it yourself?" she asked. "I can feel it in you." This she just now realized, which only added to her confusion.

Of course he had it; all of Master Crowe's lieutenants had it, but the power they possessed was as a warhorse compared to the donkey that Alverstroke had given her. So Loriot was essentially correct in saying, "What you are feeling in me is simply mental discipline, to which your second sight is an inferior shortcut."

"Can I get what you have?" she asked greedily.

"Yes, of course," he said. "You already have great ability to concentrate. But it takes diligence and tutoring."

"Will you tutor me, then?" She pressed up against him.

"Certainly. But we must get rid of the shoddy stuff," he said.

"Yes. Do that," she said crisply.

He leaned his cheek down to her head, and she closed her eyes. She was momentarily startled by the forcible removal of a foreign entity that left twisting and snapping. Then she opened her eyes to find that all was dark again. "I feel cleaner," she said. "But—there's nothing now. Oh, I want the sight again."

“Let us work on that,” he said, and turned her to begin walking around the grounds.

A little later, while Minka was writing her letter to Justinian, Lorient stopped in the doorway of the workroom to say, “Captain, I am on my way back to the barracks. But I thought to let you know that Adele allowed me to remove the second sight from her.”

Everyone stared at him. “Well done, Lorient. Thank you,” Efran said. Lorient sedately saluted and moved away. Minka looked down at her almost finished letter, then picked up the quill to add a postscript.

Following breakfast in bed the next morning, November 24th, Adele pleaded with Lorient to take her down to the barracks with him. “If I have to stay up here for another day I will lose my mind,” she said convincingly. “The second sight helped pass the time. But since you talked me into giving it up, I don’t have anything to take my mind off the fact that I *can’t see anything*.” Somehow, this was his fault.

“Very well, we will try it. Let’s get you dressed,” Lorient said amiably, so she stood eagerly.

When they were both ready to leave, he refused to order a carriage, walking her down the switchback instead. “Since you will be sitting most of the time, this is movement you need,” he said to her complaints.

Upon arriving at the barracks, he took her into Barracks #1, where Captain Barr had his office. Lorient saluted as Barr eyed Adele next to him. “Captain, I request permission for Adele to sit somewhere while I work.”

“We will try it, as long as she does not cause disturbances,” Barr said, uncharacteristically tentative.

“Thank you, Captain. With your permission, I will put her in Barracks Two, out of the way of construction,” Lorient said.

“Granted. Dismissed,” Barr said, turning to look at a duty roster that his scribe Numan presented to him.

Saluting, Lorient led Adele out and down the walk to the next barracks. Entering, he looked around, then said, “Ah. Here is something that you can do right here.” He led her to sit at a long table, then piled up something on the table beside her. “Blankets that need folding. Just stack them to your right, and someone will come take them.”

“Oh, how exciting,” she said.

“If you make yourself useful, you are more likely to be able to stay,” he noted blandly.

“Of course.” Feeling the pile, she removed one blanket to shake it out. She stood to find the corners, fold it, and set it aside with a little pat, since he was still nearby.

“Very good. If you need me, someone will be able to find me,” he said.

“Thank you, dear,” she whispered. It suddenly occurred to her that he had tricked her into giving up her second sight. Somehow, she was going to do something about that. Was Alverstroke still here?

As she folded the next blanket, she listened to Lorient walk away and exit the barracks. Then she sat to listen while she slowly continued folding.

A pair of men came in arguing about something having to do with storing personal items in the barracks. They broke off upon seeing her, then resumed in a quieter, less colorful back-and-forth. They resolved something upon the inspection of something else, then agreed to take their tentative solution to someone else. They left again, and Adele sagged. She *must* get hold of Alverstroke and get her second sight back; this was intolerable.

Someone else entered talking, and she held still to listen, recognizing the voice. Confirming his identity after a little more eavesdropping, she stood to earnestly fold and pile the blankets. Soon, he noticed her just as she had hoped.

“Well, look at you, there. Making yourself useful; that’s good. Do you know who I am, Adele?” he said.

She paused, turning her face toward him with parted lips. “That deep, rich voice sounds like a man I loved, but I know it cannot be him.”

“Why not?” he asked with a tinge of humor.

“Because I did something foolish, and betrayed him. How I grieved that he was punished for my wrongdoing—how I wished to express my deepest sorrow and shame for what I did,” she gasped. She was very glad that her ability to produce tears was unimpaired, as they now rolled down her pink cheeks from behind the dark glasses. Sadly, in the three months since she had wreaked havoc in his life, she somehow hadn’t found the opportunity before today to express her deep sorrow for it.

“There, there, Adele. It wasn’t the end of the world,” Bennard said. “I just learned I couldn’t trust you worth a dam’,” he said humorously.

“I deserve that,” she said, lifting her face as though seeing the gallows before her.

“No, now, you’re doing well. Married to the lieutenant, living in the fortress. You’re doing all right,” he said as she listened hard for bitterness.

“Yes, for an object of pity,” she said, turning her face as her hand crept to the bodice of her dress. She was aggravated to be reminded that it had no buttons.

“Well, at least you’re being taken care of,” he said. She felt movement nearby, and suddenly there was a great pile added to the small pile on her left. “And there’s a few more blankets for you to fold, so you won’t get bored.” He restrained a laugh as he began to walk off.

“Bennard,” she gasped.

She felt him turn back. “Yes?”

“I—I’m so hungry. I haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday,” she gasped.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 7

Bennard was silent for a moment, but Adele was unable to see his holding a finger to his lips, demanding silence from a pair of men who had begun to enter. He finally replied, “That’s terrible, Adele. What were you given to eat yesterday?”

“Bread. Some fruit. Some meat that was about to be thrown out to the—pigs,” she said, strained. The men grinned at this prevarication: pigs weren’t kept at the fortress. Pigs in Westford were never given meat, lest they develop a taste for it.

“That’s really terrible. Did it make you sick?” Bennard asked in feigned sympathy.

Adele had to pause to weigh possible answers, unable to see his face. Meanwhile, more men gathered at the door to listen. “No,” she finally said. “I only ate a little. But I was roused up out of bed this morning and forced to dress before I could eat a thing, after working in the garden all day yesterday. I dug holes for all the little kales, and I—harvested the pumpkins with all the roots hanging off them. Come, feel the blisters on my hands.” She held her spotless hands out to him beseechingly. Men clustered in the entryway were performing contortions to keep their laughter silent.

“Cripes, I can see them from here. How did you survive?” Bennard asked, grinning. After enduring so much humiliation for helping her escape her cavern prison, he was now thoroughly enjoying this comeuppance. One man lost control of a sharp laugh before he could clap a hand over his face.

Hearing it, Adele mistook it for a more sympathetic sound, as though a listener had choked on a sob (because she could detect others in the room). “I thought of you constantly. I survived remembering your kindness,” she said. The men around him patted him on the back.

“I did go overboard for you,” he admitted ruefully.

“You did,” she said warmly. “Now can you take me to Croft’s for just a moment? Just to get a piece of flatbread? I’m so weak, I feel I may faint.”

Loriot said, “I will take you for the midday meal, Adele. If you feel faint, you are welcome to sit to fold the blankets.” The men in front of him surged out of the room on either side, and Adele sat in disgust.

Loriot came up close to say quietly, “It doesn’t work any more, Adele. You must learn new tactics.” She silently gritted her teeth.

At dinner in the fortress, Efran stood behind his table to hear a summary of Adele’s day at the barracks from one of Barr’s men, Tiras. “She sat for most of the day in Barracks Two, Captain—ah, folding blankets. She got twenty folded, maybe, but she kept wandering out, trying to get someone to take her to Croft’s or Firmin’s—he’s got a new dining area, too, you know. Other than that, she didn’t make too much trouble.” Minka, sitting at the table in front of them, listened without turning around.

“What did Captain Barr say?” Efran asked.

“Nothing, as far as I know. He didn’t object to her coming back tomorrow,” Tiras said.

“All right,” Efran said, exhaling. “Loriot is doing something which Barr is allowing, and she’s not *here*, so we’ll be grateful for that.”

“Yes, Captain,” Tiras laughed.

“You’re dismissed,” Efran said, sitting beside Minka again. Tiras saluted and left. “So far, so good,” Efran murmured, glancing at the men that had collected around Ella. As she had not yet expressed a preference for anyone, the courtship for her was wide open. The children that had been sitting near them were roaming tables in search of uneaten desserts.

Efran took Joshua off Minka’s lap to sit him on his own, and offered him a spoonful of pumpkin custard. He tasted it, swallowed it, and leaned over for more. “What do you think?” he murmured quietly to her.

“As long as she doesn’t have second sight, she’s manageable for him, I think,” she whispered.

“Good,” he said, turning his attention to the venison steak. But Minka was coiled inside, leaning on his shoulder for comfort. He accommodated her, kissing her head, even though he was trying to eat.

The following morning, November 25th, Efran was up early, consumed with plans for the barracks and the placement of new men, as well as communications with Venegas regarding their common defense. Since he was up, Minka rose, too. She put on one of her favorite work/riding dresses, as she knew she’d probably be riding back and forth between the lower barracks and the fortress today.

While Madea’s crew was preparing breakfast, Efran went to the foyer to talk to the door sentry. Minka checked on Joshua in the nursery, but he was still asleep. (As he sometimes woke up to crawl out of his bassinet at night, there was no way to keep him out of the fireplace in Efran and Minka’s quarters. So they had begun putting him to bed in the nursery, where he could crawl out of his floor crib in relative safety.)

Loriot was in the process of walking Adele down from their third-floor room for breakfast. And a woman who was permitted through the wall gates (even before the morning tradesmen started their rounds) began walking up Main, then up the switchback.

The courtyard gates were standing open, as the guards had been called to an altercation below. She opened one of the double doors herself into the foyer, where Efran stood talking with the door sentry. This early, these three were the only ones in the foyer. And she paused, waiting.

She was in her thirties, stout, modestly attired, with long brown hair, wearing a dress with a brown shawl and white skirts. There was nothing to call attention to her as she waited by the open door.

Upon the Captain’s dismissal, the sentry turned away to meet her eyes, and stopped dead. While the sentry stood unblinking, she went around him so that Efran turned toward her. Locked by her gaze, he also stopped. She approached to ask, “May I kiss you?”

“Yes,” Efran said blankly. Whereupon she reached up to bite his shoulder at the base of his neck, and he collapsed to the floor in front of her. She bent down to drag him the short distance through the open door of the small dining room. There, she laid him on his back on the floor. He was bleeding only a little from two holes in the upper shoulder of his work shirt.

As she closed the door and turned back toward the foyer, Loriot came off the stairs with Adele. He caught a

glimpse of the woman's back and paused, feeling something strange about her. Adele drew in a slight breath, seeing a bright aura around her as well. Lorient nudged Adele toward the stairs. "Go back up to our room," he whispered. "I will come for you shortly. Go."

Obediently, she retreated two steps up the stairway, but stopped upon hearing his footfalls progress to the foyer. And she stayed at the bottom of the stairs to listen.

Lorient trod lightly to within view of the foyer, where he watched the woman walk over to the dazed sentry and ask him, "May I kiss you?" Lorient noticed that her words were slurred, as though she had something in her mouth.

"Yes," he said. So she leaned over to bite his upper shoulder with long, yellow-white fangs, and he fell over. As she turned to drag him, Lorient darted into the open door of the library. From there, he watched her drag the sentry's body to the small dining room. When she opened the door to lay him out alongside Efran, Lorient crept close enough to see the Captain lying unconscious.

While she turned to close the door, Lorient retreated back down the corridor. But more footfalls entered the foyer, and he saw the woman look toward the second sentry who had just now come in through the front doors. "Ho, Eustace, you villain, where are you? I'm not pulling door duty by myself!" he shouted.

As she went over to ask permission to kiss him, Lorient turned his head at Minka coming out of the nursery with Joshua. Going quickly to her, he missed seeing Adele on the stairs. He stopped Minka in the corridor to whisper, "There is an intruder, Lady Minka. Go around outside, get a horse, and get Joshua away right now. Tell everyone you meet to *stay out* of the fortress."

"Efran?" she gasped.

"I will see to him. Go quickly," he urged.

Nodding, she turned to hurry out the back door. While the woman began lugging the second sentry's body to the small dining room, Lorient stepped inside the nursery, watching from around the door frame as she took the body into the room and came out again without it.

The nursery assistant came up to ask Lorient, "Excuse me?" He held up a hand to hush her.

He then heard Doane, the Steward's assistant, enter by the front doors on the way to his cubicle off the foyer. "Hello! Where is everyone?" he called. The woman went into the foyer to meet him.

Lorient stepped out of the nursery, closing the half door behind him. Then he reached over to begin closing the top portion of the door. He told the nursery assistant, "Close this and lock it. Do not open it again until you hear me tell you that it's safe."

"Yes, sir," she said with wide eyes.

He exited the back door to run across the grounds toward the west fence. He paused to catch Nyland and tell him, "There is a dangerous intruder in the fortress. Tell your men to stay out until I call you."

"Sir," Nyland saluted. Even though they had been of equal rank under Master Crowe, Nyland recognized Lorient as the officer in charge during an emergency. Lorient resumed his run to the fence, which he scaled, heading for the armory. There were plenty of swords in the fortress, but they were for close-range fighting, and he could not

afford to get close to this adversary. He needed something he could use at a distance.

In getting a horse from the stables, Minka told the head stableman, Greves, what Lorient had told her. "I'm going down to the barracks to warn them," she said.

"What about the Captain, Lady?" Greves asked.

"He's still inside, somewhere," she said, distressed. Greves helped her mount Rose with Joshua asleep in the sling on her shoulder, then he led her around to the empty front courtyard to watch as she walked the horse through the open gates to the switchback.

Meanwhile, Lorient had selected a heavy spear from the armory. Lwoff approached him in great curiosity. "What've you got that needs that one, sir?"

"I don't know, but it has fangs that it's using on everyone it crosses," Lorient said.

"Can I come have a look-see?" Lwoff asked.

"Not yet, but I will need you later." Lorient tossed the spear over the fence into the back grounds, then scaled back over. The men in the sparring groups watched, anxious to join him, but he shook his head. "Wait." Then he ran to the back door, waving away the gardening crew, including Cyr. "Stay out!"

He entered the back door tentatively, looking all around as he crept up the corridor. He noted Adele lingering on the stairs as he passed. She also recognized his quiet footfalls, and came to the bottom of the stairway after he had gone by. He closed the doors to the dining hall and kitchen as he passed, leaning in to hiss at the early kitchen crew, "There is an intruder. Stay here."

Spear raised, he looked into the foyer, where the woman turned to him. Barely evading her gaze, he fell to the left, toward the keep, as she advanced on him. "May I kiss you?"

He tried to throw the spear, but with her eyes locked on him, his arm would not cooperate. As she came closer, he felt his will draining from him. But since he still had the power to move, he lunged into the keep, where the ten-foot-tall crucifix stood. And at the door of the keep, she was stopped. For some reason, she could not pass the doorway. But as long as she stood there, he could not leave.

When she turned away, he cautiously looked out the door into the foyer. He raised his spear at her departing back, then heard Adele say, "I can see your aura. You have great power. Can you give me second sight?"

The woman said, "Yes. May I kiss you?"

"If you must," Adele said, now too close for him to safely throw the spear. Lorient inwardly groaned, lowering it. As the woman moved, he pulled back into the safety of the keep.

Shortly, he was listening to Adele fall, and the woman dragging her into the small dining room. Then she shut the door and went down the corridor. Leaving the spear leaning against the crucifix, Lorient stepped into the foyer to peer down the corridor, where he saw her white skirts disappear up the stairs. He should chase her with the spear. But once she heard him, if she turned, he would be helpless. He must see to the Captain, first.

Meanwhile, Minka had arrived at Barracks #1 to tell Captain Barr what Lorient had told her. He asked, "Is the Captain in the fortress?"

“Yes, as far as I know,” Minka gasped.

“Then we will see to it. Please stay here, Minka,” Barr said.

“Yes, Barr,” she whispered. He patted Joshua, who had awakened, then Captain Barr turned to give orders. Shortly, a unit emerged to begin running down Main on foot.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 8

Inside the fortress, Lorient ran into the small dining room while the woman was upstairs. Surveying the bodies laid out on the floor—including Adele’s—Lorient lifted the Captain to sling him over his shoulder and carry him to the keep. There, Lorient laid him under the crucifix to anxiously check for a pulse in his wrists, then his neck.

It was there, faint but steady. He was alive. Rubbing his hands and his arms vigorously, shaking his shoulders, Lorient bored into his mind with a command to wake. After a few minutes, Efran turned his head, moaning, and barely opened his eyes. He blinked heavily at Lorient. “What . . . ?”

“Captain, the woman who asked to kiss you is a dangerous predator running loose in the fortress. She has gone upstairs, so I’m going to try to get the others out of the small dining room. Stay here; she can’t get in here, and don’t look her in the eye. Captain? Do you understand?”

“Yes, Lorient,” Efran breathed, and slowly began to sit up, wincing as he moved his left shoulder.

Lorient slipped out of the keep cautiously, glancing down the corridor before going to the predator’s storeroom of bodies. But she had not gone upstairs; having heard Lorient carry someone out of her storeroom, she advanced back up the corridor to pause in the door of the library. Here, she waited for him to emerge from the inaccessible keep.

When she saw him enter her storeroom again, she went to meet him. As he turned with a sentry draped over his shoulder, she blocked the doorway. “May I kiss you?”

He stopped, his hold on the man faltering, but he clamped his mouth shut, refusing to give her permission. She advanced a step, repeating, “May I kiss—?”

She lurched suddenly, and the point of a spear emerged from her front midsection, coated in blood. She wavered, then the spear was pulled backward, its points catching to jerk her out of the doorway. Efran, holding the shaft of the spear, flung her into the foyer, where she writhed on the floor.

He jerked the spear out of her back, then he and Lorient watched her body hunch unnaturally in death. Her jaws opened wide to expose two great yellowish fangs, each about three inches long. Cautiously, Efran leaned over to push on one fang, which caused both to fold back to rest on her jawbone where her lower teeth used to be. It looked almost as though they had been dissolved. As soon as he let go, the fangs sprang out again.

Efran touched the painful punctures on his left shoulder, which dripped blood. At that moment, the front doors

burst open for Barr and his men to pour in. At the same time, Wyeth and Nyland were leading their men up the corridor from the back doors.

Seeing Efran, Barr paused. "You are injured, Captain."

"There are more injured," Efran said, nodding to the small dining room, where Lorient had dropped Eustace in the doorway. One of Barr's men was picking him up as he was barely coming awake. Lorient was bringing out Adele, unconscious. Men moved past him to bring out Ellor and Doane. Those two, along with Adele, were laid out on the foyer floor.

Efran gestured to another man, "Bring down Wallace, please." To another, he said, "Bring Lwoff from the armory, please. Oh, there he is."

Lwoff came over to look at the fanged woman, and Efran studied his subdued manner. "Do you recognize it?" Efran asked him.

"I think so, Cap'n," he replied, looking at the holes in Efran's shirt with glassy eyes.

"And?" Efran pressed.

Lwoff withdrew a hunting knife from its sheath on his belt and turned the corpse so that it was face down. He cut through the back of the dress, ripping it open to expose the spine. The men crowded around to look at an odd lump under the skin about four inches wide running the length of the spine. Wallace joined the group at this time to watch silently.

Settling on one knee beside the body, Lwoff cut deep along each side of the lump, then raised the brown hair to gingerly cut horizontally at the base of the skull. Grimacing, he reached through this opening with the fingers of one hand to grasp something and pull. It was apparently difficult to remove, as two of the men had to hold the corpse's head and shoulders to the floor for Lwoff to finally extract the bloody object.

The men standing around sucked in their breath to see him pull out a flat white ribbon about 18 inches long with a fang attached to each corner of the top via a simple elastic hinge. Holding the slightly curved bony end of the ribbon with two fingers, Lwoff extended the fangs with the tip of his blade.

"'Tis a Goulven, Cap'n," Lwoff said. "I am not right happy to see this parasite again." While the men absorbed this silently, Wallace went over to look at Efran first, being the one upright. The doctor opened his shirt to peer at the holes.

"Who all got bit?" Lwoff asked, looking around.

Efran pulled slightly away from Wallace's grasp to see those that had been brought out of the small dining room. "Eustace, Ellor, Doane, Adele and me. Why? Was it saving us to eat?" Efran asked. Under the hands of another man, Ellor was beginning to come around.

Lwoff shook his head dismally. "Yer not prey for her to eat; yer a nursery for her young. She's laid her eggs in those holes; they'll hatch a worm that will crawl to the back of yer skull, grow down yer spine, and then grow fangs while yer teeth dissolve in yer head."

The men were staggered and appalled. Efran looked off, evaluating that information. "How many eggs does she lay? And how big are they?"

Lwoff considered this. "Usually only one or two, about a half inch long. More than that, they have to battle for the body, which either kills 'em too soon, or they kill each other battling."

"What kills the eggs?" Efran asked.

"Breakin' 'em. Poison," Lwoff said.

"What kind of poison?" Efran asked.

"That won't kill you? I don't rightly know," Lwoff said.

Efran turned to Gabriel. "Take this information to Ryal. Ask him to research it for us."

"Yes, Captain," Gabriel said, his eyes watering. He turned to run out the front doors.

"Doctor," Efran said, "I am going to drink myself into a stupor. You are going to probe my wounds for the eggs."

Wallace nodded feebly. Eustace said weakly, "Captain, I request permission to be the doctor's first subject."

"Denied," Efran said, smiling. He turned to see Minka, pale, with Joshua in his sling. Having watched Barr's men enter without incident, and then Gabriel ride down to Ryal's, she had commandeered a horse to bring her and Joshua up.

"Don't worry. Pray," he said, kissing her lightly. "I will kiss you again. *I will*," he said, a hand on Joshua's head. Light-headed, she fell back against the man standing behind her, whoever it was.

"Wallace," Efran said, gesturing toward the stairs. "Oh." He paused, turning to survey the men. "Barr, you'll need to come strap me down. And watch to see what the doctor fishes out."

"Yes, Captain." Barr moved to follow Efran and Wallace to the stairs.

Minka, shaking violently, took Joshua to the nursery, then returned to the keep to drop at the foot of the crucifix.

Leese stood by to assist Wallace in Efran's surgery, but the medic Tourle and his helper Milo returned Eustace, Ellor, Adele and Doane to the small dining room to be attended. Lorient remained with Adele there, though she had not come around yet. A man was sent up to Estes' second-floor workroom to tell the Steward and Administrator what had transpired, which was astounding and deeply distressing news to them.

Lwoff dropped the dead parasite onto the body, and told the men standing around, "Take it out and burn it well. Other Goulven are attracted to dead host bodies." This they did immediately. Minka remained in the keep.

Someone found a case of the old Goadby's ale to send up to Wallace's quarters for Efran, which was not as strong as the new, but good enough. After chugging three of them, Efran felt he was ready for the procedure. So Barr strapped down his chest, his arms, his hips and his legs to the rails of the surgery bed as Efran instructed, then Wallace got to work with his small forceps and tweezers.

Barr closed his eyes once or twice as the doctor dug into Efran's wounds, though he only gasped once, and that was when Wallace finished up by pouring ale into the wounds. Wallace had extracted one intact egg from his exploration of both wounds, which now bleed freely.

Shortly after Wallace had finished, Gabriel entered the surgery to tell them that Ryal had not yet located any information about the creature, but his best guess was that alcohol would poison it. As Wallace had already used this, he merely sent Gabriel down to the small dining room to tell them that, along with the Goadby's. This was poured into all their wounds; Adele reacted violently, though still unconscious.

While still lying on the surgical bed, though unstrapped, Efran asked to speak to Lwoff. When Lwoff arrived in the surgery, Efran turned his pale, perspiring face to ask, "When will we know if all the eggs are gone or not?"

Lwoff grimaced in thought. "If you start feeling sharp pains that move up across yer shoulder, then the doctor'll have to cut you deeper, Cap'n. If yer feeling nought but the pain of healing, yer good."

"I see. Thank you, Lwoff," Efran said, upon which Lwoff saluted and left.

Wallace said, "I want you to sleep here tonight, Efran, so I can keep an eye on you." Efran closed his eyes in acknowledgment.

Another soldier appeared at the door. "Lady Minka has been asking when she can come in, Captain."

"Bring her up," Efran said blearily. Then he swung his legs over the bed. Wallace raised up in denial, but Efran muttered, "After all that Goadby's, I've just got to use your garderobe." Gesturing in assent, Wallace stood aside.

Efran had just made it back to bed when Minka appeared at the door. Pale, she surveyed him, then asked Wallace, "You found one egg?"

"Yes, Minka." The doctor reached for a metal dish to show her a flat, oval white egg about half an inch long.

She winced. "Crush it; cut it; do something to it."

"I pretty well mangled it bringing it up. Hope I haven't impaired the movement in your shoulder, Efran," Wallace said.

"To save my life, I'll allow it," he said, looking to Minka as she pressed her face to his.

Efran was moved to a bed in another small room so that the doctor could work on Eustace. Minka lay with Efran on the bed, and when he started complaining that he was hungry, she helped him sit up. Then she went down to the kitchen to get a plate of ham and squash, with a lager, to bring up to him on a bed tray.

Meanwhile, Efran listened sympathetically to Eustace's yelps. And when Wallace was done with him, he brought Efran the metal dish to show him the two eggs he had dug out of Eustace's wounds.

"Are you sure you got all of them out of me?" Efran asked.

"I believe so; that's why I took so long fishing around," Wallace grunted.

Having no room for Eustace to recuperate up here, Wallace had him taken back to the small dining room with a caretaker, and Ellor brought up. Since Wallace had become rather proficient in searching out the eggs by now, he was content to find only one in Ellor's wounds. But hearing Adele (awake, in the small dining room) scream at anyone who touched her shoulder, Wallace put off surgery on her until tomorrow.

Despite the pain, Efran slept well that night with Minka wedged into his right side. She barely stirred, except whenever he shifted, her arm tightened across his chest. This did not bother him.

In the morning—that of November 26th—he awoke with the thought of dread: *How do I deal with more Goulven?* One of anything did not exist alone, and these were particularly well adapted to multiply. Between their mesmerizing stares which impeded their victims' defenses, and their efficient means of caring for their larvae, just knowing to be on guard for them did not help. If one Goulven could take over the entryway of the fortress as this one did, what could three, four, ten or twenty do?

God of heaven, Efran thought, gazing up at the ceiling, *again I come to You like a lost child. What do I do?* Still, he lay quietly until Minka began to stir. After cleaning himself up and changing clothes, he got up to start a normal day.

Emerging from his quarters, he caught sight of a reflected light in the foyer. So he entered to look around. From the door of the keep, he saw lanterns burning. Before going on duty this morning, Earnshaw was leading prayer over the Goulven, the victims, and the Abbey Lands' fight against this terrible parasite. And Efran felt great encouragement that the burden was not on his shoulders alone.

Speaking of which, he was careful, when he remembered, not to aggravate his sore shoulder, but it seemed to be healing as it should. So he went up to Estes' workroom to give him and DeWitt a thorough accounting of yesterday's events.

As they listened slack-faced, he was very glad for Loriot's preventing the creature from invading this floor. The fortress could survive Efran's impairment, but not that of these two men. Meanwhile, their discussion was frequently interrupted by Adele's screams as Wallace, down the corridor, probed her wounds. And when the doctor was done, he sent word to Efran that he'd found no eggs in her. Apparently, the Goulven was spent by then—although how many it had deposited before arriving at the fortress was unknown.

Throwing himself into his chair, Efran was again chewing on the problem of additional Goulven when Soames came to the workroom before starting the day's class in Roman's Law with Ella and Minka. Soames said, "Captain, Ryal wished to tell you that he remembered late last night that Barthelemon had experience with the Goulven, which Ryal included in the book he wrote about him that he gave to you."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 9

Efran received this information as a lightning bolt to his brain. Standing, he accidentally knocked over his chair, which he paused to set upright before preceding Soames down the stairs at a trot.

Swinging into the library where Ella and Minka were already seated, Efran went straight to the shelf where he had placed the volume on Barthelemon almost two months ago. Withdrawing it, he looked at the title: *The Warnings of Barthelemon of Occitania and How They Were Used by Efran, Lord Sovereign of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, to Save the Fortress from the Destroyer on August the Fourth of the Year 8154 from the Creation of the World.*

“Papa, sit with us for this lesson,” Ella requested. Minka was trying to see what book had seized him. Soames sat, also looking toward the book he had drawn out. Seeing it, Soames nodded in confirmation.

Efran muttered, “Dear heart, your poor Papa has some remedial reading to do.” Glancing up at Minka, he promised, “I’ll tell you all about it. Carry on.” Then he was gone.

Ella sat still for a moment, then said, “Webbe never called me ‘dear heart.’ No one did.”

Minka said, “I’ve never heard Efran say it to anyone.”

“Not even you?” Ella asked in surprise.

“No,” Minka smiled. “Not even me.” Ella looked off in wonder.

Efran took the book back up to the second floor to sit at the table and begin reading. The book opened with the discovery of the copper box with the keys and warnings, then documented Efran’s efforts to find the doors and free the Destroyer, which he accomplished with perhaps an hour to spare. Following that account, Ryal documented Barthelemon’s history of reforms so far-sighted that he was not even partially vindicated until 250 years after his death.

Finally, Ryal covered incidental accomplishments of his life, including his containment of the Goulven: a nasty parasite that had originated in the Poison Greens hundreds of years before Ares of Westford had cleansed them, the area being subsequently known as the Green Hills.

Barthelemon had become acquainted with the existence of the Goulven after a whole village in Occitania had fallen under their control so that they invaded surrounding areas—“Captain.” Efran jerked his head up at Truro’s salute. “They’ve caught another creature at the wall gates.”

Efran stood. “How many bitten?”

“None, Captain. A workman approached the gates asking to shake hands, and the guard he was talking to put his hand out through the gate. Before he could get bit, Coxe shot the man—it took him right down. They carted it off the road away, but left it outside the wall.”

“Good. What about carts coming in? Riders?” Efran asked.

Truro shook his head. “The sentries either recognize or speak with everyone coming in. This one was on foot, immediately tried to make contact, to touch.”

Efran groaned, “So we have to watch for more. All right; you’re dismissed.”

“Captain.” Truro saluted and turned out.

Efran exhaled, glancing at Estes and DeWitt before sitting to lift the volume again. He continued reading, though he glossed over some incidental facts about Goulven biology. Then Efran abruptly stood to read out loud: “‘After much heartache and loss of life, Barthelemon discovered that the Goulven are attracted to their own dead, which they eat. [This was news to Efran, who had already left the foyer when Lwoff told the other men.] So once he had collected the carcasses in a barn at the afflicted village, he waited until all the Goulven of the area congregated there, then set the barn aflame. The fire spread to other structures in the village, which burned to the ground, thus ending the plague.’”

Dropping the book, Efran ran out of the workroom. Estes and DeWitt looked at each other, then resumed work.

Running downstairs and emerging onto the back grounds, Efran grabbed the first pair of sentries he found. "Graeme, you and Hawk start up here, go to every barracks and station to make sure they stand watch at the wall gates in groups; warn them to watch for individuals coming on foot asking to kiss or shake hands. Warn them not to look in their eyes and don't hesitate to shoot. Any carriers of the parasite that are killed must be hauled outside the wall. They're attracted to their own dead."

"Captain." Graeme and Hawk saluted to depart at a run. Efran looked distractedly around the back grounds. Work was ongoing, but some looked frightened or wary. Efran turned back into the fortress to trot up the corridor.

He was met by Truro. "Captain, they killed another one that stopped at the body off the road."

"I'm coming down to look," Efran said. He paused upon feeling a twinge of pain in his upper shoulder. That was normal healing, wasn't it?

Nonetheless, he ran out to the courtyard after Truro. "Horse," Efran said, and reins were put in his hand. He leapt into the saddle, looking down at traffic held up both ways at the wall gates. Archers at the wall were firing at forms leaning over the body beside the road. (The faerie trees' reaction to the creatures was also informative: branches stood straight up in trembling horror.)

Truro and Efran loped down the switchback and up Main to the gates. There, he glanced around because of the complaints coming at him from all sides. First, the cart waiting to be let in was Averde, the baker. "Captain, what is all this? Let me in!"

"Do you have anyone in your cart?" Efran asked.

"No sir, just supplies," Averde said.

"Let him through," Efran said, and the sentries opened the gates for him.

"Then let me drive out, Captain," Lowry, the butcher, demanded. "I can't supply the fortress if I don't get my carcasses."

As Averde drove through, a young man slipped in beside his cart. "Stop!" Efran shouted at him. The baker looked down at the man. He was dressed in good city clothing, not the coarse work clothes of rural farmers. Seeing that, Efran remembered the nice casual wear of the woman who had bitten him.

"Shake my hand," the young man said, reaching up to the baker. Averde reached down to him, but before he could make contact, an archer shot the stranger. He went down writhing, his fangs clacking against the cart as he instinctively bit. In terror, Averde whipped the reins of his carthorse to lunge directly for his shop on Main.

As the gate guards hauled the dead carrier out to the side of the road, Efran looked at Lowry in the driver's seat of his cart. "Are you sure you want to leave? That's what's ahead. They're coming from Westford."

"Can you send a bodyguard with me?" Lowry asked.

Efran shook his head. "Stubborn man," he muttered, but called, "I need four volunteers to ride with Lowry's

cart.” As one man after another rode up, Efran told them, “Escort him until you meet anyone on foot who wants to touch you—shake hands or kiss you. Don’t look them in the eye! If you run across *one*, kill it and come back.” *How badly is Westford overrun? Is it even possible to burn them out?* His shoulder hurt.

To the gate guards, Efran said, “Don’t let anyone else go out until Lowry comes back safely. Vet everyone who tries to enter, even if they’re in uniform.” To Truro, he said, “Report to me in Wallace’s quarters.”

“Yes, Captain,” Truro said, grim concern crossing his face. Efran turned to lope back up to the fortress.

Falling off his horse in the courtyard, Efran ran into the fortress, ascending the steps at a run. He fell into the doctor’s quarters to fling himself on the surgery table. Leese ran in after him.

Unbuttoning his shirt with trembling hands, Efran asked, “Where is Wallace?”

“Attending the Goulven victims in the small dining room. Efran, what is it?” she asked breathlessly.

“Then you do it, Leese,” he gasped. “Cut it out.” He pulled back his shirt to expose a small lump at the top of his left shoulder, directly above one of the bite marks.

Leese drew a sharp breath, but turned to a supply table to splash her hands and a scalpel with pure white alcohol, which she also daubed on the lump. Efran swallowed, clenching the side rails as she sliced into his skin, parting it to reach in with small forceps and pull out a writhing, flat white worm about an inch long.

She held it up, dripping blood, for Efran to see. “Good,” he breathed. “Bandage me up, please—I need to get back down there.”

“You need stitches,” she protested.

“Later,” he said. “Just bandage me for now.”

“All right,” she said, blinking. She crushed the worm with the forceps, then laid it aside to reach for the plaster and cloth, with which she covered his wound. “Do you feel any others inside you?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. That’s it. But—the others who were bit—may—”

“Yes, I’m going down to Wallace now,” she said, taking up the dead worm on a cloth.

“Thank you, Leese,” he exhaled, rebuttoning his shirt as she quickly left.

Woozy, Efran stood from the surgery bed, then he squinted, thinking. He had stopped reading after he found an apparent solution. But there was more following that, wasn’t there?

So Efran left the doctor’s suite to stumble down the corridor to the workroom. Here, he entered to sit at the table and take up the book again. Estes and DeWitt looked up.

While he was flipping pages to find where he had left off reading, Estes asked, “Efran, are you all right?”

“Yes. Why?” Efran asked, reading.

DeWitt said, “You’re bleeding through your bandage.”

“Nosebleed,” Efran said vacantly. His administrators looked at each other, then returned to work.

But Efran was reading: “The fire spread to other structures in the village, which burned to the ground, thus ending the plague.

“However, the menace had appeared in areas bordering Occitania, thus threatening them all over again. And burning out such large, populated regions was inconceivable. So Barthelemon cast about far and wide for other solutions. He discovered that once the Goulven completely control a victim, they are vulnerable to starvation. For as their fangs develop, they secrete a chemical which slowly dissolves the bone of teeth, to give the fangs a resting place. Given enough time, even the jaws may be compromised. Thus they cannot chew flesh, and need extremely softened or rotted flesh to eat.

“As it happens, dead Goulven victims are the ideal—sometimes the only—food for living Goulven, being both soft and nutritious. So they will abandon their egg-laying when they smell their own dead and seek it at all costs. In an old account, Barthelemon read of how the single-minded Goulven were enticed by a Goulven victim’s body affixed to a pole in the midst of a lake. Following the odor from miles around, the Goulven waded out to it in droves. Having lost the ability to swim, all sank.

“So Barthelemon hung a body suspended by chains between two piers of a bridge over a river. Regardless how the Goulven tried to reach it, they inevitably fell in to be drowned. So ended the plague of Goulven for a century or more.”

Efran closed the book, thinking. Then he left the book on the table to go downstairs.

He paused at the door of the small dining room, where Wallace came out to him at once. “Efran, Leese showed me what she cut out of you.”

“Yes, it was simple—the thing made itself obvious, took her only a moment to get it out. But others may need a second whacking.” Efran glanced into the room.

Wallace replied, “Eustace, so far. His was apparently deeper than yours; not so obvious under the skin. Took me a while, but I found it, and he’s recuperating. But I’m concerned that Adele won’t even let me check—she is likely to have one or more that were overlooked, as I originally found none in her.”

Efran nodded. “Loriot will assist you when he comes in. Now I have some Goulven to drown.” Wallace arched his white brows at him as Efran went out.

At the courtyard gates, he told a man, “Bring a thirty-foot rope and a one-horse cart to the wall gates.” Then he swung up on the horse presented him to ride down.

The gates were not so crowded now, as most travelers accepted that this was a bad time to leave. However, Lowry was still in his cart, waiting in hope. As Efran rode up to him, Allyr, one of the men who had volunteered to escort Lowry, saluted. “Captain, we were hardly twenty paces up the road before we met the first Goulven. I can’t imagine what Westford looks like right now.” He also looked at Efran’s bloody bandage.

“Bad, I’m sure,” Efran said, looking back as his horse, cart and rope came down Main toward him. “All right. I need—Finn, go tell the miller to open the sluice gates up wide. He may see a lot of Goulven going out to Sea.”

Saluting, Finn turned down the west wall easement to lope toward the mill. As the cart drew up beside Efran, he

looked in it to see the rope, then looked around to say, “I need a volunteer to drive the cart.”

“What, Captain? I’m already sittin’ here!” Arne said, offended.

“You may have Goulven chasing you,” Efran said.

“That’s fine,” Arne said, smiling.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 10

Efran turned back to the group of men at the wall gates awaiting instructions. “I need a volunteer to man the cart.” Every man around raised his hand. Efran said, “All right, Jehan and Coish, hop in.” They quickly ran over to the cart. “Now I need at least ten archers to cover us.” All of the archers, about twenty, raised their bows.

Efran smiled. “Well, then. This group to the left of me follow us out. The rest of you man the gates. This is what we’re going to do: when the archers determine that the northbound road is clear, we’re going to bring the cart out onto the westbound road leading to the new bridge over the Passage. Jehan and Coish will load the cart with one body from the pile here. Our archers will follow us on foot as rearguard. When we reach the bridge, the archers will take their stand on the east bank to make sure no Goulven follow us. The cart will proceed for me to bait the hook. Are you ready?” he asked from astride his fidgety horse.

“Captain!” the soldiers shouted.

“Is the road clear, Quennel?” Efran asked.

“For the next three heartbeats, Captain,” Quennel said.

“Open the gates,” Efran instructed. The gate guards did that quickly; Arne drove out the cart and paused just south of the old stone bridge.

“Jehan. Coish,” Efran said. They hopped out of the cart and ran over to grab the newest body from the pile as archers flowed out of the gates behind them. When all were out, and the pair had thrown the bait into the cart, jumping into it themselves, the gates closed. Arne clucked to the horse, tapping the reins lightly, and it began trotting over the old stone bridge. Efran rode alongside; the archers followed on foot, all watching to the north.

Shortly after they had turned west on the coastal highway toward the new bridge over the Passage, another Goulven appeared coming south on the old bridge toward the pile outside the gates. It was promptly shot by the gate archers.

But by that time, Efran’s cart was crossing the bridge. He directed three archers to follow him; the rest remained at the east end of the bridge. Then Efran led the procession on a bare path along the west bank of the Passage. As he rode, he studied the trees overhanging the river.

He stopped beside a large, sturdy oak that had a solid branch extending at least ten feet over the water. To the archers, he said, “Keep an eye out for Goulven that smell our bait.”

He let go of the reins to stand on the saddle, which made for a short climb to reach the branch. Leaning down on it, he gestured below. "Toss me the rope."

Arne made a noise in his throat—the Passage was a fast-running river, very dangerous to fall in, especially as Efran had just ordered the sluice gates fully opened. But Arne took the coil of rope from the young Polonti, made one wind-up, then slung the coil up to Efran on the branch. Catching it, he separated out about ten feet to wrap one end several times around the branch over the water, then tie it off. By now, blood was soaking his shirt and dripping on the limb.

Efran tossed the other end of the rope below. "Tie that around our bait securely. Make it high enough so it's not dangling in the water."

"Yes, Captain. We have it," Jehan said in mild offense to Arne, who grunted. He didn't trust them—not because they were Polonti, but because they were so young.

But they got a satisfactory set of loops and knots secured around the body. Coish looked up. "Ready for launch, Captain?"

"Let it fly," Efran said. So Coish and Jehan pushed it out from the bank to swing under the branch about a foot above the water.

"Perfect," Efran said, seeing it hang about five feet away from the river bank. "Let's head back." He began scooting backwards on the branch.

Upon their uneventful return to the wall gates, they saw that several more Goulven had been shot over the pile. Efran gestured, "Torch this. We want them to go to the bait hanging over the water."

So someone brought oil and a live torch from the mess hall to toss both onto the pile. It roared up momentarily, consumed the oil quickly, and then died down to a slow, steady burn.

By now, Efran was very tired, blood dripping all down his front. He rode back up to the fortress, where Minka met him in the foyer to put a new Goadby's in his hand and lead him up to Wallace's quarters. There, she sat him on the surgery bed and made him drink the Goadby's on an empty stomach.

As he was nodding off, Minka laid him down for Leese to remove the bloody bandage and shirt, clean his incision, and begin stitching it up. Pain crossed his face once or twice, but he was mostly out. Minka then stripped him and bathed him thoroughly on the bed to get the stink of Goulven off him, even washing his longish hair.

She left him lying on the bed to dry off while she went downstairs to get him clean clothes. Once she had him dressed, she required Stephanos' help to get him downstairs to their quarters and lay him on their bed. And he did not stir again until the following morning.

Efran was very hungry when he woke early on November 27th. But before he and Minka went to the dining hall, he stopped by the nursery to pick up a baby who had spent much of the last two days banging angrily on the door, shouting, "Papapa! Papapapa!"—in case he wasn't making himself clear. Minka had come to get him whenever she could, but she didn't do the fun things his father did.

So when the baby's summons had finally produced the desired result, and Joshua was sitting in the sling on his father's right shoulder, he patted his arm, vocalizing, "Papapapa" in something of a singsong.

Sitting at the back bench with a full plate of eggs and cheese but no ham (due to Lowry's being unable to reach his supplier), Efran touched his stitches. "You and Leese were busy while I was out cold. It itches."

"I'm so sorry," she said without a shred of regret.

He leaned over to nuzzle her. "What a little liar."

"No deception intended," she smiled back. "I wasn't counting on fooling you." He grinned at her, then turned to shovel up eggs. "Are we done with the monsters?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know yet. I hope to hear something today," he mumbled. He took a long drink of the Delano's, then muttered, "I hope to never taste Goadby's again." She winced in sympathy.

The first report of the day came while Efran was still sitting at breakfast. Dango, one of the many new Polonti, ran up to salute. "Captain, the Second Cutch has us watching the Passage at the mill, and, as many as sixty or seventy of the Goulven have gone through the sluice gates into the Sea."

Minka gasped; Efran said, "That many?"

"Yes, Captain. Men with long poles are stationed at the mill to—push them away if they get hung on the gates or the banks," Dango said.

"Excellent. Are they seeing any at the wall gates?—at Main, the northbound road, or the east-facing gates?"

"No, Captain; I have not heard of any. Shall I go check now?"

"Yes, that would be helpful," Efran said. Dango saluted again and ran out. "We'll just sit a moment; it won't take long," Efran said, looking up intently as Dobell brought over a plate of fried potatoes. Efran nodded thanks, then swallowed to tell Minka, "I'll share."

"Thank you," she said, but reached out to pull his shirt away from the stitched incision. It was slightly red and swollen, but not alarmingly so. "Do you feel anything else?" she whispered.

"No," he said in perfect honesty. She inhaled deeply.

Momentarily, Dango returned to report, "Captain, they've seen no Goulven at any of the wall gates since yesterday afternoon—none at the east gates or the new northbound road at all. Merchants are asking to go up to Westford."

"Not yet; soon, I hope," Efran said. "You're dismissed." Dango saluted to leave with this word.

A few minutes later, Efran murmured, "Do you want to go look at the Passage with me?"

Minka gasped, "Can I?"

"Yes, it should be safe inside the wall—if you don't go swimming," he added in a mutter, and she looked offended. A little.

Shortly, he and Minka were waiting at the courtyard for horses. He had Joshua lying down in the sling to ride, at which he kicked only a little, wanting to sit up. But Efran didn't know how fast they might have to ride. It *should* be safe, but. . . .

They walked their horses down the switchback, pausing at the wall gates for a report. He noted the faerie tree branches waving normally, occasionally dropping to pluck at the plume on a sentry's ornamental helmet. "How goes it?" he asked them generally.

"We're seeing nothing, Captain," one gate guard, Cudmore, replied. "But that also means we've seen none of our usual traffic from Westford."

"Ah," Efran said. This was ominous news. He instructed another, Ayling, "Get me four volunteers to check on our bait, at least two of them carrying bows."

"Captain!" Ayling ran to Barracks #1, where a mild hubbub arose which resulted in the immediate appearance of six riders, all with bows.

The man in the lead saluted. "Coxe reporting for duty, Captain."

"Very good, six is enough. Ride over to the west bank; follow it north until you see our Goulven bait hanging over the river from an oak branch. Then come tell me if anything is different from what I've just described," Efran instructed.

"Yes, Captain." Coxe looked over his shoulder to jerk his head at the men behind him, and they rode out as directed. Everyone watched to see if there were any pursuit from the north.

The party disappeared up the west bank. Minutes later, they reappeared riding in a relaxed lope. They crossed the bridge eastward, turning south to ride over the old stone bridge. The wall guards had the gates open just as they approached to ride in. Coxe saluted Efran to say, "All is as you described, Captain. The bait is still hanging intact; it may have been picked at by something or other, but it's still whole. No evidence of anything else," he said, raising his shoulders.

"Interesting," Efran murmured. "All right, thank you. Dismissed." They all saluted as they returned to the barracks in mild disappointment.

Efran and Minka (he with Joshua now asleep in the sling) turned west on the easement directly inside the wall, behind the backyards of houses and shops in the western section. They passed through a gate to the mill yard, where they could look down at the rushing water. They both remained on their horses.

Another young Polonti ran up to salute. "Enon reporting, Captain. We saw thirteen Goulven pass through early this morning, directly after sunrise, but no more since then."

"Any on land?" Efran asked.

"No, Captain," Enon said.

"Very good. Carry on," Efran said. Whenever he remembered, as he did now, that he was almost one of those Goulven, he shivered. He and Minka rode back up to the fortress, where he put Joshua in the nursery to finish his nap.

While Minka went to Law class with Ella, Efran went to the small dining room to check on the progress of the other victims. “Wallace? How are they?” The dining table had been pushed against the wall to make room for beds, but only two were occupied now.

“Well, Ellor and Doane are showing no more symptoms—I had found one egg in each of them, and both seem to have recovered sufficiently to return to work. Eustace here has had a harder time of it. I found two eggs in the fang marks, you know, then had to dig for the third. But I’m confident he’s clear of them now,” Wallace said.

Studying Eustace, Efran murmured, “The women always liked you best. How do you feel?”

Eustace managed a laugh. “Poked full of holes, Captain, and grateful for it.”

“I understand,” Efran said with a pat on his healthy shoulder. “Now,” he broached, looking at Adele on her cot. She was awake, but strapped down. Her dark glasses were gone, and her eyes were shut.

“Yes,” Wallace said, gesturing Efran out to the foyer. Here, Wallace said, “She’s still very uncooperative. I found no eggs probing her wounds, you know, and she insists she’s feeling no symptoms. I’ve asked Loriot to feel her shoulders and her upper back; he says he can feel nothing. It seems cruel to keep her bound up, but it’s absolutely unsafe to let her up until we know for sure that she isn’t being consumed by this parasite. I wish I knew how in the world they are able to overwhelm their victims while others are unaware.”

Efran said, “What I read in Ryal’s account seemed to suggest that the victims appeared to fall desperately ill, then make a sudden, complete recovery.”

“You found a book about this? I would very much like to read it,” Wallace said.

“Yes, I’m almost through with it,” Efran said. He was still disturbed; there was something else he was missing. He needed to read more.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 11

As Efran waited through the day to see if there were any more Goulven sightings, he took Joshua in his sling to talk to Lwoff in the hilltop armory. “Cap’n! You’re looking much more alive.”

Efran laughed, “Yes, thank you, Lwoff; I will survive. I need to ask if you know how long it may take for an egg to hatch and start making itself felt. The one in me took about a day to start crawling up my shoulder. But how long can a person go without showing symptoms?”

Lwoff grimaced. “That’s hard, hard to say, Cap’n. They’re cunning buggers. I heard of one that sat quietly for a month before hatching.”

“A month!” Efran groaned.

“Aye, and by that time, they can strike when everyone feels safe, and start a whole ’nother plague,” Lwoff said.

“Is it the woman yer worried about?”

“Adele? Yes, Wallace hasn’t found any eggs in her yet,” Efran said.

“Aha. Cunning speaks to cunning,” Lwoff said.

“What? You can’t mean she’s cooperating with them,” Efran said, astonished.

“No, not that she’d intend to. But like I said, the buggers are cunning,” Lwoff averred.

“Ugh. All right, carry on,” Efran said.

“Cap’n!” he saluted.

Efran went straight to Wallace to relay this bit of information from Lwoff, and the doctor groaned upon hearing it just as Efran had. But at least they had a time frame for dealing with the scourge.

Meanwhile, Efran had men go from house to house and building to building throughout the entire Lands checking for bite marks. To date, they found none, and residents were earnestly warned to report any unexplained bites—though if they appeared, it would soon become apparent, and a disaster.

The rest of that day, Efran was so wound up that two trips up and down the western hillside did not relax him. Joshua went to sleep on the second trip, so Efran reached back to pull up the top of the sling to make sure it supported the baby’s head. Efran’s left shoulder still hurt, especially when he moved it much, but now that he knew what the parasite felt like, he knew that he was not infected.

Climbing down the hillside enabled him to keep watch on the Passage, and he saw that after a few more hours of clean flowing, the observers were withdrawn and the sluice gates returned to their normal position. Everything was beginning to look normal again. Why was he still tense?

Finally, late in the afternoon, he went back up to the workroom to put Joshua on the floor and pick up the book again. DeWitt commented, “It’s good to see you, Efran. You’re looking much better.”

Estes agreed. “We were a little worried about you for a while.”

Efran blinked at them. “Thank you. I hope it didn’t interfere with your work. *That* would be cause for worry.”

Estes laughed lightly, shaking his head. “We’re persevering,” DeWitt said.

“Good,” Efran said, throwing himself down to the chair. He opened the book where he had left off reading, but that was the end of Ryal’s comments about the Goulven. The remaining few pages covered unrelated events in Barthelemon’s life.

Disturbed, Efran flipped back to earlier paragraphs about the Goulven that he might have merely skimmed in his anxiety to find a strategy for controlling them. Starting from the very beginning of the chapter, Efran forced himself to read line by line.

And that’s when he saw for the first time: “Because of the size of the fully grown Goulven, especially their fangs, they cannot accommodate themselves to fit inside children. Therefore, they will lay eggs only in adults or adolescents of adult size. Even some fully adult women are too small for the Goulven’s use.”

Exhaling a long breath, Efran laid the book on the table, then sank back in the chair, hands on his head. Now at least he knew what he had to do. Then he got up to collect Joshua and take the book down to Wallace as he had promised. “When you’re done with it, please give it back to me. It must go back in the library,” Efran told him.

“Yes, Efran. Thank you,” Wallace said, opening it to start reading.

“By the way, it mentions that Goulven do not lay eggs in children or even women who are too small. Could that account for your finding no eggs in Adele?”

“Perhaps. But then why did the Goulven bite her?” Wallace asked.

Efran suggested, “To prevent her raising an alarm? The bite knocked all of us out.”

“Possibly. But we still have to watch her for a month, at least,” Wallace observed, and Efran nodded.

Efran did not sleep well that night. In fact, he slept so poorly that Minka finally laid herself across him to stop his thrashing. So he rolled over on her, and inadvertently scratched her with his stitches. But it gave him enough relief to sleep for a solid hour before he had to get up to go check with the courtyard gate sentries as to what they might have seen since the last time he had asked that night.

Then he went out to stand at the top of the switchback to look far down at the wall gates, lit by torches. The sentries waved an “all’s well” to him because they knew that if they didn’t, he’d be likely to ride down to check. Which he did several times that night.

At daybreak the following morning (November 28th), Efran was in the courtyard requesting a horse. He told the sentry, Conte, “I’m riding to Westford.”

“Without a bodyguard, Captain?” This Polonti, one of the Forty, was also one of the few men who would question Efran to his face.

“I’m taking thirty archers, thank you,” Efran said. “But most of them are in the barracks below.”

“Very good, Captain,” Conte said, blankly correct.

Captain Barr had just come on duty when Efran rode down and made his request for archers. Barr could not resist appointing himself as one, so until he returned, he delegated his responsibilities to Chee—another of Crowe’s former lieutenants.

When Efran had thirty mounted archers at the gates, he told them, “We are riding up to Westford. Keep your eyes moving.” Each man carried not only a bow and quiver, but a sheathed dagger at his side. Efran turned his horse, gesturing, and the gates swung open.

It was a short ride to Westford, a little over a half hour. As they entered the main avenue, they slowed to a walk, looking all around. There was no one to be seen—not on the road, or in shopfronts, or in doorways or windows. “They can’t have all been changed, could they?” someone said.

They paused at an intersection, looking down each way, seeing no movement. Efran looked down the street leading to the Porterhouse Inn, across from the location of Ryal’s old notary shop. “Down this way,” he directed.

The men followed as he walked his horse down the center of the street.

They stopped before the Porterhouse, which had been the busiest, most enduring business in Westford for at least fifty years. They saw no one, but a dozen piles of ash all down the street. Efran nodded to them, and Barr directed two men to go look at them. The two needed only to ride around the piles, glancing down, then returned to report. “Captain, they’re funeral pyres. Burned bodies.”

“Aha. Someone has been here before us,” Efran said. “Captain Barr, I’m going to deploy your men to search, but I’m keeping you by my side to tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

There were some grim smiles as Barr saluted, but Efran looked over his shoulder to say, “Connor, pick two men and go to every room on the first floor of the Porterhouse. You know where the keys are if you need to get into a locked room. Shane, do the same on the second. Truro, take the third floor. Tourse, take the basement. Koschat, take two to the stables. The rest of us will wait here for you.”

Efran watched while the men grouped up and went into the inn, then he looked up the vacant street ahead of him. Glancing back, he said, “Goss, take two men and check every building on the south side of this street. Look in; look around the first floor. You don’t have to go into every room, but call out, ask if anyone needs help. Verrin, you take two and check the north side.”

That done, Efran sat on his horse in the middle of the street, looking everywhere. Those remaining with him did the same. In a few minutes, Connor came out with two young children, one on each arm. “Captain, this is Sidney and Jaxon. They say their parents fell asleep and then got up and left—she thinks it was two days ago. They’ve been living in the kitchen.” The two looked perfectly comfortable with Connor, who was a favorite among most of the children at the fortress.

Efran nodded, then told the remaining men, “I need three volunteers to take these children back to the fortress.” Three of the remaining men presented themselves, and Efran told them, “Thank you. Each child will ride with one of you; the third man will be bodyguard. Take them to the children’s matron Eudoxie; tell her they’re orphans of the Goulven plague, and the Abbey is taking them in accordance with our charter. One of you must stay with the children to help ward them until she gives you permission to leave. The other two may return, but bring another man with you, and warn Eudoxie that there will probably be more children coming.”

“Captain.” The volunteers saluted, taking the young survivors on their horses. Efran watched to see how the children would react to being put on a horse with a stranger, but the men made a point to talk to them. Besides, they looked quite aware that they were being rescued, and they were together. So the group departed at a gentle lope, and Connor ran back into the inn.

Six men were left sitting with Efran on their horses in the middle of the street when Koschat came trotting back from the stables. “Captain, there’s no one at the stables, but twenty-two horses in stalls, and they haven’t been fed or watered in days. Loseby and Martyn are tending to them now.”

“Of course,” Efran exhaled. “I forgot about the horses. All right, go help them and then stand by.”

“Captain.” Koschat saluted, turning back to the stables.

Shortly, Connor returned, leading a girl by the hand. She gripped his hand tightly, trembling. Connor said, “Captain, this is Hadewidis; she’s fourteen, a day maid employed by the Porterhouse. She continues to do her job, even though there’s no one left.”

Efran dismounted to drop to one knee in front of her, which left her looking down on him—a more comfortable position for her than looking up at him on a horse. “Hello, Hadewidis. That’s a very pretty name. My name is Efran. Can you tell me what happened here?” he asked, crinkling his eyes at her.

She inhaled, looking around, then whispered, “No, I don’t know. People started biting people, and, they fell down, and some of them stayed like that for days, then they got up and went out. They went up and down the streets calling, calling for someone to touch. And then, other men came with slashing knives, and I hid—”

She put her hands over her eyes, shivering violently. Efran said quietly, “All right, Hadewidis, you don’t have to say any more. I would like for you to come visit my fortress. A lot of children are living there, and the matron always needs help with the little ones. Would you come visit my fortress, and see if you’d like to stay?”

Hadewidis slowly lowered her hands. “Do they hurt each other?” she asked.

“No, Hadewidis. We found out that a bad worm causes that, and got rid of it. Our fortress is a safe place. You will be safe there,” Efran said quietly.

“Yes,” she said. “I want to get away from here.”

“I’m sure you do, Hadewidis. Can you ride?” Efran asked. She nodded shakily, so he stood, wiping his lip in thought. He turned to the man at his side. “Go get Martyn and a horse ready to ride from the stables.”

“Captain.” The man saluted, running to the stableyard.

Efran waited, looking around. Connor talked to Hadewidis, who was beginning to relax. Tourse came out of the inn, trotting up to salute Efran. “Captain, there’s no one in the basement. Buuuut, there is a lot of crated food that will spoil if it’s not used soon.”

Rubbing his neck, Efran blinked at him, then Martyn loped up on a saddled horse. He dismounted to salute. “Captain?”

“Martyn, this is Hadewidis,” Efran said. The young Polonti turned to smile at her. She put her fingers to her lips to smile shyly back at him. “Take her to the children’s matron Eudoxie; tell her that Hadewidis will be a great help to her. Then bring me back thirty men and carts. A lot of carts.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 12

“Yes, Captain,” Martyn said, turning to help Hadewidis into the saddle of the horse he had just brought.

Efran waited to see them off before telling Tourse, “Have your men bring out the food crates. All of it.”

“Captain,” Tourse saluted, smiling. Then he skipped back to the inn.

Barr noted, “He is undignified but highly effective.”

“Every army needs one or two of him,” Efran said, watching as Goss brought two children from a house down the street.

Shortly, men began arriving from the Lands, and then carts came rolling up as well. More children were found in houses or shops along the street. Efran delegated the dispatching of children to Connor, the loading of provisions in carts to Tourse, and the transport of horses, carriages and tack to Koschat. Then Efran took Barr, Stites, and Truro with him to scout other areas of Westford. The Polonti Stites and Barr had both been slaves conscripted by Loizeaux to fight against Efran in exchange for their freedom. When Efran had prevailed by God’s hand, both men had joined the Abbey army instead. Truro, a Southerner, was just an all-around competent man, one of the original Forty who had joined Captain Efran at the Abbey.

They went first to the nobles district, which was nearby. And they rode up broad, beautiful, empty streets. Efran sent Stites and Truro to knock on doors, look in, and call around. No one answered. However, Truro let out a pair of beautiful, very hungry greyhounds from one empty house. The group on horseback waited while Truro fed them from a pantry, then the dogs happily trotted alongside their horses while the men continued their search.

Efran looked at Reinagle’s house, now empty, and the ruins of Bowring’s estate across from it. Scratching his shoulder, he wondered whether they had escaped the plague, and he deeply hoped that Bowring’s daughter Trina had been spared. “It appears that the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford is no longer standing,” he muttered to Barr, who raised his chin.

Two men came up to report from Connor at the Porterhouse that 31 children had been evacuated from the inn and the street, along with 22 horses and six large carts of food and alcohol, with more loading. No adults living or dead had been found. Efran asked Connor to expand search and salvage efforts into the surrounding area. “Don’t bother with money,” Efran said. “We have plenty of that. Just people, animals, and perishables.”

From there, Efran’s group rode to the outlying areas, where they looked at fields of standing grain waiting to be harvested and no one in the farmhouses. Efran sent Truro to conscript Abbey men to use one farmer’s equipment to harvest the wheat, load it in the grain wagons, and transport it with the draft horses to the Abbey mill. A second wagon was loaded with the wheat from storage bins. A third carried the equipment.

The farmer’s two dairy cows, in great pain, had to be milked before being loaded into carts for transport. The covered cans containing their milk went along with them, as well as the farm tabby. About a dozen live chickens were crated for transport, as were three baskets of eggs.

Efran directed more men to a nearby sheep farm. Here they discovered two exhausted, frightened children trying to keep the farm going after the disappearance of their parents and older brothers. Finn and Tiras won them over to the idea of bringing the whole flock to the Abbey Lands, because the fortress had been a faithful customer of their parents’ operation. Where the children went, the herd dog followed; where the dog directed, the sheep went. Soon they were all southward bound as well, with soldiers driving carts of raw wool, equipment, and household belongings.

Whatever places the men raided, Efran directed them to take everything of necessity today. They couldn’t count on making return trips in coming days.

While all that was in progress, Efran (unconsciously tugging on his shirt) turned his gaze to Shirreff’s cattle farm. Madea and Lowry had both discounted his beef as inferior, but with the plague cutting supply lines elsewhere, they might want a second look at it. Shirreff’s was a few miles northeast of Westford, so before heading there, Efran’s group returned to check in with Connor at the Porterhouse.

The area was full of men, as Connor had expanded search operations to the poorer parts of Westford, where he was finding more children. On the main street, Efran glanced in disapproval at the men coming out of upper-tier clothing stores with dresses. Then he decided to overlook it—if they were aiming to please wives or girlfriends, what of it? All girls loved pretty clothes, except Minka, who did not care. She only wanted something she could work in and ride in. She loved her pants, which these shops emphatically did not carry.

Efran relayed to Connor their intended destination of Shirreff's, then began riding out again with Barr, Truro, and Stites. Stopping abruptly at Aron's Jewelers, Efran raised his face to the vacant upstairs room, where Minka had been held. "May you burn," he whispered, then turned to ride on.

When they arrived at the beautiful manor estate where Adele had briefly lived as Cennick's purported wife, Efran sent Truro in to search for survivors. To their great surprise, he brought out an elderly woman. "Who are you? Check her for bite marks," he instructed Truro.

She objected greatly to Truro's untying her shawl and unbuttoning her bodice far enough to show her skinny shoulders. But he turned back to Efran with a shake of the head. "She's not been bitten, Captain."

"Thank God! Is Shirreff here? Who are you?" Efran repeated.

"Such shameful treatment of an old woman I've never seen!" she said indignantly, restoring her clothing.

At this time Efran dismounted to speak to her face to face, bowing his head. "I deeply apologize. But this whole area has been besieged by creatures that bite, and I want to hear how you escaped and who is with you."

She said despondently, "I am alone. I am Lord Shirreff's housekeeper Ionadi. It was—two weeks ago, perhaps, that the lord fell deathly ill, as many of his men did. He'd been bitten by something large that left great marks in his neck. I was tending him when I heard shouts and the splintering of wood. So I hid myself in his wardrobe and watched through the louvers as two large men came in with great bloody knives. 'Here's another!' one shouted, and he stabbed the lord through his chest. I almost betrayed myself crying out.

"Then they dragged him out to a pile of bodies, poured oil over them, and set them all ablaze. That was everyone in the house and fields except two young maids that the men carried off with them when they left."

Scratching his neck again, Efran looked back to Barr, who had also dismounted. Barr mused, "So they went from here to Westford. Goulven hunters?"

"Sounds like it. That's rather encouraging," Efran said. Then he asked her, "Did you recognize their speech patterns? Were they from Eurus? Crescent Hollow?"

She shrugged, shaking her head. "They were too loud."

Efran nodded sympathetically, then said, "Forgive my rudeness. I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, and my people have been fighting the creatures that bit your lord. Everyone, all adults in Westford have vanished. We are very surprised and gratified to find you here and alive."

"Hmph," she said, rearranging her shawl.

Efran went on, "I doubt you can survive here by yourself. If you will come with us, in return for your lord's cattle, I will provide you a home and sustenance for the rest of your life in our Lands. I will also provide a maid to help you and a man to do what heavy work you want done."

“You have houses?” she asked suspiciously.

“Oh, yes. Not as grand as this, but very livable. You can choose one that’s up, or we’ll build one for you,” Efran offered, crinkling his eyes for the second time today.

“I suppose that’s my best option under the circumstances,” she said reluctantly.

“You’ll love us. I promise.” He smiled fully at her, and she made a little coquettish face.

“Very good.” Efran turned to Barr. “Do we have any cattlemen in the ranks? Surely we do.”

“Yes,” Barr said thoughtfully. “Keyon,” he began, then looked up to Stites for help.

“Stourt. Hereward,” Stites offered from his saddle.

“Good,” Efran said, then asked Ionadi, “About how many head do you have now?”

“Not more than forty,” she said.

Efran looked at Stites. “Find Keyon, Stourt, and Hereward; tell them we need forty head of cattle brought down to the Lands, along with Ionadi and whatever she wishes to bring from the house. Also—” He looked toward Shirreff’s fields, then asked her, “What do your sorghum and your pearl millet look like?”

“They’re ready for cutting; no one to do it,” she shrugged.

“You will have laborers promptly,” he told her, then directed Stites, “Bring a score to harvest the feed.”

“Yes, Captain,” Stites said, saluting, and turned his horse to ride south.

“Truro, I’m leaving you here to help Ionadi pack what she wants. Behave yourself,” Efran ordered sternly. Truro smiled as he saluted, and the woman looked smugly vindicated.

For the next six hours, the Abbey Lands seemed almost deserted as much of the army labored to collect children, animals, equipment, grain and provisions from abandoned homes and farms in Westford. Estes’ scheme of setting aside acreage in the eastern section for fields, and using soldiers to work them, now looked prescient. What men were left on the Lands hurried to finish the construction of pens for new horses, cattle, sheep, and . . . pigs.

The pigs were a surprise find by a pair of men who had rounded up goats for transport. Hearing noises behind a shed, they found a newly weaned litter of ten piglets. Since they were small—maybe twenty pounds each—the men said, We should bring these, too. So they did.

But the men who had been tasked with completing pens for all these animals said, WE ARE NOT BUILDING PIG PENS. So there was great discord among the ranks between those who loved pork and those who had to get large, sturdy pens built quickly.

Lwoff, arriving at the eastern section to view the influx of new animals, said, “Yer problem is building enclosures that’ll hold pigs? Pshaw. You send some labor up hilltop with me; I’ll show you how to use the trees to get the pens built.”

So, given four men, Lwoff demonstrated how to weave young trees around large trees to create a secure, living pen. In a matter of hours, they had constructed two large enclosures on the hilltop, the outsides of which were buttressed with rocks mortared in place—not elegantly, as the wall was, but securely. These were completed in time to receive the piglets before they could get themselves slaughtered.

The highly prized dairy cows were carted, not walked, to the Lands and up the switchback to be given luxury suites in the stables that had previously held horses that were now stabled below.

With the waning of daylight, the caravans between Westford and the Abbey Lands ceased. Efran’s men rode down the middle of abandoned streets, calling, “Anyone left? Anyone here? It’s getting dark; we’re going home!” Two children who had been hiding in fear all day ran out then.

In exhaustion, Efran turned his weary horse south with the last of his men, and they loped down a winding road into a purple sky with the sun dropping amid orange-red clouds on their right.

Minka and Joshua were waiting for him in the courtyard. Seeing them, he almost fell from his saddle to gather them up, Minka in his left arm and Joshua on his right. Minka whispered, “I’ve never seen anything like that in my life—carts of children, and animals, and food! Horses and cattle and sheep! Now I’m almost watching for a flood to begin.”

“It was the strangest thing ever,” Efran said, looking up as Estes and DeWitt came down the fortress steps to meet him. “How many children did we finally bring in?” he asked them.

Estes said, “Forty-two, by my count.”

“Is there room for them all?” Efran asked anxiously.

“We’re only housing ten of those tonight. The rest were provisionally adopted by families,” Estes told him, smiling.

“Oh, well done,” Efran breathed.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 13

Still in the courtyard, Joshua insistently patted his father’s face. “He’s been a terror, with you gone all day,” Minka observed. When Joshua’s hand found his stitches, Efran realized that their itching is what had been bothering him the whole time.

DeWitt looked over the darkened eastern plots. “With the livestock and the equipment—and the men to use it”—nodding to Estes—“we’ve leapt forward to a level of self-sustenance that I had not counted on for years yet. This is rather staggering, Efran.”

Efran nodded in agreement; Estes asked, “And you found no survivors but the children?”

“No one but Shirreff’s housekeeper Ionadi. Where is she? Did she find a house?” Efran asked.

DeWitt nodded below. “A new house in the eastern section, one that DePew had built on speculation. She’s very pleased. She didn’t get everything moved in, but enough to be comfortable for the night. We’ve set her up with a maid.”

“Good,” Efran said. “Oh! She told us about Shirreff falling ill after being bitten, and a couple of men who broke in and killed him. They killed all the victims and made a bonfire of the bodies before leaving with two young girls. They appeared to be Goulven hunters.”

“I’d very much want to talk to them. Did she know where they were from?” DeWitt asked.

“No. Eurus, I hope,” Efran said.

Minka leaned on him. “Auntie Marguerite, and Justinian.”

“Exactly. Well, hopefully, we’ll be able to get messages through now. I’m hungry,” Efran exhaled.

“I understand there’s plenty of food,” DeWitt said, and they went in.

As they were about to enter the dining hall, a sentry at the door said, “Captain, the doctor asked to check you the moment you returned.”

“Ah. All right,” Efran said in mild despondence, smelling ham on the fire. He turned toward the stairway with Joshua. Minka went right along with him.

As Efran came to the door of Wallace’s quarters, Eustace was coming out. “How are you?” Efran asked, stopping him.

“Fine, Captain,” Eustace said. “Wallace gave me an all clear.”

“Oh, good,” Efran breathed.

Minka patted Eustace on the arm as Wallace waved Efran in. “Let me see,” Wallace said, gesturing to Efran’s shirt, which he began unbuttoning with one hand as he was holding Joshua. “What are you feeling?” Wallace asked.

“Itching,” Efran said, opening his shirt for Wallace to view his upper shoulder and chest.

“Um hmm.” Wallace peered through his spectacles, and Minka came to his side to look. The bite marks and stitches were slightly red, but not badly swollen or oozing. Wallace felt all over his shoulder, neck and upper back. “No discomfort?”

“No, but for the pulling of the stitches. When can you take them out?” Efran asked.

“Give it a week, at least,” Wallace muttered. He went to his medicine table to wet a small cloth from the bottle of white alcohol, then pressed the cloth firmly on Efran’s wounds.

Efran winced, asking, “What of Adele?”

Wallace grunted, “There’s been no change; I allowed her out with Loriot, but when he had to go down to the barracks, we locked her in again. I believe he’s back with her now.” Efran nodded.

He went back down to the dining hall with Joshua and Minka. Most everyone who ate up here had finished; Ella was done, but had lingered to wait for them, and had plenty of company to wait with her. Quennel was beside her at the moment, which pleased Efran, as he was a favorite—of Efran’s, not necessarily Ella’s.

Settling Joshua on his knee, Efran looked up hopefully at Dobell approaching with plates. Dobell laid one before Efran with, “I saved you some ham, Captain.” He set another plate before Minka.

“You’re a good man,” Efran breathed, picking up his fork. He looked aside at Minka’s plate of fruit, apple cobbler, and pumpkin custard.

Efran paused, gesturing to Dobell at the deficiency of her plate, but Minka said, “He knows what I like, Efran.”

“Oh. Good,” Efran said, still vaguely troubled as they received their drinks; he couldn’t understand anyone’s turning down ham.

Efran opened his ale, then looked questioningly at Minka’s lager. “He knows what I like,” she repeated, smiling, and he nodded again. As they ate, Joshua kept leaning over to Minka for bites of her custard until Efran finally put him on her lap so that he himself could eat unencumbered.

While they were finishing, another sentry leaned over Efran to say, “You’re requested in the courtyard, Captain.”

Mouth full, Efran looked back to nod. Swallowing, he lifted Joshua from Minka’s lap (as she could hardly stand with him anymore) and asked the baby, “Have you had enough?” Numerous faces around them smiled as Joshua nodded just like Efran.

He gave Minka a hand getting out from the bench, then they walked out to the courtyard, lit with lanterns. In late November, the nights were still just cool due to the hill’s proximity to the Sea. Tourle, one of the gate sentries, beckoned him over. “Have a look, Captain,” he said, pointing north beyond the gates.

They all looked at the dim red glow on the horizon, accompanied by large dark clouds. Minka gasped, “Is that fire? I smell smoke.”

“Sure looks like it, Lady Minka; a wide swath,” Tourle said.

“Westford is burning,” Efran said. “Someone was watching us today, and finished up where we left off.” They glimpsed flickers of red as the smoke grew more pungent, then Efran said, “Send a man down to Captain Barr to inform him.”

“Yes sir; did that already. Looks like there’s someone from the lower barracks coming up now,” Tourle said.

Efran focused on the switchback to see Gabriel ascending at a lope. Tourle opened the gate for him to ride in; Gabriel turned the horse, staying astride it to look north. “Blazes,” he said, figuratively and literally. “I hope to God you got everyone out.” Apparently, he had come up the hilltop to get a better view of the conflagration for his captain.

“We did our best,” Efran agreed. “We’ll check what’s left in the morning.”

“Yes, Captain,” Gabriel said, eyes on the distance. Tourle saluted as Efran turned back to the fortress with Minka on one arm and a yawning baby on the other.

The following morning, November 29th, Efran was up early to assemble a party immediately after breakfast. He sent men down to ask Commander Lyte, Captain Barr, Captain Melchior and Truro to wait for him and Loriot at the wall gates preparatory to scouting what remained of Westford.

Riding down the switchback, Efran asked Loriot, “How is Adele?”

Loriot hesitated. “I don’t really know, Captain. She swears she is fine, but . . . I don’t know.”

“Are you sleeping with her? Overnight, I mean,” Efran asked.

“Last night was my last, unless I get more assurance that she is well. She is different after the biting; I can tell that she is different, but she won’t admit that anything has changed. I don’t trust her,” Loriot said.

“Thank you,” Efran said. “Where are you keeping her?”

“With your permission, I’ll continue to lock her in the third-floor room at night. During the day, I’m letting her sit on the back grounds with two sentries,” Loriot said.

“For now,” Efran allowed.

At the wall gates, they met Lyte, Barr, Melchior and Truro ready to ride, so Efran said, “Gentlemen, let’s see what remains of Westford.” He nodded to the guards to open the gates, and they rode out.

“You can smell the ash from here, sir,” Truro said.

“Yes,” Efran said. “Does anyone smell burned human flesh?”

“Yes,” several voices replied. Efran exhaled. *Again?*

As dawn brightened to daylight, they rode up the main road into Westford. With the lake where the palace used to be on their right, they turned down the street where the Porterhouse Inn stood. Had stood.

Now, they looked at blackened rubble all down the street. Some piles were still smoking, but as far as they could see, nothing was left standing. And in the middle of the street were the charred remains of an adult, face down, still propped up on elbows as if crawling.

Barr dismounted to approach the remains, withdrawing his knife. He bent over it, studying the back, then kicked it supine with the toe of his boot. He used the tip of his dagger to open the jaws, then resheathed it to return to the group and remount. “He has no Goulven on his spine nor fangs, Captain, but I can’t tell whether he’s been bitten.”

Lyte said, “Could have been a falling out among thieves.”

“Seems likely,” Efran agreed uneasily. “Let’s proceed. Hopefully, outlying areas escaped their notice.”

They rode farther up the street, then separated to check other areas. Efran sent Melchior and Truro northeast to

look at Shirreff's manor house. In a few hours, they all collected again on the main thoroughfare.

"The nobles district is burned-out wreckage. Nothing remotely left," Lyte said.

"Shirreff's house is gone," Melchior confirmed.

Loriot told them, "Farmhouses and fields have been torched. Some are still burning. The lumber mill is nothing but ash."

"They burned down *everything*?" Efran asked in shocked disbelief. At the confirming nods, he apprehended, "Westford is no more." Shaken, he turned his horse southward, and the rest of them followed.

On the ride back, Efran blinked hard to contain the tears, but they came anyway. He could hardly conceive that the powerhouse of the Southern Continent under Henry the Great—Westford, that had stood as the center of faith and vitality for hundreds of years, that had been the capital of Lystra at its height under Ares and Henry—was destroyed.

Fighting in Westford's army had been Efran's overriding desire since childhood, his reason for leaving Eledith as a boy to make the long, dangerous journey on foot to the great city. He could still remember the early winter day that he saw the palace for the first time, and stood gaping in the courtyard at its beauty and majesty. He could still see the face of the soldier who took him to the back door of the kitchen to be fed, then led him to Captain Reedry of the Green Regiment, who put him in uniform, with boots on his bare feet, and began teaching the scrawny Polonti how to be a soldier.

The Westfordian men who had inspired him, disciplined him, taught him, and promoted him passed one by one through his mind as if saying goodbye, and he bent over the pommel, briefly overcome. The Abbey Lands had been home to him for a year and a half now, but Westford had always remained his anchor on earth.

Now it was gone. The palace was gone; the army was gone; the shops, the farms, the people were gone. Efran must make the Abbey Lands stand, because his old place of redemption was no more.

They rode back through the wall gates silent, but for Efran's erratic breathing. Then he looked up through his tears at the men coming out of the barracks to hear the news, some of whom had served under him in the Red Regiment of the Army of Westford.

Gazing at them, Efran saw Commander Wendt emerge from Barracks #1 on the arm of his handler. Wendt, the commander who had promoted Efran to Captain of the Red, the commander who had saved his life when he only wanted to die fighting—Wendt remained.

Efran dismounted and stumbled toward his blind commander. Wendt said, "Oh, Efran's crying." Whereupon Efran seized him in a bear hug, crying.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 14

“Is it destroyed, then?” Wendt asked.

Efran released him, wiping his face fiercely on his sleeve. “Yes. Completely burned out.”

“The old passes to make way for the new, Efran. The difference here is, you saved the best of it,” Wendt said. The men stood quietly by.

“As you saved me,” Efran said.

“I won’t take credit for what God does,” Wendt said. “Because He returned the favor when you stole me from Clonmel.”

Efran raised his wet face, exhaling. Then he looked at Gabriel, Connor, and Krall nearby. “The best of my men are here. The best of Westford’s produce and flocks,” he said, looking toward the penned animals to the east. “Minka,” he breathed, looking up to the courtyard, where he could see her waiting.

Returning to his horse to hoist himself to the saddle, he told his scouting group, “Thank you, gentlemen. You’re dismissed.” They saluted, and he paused to regard Wendt’s half smile. Then he turned the horse’s head toward the switchback.

Arriving in the courtyard, he fell from the saddle to lift his heart’s desire and squeeze her—not too hard, he hoped. Feet off the ground, she let him hold her, feeling his chest expand. She whispered, “I’m sorry.”

He set her back down, having to wipe his face again on his soggy sleeve. “I won’t cling to the past. I will be grateful for what God gave me then, but I will live today.”

“Of course,” she said, then murmured, “Joshua is awake, and Dobell found more ham.”

He grinned. “I am still hungry.” With an arm around her shoulders, he walked her up the steps into the fortress.

When Efran appeared in the workroom after his second breakfast, Estes showed him the work assignments he and DeWitt had made for off-duty men.

“All right, Efran,” he said, raising a list, “here are our tentative appointments: Hereward will be in charge of the beef cattle, with three assistants of his choice. Keyon will take charge of the sheep and goats, with two assistants. Aldwin will take the dairy cows, with one helper. Lwoff wants the pigs.”

“Good man,” Efran said.

“Yes,” agreed Estes. “Bloodworth will have oversight of our fields, with the authority to conscript as many men as he needs for tilling, planting or harvest. He’ll have to confer with the kitchen and our livestock men as to what needs to be planted; we’re almost certain to have the men plow new fields, besides the ground they already worked. The men named here will be exempt from regular duty, but their assistants will continue to serve unless we’re told it’s too much.”

“Very good, Estes. Thank you,” Efran said, looking over the list.

“Do you realize that we have more acreage now than Westford had at its height, including supporting fields and pasture?” Estes asked.

Efran’s jaw dropped. “What? Are you sure? Shirreff had forty acres.”

“No, he didn’t,” Estes scoffed. “He just let his cattle forage on unclaimed land. If we want, we can expand to the north, clear up to Guillaume’s logging acreage. I’ll check with Ryal on how to claim that land.”

“Oh, very good,” Efran said.

A few hours later, Ellor, on door duty today, appeared at the workroom to tell Efran, “Captain, a party of five men, armed, are at the wall gates requesting to check for Goulven infections.”

“Ah,” Efran said, enlightened, as DeWitt and Estes looked up dubiously. “These must be our Goulven hunters. Get me a horse; I will come speak to them.”

“Captain.” Ellor saluted and exited.

When Efran got to the front doors, he paused to tell Ellor, “I may or may not bring up a few of these men. I want you to assemble here in the foyer yourself, Doane, Eustace, Adele, and six other random people, all adults. Put Adele at the very back.”

“Yes, Captain.” Ellor saluted with a glimmer of understanding.

Accompanied by Stites and Verrin, Efran leisurely rode down the switchback and up Main at a walk. Arriving at the wall gates, he looked over the men waiting on horseback: rugged, determined, whom he judged capable of what Ionadi had described. “I am Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands. Who are you and what do you want?”

“Lord Efran, I am Salotto, leader of these men. We are dedicated to eradicating the Goulven parasites that have spread across the Southern Continent. I request permission to inspect your fortress and lands for infections.”

Efran regarded them for a moment. “How do you conduct inspections?”

“With Hulls,” Salotto said, indicating the man to his right. “He can detect infections.”

“What do you detect about me?” Efran asked Hulls from across the gate.

The man regarded him, then said, “You have been infected but cleansed.”

“That’s correct,” Efran said. “So, Salotto, I will permit you and Hulls to come up to the fortress. You must leave your weapons here.”

Efran waited while the two men reluctantly unfastened their dagger sheaths to hand off to another of his men. Then the gates were opened for those two to enter.

They rode up Main at a walk with Efran leading, Salotto and Hulls behind him, and Stites and Verrin in the rear. Passing shops, carts, and numerous pedestrians, Salotto glanced repeatedly at his detector, who was looking all around but saying nothing.

They all gave up their horses to Squirt the stableboy, then Efran led his guests into the foyer to regard the group gathered there. Efran said, "I would like to see more of your ability to detect infections. Take these one at a time, please, and tell me what you find."

Hulls went up to a cleaning woman in front. She eyed him as he looked her over, then he said, "She's clean."

"Thank you; you may go," Efran nodded to her.

The next two people Hulls also pronounced clean, and Efran dismissed them. Hulls paused in front of Eustace to say, "He's also been infected, but is clean."

"Thank you; you may go," Efran nodded to Eustace, who saluted before leaving.

Hulls pronounced the next man clean, then came to Ellor. "Here's another one that's been cleansed of infection," Hulls said.

"Thank you; you may go," Efran told Ellor. He stepped to the side of the foyer but did not leave, as he was on door duty. Lorient had come in to watch by this time.

Hulls looked at Doane and said, "Another cleansed. I see you've had some success dealing with infections."

To Doane, Efran said, "Thank you; you may go." He did not respond to Hulls' observation, and Doane limped back to his cubicle.

Hulls found the next two men clean, whom Efran dismissed. Coming to the woman in dark glasses, Hulls stiffened at once. "She's infected."

A momentary shock wave passed through the foyer, then Efran said, "Thank you, Hulls, Salotto. You may go. Stites, Verrin—please escort our guests back down to the gates."

Salotto said, "Let us deal with her, Lord Efran."

Efran looked at him coldly. "Your associate noted our success in handling infections. You may leave my people to me."

He nodded to Stites, who came up to stand in Salotto's face. The Goulven hunter paused, then said, "We will be watching."

"Off Abbey property, which is north of the old bridge," Efran said. Stites and Verrin then escorted the two men out.

In the foyer, Lorient came up to stand beside Efran, and they both looked at Adele. "How do you feel, Adele?" Efran asked.

"I'm fine," she said.

"You don't hurt anywhere?" Efran asked.

"No," she said. She did not look to be in pain. But Efran remembered what Lwoff had said about the Goulven going dormant for long periods of time.

Efran looked over to Ellor. “Get two volunteers to walk her around the back grounds.”

“Captain.” Ellor saluted, then turned away.

Efran and Lorient continued to stand quietly until Mathurin and Telo, both young Polonti, came up saluting. Efran said, “Please walk Adele around the back grounds as she wishes. When she’s ready to go in, she must be locked in her third-floor room. If she’s hungry, you may bring her meal to her room.”

“Captain.” They saluted Efran, then Mathurin went over to put Adele’s hand on his arm. “Follow me, please, lady,” he said. She went without a word.

Efran and Lorient regarded each other, and Efran said, “I don’t know what else to do but wait. If you have any other ideas, feel free to tell me.”

Lorient shook his head slowly. “I don’t. But you should know, when I saw the woman—the Goulven carrier, the first one—in the foyer, I told Adele to go back upstairs. She didn’t; while I was in the keep, she came out to tell the woman that she sensed power in her, and asked if she could give her second sight. The woman said *yes* before asking to kiss her—and that’s when she bit her, of course.”

Efran almost stopped breathing. “Could she have given Adele second sight?”

“I don’t know. Adele tells me nothing, but, as I said, I sense a change in her. That may be what this Goulven fighter sensed, as well,” Lorient said.

Efran crossed his arms over his chest, looking up to the ceiling. “But we don’t know.”

“No, Captain. We don’t know.”

Outside, Adele sat quietly on the bench. She actually did not mind sitting out here alone, as she was experiencing a kind of sight she’d never had before. It was not seeing with her eyes; she had accepted that her regular eyesight was gone forever. This was a second sight far superior to the weak seeing that Alverstroke had offered.

She could close her eyes, look away, or even pretend to go to sleep, and still see images of others around her. She could not discern objects, only people—but so vividly! They were rendered in glowing outlines, like silver on a blackboard. Certain people, like Efran, she could see almost in detail, but with the additional sense of his thoughts or emotions.

Just now, in the foyer with Lorient, she discerned Efran’s turning his head to speak and the movement of his lips. She watched him rear back in frustration and open his hands questioningly. When the visitors had suggested killing her, she perceived his immediate resistance to the idea. But she also knew it was not due to any love for her, but a proprietary sense toward the people under his care. Outsiders would not dictate to him what to do with his people.

Her little sister Sybil was also very clear to her, but her outline was diffused, softer than Efran’s. Adele also saw Sybil’s aura waver indecisively whenever she came close to her. But what was most interesting was what happened when she and Efran drew close to each other. Then, their auras flared up like flames—his, especially, leapt out to almost encompass her bodily. Hers spread softly, as if to receive him. Where their auras met, they merged in perfect synchronization, like notes in harmony.

Adele didn't particularly enjoy watching this hidden demonstration of love, as she knew this was something she was never likely to experience. But she also saw that it could be disrupted.

As for this Goulven nastiness, Adele honestly didn't know whether she was infected or not. So she just didn't think about it. Besides, she was rather enjoying this new sense of power.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 15

The Goulven hunters that Efran had dismissed did leave the Abbey Lands—barely. They set up camp in the meadow just feet beyond the old stone bridge. This did not trouble Efran; he merely dispatched archers to the gates. Besides the sentries stationed at the gates of the new northbound road and the eastern gates, he also sent guards out to the newly plowed fields as well as to the cattle and sheep pens, which were beyond the protection of the walls. But again, Efran was not overly concerned. The number of men working out here rendered the threat of attack by five men implausible. And Hulls apparently detected no infections other than Adele's.

Therefore, Efran knew that their concern was not with the men working on the land, but with the woman in the fortress who appeared to be infected. So, let them watch. They were being watched in return.

That afternoon, Efran and DeWitt, along with Martyn and Stourt, rode out to see how the cattle and sheep were acclimating to their new surroundings. (Estes did not come, as he had people checking on the children who had been provisionally adopted yesterday.)

Hereward was already deeply involved with the cattle after they had been neglected for weeks. Men were building separate pens for the bulls, which was an urgent need. Fortunately, the sheep and goats readily accepted grazing with the cattle, and as they ate different herbage, the mix would prove to be a good use of the land. Hereward and Keyon, the latter in charge of the sheep and goats, were consuming the knowledge of the sheep farmers' children, who rode with them over the meadowlands while their sheep dog trotted authoritatively alongside.

Returning to the fortress, DeWitt went on up to the workroom while Efran dismissed Martyn and Stourt. Efran paused in the foyer, feeling—disjointed. Distracted. By what?

Wallace came off the stairs and up the corridor, then noted Efran in the foyer. Handing him Ryal's book, Wallace said, "Efran, thank you for lending this to me. It was quite interesting; I had no idea at the time of the struggle involved in saving the fortress from the Destroyer. And the passages about the Goulven were most interesting, especially that on the mental energy. I had been so focused on the physical problem, it never occurred to me that there might be a spiritual aspect of the attack."

"Spiritual aspect? What? In the book?" Efran asked in confusion.

"Yes. Here, let me see if I can find it again." Wallace took the book to begin flipping through it. "I don't know what's wrong with me lately; I seem to have trouble concentrating." He was silent a moment as he searched, then he landed on a page and extended the book to Efran. "There, on the left-hand page."

Efran took the book, scanning the page. This was a section directly preceding that on the Goulven. Here, he read, "Other invasive bodies that affect the nervous system can also impart unnatural mental abilities to their victims,

at least in the short term. Barthelemon was a pioneer in researching these effects. In dealing with the Goulven parasites, for instance, he discovered that extremely receptive victims could directly receive the ability to reorder or impair mental vibrations in others even without the physical presence of the parasite. However, once this power hits its peak, the victim is rendered insane or idiotic before he dies.”

Efran had to reread this passage several times in order to absorb its meaning. Then he slowly lowered the book. “I see. Thank you, doctor.”

“You’re welcome. Now I have to go figure out what I was working on,” Wallace said with a shake of his head.

“Yes. What I was working on,” Efran repeated, turning up the corridor. He paused in the foyer to look at the book. “What was I—? Oh, yes, I need to reshelve it.” As he started to turn back in the corridor toward the library, he caught sight of the door sentry, one of the earnest young Polonti. He looked to be asleep on his feet.

Blinking, Efran went over to shake his shoulder. The youngster awoke with a start. “Captain!” he said, snapping to salute.

“What’s wrong with you?” Efran asked.

Disoriented, he blurted, “I am sleepy, Captain; I don’t know why.”

“All right, we’ll—find another man,” Efran said, troubled. He looked down at the book again, then returned it to a shelf in the library.

Where was Minka? When had he last seen her? Tentatively, he went to the back door to emerge onto the grounds. There, he saw her standing still, holding Joshua. Efran went over to touch her shoulder and she jumped.

“Efran! Why are you angry with me?” she asked.

“Angry? No, not at all. Why do you think I’m angry?” he asked. He looked at Joshua, who was deeply asleep.

“Efran,” she said, troubled. “I haven’t heard the bells in days. Or the faeries. They’re all silent.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” he said. Then he suddenly looked toward the bench under the walnut tree where Adele sat. As he turned his gaze to her, she turned her head away, and he felt a distinct sense of release.

Minka let down as well, blinking. “Efran, something’s wrong. I don’t know what it is.”

His eyes flicked back up to Adele, who appeared to be looking toward the vegetable gardens. Turning his eyes in the same direction, he saw Tourjee standing indecisively over a row of leeks. This was unusual: Tourjee knew exactly what needed to be done, and did it. The other workers were also standing idle, for the most part.

Efran swiveled back to Adele; she lowered her head, then raised it to him, and he felt as if he’d been hit in the face with a wet towel. The smothering persisted until he turned away from her—and even then, there was a lingering oppression.

Leaving Minka standing in the yard, he went into the corridor, murmuring, “This can’t be happening. She’s *blind*.” Then he saw Lorient slowly coming off the stairway. Drawing up to him, Efran said, “Lorient, Adele is getting out of hand. She’s got second sight, or something. You’ve got to take it away from her.”

Loriot shook his head. “She is too strong for me now, Captain. Something must be done quickly, but—I am no longer able to influence her.”

Trembling, Efran ran up the stairs to the workroom. There, he looked in on Estes and DeWitt sitting idle at their work table. Estes glanced up to say, “For some reason, I can’t make sense of the tables I made yesterday.” DeWitt was stroking his brow over the paperwork in front of him.

Efran turned to run back down the stairs. He went up the corridor to the foyer, where he ran into the keep. Here, standing before the crucifix, he stopped to get his breath. Raising his eyes to the window above the ten-foot-tall crucifix, he whispered, “God of light, what do I do? I am lord of the fortress; I am responsible for it. *What do I do?*”

He got a grip on himself, trying to think. Then the thought came: *I will look at no vile thing*. He squinted, thinking. That was a verse from the Psalms, one of many that Therese made him memorize. But what . . . ? Then he remembered that he had been warning everyone not to look in the Goulven victims’ eyes. But—Adele’s eyes were useless. Yet, he saw her just now turning her face—her attention—toward different areas. If she had second sight, then she was seeing *something* of what she was focusing on.

“Then what do I do?” he whispered. *I hate the actions of the faithless; they will not cling to me*. He thought hard on this. “If I go out with Your authority, she won’t overpower me. Is that it? Will You go with me?” he asked, looking up at the light.

He had to find out; he had to stop her before she brought the whole hill to its knees. Exiting the keep, he ordered himself, “Don’t look in her face at all—she’s harboring some vile thing. Don’t let it cling to you.”

Exiting the back door onto the grounds, he focused on Adele’s feet as she sat on the bench. Peripherally, he saw her head swivel toward him, and he felt her throw up a wall. But it was not as strong as it had been earlier. Approaching her quickly, he raised his eyes only as far as her midsection to grab hold of her shoulders, lift and turn her so that she was facing the orchard, and beyond that, the Sea.

His arm around her ribs, he said, “Let go of it.”

“No,” she said, then began screaming, “Help! Help me!”

Several men ran up behind him. “Captain?”

“She’s infected! Get back!” he ordered. They hesitated as she continued to scream. “Shut up!” he ordered.

She stopped, but lowered her face, attempting to bite him with her regular teeth. He pulled her head back by her hair, ordering, “Let go of it.” He felt the men behind him, but they did not interfere.

“No. I want to keep it,” she said in a strained voice.

“It will kill you,” he said. “And before you die, it will rot your brain.” The men backed away fearfully.

After a moment, she gasped, “It won’t go.”

He put his mouth to her ear and whispered, “I order you to leave her.”

She collapsed in his arms, but he didn’t let go of her. Turning his head to the men behind him, he said, “Get me a

sack, to cover her head.” Two of them ran off. Hoisting her up, he repeated in her ear, “I order you to *leave*.”

“It’s gone,” she said.

“No, it’s not,” he scoffed. But he did notice Tourjee’s crew coming back to life. *God of heaven, if it’s truly gone, let the bells ring*, he thought.

He waited a moment, hearing nothing. So he leaned forward again to whisper, “If you don’t order it out yourself, I’m going to put you out of the gates where the Goulven hunters are waiting, and I will let them deal with you.”

A minute later, he heard the bells ring—not loudly, not strongly, but they did ring.

As a man brought a small feed sack to hand to him, Efran let go of her with one arm to jerk the sack down over her head. Then he turned to begin walking her back to the fortress. He told Telo at his side, “Ride down to the Goulven hunters out front. Tell Salotto and Hulls to come up to the foyer, unarmed.”

“Captain!” Telo saluted, springing away.

“It’s gone! I swear it!” Adele cried, her voice muffled by the sack.

“We’ll see,” Efran grunted.

He escorted her through the back door, up the corridor into the foyer. The guards at the door turned to him, saluting, and he said, “Open the doors. We’re expecting visitors.”

They flung the doors open, then stood back waiting. Adele said, “Take this stinking sack off my face.”

“Shut up,” Efran said. Minka came into the foyer behind them to watch. Shortly, Lorient appeared as well.

In a few minutes, Efran watched the courtyard gates open to Salotto and Hulls. They entered the foyer and paused while Efran took the sack off Adele. “Well?” he said. Adele straightened the dark glasses on her face.

Hulls walked up to her, peering intently. He hesitated for a minute, glancing around. Then he said, “Something has left her, but is lingering nearby.”

“Ah. How do I make it leave for good?” Efran asked.

“Kill her,” Hulls said.

Adele started screaming. Covering her head once more, Efran said, “Not yet. Thank you. Goodbye.” Exhaling in frustration, the Goulven hunters turned back out, to be led down the switchback and up Main out of the wall gates again.

Seeing Minka and Lorient behind him, Efran nodded to another sentry. “Take her up to her third-floor room and lock her in.”

“Yes, Captain,” he said, then paused to ask, “Key?” Lorient dug it out of his pocket to hand it over. The man then took Adele by the elbow to walk her away.

When she was out of the foyer, Efran explained to both of them what he had found in the book, what he saw

happening in the fortress, and what he had just done with Adele. He ended, “Ryal’s book called it ‘mental vibrations,’ though it seemed to me more like an evil spirit. I don’t know if you heard Hulls, but it’s still nearby. And it will infect us all if Adele—or someone else—lets it back into their mind.” They just looked at him.

“I should take her out of the fortress,” Lorient said.

Efran objected, “But then, whatever place you take her will come under the influence of the Goulven and spread until it’s unstoppable.”

Minka asked, “How did it infect Adele mentally and no one else?”

“She asked for it,” Lorient said. “She asked the woman for second sight. So she gave it to her.”

“Then the problem is Adele,” Minka said.

“Yes. Again,” Efran said.

Sighing, Minka turned into the keep to sit at the foot of the crucifix again.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 16

The following morning, November 30th, Delano came to Efran in the foyer to ask, “Lord Efran, may I take a few men to check on my plant and workers in Westford?”

“Your plant? Your lager production,” Efran groaned. “Oh, Delano—Westford’s burned to the ground. Destroyed.”

“Did you see the brewery, sir? It’s not actually in Westford, but south of it,” Delano said.

Efran thought about this. “No, I don’t think any of our party saw it. Yes, tell the gatesmen that I want at least six men to go with you, then come tell me what you found.”

“Thank you, sir,” Delano said, going out to speak with the guards.

Shortly thereafter, Efran came out to the courtyard to nod at the six riders in Abbey uniforms going out the gates with Delano and his grown son. While Efran didn’t entertain much hope that they’d find anything standing, he did wish it wouldn’t be a total loss. Delano grew his own barley for his brews; although his plant here in the Lands was up and running, it would cripple his production to lose his fields.

As the party departed the wall gates, Efran looked past the old stone bridge to see that three of the Goulven hunters remained camped in the meadow. The other two were probably scouting.

Hearing, “Papapa,” behind him, Efran turned as Minka brought over a beefy 11-month-old.

“He’s getting so heavy,” she groaned, putting him on his father’s arm.

“For which I am so grateful,” he said, leaning down to kiss her. “I remember how small he was at birth.”

“That was scary,” she agreed. Speaking of which—“What of Adele this morning?” she asked.

“I haven’t talked to Loriot yet. I won’t say I’m afraid to, but—I am afraid. At least DeWitt and Estes seem better able to concentrate today,” he said.

“Can we make the Goulven leave? I am praying for it to leave,” she said.

“It won’t, as long as Adele wants it,” he pointed out.

“Unless someone stronger makes it leave,” she mused. He shrugged, nodding. She pulled down his shirt to look at his stitches. “How does it look?” he asked, smiling.

“Not infected,” she smiled back up at him.

“Oh, have you seen the dairy cows?” he asked.

“Dairy cows?” she said, grinning in surprise.

“Uh huh,” he nodded.

“No! Where are they?” she cried.

“Up here. Come on,” he said.

So he took her and Joshua to the door on the west side of the fortress. Exiting, they saw Aldwin just bringing the cows out to graze after having been milked. “Oh, they’re so sweet!” she cried. Aldwin and two brown cows with great big eyes looked over.

As Minka went over to pet them and get acquainted, Efran and Aldwin talked about what the cows would need for steady milk production. “They’re healthy, which is good; don’t know how long they went without milking, but they seemed to have recovered fine. Ginger here had to be milked all the night before last to get rid of her infection, but she’s perked up considerable now,” Aldwin said.

“Ginger! What a sweet name,” Minka cooed.

“T’other’s Nutmeg,” Aldwin said, and Minka loved on them both.

Following, they went over to the training pens to watch Tess and Ella work with the horses. Efran looked on, muttering, “Tess takes too many risks.” She was still wearing splints and bandages on her arm.

As Efran with Joshua and Minka were returning to the front courtyard, he looked down to see Delano and his son riding up Main with the soldiers. It appeared that father and son were about to turn into their brewery when several of the men waved insistently at them. Efran’s brows drew down in mild curiosity as all began loping up the switchback.

Gesturing for the gates to be opened, Efran squinted at the men who poured through. He demanded, “Why are these men smiling? They never smile!”

Delano said, “Well, Lord Efran, the fact of the matter is, the lager plant is fine. My workers’ houses are fine; the fields are fine. I guess the plague and the looters just overlooked them.” His son and bodyguard were grinning.

“How?” Efran demanded. “How could that be?”

Delano hesitated. “Do you want to know the truth, Lord Efran?” he asked, dismounting.

“Yes!” he cried.

“Well, sir, my wife is a praying woman. So, when we heard about all this trouble in Westford with the plague, and the fires, my wife just got down on her knees as she does,” Delano admitted.

Efran’s eyes went glassy. “I want to meet her. Give me your horse,” he ordered one of the men.

“Efran, you don’t have the sling for Joshua,” Minka objected.

At the same time, Delano said, “If you don’t mind, Wystan here’ll go bring her up—she’s been wanting to see the fortress.”

“Uh—yes—of course,” Efran stuttered.

So while Wystan turned to lope back down the switchback, Efran looked at Shane, who had led the bodyguard. “Other than prayer, did you see any reason the brewery, homes and fields went unnoticed?”

Shane uttered a laugh. “Not really, except that they’re not in central or north central Westford. They’re just sitting off by themselves behind a row of yew.”

“But surely there’s a road leading to the brewery,” Efran argued.

“Yes, Captain, with a big sign and stalls and equipment buildings, which I guess didn’t interest the Goulven,” Shane shrugged. The other men were shaking their heads.

Delano added, “The one problem we found—and it’s a big one—is that our partner’s hops field in Westford was torched. We’ll replant as soon as possible, but we need hops right now.”

“Hops,” Efran repeated, looking down the switchback as a woman exited the Delano’s brewery to begin riding doubled up with Wystan on his horse. She looked very normal—in fact, she looked much like the normal-looking woman who had walked into the foyer to start biting people.

As she and her son entered the courtyard and dismounted, Delano said, “Lord Efran, please meet my wife Madgwick. Dear, this here’s the lord and the Lady Minka. And that’s their son Joshua”—who was asleep on Efran’s shoulder.

“How do ye do?” she said brightly, smiling. Minka loved her at once.

“I’m delighted to meet you, Madgwick,” Efran said, extending a hand to her. “Please come in.”

“Oh, my, thank you,” Madgwick said. Her crinkling eyes were lost in her pink cheeks as she smiled. “Hello, dear,” she said, patting Minka’s hand.

“I feel like I’ve been blessed,” Minka spilled out.

Madgwick paused. “If you want,” she said amiably, almost like an invitation for Minka to help herself.

They all went into the foyer, including the soldiers. Madgwick looked at the white stone walls, marble floor, and brown tree roots cascading down the sides of the domed ceiling. “Isn’t that lovely. We can see the tree on the rooftop from the Lands, and some people think it’s not real, but you can tell it’s alive—”

She broke off, looking around in mild concern before looking up again. “Oh, dear! There’s a nasty thing up there! YOU GET OUT RIGHT NOW!” she shouted. The men’s eyes grew wide, but Delano nodded with a vague look of *here we go again*.

Efran opened his mouth, but then the bells began pealing loudly and joyfully. “Efran!” gasped Minka.

“It’s gone!” he said, gazing at Madgwick. “How did you do that?”

She smiled sweetly at him, and Delano said, “She’s a praying woman, Lord Efran.”

Efran turned to her seriously. “Pray for us.”

“Of course, dear,” she said, patting his arm. “The bells are a nice touch,” she added.

Efran was still studying her when Loriot ran in from the front doors. “Captain, it’s gone.”

“Yes, we know,” Efran half laughed. “You might want to go up and check on her.” Loriot trotted through the foyer to the stairway.

Meanwhile, Efran held out his free arm to Madgwick to escort her on a brief tour of the first floor of the fortress and the back grounds. She looked at the keep, the library, the kitchen, the dining hall, the nursery, the gardens, the conservatory, the orchard, the archers, the sparring groups, the horses, and the great faerie tree on the west side of the fortress, in which the faeries blew her kisses and applauded, which she thought amusing.

Efran brought her back around front to look down the switchback over the Lands. She murmured, “This is a place of blessing. May it ever be so.”

“Thank you,” Efran said in deep gratitude.

Late that afternoon, Efran received a letter from Crescent Hollow. Once the messengers had been cleared, Efran asked them if their city was having problems with people transmitting the eggs of a parasite by biting each other.

They looked at him incredulously. One said, “People who—bite? With large . . . fangs? That deposit eggs under the skin?” he asked in horror. The other appeared to be weighing Efran’s mental state.

“That answers my question; thank you.” Turning to the nearest sentry, Efran began, “Routh—How’s your arm?” he interrupted himself to ask.

“Healing very well, thank you, Captain.” He pulled up his uniform sleeve to display his scabs.

“Good. Yes, please take the messengers to Croft’s; get them dinner and put them up for the night,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain,” Routh said, saluting.

“Thank you, Lord Efran,” the lead messenger said, bowing. On the way down to Croft’s, the two privately decided that the Captain must be slightly unbalanced due to his legendary battles, but it was nice that he remained hospitable.

Seeing them out and down the switchback, Efran noted that the Goulven hunters were gone.

He took the letter up to share it with DeWitt and Estes, both of whom were working unimpaired, as usual. The sight never failed to reassure Efran, especially today.

Holding the letter aloft, he announced, “From Crescent Hollow, which has not yet been invaded by the Goulven.” Having gotten their attention, he broke the seal to read: “‘To Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands, From Lord Goadby’—which he is not any longer. Nonetheless, he says, ‘Efran, I am relocating my enterprises and wish to entertain a bid from you on purchasing my building, equipment and stock in Crescent Hollow. Your faithful servant, Goadby.’”

He looked up at the other two, who studied him and each other. DeWitt said, “I don’t know what we could possibly gain from purchasing his operation in Crescent Hollow. It’s too far away for us to manage effectively, and even if we did, we’d be competing with our own ale maker.”

Efran nodded in agreement, then Estes said, “But we might be able to purchase some of his equipment for Delano’s use—”

“Hops,” Efran said instantly. “Delano said his source of hops in Westford went up in smoke.”

“Ah,” Estes said. “We’ll address that. We’re also running very low on lumber—our mill is set up only for grains. The men have cut a few trees from the west bank of the Passage for now, but it’s nowhere near enough. Let’s see. . . .” He pulled out a duty roster. “Who do we have that has any experience with brewing?”

After discussing this, they decided to have three men take a return message to Goadby tomorrow morning, accompanied by the Crescent Hollow messengers. They would carry however much money DeWitt allotted, without committing themselves to anything.

Then Efran went down the corridor to Wallace’s quarters. He was not there, but Leese was, so Efran beseeched her with much crinkling of the eyes to remove his itching stitches. Which she did.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 17

The following morning, December 1st, Efran sent Commander Lyte’s Aide Gabriel, Captain Barr’s scribe Numan, and the all-around competent Stites to accompany Goadby’s messengers back to Crescent Hollow. Efran gave these three broad authority to make decisions on his behalf in the obligation of Abbey monies, men or time, and emphasized their need of hops and lumber. He also laid a pouch containing 75 royals on Stites, in case they found something worth purchasing at once.

That done, Efran asked DeWitt and Estes, “Have we heard anything from Venegas?” That was a small Polonti city about three hours to the east.

Estes’ eyes widened in alarm; DeWitt said, “No.”

“We had better send someone,” Efran muttered, and they silently agreed.

Thinking hard, Efran took a pouch of royals and rode down to the barracks. Finding Captain Melchior, Efran told him, “I want you to take whatever men you feel necessary to Venegas. We’ve heard nothing from them; we need to know if they’ve been invaded by the Goulven. I wish you not to attempt to fight them, but defend yourselves as necessary.

“Also—” Efran gave him the pouch, which contained 40 royals. “They have a mill; we don’t know if it’s operative, but we need lumber badly. Also, hops. Barnby has a brewery there; see if he’ll sell us any hops. That is, if they’re not overrun by Goulven.”

“Yes, Captain.” Melchior took the pouch, saluting, and Efran left him to it.

A half hour later, a sentry reported to Efran that Captain Melchior had left for Venegas with three men. When Efran relayed this information to his administrators, Estes said, “Three? Only three?”

“He’s a confident man,” Efran observed. DeWitt raised his brows. He had noticed that Crowe’s men were a confident lot, with reason.

With Joshua under the work table and Minka sitting at it, Efran summoned Lorient. When he arrived at the workroom, saluting, Efran gestured, “Sit and tell us how Adele is this morning, Lorient.”

“Thank you, Captain.” Nodding at the others, Lorient pulled out a chair to sit. “She won’t talk to me, and, seems to be very unhappy about losing the second sight, again. It must have been very powerful.”

Efran said, “Yes, I experienced that.”

“As did I,” Lorient confirmed. “And had you not stopped it when you did, Captain, I believe she would be in control of the Fortress right now.”

The others thought about this, then Efran asked, “What do you recommend we do with her?”

Lorient hesitated, then replied, “If she were anyone else but the lady’s sister, I would kill her. Her constant grasping for power draws predators. We may not be through with the Goulven—she will have it back, if given the chance.”

“As we have seen over and over again,” Efran murmured, looking up to the ceiling.

Minka, pale, said, “Get Commander Wendt to talk to her. Before you do anything, let him talk to her.”

Efran studied her, then conceded, “It’s about time. Is she in the third-floor room?” he asked Lorient.

“Yes, Captain.” Lorient withdrew the key from his pocket to hand it to him.

“Very well,” Efran said, standing. Lorient stood, and Efran told him, “You may attend your duties.”

“Captain.” Lorient saluted him and the administrators, then turned to Minka to bow. “I am sorry.”

“No,” she said quickly. “You will not apologize for her. I’m done with that myself.”

“Yes, Lady,” he said almost wryly, then left.

In the stillness following Lorient’s departure, Efran said, “I’m going to get the Commander. I will supervise his conversation with her. Wait here, please,” he told Minka, and she nodded.

“Good luck, Efran,” DeWitt said grimly, Estes concurring.

“Thank you.” Efran turned out to go downstairs to the foyer, then out to the courtyard where he told a gate sentry, Loseby, “Please have Commander Wendt brought up.”

“Captain.” Loseby had another man, Serrano, ride down with the order to the barracks below.

Shortly, Efran watched Serrano ride back up alone. Dismounting, he saluted Efran to tell him, “Captain, the Commander is on his way. He said unless it’s urgent, he wants to walk.” Efran nodded, having seen that Wendt preferred to walk rather than ride, and it was certainly helping him regain his strength and mobility. Efran then watched him begin to ascend the switchback with one of his handlers. He was almost trotting.

When Wendt came into the courtyard, Efran stepped up. “Thank you for coming so quickly, Commander.” To his handler, Efran said, “I’ll take him from here. Thank you.”

“Captain,” Willis said, then stood back to wait at the gates.

“This must be serious,” Wendt said when Efran turned back to him.

“Yes, actually, though nothing new. Please follow me, Commander.” Efran took him into the foyer, and from there into the small dining room. Here, he shut the door so that he could give the Commander a complete rundown of their situation with Adele, and Minka’s request that he talk to her.

“Frankly, Commander, we’re at our wit’s end. This last crisis has been the worst, and Lorient recommends ending it. If we can’t reach her somehow, I’m afraid that’s what it may come to,” Efran said.

“I see. Well, take me up to her,” Wendt said.

“Thank you, Commander.” Efran opened the door to ask for two men, Teschner and Pleyel, to accompany them up to the third floor.

With these men, Efran led Wendt up two flights of stairs to enter the anteroom and pause before Adele’s door. He knocked and said, “Adele, I’ve brought someone to visit with you.” He listened; hearing what might have been permission to enter, he unlocked the door.

Bringing the sentries inside to stand at the door, Efran and Wendt entered the receiving room. Adele, sitting by the north-facing window, turned slightly toward them. Efran said, “You know Commander Wendt. Minka and I felt that he might be a profitable sounding board for you.” With that, he pulled up a second chair to face her and guided Wendt to it. As the Commander sat, Efran withdrew to sit on the edge of the table and silently watch.

“Hello, Adele,” Wendt said. “I just heard about your experience with the Goulven. Please tell me about the second sight they gave you.”

She turned her head minutely. She had already determined not to speak to him at all, but this request was irresistible. “It was unlike anything I’ve ever experienced, even when I could see. I could not see people completely, but, outlines, auras, in vibrant shapes and occasionally colors. I saw emotions; I heard thoughts; I saw rhythms and patterns that I still don’t understand. But there is a whole universe of things that we can’t conceive. I was just beginning to tap into it when Efran made it stop.”

“I see,” Wendt said. “Yes, I see outlines of a few people that way; I also can discern feelings and emotions far better than I could when I had my sight. But I have been protected from any further exposure to what would destroy me.”

She turned away abruptly. “Oh, now you are simply lying.”

“No,” Wendt said. “There’s a reason we’re not equipped to see beyond the tiny strip of visible light in the whole spectrum around us. We’re not strong enough to contend with the unknown. And those who crack open that door to look anyway go insane or die.” She scoffed again, and he insisted, “You would have died, Adele, and taken a hill full of people with you.”

“I don’t care. The experience would have been worth it,” she said coldly.

“And that’s our difficulty,” he said, leaning back. “It’s one thing to discard your own precious life; it’s another to decide that someone else’s means nothing.”

She shrugged disdainfully. From his seat on the edge of the table, Efran crossed his arms over his chest and looked up to the ceiling. *God of heaven, am I to be forced to execute my wife’s sister?*

At that moment, Efran became aware of a shimmer in the air next to the table on which he sat. Looking over quickly, he saw light break out of nowhere and a form appear. It was a man-like being robed in beauty, with a sword at his side and a crown on his head. “Alberon,” Efran whispered. The King of Faerie. Teschner and Pleyel, at their post by the door, were watching dumbstruck.

“Lord Efran,” he said in that unique voice that sounded like flowing water. “I have come to offer assistance with the woman Adele.”

“What is your offer, good King Alberon?” Efran asked, respectful but wary.

“That she come with me as Queene of Faerie,” Alberon said.

At Adele’s gasp, Efran turned back to her. Both she and Wendt were looking at Alberon. Obviously, they could see and hear him. “Queene? You would make me your queene?” she asked breathlessly.

“Yes, one of them,” Alberon said to her.

“Would I see?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Everything?” she demanded.

“Everything in our realm and the visible in this realm. Not that of the Goulven; we do not traffic with them,” Alberon said.

“What would I look like? Would I have a faerie body?” she asked.

“Your present body would be transformed. Here is what your sister looked like when she was briefly one of us.” And Alberon presented an image of Minka in her glittering faerie robe, her hair golden white and curled to her waist. Efran tensed at the picture; the only thing beautiful about it to him was her face, which was hers.

“Yes!” Adele said exultantly.

Efran asked guardedly, “What would she do there?”

“She would be our Standing Goddess,” Alberon said.

“Yes!” she cried.

This alarmed Efran. “What could she do to us?”

“Queene Adele would have no power in your realm. You could see her any time you wished, and she may look at you, but do nothing,” Alberon said.

Wendt observed, “There’s a lot he’s not saying, Adele.”

“I don’t care! I’ll be able to see in your realm *and* this one?” she cried.

“Yes. Wherever your eyes turned to look, you would see,” Alberon said.

Apprehensively, Efran said, “You might want to think about this, Adele. And ask more questions.”

“I’ll do it. Transform me now,” she demanded.

“Consider Lord Efran’s words, for your choice is irrevocable,” Alberon said.

“Adele—” Efran began in a warning.

“Shut up!” she cried, standing. “Yes, Alberon whoever you are! Make me Queene.”

“As you say.” Alberon lifted a finger, and half the room became a faerie room, alive and moving. There was the image of Adele in faerie dress, standing on a dais. She was in an extravagant gown, glittering with a thousand diamonds, chased with gold along all edges, with intricate designs of gold and silver on red silk. There was a crown of splendid gold on her head, and a necklace of diamonds that cascaded down her front.

In the moving picture, lesser faeries came up bowing to her, saying, “Hail, Queene Adele.”

She nodded gracefully to them with beautiful blue eyes restored to perfection. “Thank you. Now I wish to come down.”

“Hail, Queene Adele! You may look wherever you wish,” they said to her, and she raised her face, radiating unworldly beauty.

Efran was shaking by now. “Adele, don’t.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 18

“Are you insane?” Adele shouted at Efran. “Give me that!” she demanded of Alberon.

Alberon said, “All you need do is walk into the picture. But once you walk in, you will not walk out. You will be there for eternity.”

Efran lurched up. “Adele, we’ve had our differences, but I can’t let you do this.” He stood to block her way. Having been thrown into the faerie realm when he demanded Minka’s return, he knew it was full of deception.

“Idiot!” she cried. She knocked over her chair running toward the picture. Efran caught her arm, but she wrenched free to throw herself at the vision.

As Adele passed the barrier, she was transformed into the figure on the dais. She looked down at the fabulous dress with a drape of sheer red silk. She raised her hands to look at her spotless skin and elegant fingers with nails painted silver. She touched the glorious crown on her head, then spread the full, shimmering skirts chased with hundreds, thousands of threads of silver and gold. Her dais was in a small hall that looked to be carved of rock.

“Hail, Queene Adele,” the faeries said, bowing before her. She looked down at them, noting their whimsical outfits and wings. She looked up to see that they entered the small hall through one door and exited through another. But she didn’t see anything else in the hall.

“What is there to see?” she asked in confusion.

“Hail, Queene Adele. You may look wherever you wish,” the faeries said, pointing to the wall in front of her. There, she saw images of the fortress, the orchard, and the gardens.

“Where’s Sybil? I want her to see me,” Adele said. Instantly, the wall in front of her opened to show Minka sitting at the workroom table. Startled, she looked up at Adele and her face drained. “Adele! What has happened to you?” she cried.

“Dear Sybil,” Adele smirked. “I am more beautiful than you could ever hope to be.”

“Adele!” Minka cried in horror. “Adele!” She fell on the table, weeping, and Adele watched Estes run over to comfort her.

“Oh, that was hilarious,” Adele said. Then she looked at Efran standing outside the barrier, watching with tears in his eyes. “Don’t you wish you could have me now?” she asked, brows arched.

“I’m sorry,” he said sincerely.

“I’m sure you are.” She turned to the front again, where more faeries rushed in the door on the left to bow to her.

“Hail, Queene Adele,” they said.

“Thank you. Now I wish to come down,” she said, trying to step off the dais. But the dress was so heavy, she couldn’t move.

“Hail, Queene Adele! You may look wherever you wish, but you may not come down. You are our Standing Goddess,” they said. Then those faeries ran out the door on the right.

New faeries came running in the door on the left. “Hail, Queene Adele!” they said.

“Very good,” she said, slightly peeved. “But I can’t stand here forever. I’ll need to sleep and eat. Actually, I think I’m hungry now. Where’s your dining hall?” she asked, shaking out the glorious skirts.

“Hail, Queene Adele. You are immortal. You need never sleep nor eat. You may look wherever you wish, but you may not step down. You are our Standing Goddess,” the faeries said before rushing out the door to the right.

“All right, stop that,” Adele said testily, glancing at the doorway where Efran was watching from the other side. “As the Queene, I’m demanding you get me down from here.”

“Hail, Queene Adele! You may look wherever you wish, but you may not get down. You are our Standing Goddess,” the faeries said. Then they rushed out the door to the right while new faeries rushed in the door on the left.

“What? I can’t get down?” she said dubiously. Then she looked over as the doorway began closing. Seeing Efran turn away, she said, “All right, stop. I want down. Efran! Help—” The doorway closed.

The picture vanished, as did Alberon. Only Efran, Wendt, and the two soldiers were left in the third-floor room. Shortly, the door flew open for Minka to rush in. “Efran! Is she really—did she really—?”

He nodded. “She’s gone. And it was entirely her choice.” Minka flew to him and he gathered her up.

After a moment, she pulled away. She looked at Wendt to ask shakily, “Commander, have you had your tea?”

“No, Minka,” he said, standing. “And I think I need a good strong cup right now.”

“Me, too,” she said, taking his arm.

“I’ll have a cup,” Efran said. “But spike mine with ale.” Teschner opened the door with a salute, then he and Pleyel followed the Captain, the Commander, and the Lady Minka down to the kitchen on the first floor.

As it turned out, Wendt, Efran and Minka all had tea spiked with ale. “Don’t get used to it that way,” Minka said darkly to the Commander.

“No, that wouldn’t be healthy,” Wendt agreed, although there was much he didn’t say.

As they were coming out of the kitchen, Lorient met them. He asked Efran, “Captain, where is Adele?”

“You will see. Ask to see her,” Efran said.

“Did I not just ask, Captain?” Lorient asked in confusion.

Efran turned his face up to say, “King Alberon, Lorient would like to see Adele.”

A window opened in the air before them, and they all looked in at Adele on her dais. She saw them immediately. “Oh, Lorient! Thank goodness, get me out of here!”

They watched faeries rush up to bow before her. “Hail, Queene Adele.”

“Shut up!” she snapped as they ran off. “Lorient, darling, tell that awful Alberon that I simply didn’t understand the conditions of the deal; therefore, under the Law, I’m not bound to it.”

Lorient looked completely mystified. “Where are you?”

“In the faerie realm,” she said crisply. When faeries ran in to pay homage to her, she shouted at them to go away.

“How did you get there?” Lorient asked.

“The king of the faeries offered to give me back my sight as his queene. But he failed to explain that I’d be standing here forever,” she vented.

“Hail, Queene Adele!” the new faeries said, bowing, then skipped away as she screamed at them.

“You chose to go there?” Lorient asked.

“Well, wouldn’t you, if they offered you this dress?” she said, raising it to show him the elaborate gold and silver embroidery.

“But no human can live in the faerie realm. You have to be made faerie,” he said.

“Details, details,” she shrugged.

“An important detail. Once you are made faerie, you may never return to the human realm. It is like—a log that is burned or an egg that is broken. One becomes heat and smoke; the other becomes dinner. But they do not return to what they were,” Lorient said.

For the first time, she looked pensive, paying no attention to the faeries who passed before her. “Hail, Queene Adele!”

Then she said, “But . . . I didn’t know this.”

“If you don’t know how to swim, and you jump in the river, you will drown for what you do not know. So you do not jump into the river unless you know the risk,” Lorient said. The other three watched compassionately, knowing that he had tried to explain things to her before. Now, finally, she was listening.

She exhaled, slapping her arms to her sides in frustration. “All right, I was wrong. I’ll give them back the dress and be done with it.”

“Hail, Queene Adele!” She began pulling at the sleeves, but they were too tight. There were no buttons. She pulled at the scooped neckline, which did not even pucker. She yanked on the necklace that did not break, nor would the crown come off her head. “Hail, Queene Adele!”

“Get me out of this dress!” she shouted.

“Hail, Queene Adele! The dress is part of you, and shall never part from you,” they said, skipping away through the door on the right.

Adele finally stopped struggling to look at Loriot with beautiful blue eyes full of fear. Minka was crying as though she were the one stuck on the dais forever. Unable to watch any more, she turned to bury herself in Efran’s side. He covered her, kissing her hair.

“Loriot, help me,” Adele breathed.

“I tried, Adele,” he said.

Minka turned to shout, “Alberon, take me instead! Release Adele and put me there!”

Alberon’s voice said, “Reine Minka, you can release your sister only if you become Queene.”

Efran looked down at her. “You promised me you wouldn’t,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes. “Forgive me, Alberon; I spoke in haste. Is there no other way to release her?”

“Only if another takes her place,” Alberon said.

“I will,” Loriot said.

They all looked at him in shock. Efran said, “Loriot is my underling and I forbid it.”

“Loriot is rejected as replacement for Queene Adele,” Alberon said.

“Hail Queene Adele,” the faeries said.

Adele parted her lips, tears coming to her eyes. Efran said, “Close the window,” whereupon she vanished.

Loriot took a deep breath, then said, “Thank you, Captain. I—don’t know why I said that.”

“That’s Adele, wreaking havoc even from the faerie realm,” Efran said. “And I forbid anyone from speaking with her again. She’d work on you again to take her place, but the only one who could do that was the Crucified.”

“Well said,” Wendt whispered. Loriot nodded, head hanging. Minka clung to Efran. Somehow, he was not surprised that she had offered herself in place of her sister, nor was he fearful that it would happen.

Then she raised up to say, “Alberon, is what Loriot said true? That once a human becomes faerie, there is no going back?”

“Yes,” Alberon’s voice said. He didn’t bother to appear.

“Then—why did you let me think that I could help her if I became Queene?” Minka asked, vexed.

“I wanted to see what you would say,” Alberon said. She stared at Efran, who raised his brows, communicating, *Faeries are tricksters*.

“And Lorient?” she demanded.

“I never told Lorient he could,” Alberon demurred.

“You said another could take her place,” Minka argued.

“And another could, but she has rejected Him,” Alberon replied.

Minka thought about that. “You are very slippery, Alberon.”

Efran nodded; Alberon said, “There is much I do not say, Reine Minka.” Wendt suppressed a chortle.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 19

Melchior and his men returned in the early evening followed by a long cartload of lumber with bags of hops piled on top. As soon as Efran received the report of his arrival, he went out to the courtyard to demand a horse, but neither Minka nor Joshua would let him ride down by himself. So he had to wait for someone in the nursery to find a clean sling while Minka’s favorite little mare Rose was saddled and brought around.

Finally, Efran, Joshua and Minka rode down to see, first, 40 or 50 bags of harvested, dried hops being delivered by Melchior’s men to a jubilant Delano in his tivoli-decorated brewery. But Efran’s crew had to ride farther to talk to Melchior, out to the east meadow where more animal pens were needed.

Seeing them approach, Melchior turned to salute. “Captain. Lady Minka. Surchatain Sewell was pleased and grateful for your purchase of the lumber they had in stock, and promises to have more from Eviron cut quickly. The new master of Bowthorpe is the brother-in-law of Monsell, who—disappeared, somehow; I am not sure what happened to him. But his brother-in-law, Guillaume, was doing well with his logging until Westford fell, so is also very happy to supply you with oak. I understand that he sends his felled trees down to the sawmill at Venegas because his own had stopped working under Monsell.”

“I see. I saw the bags of hops being dropped off with Delano,” Efran said.

“Yes, it seems that Barnby is converting his brewery to another use, so was happy to sell us the hops he has on hand. He has more in a field that should have been cut weeks ago, and will give it to us cheaply if our men harvest it. We probably need Delano to look at the hops to see if they’re still good before we go in with scythes,” said Melchior.

“Good. Did you hear anything about Goulven in Venegas?” Efran asked.

“In a way. Sewell said that about a week ago, five men entered Barnby’s and killed ten or twelve people—caused a panic, as they were afraid they were being attacked again. It seems that the men took the bodies out and burned them, then rode through the city. They went in a few places, but killed no one else before they left. I would guess them to be our Goulven hunters who stopped the plague in the early stages there, and then came to look us over,” Melchior said.

“That sounds right. Well done, Melchior. Carry on,” Efran said, then turned back with Minka and Joshua into the spreading rose clouds of sunset.

The following day, December 2nd, Minka received a letter from Justinian. “Finally!” she cried, although it had been only a week since they’d last heard from him. She was so excited that she ran it straight up to the workroom without opening it or changing out of her chickening clothes, which she had just put on.

She burst into the workroom, waving the letter like a banner. “We finally got a letter from Justinian!”

“Excellent,” DeWitt said, sitting up. “Read it to us, please.” Estes looked over from his ledger shelves, smiling.

“All right.” She broke the seal and shook out the letter. Turning it right side up, she cleared her throat and began, “To my flawless bird of paradise—” She paused to look toward Efran’s chair, then blinked to see it empty. “Where is Efran?” Bending to look under the table, she saw nothing but tree roots and DeWitt’s feet. “And Joshua?”

DeWitt laughed, “Out riding in the east meadows, of course. May we hear the letter anyway?”

“Yes,” she said firmly, repositioning the parchment to continue:

““Have only a moment to get this off. A band of five men is terrorizing Euris; they have killed Surchatain Quilicus and a number of his advisors, Councilors, women friends, and servants, and piled up the bodies in the palace courtyard to burn them. The city is in panic; we are holed up at Featherstone, refusing entry to anyone who comes to the door. Marguerite is fine—she says that we are safe as long as no one goes in or out for a while. I am relying on her wisdom and the fact that we have an abundant supply of bourbon and veal to carry us through any crisis.

““Hope you are all safe and well. And where, pray tell, is Adele? I am having nightmares of her haranguing me about someone who has trapped her on a dais, although she is clothed in splendour with a crown of gold on her head! Am I losing my mind, or is everyone else?

““Desperate to see your sane, loving face again,

““Your Own Justinian.’

“Oh, dear,” Minka murmured. “Lord God, keep them safe. Alberon! Make Adele stop bothering Justinian!”

DeWitt asked, “Who received the letter, Minka?”

“I did,” she said, looking up. “Justinian’s messengers brought it to me downstairs. They were fine; certainly not infected. I sent them to Croft’s.”

“Good,” DeWitt said, standing. He added, “I’m going down to interview them.” Estes nodded.

“That’s good. I’m going to take the letter to Efran,” Minka said, folding it to put in her pocket. She had stopped caring who saw her in her chickening clothes; she liked them and wore them wherever she liked.

“I’ll ride with you out there to find him, then interview the messengers on the way back,” DeWitt said, coming to the door.

She objected, “Oh, you needn’t go that far out of your way. Interview them; I can bring Efran back to Croft’s, and there is no danger here.”

Again, Estes looked up to nod to DeWitt, so he conceded, “I’ll ride with you as far as Croft’s, then.”

“That would be nice,” she said, and they went down to get horses.

Minka did indeed find Efran. On his horse, he was supervising the extremely risky transfer of two bulls into their own separate pens when one of the men pointed out the figure in colorfully painted clothes loping toward them. So Efran returned to the sentry with whom he had left Joshua sleeping in his sling, reclaiming him to drape the sling over his shoulder without waking him. Then he clucked the horse to a walk to intercept her.

In another realm, Adele was watching Efran on her wall. She had been watching him ever since he had awakened that morning. Actually, she had watched him periodically through the night, but that was not very interesting, as he slept soundly except for when he woke up to roll over onto Sybil, which Adele did not want to watch at all. “Ugh.”

When he woke in the morning, however, she watched him inhale deeply, his chest expanding, and she said, “Good morning, darling.” He didn’t react except for closing his eyes briefly again, then he rolled over to nuzzle Sybil. She smiled in her sleep, cuddling him. “Hail, Queene Adele!”

“Get out of the way!” she shouted, then continued to watch as Efran leaned over the washbasin to wash his face. His hair was bothering him again, so he combed it back with his hands while it was wet. “You want me again, don’t you, Efran?” she suggested.

He pressed his fingers over his lips, then bent to pick up his boots, and she could see him wondering what happened to his favorite boots with the eelish bites in the toe. “Forget the stupid boots! I am right here!” she shouted.

“Hail Queene Adele!”

“You think to ignore me? I won’t let you. I will kill you, Efran, before I let you go. Do you hear me? I will kill you,” she said intently. And she continued to watch him.

As Efran’s and Minka’s horses met nose to tail on the dirt road, she pulled out the letter to hand to him. “From Justinian, just now arrived. DeWitt is at Croft’s to interview the messengers.”

“Ah. Excellent,” he said, opening the letter.

He read it, growing uneasy, then handed the letter back to her and took up the reins. “I want to interview the messengers, as well.”

As she started off with him, he paused to look at her in hesitation, but she said, "Efran! I took the letter from them! They're fine!"

"Don't abuse your guardian," he muttered, but allowed her to accompany him to Croft's.

At that time, Lorient had gone to Ryal's shop to tell him, "I don't know whether to divorce Adele or have her declared dead."

Ryal looked at him in concern while Giardi stood by in shock. Then Ryal said, "Perhaps you had better tell me what has happened so far."

So Lorient told him about Efran's bringing Wendt to talk to her (which Lorient did not see) and Alberon's offer to make her Queene (which he did not hear) and then seeing her trapped on the dais in the faerie realm. After absorbing that for a moment, Ryal pulled out one of the ledgers and said, "I will issue a divorce for you until I get more information from Efran on this." Lorient accepted that without argument.

Efran and Minka found Justinian's messengers enjoying an early dinner and ale while talking with DeWitt. Upon the arrival of the Captain, however, they had to repeat everything they had told his Administrator. One informed Efran, "No one could believe the attack on the palace, but it seemed to be vulnerable due to the disappearance of so many of the guard. The whole city has gone into hiding because of five men!"

"They're not the ones to blame," Efran muttered. "When was this?"

"We heard the news three days ago," the messenger said.

Efran looked at DeWitt. "Which tells me we had better be prepared for a second wave of Goulven."

Efran gestured to a soldier to send men to all the wall gates and the courtyard gates to warn them to watch for Goulven victims again. As that man was leaving, another found the Captain to report that the miller was seeing bodies at the sluice gates again, so had opened them wide. Efran told him, "Post a watch there to start counting."

"Captain," he said, sprinting off.

Efran turned back to Justinian's messengers to ask, "On your ride down, did you see people on foot who wanted to shake hands or kiss you?"

The lead man shook his head, but the other raised his shoulders dubiously. "What?" Efran demanded.

He said, "We saw foot travelers, Captain, but we sure weren't going to stop to talk with anybody. No one got a chance to get close to us." Both were former soldiers who acknowledged Efran's authority.

"That's good. All right, set out in the morning, then, but be wary. If the road gets too crowded, come back," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain," they said.

So Efran, Minka, Joshua and DeWitt returned to the fortress to have their own dinner and talk. Efran listened in amusement to Minka's description of the skirmishes between the established chickens and the new ones. Several new coops had been thrown up at once to prevent serious injuries among the combatants, but a few birds were

notorious escapists who could be found at any time in the garden, orchard, or woods outside the fence. Tourjee had already promised that any chickens found in his beds would become his family's dinner.

Then Efran watched the men compete for Ella's attention, which was always entertaining. After two months at the Abbey, she had not yet selected a favorite among them, which was a relief to Efran. He was still uncomfortable with the reality of being the father of a 16-year-old; he could hardly conceive being a father-in-law and a grandfather at 29 or 30.

Then when he and Minka were in bed, she cuddled him, tired but happy. "I'm glad you weren't fooled when I said I wanted to take Adele's place on the dais. I don't even know why I said that."

"It's your sister getting into your head to make you say what she wants," he murmured. She snorted something affirmative, but he heard Adele saying, *I will kill you, Efran.*

In fact, he had been hearing her say that all day. Whatever he was doing—talking, watching, working, eating, making love to Minka—Adele was there, promising to kill him. And when he saw Justinian's complaint about her haranguing him in nightmares, he knew that Alberon's locking her away in the faerie realm had not dampened her mental power at all. Although the Goulven with its second sight was gone, some permanent effect remained—some enlargement of her capacity to cross realms spiritually, in thought. In fact, Alberon's transforming her into faerie may have amplified that.

So after Minka had gone to sleep, Efran quietly got out of bed, collected his clothes, and went to the keep. Earnshaw had requested that a lantern be kept burning here at all hours, to accommodate emergency prayers. As Efran dressed and sat to put on his boots, he noted the additional benches that had been brought in, and the old book of the Holy Canon sitting open on the lectern at front. Glad and grateful that this room was now functioning as originally intended, he stood before the crucifix in the dim yellow light.

He lifted his eyes to the window above, through which moonlight, and now lantern light, illumined the Scripture on the opposite wall: "For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be shaken. . . ." He didn't need to see the rest of it, having memorized it since it had prevented him from killing himself. That was after Minka had left 18 months ago.

He stood in the quiet keep, listening to the silence. Adele was as yet unable to penetrate this holy place with her thoughts. However, given enough time, now that she was immortal, she could conceivably broach it someday. More immediate, however, was the fact that he could not stay here; he must leave this place of safety in order to do his job. So he would have to bind himself so completely to the Spirit here that He would go with him when he had to leave.

That's what Delano's wife Madgwick had done. However long it had taken her, Efran didn't know, but the threat before him was imminent, the need urgent: *Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the Lord, and to seek the Lord of Hosts; I am going.* [Zech. 8:21]

So he stood before the crucifix to pray. Realizing that he always forgot God's answers to prayer the moment after they came, he took time now to catalogue every deliverance, every blessing, every good thing that had ever happened to him, knowing that it all was from God his Maker. Acknowledging what God had done seemed essential to getting the next answer.

Struggling to remember everything was exhausting, and more than once, Efran overwhelmingly felt the need to sleep. But time was passing. While Adele had all the time in the universe, Efran had hours, maybe minutes, to prepare for a battle won solely by thought.

At length, he looked up to see early morning light creeping into the keep. Was he ready? He didn't know. He didn't feel ready. But it was amusing to imagine walking out to the gate and saying, *Hold it; stay right there; I'm not done praying yet.*

Shortly, the keep was illumined by full daylight, and Efran heard running boots and shouting. The courtyard warning bell began clanging in response to the wall gates bell. It was time.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 20

Efran walked out to the courtyard gates where the young Polonti sentries stood staring up the northbound road. Coming alongside them, he saw a mass of bodies walking down the road toward the Lands. Even this far away, he could see that they were not all Eurussian soldiers. Some were, but most wore all different kinds of clothing. Still, they were all adults, and all walked with that same calm stride of the Goulven-possessed. *I'm here to kill you, Efran, Adele said.*

“Get me a horse,” he said.

Reins were immediately placed in his hand. Efran leapt up easily into the saddle and turned the horse to lope leisurely down the switchback. As he emerged through the quivering faerie trees onto Main, he saw Barr assembling his archers. That was a reasonable response, but with the hundreds flowing down the road toward them, some would be missed; some would get over the gates. And they would not necessarily be distracted by their own dead, as they were being compelled toward a target: himself.

Approaching the gates, Efran paused to tell Barr, “Fire only on my command.”

“Captain.” Barr saluted.

Efran rode on. The sentries had locked the gates, and were standing aside to not get caught in a Goulven stampede or a fusillade of arrows.

Efran's mind was blank as he pulled up to the center of the gates. Some of the archers behind him were urgently muttering under their breath for him to get out of the way. But Captain Barr's unflinching eye warned them that there would be eternal latrine duty for anyone who defied command. Meanwhile, the oncoming Goulven army focused immediately on the man on horseback as their quarry.

When they had reached the gates, and were beginning to push against them, Efran said, “Go to the river.” Their only reaction was to push harder. The gate lock creaked loudly under the stress. The pressure from the Goulven in the rear on those trapped at the fence forced their fangs to spring out, and their jaws gaped open. The archers positioned themselves around their Captain. There was a light breeze behind him.

“Go to the Passage!” Efran ordered.

There was a pause, then some of the Goulven turned away to the west, toward the river. Astride his horse, Efran did not repeat himself, but only stared them down with the unspoken demand to go drown themselves.

The wind kicked up behind him. At the same time, the odor of the Goulven bait that Efran had strung up a week ago suddenly got their attention, and a number of heads swiveled to their right. Efran glanced toward the mill on the river; the last he had heard, the sluice gates were wide open. He hoped they still were.

Efran looked back down at the crowd at the gates, which had stopped creaking. Some were peeling away to go to the river, but others were standing still, blinking. When one man turned to begin walking north—not toward the river, nor with the Goulven stride—a gate sentry shouted, “Stop!”

He turned back around. “Why? I just want to go home.”

The sentry, Meece, ran back to his post, demanding, “Come here and let me look at your shoulder.” Bemused, the reluctant invader came over to open his shirt to the sentry’s inspection. After checking him thoroughly, Meece waved him away. As the man started back up the road, Meece turned to report, “He hasn’t been bitten, Captain.”

The archers exhaled, letting down their bows. The wind kicked up from the Sea, somehow finding its way around the hill to blow dirt in the invaders’ eyes, driving them away from the gates. That irritation appeared to be the final straw. While a fraction of the mob went to the Passage, most of the rest began turning back north on the road. Adele was not strong enough to hold them to her purpose—yet.

“Wait a minute! You come back here and let me check your shoulders before you leave!” Meece ordered. His partner Finn was muttering to himself at the futile demand. Efran smiled.

A minority of the distracted attackers turned back to open their shirts for Meece, and he waved them off one at a time. Efran watched perhaps thirty or forty go to their end at the river, while the rest, easily three times that, disappeared up the road on their way home. Apparently, most of the invaders were just weak-minded souls who were easily led.

Watching them walk away, Efran said, “Adele, you will not bother us again.”

Oh, won't I? she replied.

“No. You will leave us alone,” Efran told her.

Oh, but I've only just begun. I have immortal eyes now, and because I can see you, I can reach you. And I will kill you, she said.

Efran closed his eyes, as near to despair in dealing with her as he had ever been. Alberon had not only *not* helped with her, but in transforming her into faerie, just made her all the more powerful. On top of that, giving her a window to see and harass anyone she wanted gave her a wider field of conquest. For the first time, Efran suspected Alberon of using her as a pawn in his own power games.

God of heaven, what can I do against her? I'm empty. Just seeing us, she can destroy us one by one, Efran thought. To Adele, he sighed, “What will it take, then, to make you stop attacking us?” He waited a minute for her to think of something. Tensely, he listened, then said, “Adele? Just give me a clue, an idea of what will satisfy you besides killing me.”

When he got no response, he said, “Alberon, show me Adele.”

A window opened in the air in front of him, and he watched Adele look to the left and right, shouting, "Open the windows! Bring lanterns in here!"

"Adele," Efran said. She looked toward his voice, and he saw that her eyes were completely white again. "Goodbye," Efran said.

The window vanished, and he looked up to heaven to breathe, "Thank You. Again and again, thank You. You are Victoris."

Efran turned his horse to see the archers staring between him and the vanishing attackers. "You're dismissed," he said. Barr saluted, then motioned his soldiers back to the barracks.

At that time, another soldier ran up to him. "Captain, Ryal asks you to stop in his shop whenever you're able."

"I'm coming," Efran said, tired but on his knees mentally in gratitude. He paused outside of Ryal's shop as Minka rode out of the courtyard gates on her little mare.

He waited for her to ride off the switchback, swished along by the faerie trees, and draw up to him at Ryal's step. "What happened? You didn't sleep with me! Did you sleep in the keep? What was going on at the gates?"

He laughed, then yawned. "Let's go take care of Ryal, first."

"All right," she said dubiously. One of the archers ran up to ask Efran a question, so he paused on the sidewalk outside Ryal's shop to talk to him. Waiting, Minka saw Captain Neale emerge from the shop with a beautiful young Polonti woman on his arm. The girl glanced apprehensively at Minka, who smiled at her, as this was someone Neale cared about. So the girl smiled in return, lowering her eyes.

Without disturbing Captain Efran's conversation, Neale took the girl across the street to Firmin's. Minka watched thoughtfully.

Concluding his discussion with the Captain, the archer saluted and turned away. Efran and Minka then went into the notary's shop with the tinkling of the bell on the door, and he thought how comforting it was to hear that. This piece of Westford remained.

He suddenly wondered: given the years that Ryal and Efran both had been in Westford, why didn't Efran know him before coming to the Abbey? Then he apprehended, *Because Ryal followed the Law, which the palace administrators didn't always want to do.*

When Ryal and Giardi both came out from the back, Efran smiled. "Hello, Giardini."

"Hello, Efran. Minka," she said warmly. He was disappointed that Giardini didn't laugh.

"Hello, Minka," Ryal greeted her, then said, "Efran, Lorient has told us the most amazing story leading to the fact that he doesn't know whether he should divorce Adele or declare her dead."

Efran nodded. "For all intents and purposes, she's dead, Ryal."

"Explain this," he said grimly.

So Efran took him through the events of yesterday, culminating in the halfhearted Goulven attack of this

morning, and his last conversation with her. “She said that as long as she could see us, she could attack us. So I prayed to God in my usual flailing. And when I asked Alberon to open the window, I saw that her eyes were white again.”

“Again?” Minka gasped. “She’s blind again? Stuck on that dais forever?”

Efran turned to her. “Everything that has happened to her has been her choice. She was warned over and over. I myself almost got dragged into the faerie realm trying to prevent her entering it.”

“I would not blame you,” she said, grasping him around the waist.

“Or God,” he insisted. *Will He make requital to suit you when you reject Him? For you must choose, and not I.* [Job 34:33] “What can He do when she refuses to listen? He won’t override her own choice.”

“I know,” she whispered. “I have to learn to let go.” He bent to kiss her head in agreement.

Ryal cleared his throat. “Then I will declare her dead, and send word to Loriot that he’s free.”

“Thank you, Ryal, Giardini,” Efran said. Then he turned out with his Minka.

Back in their quarters, Efran took off his pristine new boots, mourning, “My old boots, with the eelfish bite holes. Whatever happened to them?”

“Oh,” she said, stirring. “I put them out to be cleaned.” She went to the outer room to look around, and found what she wanted in a corner. Then she brought his treasured boots to him, cleaned of eelfish guts and other substances, but the holes undisturbed.

“Thank you,” he said, placing them carefully beside the bed before falling back on it and closing his eyes.

Minka permitted no one to disturb him until he awoke about two hours later. Then, she had Routh come cut his hair.

Late that afternoon, Gabriel, Stites and Numan returned from Crescent Hollow. Numan was driving a large wagon full of crates. Since the wagon was too heavy to be pulled up the switchback, they parked it at the bottom to unload the crates into smaller carts to be transported up to the fortress.

As the crates began arriving in the courtyard, Efran, Estes and DeWitt came down to look at what Gabriel had found. A sentry opened the first crate to reveal bottles. Taking one out, DeWitt said, “Goadby’s. This is the new Goadby’s that everyone hates.”

“Really?” Efran winced.

Another crate was opened and a bottle extracted. “The new Goadby’s,” Estes confirmed. Efran looked sick.

Shortly, they had 50 crates of the new Goadby’s ale sitting in the courtyard. Then Gabriel, Stites, and Numan rode up the switchback with the large, empty wagon. Dismounting, Gabriel saluted Efran with a restrained smile. “Reporting from Crescent Hollow, Captain.”

“With fifty cases of the new Goadby’s ale,” Efran said in a hollow voice.

“Yes, Captain,” Gabriel said, Stites and Numan standing placidly behind him. “I spent all seventy-five royals on these crates.”

“Each case was—one and a half royals each?” Efran gasped. It was an outrageous price for the new ale that had bombed so spectacularly that Goadby couldn’t even give it away.

“Yes, Captain,” Gabriel said. “We got the draft horse and wagon on your surety alone, so they’ll have to be returned, with payment.”

“Wh—” Efran began.

Gabriel explained. “The Goadby’s plant has a new owner, who discovered by accident an important use for the new formula.”

“To drink, or as a rust remover?” Efran asked.

“To drink, Captain,” Gabriel confirmed. “We actually saw it in use, and heard authenticated accounts of its effectiveness.”

“What on earth could make it worth drinking at a royal and a half per case?” Efran cried.

When Gabriel told him, Efran was silent. Then he said, “Estes, I want commendations for these men.”

“Absolutely,” DeWitt concurred, and Estes nodded.

The three saluted, and Efran dismissed them to go rest from their trip. Then he told another man, “Take six of these cases to Venegas; tell Surchatain Sewell what they’re for.”

“Yes, Captain,” the man said, gesturing to another.

With another thought, Efran held up Estes and DeWitt from leaving the courtyard: “Please stay a moment. Besides the commendations for those three, I want to present two men with a Meritorious Cross”—the highest award that the Abbey could give its soldiers. Efran’s administrators stood aside to listen to him as the cases were carried into the fortress, with six set aside for Sewell.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 21

Upstairs in the third-floor suite, Lorient was packing up Adele’s things, or trying to. Despite everything, he was genuinely grieving her. The joy of seeing his prescient dream confirmed by their one night of love together was short-lived, crushing him when it left. In his mid-forties, he was probably the oldest and least attractive of the Polonti here. With no rank at all to draw a woman’s interest, he had no hope now of a wife or children. He would die alone.

He continued to sit in the suite, watching the sky darken through the north-facing window. Dinner was in progress downstairs, but he felt no desire to go eat; he felt no desire to do anything anymore. He was tired.

There was a knock on the door. "Enter," Lorient said, standing to finish packing up his dreams.

A sentry stuck in his head. "The Captain wants you in the dining hall, Lorient."

"I am coming," he said, tossing the remaining dresses on the bed.

He went downstairs and entered the dining hall to stand along the back wall. Captain Efran, at the front of the hall, briefly nodded when he saw him. Then the Captain said, "I'd like your attention again, please." The hall quieted at the request following the commendations he had just awarded to Gabriel, Stites and Numan for their astute purchases from Crescent Hollow.

The Captain said, "We've just come through one of the worst attacks that a city could experience. While there may be a few more Goulven come our way, I feel confident that we've seen the worst of it, now that we know what to do. Many of you demonstrated courage in this crisis, but I want to recognize a few whose quick thinking saved us. No one on the Lands has died because of the Goulven, but had it not been for these two men in particular, I would have been the first."

Efran turned aside to receive an insigne from Cutch, Commander Lyte's Second in Command. "Lwoff, present yourself."

Gaping in surprise, Lwoff got up from his table in the far back to amble awkwardly to the front. "Lwoff, you were the first to identify the parasite and tell us what to expect. Without your knowledge, I and the others who were bitten would have been beyond all hope by the time we discovered what we were dealing with, and it is certain that we would have infected most everyone else in the fortress. In recognition of your actions, I present you with the Meritorious Cross, with my gratitude." Applause filled the hall, and Efran pinned the insigne to Lwoff's untidy jacket as he grinned in pride and disbelief.

Lwoff stood back, fingering his award, and the Captain said, "Lorient, present yourself."

Slightly frowning, Lorient walked to the front of the hall. Efran took another insigne from Cutch, then looked up at the taller man and said, "Lorient, you were first on the scene after I had been bitten. Not only did you save my wife, you kept the Goulven confined to the first floor, brought in the weapon necessary to kill it, and maneuvered it in position to be killed."

Lorient was shaking his head with, "All that was accidental, Captain." Which, to his credit, was mostly true.

Efran stared him down, continuing, "Due to your courage and resourcefulness in confronting a dangerous unknown, everyone in the fortress was saved. Therefore, I present you with the Meritorious Cross, with my gratitude." The Polonti in the hall leapt to their feet to applaud Lorient as Efran pinned the insigne to his jacket. It was not only vindication of the Polonti, but exoneration of Crowe's men. "Go get a plate," Efran ordered.

"Captain," Lorient saluted. He turned back to the hall, barely raising a hand in acknowledgment of the applause. Dobell trotted over to hand him a full plate and an ale. "Thank you," Lorient said uneasily.

He had made it almost all the way to the back of the hall when Ella stood at her bench. "Come sit with me, Lorient," she said. He stopped in surprise, but Minka made everyone move down to make room for him.

Sitting, Lorient opened his mouth to say something, but Ella said, "Congratulations on your award. It was well earned. Please tell us exactly what happened."

“Thank you, Lady Ella,” he began awkwardly.

“Just Ella. Go on,” she said.

With Ella on his left and Minka on his right, Lorient began hesitantly recounting the morning eight days ago that the woman walked into the foyer to bite the sentry and the Captain. Efran returned to the table to sit at Minka’s right and take Joshua on his knee, necessitating another scoot-down.

As Lorient talked and Ella listened, no one saw anything in her manner but courtesy. Minka, however, gripped Efran’s hand under the table. He gripped it back, although that meant he could no longer eat nor drink.

Following dinner, as Ella rose and the men jumped up to bow to her, she said, “Lorient, Tess and I are having trouble with Cloud. Will you come out to the stables to give me some advice?”

Lorient looked surprised. “Yes, if—the Captain permits.”

“Now? No,” Efran said crossly. “It’s dark. Training is over for the day.”

“But learning can take place any time, Father,” Ella said primly. Minka was grinning.

Efran gaped at his daughter. “Do I need to send a chaperon with you?”

“Of course not. This is a Meritorious Cross recipient,” Ella smiled, taking Lorient’s arm to walk out.

That night, Efran asked Minka for an explanation, which she gave: “Ella has picked a favorite.”

“But he’s—old! He’s at least fifteen years older than I am! He’s better suited to be her father than I am!” Efran protested.

Minka shrugged happily. “You can’t explain love, Efran.” He groaned, shaking his head.

And that night, Lorient lay in bed for hours, unable to sleep for reliving how she had pulled his head down in the darkness to kiss him and whisper in his ear.

Three days later, in the afternoon of December 6th, a finely dressed party of three arrived at the wall gates in an elegant carriage. The two men and one woman were deeply affronted at having to display their bare shoulders before the wall gate sentries would allow their carriage to pass. Even the driver and footman had to partially disrobe! But the party complied, knowing that the payoff would be very great indeed.

Shortly, a sentry came to the door of the second-floor workroom to salute and say, “Captain, a Councilor Wedderburn, Lord Whelpton, and Lady Challinor request an interview with you.”

Efran looked up indifferently, then he squinted, turning to Estes. “Challinor. Is that—?” Estes responded by putting his head down on the table. DeWitt looked at him in astonishment.

Efran told the sentry, “Put them in the small dining room with refreshments. I will be down shortly.”

“Captain.” The man saluted and turned away.

Efran rose from the table. "Obviously, Estes has to come. But I want you there, too, DeWitt. And Minka." Looking to another sentry, he instructed, "Find Minka; send her to the small dining room."

"Captain." He also saluted and ran off.

"What's this about, Efran?" DeWitt asked. Estes rose from the table, green-faced and sighing.

"Why, they want half the Abbey Treasury, of course," Efran said. DeWitt looked alarmed; Estes sick, and Efran amused as he scooped up Joshua from among the faerie tree roots.

The three arrived at the foyer, Efran carrying Joshua. He told the door sentry, Skalbeck, "Please tell Ryal we need him up here to take sworn affidavits."

"Yes, Captain," Skalbeck said, stepping out to give the order.

At that time, Minka came into the foyer in her chickening clothes. "Someone is here? Let me change," she said.

Efran looked over. "No, you're fine. After all, I'm wearing my boots with the eelfish bite holes," he said, offering his foot as evidence. Not only that, he was still carrying Joshua.

Minka peered at him. "You're also wearing your devious face."

"No, no," Efran objected. "You're the one with the devious face. This is my normal expression."

Minka looked around, then gasped, "Estes! What's wrong with you?"

"I was corrupted by your husband, Minka," he said sorrowfully.

"What?" she cried.

"No, now, Estes, you're not the one on trial here," Efran said. His attempt at consolation was ineffective due to excessive cheerfulness.

"On trial?" Minka asked.

DeWitt said, "Efran thinks it's another case of Provision for a Wronged Husband."

"What?" Minka cried.

"Now, everyone, stop getting excited. Let's go in and hear the facts," Efran said with relish, bouncing Joshua.

Skalbeck, smiling, opened the door to the small dining room for them to file in. Efran looked around to see the two men standing beside the chair of the woman who was seated. Yes, she was quite beautiful, though nearing forty. She raised her face to Efran in wounded righteousness. When she caught sight of Minka's chickening clothes, her eyes glazed over.

"Lord Efran," Wedderburn said in satisfaction. Despite being dressed in elegant robes, he still looked like a grifter.

Efran said brightly, "Hello, Wedderburn. Have you been busy? Ah, Lady Challinor, you look lovely. How long has it been? Eight years or so? And you must be the lady's husband. Lord Whelpton? I'm afraid we've never been introduced."

"You're about to find out just who I am, young man," the lord said grimly. He was about fifty, looking very much like a wronged husband about to receive great wealth.

"Oh, good," Efran said. "Let me introduce my wife the Lady Minka, my Administrator DeWitt, and my Steward Estes. Please do help yourselves from the sideboard and be seated." He turned to Skalbeck to say, "Admit Ryal when he comes, please."

"Captain." Skalbeck saluted, closing the door.

"Sit," Efran ordered his three witnesses, who took chairs at the far end of the oval table from where the visitors sat. Efran also sat. "Oh, this is my son Joshua," he said, bouncing him on his leg. "Uh oh." He looked down at the baby's wraps, then lifted him away from his body with both hands. "Can you get the door, Minka?" he asked, rising again.

She stood to open the door while Efran handed Joshua off to Skalbeck. "Wraps," Efran said.

"Yes, Captain. C'm here, bugger," Skalbeck said, taking the baby in the same self-protective manner to hasten away with him.

"There, now. We'll just leave the door open until Ryal comes," Efran said. Everyone was staring at the wet spot on his pants leg, so he waved. "I'll change when we're done." Taking her seat, Minka suspiciously eyed his cavalier manner.

"So then," Efran said, sitting and folding his hands on the table. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" He looked at his visitors benignly.

Wedderburn, whose reliable instincts told him something was amiss, cleared his throat and said, "I'm afraid that Lord Whelpton is bringing suit against you in accordance with the Provision for a Wronged Husband."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 22

"Oh, I see," Efran said in mild interest. "In which case, we need sworn depositions. I'm sure that our notary will be here as soon as possible, so please do enjoy the refreshments. We're very proud of the ale produced right here in the Lands by Delano's."

Efran's untroubled manner caused both the lord and the lady to eye Wedderburn, and he shifted uncomfortably. Efran rose to go to the sideboard himself. "You look like you need one, Wedderburn," he said, putting a bottle in front of him. "DeWitt? Estes? Here, hand this one to Estes, if you don't mind," Efran said, putting a bottle in Lady Challinor's hand. After the first moment of shock, she handed it to DeWitt, who passed it to Estes, who opened it to take a swig.

"Minka, there's pumpkin custard," Efran noted.

“Any cobbler?” she asked from the other end of the table.

“Yes, apple,” he said.

“Give me both,” she said, spreading her hands as though clearing a space on the table in front of her. He did, and she ate both.

At that time, Ryal appeared at the door with his portable writing kit, a sheaf of forms, and Soames. Efran said, “Lord Ryal! Thank you for coming. And Soames! Are you here to take notes?”

“Yes, Captain,” Soames said, taking his quill set and blank papers to the far end of the table next to Estes.

Efran told them both, “Wedderburn here has brought Lord Whelpton and Lady Challinor to sue me under the Provision for a Wronged Husband, so we’ll need you to take sworn statements.” Ryal looked at him in alarm, then looked at Minka, who cocked a brow at him. Soames froze, then began setting up his writing equipment with gusto.

Ryal sat tentatively in the chair Efran held out for him. “Very well,” Ryal said, then cleared his throat. “First, we must administer oaths. Lady Challinor, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” she said in a dramatic exhalation. Efran smiled hazily.

Ryal asked, “Lord Whelpton, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this hearing?”

“Yes,” the lord said, almost hissing.

Ryal asked sternly, “Lord Efran, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this hearing?” Remembering Lady Leila’s lying under oath during Efran’s first trial under the Provision for a Wronged Husband, Ryal instinctively blamed him.

Efran looked mildly offended by his tone. “Don’t I always?”

“Answer correctly, if you will,” Ryal said stonily.

“Yes, of course I do so swear,” Efran said righteously. As Ryal began to hand the sheet of sworn oaths to Soames, Efran noted, “You have to swear in Estes.”

“Estes?” Ryal looked up in surprise.

“Yes, he knows something,” Efran said, pressing his lips together in poorly disguised delight.

“Well then—Estes, do you swear on your soul to speak only the truth in this hearing?” Ryal asked him.

“Yes,” Estes sighed. Several people looked at him in concern.

Ryal looked over to see that Soames was ready to take down the interviews. “Now then,” Ryal opened reluctantly. “Lord Whelpton and Lady Challinor, where do you live?”

Whelpton replied, “Eurus. I am Acting Treasurer and Royal Liaison for the Council of Eurus. Ever since Captain

Efran here attained this fortress, the rumors of his conquests have been circulating with my wife's name attached. The damage to my position and dignity require compensation."

Ryal said, "I understand. Lord Whelpton, do you have cause other than rumors to believe that Lord Efran has wronged you with your wife?" She looked uneasily at the still-open door.

"Yes," he said, his stony jaw trembling slightly. "She confessed the matter to me only recently."

"Lady Challinor, if you will, please tell me about the instance or instances of infidelity," Ryal said.

She looked uneasily at Soames' writing everything down. "Can we do this privately?"

"I'm very sorry, but the trial records are public," Ryal replied.

"Oh, well." She gathered herself, then said, "It was September the fourth of the year eighty-one forty-six [eight years ago]. My husband was in Eurus on business, so, I invited Efran to my house that evening." She related this with eyes downcast as Efran watched her fixedly.

"Excuse me," Ryal said. "Where did you live at the time?"

"Westford," she said. "In the nobles district, of course."

"I see," Ryal said, checking to see that Soames was keeping up. "Now, where did this invitation take place?"

Challinor's mouth fell open slightly. "Ah. . . ." She wet her lips nervously. "The—officers of the army had been invited to my home for a reception to. . . ."

Ryal, frowning, turned to Efran. "Can you tell us about the setting for the invitation?"

"Yes," Efran said. "The Lady Challinor heard about my commendation for bravery at the Battle of Brier Ridge and offered to hold a reception in my honor at her home. Commander Wendt, the captains, a few other military personnel, and some very pretty ladies were invited. It was a very nice affair. Good food, friendly company," he said. She was looking down, red-faced. Soames was writing rapidly.

Ryal asked him, "Do you remember the manner in which she issued the invitation?"

"Yes," Efran smiled. "She caught me in a corner, told me how much she admired me, and expressed her desire to be intimate."

The room was momentarily frozen while Soames' quill scratched rapidly. Ryal cleared his throat. Unwilling to ask Efran for the specific wording, he asked, "Lady Challinor, does that agree with your recollection?" Eyes downcast, lips pressed together, she shrugged. Ryal said quietly, "I require a yes or a no, with an explanation of the latter."

"Pretty much," she murmured.

"Then I will take that as a yes," Ryal said. "Now, Efran, did the lady set a time for this tryst?"

She winced at the word; Efran looked off, frowning. "No, I don't believe so. She merely said to make it late enough so that everyone would be gone. I was to wake her if she was sleeping."

“Where were you to come?” Ryal asked.

“To her bedroom on the second floor,” Efran said.

“I see. And did you?” Ryal asked.

“No,” Efran said, smiling.

Challinor looked up, shocked and then furious. “That’s a lie! You came in and took off your clothes right beside my bed! And then you climbed in, and we—” She broke off, looking at his wife. But Minka was studying Estes.

He sighed, “That wasn’t Efran. That was me.”

Everyone in the room except Efran stared at him, and then three people started talking at once. Ryal overrode them: “Silence! Everyone be quiet! Efran, will you please explain this?” Obviously and perhaps unfairly, Ryal again blamed Efran for someone else’s transgression.

“Yes,” Efran said, crossing his arms over his chest and looking to the ceiling. “Yes, she invited me, and I told her I would come. If I had been a decent man, I would have found a way to decline gracefully. But I disliked her—I almost hated her—because she had a Polonti maid that she treated very badly. And she threw a party in my honor when her husband was gone, being careful to invite only certain people of the lower class—which included the army, of course. But when she saw me on the street, or when she was with her friends, she was very careful to snub me. She was the walking embodiment of *moekolohe*.” He paused, reminiscing, and the room was quiet. Challinor looked to be on the threshold of a dead faint.

Sighing, Efran continued, “But she was a beautiful woman who once before had mistaken Estes for me. So I told him, ‘You go keep my appointment.’ He said, ‘She’ll know it’s not you.’ I said, ‘No, she won’t. She’s not that observant; it will be dark, and all she’ll be looking for is a well-built Polonti in her bed. You’ll do.’ And he did.”

Ryal swallowed, then asked, “Is that accurate, Estes?”

“To the letter,” Estes said. “And the lady and I made a full night of it. I left at daybreak.”

There were a few moments of tense silence, then Ryal cleared his throat and asked Estes, “Are there any corroborating details you can give to prove that you were the one there?”

Estes looked at the wall opposite, thinking. “This was her own bedroom, not one she shared with her husband. It was entirely decorated in pink silk. I was—overwhelmed at the thought of how much all that pink silk cost. She . . . never questioned whether it was Efran or not; she called me ‘Efran’ throughout.”

Whelpton exploded, “How could you see pink silk *at night*?”

Estes looked at him wryly. “Door to the balcony wide open—in case I had to leave quickly—and a full moon that night. I was sure she’d realize I wasn’t Efran, so I mostly kept my face down on her neck or—” He broke off while Challinor wilted.

“Anyway,” he said, returning to remembrances. “Oh, I forgot! She had bruises on her neck and her upper arms—bad bruises. I asked her who had hurt her, and she said, ‘My husband. But don’t mind that, just make love to me.’ So I did,” he shrugged.

There was a full minute of silence while Soames' quill swept violently across the paper, leaving blobs of ink whenever he hastily redipped. Then Efran summed up, "So, you're suing Estes instead of me. Estes, what's your net worth? Approximately."

Estes grimaced in thought. "Maybe—a thousand royals."

"Oh, we pay you well. So, Whelpton, the Provision states that you can have the man whipped or take half his worldly wealth. I'm sorry, but I won't allow you to whip Estes. You'll have to settle for five hundred royals. The Fortress will pay that, Estes, no worries. I'm all for skipping the trial and just agreeing to pay you five hundred royals out of Fortress funds. Won't that do? I don't know what Wedderburn's cut is, but as long as it's not more than half, that still leaves you a nice sum, doesn't it?" Efran said.

There was a deep silence, then Whelpton asked, "Why are you willing to give up five hundred royals if it wasn't you?"

Efran's face changed to that of the glassy-eyed nemesis. "Because then it's all a matter of public record. Every line of this testimony will be available to public view. And I will pay for a hundred certified copies to be made and circulated in Eurus."

"You wouldn't," Challinor breathed, white-faced. Whelpton's face, in contrast, went gray.

Regarding the lord, Efran asked, "Would I do that, DeWitt?"

"Oh, yes," DeWitt said, running a hand through his hair. He glanced at Estes for his reaction. Surprisingly, he was . . . okay with that.

Challinor was not. As she sat in brokenness, Efran told her, "Take your cut and leave him. You're still very beautiful. Crescent Hollow is a friendly place for women fleeing a bad situation."

"I—I—" She began sobbing. "I'm sorry—this was such a bad idea. I can't go through with this."

Ryal asked, "Lady Challinor, for the record, do you wish to proceed with the suit?"

She sat up abruptly. "No. And I refuse to proceed," she said, trembling.

To Whelpton, Ryal said, "I cannot compel her to testify against her will. And without her testimony, you have no suit."

Efran whistled, and Tourle appeared at the open door. "Captain?" he inquired, saluting.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 23

Efran instructed Tourle, “Lord Whelpton and Wedderburn are done here. You may have them escorted off Abbey property.”

“Yes, Captain. Gentlemen, if you will come with me.” He was clear: come or be compelled.

Whelpton and Wedderburn rose slowly from their seats. The lord said, “I’m not leaving without my wife.”

“Do you wish to go with him?” Efran asked her.

“No,” she said, looking down.

“Goodbye, gentlemen,” Efran said, looking off. Tourle stepped into the room to gesture to someone outside, and two large Polonti appeared at the door. Efran sighed to his guests, “Don’t make them break furniture; I hate it when the furniture gets broken.”

Stony-faced, Whelpton and Wedderburn walked out, with the lord looking daggers at the grifter. The Polonti saw them loaded into their carriage and sent down the switchback. Efran’s men did not stop watching until the carriage crossed the old stone bridge north of the Lands and disappeared. Then they returned to report, “Captain, the visitors have departed the Lands.”

“Excellent,” Efran said, looking at the lady drooping in despair.

Ryal stood, beckoning Soames, who gathered up all the materials scattered in front of him. “We’ll be leaving, Efran. And—we will destroy our notes on the hearing, Lady Challinor,” Ryal said. She nodded, head down. Soames looked disappointed.

After they had gone, Efran told her, “We’ll send you off to Crescent Hollow in the morning with a letter to Surchatain Auber. He’s a decent man; he’ll get you settled. Oh, and—a hundred royals. Do you think that would be sufficient?” he asked Estes.

“Oh, yes, especially with Auber’s patronage,” Estes said kindly. She glanced up at him.

Efran looked at Minka. “Can you find her some lady things?”

“Yes,” she said, rising to leave the room. Given what Minka was wearing, Challinor looked after her in some apprehension, but said nothing.

Efran said, “Now let’s get someone to organize a travel party for you. Who’s available?” he asked DeWitt, who hesitated, thinking. But Efran said, “Stites. He’s reliable. Summon him,” he told Tourle, who saluted and stepped out.

Standing, Efran smiled at Challinor. “Excuse me. I have to go change. Hand her over to Stites when he comes, if you will,” he told DeWitt and Estes. Then he paused. “It’s nice to see you again, Challinor,” he said sincerely. She closed her eyes.

After Efran had left, DeWitt rose as well. “Back to work,” he said, nodding to the lady and patting Estes on the shoulder as if congratulating him.

That left Estes and Challinor alone in the room. She looked up at him, smiling slightly. “It *was* you. I recognize your voice.” He smiled slightly in acknowledgment, and she added in a whisper, “You were wonderful.”

Reddening, he murmured, “You were very nice as well.”

Half laughing, she looked off to say, “And here you are, Steward of the Abbey Lands. Oh, if I could only relive that night, I would have it go differently. I would see you in the morning light, and say, ‘You are not Efran.’ You would say, ‘No, I am his friend Estes.’ I would tell you, ‘I love you. Take me away from this horrible man.’ Then you would, and I would be your wife. There would be struggles and hardship, but we would live in love, and come to this place.” She looked at the white stone around her.

He gulped, then said, “I am married, and have a son.”

“Of course you are. Of course you do,” she said, looking away.

At that time, Minka was ascending the stairs, wondering in vexation how she was going to find clothes and essentials acceptable to a Eurasian lord’s wife before tomorrow morning. She’d just have to see what was left in her third-floor clothing stash.

She looked up at Lorient descending the stairs toward her. “Lady Minka,” he said, holding out a canvas satchel to her. “Here are all of Adele’s things. I don’t know what to do with them.”

“Oh!” she laughed. “I do. Thank you, Lorient.” Then she paused to scrutinize him.

“Lady Minka?” he asked in mild concern.

“I’m trying to visualize you as a son-in-law,” she said with a shake of her head. Then she turned down the stairs with the satchel while Lorient stood unmoving on knees that would collapse should he try to lift them.

Minka took the satchel to the small dining room where Estes sat with Challinor. They looked up at her entry. “Here are a few things that should tide you over, Lady Challinor. I wish you the very best,” Minka said sincerely, handing her the satchel.

“Thank you,” Challinor said, wilting. She didn’t know how much more these people could torture her with their kindness.

“Back to chickening,” Minka said, then assured Challinor, “I don’t dress like this all the time. And I’m sorry that there’s nothing like it in the bag.” Challinor laughed, trying not to sound as relieved as she felt.

A few minutes after Minka had left, Stites appeared at the door. “Stites reporting for duty, Steward,” he said, saluting.

Estes rose in relief. “Yes, Stites, this is Lady Challinor. Efran wants a carriage and bodyguard to take her to Crescent Hollow in the morning.”

“Yes, Steward,” Stites acknowledged.

To her, Estes said, “I’ll have your royals for you in the morning.” Then he realized, “You need a place—” To Stites, he said, “Find her a place for tonight. I’m afraid Croft’s is full, however.”

“Yes, Steward,” Stites said, eyes widening slightly in apprehension.

“Good luck,” Estes nodded to her. Then she and Stites were alone in the small dining room.

Stites stood grappling with the situation for a moment, then asked, “Where in Crescent Hollow do you wish to go, Lady Challinor?”

“I don’t know,” she laughed, tears rolling down her face. “Efran thought I should go straight to Surchatain Auber, but I can’t see doing that.”

Were Stites not made of steel, the sight of a crying woman whom he was responsible for would have paralyzed him. But he collected all his considerable resources to say, “Perhaps if you could explain to me why you are here and why you must go to Crescent Hollow, I would know better how to help you.”

She looked up at him. “You might want to sit down.” So he did, and she told him the whole sordid story of this morning’s hearing that was rooted in the events of a single day and night eight years ago.

He absorbed all that, then asked, “Why must you leave the Abbey Lands at all? Why not stay here?”

She shook her head. “I have no friends here, no place to stay. Efran or Estes may want me to leave, and I would not blame them for it.”

“If I found you a place to stay and secured permission for you to live there, would you be willing?” he asked.

She glanced aside at the impossible. “Yes, of course.”

“Then wait here, please,” he said, standing. And he left the room. Challinor opened the canvas satchel to look through it with a sigh and a shrug.

In the second-floor workroom, Efran was receiving an update from Estes on the children rescued from Westford: all but four had been provisionally adopted by approved families on the Lands. The four children remaining in the fortress had been taken under Toby’s wing, who was considered the official receiver of new arrivals. He gave them all introductions, tours, snack raids, and cheats for dealing with the tutor.

Surprisingly, Ella’s younger half-brother Almund had become Toby’s right-hand man in this occupation, adding his own unique perspective and authoritative guide to manipulating Tourjee for special garden privileges.

There were more success stories that Estes didn’t know the half of: Hadewidis, the fourteen-year-old Porterhouse Inn maid, had proven herself so adroit with numerous responsibilities that there was a spirited competition for her services among several department heads in the fortress. Therefore, she got her choice of duties, plus a small salary and lodging in the fortress.

And there were so many nice young men about! They all asked her age; were all currying her favor against the day she could officially be courted. But her favorite remained Martyn, who had escorted her to the Lands a little over a week ago. She awoke many days in disbelief at her good fortune, listening to the rooftop bells joyfully chime morning matins.

Shirreff’s housekeeper Ionadi was snapped up by Firmin to work in his new tearoom. This she instantly embraced. Not only was she efficient and knowledgeable, she became known for her delightful eccentricities and

zealous service of repeat customers. So Firmin offered her room and board which she found so convenient, she gave up her house on the Lands.

Stites inadvertently interrupted Estes' report when he appeared in the workroom. Efran, DeWitt and Estes looked over as he saluted and said, "Captain, I have been talking to Lady Challinor, and she says she would rather stay here at the Lands than go to Crescent Hollow. May I put her in Twenty-Two? Last I saw, it was clean and empty."

Efran looked aside to Estes and DeWitt. "Is anyone in Twenty-Two now?"

"No," Estes said, rising. He went to a cabinet to take keys off a hook in a board. Extending these to Stites, he said, "If she finds it acceptable, we'll let her stay there rent-free." Efran glanced up to nod; DeWitt was on to something else.

"Thank you, Steward," Stites said, accepting the keys. "May I have a few royals to get her situated?"

Efran grimaced. "I promised her a hundred, didn't I? I've got to learn to keep my mouth shut. Well, give it to her in increments. Start out with twenty-five today."

Estes said, "That will go a long way here." He took a pouch from the cabinet to hand over to Stites. DeWitt glanced up from his worksheets at the exchange of coins.

"Thank you, Steward," Stites said, receiving the pouch.

Efran said mildly, "Let us hear how it goes."

"Yes, Captain." Stites saluted and turned out.

Upon Stites' departure, Efran glanced at Estes to murmur, "She likes Polonti." Estes pressed his lips together in agreement.

At this time, Wedderburn and Whelpton were sitting in their carriage proceeding westbound through the acrid ashes of Westford. Whelpton, who had not stopped glaring at Wedderburn since the start of their ride, said acidly, "Well, that went splendidly." His voice was muffled due to the kerchief tied across his face to keep out the fine ash and odors from the wreckage of the city around them.

Wedderburn waved. "A minor setback. We'll collect her from Crescent Hollow and reinstate the suit against the Steward." They were on their way to that city now, though it would be late in the night when they arrived.

Whelpton almost groaned, looking off. "Stupid woman, to not know who's in her bed." Then he reached up to pound on the ceiling of the carriage. "Faster, man! Faster!" he shouted. The carriage picked up speed.

"Doesn't really matter," Wedderburn said. Whelpton turned to glare at him again, and Wedderburn lowered the kerchief from his face to insist, "No, listen. When we reinstate the suit, we'll demand an accounting of the Steward's finances. He may be worth considerably more than a thousand royals. Also, we'll attach Lord Efran as an accessory for enticing his associate into an adulterous act with your wife. We'll get something out of Efran for our trouble. And . . . the law says you discipline your wife as you see fit," Wedderburn noted.

Whelpton opened the carriage window to see that they were finally out of Westford. Breathing more easily now,

he looked over the landscape, golden in the afternoon, and contemplated disciplining his wife.

Stites reentered the small dining room with pouch and keys. Challinor looked up. He said, "I've found a house that's vacant right now. It's small, and nothing like what you're used to, but the Captain will let you have it rent free if you're inclined to stay. Would you like to come have a look at it?"

She stood in mild disbelief. "Yes. Yes, I would." When she started to shoulder the satchel, he took it to carry.

They went out to the courtyard and down the switchback on foot. "This is rather charming," she murmured, looking down at the faerie trees, the community well, the paved roads and crosswalks, the new Delano's, Croft's, and especially the elegant, sprawling Elvey's.

"We are fond of it," Stites said, almost poetically for a Polonti. She smiled at him, and he glanced back at her.

At the end of the switchback, he took her west down a nearby paved road. She took a long look at Elvey's, then glanced at the houses they passed, with tidy flowerbeds and children running from yard to yard. Directly ahead of them was the roaring Passage with the mill upstream a little ways. On the west bank of the river, the trees began in earnest. Then Stites turned aside at one house much like all the others, and put the key in the lock to open the door.

She entered to look around a bare little house which nonetheless had a very nice bed in the back bedroom, with pillows and bedclothes. Dropping the satchel onto the bed, she went into the kitchen to look at the barrenness as he watched her. "It's very nice," she said. "I'll be very glad to have it."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 24

"Good," Stites said. "The Captain gave me a bit of living money for you. If you like, we can go down to the green grocer to get some victuals."

Challinor studied him smilingly. "'We'?" she asked.

He admitted, "The Captain asked me to get you settled in."

"That's very generous for someone I tried to sue," she observed.

Stites shrugged, "We don't hold grudges"—not even from an hour ago, apparently.

She laughed, "How funny you are, for a—" she broke off awkwardly.

"Polonti," he finished for her, adding dryly, "Yes, I'm known for my wit."

She laughed fully, then. "Let me change into something less ridiculous, and then I will be delighted to go shopping with the Captain's money."

“Very good,” he said, looking away in satisfaction as she went back to the bedroom to put on Abbey wear.

Stites squired her around, first stopping at Croft’s for a light meal and ale so that he could be seen with a beautiful woman. Then he took her to Averno’s Bakery, Firmin’s Fruits and Vegetables, Shurtleff’s Fish Market, Delano’s, and the little specialty shops that carried grains and cereals, potted foods, candles, firewood, and all the incidentals that made a house livable.

He carried four-fifths of their purchases back to the house, while she held two bags, one of rice and another of fresh kale and leeks. As they unloaded everything in the kitchen, Stites took off his uniform jacket, pretending not to notice her eyeing his physique under his white shirt. He rolled up his sleeves over muscular forearms and nodded, “There’s a pan in that lower cabinet.”

She knelt uncertainly, pulling out something with a handle. “This?”

“Yes. Put it there; I’ll get a fire going and fry us some trout,” he said, pulling out the firesteel and breaking open the freshly purchased lard. She watched in fascination as he started a fire in the stove, put a pan on the grill above it, and spooned lard into the pan.

“You can cook?” she asked in interest.

“Oh, yes. You can’t survive in the army otherwise,” he said, sprinkling ground meal on a plate to coat the fillets while the lard heated up over the small fire.

She put plates, cups and utensils on the small table, then went around lighting candles from his cooking fire. “That smells wonderful,” she murmured, coming up behind him.

“I’m good at what I do,” he assured her.

They had a nice, cozy dinner, then he showed her how to clean up with a minimal amount of water (as he had gone back and forth three times to the corner well drawing water).

With everything done, he shrugged his jacket back on, saying, “I’ll come by again in the morning—”

“Where do you sleep?” she asked, her eyes wide.

“In the barracks,” he said, pausing.

“Then sleep here tonight,” she breathed. “I won’t make you sleep with *me*—I mean, I’m only afraid—I never could sleep by myself. I’ve been afraid of the dark ever since I was small. When my husband tired of me, I made my maid sleep in the bed with me. I suppose that *was* mean of me,” she laughed in a tremulous, self-conscious voice. “Only, if there’s no one you’re obligated to go home to, please just—stay for a while. At least until I fall asleep.”

“All right,” he said, removing his jacket again. She took his hand to draw him into the bedroom after her.

At dinner in the fortress that evening, Minka and Efran were eating quietly while Ella sat surrounded by men as usual. She was listening politely, smiling at their jokes, while her father and stepmother hissed back and forth at each other. They were not angry, only trying to be quiet. Minka was smiling, eyes down, while Efran looked up periodically, exasperated or searching.

Finally, he leaned over to whisper a question to her, who relayed it to Ella next to her. She turned to reply to them both, “That would be lovely, thank you,” before victoriously spooning up another bite of flan.

Efran looked back at one of the sentries that always lingered nearby. “Get Lorient down here, please.”

“Captain.” This man, Tiras, was not only alert but Polonti, so had been keeping tabs on Lorient’s whereabouts for several days now. Tiras ran down the corridor to the courtyard and from there to the switchback. This he took at a trot until emerging through the faerie trees, which whooshed him along with fluttering leaves.

Tiras ran all the way up Main to the mess hall in Barracks #2, where he burst in to look around with heaving chest. Spotting the man in question, Tiras ran over to poke him in the back as he sat eating. “Captain summons, Lorient.” Nodding, Lorient rose, stepping over the bench.

As he began heading out in a walk, Tiras poked him in the back again. “Hustle, Lorient!” he ordered the man who had been a senior lieutenant under Master Crowe, and was quite old enough to be his father. With a slight groan, Lorient complied. He’d had a long day.

With the upstart sentry continually prodding him to hasten, Lorient trotted down Main, up the switchback, into the fortress, and down the corridor to the dining hall. While Tiras stopped at the door, Lorient presented himself to the Captain’s seated back with a salute. “Lorient reporting, Captain.”

As Minka began pushing Efran to scoot down on her right to make room on her left, between her and Ella, Efran glanced back at him. “Have a seat, Lorient.”

“Yes, Captain. Thank you,” Lorient said uncertainly.

While squeezing in between Minka and Ella—because he was large—Lorient apologized first to Minka: “Pardon me, Lady Minka.”

“You just have to get here earlier, Lorient,” she advised nicely.

“Yes, Lady Minka,” he said, then looked down at Ella pressed against his arm. “Pardon me, Ella.”

She grinned up at him. “Maybe.”

He glanced away in mild confusion. “*Maybe*”? *What did that mean?*

Fortunately, Minka and Ella talked about everything around him, so all he had to do was nod politely every now and then. The kitchen assistant brought him another full plate, only solid beef instead of hash, so he agreeably began eating again. The man on Ella’s left, Quennel, refused to give in to the new arrival, so continued to regale Ella with stories of male incompetence in the fields and pens. This had her restraining her laughter so as not to spew food.

“Where were you working today, Lorient?” Efran asked around Minka.

Lorient had to reply to him over Lady Minka’s head while she was listening to Ella around him. “Supervising the relocation of herds around the proposed pasture and fields, Captain. The gardener requires a certain location for the new grape vines, which must be protected from the goats at all costs. They consume everything,” he said despondently, glancing down at Minka’s large blue eyes, fixed on him in fond amusement.

Efran and Ella both spoke to him at once then, so he replied, “Yes, Captain,” before turning to Ella. “Pardon?”

“I said, I want to see the goats tomorrow,” she repeated patiently.

His face said, *Why? They’re just goats* before he turned toward Efran around Minka to say, “Request permission to take Lady Ella out to the pastures tomorrow, Captain.”

Efran grunted, “Granted, after her Law lesson.” *What’s wrong with Quennel?* he asked Ella peevishly, but she wasn’t reading his thoughts tonight.

Across the hall, Tess, eating with the stablehands, looked up to see Ella pressed against Loriot’s arm, and pangs of jealousy smote her heart. *I was after him before you were!* she cried inwardly. This must not stand. Tess would not give him up without a fight. She began planning counter measures while the man at her left explained that she was going to have to use a different method to break Cloud.

At another table, Geneve sat patiently listening to the men around her discuss various ways to subdue the Goulven permanently and at once. Her husband Melchior was deeply invested in this conversation, as his men were on the front lines of defense against them, and he wanted to lose none of them.

She glanced down the long row of tables where Wyeth sat close to his wife Cyr, speaking in sign language to her alone, as no one around them could understand it. With all that, Geneve felt the need for attention. She was idle at work because her boss Lemmerz, the Lands’ construction supervisor, was momentarily idle. He had a petition in hand by Abbey residents for a chapel, and approved plans and a plot right off Main on the Coastal Highway South, but they were waiting on funding.

Above the heads of them all, three faeries sat on the ceiling rafters. “Oh dear, oh dear,” Sir Nutbin fretted, looking over the hall. “So much discord. So many problems we could help with, were we only allowed.” His bushy tail twitched in distress as he cleaned his monocle fiercely with a large white kerchief extracted from the pocket of his plaid vest.

“True, dear Nutbin, so true,” lamented Sir Ditson. With the approach of winter, his elegant Justinian-inspired suit and top hat were now creamy white, with a silver headband, silver waistcoat, and silver knob on his new ebony walking stick. “No one will give us entry!” he wailed. “Lord Justinian would, were he here.”

Kele, sitting beside them, smiled. In celebration of the upcoming season, she was wearing a dark evergreen dress, dotted with tiny colored lights. “Poor men, that have never learned to ask,” she purred.

“Ask, dear Kele?” Ditson asked in great interest while Nutbin blinked behind his monocle. “Are we permitted to ask? This is new. This is revolutionary.”

“Silly creatures,” she laughed. “‘Elemental spirits’ is certainly the term for some of you.” Whereupon she left the ceiling beam to fly down and alight on Minka’s shoulder.

Minka turned to her immediately. “Kele! Hello! I’m so glad to see you again.”

“Thank you, dear Minka. We have all been laboring so hard to get ready for the winter, you know”—which was remarkably mild on the hilltop and Lands, but faeries cherished their seasonal customs. “Nonetheless, we’ve seen several human problems that we would love to help with, but require permission.”

“Oh, Kele, you have it, of course—as long as there are no deceptions,” Minka said darkly.

“Oh, no, dear—any faerie caught in a lie loses half his power,” Kele assured her.

“Really?” Minka asked.

“Yes! We call it ‘Provision for a Wronged Human,’” Kele said smugly.

“Oh, that’s hilarious. And good to know! So, yes, you have permission. We’re deeply grateful for your help,” Minka said. Efran glanced at her, hearing her without seeing the faerie. But he was incurious due to the excellent suckling pig in front of him.

“Thank you, darling.” Kele bestowed a faerie kiss on her cheek, which made Minka smile so warmly that Efran lost interest in the pig for looking at her. He put his fork down, and she leaned on his arm.

Returning to the ceiling rafter, Kele waved her hand at the pair. “Have at it. Permission is granted.”

“Oh! Marvelous Kele!” Nutbin exclaimed, kissing her hand, while Ditson bowed extravagantly to her. Then they flew down to the areas of immediate concern. Being faeries, they were generally invisible to humans, of course.

First, Nutbin landed on Geneve’s shoulder, digging in with his sharp claws. “Ow!” she cried, bolting up to a stand. Melchior glanced at her, but someone else was speaking to him, so he turned back around.

“Go! Go! Go!” Nutbin ordered, transferring himself to the back of her head to prick her scalp.

Aggrieved, she strode to the rear of the hall to stand behind Efran’s bench. “Excuse me, Captain; may I speak with you?” she asked, hand at the back of her head.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 25

Efran glanced back at her, then stood from the bench. “Yes, Geneve?” he asked warily.

“Captain, a group of eighty-five leaseholders has petitioned Lemmerz to build a chapel. He has plans and a plot that Steward Estes has approved, but we are waiting on funding. DePew says he is overextended as is, and can’t give us anything for the next six months. Since the project is desired and approved, I am requesting that the Fortress fund it, sir. The cost is estimated at six hundred royals.” She finished her much-rehearsed speech and fell silent, aghast at her own audacity to ask for this. Minka looked up, listening.

Efran studied Geneve, then said, “Granted. Go tell Estes what you need to get started immediately.”

Her mouth fell open. “Thank you, Captain. Hello, Minka,” she said, looking down.

Minka grinned, “Good job, Geneve. You hit all the right points.”

Laughing in disbelief, Geneve hurried over to catch Estes before he left the dining hall. As Efran sat again, he

watched Estes nod to her. Then Efran turned to his wife, who was looking at his lips. And his heart rate escalated. Again. Still.

Meanwhile, Ditson was standing on Quennel's shoulder as the young man despondently looked at the back of Ella's head while she murmured something to Lorient. Ditson extended his silver-knobbed walking stick to tap her lightly on the head. "Look over here," he said. She glanced at Quennel, who perked up, then she turned back around to Lorient.

Ditson tapped her on the head with the silver knob again, a little harder. He lectured her, "You don't need a father. You need a young man to grow old with. Look over here."

Ella turned around again while Quennel smiled a little quizzically. "I'm not particularly gifted with horses, but I can teach you to hit anything with a bow and arrow," he ventured.

"You can?" she laughed.

She turned back to Lorient, whereupon Ditson whacked her solidly on the skull. "He's not the one for you! You need someone fresh and young who adores you already!"

With a gasp, she turned back around to Quennel. He eyed her. "Can I have your attention for a moment?"

She blinked at him. "Yes."

He smiled, crinkling his eyes at her. Observing that, she said archly, "I know that trick."

"Is it wrong if it works?" he asked, and she laughed at him. He reached over to refill her cup with lager. She murmured something to him, which he answered in a murmur, and she smiled.

The sentry Tiras, observing this interaction, was glad that he wouldn't have to be running down to the barracks mess to haul Lorient up to the dining hall anymore. Quennel was a better choice for Ella, and the only thing Tiras cared about—the only thing that any of the Polonti cared about—was that she choose one of them, so that the Captain's Polonti blood would be strengthened in his grandchildren.

Following this victory, Ditson straightened his glittering silver waistcoat in resolve, gripped his stick with both hands, and stood on top of Lorient's head. Inhaling deeply, he began to pound the frontal bone with repeated blows until he had fairly dented the elegant silver knob. Still Ditson persisted in the battering of the hard head while the simulated sweat dotted his brow and his cheeks grew convincingly red with effort.

At last, Lorient looked across the hall at Tess, who was drinking while she watched him. Dinner over, he rose with his eyes on her. Dubiously watching him approach, she stood behind her now-empty table. He came over to say, "You're going to have to use another method with the mare, you know."

She raised her large brown eyes to him. "Will you come show me tomorrow?"

"If I have time," he conceded.

She smiled, glancing down. "I'd appreciate it." And he walked off with a half-smile.

While Sirs Ditson and Nutbin were thus occupied, Kele was placidly looking over the whole hall. She saw Hadewidis enter the doorway uncertainly, looking around. So Kele reached over to let fall a single drop of liquid

love onto Martyn's head. He quickly looked to the doorway, then went over smiling to offer Hadewidis a seat beside him. She nodded, fingers shyly at her lips.

Looking further, Kele saw a young Polonti sitting by himself, eating slowly. His weariness from a difficult, discouraging day hung over him like a shroud. So Kele leaned over to toss a drop onto Stephanos' head, who was on his way to another table with his plate and ale. He glanced over to the boy, but didn't change direction until she bombarded him with a handful of crystallized drops.

Stephanos stopped, and took his plate to sit abruptly by the boy, whose head shot up. "You're doing well, lad," Stephanos said. "Shall I tell you how better to handle your stupid overseer?"

"Yes sir thank you sir," the boy said. He was in shock at the attention from a respected Southerner, a member of the elite Forty. So, after opening his ale, Stephanos leaned his massive forearms on the table to pontificate, and other men drifted over to add their observations while the boy looked around in dazed gratification.

Kele then looked over to her dear human friend, but saw nothing needed there. Efran, rising from the table with his hand at Minka's back, looked down at Ella, still seated in close conversation with Quennel. Unwilling to interrupt or wait, he muttered to Tiras, "Keep an eye on them until she's in her quarters for the night."

"Yes, Captain." Tiras saluted in satisfaction. So Efran, his arm tight around Minka, walked her back to their quarters. Moreover, both Ella and Loriot somehow forgot that she had asked to see the goats tomorrow.

Ditson and Nutbin returned joyfully to Kele on the ceiling beam. "Oh, worthy Kele, to have the temerity to ask permission!" Nutbin cried.

"A worthy night's work as well, my good Nutbin," Ditson exhaled in exultation. "And our great gratitude to you, dear Kele, for the opening."

"Indeed, our gratitude knows no bounds," Nutbin averred. "But now, what can we do about the Goulven?"

Kele's expressive white brows arched. "Oh no, my good faeries. I'm terribly sorry, but a higher power has taken that task to himself. As his work is already underway, we mustn't interfere."

Ditson said, "We are disappointed, but obedient. Please, may we request your intervention on our behalf another time, dear Kele?"

"You may," she smiled, and they were effusive in their thanks.

Early the following morning, Wedderburn and Lord Whelpton were about to resume the last short leg of their trip to Crescent Hollow. Three-quarters of the way on their journey last night, they had been forced to stop in an abandoned house to rest themselves and their horses. They were glad of the shelter, and surprised to find a banked fire waiting, as well as hay for the horses and modest provisions for themselves.

Still, Whelpton was annoyed with the need to improvise. That was not one of his skills.

"Why I let you talk me into going straight to Crescent Hollow instead of going home to rest first, I don't know," Whelpton vented. He washed his face in the vacant homeowner's washstand and irritably began to redress.

Wedderburn, who had spent a mostly sleepless night on a pallet, muttered, "By the time we got to Crescent

Hollow from Eurus, she'd be well away somewhere. Far more likely to find her when we come unexpectedly on her heels."

"Well, let us be off, then," Whelpton said, disgruntled. His driver and footman, having slept in the stables, were even less enthusiastic about resuming the trip. Nonetheless, with day breaking behind them, they set off down the broad, paved road to Crescent Hollow.

At that time, Stites was rising from bed when Challinor put a hand on his back. "Don't go."

"I have duty," he smiled over his shoulder. "But I'll be back tonight."

"Show me where your notary is, first," she requested. He looked inquiring, and she explained, "I need to divorce Whelpton. I don't want you whipped or robbed of half your worldly wealth."

He considered that, then said, "Get dressed. I'll take you before going to work."

She smiled, throwing back the bedcovers.

As Whelpton's carriage drew closer to Crescent Hollow, they encountered an unexpected hubbub of people, carts, wagons, and conveyances of all kinds. Soldiers were directing lines of traffic in and out of a central distribution area. "What?" muttered Whelpton, looking out the window.

"Incoming to the left!" a Hollowan soldier shouted at Whelpton's driver. "To the LEFT!"

The driver obeyed, seeing no other avenue open. "What is this? What's going on?" Whelpton called.

A man approached with a chalkboard. "Where're you from?" he asked.

"Eurus," Whelpton replied, mystified.

"Oh, yeah, we're getting a lot of Eurusians. How many cases you want?" the checker asked.

"Cases?" Whelpton asked blankly.

The checker peered into the carriage. "You got someone in here who needs treatment right away?"

"Treatment?" Whelpton repeated.

"Explain it to us in detail," Wedderburn interposed.

The checker said, "Huh. You don't know? The new owner of Goadby's discovered that the new ale formula kills the Goulven parasite right in the body—dissolves it right out, so that even the fangs can be pulled out, and leaves the victim whole again, but for his teeth. Yeah, some recovered victims will have to eat mash the rest of their lives, but many of 'em still have enough to chew with. If you're doubtful, we have several recovered victims and physicians on hand to verify, but, you'll lose your place in line to talk to 'em. And we got people coming in from across the whole danged Continent to get it; got the plant running 'round the clock in production and still run out daily. So you either buy or move over this way for testimonials."

“How much?” Whelpton asked, digging out his purse.

“Five royals a case,” the checker said.

“Gimme four cases. What’ve you got on you?” Whelpton demanded of Wedderburn.

“Here. Ten royals,” Wedderburn said, handing them over.

“Six cases,” Whelpton corrected himself, giving the checker all the gold coins.

The driver called down, “Sir, how are we going to carry six cases of ale?”

“Throw out all the luggage!” Whelpton shouted up at him. “If that doesn’t give you enough room, leave the footman here!” The footman looked down in dismay.

Making a notation on his chalkboard, the checker gave Whelpton a disk with the numeral 6 on it. “All right, give that to the man in gold braid at the head of the line, and you’ll get your cases. Over to the left, here.”

As the driver pulled the carriage over to the designated waiting area, Whelpton breathed, “Do you know how much we’ll be able to sell these for in Eurús?”

“A lot,” Wedderburn agreed. “But what about Challinor?”

Whelpton blinked at him. “Who?”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on December 7th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Goulven* (Book 13)

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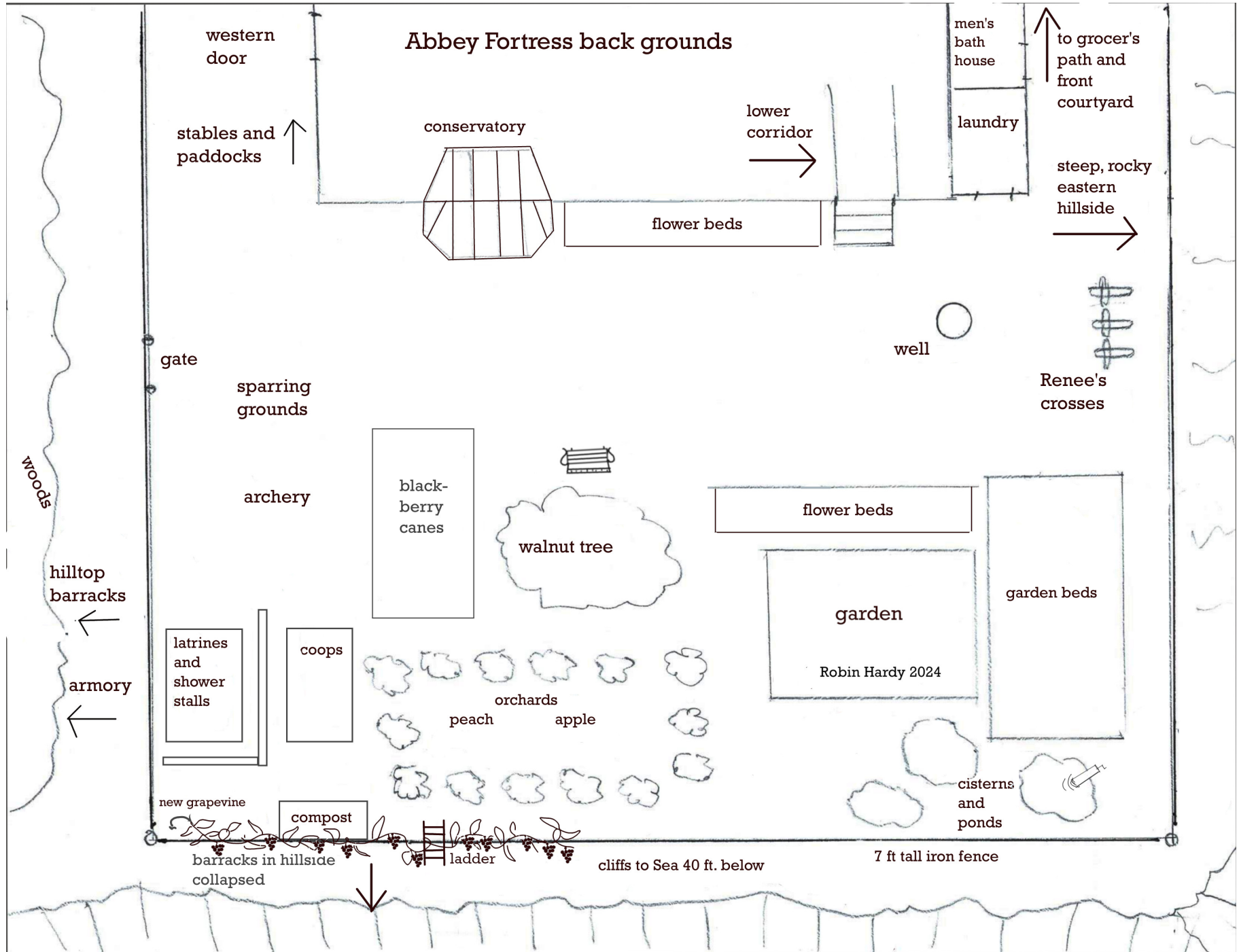
Adele—ah DELL
aike—AY kay (shooting by instinct)
 Alberon—AL ber on
 Allyr—AL er
 Ares—AIR eez
 Arne—arn
 Auber—aw BER
 Averno—ah VURN
 Barthelemon—BAR thuh luh mon
 Bennard—beh NARD
 Bethune—beh THUNE
 Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree
 Bowring—BOWE ring
 Cennick—SIN ick (cynic)
 Challinor—CHAL en or
 Clonmel—KLON mell
 Conte—cahnt
 Cordelia—cor DEEL yah
 Cyneheard—SIGN herd
 Cyr—sear
 Delano—deh LAN oh
 DeVenter—deh VEN tur
 Doane—rhymes with *loan*
 Dominica—dah MIN ee ka (the Lord's day)
 Eadgifu—ee YAD gif oo
 Efran—EFF run
 Eledith—ELL eh dith
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Enon—EE nun
 Erastus—eh RAS tis
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eudoxie—you DOX ee
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 Eustace—YOUS tis
 Eviron—ee VIRE un
 garderobe—GAR de robe
 Ghislain—gis LANE (hard g)
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goadby—GOAD bee
 Goss—gahs
 Goulven—GOHL vin (hard g)
 Graeme—GRAY em
 Greves—greevs
 Guillalme—gill ALM
 Hadewidis—hay DWEH dis
 Hereward—HERR uh wuhd
 Herzogl—HURT zog uhl
 Howe—how

insigne—en SIN yeh
 Ionadi—ee YON ah dee
 Jasque—JAS kee
 Jehan—JAY han
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 Kele—kay lay
 Keyon—KEE yun
 Koschat—KOS chat
 Knapp—nap
 larva—LAR vuh; larvae—LAR vee
 Lemmerz—leh MERZ
 Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
 liaison—lee AY zahn
 Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
 Loseby—LOWS bee
 Lowry—LAHW ree
 Lystra—LIS trah
 Madea—mah DAY ah
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 Mathurin—mah THUR in
 Melchior—MEL key or
 meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
 Milo—ME low
 Minka—MINK ah
 minute—my NOOT (a little bit)
moekolohe—moh ee koh LO ee
moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee (queen)
 Monsell—mon SELL
 obsequious—ahb suh KWEE us
 Occitania—awk si TAIN yah
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pleyel—PLAY el
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 prescient—PRES ee uhnt
 Quilicus—QUIL eh cus
 Reinagle—REN ah gull
 Reine—rayn
 Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
 Salotto—sah LOT oh
 Serrano—suh RAHN oh
 Shirreff—SURE if
 sluice—sloos
 Stephanos—steh FAHN os
 Stites—stights
 Surchatain—SUR cha tan
 Surchataine—sur cha TANE
 Sybil—SEH bull
 Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
 Telo—TEE low

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and the Goulven* (Book 13)

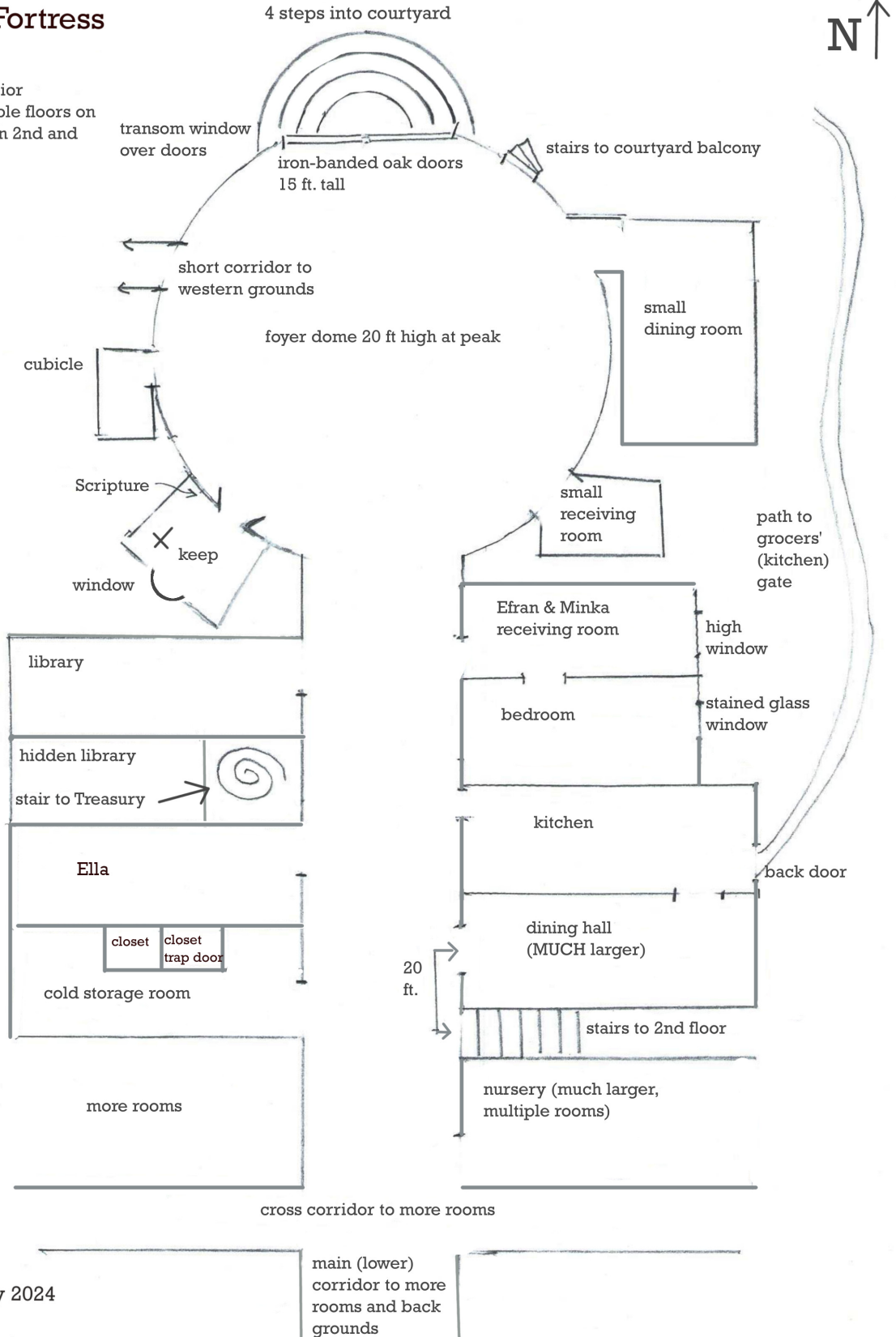
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Teschner—TESH nur
Therese (Sister)—ter EESE
Tiras—TEER us
tivoli—TIV uh lee
Tourjee—TUR jee
Venegas—VEN eh gus
Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
Verrin—VAIR en
victuals—VIH tuhls
Webbe—web
Wedderburn—WED er burn
Wystan—WIS tan



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors



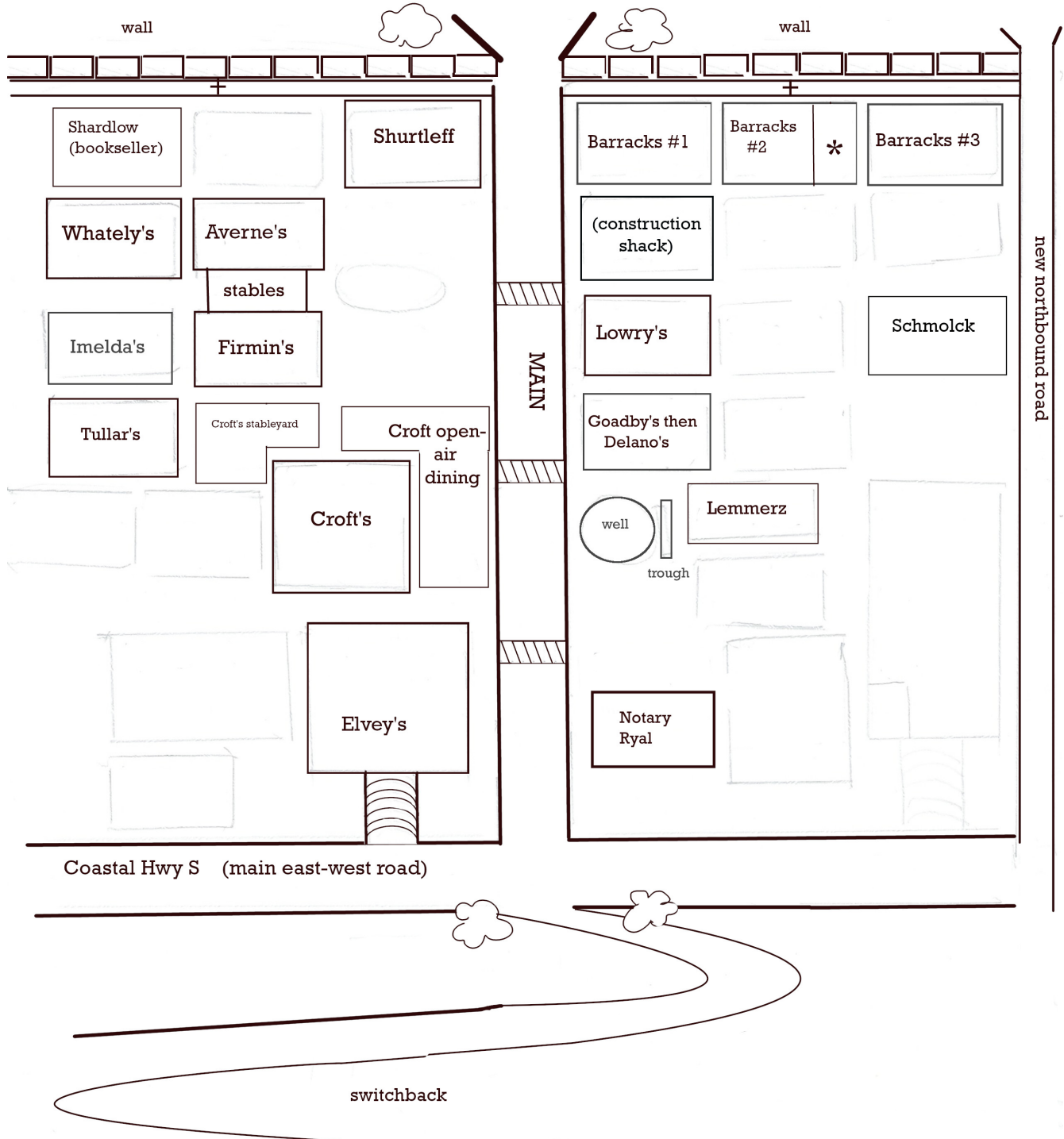
NOT TO SCALE

Robin Hardy 2024

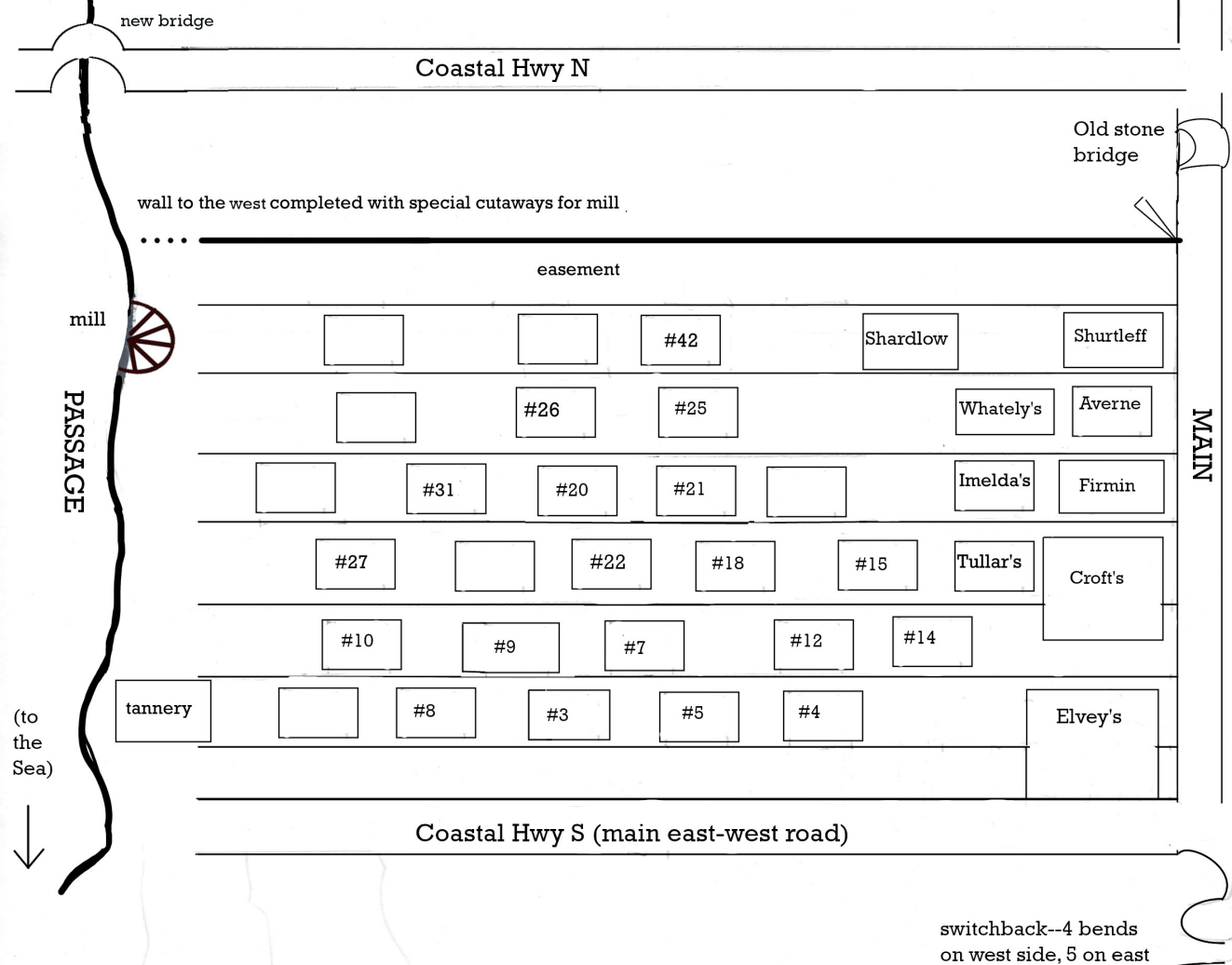
Abbey Lands Main Road

* infirmary and mess kitchen

+ easements

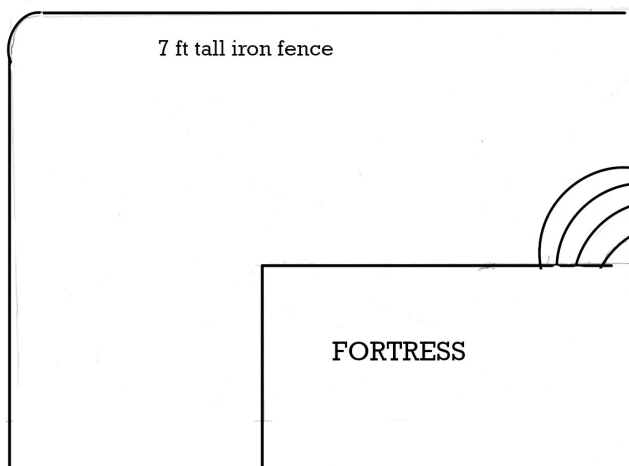


Abbey Lands Western Section



KEY

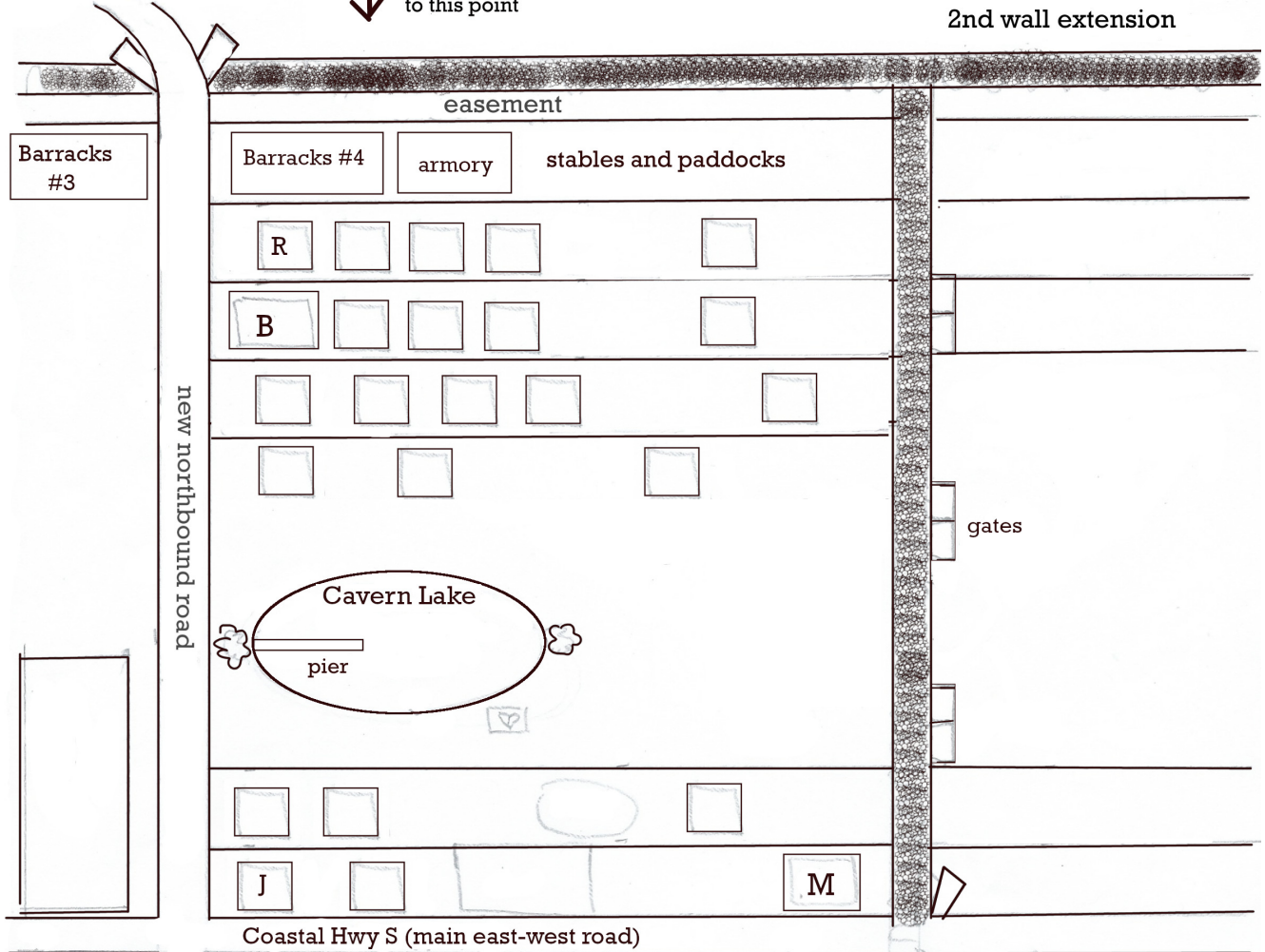
- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - Challinor and Stites
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening



road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

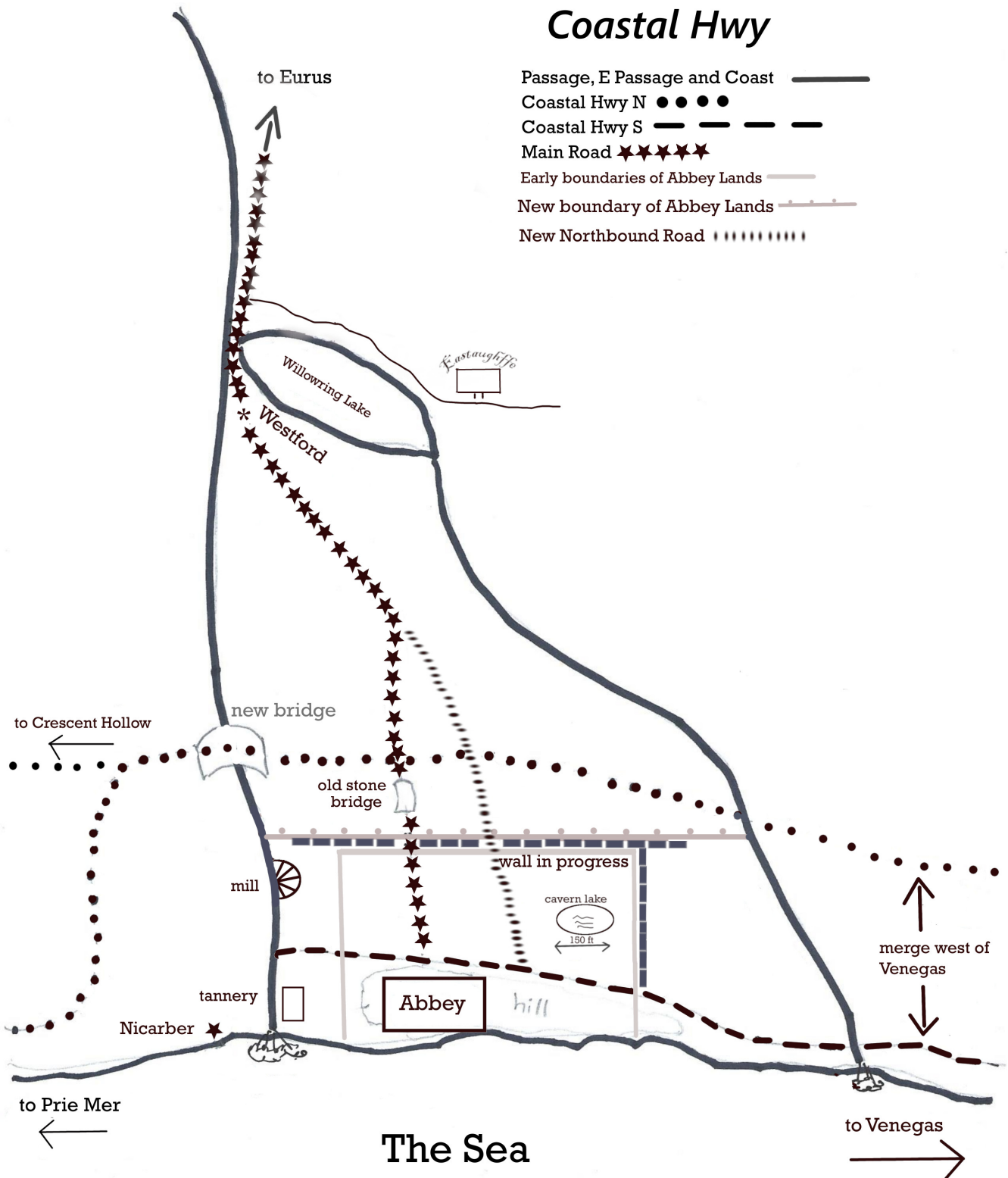
↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

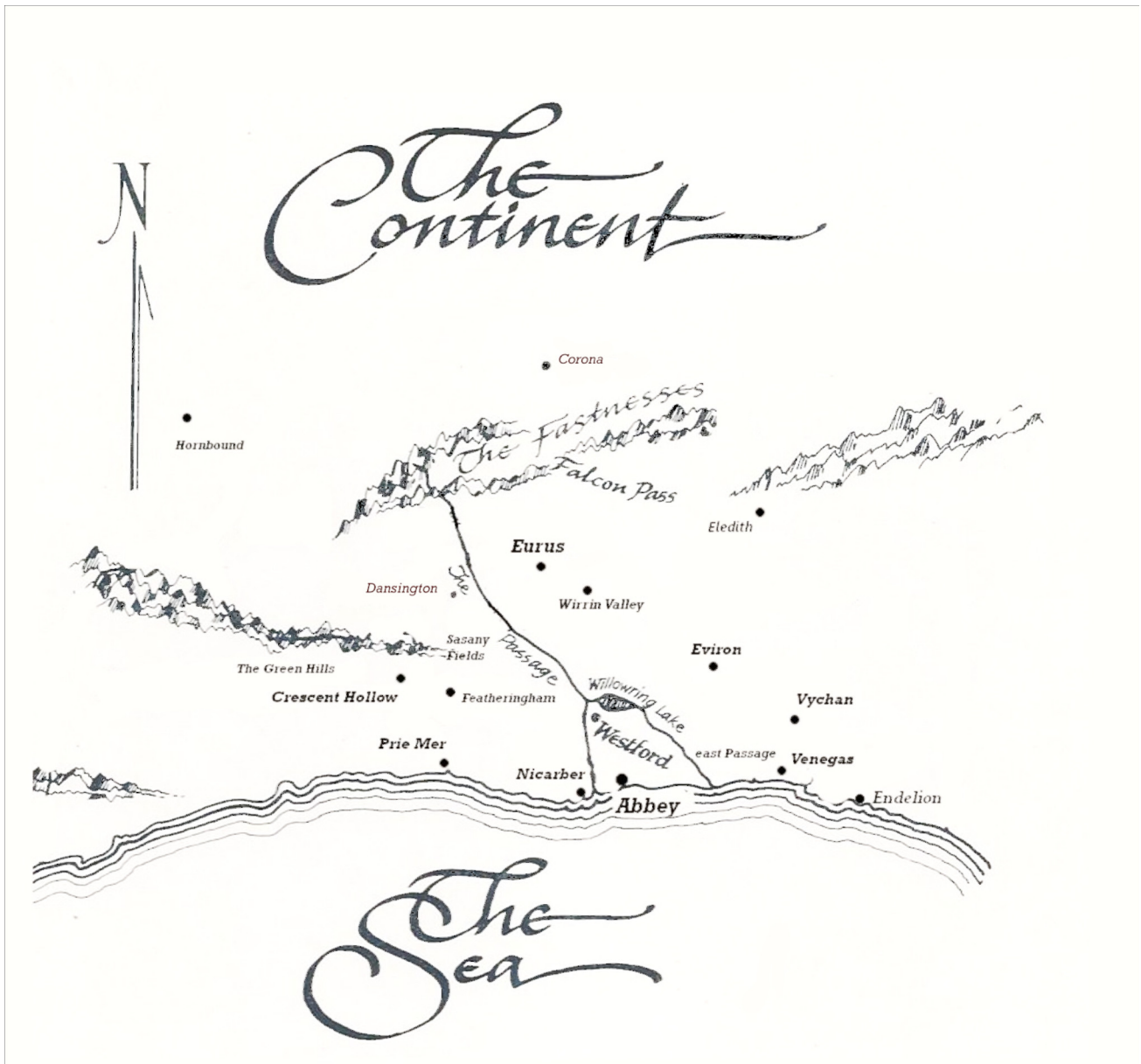


- A
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J - Elvey's outlet
- K
- L
- M - Meineke
- R - Delano's office

Coastal Hwy

- Passage, E Passage and Coast —————
- Coastal Hwy N ●●●●
- Coastal Hwy S - - - - -
- Main Road ★★★★★★
- Early boundaries of Abbey Lands ————
- New boundary of Abbey Lands ————
- New Northbound Road | | | | |







What Adele Saw (Book 13:
Lord Efran and the Goulven)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy

I originally intended to make this illustration that of Efran getting bitten by the Goulven carrier. But no matter what I tried, it always wound up looking like an ad for a cheap horror movie. Since I have been seeing so many AI images, I decided to try it out—specifically, [EasyPeasyAI](#). Below is the picture it produced from my description of Efran.



I laughed. I know that my knowledge and skill with it are subpar, and the technology can only improve, but I haven't seen convincing facial expressions in any of the AI images I've looked at so far. Also, his pants are too tight and too short. :D

So I went back to the manuscript of *Lord Efran and the Goulven*. In Chapter 14, Adele, blind, can still see certain things: “She could close her eyes, look away, or even pretend to go to sleep, and still see images of others around her. She could not discern objects, only people—but so vividly! They were rendered in glowing outlines, like silver on a blackboard. Certain people, like Efran, she could see almost in detail, but with the additional sense of his thoughts or emotions. . . .

“Her little sister Sybil was also very clear to her, but her outline was diffused, softer than Efran's. Adele also saw Sybil's aura waver indecisively whenever she came close to her. But what was most interesting was what happened when she and Efran drew close to each other. Then, their auras flared up like flames—his, especially, leapt out to almost encompass her bodily. Hers spread softly, as if to receive him. Where their auras met, they merged in perfect synchronization, like notes in harmony.”

So when I came across [this](#) beautiful image¹ on Freerange Photos, I saw Adele sitting on the bench on the back grounds. The book that the model is reading is a Bible. I hated to erase it, but blind Adele can't read, and she wouldn't read that book anyway. (I put a piece of flatbread in her hand instead.)

I substituted a [bench](#)² for the rock she's sitting on, and the wonderful silhouettes of Efran and Minka are from [klipartz.com](#).

My illustration still looks cartoonish, but at least benign.

Robin Hardy
May 5, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright on this illustration.

1. It's borrowed from Pexels, but among tens of thousands of photos, I haven't been able to find it.
2. Photographed by [James Pond](#) on StockSnap