



The Stories of

*The Abbey of St. Benedict
on the Sea*

Book 11

*Lord Efran and
Leviathan*

Robin Hardy

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Book 11

Lord Efran and Leviathan

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	Map 1 Back Grounds
Chapter 2	Map 2 First Floor
Chapter 3	Map 3 Main Road
Chapter 4	Map 4 Western Section
Chapter 5	Map 5 East Central
Chapter 6	Map 6 Coastal Highway
Chapter 7	Map 7 Continent
Chapter 8	Efran Meets Leviathan
Chapter 9	Notes on Efran Meets Leviathan
Chapter 10	
Chapter 11	
Chapter 12	
Chapter 13	
Chapter 14	
Chapter 15	
Chapter 16	
Chapter 17	
Chapter 18	
Chapter 19	
Chapter 20	
Chapter 21	
Chapter 22	
Chapter 23	
Pronunciations	

Chapter 1

It took minutes for word to blaze throughout the Abbey fortress that Ella, the sixteen-year-old girl who had been seen around the grounds with Minka, was, in fact, Captain Efran's daughter, and would be living henceforth at the Abbey. So, the Captain had a 16-year-old daughter. A marriageable daughter. Here. At the Abbey. That she was a half-breed—Efran being Polonti and her mother a Southerner—only expanded the field of interested suitors.

Because there were hundreds of men in the Abbey army, eligible males in the Abbey Lands vastly outnumbered females anyway, but with a diamond suddenly dropped into the pool, the men had questions, primarily: Would the Captain allow courting of his daughter? And if so, how, when, where and by whom?

These questions were communicated to Captain Efran through his favorites, primarily the Captains Towner, Younge, Neale and Barr. Therefore, three days after Efran and Ella had announced the fact of their relationship, Efran sat down with Ella and Minka to work on some highly sought answers.

They met in Ella's receiving room of her first-floor quarters. These had previously been Justinian's off and on, but he gave them up to her with the kind of intuition that made him so valuable as an emissary and information gatherer.

Sitting with Ella and Minka at a small table with a Goadby's in hand, Efran leaned back to tell Ella, "We're in entirely new territory, so we're all going to make mistakes. I want mine to be on the cautious side, but, I'm trusting you and Minka to tell me when I'm—getting excessive."

He paused as the two females exchanged smiling glances. "Yes, I'm glad you both understand," he said, wiping his sweating lip. "First, Ella, Minka can tell you how knowing Roman's Law has saved us more than once. So, starting today, you will be tutored by Soames in the Law for a half hour every day at the time of your choosing, but before you do anything else. Then, I will require you to put in at least an hour a day working anywhere in the fortress or on the grounds that Minka considers appropriate. Perhaps we should have covered all this before you decided you wanted me to be your father," he suddenly wondered.

Both young women laughed at him. "All that sounds reasonable, Papa," Ella said, smiling with a tinge of cunning.

Efran narrowed his eyes at her. "And the lady probes for areas of vulnerability."

Ella laughed, "How did you get to be so suspicious of women?"

Efran winced, looking up to the ceiling—Ella's mother had seduced 11-year-old Efran when she was about the age he was now: 28. Minka interjected, "If it's all right with you, Ella, I would like to sit in on your Law lessons. I need to know it, as well."

"Of course," Efran said as Ella was saying, "Certainly." They paused to eye each other, and Ella added, "My mother and I never had the same thought at the same time, or even at different times. It's a strange sensation."

"You should see the similarities I'm seeing," Minka said.

Efran nodded. “Good. Now, once you finish your Law lessons and your work, I want you and Minka to go explore Abbey Lands shops. You will take two bodyguards, one of whom will always be from a list that I have given to Commander Lyte. But you needn’t worry about that; only that you will be required to take two bodyguards. It will help them if you go about the same time every day. You may spend whatever you like at Abbey businesses. I consider this just as essential as your study of the Law.”

Ella gaped at him. “Are you serious? That’s—wonderful! But how will I know what’s too much?”

“Minka will guide you,” Efran said. “Though I’ve often told her to spend whatever she wants, and she’s never remotely approached overspending.”

Mildly correcting, Minka said, “I was told that my purchases at the hunting shop astounded you.”

He looked at her. “Because I didn’t know that you were buying for Martyn. I had visions of your downing a ten-point buck and—didn’t know what to do with them.”

Minka laughed at that, then said, “Oh! I saw the new horses brought in yesterday, and there was the most beautiful little white mare—solid white, all over. May I try her out, Efran?”

“Of course. Hold on.” He stood and went to the door, where he spoke a few words to the sentry. Then he returned to his seat to say, “I’ve sent a message to Jasque to hold her for you.”

“Thank you,” she smiled at him. As he was smiling at her in return, Ella said, “Now that we’ve covered the Law, chores, shopping, and the new white mare, what about the men?”

Efran looked as though he’d just been hit in the gut. After some moments of anguished thought, he said, “No kissing.”

“All right,” Ella said slowly. “And . . . ?”

Efran looked helplessly at Minka. She looked back at him dubiously, then offered, “Suppose we say that she can talk to anyone she likes on the grounds, and she doesn’t have to talk with anyone she doesn’t want to. She’ll sit with us at meals, and anyone she wants can sit with us. How is that to start with?”

“That’s fine,” Ella said while Efran made a noise in his throat.

Since none of them knew what to talk about from there, Efran released them to their day. First, Soames was brought up for their inaugural Law session. He lugged a table and chairs into the library, then sat with Ella and Minka to begin covering what he considered the most important topics.

First, he began with the Prohibition Against Show Trials, and how that had recently proved so critically important as to earn him a Meritorious Cross for pointing it out. Minka was uncomfortable during Soames’ discussion of the charges against her for kissing Polonti, and Ella asked many questions about that trial which he covered in detail.

Then Soames covered the Provision for a Wronged Husband, and Minka quietly died inside while he and Ella discussed all aspects of Efran’s trial, including the fact that Lady Leila exonerated him by blatantly lying under oath. Ella asked, “Were there no repercussions for her doing that?”

Soames replied, “If she were a resident of the Abbey Lands, or if someone affected by the ruling made a formal

accusation against her, yes, indeed, she would be put on trial for perjury, for which she almost certainly would be found guilty.”

“Then what?” Ella asked.

“She would be punished however the notary, Ryal, stipulated. Then Captain Efran could be brought up for retrial, and most likely be found guilty,” Soames said, with the detachment of a theoretical exercise. Minka sat thinking what that would do to Efran, and the Abbey Lands.

“Oh, my. Are there any other men who have standing to bring charges against him?” Ella asked.

“I don’t know,” Soames said, looking questioningly at Minka.

“No,” she whispered, trembling.

By the time they emerged from the hour-long discussion of those two trials, Minka was exhausted. She and Ella paused in the lower corridor as Ella said, “I have to find a chore now.”

Minka collected herself to look around. “Oh! Do you want to look in the kitchen? Madea is the best cook on the Southern Continent—Efran is a wonderful cook himself.”

Looking disinclined, Ella went on down the corridor slowly. Minka said, “Oh, here’s the nursery! Have you seen Joshua?”

“Yes,” Ella said, smiling, and bypassed the nursery as well.

As they progressed down the corridor, Minka glanced at a new maid scrubbing the floor on her knees. Seeing Minka’s glance, Ella shied away. But Minka was not looking at the chore, but the girl, whom Minka had seen carrying bed pans out of Wallace’s surgery to empty and clean. She was visible for her long, light blonde hair, but shy and skittish to the extreme—when anyone approached her, she literally ran away. Minka wanted to know why.

Nonetheless, Minka and Ella went on out to the back grounds, where Minka inhaled the glory of a golden fall on the Abbey hilltop. “Oh, they’re harvesting everything. Aren’t the pumpkins sweet? And the apple trees are still full—they’re running out of baskets to hold them all!”

“That’s lovely,” Ella noted, bypassing the gardens, the flowerbeds, and the orchards. As the women came within view of the archery and sparring grounds, many of the men paused to turn and bow to them. Ella laughed, waving regally, which pleased them very much.

Minka was silent as she and Ella walked to the stables and the pens. Here, they paused to watch a yearling being trained to the bridle. Ella leaned on the railing in interest, for it was Tess training him. A 17-year-old Southerner with short, dark hair, she was something of a hothead.

Seeing them, Tess led the horse over to them. “You must be Ella! I’m Tess, a trainer, and I’m married to Captain Barr. Have you met him?”

“Not formally,” Ella replied. “But he’s Polonti, isn’t he?”

“Yes,” Tess said. “He’s the only Polonti Captain—besides your father,” she laughed, and Ella laughed.

“How much experience do I need with horses to be a trainer?” Ella asked.

“Oh, you could start at once,” Tess said. “Let me go get Jasque, our head trainer.”

As Tess started off, Minka exclaimed, “Oh, Ella, you’ll need pants! We’ll go to Elvey’s today to get you measured.”

She glanced at Minka as Tess turned back to laugh, “She’ll wear the men’s gear; not what Elvey makes.”

“Good,” Ella exhaled. Minka absorbed that silently.

Tess trotted the horse back to the stables and immediately came back with a rugged Polonti whom Minka did not know. Tess said, “Ella, this is our head trainer Jasque. She wants to work with the horses, Jasque!”

“Very good. Come on back,” he said, nodding.

Minka said, “We need to run this by Efran, Ella.”

Tess and Ella looked at her as if having forgotten that she was there. Jasque said, “Yes, get his okay, Lady Ella, then come back.” (As Efran’s daughter, of course Ella would be titled. But having no precedent for that, Efran asked Ryal what to name her. Due to her youth, Ryal suggested starting with Member, which could be upgraded later. So her title was, “Lady Member of the Abbey Fortress and Lands.”)

“Be right back.” Ella turned to fly into the fortress, and Minka followed.

Inside, Ella paused, unsure where Efran would be. Catching up to her, Minka said, “He’s probably in Estes’ workroom on the second floor.” She went to the stairs to lead the way up.

When they appeared at the door of the workroom, Efran, Commander Wendt, Estes, DeWitt and his assistant Pieta looked up. Smiling, Efran said, “How goes it?”

“Father, I want to. . .” Ella trailed off, watching Minka cross the room to drop into Efran’s lap.

He covered Minka with his arms, smoothing her hair, and looked up at Ella again. “Yes?”

Ella said, “I hope you don’t expect me to sit on your lap.”

Efran laughed, “No, that’s Minka’s job. What did you want to do?”

Ella still seemed disturbed at the sight of Minka curled up on his lap. “How old is she?”

“Seventeen. What did you want?” he asked again, pointedly.

She shook her head as if disowning the sight. “Jasque has given permission for me to work with the horses.”

“All right,” Efran said slowly, “but you may not break them.”

“Does Tess?” she asked.

“I don’t know. But you may not. It’s too dangerous,” he said.

She watched Minka curl an arm around Efran’s chest. “I worked with horses a great deal in Dansington,” Ella broached.

“No,” Efran repeated quietly.

Ella exhaled in resignation. “As you wish,” she said crisply, turning out.

After Ella had left, the room was quiet, as Minka did not chatter or even speak. She merely hid her face on Efran’s neck while he continued to smooth her hair. Then he looked up to the sentry at the door. “Send someone to tell Jasque that Ella is not to break horses.”

“Cap’n,” he saluted, moving off.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 2

Minka sat up on Efran’s lap to look at the Commander and open her mouth. Everyone in the room was waiting for her to ask him if he wanted his tea when a soldier, Earnshaw, appeared at the door with a salute. “Commander Wendt, Commander Lyte requests your presence at the lower barracks.”

As Efran had loosened his arms around her, Minka suddenly got up to leave the room. Earnshaw stepped aside for her, then went over to stand in front of Wendt’s chair. “Commander?”

“Yes. I’m coming,” Wendt said, standing. Earnshaw turned for Wendt to place a hand on his shoulder and walk out behind him. After refusing to sign a loyalty oath, Commander Wendt had been blinded by Minka’s father, Surchatain Lightfoot.

Those left in the workroom remained silent for a moment, then returned to work. Efran sat chewing his lip.

Minka went down to the cavern below the cold storage room just to look around. There were no boxes, and nothing came to the ledge to talk with her. Missing Heye deeply, she went up again. After checking on Joshua and finding him engrossed in play with another child, she went to the faerie tree outside the fence on the hilltop just to look.

She could discern the faeries working, but none seemed inclined to come talk to her. Then she realized that they must have been offended because she had rejected being their Queene. So she wandered back to the gardens. With her now out of sight, Wyeth turned to instruct his men on their next exercise.

Minka spent the next few hours helping to harvest the last of the summer squash and the pole beans, and then taking the bushels into the kitchen for preparation. At that time, a man came up bowing. “Lady Minka, the Captain asks if you can accompany the Lady Ella around the Abbey shops.”

“Of course,” she murmured, pausing to wash her hands. She knew she was rather disheveled from spontaneous

garden work, but didn't really care. She could ride in any work dress she owned.

In the courtyard, she was mildly surprised to find four people and five horses waiting for her. Ella and Tess were there, both dressed in good Abbey casual wear. Also waiting were Barr and Tourse as bodyguard. Minka paused before them to murmur, "I'm sorry; I was just now summoned."

Barr and Tourse bowed to her; Tess snorted, "We can tell."

"Don't be rude," Ella rebuked her, smiling. They both turned to mount beautifully without mounting blocks. Minka looked down at her own low-heeled shoes: she had come out without even bothering to put on riding boots. So it was with some awkwardness that she kicked her dress out of the way to climb up on the saddle.

Tess chortled, but Ella preferred to emulate Barr's respectful indifference. They rode out of the gates and down the switchback at a walk. Tess and Ella led; Barr and Tourse rode on either side of Minka behind them. As soon as they departed the switchback, the girls in front led directly to Croft's. So the three behind them followed.

The girls were seated in a booth while their bodyguard took a nearby table. First thing, Minka gestured for the men to receive ales. This they were permitted whenever they were on duty at Croft's. When the bottles came, both men lifted them in acknowledgment to her. All this was in accordance with strict protocol involving bodyguards. For herself, Minka was reluctant to order ale because she didn't know yet what Efran would allow Ella to have. So Minka ordered tea.

Tess tossed her head to order two ales, but Minka told Ella, "I'm afraid you cannot have Goadby's ale until we check with Efran. Would you rather have tea or ginger beer?"

"Ginger beer is fine," Ella said quickly. But Tess still received two ales, and drank one quickly before starting on the second.

When all had their drinks, Tess and Ella fell to laughing over that morning's training session. Minka smiled, gathering that Jasque let Tess do what she wanted with the horses, as she was evidently very good at it. But when she mentioned being thrown, Minka glanced up in concern. "Oh, my, that does sound dangerous. Were you hurt?"

"No," Tess scoffed. "It's not really dangerous; you just have to know how to roll off." Glancing at Ella, she said, "I'll show you how tomorrow."

Minka said, "Oh, no. Efran said she's not to break horses."

Working on her second ale, Tess pursed her lips at her. "All right, Mother." She winked at Ella, who lowered her eyes.

Minka looked away in the silence, then said, "If Ella disregards her father, then she won't be allowed to work with horses anymore, and you and Jasque may lose your jobs."

Tess eyed Minka in rising defiance, but Ella said, "I won't disobey him, Minka."

"Good," she murmured, sipping her tea.

There was another long silence, during which Minka looked around just to see who was close enough to eavesdrop. But the tavern was only half full, as it was still a few hours away from dinner time. Her eyes lit on

her bodyguard, and she smiled at them. They smiled back. She knew them well; they were both favorites of Efran's.

But Tess saw Minka smile at Tess' own husband, who only recently stopped standing for Minka at dinner because Efran told them to stop. So she patted the bench seat beside her. "Come sit with me, Barr."

He shook his head mildly, at which she scowled playfully, "Get over here! I want you to."

He looked away. Minka hesitated, but said, "He can't; he's on duty, Tess."

Tess shrieked in laughter. "Will you stop acting like you're in charge?"

Ella said quickly, "Tess, I don't want trouble. Don't be disrespectful."

Tess rolled her eyes. She took a long swig from her ale as though to make a point, then got up to sit in Barr's lap. Startled, he picked her up to put her back on the booth seat. She laughed, rising again, but then Tourse stood to whisper in her ear.

Tess abruptly sat back down to glare at him. Barr glanced at him as well; Tourse looked off with tightly pursed lips. Although no one other than Tess had heard him, the whiff of blackmail in the air was strong.

Minka stood. "I need to get back to clean up for dinner." Emulating Efran, she put two royals on the table in overpayment.

Her imminent leaving created a dilemma for the bodyguard which Ella resolved by standing as well. "I think I'd better get back, too."

Their bodyguard immediately rose to accompany them. Tess lingered in the booth, but when they all began to walk out without her, she jumped up to follow.

All were quiet on the short ride back up the switchback. As they dismounted in the courtyard, Minka told Ella, "You probably should go tell Efran that you're back."

Ella paused. "You're not coming up?"

"Not right now," she said, then went in to ask a man to have a tub filled in her quarters.

Almost an hour later, Efran knocked on the door as she was getting dressed, so he had to wait only a minute for her to come unlock it. Seeing the tub, he said, "Oh, good; that's why you didn't come up." He began stripping to make use of her bath water.

"You may not want to use my water this time; I was very dirty," she said ruefully.

"You should see the water in the men's bath house," he said, stepping in. Then he stopped dead and said, "Forget I said that."

He was opening his mouth to say something else, but she said, "Let me go check on Joshua; I haven't seen him for hours." Reluctantly, he nodded, sinking into the water. She stayed in the nursery to play with the baby for a while.

Another half hour passed. As Minka began coming up the corridor from the nursery with nine-month-old Joshua, she saw Efran waiting at the door of the dining hall. Without seeing him, Geneve stepped off the stairs, turning toward Minka. "What happened when you were out? Barr just came in and took all of his things out of his and Tess' rooms!" Geneve, Gabriel's sister, was a forward woman of 22, the first woman ever to be admitted into the Abbey army.

"That sounds like something you should ask Tess," Minka said cautiously as Efran looked on from twenty feet away.

"She doesn't know!" Geneve said.

"Then neither do I." Minka went around her. Geneve, exhaling, went down to the back door.

Carrying Joshua, Minka entered the dining hall with Efran's hand at her back. As she stood behind the bench, she laughed, "He's getting too heavy for me to climb over the bench with him!"

Efran promptly took her in one arm to hold her elbow with his other hand and help her over the bench. When they had sat, he looked up to see Dobell on his way over with their plates. Another kitchen assistant had brought their ales.

"Thank you, Dobell," Efran said as their plates of sausages and squash were set before them.

"Cap'n," Dobell acknowledged. "Lady Minka." She smiled up at him in gratitude that he knew to give her about half of what Efran got.

Holding Joshua on his leg, Efran started eating. "What happened?" he asked quietly.

Minka had reluctantly begun on an answer when Ella appeared at the table to sit on Efran's other side. "Am I late? I wasn't sure when you'd get here."

"No, you're right on time," Efran said, raising his chin at Dobell again.

Minka mentioned, "Oh, the question came up at Croft's as to whether Ella can order ale."

"No, just at dinner," Efran said.

Minka nodded, but Ella said, smiling, "I am of age."

"But you are my daughter," Efran returned, smiling as well, "and ale can impair a girl's judgment. What happened with Tess at Croft's?"

Ella glanced cautiously around him at Minka, but Efran added, "Geneve was complaining that Barr moved out of their rooms here."

"Oh, no. Really?" Ella asked, wincing. "Tess was just teasing."

"What happened?" Efran repeated.

"Nothing, really. She just asked him to sit with us in our booth, and when he didn't, she sat on his lap. He *is* her husband," Ella said as justification.

Before replying, Efran waited until the kitchen assistant set her plate and ale in front of her and left again. Then Efran said, “Men on duty are bound to very strict rules as to their conduct. There are no personal asides; they may not do anything that is not related to their duty. That is particularly true for anyone guarding you and Minka, who are the two most important women at the fortress. That is also particularly true for Barr, who is the highest ranking Polonti in the Abbey army. As such, he’s scrutinized anywhere he goes. For his wife to ‘tease’ him when he is on duty makes all of us look . . . inferior. Undeserving of respect.”

“Ohh.” Ella hung her head. “I’m so sorry.”

“Unless you laughed or encouraged her, I don’t see why you should apologize,” Efran said, glancing at Minka on his other side.

“She didn’t, Efran,” Minka said. “Ella kept telling her to be respectful, but Tess was on her second Goadby’s by then.” Ella glanced at her. Minka said bitterly, “I listened to her at the fence plead with him to marry her. She said, ‘I won’t make demands on you; I won’t make life difficult for you’—then she did just that.” Ella wilted.

Efran nodded, readjusting his hold on the squirming baby. Seeing his teeth—four of them—Efran broke off a tiny bite of the soft inner sausage to put it to Joshua’s mouth. He swished it around on his tongue, then swallowed it and leaned over for more. Efran said to Minka, “You were upset before going to Croft’s.” Ella looked over in mild alarm.

Minka sighed, “Our first Law lesson was on your trial and my trial. It was important for Ella to know about them, but I didn’t want to relive either one.”

“Me neither,” he admitted, glancing up as Barr came in for a plate, which he took to the far side of the hall from where Tess and Wyeth were sitting. Efran nodded to himself.

Ella had her head down, eating, but Minka saw Wyeth look over to them from his table, then watch Barr sit on the other side of the dining hall. Wyeth then got up to take his plate to where Barr was sitting. Tess, looking around to find herself alone, left the hall.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 3

The following day (October 8th), after Efran had been informed that Ella had completed that day’s Law lesson and was now at the stables, he went out to sit and watch from an obscure vantage point overlooking the pens. He didn’t see her for some time, but he did see Jasque come out to look around before re-entering the stables.

Shortly, Ella emerged pushing a wheelbarrow of manure which she dumped in a particular spot outside the pen. The head gardener Garrett had given Greves, the soldier in charge of stable maintenance, very specific instructions on maturing horse manure for the gardens, which Ella was obviously following. Efran stood, pleased that she was doing the grunge work that all new hands had to do.

He was about to leave when he saw Tess’ brother Shanko leading a small white mare on a halter out of the

stables and across the back grounds. As that was the mare that Efran had reserved for Minka, he stepped over to watch Shanko lead it around the southeast corner of the fortress toward the grocers' gate—the narrow side gate leading directly from the kitchen to the switchback. Efran had never seen anyone taking a horse to the front courtyard that way.

So he followed in growing concern. As far as Efran knew, Shanko had been pulling informal guard duty for one or more shops on Abbey plots, having been too undisciplined for the army. Efran knew of no reason that he should be taking anything off the grounds, especially the mare that had been promised to Minka. When Efran got to the courtyard to see Shanko leading the mare down the switchback, he waved down the guard's suggestion for a horse and followed Shanko on foot.

Efran trailed him far down the main road to a side road into the western section, then on down to the rear of a shop with the sign "Tools Sharpened" out front. Still unnoticed in his work clothes, Efran watched Shanko receive apparent payment for the horse and walk off again. Efran watched him go, then walked up to the purchaser of the white mare to ask, "Are you the leaseholder of this plot?"

The buyer, a beefy man with a nose that looked to have been recently broken, glanced up at Efran disparagingly as he replaced his pouch on his hip. "Who wants to know?"

"I do. Show me your bill of sale for this horse," Efran said.

The buyer leaned forward to laugh, "Go back to your hole, crud."

The shock of hearing an epithet that he hadn't heard for many years caused Efran to shoot out a hand. But instead of hitting his face, Efran gripped his forefinger in such a way that he sank to his knees, crying in pain. Efran then leaned over to repeat, "Show me your bill of sale for this horse."

"I don't have one! I just bought it from a friend!" he cried.

Efran let go of his finger. "Who? What's his name?"

Gripping his hand while tears streaked down his face, the man weaved on his knees and said, "Grob."

Efran chuckled at the spontaneously created name, then asked, "What's your name?"

A cagey look came over the teary face, and he said, "Hassler."

Efran smiled. "All right. Get up, 'Hassler,' and come with me." The wary purchaser, whom Efran knew not to be Hassler, got to his feet to walk beside Efran and the mare up the main road to the notary shop. Then Efran pulled open the door to walk "Hassler" and the small mare inside.

Ryal and Giardi both came to the front. "Oh, how sweet!" Giardi said, coming around the counter to stroke the pretty little mare.

"Yes, Minka thought so," Efran agreed, smiling. "Oh, hello, Ryal. I want to lodge a complaint against this vagrant for receiving stolen goods."

"I see. And I suppose this horse is the goods which you recovered," Ryal said, leaning down for his writing implements under the counter. Giardi was still petting the mare, who nosed her in return. "Hassler" was stealthily backing up behind her at Efran's side.

“Yes,” Efran said. As he was describing the theft of the horse (without naming Shanko), “Hassler” suddenly darted out the door to leap off the steps and run away.

The three in the shop paused to watch the door slam shut behind the fleeing miscreant. They were silent a moment, then Efran said, “Well, forget that. He’s not important; I know who the thief is.”

“At the fortress? That’s not good,” Ryal said, putting away his writing implements again.

“He won’t be there for long. You can come up to play with Minka’s new pet any time, Giardini,” Efran added, smiling, and she laughed.

Efran then walked the mare out the door, down the steps, and up the switchback to the stables. Here, he encountered Ella coming out with another wheelbarrow of manure. He smiled, “Very good, Ella,” and she grunted.

But Efran paused to look for Jasque, who came up shortly. “Cap’n! What can I do for you?”

“Hello, Jasque. Isn’t this mare one of those you acquired a few days ago? That I asked you to hold for Minka?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Captain,” Jasque said, looking confused. “Where did you find her?” He took her halter to run a hand down her back.

“How often do you see Tess’ brother on the grounds?” Efran asked.

“Tess’ brother . . .” Jasque repeated slowly. “Would that be the young layabout in the tan jacket? Short, dark hair?”

“Yes,” Efran exhaled. “Where is Tess?”

“I was just looking for her, Captain,” Jasque said, disturbed.

“How is she doing in her work?” Efran asked.

“Well, Captain; she’s very good with the horses. She’s just late today,” Jasque said.

“When she shows up—if she shows up—send her up to Estes’ workroom on the second floor. And the young layabout is banned from the grounds,” Efran said. “Oh, and, Ella is not to break horses.”

“Yes, Captain, I got your word on that,” Jasque said with a brief salute. Efran nodded, walking away.

Because Joshua was eating more solid foods now, the nursery staff fed him in a raised chair with a tray. Being habitually unable to arrive at the scheduled time for his feedings, Minka let them do that, appropriating him to play outside or have dinner with his father. So today, waiting for word as to when the new mare would be ready, Minka decided to check on the trail of lime that resulted in a great pile for paving. The road crews were using so much of it, she was curious as to whether it was running out.

As she stepped out the great doors into the front courtyard, she glimpsed a spot of white on the upper

switchback, and gasped. It looked like a small child's dress—there appeared to be a young child lying on the switchback. So she flew to the gates, crying, "Open them!"

As the sentry did, he was explaining something, but she never heard him. Once the gates were open, she ran to the spot of white, stopping over it with a lurch. And she slowly bent to pick it up.

It was a doll, the doll from the cavern that she had given Geneve, because she thought she was pregnant. Smoothing the doll's dress, Minka glanced up at the third-floor window from which the doll appeared to have been thrown. Her head had been slightly cracked by the hard landing, but it was otherwise undamaged. Just a little dirty.

Dismayed, Minka carried the doll back into the fortress while the gate sentries watched in sympathy. She cuddled it, crying unwillingly, and took it to quickly hide it in the bottom of her wardrobe. Sternly wiping away the tears, she turned out to begin down the corridor toward the back door.

Not seeing her, Geneve darted off the stairs in front of her, turning toward the back door as well. She was in uniform. As Minka stood frozen in place, Wyeth came off the stairs to run after Geneve. She turned to him, but his height prevented her seeing the girl behind him in the corridor.

"Geneve! Wait, we—"

"I'm not pregnant, and I don't want to get pregnant, Wyeth," she said firmly. "I want to go back to duty. That's all I ever wanted."

"But—we're married, Geneve; you married me, and—and—" he stammered.

"I'm sorry; I'm not going to risk it," Geneve said. With that, she turned to resume a brisk stride to the back door.

Wyeth stood there a moment, head hanging, then turned to see Minka silently crying in the corridor behind him. She could barely look up to whisper, "I'm so s-sorry, Wyeth—"

He exhaled, coming up to her. "Thank you, Minka. I am all right," he said, smiling.

Shoved from behind, he gripped her arm to avoid stepping on her as Tess turned to run up the stairs behind him. He shook his head in humorous exasperation, then stepped back to bow to her. "I must get to the grounds now."

"You are very good at it, Wyeth," Minka said. He grinned at her and walked off.

"Oh, why can't people keep their promises?" she gasped, then flew up the stairs with the intention of flinging herself on Efran.

When she turned into the workroom, however, she came upon Tess' back as she said, "Tess reporting as summoned, Captain." So Minka quietly withdrew to the wall behind her.

Efran's leaning back in his chair enabled Minka to see him around Tess, and him her, but he did not look at her. He said, "Where is Shanko working, Tess?"

She paused at the unexpected question. "Ah, at . . . Dix's plant shop, as far as I know."

"How many horses has he taken off the fortress grounds?" Efran asked. DeWitt and Estes paused in their work to

look up. Commander Wendt was in his chair, already listening. Efran looked down at some parchments on the table in front of him as he waited for her answer.

Tess was silent for some time, and Minka heard her breathing alter. “Horses, Captain?”

“Yes,” he said, raising his eyes to her.

“None that I know of, Captain,” she said unsteadily.

“That’s possible,” he murmured, fingering a parchment. Then he sat up to say, “Jasque says you do good work with the horses. Don’t let Shanko ruin that for you. He’s about to get himself banned from the fortress grounds.”

“Yes, Captain,” she said.

“You’re dismissed,” he said.

“Captain.” She saluted and turned out with a white face.

Minka stayed where she was while Efran leaned forward to whistle. Finn stepped in. “Captain?” he saluted.

Efran leaned back. “Young man by the name of Shanko—short dark hair, tan jacket—should be at Dix’s plant shop. Go haul him up here.”

“Yes, Captain.” Finn saluted and turned out.

Smiling, Efran held a hand out to Minka. She came halfway across the room, then stopped to say, “Can I get your tea, Commander?”

“Tell Efran why you’re upset, then you can. Thank you, Minka,” he said.

“All right.” She took another step toward Efran, then said darkly, “I didn’t hug Wyeth.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 4

Fighting to not smile, Efran said, “Come here,” patting his leg. She finished the trek to curl up on his lap. Smoothing back her hair, he said, “Why did you feel the need to hug Wyeth?”

She groaned, “Geneve told him she’s not pregnant, and didn’t want to get pregnant, so she was going back on duty.”

Efran looked at the other wide-eyed men. “Where did you hear this?”

“In the middle of the lower corridor!” she said, sitting up in indignation. “She didn’t see me. No one ever sees me. But poor Wyeth was heartbroken.”

“He’ll be all right,” Efran assured her, coaxing her back to his chest.

“That’s what he said. But you should have seen his face,” she murmured.

“Well, we do feel everything deeply,” Efran said, quoting her remark about Polonti. (Estes grinned, unseen.)
“But fighting will make him feel better in no time.”

“If you say so,” she sighed. Raising up against his hands again, she asked, “Can I go see the new mare now?”

“Yes. I’ll be out there shortly,” he said, letting her go.

“Good,” she said, getting up. Pausing before Wendt’s chair, she said, “If you’ll come with me, Commander, we can stop for your tea on the way out to the stables.”

“That would be fun, Minka,” he said, standing, and she happily took his arm.

After she had procured a steaming cup of mint tea for the Commander in the kitchen, they headed out to the back grounds. Wendt told her, “Oh. I saw the third person again.”

“What?” she gasped.

“Yes, it wasn’t Death, but it wasn’t good, either,” he said.

“What was it?” she asked.

So he told her that the Third Person had offered him “second sight,” which he defined as the ability to see what others could not see. And he was offering it to Wendt because he was blind. “I declined his kind offer, because I’m pretty good at smelling traps. And this one stank.”

“Oh, Commander, you frighten me,” she said, holding his arm.

“No need to be frightened, I scared it away,” he said, smiling.

“Of course. I should have known,” she said as they walked on. Looking around the gardens, Minka saw Toby with Almund. “You know Toby, don’t you?” she asked. “He was the first orphan that Efran brought here, besides me.”

“Oh, yes,” Wendt said. “He’s a very sharp boy.” He took another sip of tea.

“It looks like he’s taken Almund under his wing. That’s Ella’s little brother; he’s eleven, I think. He showed up day before yesterday; had walked all the way from their home in Westford after his father, Webbe, strangled his mother—Palestrina. That was after he finally looked at Efran’s testimony, about what she did to him when he was eleven,” Minka said quietly.

“Oh, that’s bad,” Wendt said.

“Yes. Almund wasn’t talking at all when he first came. I don’t know if he is now,” she said. Then she called, “Toby, has Almund met Commander Wendt?”

Toby looked up. “No. C’m on, Alcmund; you need to meet the Commander.” He took the other boy’s hand to pull him toward Minka and Wendt. Alcmund came without resistance, though his face was still blank. Toby said authoritatively, “Alcmund, this is Commander Wendt. He was Efran’s Commander in the army of Westford, when he was Captain of the Red Regiment.”

“Hello, Alcmund.” Wendt stuck his hand out toward the boys. Toby brought up Alcmund’s right hand to put it in Wendt’s. Despite his shock of white hair, Wendt was not elderly, having lately turned 44. He was regaining his health and his strength due to his new position as advisor to Commander Lyte and the excellent fare provided by the Abbey kitchen.

Minka and Toby watched Alcmund look up at Wendt’s dark glasses. “You’re blind,” he whispered. Toby widened his eyes at Minka: this was the first thing Alcmund had said since arriving two days ago.

“That’s correct,” Wendt said, taking another sip of tea.

“Did you see something bad?” Alcmund whispered.

“To make me go blind? Not exactly,” Wendt replied. “Did you see something bad?”

“He’s nodding,” Minka whispered.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” Wendt asked.

There was a long silence. “Did it hurt?” Alcmund asked hoarsely.

“Yes, very much. Why?” Wendt asked.

“I want to be blind,” Alcmund said. “I never want to see anything bad again.”

“But then you’d never see anything good, either. And you need to see beautiful sights to get rid of the bad ones,” Wendt said.

“What will make it go away?” Alcmund whispered, face slack as his inner eye replayed something over and over again.

“Look long and hard at good things,” Wendt said. “Friends’ faces. Look hard at Toby.”

Toby turned Alcmund toward him, then turned his face to his right. “This is my best side.”

Wendt said, “Look at Minka. Looking at her makes everyone feel better.”

Toby then took hold of Alcmund’s chin to turn his face toward Minka. She knelt, smiling. “We’re so glad to have you here with us, Alcmund.” Wendt was silent to let Alcmund look at her, and he did almost smile.

“Look at what’s beautiful around you—the trees, the gardens, the sky, the sun. I miss seeing the sunlight most of all,” Wendt said. Alcmund turned his eyes up to the clouds, where the sun was about to emerge from wispy shrouds.

“Would you like to come see my new horse, Alcmund?” Minka asked. “She’s the color of clouds. We’ll ask Jasque if you can ride her.”

He looked around, slowly nodding.

As they all went toward the stables, they passed the archery and sparring grounds. While the archers were at practice, the men sparring had gone on to other duties, so Nyland and Wyeth were conferring over changes to their schedule. Wyeth broke off to look at Minka, who had turned to smile at him. Nyland shook his head at him. He said, "I know."

Meanwhile, in the fortress, Lorient was bringing Shanko up to the second-floor workroom. Lorient had been one of Master Crowe's lieutenants—the largest and most deadly of them. After Efran had exposed Crowe so that his own men killed him, Lorient had been poised to kill himself when Barr intervened. Barr brought him forcibly to the Abbey, signing his name on the application to join the army. When Lorient was immediately accepted, Barr put him in his own unit. Lorient then turned his considerable expertise to doing whatever Barr told him to do, and Barr had told him to find Shanko. So here they were.

Efran sat back in his chair as the blank-faced Polonti deposited the sweating, unsteady, reluctant visitor in front of the table at which the Captain, the Steward, and the Administrator sat. Shanko gawked at the robust tree trunk erupting from the center of the table. His eyes followed the trunk up to the branches spreading along the ceiling, then he fell to his knees to look at the roots that disappeared into the floor. With difficulty, Shanko hoisted himself back up to a stand by means of the tabletop. Lorient evaluated the tree only as far as it was related to the proceedings in the room.

Efran's eyes flicked up to the unknown Polonti soldier. "Thank you; stand by, please." Lorient saluted and stepped back against the wall without so much as blinking.

Efran chewed his lip for a minute, then asked, "Who'd you sell the white mare to, Shanko?"

The young man looked at him quickly, then narrowed his eyes to ask, "What mare?"

"I saw you," Efran said, smiling.

Shanko's face became a portrait of bemused innocence. "You must have been mistaken, Captain."

"Where've you been?" Efran asked.

"Working," Shanko asserted.

Efran turned his eyes back to the soldier. "Where'd you find him?"

"Sleeping in the wardrobe in the main bedroom of the house behind Dix's Plant Shop, Captain," Lorient replied.

Efran and Estes laughed; DeWitt shook his head. Groaning, Efran laced his fingers behind his head to look up at the branches adorning the ceiling. Then he leveled his gaze at the layabout. "I like your mother; she's a good friend of Marguerite, who enabled me to marry her darling Sybil," Efran mused. "You, personally, are a liar and a thief. But I don't want to hurt your mother."

He looked over at Estes and DeWitt, sitting silently. "Well? Help me!" Efran demanded.

DeWitt remarked, "Efran, sometimes you ask the impossible."

Efran laughed. Shanko, observing all this, was seen to relax. “Eh, don’t get your hopes up,” Efran advised him, and Shanko looked cautious.

Efran looked back at the silent soldier. “What is your name?”

“Loriot, Captain.”

“You were one of Crowe’s top men,” Efran said.

“Yes, Captain,” Loriot said.

“Who got you to come over to us?” Efran asked.

“Captain Barr, sir,” Loriot said.

“Of course. Are you in his unit now?” Efran asked.

“Yes, Captain,” Loriot replied.

“Barr has an eye for quality. He ditched Orrick and Huish for the best of Crowe’s staff,” Efran muttered. Looking at the rocklike Polonti, Efran asked, “What would you do with a petty criminal whose mother you respect?”

“Latrine duty is highly effective, Captain,” Loriot said.

Efran smiled, settling back. “Under the right supervision, yes. Take him to Barr; tell him my dilemma. You two devise something effective and not—burdensome on yourselves. Report to me in a week.”

“Yes, Captain,” Loriot said, almost smiling.

“Thank you; you’re dismissed,” Efran said in satisfaction.

Loriot saluted, then needed to only look at the young scoundrel for him to stagger over in reluctance.

After they had departed, Efran rose, sighing. “I’ll be out at the stables.”

Arriving unnoticed at the pens, Efran hopped up to sit on the railing and watch Toby, Almund, Minka, Wendt, Tess and Ella gather around the white mare, bridled. She was a little skittish with so many strange hands petting her, so Tess took the reins to begin leading her around the pen.

Minka caught sight of Efran, then, and ran over to climb up the railings to sit beside him. He kissed the top of her head and she held his arm. Then she said, “Oh, no! I left the Commander.”

Before she could climb down again, Efran said, “Call him over.”

So she waved and called, “Commander? I’m sitting with Efran.” Due to some strange faerie influence, the Commander could see a faint luminous outline around her form—Wyeth’s, too, for that matter. So he turned and began tentatively walking toward her and Efran. When he reached them, she guided his hand to the railing so

that he could sit with them. He placed his empty tea mug under the lowest rail before climbing up.

Efran said to Wendt, "I see you've met Ella's little brother, sir. How is he doing?"

"Eh, it's hard to say. At least he spoke," Wendt said, settling on the top rail on Minka's other side. "Apparently, he saw his father strangle his mother, or the aftermath."

"I'm afraid so," Efran murmured. He was watching Tess work with the horse, talking to Ella, who was nodding. The boys were standing by, watching.

Then Toby ran over to ask, "Can I ride Cloud bareback, Efran?"

"Let's see Tess do it, first," Efran replied. Nodding, Toby ran off again.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 5

"Cloud?" Efran asked Minka, smiling.

"The boys named her," she said, smiling as well. As they watched, she described for Wendt what Tess was doing with the horse. "She does handle them beautifully," Minka admitted.

Efran said, "Oh, one of Barr's men found Shanko asleep in the wardrobe of Dix's house behind her plant shop."

Wendt barked out a laugh and Minka looked at Efran in pained incredulity. He continued, "He denied anything to do with the mare, even after I told him that I saw him take her. So I handed him over to one of Crowe's former men who's now in Barr's unit. He said something about latrine duty."

Minka groaned and Wendt laughed, "That will cure him."

One of the men hopped over the rail to turn to them, saluting. "Good afternoon, Commander Wendt. Lady Minka. Captain, requesting permission to talk to Lady Ella. I'm off duty, sir."

Efran nodded. "Go introduce yourself, Quennel."

"Thank you, sir." Quennel shot off with a hop.

Minka told Wendt, "Oh, that's another cute Polonti. They're everywhere. Where did he come from?" she asked Efran.

"I don't know, but he's deadly with a bow; uses a strange technique I've never seen before. Towner has him training the other archers on it," Efran said. Then he turned to Minka with brows drawn. "'Cute,' eh?"

"Oh, yes, they just litter the grounds," she said authoritatively. Wendt chuckled but Efran looked perturbed.

Soon, Ella's potential suitors were littering the training pen. Tess had attempted to slide onto the mare barebacked, but Cloud bucked, and Tess slipped off again. So a couple of the men put Toby and Alcmund onto their shoulders to run them around. Minka described this to Wendt, sighing, "Oh, Alcmund is laughing."

"Good," Wendt nodded. "There's just something in the air here."

Jasque came out of the stables with another horse that needed work, so he waved the extraneous men away. Efran slid off the outside of the rail and had turned to help Minka down when Captain Neale ran up. "There you are! Commander Lyte requests your assistance, Commander Wendt. Have you had your tea?" he asked, looking around.

Minka tossed her head in victory as Efran and Wendt laughed. "Yes, I'm cleared to go. My mug is down there somewhere," Wendt said.

"I'll take it in for you, Commander," Minka said, bending to pick it up.

"Thank you, Minka," Wendt said. Neale saluted Efran before placing Wendt's hand on his shoulder to lead him away. Satisfied, Minka left the grounds with the mug to stop by the kitchen on her way to get Joshua.

As Quennel was leaving the pen, Efran caught him. "Quennel. Show me how you shoot."

"Captain!" Quennel cried in delight. "Come to the range." They walked amiably toward the firing line while word spread that the Captain, an expert archer, had asked to be tutored in a new technique. Thus, by the time they got bows and arrows and took their place on the line, there was a crowd of men behind them.

"It's *aiké* shooting, Captain," Quennel explained. "A Polonti gift of shooting without thought."

Efran looked skeptical. "I've seen you do it, but, I don't see how. . . ."

Quennel took up a bow, nocked an arrow, canted the bow at a stunning 40-degree angle, glanced at the target, then drew and released. The arrow sank in the center. Efran blinked. Quennel told him, "Take up the bow. Fix on your target. Nock, cant, and release. Don't think."

Efran took the bow, nocked and fired as instructed. The arrow almost missed the target altogether. Quennel shook his head. "You are not canting enough."

"Why cant so much?" Efran asked.

"So that you cannot shoot as you always have, aiming with the eye, but with instinct. Look at the target to fix it in your mind. Cant and shoot," Quennel said.

"What if the target moves?" Efran asked, nocking another arrow.

"Once you have put the target in mind, your inherited sense tracks it," Quennel said. "Shoot over and over, rapidly. That puts you in the—the river, the flow, of the instinct."

So Efran nocked and shot. Again the arrow went wide, but he nocked again and shot. He shot fifteen or twenty arrows, the men behind him feeding them to him, which went all over the target and into the hay behind it. The temptation to give up making a fool of himself must have been strong, but Efran was determined to get this down, somehow. So he kept shooting.

All at once, the arrows began flying to the center. It was not apparent that he had changed anything in his technique, but the arrows went to the center of the target so reliably that new shots began splintering the tightly grouped arrows already there.

Efran stopped, then, pensively eyeing the results. “I . . . could feel it when something dropped into place.”

“Yes,” Quennel said. “Practice, but the practice is for the feel and not the style.”

“Do I need to continue to cant?” Efran asked.

“No, you can hold the bow however you like, as long as you remain in the river. The more you do it, the easier it is to keep doing it,” Quennel said.

“I see. Thank you, Quennel.” Efran gave the bow back to him as other men surged up to learn *aike* shooting. *Strange*, Efran thought. *But somehow exactly right.*

At dinner that evening, Ella was blushing to be surrounded by men who wanted her attention. Efran was on her right, but the men took up space on all other sides, a few even kneeling behind her bench. Efran let that go on for a while, then said, “All right, she’s got to eat. Ella, pick two to stay and eat. Everyone else has to go sit elsewhere.”

Flustered, she looked down. “Oh, I—don’t know! They’re all so charming—”

Minka, on Efran’s other side, said, “Well, Verrin was there first and Allyr makes you laugh. How about those two for tonight?”

“Yes, that’s fine,” Ella smiled, unable to look up as the favored ones grinned and the others departed, downcast.

Efran turned to whisper, “Minka to the rescue” as Allyr said something that made both Ella and Verrin laugh. Minka looked at Efran’s lips so that his heart rate shot up. Still.

She glittered at him, and he kept one hand on her leg while he ate with the other. But she glanced over despondently at Tess and Geneve eating at their old spot while Wyeth and Barr ate across the hall. Tess looked occasionally at Barr, and Wyeth looked over to Geneve, but the other two did not return the glances. Minka had heard whispered that the men had returned to the barracks while Tess and Geneve occupied the two third-floor rooms. And it made her very sad.

The following day, October 9th, repercussions from Ella and Efran’s announcement rippled down from Westford. Efran’s scouts returned with word that Lady Palestrina had been quietly buried and Webbe stripped of his title of Surchatain. He was reported to be in a state of complete mental breakdown, and being cared for at a friend’s home. For now, the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford was ruling, headed by Lord Reinagle. A messenger from the Committee had been sent to Webbe’s oldest son Cyneheard at university in Euris, and they were waiting for a reply.

Messengers from the Standing Committee came to the Abbey fortress to ask if Alcmund were there. This Efran confirmed, but would not allow them to see him. Instead, Efran took Ella out of Law class for her to talk with the messengers in his presence.

“Yes,” Ella told them, “Almund walked here three days ago. I’m not sure what he saw, but it was something that disturbed him so much, he wouldn’t talk at all at first, and he still won’t tell me what happened. Other than that, he’s well, and he’s staying here with me.”

The head messenger told her, “We need to see him.”

“No,” she said. “I am the only family he has left here, so you will just have to abide by my word.”

“Goodbye, gentlemen,” Efran said, gesturing his foyer sentries forward. So the messengers reluctantly left.

Efran turned to Ella, and she momentarily leaned her head on his shoulder. “You did well,” he whispered.

“Thank you,” she breathed.

“Back to Law class,” he said with a slight smile. She nodded, turning to the corridor.

The section of Roman’s Law that Soames was covering with Ella and Minka today was that of marriages and divorces. The provisions for these were commonsensical and consistent with the practices around the Continent: marriages were by consent of both parties, and both must provide proof of majority—16 years old—if there was any doubt. Applying for a divorce required a 30-day waiting period before it was granted, and remarriage after divorce also required a 30-day waiting period.

But there were a few special exceptions that Minka found intriguing. Immediate emergency divorces were available to wives who feared violence from their husbands against themselves or their children, or in clear cases of infidelity or abandonment on the part of either party. Also, any soldier who was of age could apply for divorce or remarriage without a waiting period, as any might be called up for hazardous duty at any time. This was interesting enough for Minka to remember it.

Several hours after the messengers from the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford had departed, Efran was informed that the members of that same committee—the Lords Reinagle, Kelso, Bowring, and Rinkart—were at the wall gates, demanding to see the records attesting to Efran’s claim of Ella as his daughter.

So Efran went out to the courtyard to instruct, “Get me a horse and five bodyguards.” While waiting, he looked far down the road at the collection of nobles standing outside the gates while the butcher and baker were allowed through, and he smiled.

Shortly, Gabriel ran to the gates where Efran was waiting. “Captain, Geneve is back on duty, and asked to be a part of this bodyguard.”

“Not today, Gabriel, but you come,” Efran said.

“Thank you, Captain.” Gabriel saluted and ran back to the group of men gathered at the stables. “Now, this is a high-profile assignment, so we’re going with the men who have seniority—”

“And me,” Geneve said beside him.

Gabriel glanced at his sister. “He said not for this one, Geneve. So we’ll take—”

“Why not?” Geneve asked. Some of the men grimaced at her presumption.

“Geneve, that’s a question we don’t ever ask. Now, is Hawk here? No? Then we’ll go with Connor, Tourse, Arne, and—Detler. Hustle out.”

Geneve caught Gabriel’s arm as he tossed down the roster. “I want to talk to you when you get back.” He shook his head, pulling away.

When the bodyguard arrived in the courtyard with their mounts, Efran told them, “We are going to stop by the notary shop first, then you will accompany the lords you see at the gates as I instruct.” They nodded or saluted, then Efran hopped up on his horse to lead the company at a leisurely lope down the switchback to Ryal’s shop, where Efran had all of them accompany him in.

Giardi looked startled at their entrance, but Ryal came up immediately to the counter. “Yes, Efran?”

“Good afternoon, Giardini. Ryal,” he said, smiling. “Some nobles of Westford want to see the records on Ella. Do you allow this? I will leave a bodyguard here for you.”

“Yes, Efran,” Ryal said, “but let’s have no more than two looking at the records. Yes, I will appreciate a guard or guards to make sure that no records are taken or destroyed.”

“Very good,” Efran said, turning around to look at his men. “Connor, Gabriel, Tourse—you three will accompany Lords Reinagle and Bowring to view the files, and see that the records are handled with the care of a newborn. Arne and Detler, you will accompany Lords Kelso and Rinkart to Croft’s, and see that they stay there and drink. Do you have any money on you?”

Arne and Detler glanced at each other; Arne said, “No, Captain.”

So Efran dug in his pocket for a few royals to hand to him. “Tourse, when they’re all out of the gates again, you come tell me about it,” Efran added. The men nodded assent, smiling grimly.

“Now we shall go tell them this,” Efran said, leading them outside to remount.

They rode to the wall gates, where Reinagle shouted, “This waiting is outrageous! We demand that you allow us to see these purported records of this terrible slander and indignity that you have inflicted on Surchatain Webbe and his family!”

Efran said, “Lord Reinagle, the notary has stipulated that only two of you may come in to view the records; therefore, three of the gentlemen beside me will accompany you and Lord Bowring into the notary’s shop. Two other of these gentlemen will accompany Lords Kelso and Rinkart to Croft’s to wait. You may let them in now,” he told the gate guards.

As the lords entered, Kelso and Rinkart willingly went with Detler and Arne to Croft’s while Reinagle kept up a stream of outrage directed at Efran about this unconscionable slander of Lady Palestrina. As they pulled up to the notary shop, Ryal stepped outside to welcome them.

Glancing at Ryal, Efran said, “Lord Reinagle, you are directed to comport yourself with courtesy in this shop. If you threaten, abuse, or make a move to damage or remove anything here, my men will remove you. All right?”

Bowring said hastily, “Of course we’ll comply, Efran; he’s just upset.”

“Not like he’s going to be,” Efran predicted, turning his horse back toward the switchback. The bodyguard and nobles dismounted to go inside the shop.

At this time, Minka, in her chickening clothes, was cleaning out henhouse Number 3 (out of five). She saved the difficult work for those times that she had difficult thinking to do. And at present, she was torn up over the couples she had helped.

She was very sorry for having used her influence on Barr to get him to marry Tess, and had she realized that this was what she was doing, she would not have done it. But she had been naïve enough to think that Barr needed to hear Tess out, when he had been perceptive enough all along to know what she was like. Minka straightened, exhaling, “Why would he let me do that?” All she could think was that he was grateful to Efran for a second chance to live and to serve, so that gratitude extended to her.

“I will never interfere like that again,” she vowed, cramming dirty hay into her bag.

And then there was Geneve. Minka was really angry at her. When Geneve thought she was pregnant, Wyeth stepped up to provide her the honor and security of a husband. But when she found she wasn’t pregnant, she dropped him. “That’s wrong; that’s just wrong,” Minka murmured in distress. And why in heaven’s name would she throw the doll out the window rather than give it to one of the orphans? With a cracked head, it wasn’t any good to give away now.

Minka was lugging the bag of dirty hay out to the compost pile when she heard behind her: “Minka, I need to talk to you.” Surprised, she turned to see Geneve approaching with a troubled face. “Why hasn’t Efran given me any assignments?”

Minka blinked at her. “Wha—? You just came back on duty yesterday. What were you expecting?”

“I’m not anywhere on the duty roster for anything,” Geneve complained.

Open-mouthed, Minka said, “Why are you telling me? I don’t make the duty rosters.”

“So you can ask Efran,” Geneve said.

Minka shook her head. “Do you know how many men they have on the rosters now? And that I don’t tell him what to do with them?”

“Well, I would think you owe me a favor,” Geneve said.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 6

“What?” Minka said blankly. “Owe you what?”

“For. . . Never mind, that’s wrong,” Geneve said. Nodding slowly in agreement, Minka turned back toward the compost pile. Geneve reluctantly followed. “It’s just that—I’ve wanted to do this for so long, and to see it slip away like this hurts.”

Like you hurt Wyeth? Minka glanced back at her, but said nothing as she lugged the bag of dirty hay to the compost pile and emptied it. Then she folded up the bag to replace it in the coop. From there, she walked over to the well on the other side of the grounds to wash her hands.

When she turned around again, she was startled to see Geneve still with her. "I need your help."

"There's nothing I can do for you," Minka said, walking around her.

"You can talk to Efran for me," Geneve said.

"Oh my goodness, why?" Minka asked, turning back to her.

"Because he listens to you," Geneve said.

"Because I don't interfere in matters that are none of my business"—*at least, now I don't*, she thought. "He has so many good men, and so many new ones vying for a chance, there's no way I'm going to tell him who to put on the duty roster," Minka said as she resumed walking toward the back door of the fortress. Neither woman was aware of the number of men listening.

"If you were grateful at all, you would," Geneve said, following.

"Grateful for what?" Minka asked again.

"Grateful that I saved your life," Geneve said, finally.

At the back door, Minka slowly turned. "You know, I think you didn't have to kill that woman. Once you got the knife out of her hand, you didn't have to slit her throat, especially so close to my head. A man would have just disabled her, especially as she was Surchatain of Venegas, and your killing her created all kinds of trouble for Efran. And then, when he came in looking for me in all the blood, you didn't say, 'She's all right; she's under the table for safety,' you just had him come look at me covered in blood without knowing that I wasn't hurt. So, no, I don't think you handled any of that as well as a man would." To be fair, any deficiencies in her performance were due to her inexperience rather than her sex.

There was utter stillness around them as Geneve stood in shock, pale. Then she lowered her eyes and walked away. Minka glanced at the men who were watching her with eyes alight, and she turned to go inside. The door sentry, a man she didn't know, looked over her head to barely whisper, "Thank you."

Troubled, Minka went to her quarters to wash up and change clothes, then she went to the nursery to get Joshua. Forgoing a blanket or a book, she took him out to the bench to let him play in the grass. Toby, Tarrant, Alcmund, and Hassie came over to sit with her and eat apples. Toby brought one for Minka, of course. She ate it, laughing at their arguments and nefarious plans.

Tourjee the undergardener brought small pumpkins over for them, which they decided to take down to their hut. "Will you come, Minka?" Toby asked.

"I want to wait for Efran," she said, smiling.

"All right." Toby leaned over to kiss her cheek, so Hassie did, too. Alcmund looked away shyly, but Tarrant was already heading out.

“Take four men, and make sure the sentries know where you are,” Minka called after them, and Toby waved over his shoulder like Efran did. She then looked down at Joshua stuffing grass in his mouth, so she leaned over to get it all out again. When she looked up, Efran was ambling toward the bench, and she bit her lip guiltily. She didn’t know what he might have heard about her disparaging Geneve’s service.

He sat beside her to lean over and pick up Joshua, who was waving and gurgling in excitement. “Well,” Efran said, glancing around with a humorous look, “you prefer men to attend you, I hear.”

“Oh,” she exhaled. “Some day I will remember not to say anything outside where voices carry.”

“Was Geneve asking you to ask me to give her assignments?” Efran asked.

“Yes, and I shredded her for it,” she said dully. “I could have just declined, but I—told her she didn’t have to kill the Surchatain of Venegas, whatever her name was.”

“Clonmel. And you’re right,” he said. “Geneve is skillful—for a girl—but not indispensable like Barr.” He bounced Joshua as he talked.

Minka closed her eyes in remorse. “Oh, Efran, I’m so sorry for making him marry Tess.”

“Then make him divorce her,” he said, shrugging.

She laughed, pained. “No! I’m not interfering in anyone’s life anymore.”

He looked up at something specific, so she looked over at Tourse approaching. He drew up, saluting. “Captain. Lady Minka. The document inspectors have departed.”

“Sit down,” Efran nodded. “And—?”

Tourse plopped down on the bench beside him. “Reinagle spent several seconds flipping through the sheets and declared it all hogwash. The notary warned him that if he made the accusation publicly, he’d be hauled to court on charges of defamation, in which case the documents would be made public.” He leaned over to make faces at Joshua, who chortled.

“Who would be judge of such a trial?” Efran asked.

“Ah, as I understand, it would be the highest authority in the notary’s district,” Tourse said.

Minka smiled at Efran, who laughed, “I would enjoy that so much.” Joshua laughed along with him.

“Yes, with you and Ryal judging each other’s cases, you can’t lose,” Tourse said, which made Efran laugh again. “At any rate, Bowring read everything thoroughly, and left looking a pale shade of green,” Tourse observed.

“Ah.” Efran nodded. “When the Committee meets to decide what to do, Reinagle will vote for retribution, but Bowring will abide. We’ll see how that plays out.”

“What did you whisper to Tess at Croft’s to make her sit down and leave Barr alone?” Minka suddenly demanded of Tourse.

He looked at her with pursed lips, then asked Efran, “Do I have to answer that, Captain?”

Efran studied his son. “Yes.”

Tourse turned to tell Minka, “That she had been observed in the men’s bath house.”

Minka gasped, “Is that true?”

“Not that I know of. Should it be?” Tourse asked.

Efran laughed and Minka’s jaw dropped in horror. “I didn’t want to say it out loud,” Tourse pointed out. “All the same, she didn’t deny it.”

“You men are horrible!” Minka said.

“Then why are you laughing?” Efran asked.

“I’m not laughing!” she cried, laughing.

At dinner, Efran thought it a good idea, again, that the first men beside Ella would stay to eat, but he made it easier for them by allowing one on either side of her and two across the table from her. This was necessitated by the fact that suitor number four was the one who brought her a plate and Goadby’s, which Efran let her have with dinner.

As it was, Ella drank only half of it, and ate only part of her excellent chicken fricassée because she was listening to and laughing at the men around her. She made only a few comments, which were clever or sweet. And because she looked most like Efran when she laughed, she was very attractive throughout dinner.

Listening to the men, Efran had to frequently turn to Minka to wince or roll his eyes, so she got to laugh at him as well as them. Joshua laughed with her on her lap, but paid close attention to the men nearby. She glanced around to see Barr and Wyeth sitting with some other men while Tess and Geneve didn’t seem to be anywhere in the hall.

When Efran finally stood to signal the end of dinner for Ella, the men around her lurched up to bow. She inclined her head shyly and took her father’s arm. He reached his other hand to Minka to escort them both out. At the door of Ella’s suite, she kissed Efran’s cheek warmly. “Oh, that was so much fun. I’ve never had so much attention my whole life!”

“It’s about time, then. Goodnight,” Efran said, and Minka smiled as Ella flew into her suite tell Sudie (her Polonti maid) everything. Minka took Joshua back to the nursery for his nighttime bottle.

Efran was impatiently waiting when Minka got back to their quarters with Joshua. “What took you so long?” he groused, watching her put the sleepy nine-month-old into his crib on the floor.

“Boys need cleaning up after they do anything,” she said, staying out of Efran’s reach so as to get ready for bed herself.

“Just take everything off. You don’t need to put anything on,” he said, reaching out. She thought her wardrobe was a safe distance from the bed, but misjudged his reach. He caught her arm as she took out her nightdress. “Come here to me.”

“I suppose I will, then.” She nestled into him, and he covered her hungrily.

He raised up a moment later, panting, “Did you feel something?”

“Did I feel—what?” she laughed.

He looked around the starlit room. “Huh.” And then he returned his complete attention to her.

Later in the night, Efran was awakened by—something. He listened in the cloudy darkness for a long time, but finally went back to sleep.

The following morning, October 10th, Efran, Estes and DeWitt were in the second-floor workroom conferring over pending projects; Commander Wendt was seated in his chair. Efran complained, “Why is it taking Goadby so long to finish his plant?”

“He’s waiting on the stone,” DeWitt said.

“Stone?” Efran said blankly. “He needs *stone*?”—as they were sitting on a mountain of stones.

“He’s using a special stone, tivoli, that has to be imported,” Estes said.

Efran blinked at him. “Well, that’s precious.”

Estes then complained, “Goadby hasn’t fulfilled his obligation as a noble to contribute to the Widow’s Fund.”

Unheeding, Efran looked around in exasperation. “Where’s Minka?”

“Were . . . you expecting her?” DeWitt asked carefully.

“If she doesn’t get up here pretty quickly, Lyte’s going to have to fight her to get the Commander down before his tea,” Efran said, looking at the smiling Wendt.

“I thought they worked that out,” DeWitt said.

At almost the same time, Minka came swinging into the room carrying a mug of hot tea in both hands. “Here we are, Com—”

A loud *boom* rocked the room, sending her sprawling to the floor as the mug shattered against the wall. All of the men were thrown off their feet, and the Commander pitched out of his chair.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 7

While Efran was pulling himself up by the table, another crash jolted the room, shattering the glass in the east window. The seams of the rock walls separated and the floor sagged in one corner. Efran scrambled across the floor to grab Minka by the arm and throw her under the table amid the faerie tree roots. “Stay there!” he shouted. “Commander, get under the table with Minka!”

“I hear you,” Wendt said calmly, turning to see her outline as she reached out to him.

“Joshua, Efran!” she cried.

“I’m on my way,” he said, darting for the stairway. As he was running down the stairs, another tremendous blow rocked the whole structure, and Efran rolled the rest of the way down the stairs. He never felt it when he landed.

In the corridor, he glanced around at the heaving walls and uneven floor. Getting to his feet, he pushed himself along the wall to the nursery door. Men were grouped around the half-door, bringing out the last of the children to pass them along to the back door. Seeing that evacuation in progress, Efran bypassed it for now. His most urgent task was to find the cause of the battering and stop it. Instinctively, he knew it was not a natural phenomenon.

Efran ran out through the back door, sagging open. Another fierce blow rocked the ground under him. He fell off the steps to spread-eagle in the dirt, then scrambled up again.

There was nothing in the air hitting the fortress; whatever it was originated somewhere on the hill. *Another Destroyer*, Efran thought, *and we weren’t able to find out how to stop it.*

Seeing the ground roll under his feet, Efran glanced to the side as the new glass wall of the conservatory exploded from the pressure. He covered his head, but the small glass blocks were merely blown out of their lead framing without shattering. They hurt when they hit, but didn’t cut him. *It’s from below ground. More fireballs that we never saw?* And Efran began running toward the back fence.

Not seeing the ladder anywhere, Efran ran at the inward-leaning fence to grasp the spikes and pull himself up, propelling himself over by means of the thick grapevine weaving around the balusters. Landing, he barely noticed Lwoff running up to him from the now demolished armory outside the fence in the woods to his right.

Cautiously, Efran edged toward the cliff, prepared to fall back at the next jolt. As he leaned to look over the edge, something large and dark rose up to meet him. “Cap’n!” Lwoff breathed in wonder. “You got a—”

A giant snout with nostrils the size of ovens emitted hot air that forced both men back a step. Ten feet behind and above the nostrils were green eyes as large as lighthouse braziers, and just as bright, with black slitted pupils the length of Efran’s arm. Great winglike fins rose above the cliff to stretch almost the entire width of the hill when extended. The thick leathery hide was covered with gray scales. And the yellow belly had the appearance of brass plating.

“Leviathan,” Lwoff whispered.

Two great siphons alongside the creature’s head went erect and Lwoff shouted, “Down, Cap’n!” as he threw an arm across Efran’s chest to knock him onto his back, falling with him. A blast of steaming sea water erupted from the siphons to shoot just above where the men lay. Then Leviathan sank back below the hilltop.

Rising to their knees, Efran and Lwoff edged forward to look down over the cliff. At the bottom, where the hill met the Sea, Leviathan was gouging out rock and dirt from the massive holes it had just made in the hillside. “What is it doing?” Efran whispered.

“Making a nest, Cap’n,” Lwoff said.

They watched for several minutes as Leviathan carved out great clawfuls of dirt and rock, then experimentally wedged itself inside the gaping hole before emerging again to continue carving out the doorway.

Glassy-eyed, Efran stepped back from the edge, then turned to look at the ruins of the fortress. Because of the tree roots and branches encompassing it, the structure had not fallen completely to rubble, but. . . .

Great cracks in the stone walls ran from the foundation to the crenelation. Windows were skewed hopelessly out of square or separated altogether; all glass, including the decorative stained glass, was shattered, fragments glittering everywhere at the base. Splintered wood and rubble littered the grounds all around—fortunately, Efran did not see anyone pinned under it. But there was no decorative element that remained intact on the outer walls.

“It’s irreparable,” Efran whispered. “Had we all the money in the Continent and a lifetime of years, we couldn’t put it back to rights.” Rebuilding from scratch would take years—months just to clear away the debris. And the money? The Treasury? Essential records? Supplies? Food?

People were coming out of the fortress to look at the cracked and sagging stone, the dislocated shutters, the shattered doors. “Is anyone hurt?” Efran shouted.

Several people turned to shake their heads at him, and one man called, “Not that we’ve found, Captain!”

In a daze, Efran stumbled around front on the outside of the leaning fence. Fortunately, most of the horses had been transferred to stables on plots below, but those that remained had bolted out of collapsed stalls. Agitated chickens fluttered around the piles of wood that had been their coops.

Efran’s stomach dropped as he remembered the wild child who would not even come in to sleep at night. “Pia?”

I’m fine, Efran; trees are rerooting. All are fine out here, better than inside, he heard her.

“Good,” he breathed, continuing his run around the shattered fortress. He hardly paused to note that the *aina* child who could command animals could now speak to him mind to mind, as well.

He stopped outside the crooked gates to look into the courtyard. Great cracks separated the ground, making it unsafe for horses or people. Efran looked down at the switchback, where levels were now tilted, impassable for any wheeled conveyance. But the Lands itself below the hill looked undamaged. He turned back to survey the front of the Abbey fortress, their safe place that had stood untouched for centuries.

The front doors remained, but there was a large crack rising from the archway of the doors to the shattered transom windows above them. The courtyard balcony, above and to the left of the doors, was cracked clean through. The second and third levels were partially collapsed, the second-floor balcony listing dangerously.

He pushed past the stuck gate with the thorny wreath of roses to walk gingerly into the courtyard, cracked like parched ground. A number of people were staring at the ruins from the main road running through the Abbey Lands, and several of those onlookers quickly rode north.

The tears were standing in Efran's eyes, but he was too shocked to cry. "It's over," he whispered. "We can do nothing without the fortress, without the Treasury, the Law, the stores. All of it—the army, the homes, the shops . . . our orphans, our charter, our families . . . all the work invested in this place . . . all destroyed with it."

I shall not be shaken. The words carved on the wall of the keep came to him again, and he laughed in despair. As many times as those words had been proven true in the past, they now rose up from the ruins to taunt him:

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
for my hope is from him.
He only is my rock and my salvation,
my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
On God rests my deliverance and my credibility;
my mighty rock, my refuge is God.

"My mighty rock," Efran said, his voice cracking—"lies crumbled."

He looked at the roots of the faerie tree, grown more vibrant and strong since DeVenter's dragon tried to destroy it six weeks ago. Estes had said that the roots, having grown into the foundation, would enable the fortress to stand against anything . . . except the hill crumbling beneath them.

Efran raised his eyes, but he was too close to see the tree sprouting from the top of the fortress. It must be dying now.

At least the blows had stopped, and the hill sank back into stillness. Lowering his eyes again, Efran looked at the roots that extended around and through the stone of the fortress deep into the interior of the hill. Those roots were certainly now dislodged and broken. He wondered, how long would it take them to die? Those of a faerie tree, generations, probably—especially as healthy as they looked at present.

In fact, the roots looked almost—muscular. Throbbing with life. Almost . . . moving.

Efran's brows drew down as he focused on the roots in front of him. They *were* moving. They were—contracting upward. Drawing. Tightening.

He squinted, backing out of the gate to the switchback to get a larger view. In the grip of the massive roots and branches encompassing the fortress, the broken stones were moving. Realigning. Repositioning. Reconstructing.

Efran began shivering violently as he watched the ruined walls reform upward. Massive, sinewy branches coaxed doorways into realignment and window openings into squares again. Smaller branches lifted pieces of broken pediments, brackets, columns, quoins and other elements back into place as Efran watched, teeth chattering.

But then he felt the ground move beneath him, and he cried out in dismay—was Leviathan back to pounding? But—no. It was a different movement, a—a concerted gathering. The hill itself was reforming. Efran spun to look as the switchback realigned itself, beginning with the lower levels. In an upward wave, the ground contracted to close cracks and restore perpendicularity.

And he apprehended: it wasn't just the fortress that was alive, it was the hill itself. The hill and fortress were of

the same body. As the faerie tree on the roof had expanded to accommodate the faeries, so the hill had accommodated Leviathan. But now it was restoring its accommodation of the fortress.

Overwhelmed, Efran watched the fence and gates revert to vertical and the cracks in the courtyard close. At the same time, unseen but felt shifts in the ground below the fortress' foundations buttressed the roots and branches in their restorative work.

When Sir Ditson appeared before him, Efran almost fell down backward. "There you are, Lord Efran! Now that pesky Leviathan has got the bulk of her nest carved out, we need your permission to fix up the inside of the fortress. The tree can't reach everywhere, you know," he said apologetically.

"Yes. P-please do," Efran whispered.

"Oh, and the pens and stables? The animal pixies have calmed the horses, but our woodworkers need your permission for the reconstruction," Ditson rattled off, checking boxes with a huge ostrich quill on a yard-long list he had somehow produced from an inner jacket pocket of his autumnal gold suit. "Oh, and the henhouses. Chickens everywhere."

"Y-y-yes," Efran said, shaking.

"Aaaand, we mustn't overlook the armory, the storage and firewood sheds which your tree faeries out here should see to." Through massive gold-rimmed spectacles, Sir Ditson directed a stern gaze toward the faerie tree on the grounds outside the fence.

"All of it. Yes, if you—they—would," Efran said, willing himself to stop shaking.

"Very good, Lord Efran. Fence, gates, check." Ditson suddenly peered at the fence. "Even out the width of the balusters!" he shouted, and Efran jumped as the fence at his elbow realigned its spacing. "We're most happy to oblige. So much to see to! Nutbin is overseeing the kitchen work, and I must see that he doesn't eat all the spilled nuts!"

The little man doffed his autumnal gold top hat and disappeared. Efran was suddenly struck by how much Ditson appeared to emulate Justinian.

After absorbing everything Ditson had just told him, Efran ran up the courtyard steps into the foyer. Before he could even look around, he was accosted by four or five faeries: "Out! Out! Out!" "Work in progress!" "Go away!"

Only glancing at the devastation of the foyer, Efran would not leave until he had looked into the keep. And when he did, he saw the crucifix upright and undamaged, the window above it intact, and the inscription of the Psalm secure in its place on the wall. Some benches were overturned, but this was the only place on the grounds that remained unshaken. The faeries were not needed here.

When he exited to the foyer, indignant worker faeries pulled his hair and twisted his ears until he fell back out the front doors, rolling down the fortress steps, now realigned. From there, he ran around the west side of the fortress to the back grounds. Everyone else who had been inside was standing around, watching the reconstruction happen before their eyes.

Minka ran up to him, carrying Joshua. Efran took the baby off her arm as they both looked at walls shifting upright. "Have you seen Ella?" Efran asked, looking back over the grounds.

“Yes—last I saw, Quennel had her,” Minka said. He then looked back at Ella with three or four men protectively around her.

“And—the ch-children?” he asked, teeth chattering again. She pointed, and he saw Toby gathering everyone and counting. The tutor was sitting on the ground, crying.

“The soldiers got all the little ones out,” Minka told him. “All accounted for; all fine.” She drew a sudden breath. “Efran, the faeries are fixing the conservatory wall of glass.”

He looked over at bits and pieces of glass flying up from the ground to be fitted in leading that was suddenly straightened and appropriately curved. The glass bits were then smoothed all of a piece. “It looks better than when it was first installed,” he said, weaving.

“I was just—looking at the end of everything,” he said, struggling to comprehend. “And then—the tree, and the faeries—I guess they’re not mad anymore that you’re not their Queen—”

“Shhh!” she interrupted him, laughing weakly.

“Right,” he said, wiping his mouth. Joshua put his head down on Efran’s shoulder, forefinger in his mouth. “Did the Commander get out?” Efran asked, looking around.

“Yes, Commander Lyte came up and took him down to the barracks below, where they needed him anyway,” Minka said. “He said that nothing on the plots appears to be damaged. What—what caused it, Efran?” she asked, holding his arm.

“A—Leviathan, carving out a—a nest in the lower hill,” he said. “She’s done with the—whacking part, I understand,” he added.

She thought about this. “A Leviathan is a mythical sea monster.”

“Yes, like faeries are mythical, too,” he said, nodding. He looked down to see that Joshua was asleep on his shoulder.

“Did you see it? The Leviathan?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “She is very big, and dark gray with gold plating on her chest. Shoots water like Heye. Kind of like a dragon of the sea.”

Lwoff came up to them. “Lady Minka,” he said, effecting an awkward bow. “Cap’n, the little people are putting the armory back together.”

“Yes. Thank you!” Efran shouted in the direction of the armory. Joshua startled slightly in his sleep, and Efran patted his back apologetically. Then he watched pieces of lumber began rearranging themselves in the woods. “Have you looked in on Leviathan again?” he asked Lwoff.

“Just the outside of the nest, Cap’n—the new cave. The opening’s mostly underwater, but I think she made it pretty big on the inside. Would love to see what the cavern under the fortress looks like now. But, I don’t know that I’d check it yet, with her laying. Don’t want to get ’er riled up,” Lwoff said.

“Nooo, we don’t want to rile her. So, will we see—baby Leviathans in a few weeks?” Efran asked weakly.

“That would be natural, with her going to the trouble of hollowing out a nest, and all,” Lwoff said. Efran exhaled.

About an hour later, movement on the outside of the fortress appeared to stop. After giving the sleeping baby to Minka, Efran walked the perimeter of the fortress, seeing no exterior damage remaining. Balconies, windows, ornaments all sat as they had been on a straight vertical structure. The branches were curling back in place around protrusions, the green and copper leaves flitting.

As Efran rejoined Minka on the rear grounds, Ditson and Nutbin appeared, bowing. Ditson said, “Lord Efran, Reine Minka, we are very pleased to inform you that the fortress is fully refurbished and cleaned for your occupation. Is that not the case, Nutbin?”

Nutbin replied, “Indeed it is, Ditson! With that, King Alberon wishes to extend his apologies for mistakenly taking Reine Minka to be Queene.”

“Thank King Alberon for his most gracious apology, which we warmly accept,” Efran said quickly. “And we are deeply appreciative of your—amazing restoration of the fortress.”

“Oh, yes, we are extremely grateful to you, and to King Alberon,” Minka agreed. “But, may I ask what ‘Reine’ means?”

Ditson said, “Indeed you may, Reine Minka! It is the title of Queene in Waiting.”

Efran asked guardedly, “Waiting on what?”

“Waiting on when she is ready to accept the position, Lord Efran,” Ditson said, bowing.

“I see. Thank you,” Efran said, back to wary.

“You are most welcome, Lord Efran, and please do call upon us to serve you again,” Ditson said with a bow, then he and Nutbin vanished.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 8

Efran looked at Minka to ask quietly, “Would you want to—accept the position of Faerie Queene at some point?”

She looked shocked, then with a tender smile, shook her head. He asked, “Even if I hurt you again?”

“You don’t mean to,” she whispered.

He let down in relief, wrapping an arm around her. “I don’t know how much more I can take today.”

“Everyone’s going in,” she noted, hoisting Joshua up on her shoulder.

“Is he getting heavy for you?” Efran asked, taking him off her.

“Yes!” she said in surprise. “We can thank Bethune for that”—who had been his nursemaid as well as midwife.

“Yes.” Settling Joshua on his shoulder, he put a hand at her back to walk her up the back steps into the fortress.

It looked all new, straight, and clean; doors opened and closed smoothly, and not a crack remained to be seen. “I can’t believe it,” he breathed. “This place is not only alive; it heals itself.”

“With the faeries’ help,” she said.

“That came in a box with the fortress,” he noted, and she smiled.

(There was plenty of work remaining, however, as the fortress residents discovered throughout that day and those following. Faeries cleaned according to their own preferences, so kitchen workers discovered jars arranged on shelves without labels, for a cleaner look. Black and red ground pepper, which most faeries disliked, disappeared entirely. Shiny clean copper-bottomed pans were hung high on the walls for decoration, far out of reach of human hands. Many other surprises awaited Madea’s kitchen crew as they searched for vegetable bins that were found on top of high cabinets and dangerous pointy metal things that had vanished.

Likewise, nursery workers found the tallow they used for diaper rash had been formed into candles instead, and the diaper cloths stuffed with feathers and made into crib pillows [which were never used in cribs due to the risk of suffocation]. Breast milk was curdled for cheese, which meant that nursery workers had to put out an emergency call for more milk. Despite these and many other hiccups, no one complained about the faeries’ help.)

Today, when Efran and Minka brought their sleeping baby into the repaired nursery, tree roots still ran down the walls as swings or hammocks. Efran started to lay Joshua in a crib, but Minka reminded him, “The one on the floor is his. When he wakes up, he climbs out, no matter how high it is.”

“Oh, yes,” he said, remembering, so he put Joshua in the floor bassinet.

As they left, the nursery worker shut the half door behind them. Efran watched it quietly swing shut, and he was filled with a profound sense of gratitude for the immediate, emphatic restoration of their home, their lives, and their hope. He could not comprehend it. Minka, remembering her panicky run through debris to get Joshua *just this morning*, was regarding the spotless corridor. “I need to get the Commander more tea,” she murmured.

A sentry, a new Polonti named Tiras, ran up to salute. “Yes?” Efran said, snapping to.

Tiras said, “Messengers from the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford in the foyer, Captain.”

Smiling, Efran glanced at Minka, both knowing they had come to gloat. “I’ll be right there.”

“Captain.” Saluting again, Tiras trotted back to the foyer.

“Want to come watch?” Efran asked her.

“Yes,” she said, taking his arm. “Efran, God meant this place to stand.”

“I know,” he said, groaning at the weight of the gift.

Walking down the corridor, Efran was looking up at ceiling and wall seams that were miraculously realigned, but Minka had her eyes on the maid with the ash-blonde hair in front of them. She was carrying an armload of books back to the library that the faeries had used as step stools in their reconstruction but neglected to return, finding them convenient where they were. While Efran appeared to be unaware of the maid, Minka was watching as she dropped a book and bent to retrieve it without regard for the footfalls directly behind her.

Minka reached quickly for Efran's arm, but was unable to prevent his falling over the bending girl to roll flat on his back in front of her. She rose with a small cry as Efran looked back, apologizing. Seizing the wayward book, she ran with her armload into the library.

"Did I hurt her?" Efran asked as Minka attempted to help him up when he was simply rising on his own.

"No, I don't think so," she said thoughtfully. As they passed the library, they both glanced in to see her intently reshelving books, head down. Before they went on, Minka noticed the square of slate and stick of chalk the girl pushed back down into a large pocket.

Passing the dining hall, Efran glanced in to see Ella standing at the back table surrounded by men who were discussing what clean-up work remained from the tremors. Efran leaned in. "Ella, please come to the foyer."

"Certainly, Father," she said, joining him and Minka in the corridor while the young men looked on.

"Thank you; it will only take a moment. Are your quarters in good shape?" he asked.

"Yes, Father; Sudie and I had only a little rearranging to do. We just finished restocking the storage room down the corridor. For some reason, all the clean chamber pots had been hidden in the back of a closet. Sudie and I were handing them out at the door right and left," she laughed.

"Good," he noted. Faeries disliked reminders of human biological functions.

Holding Minka's hand, with his other hand at Ella's back, Efran walked them to the foyer where two men in purple uniforms stood waiting. One focused on Efran's entry while the other was glancing around the pristine foyer, moving only his eyes. "I am Lord Efran," he said, stopping before them.

"Lord Efran," the first man said, and paused to look at Ella, who looked back with questioning brows.

"Yes?" Efran said.

The man drew a breath to say, "The Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford is . . . appalled and dismayed by the . . . terrible collapse of your fortress, and, offers whatever help you may require to—rebuild. However, they also insist that as your fortress is obviously . . . uninhabitable, that you surrender Chataine Ellacombe to her own home in Westford." Having successfully got out his message, he clamped his mouth shut.

"Ella? Do you wish to reply?" Efran asked.

"Yes. This is my home. I'm not leaving," she told the messenger.

Efran nodded. "Thank you, Ella. You may go." With a brief curtsy to him, she swiftly reentered the corridor to return to the dining hall.

Efran turned back to the messengers. “As for the condition of the fortress, I’m not sure what to do,” he said placidly, letting his eyes roam over the glistening foyer, with the brown roots running down from the center of the dome in the original crevices of the vaulted marble ceiling.

Seeing a pebble on the white marble floor that one of the men had tracked in, Efran picked it up to put it in the messenger’s hand. “There. That should take care of it. Now, please thank the Committee for their concern, and give them my assurances that we will carry on despite interruptions. You’re dismissed.”

Pebble in hand, the messenger bowed. He and his fellow turned out, both eyeing the stonework around them.

Efran and Minka watched, gratified, as the messengers mounted their horses in the courtyard and the sentry opened the gates for them to depart. “I still can’t believe it,” he whispered. “What a killing blow that would have been if the fortress were still rubble around us.”

She gasped. “Bells! Bells are ringing above us!” She looked up.

“Bells?” he said, listening. Then his face opened in surprise. “Yes, I hear them.”

“Oh, let’s go look!” She started running for the stairway.

“Now, now, we walk,” he said reprovingly.

She cut mildly humorous eyes to the man notorious for running down corridors. “Yes, Captain.”

He had to go slower for her to climb all the various stairs, but they finally made it up to the highest point of the fortress, the bell tower, in front of which the faerie tree had sprouted. He and she paused to take in its spreading, defiant glory, the shade of its branches covering the entire rooftop. And behind it the bells were indeed ringing after many long years of silence.

Numerous faeries emerged from the tree to greet them, including the first faerie in the fortress, Kele. Her dress was cherry red today, which went well with her white hair. “Oh, Kele, I’m so glad to see you!” Minka cried. “The bells are ringing!”

Vexed, Kele said, “Oh, I’m so sorry. Everyone was so excited about the work we got to do today that we drew an unexpected influx of bell faeries who just could not resist, even though they had not permission.” The bells went silent but for the reverberations.

“I give them permission!” Minka cried.

“Yes, let them ring,” Efran agreed. “But ask them to ring so that they can be heard only by those who want to—or need to—hear them.”

“That’s wise,” Minka agreed.

“Oh, how kind you are to our bell faeries, Lord Efran!” Kele exclaimed.

“What a glorious sound,” Minka breathed, as the bells began pealing again, muted for the visitors.

“Kele,” Efran asked, “do you know anything about the Leviathan that made all your work necessary today?”

“Oh, yes, Lord Efran, how naughty she is! But she claimed the hill as her ancestral laying ground, so came back to make her nest in its caverns again. She just had to clear the entryway,” Kele said. “Her name is Symphorien.”

Efran said, “If you will, please tell Symphorien that we acknowledge her right to her nesting grounds, and mean her no harm, so let her please be gentle with us.”

Kele laughed in her tinkling way. “Yes, Lord Efran, we all desire to live peaceably.”

“Very much so. Thank you, Kele,” he said, bowing, which caused her to get all fluttery.

As Efran and Minka turned back to the stairway, she murmured, “Charmer.”

“Just seeing if it works on faeries. Hoping to make it work on Leviathans,” he returned.

She closed her eyes. “I love the bells. How did I ever live without them?”

He paused in the stairway to absorb the piercing beauty of the sounds. He murmured, “When you’re deaf, you can’t imagine the sweetness of song. I never knew how many ways love finds expression.”

“Deaf!” she gasped to herself, then nodded in comprehension.

They started down the stairway again. “Did you notice,” she broached, “how all parts of the fortress and hill are being put to use again? The bells, and the nesting grounds . . . ?”

“Yes, I’m beginning to see that, and how the hill accommodates use. I’m still shaking over the hill shrugging itself back up like a—giant rising,” he said. *The spirit of the hill. God put an angel in the hill to watch over us—as the angel of the palace of Westford brought it down because of the evil in it. Oh, God, let us stay faithful.*

She hugged him tightly, and they went in to dinner, which the kitchen workers had prepared with hunting knives.

Early the next day, October 11th, Minka had just returned Joshua to the nursery after his morning bottle when she was startled by a loud, angry voice in the corridor behind her. She turned to see one of the cleaning supervisors berating the girl with ash-blond hair, who was standing before her with staring eyes, paralyzed. Minka interrupted her: “Excuse me. I’ll take care of this,” she said, taking the girl by the arm to lead her outside, feeling her tremble the whole way.

Minka took her to a safe spot away from everyone else, then turned to face her. The girl was no taller than herself, with pale blue eyes in a pale face. But she pressed her lips together to buttress her courage and said thickly, “I am deaf.”

Minka nodded, having already realized that. So she pointed to the slate in the girl’s pocket, who swiftly withdrew it to hand it over, with the chalk. Minka wrote, “I am Minka. Your name?”

“Sear,” the girl said, then spelled it on her chalkboard: “Cyr.”

“Cyr. That’s lovely,” Minka said, then looked to see who was in the garden area this morning. She did not notice that Wyeth had just exited the back corridor. But he saw her, and paused.

Cyr experimentally made a hand sign to Minka, who shook her head in dismay. She took up the slate again to

write, "Want to work in the gardens?" Reading it, Cyr nodded.

So Minka took her by the hand over to Tourjee, the undergardener. "Tourjee," she said.

He turned. "Oh, good morning, Minka. Thank you for your help in the orchards, dear." He was tall, lean and fatherly to everyone under forty.

"You're most welcome, Tourjee. This is Cyr; she's a good worker, but she's deaf. Do you need any help?"

"Oh, always, Minka. Hello, Cyr." He nodded, and she tentatively nodded in return. Minka held up her slate to rub out the previous words and write, "Tourjee Undergardener GOOD MAN"

When Cyr read it, she smiled at him, her whole face brightening. She made hand signs to him, as well, but he shook his head. "Sorry, Cyr; I don't know the hand language. But I'd like to learn."

"Oh, I as well," Minka said. "But she has the slate, if there's anything you must tell her."

"Most of it I can just show her. Come, dear; we're planting the winter greens today," Tourjee said, waving her along.

Cyr looked back to smile at Minka, who exhaled in satisfaction. Wyeth observed all this, then went on out to the sparring grounds.

Minka re-entered the fortress by the back door. Progressing up the corridor, she paused to watch the cleaning supervisor impatiently bring more books into the library. "I told her twice to get these off the balcony," she fumed.

"She's deaf," Minka said.

"That's no excuse. If she can't do the work, she should be put out," the woman stated.

Considering that, Minka said, "Isn't it difficult overseeing people who can't do their jobs?"

"Oh, you wouldn't believe!" the woman exhaled, straightening.

"You need a more suitable position, don't you?" Minka asked.

"I would appreciate it," she said stiffly.

"I can help you there. What's your name?" Minka asked.

"Orla," the woman said, studying her. She knew this was Lord Efran's wife, but doubted her ability to do much.

"Wait right here," Minka said, turning out of the library to run straight up to the second floor.

Minutes later, Minka returned to hand her a slip of parchment. "There you are! It's your new work order from the Steward Estes. You're to report to Administrator Doane in his office off the foyer."

Taking the order, Orla hesitated. "The cripple?"

Minka smiled with an evil, arched brow. "You could say that."

Dubious, Orla glanced at the order, which had the date, some numbers, her name, and "Gushken." Wondering what kind of supervisor a *gushken* was, she walked the order up to the foyer, where she presented it to the young man at the desk. "I am Orla. I suppose I'll be helping you?" she asked reluctantly.

Looking at the order, Doane's face brightened. "Oh, excellent! No, Orla; you've got a far more important job than that, with great pay. Let me note your starting day, here, October eleventh." This he wrote in a ledger at his elbow. "Now, take this to Gushken on the eastern grounds," he instructed, handing the work order back to her with a nice smile.

She could hardly help smiling back at him. "Very well."

She exited to the courtyard to walk around the east side of the fortress, mulling, *So Gushken is a person. I've heard the name. But who . . . ?* Looking around, she saw nothing but a man in coveralls and a row of wheelbarrows. But there was a handsome blond soldier striding toward her, so she presented the work order to him. "Gushken?"

Connor bowed to her. "No, ma'am," he said, pointing to his left. Hearing his name, the man in coveralls looked over as Connor resumed his errand.

"Well it's about dam' time," Gushken grouched, stalking over to snatch the work order from her limp hand. "And in fancy-schmancy inside worker clothes," he snorted. "You'll learn to wear coveralls in time. But now these here wheelbarrows has got to be dumped over the cliffs here. Let me tell you right up front that you *do not attempt* to dump your load through the fence; you gotta walk it outta the grocers' gate over to the cliff, so don't fall like the last idiot did. You gotta get around to the back cliffs and you *do not* dump the loads anywhere but the *south* cliffs. Are you hearing me? Then get going, and start with this wheelbarrow of garderobe overflow that's been sitting here for two days. Get on it!"

Face frozen, Orla complied.

Midmorning, the wall gate sentries sent up word to Efran that Lords Reinagle and Bowring, along with Ella's older brother Cyneheard, were requesting to see him. Cyneheard was newly home from university. They were being detained at the gate because Cyneheard was armed, and refused to lay down his sword.

Efran was exceedingly pleased. The wall had been completed around the entire eastern section, so that all occupied plots and many prospective ones were now protected. Extension of the northern wall eastward was already underway. The wall guards were well trained; the messaging effective so that he didn't have to ride down there himself to find out what was going on.

"Excellent," Efran murmured to the sentry, Stourt. "Reinagle and Bowring may come up; Cyneheard will remain outside the gates until he lays down his sword. They will be escorted to the small dining room, where I will have Ella waiting to talk to them."

"Captain," Stourt saluted, and ran back out to his horse.

Still smiling, Efran asked that refreshments be brought to the small dining room, as well as Ella, Minka, Estes and DeWitt. "Oh, and Commander Wendt if he is available. If Commander Lyte has already stolen him away, we'll let them be."

“Captain, Commander Wendt is already down at the lower barracks, but we’ll summon the others,” Ellor replied with a salute.

“Thank you.” Efran turned to the small dining room to wait. He looked up in persistent wonder at the living roots descending from the unblemished ceiling, and inhaled deeply. He still could hardly take in the swiftness of their latest deliverance.

Minka and Ella arrived at the same time as the refreshments of ale, flatbread, walnuts, and pumpkin custard. “We were in Law class,” Minka told him. “Pumpkin custard! May I try it?”

“Of course,” Efran said. He turned to tell Ellor, “Send Soames back to the notary shop until we’re done here.”

“Captain.” Ellor moved off, pausing to salute DeWitt and Estes as they arrived.

Taking an ale, DeWitt said, “This should be entertaining. I heard about the messengers Reinagle sent yesterday.”

“Quite,” Efran grinned. “Everyone get what refreshments you want and sit down.”

“Is Cyneheard really with them?” Ella asked, picking up a custard cup and a piece of flatbread.

“If he’ll condescend to leave his sword at the gates,” Efran said, and she snorted. She sat beside Minka, who was stirring walnuts into her custard.

Efran alone remained standing as three men entered the room. “Welcome, Lord Bowring, Lord Reinagle. Cyneheard, I am Lord Efran. This is my wife Lady Minka, my Steward Estes, and my Administrator DeWitt. Please all of you help yourselves and be seated.” Cyneheard was a tall, lanky 18-year-old with curly brown hair that was exactly the correct length for university men. He was understandably tense, his blue eyes flicking around the room before they landed on Ella, contentedly eating custard.

Efran was sitting himself as Reinagle, trembling in anger, said, “This is *Chatain* Cyneheard.” Ella glanced up at her brother with a sardonic smile as he studied her.

“Accept my apologies, Chatain,” Efran said, untroubled. “Do help yourself.” Bowring immediately took an ale; Reinagle sat with nothing. After hesitating, Cyneheard also took an ale.

Efran said, “Ella agreed to be available to answer your questions this morning, so feel free to ask. I am trusting your lordships to be noble with your words. I will permit no abuse nor disrespect of her.” He smiled around the table. Ella lifted her head, tears standing but contained.

That short speech resulted in several minutes of silence while Cyneheard studied Ella and she giggled to Minka about something. Bowring, sweating, finally said, “We received numerous reports of your fortress collapsing yesterday, Efran.”

“Minor construction accident,” Efran said off-handedly. One or two people around the table sternly did not smile nor choke on their ale.

Cyneheard inhaled, then said, “Ellacombe, you’re wanted at home.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 9

“By whom?” Ella asked. “Oh, that custard was marvelous.”

“You’re permitted another,” Minka said, rising to fetch one from the sideboard. “The custard cups are so small.”

“Thank you,” Ella said, taking it. Then she looked up inquiringly at her brother as Minka sat again.

“By me,” Cyneheard said.

“Are you not returning to university?” Ella asked.

“Yes, but—I will be home on holidays,” he said.

“So I’m supposed to leave my father and all these people who care about me in order to wait for you in an empty house where your father murdered our mother?” she asked, delicately licking the spoon.

“I do not accept this—slander of our mother,” Cyneheard said tightly, glancing at Efran.

“Be careful; Ryal will charge you with defamation if you go around saying it was false,” Ella replied, half-laughing.

“It’s not funny,” Cyneheard whispered through gritted teeth.

“No, indeed, he’s perfectly serious about it. His reputation is at stake,” Ella said.

Beginning to sweat, Cyneheard looked at Reinagle, who raised up and opened his mouth. Efran darted hard eyes to him and hissed, “Don’t speak.”

Without looking at him, Reinagle slowly deflated, finally shutting his mouth. Ella grinned at Efran, who looked back complacently.

There were long minutes of silence while Cyneheard looked down. Finally Ella asked, “Where is Webbe?”

Eyes lowered, Cyneheard replied, “Staying with Lord Rinkart, for the time being.”

“Did he strangle her to death?” she asked.

Cyneheard blinked rapidly. “He was driven to it by the accusation.”

Ella laughed. “Really? After reading my father’s testimony, he was so convinced of her innocence that he went home and killed her with his hands?”

“Don’t say that!” Cyneheard shouted.

“It’s the truth!” she flung back at him. “We’re speaking the truth now.”

Cyneheard sat with head hanging. “I don’t understand any of this.”

“Did you read the file at the notary’s?” she asked.

“No,” he said.

“Then that’s where you need to start. Read it all. Then come back with your questions,” Ella said.

Cyneheard sat drooping, then abruptly stood and walked out. They heard him depart through the front doors. Bowring hastened after him. After a moment, Reinagle followed.

Efran looked at his daughter. “Well done, Ella. Very well done.” Minka reached over to grip her hand.

“Thank you,” Ella said, then drew a deep breath. “You’ll notice he never even asked about Alcmund.”

Efran nodded, then said, “I have a feeling he’ll be back. We’ll postpone your law lessons for a while longer.” She silently consented.

DeWitt stood, saying, “Let us hear what happens. I don’t think we need to be present for such a personal interview.” Estes rose in agreement.

Efran said, “Yes. Thank you for coming down.”

Looking to Ella, Estes said, “I’m as proud of you as if you were my own. So you must consider me your uncle.”

“Done, Uncle Estes,” she smiled, and they went on out.

An hour later, Cyneheard was back by himself. Efran summoned Ella and Minka to the small dining room, then sat while Cyneheard threw himself into a chair, head in his hands.

While they waited for the women, Efran noted, “You never even opened your ale.”

Cyneheard stuck his hand out, and Efran put a fresh bottle in it. Then Cyneheard looked at him and said, “I didn’t even know that that was physically possible”—obviously referring to Efran’s testimony. Efran raised his brows, shrugging. He also took a drink.

Cyneheard was inhaling, possibly as a preface to another observation, when Minka and Ella came in. Efran rose to seat them, then shut the door. Ella waited for her brother to speak without helping him along. He abruptly asked, “What do you expect to do here?”

She evaluated the question, then said, “I am being tutored in the Law; I am learning to train horses, and I am meeting a great many men.”

“You could do all that at university,” he said dismissively.

“But here I have worth,” she said.

Cyneheard rocked in his chair, then looked at Efran to say, “My father is paying for university.”

Efran looked at him quizzically, then opened his hands. *All right. So?*

Deeply conflicted about something, Cyneheard continued to rock in his chair. Minka said, “You’re welcome to stay here if you like, Cyneheard.” Efran and Ella looked at her in surprise, then at Cyneheard.

He lowered his head, shuddering with grief. “Yes,” he croaked. Then he raised up, bracing himself, and said, “But I need to finish out this term, which ends at Christmas.”

Minka said, “Then write to us, and we will write you, as well.”

“Would you really?” he gasped, studying her.

“Of course. Won’t we, Ella? Efran?” Minka said.

“Yes,” Efran said.

“Oh, Cyneheard.” Ella got up to walk around the table and put her arms around his shoulders while he sat.

That broke the dam. He held her arm with one hand, choking out unwilling sobs while tears ran down his face. “My father paid through this term, but they may k-kick me out when they know of the d-death,” he gasped.

“Then come whenever you want,” Efran said.

“Why would you have me?” Cyneheard breathed.

“You’re family,” Efran said, smiling.

Cyneheard stared at him. “I had no idea that you were so—all I knew was that you were the Polonti Captain who had stolen the young Chataine as wife.”

“I am renown as the bride stealer,” Efran admitted, pleased.

Cyneheard shook his head. “This place is bewitched.”

“Or something more powerful,” Efran offered. “Let’s say, blest.”

Ella pulled on Cyneheard’s hand. “Come, let me show you around. Alcmund is here, too. You’ll never want to leave.”

He stood, glancing around the room in bewilderment, then walked out with her.

Efran and Minka remained seated. He turned to her to ask, “How did you know that he wanted to stay?”

“It seemed obvious,” she murmured.

“To you,” he exhaled.

“You wanted to get back at Webbe. Now you have his whole family,” she observed.

He sat back to regard her. “That is a little frightening.”

“That is your charter,” she said, leaning toward him, and he enveloped her.

A little while later, Ella brought Cyneheard to the dining hall to eat the midday meal with them. There, he was astonished at the quality of the food and the amiability of the men who stopped by Ella’s table to be introduced to him. They all agreed that he needed to stay in the barracks when he returned for good. “We’ll find a spot for you even if we have to pass you off as part Polonti,” Quennel told him.

“What about my blue eyes?” Cyneheard asked in genuine doubt.

“Squint. A lot,” Quennel told him, and there was much supportive laughter.

Now that the children were out of class, Ella took Cyneheard to find Alcmund, who was surprised to see him and actually glad to hear that he would be coming to stay at the fortress as well. “Efran is our father here,” Alcmund told him. “Not just Ella’s, but of all of us.”

“That’s good,” Cyneheard said. “I’m glad to see you and Ella doing so well here. Yes, I will be glad to come.” He was surprised by the relief of saying it out loud.

When Cyneheard came to the foyer to leave shortly afterward, he hugged Ella and shook Efran’s hand. Efran told him, “Keep us apprised, but if you just show up, that’s all right, too. Sometimes it’s unavoidable.”

“Thank you. I hope to make it through the term, but, I will come at some point.” Cyneheard looked at Ella to say, “It’s a strange feeling to be welcomed by people who don’t know you.”

“I know! Isn’t it wonderful?” she laughed.

“Yes,” he said.

When he mounted his horse in the courtyard and turned its head to ride out the gates, he raised his face at the sound of bells. Looking up to the unseen bell tower, he thought how touching it was to be sent off with the ringing of bells. It was like a—benediction.

Following, Efran summoned Soames to finish Ella and Minka’s lesson in the Law for the day. Ella groaned, as that meant she might not have time for the horses before dinner, but she did not complain.

At that time, a very unhappy Geneve was at Croft’s with her brother Gabriel, and she was complaining. With strained patience, he listened as she said, “I don’t know what to do now. I don’t know where it all went wrong.”

“Your first mistake was sleeping with Nares. Your second mistake was marrying him,” Gabriel said brutally.

She gritted her teeth. “Why?”

He lowered his voice. “Because, in the Captain’s eyes, you are no longer a soldier but a potential mother. That’s why he doesn’t like women in the army, Geneve—he will never put a pregnant woman in harm’s way.”

“But I’m not pregnant. And I’m not going to be,” she said intently.

“Oh, you bungled it worse after that,” he said, shaking his head.

She groaned, “I know; I shouldn’t have said anything to Minka.”

He froze. “Minka? What about Minka?”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 10

Cautiously, Geneve admitted, “I asked Minka to talk to Efran about getting me on the duty roster.” Having said that, she watched the blood drain from his face.

“That’s—” He shook his head, looking off in wonder. “That’s the problem with women. You seem to look at the army as a—a club, and you blur the lines of command. See, to you and me, he’s not ‘Efran,’ he’s the Captain. We always refer to him as ‘Captain’ as a reminder that he is our superior, and not our equal.

“You know, I will blame the confusion partly on the Captain himself,” Gabriel went on. “When he had you try out, he could have fairly disqualified you any number of ways. But he bent over backwards to give you a chance. And then he loaded you with easy assignments to give you experience and confidence. You got assignments that good soldiers who have been with him for years didn’t get. But none of them complained.

“That was your worst mistake: complaining about assignments. I made a mistake, too, going to him to ask if you could come on the bodyguard detail, and when he told me ‘no,’ I realized I’d crossed a line. He overlooked it because he’s never forgot us forty who came out under Estes to fight Loizeaux’s army.” Gabriel paused to bask in a treasured memory here.

“All right, I was wrong. What do I do now?” Geneve asked.

He was silent a moment. “In order to . . . ?”

“To get assignments. To get back on the duty roster,” she said.

Gabriel sat back in helpless exasperation. “You picked a bad time to ask for a second chance. Have you noticed all the new men? The army has exploded with new recruits and hundreds more on the waiting list. Why should he give you anything when there are hundreds who are stronger, more experienced and not ever in danger of being pregnant?”

She looked away in denial and he asked, “How did your request to Minka end up?”

Geneve gestured. “Oh, she got mad at me and told me I shouldn’t have killed Clonmel.”

Gabriel’s eyes widened in shock. “Minka? Got mad? You made *Minka* mad?” She looked tentatively guilty. “Well,” Gabriel exhaled, “at least you have Wyeth. He’s a good man; he’ll be attentive and faithful, and with a Meritorious Cross, he’ll never lack work.”

Geneve said nothing, and Gabriel reached into his pocket for silver. “I’m back on duty shortly. Are you coming up?” She nodded, rising, and he left coins on the table for their ales.

That evening, after Efran had taken care of Minka's needs, he lay holding her in bed, watching the moonlight cast muted colors onto the wall through the stained glass window above the bed. He suddenly twisted to look up at the window. Being unable to see whatever it was that he wanted to see, he got up to stand on the headboard.

"Efran?" Minka raised up. "What—?"

He climbed back down. "The faeries fixed the crack in the glass."

"Was there a crack in the glass?" she asked.

"Yes, and it wasn't part of the leading. The crack is gone now."

"Oh, good." She nestled back onto his shoulder with a sigh.

"What did it feel like, being a spider?" he asked. She looked up at him. He explained, "In Alberon's cave. You came out as a spider, and I was supposed to recognize you to get you back. What did it feel like to be a spider?"

She hazily regarded the faint colors on the wall as she thought back. "I didn't know I was a spider. When I heard the thump, and looked out to see you leaning against the rock, I ran to you, and when you—fell back, and called me a 'hairy little monster,' I realized that something was wrong. So I stopped to try to find out what had happened. I held up my hand, and just saw a brown thing. Then you called me 'Fang,' so I stayed as still and quiet as I could so you wouldn't kill me.

"It was heartbreaking to listen to you, and I wondered if we would be trapped like that forever, you grieving me while I was there, but unable to reach you. When you finally opened your eyes to look at me again, I reached out to you again, and you took my hand. I felt you take my hand. And that broke the spell," she said.

"That was scary," he said, gathering her into him. "But I'm glad we're all right with the faeries now."

She murmured something, half asleep, and he pondered how to get right with the Leviathan, Symphorien, now.

On the morning next, October 12th, Efran made an appearance in the second-floor workroom to placate Estes with input on some decisions about some matters that he wanted action on. So Efran sat to listen to Estes' reasoned arguments about the course he wanted to take.

After gravely thinking it over, Efran decided that Estes' plan was superior to anything Efran could offer, and told him so. Estes was relieved to get that decided, and Efran was glad to put his mind at rest, because Efran still had only the vaguest idea what the plan was, or even what the problem was, because Efran was preoccupied with Symphorien.

Handling situations with women and their babies (or lack of them, or the wrong kind by the wrong father) was fraught with peril, as Efran had learned with Minka, Adele, Palestrina, and now Symphorien. While he was grateful and glad for the relationship of the hill, the great tree and the faeries with the fortress, he did not think he could physically endure seeing it crumble again because Symphorien was dissatisfied with her nursery.

So, despite Lwoff's lucid warning to not rile her, Efran wanted to see what she had done to the cavern below the fortress where some of the foundations were sunk. Also, if possible, he wanted to try to communicate with her.

SO, with trepidation, he went down to the cold storage room to open the closet where the trap door was located,

and found himself facing a set of shelves loaded with baby supplies. Thereupon he had to remove the bottles and pads and cloths from the shelves and take out the unit to place it against the wall, then reload it with all the supplies.

That done, Efran paused over the trap door to look at the light seeping out from around the edges of the door in the dark closet. Unquestionably, there was light beyond the door. So what was this portion of the fortress resting on?

Efran shut the closet door behind him and knelt to pry up the door in the floor, resting it against the back wall of the closet. (The knife that he had used for this remained unnoticed on the floor.) And he looked down at brightly lit water that came up to within ten feet of the floor joists. The ledge was completely submerged; only 8 steps of the steep stairway remained above water. So Efran sat on the closet floor to first remove his boots and socks, then roll up his pant legs and put his bare feet on the second step from the top. From there, he began to descend face outward, gripping the railing.

Once his head was below the floor, he looked in astonishment at the blaze of sunlight on his left. Symphorien had broken out a portion of southern-facing hillside about twenty feet high from the water level (but no telling how far below the water) and at least twelve feet wide. This illumined the entire cavern and part of the attaching one. The murky green seawater lapped at clearly visible rock all around the cavern, which was roughly circular with a diameter of about fifty feet. Efran could see no ledge for a nest in this cavern or the one attaching, which probably meant that it was underwater.

At first glance, Efran overlooked the foundation footings, as they were much the same light gray color as the surrounding rock, marked with the same residue that had been deposited over the centuries. But once he saw them, he focused on the ones closest to him. Studying both the rock and the pillars running down it, he could not see any cracks. And—

He leaned perilously over the water with a gasp. The roots were there, as well, almost camouflaged because they also were light gray. But they snaked alongside the footings down to the water. Would the salt water harm the tree? But the cavern waters had connected to the Sea before Symphorien's incursion, and the tree had thrived for almost two months now.

Efran turned on the stairs to look closely at the opening on his left. He raised a hand to block the sunlight so that he could see the dim recesses above the opening. He saw only rock, not broken footings or torn roots. It appeared that Symphorien broke through about six feet of rock to reach this cavern, or enlarge a small underwater opening to it.

The closest footing he could see to the opening was about five feet from the edge farthest away, or close to twenty feet from where he stood. He was too far away from the footing to see cracks, but there was no obvious damage, and the roots alongside appeared to be aggressively healthy. Was it merely coincidental that she missed taking out part of a footing by five feet?

Becoming aware of a swell in the water in front of him, he gripped the railings to steady himself. The dark gray head emerged with the water cascading off the bony plates of her face, and the jaws that could easily swallow him whole rested just at the water line while the bright green eyes examined him.

"Hello, Symphorien. I am Efran," he whispered. He listened hard, but could hear nothing. So he added, "Polonti make terrible eating; our blood is bitter."

One clawed foot came up out of the water and Efran scooted back up the stairway quickly, hoisting himself

backwards onto the floor of the closet. Then he leaned over to watch her scoop away the stairs and the railing with one swipe of her claws. “Ah, yes, no—no one will bother you, Symphorien. Hope the babies do well.” With that, he quickly lowered the trap door and found the small chest to put on top of it.

He backed out and shut the closet door, exhaling. “That went well.”

At that time, Minka was on the back grounds in the orchard picking up yet more apples. The great shaking of two days ago had loosed so many that they covered the ground several layers deep. Whole storerooms were being filled with apples, and she had peeled a great many today to set out for drying. Minka had helped pick up scores yesterday, but they kept falling.

A kitchen helper brought out another dozen empty baskets, which she took to begin separating. She was one of only a handful working out here today; there was just too much else to do in getting the fortress back to rights.

Men suddenly appeared around her, appropriating the baskets and filling them by picking up three apples in each hand. Baskets that were filled were run to the kitchen, and the men who took them brought out more empty baskets, until they were reduced to using canvas sacks.

Minka watched all this in bewilderment for a moment, then saw Wyeth and Nyland standing by idly, smiling. Lowering her shoulders in exasperation, she marched over to chastise them, “Your men aren’t going to learn to kill by picking up apples unless they start throwing them.”

The fight instructors laughed at her, and Nyland explained, “They were getting lazy after only three hours of rearranging the armory. So we gave them something easier to finish their workout, the slugs.”

“Thank you. I will make sure you both have apple cobbler at dinner for the next few months, until you start running when you see me coming with it,” she promised.

They laughed again, and Wyeth said, “I will eat it from your hand.”

Nyland glanced down, but Minka scoffed, “After I spent a month’s allowance at the pottery? Don’t even think about it.”

“As you say,” he smiled down at her, and she looked smugly satisfied.

One of the men ran up to her, bowing. “We picked up all we could find, Lady Minka.”

“Thank you,” she said warmly.

Nyland waved the men away, then bowed again to her. “We claim the right to make the men do whatever menial work you think to do, Lady Minka.”

She shook her head at them both. “You’re all charmers,” she said in mild disgust, then headed back to the fortress.

Nyland turned to Wyeth with a rebuke at the ready, but Wyeth murmured, “I will never touch her. I only like to see her smile.” Nyland raised his brows, nodding.

In the lower corridor, Minka had to pause to contain her tears. “Geneve, I will never forgive you,” she breathed.

Efran came out of the cold storage room looking both ways. Seeing her—and apprehending at once that she was crying—he came up with conciliatory hands raised. “I just went down to check on the foundation footings. Ah, Symphorien did come up, but she only scraped away the stairs. I was back up in the closet by that time.”

As her look of shock was unabated, he added, “The foundation and the tree roots look fine. Shall we get Joshua out of the nursery now?”

“All right,” she said cautiously, and he smugly put a hand at her back to walk her to the nursery.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 11

As Minka, Ella, and Efran with Joshua came into the dining hall for dinner, Minka was thrilled to receive a letter from Justinian. “Finally! It’s been almost two weeks since he left!” Ella, seated on Efran’s other side, glanced over, but the men around her were determined to retain her attention, and were so far successful in their efforts.

Efran smiled, torn between attending Minka with the letter and watching Dobell bring their plates of pan-fried trout. Receiving her plate, Minka smiled up at Dobell while breaking the seal on the letter. “Dear Minka,” she began.

Efran leaned over to correctly read, “‘To my adorable kumquat.’ Kumquat? What is that?” Joshua reached down to pat the trout in interest.

“It’s an adorable fruit that Marguerite’s gardener grows. Don’t let him have the trout; give him bites of the boiled carrots,” Minka said, scanning the letter. Then she laughed and began reading aloud:

“‘I have received numerous confirmations of the total destruction of your fortress and an equal number of confirmations that it stands as proud and solid as its lord. To spare you my coming down again to find out what you’re about, I will assume that your faeries are playing with your detractors to drive them insane. So I will leave that alone.

“‘Our illustrious Surchatain Blairgowrie is skillfully negotiating the treacherous waters of rulership, made even more tumultuous by the remarkable efforts of his lovely wife, our precious Surchataine Adele, who is now demanding that all furriers in Eurus be brought under the control of the palace after one of them refused to gift her with an expensive mink capelet. That furrier, one Enguerrand, is brother-in-law to the current High Councilor Handschuh, so it is decidedly inconvenient for dear Adele to be fomenting mischief between those two and our distinguished Blairgowrie. But the adder must bite, for that is her nature. Meanwhile, Chatain Eadgifu remains absent, apparently still off on his honeymoon with the unnamed maid he preferred to marry over the Chataine Ellacombe.

“‘Speaking of whom, Surchatain Webbe has admirably rallied from his brief interlude of homicidal insanity to return to Sandilands, his estate in the nobles’ district, and resume ruling. Or so he says. In support of his position, he has issued proclamations to the effect that (1) Lady Palestrina, distraught over baseless accusations made against her, hanged herself, (2) he is still ruling as Surchatain and anyone who says differently will feel his wrath, and (3) his children must be returned to him at once.

“Everyone knows where Ellacombe is; no one has seen Alcmund but everyone is fairly sure where he is; Cyneheard has been summoned from university, but no one has seen him, and those who have are not admitting it. I checked today (Oct. 12) with the university admittance office, which informed me that Cyneheard has been expelled and will not be granted a refund of tuition due to the heinous act for which he was expelled.

“Nonetheless, Webbe’s inconvenient resurrection has put the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford in a quandary and the actual citizens of Westford in doubt as to whose edicts they are to follow. This drama we Eurusians are following with gleeful interest to detract attention from our own.

“And that is: Adele has apparently convinced Blairgowrie that the Gargoyle’s acquisition of Ellacombe is evidence that he wishes to rule Westford. Therefore, Blairgowrie is warming to her suggestion that when Eadgifu is found, he and Ellacombe be quickly married (regardless of their respective wishes) so that Eadgifu can be set on the throne of Westford. This will require removing Ellacombe from the Abbey by force or trickery, which Blairgowrie appears willing to do.

“Meanwhile, I trust that my wee kitten is—” Minka abruptly stopped reading and folded the letter.

Efran glanced over humorously, preoccupied with trying to convince Joshua that boiled carrots were really and truly as good as fried trout. “Keep reading.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head carelessly, but her curls were trembling. Seeing that, Efran placed Joshua on her lap and removed the letter from her hand in one smooth movement. When she gasped, trying to hold on to the letter, he looked at her in concern.

While she held Joshua, he opened the letter to read silently, “Meanwhile, I trust that my wee kitten is keeping her head above water with the tsunami of new Polonti at the fortress. For I have it on good authority that despite the prohibition on standing at dinner in her honor, a certain kitten is still regarded as *Moiwahine* among the faithful, who remain devoted to her. This is understandable.

“More stunning developments to come.

“Your earliest devotee,

“Justinian”

Efran glanced at unrelated laughter to his left from Ella’s devotees, then looked back at Minka, whose eyes were down. “Someone has made you uncomfortable. Who?” he asked in a low voice.

“No one!” she said, darting up fierce blue eyes. “But I won’t have you suspecting hundreds of innocent men of having designs on me because they do silly things like bow. I don’t know who Justinian talked to—I suspect no one—but the men have definitely dropped the idea of my being queen,” she whispered fiercely.

“All right; it’s all right,” he said in an attempt to soothe her, his hand on her leg. Since Joshua was taking up so much room on her lap, Efran lifted him off. “I won’t turn into a jealous monster again. I promise I won’t doubt you—you were even faithful as a spider,” he smiled.

“Thank you,” she breathed, leaning into him, and Joshua puckered his lips at her.

At the end of dinner, when Minka took Joshua to the nursery to change his wraps, Efran took Justinian’s letter to

Estes before he could leave the fortress to go to his house on a plot below. “Keep it to read tomorrow. Just—look at the last paragraph.”

Brows contracting, Estes read it, then looked up at him. Efran asked, “Have you seen this happening? Have you noticed their showing—deference? Obeisance?”

“No, I really haven’t, Efran,” Estes said.

“Do you have any idea who Justinian talked to?” Efran asked.

“No, you’d have to ask him,” Estes said.

With difficulty, Efran said, “Someone—one of the men—said something to—alarm her. I know the signs, Estes; I know the look she gets when someone tries to get too close to her.”

Estes considered this. “If that’s so, the only thing you can do is wait for her to tell you about it. If you push it, you’ll push her away, or push the problem further into hiding. You remember what Wendt always told us about patience as a strategic weapon.”

“Yes,” Efran said instantly.

“If there is an enemy lurking, patience is your best weapon for exposing it. Or him,” Estes said.

“Yes. You’re right. Thank you, Estes. I will do what you say,” Efran said.

“Good. Good night, Efran,” Estes nodded.

“Tell Kelsey hello from us. Minka misses her,” Efran said. Estes nodded and left the hall with Justinian’s letter.

Efran turned away. *Yes, I will wait for him to show himself. He won’t be able to help it.*

After bringing Joshua out of the nursery, Minka paused at the door of the dining hall to see Efran talking to Estes. So she quickly took Joshua with her to the keep. Here, she drew up to the crucifix in the dimness, bowed her head, and whispered, “Please, please find someone for Wyeth to love. Please.” Then she hurried out again before Efran would see that she was troubled.

Early the following morning, October 13th, Gabriel ran up two flights to the north end of the third floor to pound on one of the doors. “Geneve! You’re on the duty roster!”

Tess’ voice shouted back, “She’s in the other room!”

Exhaling, Gabriel ran over to the next door to pound. “Geneve!”

She opened it at once, half dressed. “What?”

“You’re on the duty roster. Get down to the hilltop armory as quickly as you can,” Gabriel panted.

“Great! Thank you!” She quickly closed the door and Gabriel turned to run back down two flights of stairs.

At that time, Tess came out of her rooms with a stuffed duffle bag slung over her shoulder. She trotted down all the stairs, then glanced up the lower corridor. Seeing Minka come out of the nursery, Tess walked over to tell her, “If you see Barr, tell him that Jasque has given me a room off the stables. It’s much more convenient to my work. He should appreciate that.” Tight-lipped, she turned to walk down the corridor and exit onto the back grounds before Minka could utter a word.

Minka blinked in shock, then started thinking. She quickly ascended to the third floor, where she hurried to the north end. There, she found the outer door to the anteroom standing open, as well as the door to the right-hand suite. The key was in the lock.

While Minka was in the suite, Geneve exited her suite next door and ran out. Minka was looking around a dirty suite left in disarray, with the dresses pointedly left in the wardrobe or strewn on the floor. Fingers at her lips, she was thinking hard. Then she removed the key from the lock, leaving the door wide open. And from there she went to the first maid she saw to give her instructions on cleaning and restocking the suite.

Minka also went to Doane’s cubicle off the foyer. Greeting him, she asked for paper, which she wrote on, and gum, which he gave her. This she ran back up to the third floor. As two maids came in to clean, Minka gummed a sign on the door which read, “RESERVED. See Minka.” And she put the key in her pocket.

Geneve ran all the way out to the armory in the woods. When she arrived, she found Captain Younge standing in front of it talking with another soldier whom she didn’t know. She saluted Younge crisply. “Geneve reporting for duty, sir.”

He nodded at her as he continued talking to the man. “It needs to be done today, if possible. Fortunately, this armory isn’t as large as the one below,” the Captain was saying.

“Yes, sir,” the soldier said, looking at a paper in his hand.

“Good luck, then.” Younge clapped Geneve on the shoulder as he walked off, almost knocking her off her feet.

Disoriented, she looked back at him. Then she turned to the soldier who was still perusing the paper. “Well, then,” he sighed, “let’s get on it.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Bennard,” he said, glancing at her sympathetically.

“What . . . ?” she began.

“Let’s go in,” he said, jerking his head. He turned to open the double doors of the arms warehouse, well illumined by high glassed-in windows all along the roofline.

He and she looked into a vast disorganized mess of equipment—helmets, bows, arrows, swords, knives, armor, tunics, and many other such pieces. Bennard said, “The faeries decided everything needed to be organized by shape. Or color. It’s hard to say what they had in mind. Anyhow, the sparring groups worked a while on reorganizing weapons yesterday, but didn’t have a layout as to what goes where. So here we are.” He looked back down at his list. “Full sets of fight dress go in the compartments on the front left wall. That’s this here.” He looked up at rolling compartments that would hold hundreds of suits.

“Now then. Each set contains nine pieces, listed here.” Bennard showed her a sheet. “They’re to be stored one set to each compartment from the tunic up. So, it’d probably be easiest to stack all compartments in a unit with the tunic first, then the belt, dagger with sheath, groin protection, [he glanced at her midsection to laugh dryly] then the body armor, shoulder plates, sandals, and helmet.”

He paused to move two rolling units out from the wall so their compartments were accessible. Each unit held fifty compartments, and there were five altogether. And that was just for the fight dress. “Now. Swords in scabbards are stacked so”—he paused to demonstrate with several. “Javelins beside them. Bows and quivers stocked with twenty arrows go together. Oh, and, shields over here. So let’s get started.”

He walked over to one hill of metal. “I’ll start putting like pieces in a pile so you can start filling compartments.” And he pulled a helmet out of one pile to place it in a relatively empty spot on the floor. He placed a belt in a spot away from it.

Glancing up at her, he noted, “Any time now.”

She exhaled, “This will take forever.”

“Could be worse,” he said. “I just worked my way off latrine duty.”

Gulping, she went over to a pile to begin sorting.

At that time, Lorient was hauling two men, one in each hand, up the stairs to the second-floor workroom. As he entered, Efran, DeWitt, and Estes looked up. Commander Wendt, seated in his chair, turned his head at a body odor that he recognized.

“Captain,” Lorient said, saluting. “It has not been a full week, only five days, since you gave me the assignment with Shanko. However, he was missing from the barracks this morning, so when I found him, Captain Barr instructed that he and his accomplice be brought to you.”

“Very good, Lorient. Tell me about this accomplice,” Efran said, recognizing him at once.

The man with the recently broken nose looked around warily, then stiffened at the sight of the Commander. Lorient said, “His name is Rowe; he tried to give the name ‘Hassler,’ who is the leaseholder of plot number forty-two with the tool sharpening shop.” Wendt smiled ever so slightly.

Lorient continued, “I found them hiding in the back of the shop. Leaseholder Hassler claimed to know Rowe only as a day laborer and Shanko not at all.”

“Ah,” Efran said, smiling. “Did you get tired of latrine duty, Shanko?” The young man shrugged.

At that time, Wendt slowly stood, and Rowe jumped. “Stay back, old man!”

The fortress administrators studied Rowe. Intrigued, Efran asked, “Why does he frighten you?”

“Pretending to be blind,” Rowe muttered angrily. Shanko glanced back at Wendt in confusion.

At that time, Minka came swinging into the room. “I have your tea, Com—”

As everyone in the room turned to look at her, she gasped upon seeing Rowe, then looked at Wendt standing. And she burst into laughter, spilling a little tea. Rowe turned red; Wendt started laughing, so Minka had to come over to the table to put the mug of tea down and hang on the Commander to laugh. The men watched in amazement; some smiling, some not. Efran stood.

Minka suddenly looked up again at Rowe. “You broke his nose!” she cried, leaning on the Commander again. Wendt shrugged.

“He pretended to be blind!” Rowe shouted.

“When?” Efran asked Minka in mild wonder.

“Oh, that was—” Minka stopped to think—“early August, when the Commander and I went to Hassler’s shop to get hand tools. He [nodding to Rowe] tried to force me out of the shop when Hassler was in the back. The Commander stopped him.” She glowed in vindication of her hero.

“That’s excellent, but, where was your bodyguard? *Who* was your bodyguard?” Efran demanded.

She looked at questioningly at Wendt. “We took someone, but I don’t remember who. Do you?”

“No,” Wendt said, shaking his head. “Sorry, I don’t.”

“We didn’t need him, anyhow,” Minka said, holding Wendt’s arm.

“All right,” Efran breathed. “I promised you I wouldn’t be jealous, but I’m getting there.”

Wendt sat with his tea and Minka went over to hold her husband. “I’m sorry. It was just too much fun to pass up.”

Efran sat, pulling her down to his lap. “Now then, where were we?” he asked, looking up.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 12

“Captain Efran, Captain Barr suggested returning Shanko to his mother,” Lorient said. Shanko exhaled, sagging.

“That sounds like a fine idea,” Efran said. “Evict them both. Shanko, I’m writing your mother to tell her you’re on your way back to Eurus. If you come back here, Commander Wendt will break your nose. If Rowe comes back, he dies.”

“Captain,” Lorient saluted, but waited for Efran’s dismissal before turning out with a hand on each slacker/thief.

Everyone watched them go, then Efran inhaled, glancing at the Commander and shaking his head. “Don’t shake your head at me, Efran,” Wendt said, admirably not smiling.

“Yes, Commander,” Efran said.

Estes groaned, “Brier Ridge all over again.” This was the longest-lasting argument between Captain Efran and Commander Wendt.

Cuddling Efran, Minka said, “You told me that Commander Wendt was the best officer you’d ever known, that he didn’t waste lives or cut corners, and he planned like the devil, even small jobs. And that was after Brier Ridge.”

“Did he really?” Wendt asked.

“You could have told us that,” Estes said resentfully to Efran.

Efran was almost scowling. “When did I say that?” he asked her.

“At the tree,” she said.

“Oh,” he said guiltily.

“He saved your life for me,” Minka whispered.

Efran nodded. “I was a little sore about that at the time. It was the perfect opportunity to go out in glory, like—” He almost said “Oatman,” the heroic, sacrificial soldier whom Wendt had likened him to. Efran didn’t want to remind everyone about that unmerited comparison.

“Well, I am grateful to the Commander, so I get to hug him,” she said, eyeing Efran. He nodded, chastised.

Around that time, Wyeth was walking to the back door of the fortress from the sparring grounds, heading in for the midday meal. He glanced aside at a blonde girl eating a biscuit and apple on the bench under the walnut tree, and he paused. It had been two days since he had seen Minka bring her out to Tourjee.

Shrugging in affected indifference, he turned toward the door, then abruptly turned back around to walk toward the bench. She did not notice him right away, but when she looked up to see him approaching, she stood as if to run. But he signed to her: *Hello*.

She dropped her apple in shock, then signed back to him, *Hello*.

He signed, *I am Wyeth*—saying, “Wyeth,” so that she could read his lips. *May I sit?* he inquired.

She patted the bench beside her, smiling as she asked, *How do you know signs?*

He sat to pick up her apple and hand it back to her. *My mother was deaf. So I learned early to sign and to fight,* he replied. *What is your name?*

“Cyr,” she said shyly in her thick voice. Then she pulled out her slate to spell it for him.

He asked, *When did you come here?*

She replied in a flurry about her father bringing her several weeks ago from Westford. As he was too ill to work the hours needed to pay the rent, he just trusted that the place with a charter to take in unwanted children would make space for her.

How old are you? Wyeth asked.

I am 18. The notary has my birth record in case Her hands suddenly dropped to her lap and she looked off, blushing.

Wyeth smiled. *That is good to know.*

She laughed, bending to bury her face in her hands.

They continued to talk for the next hour. Wyeth did not make it to the dining hall before he had to return to the practice grounds, but he didn't mind.

That afternoon, two messengers from Surchatain Webbe arrived at the fortress demanding to speak with Efran. So he went to the foyer to talk to both of them with Minka and Ella watching from the corridor.

"I am Lord Efran," he said, unconsciously spreading his feet in his fight stance.

"Lord Efran, Surchatain Webbe requires that you return his children to him immediately," one messenger, the larger man, said.

Efran replied slowly, "His son Cyneheard is not here. My daughter Ella is here. I will allow you to take one last message from her to Webbe. This is the last time I will burden her to respond to any demand of his. Ella?" he said, turning.

She came out to the foyer with fiery eyes and set lips. "Here is my response: Webbe is not my father, but he murdered my mother. I am of age; he cannot force me to do anything. This is my home. I will not leave it. Nor will I allow Alcmund to be taken from the safety of this place. He was almost destroyed seeing what his father did; I will not allow Webbe to finish him off. Goodbye."

"Goodbye, gentlemen," Efran said. The door sentries immediately swung the doors open and stepped forward.

Webbe's messengers hesitated, then bowed and left.

Ella and Efran watched out the door as they disappeared down the switchback, then he put an arm around her. "You won't have to do that again," he said.

"Thank you." She lifted up. "But we're done with our Law lessons and I was about to go out to the stables."

"Go ahead," he nodded, smiling, so she turned to run out.

Efran looked back at Minka, his smile fading. She was suspended in the middle of the corridor, eyes unfocused. "What's wrong?" he asked, coming up to her.

She blinked, coming awake. "Just thinking," she said, nestling into his chest.

"Is it always so hard?" he whispered.

"I want to do the right thing," she said, turning her head on his hard chest.

“Good,” he breathed. “I know you will.” He closed his eyes to gather her up.

After a long, tedious, taxing day, Geneve dragged herself across the grounds and up two flights of stairs to her third-floor room. Since she and Bennard had only gotten about halfway through the task of rearranging the armory, she had to be out there again tomorrow at first light to see if they couldn’t get it finished.

Candle in hand, she saw at once the sign on Tess’ door, and knew that she had finally decided Barr wasn’t coming back, so left for more convenient quarters on the grounds. While Geneve had been expecting it, she was still dismayed—it was quiet and lonely up here without any company at all. But Geneve was barred from sleeping in the barracks, and she wasn’t quite ready to think about taking Wyeth back. So she went into her dark, empty suite and locked the door behind her.

The following day, October 14th, Minka was tense and distracted waiting for something to develop. That was hard anytime, but especially now, as she didn’t know precisely what she was waiting on. All she knew was that she needed something to happen so that she would know what to do.

Efran saw at once that she was uneasy, but she had nothing to communicate to him except her anxiety. Since she wouldn’t tell him why she was anxious, he had no idea what it was all about. So he let her go about her chores while he went up to the second-floor workroom to wait in figurative darkness.

All the men in the workroom noticed without saying so that she did not appear with the Commander’s tea that morning. He knew something was wrong by listening to Efran’s strained breathing, but he also knew not to ask. DeWitt and Estes worked quietly on the mountain of work that managing the Abbey Fortress and Lands entailed.

At midday, Minka put Joshua down for his nap and went to see how Cyr was working out for Tourjee. Not seeing her in the gardens anywhere, Minka was turning back inside when she chanced to see Cyr and Wyeth on the bench under the walnut tree. They were signing to each other over plates and ales from the kitchen.

What do you want to do? Wyeth asked her.

Cyr looked confused, and signed a question mark. He clarified, *Do you want to fight in the army?*

Her eyes widened in astonishment. *Fight? Against men like you? That’s crazy. I am very happy working in the garden. They are all so nice, and don’t shout at me; they just show me what needs to be done and let me do it. And I am learning so much.*

Wyeth lowered his head, smiling.

Watching, Minka caught her breath. “Yes!” she exhaled. It was all making sense now, if—“Am I rushing it?” she asked herself uneasily. “Don’t I rush everything, though? I might as well just see if. . . .” She watched Cyr rise from the bench and kiss Wyeth lightly on the cheek before running off in embarrassment to the tilled vegetable beds. He definitely smiled.

Fingers at her lips in hope, Minka stood by the back door as Wyeth rose with the plates and began walking toward the door. He looked up to see her, and smiled tentatively. She ran up to him. “Do you like her, Wyeth?” she asked breathlessly, fingernails at her mouth in case she had to bite them.

He lowered his head to nod. Minka whispered, “She’s eighteen, you know. Her birth record is with the notary.”

“She told me,” he grinned, then his smile vanished. “I have not even filed for divorce from Geneve. Even if I did that today, it would be a month—”

“Not for a soldier,” Minka said in a low voice. “There’s a special provision in Roman’s Law for soldiers. You can file for divorce today and get married immediately.”

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“I think so. I—we—you’d have to check with Ryal,” she said.

Slowly, he went over to put the plates on the steps. “I could go now,” he said thoughtfully, “but you must come with me to talk to Ryal.”

“Why? You don’t need me,” she said quickly, feeling already too much a busybody here.

“I know nothing of this provision. I—do not know how to even ask about it,” he said. “Please come talk to Ryal with me.”

“Oh,” she groaned. “All right. Get us horses.” He nodded, running toward the stables while Minka picked up the plates to return them to the kitchen.

She went out to the courtyard to wait. Shortly, Wyeth came around with a gelding for him and the small mare for her. He nodded to her as she flew up into the saddle. He jumped on his horse, and they turned out the gates to begin loping easily down the switchback. The gate sentries, both new Polonti, watched as he and she pulled up to the notary shop.

“Wasn’t that Lady Minka?” one sentry asked the other.

“Yes, and she has the fight instructor Wyeth for a bodyguard,” the other said knowledgeably.

“Then all we need do is inform the Captain. Is that correct?” the first asked.

“Yes,” said the second. “I will remain here while you make the report. He is usually found in the Steward’s workroom on the second floor. If he is elsewhere, the sentry at the door will know.”

“Good,” the first said, turning to run up the steps into the foyer.

It was quiet in the workroom, as Minka was not there to pick fights over the Commander or wave letters from Justinian. The sentry appeared at the door, saluting. “Captain, the Lady Minka is at the notary shop with Lt. Wyeth.”

There was a moment of shocked stillness, then Efran whispered, “Thank you. You’re dismissed.” Saluting again, the sentry departed. Efran faced forward, looking across the room with sightless eyes. “Wyeth. Good man,” he whispered.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 13

DeWitt exhaled, “Efran, this could be about anything. Stop jumping to conclusions.”

“Yes. You’re right,” he said tonelessly. And the men resumed working while Efran looked at the roots of the faerie tree burrowing down through the floor.

At the notary shop, Minka was leaning on the counter with Wyeth at her side. “Ryal, I learned in Law class about the provision for soldiers to get an emergency divorce for remarriage without waiting. Doesn’t that apply to Wyeth?”

Studying her in concern, he gravely asked, “Why are you asking, Minka?” Giardi, beside him, was watching.

“Oh,” Minka exhaled, drooping in aggravation. “See?” she vented at Wyeth. “Ryal, this doesn’t concern me except as a busybody. There’s a beautiful girl who wants to marry him since Geneve walked out on him. Her name is Cyr, she’s deaf, and you should have her birth record.”

“Wait one moment,” Ryal said, having forgotten all about that provision for soldiers to divorce and remarry. So he whispered to Giardi to check their copy of Roman’s Law in the back room. As she went out, he said, “Let’s start with the divorce. When did Geneve leave you, Wyeth?”

“It was about a week,” he said.

“Is there no hope of reconciliation?” Ryal asked.

“I—tried to talk to her, but she will not. . . . She wants to make sure she doesn’t get—with child—so that she can fight in the army,” he said in pained awkwardness. Minka closed her eyes in distress.

“I see,” Ryal said heavily. Reentering from the back room, Giardi nodded at him. So he pulled out the divorce ledger while she brought out his quill set and parchments.

At this time, Soames stuck his head in the second-floor workroom in the fortress. “Lady Minka? Oh, she’s not here.”

Since Efran was unable to speak, DeWitt asked, “What is it, Soames?”

“Lady Ella is ready for Law class, but I can’t find Lady Minka,” he said.

“Go ahead and start; we’ll send her in,” DeWitt said.

“Yes, sir,” Soames said, withdrawing.

At the notary office, Ryal was presenting the petition of divorce to Wyeth for his signature. Ryal told him, “You need to give this to Geneve. As a courtesy, we’re going to give her one day to respond. If she doesn’t, then you are considered free to marry Cyr. Oh—but first, let me see if I do have her birth record.”

He turned around, but Giardi had already located the bulging ledger to place it under his nose. “Cyr?” he said. “How is it spelled?”

Minka opened her mouth but quickly shut it as Wyeth said, “C-Y-R.”

“Interesting name,” Ryal murmured, leafing through loose documents. “Ah.” He pulled one free. “Born in Westford?”

“Yes, her father’s name is Clet. I don’t know her mother’s name; she’s long dead,” Wyeth said.

“Cyr, born to Clet and Marje July twenty-second of the year eighty-one thirty-six,” Ryal mused. “Yes, she’s eighteen. So bring her here tomorrow at this time, and if she’s willing, you may be married—IF you’ve not received a response from Geneve.”

Wyeth exhaled. “Yes, thank you, Ryal. Minka.” He turned to hug her in gratitude as a passing matron glanced in through the window.

“No,” Minka protested, squirming out of his embrace. “Let’s get back up to the fortress,” she said, agitated. Reaching into the pocket of her riding skirt, she pulled out a royal to place on the counter.

At the objections from both Wyeth and Ryal, Minka shouted, “Shut up!” and flew out to her mare. Grinning, Wyeth followed with a folded document.

They rode up quickly to the courtyard, where the sentries took their horses. Both Minka and Wyeth ran into the fortress. While she went to the nursery where Joshua was waiting to be fed, Wyeth ran the petition upstairs to shove it under Geneve’s door. Then he paused at the sign on the other door.

Running back downstairs, Wyeth looked up and down the corridor until he saw Minka emerging from the nursery with Joshua. Accosting her, he said, “Minka, the second room on the third floor—” He was currently living in the hilltop barracks, no place for a married man.

“Yes!” she said. “I had it stocked! Here!” She pulled the key from her pocket to give to him, which a passing soldier noted. Because Wyeth looked about to hug her, she shoved him away with a gasp and he laughed.

The dining hall was abnormally quiet that evening. Efran did not notice, being in his own personal cave of despair. Minka did not notice, being absorbed in her concern for the futures of several people that would be determined by tomorrow afternoon. Whispers were going all around the hall, and downcast eyes were flicking toward the Captain and his young wife. But no one would dare tell him what was being whispered.

Neither Wyeth nor Cyr was in the hall; he had located the women’s ward on the second floor and asked her (by signs) to marry him, which she accepted jubilantly. Then, having already discounted Geneve, he told Cyr to meet him in the foyer tomorrow afternoon.

Geneve entered the dining hall wearily. She and Bennard had finished up the armory in time for her to receive notice that tomorrow she would be helping him stock Barracks #1 on the plots below with fresh uniforms and take dirty laundry from there up to the hilltop laundresses—basically, maid’s work. It was depressing, but she knew that her only path to better assignments was to do the dirty work faithfully.

During her hours working with Bennard, he had vented considerably about his stupid decision to help Adele escape, which resulted in the assignments he was now given. He felt himself fortunate to still be in the army at

all, and determined to work his way up out of disgrace. This made Geneve wonder what she was being punished for. She'd have to ask Gabriel.

In the dining hall, Geneve looked around to see Tess eating and laughing with the stablehands. Groups of soldiers filled tables here and there, but no one glanced at her to offer a seat. So she took a plate and ale up to her room on the third floor. Despite the north-facing window, it was already dark and the one candle she had did not illumine the floor of the receiving room. (The large day candle remained in her bedroom.) So she did not see the folded petition of divorce.

In bed that evening, Efran held his treasure. She was exhausted from the stress of the day, while he was practically catatonic. With great effort, he rallied to stroke her hair and ask, "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

Almost asleep, she murmured, "Not yet."

His heart almost stopped. "Not yet?"

"No, waiting for tomorrow," she breathed, and was asleep.

"Tomorrow," he repeated. Then he lay there stroking her hair, wet from his tears, until he fell asleep to dream that a huge spider was biting him over and over again.

The following day, October 15th, brought a raging storm from the Sea to batter the hilltop. So there was no work in the gardens, nor archery practice, nor sparring, nor training of horses. But the laundry work in Barracks #1 below was not affected by rain except that Geneve and Bennard had to wrap the linen uniforms carefully so they would not get wet on the way down. In leaving her suite, she accidentally kicked the unseen folded parchment under the small table by the doorway.

Minka spent the morning tending Joshua when not in Law class—for Soames was not deterred by the rain. Although Ella was sleepy and Minka distracted, he did his utmost to interest them in the intricacies of tax law, which fascinated him.

Efran spent the morning sitting at the workroom table staring up at branches that passed through the ceiling as if it were only air. Mentally, he counted minutes. When would it be "tomorrow"? In the afternoon, he guessed, for that was when they went to the notary shop yesterday. His main question was, Why must she wait till "tomorrow" to present him with a petition of divorce? It occurred to him that he could get answers by going to Ryal's shop himself, but he shrank from receiving such information from Ryal—or worse, Giardini.

So he sat waiting for the blow to come, and his administrators didn't even try to ask him anything.

In the brewing cauldron that was the hilltop barracks, Nyland accosted Wyeth, surrounded by angry men. "What were you doing with Lady Minka at the notary's yesterday?"

Wyeth laughed, "She was helping me get a quick divorce from Geneve so that I can marry Cyr!"

"What? Who?" Nyland asked.

"How?" other men wanted to know.

Wyeth said, “Cyr is the new blonde working in the gardens. She’s deaf, so I signed to her, and we—talked well. Then Minka told me about how she had found in the Law that soldiers can divorce and remarry without a waiting period. I didn’t believe it, so asked her to come talk to the notary for me. And there is! He gave me a notice of divorce to give Geneve, and if she doesn’t answer by this afternoon, I am free to marry again.”

The men listened in astonishment, then they were laughing, slapping him on the back and ribbing him mercilessly. When someone smuggled in several cases of Goadby’s, their celebration was complete.

After a depressed and lackluster midday meal, the fortress residents were mildly encouraged to see that the rain had stopped. But by that time, Geneve and Bennard were already soaked through. They returned to the hilltop with a cartload of dirty uniforms that had to be taken to the laundresses in their building on the back grounds. It was backbreaking work, hauling all of that into the wash house. Then she and Bennard received their next assignment: cleaning mud out of Barracks #1 and #2 on the plots. Maid duty.

Geneve almost quit right there and then, especially as Bennard, with seniority, was now her de facto supervisor, and felt great relief in giving her orders. But she set her jaw to follow through with it so that she could again receive the prestigious assignments that she had taken for granted.

With the advent of afternoon, Minka paced the corridor with Joshua until Cyr appeared off the stairs, greatly excited and relatively primed. She wore light lip rouge and red chrysanthemums in her ash blonde hair. Minka ran to her own quarters to lay Joshua in his crib on the floor and dig a pretty but seldom-worn necklace from her wardrobe. This she ran out to drape around Cyr’s neck, sending her off to wait for Wyeth in the foyer. Then Minka ran back to her bedroom to catch Joshua as he was climbing out of the crib. She took him back out to pace the corridor.

Seeing Wyeth come through the back door, Minka darted into the library with Joshua to hide as Wyeth passed. Then she followed at a distance to watch him grab up Cyr and take her out to the courtyard (which confused several people). They walked down to the notary shop, and Minka went out with Joshua to wait at the gate. Numerous people took note of this, and much whispered conversation ensued.

Finally, when Minka thought she would lose her mind, Wyeth and Cyr emerged from the shop. Looking up from the main road, Wyeth waved a document at the courtyard gates, and Minka almost fainted in relief. She barely noted their starting back up the road to the switchback hand in hand—her part done, she was waiting no longer. She climbed the broad steps to enter the foyer.

Then Minka looked up, catching her breath. “Bells,” she whispered. “Oh, those beautiful bells.”

Joshua, asleep, was crushing her shoulder, so she handed him over carefully to the nursery attendant. Then she climbed the stairs to the second floor and wearily presented herself in the workroom.

Estes and DeWitt looked up; even the Commander swiveled to watch her outline enter the room. Efran turned his listless, red eyes toward her to receive whatever was coming. “It’s done,” she exhaled. Covering her eyes, she moaned, “Oh, I can’t help being a busybody. If they don’t make it work, I’ll kill them both.”

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 14

The men looked at each other and Efran mostly sat up. Wetting his lips, he patted his leg. “Come here.”

She started over to him, then abruptly stopped. “Have you had tea, Commander?”

Masculine moans and laughter bubbled up. Admirably restrained, Wendt said, “Go tell Efran what he needs to know, first.”

“All right,” she exhaled, throwing herself into Efran’s lap. He covered her with his arms, smoothing back her hair as he always did. “You can’t tell anyone,” she warned them.

DeWitt erupted, “No, we can’t, because we have no idea what you’re talking about!”

She glanced over at him. “Goodness, DeWitt; what’s wrong with you? I’m the one who’s been in torment this whole week!”

Efran whispered, “Can you just tell us what you’ve been doing?”

She sat up with a sigh. “Worrying about Wyeth. Ever since Geneve dumped him so horribly, he’s been acting—somewhat—affectionately toward me. He never did anything,” she stressed, “but it worried me, so I knew that somehow I had to find him another girl. And I asked God to help me. And God sent Cyr—she’s the deaf girl you fell over in the corridor because she didn’t hear us coming.” She stopped to take a breath and they all waited.

“Oh, Wyeth knows hand language because his mother was deaf. But they started having the midday meal together, and I found out she’s eighteen, and Wyeth is exempt from the waiting period after divorce because he’s a soldier, only he had to wait a day to see if Geneve responded to the Petition of Divorce that he gave her. She didn’t, so he and Cyr just now went down to Ryal’s and got married. Oh, and, Tess moved out of one of the rooms on the third floor, so I had that one cleaned up for them, and gave Wyeth the key to it yesterday,” she explained.

Looking around, she asked plaintively, “Am I excused for being a busybody in this case? I was so afraid Wyeth would get himself in trouble with you [looking at Efran], when all he needed was someone who would love him.”

Estes and DeWitt laughed in relief. “You’re excused,” Efran said, blinking back tears.

“Thank you,” she sighed.

“Are they back from Ryal’s?” Efran asked.

“They should be, yes,” she said.

He lifted her to stand. “Then let’s go see if the kitchen will bring out some refreshments for them,” he said.

Minka gasped in delight, and grabbed his fingers to run to the doorway. But when she stopped abruptly, he ran into her from behind. “Commander, come down with us,” she ordered.

He waved. “I’ll be down when you get the food out.”

The men laughed and Efran picked her up to get her moving again.

Downstairs, Efran went into the kitchen while Minka anxiously looked around. In the foyer, she found Wyeth and Cyr talking with a few soldiers who wanted to know what was going on. Minka cried, "Come to the dining hall! Efran is getting the kitchen to put out refreshments for you!"

Wyeth turned, grinning; Cyr turned questioning; but Minka restrained herself to let Wyeth bring his new wife into the hall while Madea's ever-ready crew began stocking the tables with flatbread, chutney, pastries, jerky, apples in all forms, and, of course, ale. Soon the hall was filled with a lot of people ready to celebrate anything, and curious as to what they were celebrating today. After finding out, some of those people had the decency to be ashamed for what they had been thinking. Or saying.

Efran slapped Wyeth on the back and leaned down to kiss Cyr lightly on her very pink cheek. Then they all stood around talking, Wyeth translating for Cyr as fast as he could. She looked dazed. But Soames became an instant hero (again) when he walked over to the happy couple and signed, *Congratulations on your marriage*.

With a gasp of delight, Cyr signed, *Thank you!* and Wyeth grinned at him. With a nod to him, Soames left for his duties.

As promised, Estes and DeWitt brought the Commander down, who demanded to be taken over to the happy couple first. Wendt knew Wyeth, having presented him with his Meritorious Cross. So Wendt congratulated him with a handshake, then asked to be introduced to his bride. And when the blind man congratulated the deaf girl with a kiss on her cheek, there were tears in the eyes of some people who were later to strenuously deny it.

The fact of so many people being in the dining hall in the middle of the afternoon drew other people, so when Barr and a few of the soldiers in his unit stopped by, Wyeth took him by the shoulder to whisper in his ear. Barr nodded, kissed Cyr, and then went down to the notary shop himself. Shortly, a soldier delivered a folded parchment to Tess' room at the stables, but did not interrupt her in her work. (As she was already interested in one of the stablehands, finding the document didn't disturb her very much.)

With all the people in the hall, it was almost inevitable that Bennard and Geneve would stop in. The din ebbed slightly as the two helped themselves to apples and flatbread, glancing around. Since Wyeth and Cyr were deep in the crowd, and Efran was talking with Commander Lyte, the two shortly left again without enlightenment.

Lyte broke from Efran as Stites approached to relay a short message to the Captain. He received it with a nod, then watched Lyte talk to another young soldier, Walch. It took a moment for Efran to comprehend why it struck him as strange. Then he realized that it had to do mostly with Walch's bearing—he was neither awkward nor nervous talking with his Commander, but self-possessed. The two were talking almost as equals, certainly close associates. And when they parted, Walch did not salute, nor was he dismissed—he just walked away.

As Lyte turned to see him watching, Efran observed, "You know Walch."

"Yes, he's Eurasian," Lyte admitted before catching himself. "Excuse me, Captain."

"Yes," Efran said, but found himself . . . wondering.

As the celebration was winding down, a soldier entered to salute and say, "Lieutenant Wyeth, the Second Cutch says congratulations, and would like for you to hold your regular sparring practice this afternoon."

Sympathetic groans went up, but Wyeth turned to Cyr to sign. She laughed and said (with fairly good pronunciation) “I have to go to work, too.” He signed something else which made her hide her face on his dress jacket in embarrassment.

Walking out with Minka, Efran murmured, “I need to trust you more.”

“Yes, that would be helpful,” she said indignantly, and he covered her, laughing.

Dinner was subdued that evening, as so many people were still full from the wedding celebration. Geneve got a plate and an ale to take up to her room, as usual. When she had the door open, rapid footfalls pounding down the corridor startled her into swiftly turning, so that she and Wyeth came almost face-to-face in the anteroom. Exhausted from the menial labor of the last several days, she fairly lost her temper. “I’m sorry, Wyeth; I’m not interested in getting back together and I would appreciate your not pushing me. If I ever decide differently, I’ll let you know, but for now, I just want you to leave me alone.”

He nodded, and she went into her room with her plate and ale. Setting dinner on the small table with the candle, she turned back to relock her door emphatically. Then she took her dinner to the table in front of the window. When Wyeth had this room, he had left the window open to let the branch with the sweet-smelling flowers snake through the room. But the branch died shortly after she had moved in alone, and she didn’t know why.

When Geneve climbed into bed that evening, she could hardly sleep for the banging from the other suite, whose bedroom wall abutted hers. Was Wyeth in that other suite? She didn’t think so; last she knew, he was in the barracks. But when the banging went on and on, she finally pounded on the wall.

The banging stopped at once, then she heard laughter from more than one person. Finally, she heard sounds of something heavy being dragged, and then the banging resumed, though not as loudly. She sighed, realizing that she was going to have an awkward conversation with someone soon.

In the morning, as Geneve was about to leave, she finally spotted the folded parchment under the table. She bent to pick it up and read it, several times. It was dated two days ago—October 14. But he had said nothing about it last night. Then again, she had not given him the opportunity to say much. In some despondence, she tore the parchment in half. She listened to the door of the other suite open and close, and someone walk away quickly (which was Wyeth leaving for work).

She remained paused before the door, absorbing the blow of this document. She had not expected that of Wyeth—he had been so eager to marry her, and so grateful when she did, that she just assumed he would accommodate her priorities. Was that him next door with a girl? Geneve knew that remarriage after a divorce required a thirty-day waiting period. It just didn’t seem like Wyeth to risk an unwed pregnancy, not with his position.

She wilted slightly. He was a lieutenant with a Meritorious Cross, which meant prestige and good pay. Now she was beginning to regret prioritizing army service over her marriage. She certainly wasn’t any better off right now. “Oh, I can’t take time to worry over that at the moment. I have to report for duty.” She almost sneered at the last word.

As she began to open the door, she was surprised to hear the other door open and close. Then there was the sound of a key turning in the lock. Emerging from her suite, she saw a blonde girl walking away. Astonished, Geneve blurted, “Were you with Wyeth last night?” But the girl kept walking in a happy, bouncy kind of way. Geneve mulled over her rudeness, then locked her door to leave.

When Minka arrived at the library for Law lessons, neither Ella nor Soames was there yet. So she sat and waited, admiring the stands holding Roman's Law and the Holy Canon with the great sword of Ares in a special display between them. And suddenly, out of nowhere, a devious idea came into her mind.

Soames walked in, then, and Minka pounced on him. "You know hand language! Teach me quickly to sign, 'Polonti men make wonderful—' She glanced aside as someone passed the open library door, then she leaned over to whisper the last word in his ear.

He turned deep red and protested, "Some Southern men do, too."

"Of course," she laughed. "But this is a message for Cyr."

"Oh." So he showed her the hand signs several times. These she practiced all through their lesson, even after Ella came in. Ella demanded to know what she was signing, so Minka told her. So they both spent the rest of the lesson practicing it, to Soames' mild disgust.

Gabriel stepped into the second-floor workroom where Efran, Estes, and DeWitt were conferring over maps. They all looked up as he saluted and said, "Captain, Webbe is at the wall gates with an armed guard of about twenty. He's demanding his children."

Efran stepped around the table. "Is that so. I'll come down and have a look." Gabriel turned into the corridor as Efran walked out with a half smile.

They two came out of the fortress into the courtyard to look down the main road to the wall gates. Webbe, on a horse, was front and center directly outside the gates, surrounded by his mounted men. He was having to bat away faerie tree branches, which seemed to be poking him. Regular Abbey traffic was held up behind his men, who were completely blocking the road and spilling onto the meadow around it.

Efran glanced at Serrano on a horse beside him. "Go ask Captain Barr to send a pair of messengers up the new north road to Reinagle or Bowring—tell them that they need to come get Webbe or he's going to get himself killed."

"Captain," Serrano said, spurring out of the courtyard to lope down the switchback and the main road toward Barracks #1, where Barr had his office. Geneve emerged from the fortress at that time, her destination being Barracks #2, east of #1 by just a few feet. She came to the gates to look down the road in concern.

"Can anyone see how they're armed?" Efran asked.

"Looks like just swords, Captain, but it's hard to tell for sure at this distance," one of the gatesmen, Verrin, said.

"Eyepiece?" Efran asked, looking around.

One was handed to him, the bearer muttering, "Here, if it will help. We can't see if they've got bows slung down their backs or not."

Efran put the metallic tube to his eye, looking, then lowered it with a shake of his head. Handing it off to Verrin, he said, "I need a volunteer to ride down with a message."

“I will, Captain,” Geneve said, but hers was only one of several voices. Gabriel pulled her jacket. She glared at him, but he mouthed, *Get back*.

Efran turned toward someone else, brushing her. She took a small step back. He instructed, “Stephanos, mount up.” As he did, Efran whistled to Mathurin. “Get Quennel to outfit me twenty archers on horseback.” With the flick of a salute, he ran off. To another man, Kaas, Efran said, “Ride down and warn residents to stay off the main road until we get the gates cleared.”

“Captain,” Kaas said, leaping up to lope down the switchback.

“There go the messengers to Westford,” Tiras pointed, and everyone looked at the pair loping up the new north road, east of the old main road.

“Good,” Efran said. He waited to see Kaas warn residents off the main road below them, then he turned to Stephanos, mounted and waiting. “Go tell Webbe that he and his men must get off Abbey land immediately. I will have archers take out any that continue to block traffic; anyone who harms a traveler dies. Be prepared to die.”

“Captain,” Stephanos said, turning his great horse down the switchback. He was a big man, indicating a serious message.

Having persuaded Abbey residents off the main road, Kaas began climbing the switchback as Stephanos descended. When Kaas reentered the courtyard, Efran said, “Stand by.” Kaas saluted in acknowledgment.

Upon the entrance of the mounted archers into the courtyard from the stables, Efran turned abruptly from the gates, stepping on Geneve’s foot. He hopped off it while Gabriel pulled her away more forcefully. Efran told the leading archer, “Quennel, array behind Stephanos; shoot anyone who nocks.”

“Captain.” Quennel kicked his horse out of the gates, his archers thronging behind him. When Efran jumped back to watch, he fell over Geneve.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 15

There was a shocked stillness in the courtyard as Efran bounded up, lifted Geneve, and turned her gently. “Go in, Geneve.”

“But I—” she began.

“Go,” Efran said, watching the archers. Geneve drew back to the fortress steps. Efran stood tensely at the courtyard gates as Stephanos drew up to the wall gates far down the road. Quennel and the archers spread behind him, drew out their bows, and nocked in unison. Then they raised their bows, all canted at the same forty-degree angle. To a Westfordian, this had to be unnerving. And the faerie trees continued to slap at Webbe’s riders.

Stephanos gave his message with the alien Polonti archers behind him. Webbe wavered, then turned his horse,

gesturing, and his mounted men drew off on either side of the road. This put them almost directly under the trees, which began a concerted assault on the bewildered riders.

Meanwhile, Quennel lowered his bow. With the archers on either side of him doing the same, it looked mesmerizing. "Oh, well done," Efran whispered. As a captain in Westford, he had drilled his archers on uniformity, but had never seen choreography with bows. The faerie trees, however, might be at the point of provoking attacks from Webbe's men, who were convinced that Abbey soldiers were hiding in them.

Nonetheless, the wall gates were opened to permit stalled traffic to resume down to the Abbey plots. Stephanos and the archers drew to either side of the road, bows at the ready.

Efran shook his head. To Kaas, waiting on horseback, he said, "Have Stephanos tell Webbe that his men must withdraw past the stone bridge or the archers will start shooting. Anyone who interferes with travelers will be shot."

"Captain," Kaas said, exiting to the switchback.

Efran looked east. "Has anyone seen Barr's messengers to Reinagle and Bowring returning?"

"No, Captain." "No."

"Keep an eye on the new north road for me, then," Efran said, perturbed.

Those in the courtyard watched as Stephanos delivered the second message. Quennel's archers, now arrayed at the wall on either side of the road, nocked to lift their bows, canted horizontally, and aimed at Webbe's men.

With Webbe shouting in defiance (and a tree branch plucking at the fussy crest on his helmet) his men nonetheless turned back to cross the stone bridge and plant themselves on either side of the road. Quennel's archers withdrew their bows out of sight. Without waiting for permission, Abbey residents resumed their errands. Efran continued to watch, waiting. His eyes flicked frequently to the new road north.

Geneve came up to say, "Captain, I need to get to Barracks Two." Gabriel looked off, glassy-eyed.

"No," Efran said quietly, watching.

"One of his men going over," a sentry said. Everyone pushed up to the gates to watch one of Webbe's men ride up to a cart that had just crossed the bridge coming south. Pushed aside, Geneve pushed back. They all watched Quennel release a warning shot over the rider's head. He ducked, shouting something, and quickly withdrew.

The driver of the cart raised a placating hand to the archers, and another man at the gates laughed, "He was just placing an order."

As they continued to watch, Efran grew increasingly restless. "What's taking them so long?" he muttered, scanning for Barr's messengers.

"You want someone to ride after them, Captain?" Shane asked.

"Not yet," Efran said. "Patience," he said as if reminding himself.

They continued to wait. "I don't see anyone coming from Westford to talk to Webbe," Corwyn observed.

“They can’t control him,” Efran said. “No one knows what to do with him. I was just hoping—” He fell silent, watching.

Pleyel said, “Here come Captain Barr’s men down the new north road! But who—?”

Heads swiveled as the group at the gates watched Barr’s messengers ride down the road with a third rider between them—a tall woman in an elaborate riding dress. She wore a flowing scarf tied tightly around her head, and kept putting a hand to it, as if fearing it would blow off.

The group at the gates intently watched the trio turn west onto a plot road, heading for the hill. They stopped briefly to give their report to a soldier, who ran down main to relay it to Captain Barr in Barracks #1. The riders then resumed loping toward the switchback. As they began ascending, Efran leaned on the gates to laugh. “Oh, well done!” Turning to another mounted man waiting, Stourt, Efran said, “Go down and tell Stephanos to escort Webbe up alone. The archers will stay to keep an eye on his men.”

“Captain,” Stourt said, reining around. As he loped down the switchback, he raised a hand at Barr’s messengers, then paused to look back at them before going on down to the road.

The group at the gates fell back for the riders to enter—Efran checked to see that no one was in his path when he stepped back. After the tall woman with big feet dismounted, Efran threw an arm around her shoulders and told the messengers, “Come.” With the sudden dispersal of the group at the gates, Geneve sighed and went on down to Barracks #2.

As Efran and his party bounded up the fortress steps, he told Routh at the door, “Have them bring Webbe to the small dining room. But make sure they knock and wait for admittance.” While Efran hustled the returning party in, he told another sentry, “Get Minka and Ella in here. Also an early dinner.” And the party threw themselves down around the table, panting and laughing.

“I can hardly wait to hear this,” Efran said, handing out bottles of Goadby’s to the men sitting around the table: Rigdon, Hawk, and Webbe’s eldest son Cyneheard. He pulled the scarf off his head to run a hand through his sweaty hair.

“The last few days have been a nightmare,” he exhaled, pausing to take a long drink. Then he wiped his mouth on the embroidered sleeve of the dress. Pausing to look at the fresh stains, he murmured, “Oops.”

“Take your time; have something to eat,” Efran said as a kitchen assistant brought in platters of slow-roasted pork and fried squash medallions, as well as small dishes of pumpkin custard and apple cobbler.

Efran held up a plate for the assistant to fill, then set it before Cyneheard. Upon Efran’s nod of thanks, the assistant left, closing the door behind him. “I haven’t eaten anything but garbage for three days,” Cyneheard gasped, taking up the fork.

“Eat slowly, then,” Efran cautioned. Rigdon and Hawk served their own plates and sat to eat.

The door opened again for Minka and Ella to appear. Minka exclaimed, “Cyneheard! Are you back for good?”

Mouth full, he nodded. Ella asked, “Why . . . are you wearing Mother’s best riding dress?”

He looked up to mumble, “I’m a wanted man.” Clearing his mouth, he told her, “When I left here—what? Five

days ago?—I rode back to university, where the moment I arrived, I was booted out and told never to return. So I started to ride back here, but apparently Father has put out a reward for my return—and yours, and Alcmund's. So I was caught twice, and transported twice to Sandilands. The first time I just walked out, as no one was there to make me stay. The second time, Father left guards, so I had to wait till they were sufficiently drunk before I could get out—but then I took the dress to ride in.”

He stopped to fill his mouth again, then said thickly, “Today, I rode out wearing the dress to come back here when I saw Father and his apes going down the south road—knew I'd never make it around them. But then these two chaps in Abbey red stopped to have a look at me, and brought me back a different way.” Done with his part of the story, he turned his full attention to dinner. Minka took fried squash and apple cobbler to the table. Ella helped herself to a little pork and pumpkin custard, and both sat to eat.

Meanwhile, everyone looked at Rigdon, who was wiping his mouth on a napkin. “We couldn't find Reinagle or Bowring, Captain; they appear to be making themselves scarce. But while we were in the road debating our course, the young man in the expensive dress waved us down. So here we are.”

Hawk added, “Webbe's only got a handful of men, Captain; he doesn't have anything to pay them with. Whatever money he had has been siphoned away.”

“I haven't got a copper of it,” Cyneheard grunted.

Mindful of Justinian's warning that Blairgowrie was looking to take Ella by any means, Efran told her and Cyneheard, “Well, I'm allowing Webbe up here for the last time. Unless you ask, he will not be granted entrance again. You don't have to see him today if you don't wish; I just want to make certain that we tie up all loose ends.”

Cyneheard nodded; Ella said, “Thank you, Father.”

Cyneheard glanced at her. “Does that feel strange? Calling Lord Efran ‘father’?”

“Yes,” she said, grinning. “It's like I'm pretending to be a princess in a faerie tale, only one that goes on for as long as I wish.” Minka turned smiling eyes to Efran, and he nodded slightly.

“What about Alcmund?” Cyneheard asked.

Efran shook his head. “I won't risk his seeing his father again so soon after what he witnessed—whatever that was. He only recently started talking again.”

There was a knock on the door. Already standing, Efran put a hand on the door lever, but looked at Cyneheard and Ella before opening it. Ella shrugged indifferently; Cyneheard held up his plate. “More of that excellent pork, please.” Rigdon, closest to the sideboard, got up to refill the plate and hand it back to him.

Efran opened the door. Webbe, wearing a helmet with a badly tattered crest, a too-small tunic with a breastplate, greaves, and metal shoes, limped in to sit at the table and take off his shoes. “These are terrible for walking in.”

He sat up, exhaling, “There. That feels much better.” Efran glanced under the table at his bare feet on the cool marble floor. Webbe then gazed around the table. Ella looked back at him with a slightly quizzical expression; Cyneheard had his face down in his plate.

Webbe began as if addressing a crowd of hundreds: “So, hello! I'm glad to see you. Here we are, then, and that's

what it has to be, now that we are here. Things will be better, for we have a plan, and that plan is for. . . .” Seeming to lose his train of thought, Webbe stood in his bare feet. “We are leaving now.” He looked from Ella to Cyneheard, almost visibly counting. “There’s one more. . . .”

“Let’s try that fried squash,” Cyneheard said, handing his plate back to Rigdon.

Rigdon glanced at Efran, who said, “A small helping. We don’t want you to overload an empty stomach.”

“I’ll chance it,” Cyneheard said, gesturing. Efran nodded, and Rigdon scooped out a medium helping (small for a soldier) and handed the plate back to Cyneheard’s outstretched hands.

Webbe, authoritatively pushing his chair back to the table, said, “So now that there is no argument, we shall be off, as it were. Come now.” He lifted his chin, blinking at the walls as if expecting something to emerge from them.

Ella said wistfully, “I haven’t tried the cobbler yet.” Rigdon amiably handed her a dessert dish from the sideboard. “Thank you,” she smiled primly.

“You’re welcome, Lady Ella,” Rigdon said. Then he saluted Efran. “I’m off to report to Captain Barr, sir.”

“Very good,” Efran nodded, and Rigdon walked out around Webbe.

Suspecting that someone had escaped, Webbe darted his eyes sharply around the room, then declared, “That’s enough eating. No one talk, either.”

Cyneheard leaned back, groaning. “Ohhh, that was excellent. I need to sleep for a week now.”

Hawk looked at Efran. “Down below or up here, Cap’n?” The men had put the hilltop barracks in order quickly after the collapse—once the faeries had it standing again, they disdained doing much inside except to fold all the cots and stack them against the wall up to the ceiling, as well as button up all the jackets and pants.

“I believe they set aside a cot for him up here,” Efran said.

“Right. I’ll show you,” Hawk said, rising. No one said anything about Cyneheard’s attire because no one knew what, if anything, he was wearing underneath it.

“Thank you, friend,” Cyneheard said, shoving his chair back. “Thank you, Captain,” Cyneheard said, saluting.

“You’re welcome,” Efran said, smiling, then nodded at Hawk’s departing salute.

As they two started out, Webbe said indignantly, “That’s your mother’s riding dress.”

“Oh! I forgot,” Cyneheard said. “Ha.” He stripped it off over his head, leaving him in undershirt and breeches. Ella shielded her face with a hand. Cyneheard tossed the dress onto Webbe’s head, then walked out with Hawk.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 16

Given the open door to the small dining room, Mathurin entered. "Pardon, Captain," he said, saluting, "but a few of the men are wondering if Lady Ella will be in for dinner tonight."

Efran looked humorously at Ella, who asked coyly, "May I be excused, Papa?"

"Yes, you may," he said.

Minka rose. "One of us has to chaperon."

Efran nodded slightly. "Go ahead; I'll be right in."

"Bring Joshua," Minka purred, and he grinned.

That left Efran, Webbe, and an expensive riding dress in the small dining room. Efran looked at him, waiting.

Webbe looked distractedly at the empty room. "Where did they go?"

"You might want to check Sandilands," Efran suggested.

Webbe thought about that. "Yes, I think I will."

"Excellent." Efran looked out the door to Cudmore, who came up, saluting. Efran told him, "Surchatain Webbe and his men are going back to Sandilands now."

"Yes, Captain. This way, Surchatain." Cudmore walked Webbe, barefoot, carrying a voluminous riding dress, out to his horse in the courtyard. Then the courtyard gate sentries watched him ride down to the wall gates, and the wall gate sentries watched him and his men ride off. So Quennel and his archers came up to dinner.

Efran had a few men bring all the remaining food and ale from the small dining room into the dining hall, where the refreshments were deposited on the back tables around Efran and Minka's usual place. So men and children appeared out of the walls to help consume it all.

By the time Efran showed up with Joshua, Ella was at table with Minka and several men in attendance. Efran remained standing as Toby, Noah, Ivy, Erastus, Cleo, Hassie, and Alcmund swarmed his table, eating and chattering. Minka removed ales from the mouths of several children. The men made sure that nothing was wasted.

Tess and Geneve were eating across the hall with the stable crew, but when the men saw the influx of food around Ella, they got up without apology to hover around the back tables. Quennel's crew landed around those tables right away, and Quennel raised his Goadby's to Efran: "Seen you practicing the *aik*e shooting, Captain. You have it down right well; you're deep in the flow."

Efran shook his head. "I'm glad you showed me how. I can't believe I've been shooting the hard way for fourteen years now."

Minka looked up from her seat. "Fourteen years?"

“Didn’t I tell you my whole life history?” Efran asked wryly. “Yes, I made it down to Westford when I was fourteen; inserted myself directly into the army.” He was distracted by the faeries’ replenishing the food platters on the tables around him. No one else seemed to notice; Minka was studying her husband, who knew there’d be questions later. But she was remembering how Commander Wendt had said that when he promoted Efran to Captain at the age of 20, he was already a seasoned soldier. And that was because he’d had six years’ service by then.

The talk around the table drew her attention, and she listened to one personable stablehand describe Ella’s rapid progress in horse training. Listening as well, Efran helped himself to pork rolls and fried squash. Joshua opened his mouth, so Efran gave him a bite of everything.

Minka turned as Wyeth and Cyr paused at their tables on their way out of the hall. Efran smiled at them but Minka swung her legs over the bench to jump up. Wyeth grinned down at her until she reached up to turn his face away. “You can’t look,” she decreed. Then she signed something to Cyr. Ella turned to watch, but did not join her.

Cyr covered her mouth in a screech of laughter, signing back, *Yes!* Wyeth looked back quickly, too late.

What did she say? he demanded of Cyr, smiling. She merely laughed at him.

“I know what you said,” Efran told Minka, lowering his chin at her.

“Do you know hand language, Captain?” Wyeth asked eagerly.

“No, but it’s the same thing she told Kelsey,” Efran said, still eyeing his wife. She laughed guiltily, resuming her seat.

“Well?” Wyeth asked his bride. Such an obvious query did not require signing.

To everyone’s delight, she said, “Tell you later.” All the men laughed knowingly, some a little enviously.

“Excuse us; it’s ‘later.’” Wyeth bowed to Minka and briefly saluted Efran before escorting his wife out, who was laughing again.

“Good man, Wyeth,” Efran murmured, feeding Joshua a small spoonful of pumpkin custard. The nine-month-old rolled that around on his tongue, then opened his mouth for more.

After the newlyweds’ spectacle, Tess leaned over to mutter something to Geneve, but she, remembering the banging, rested her forehead dismally in one hand.

Later that evening, Efran held Minka in bed to murmur, “That’s what you said to Cyr, isn’t it?”—having just told her.

She laughed, snuggling into him. “So? It’s true.” He acknowledged that, then she sighed, “I feel so bad for Geneve. She doesn’t realize what she threw away.”

Efran considered that, then said, “She’s off duty except for housekeeping.”

“Oh,” Minka groaned. “I’m sorry.”

“Why? Many men don’t make it.” He pressed his face contentedly into her neck and hair.

“She wanted it so badly,” Minka murmured.

“Um, I don’t think so,” he mumbled, sleepy. “Gabriel made it look easy, so she thought it should be easy for her, as well.”

Minka thought there was more to it than that. Too tired to dwell on it, she closed her eyes instead.

Martyn returned the following day, October 17th, with the group that had been assigned to scout out activity in the Sasany Fields. This was where Master Crowe had run the camp at which Martyn was trained. After Efran had exposed Crowe’s deception and his own men had killed him, many of those men had come down to the Abbey. But Efran worried that some might have returned to restart the camp. And he was right.

The leader of the scouting group, one of Crowe’s lieutenants named Chee, reported to Efran, “There are about thirty that have returned to rebuild the camp. But we don’t believe they will be a threat to you, Captain; they know many of us have gone over to you. And we stayed for several weeks to help them resupply and enlist their help as an outpost. Captains Neale and Younge came out for a few days to observe, as well. The camp leaders, Hob and Wymond, have agreed to warn us of troop movements.”

“Very good, that’s certainly a relief. Go bed down as you need,” Efran told him.

But Minka made off with Martyn to Croft’s, making sure to tell the gate sentry where they would be. She wanted to get his own report, and to tell him of all the news at the Abbey. He was astonished to hear of the Leviathan’s destruction of the fortress and the hill’s rebuilding, and of Efran being the father of a 16-year-old. So there was much quiet hissing between them in the corner booth.

Martyn agreed with Chee’s opinion that the men reassembling the training group were no threat to the Abbey, but, he had reservations. “The Sasany Fields is a strange area. There are voices that blow in on the wind, that speak in your mind as your own voice. It takes great mental discipline to discern what voice is not your own, but a suggestion from outside.”

“That’s scary,” Minka said.

“It’s scary to experience it, especially when you realize that something foreign had been making itself at home in your head,” Martyn said, upending his ale. Although Minka wasn’t sure he was sixteen yet (so as to legally drink), she wasn’t going to ask; Martyn had earned his ale.

As they were rising to leave, Tess and Geneve entered with two stablehands. Minka instinctively smiled at the men, as she had talked with both of them at dinner last night about Ella’s progress with the white mare (which she was *not* breaking).

Seeing her smile, Tess barked, “And there’s Minka, flirting as usual.” Most daring of all, Minka was wearing her pants.

The stablehands glanced at Tess; Martyn evaluated her, and Geneve gasped, “Tess, shut up!”

“Why are you defending her? She got Wyeth to divorce you,” Tess told her. One of the stablehands quietly

turned and walked out. As that was the man that Geneve had been interested in, she left as well. Minka lowered her head and made for the exit, Martyn right beside her.

That left one stablehand and Tess to be seated at a small table. Having sat, he studied her. "What d'you have against Minka? You rail about her all the time."

She shrugged. "She made Barr marry me, and that didn't work out so well," she said glumly.

"With a mouth like yours, she's responsible for how your marriage went?" he asked, and she looked down. "Girl, you're good at training the horses; now train yourself."

She pressed her lips together, but nodded.

When Minka and Martyn had received their horses from Croft's hostler, he asked, "Do you want to tell me about Geneve?"

"I guess I'd better," she sighed. "Let's walk the horses around the lake." So they turned on the east plot road to ride at a walk while Minka told Martyn about Geneve marrying Wyeth after Nares died, when she thought she was pregnant, and then discarding him when she found out she wasn't. (One of the gate sentries noted the pair leaving Croft's to head for the lake.)

"I'm a busybody," she confessed despondently as they walked around the lake. "But she treated him so badly, and when I found out about the provision in the Law allowing soldiers to divorce and remarry without a waiting period, I told him about it, because another girl was very interested in him, and they just got married."

Martyn thought about that for a while, then said, "Tell me about Tess."

"Oh, she also wanted to be in the army, but she didn't make it because she was so angry and uncooperative," Minka said unhappily.

"So I see," Martyn said. "I'm sorry that Geneve didn't work out. We three had a good time that day when she and I were your bodyguards."

"Oh, didn't we?" Minka smiled.

"Yes, except for the problem with your sister. What is Adele doing now?" Martyn asked.

"Oh." Minka's eyes widened. "You're not going to believe this." And she told him about Adele's marrying Blairgowrie to become Surchataine of Eurus, with one of her first actions trying to get Blairgowrie's son married off to Webbe's daughter, who turned out to be actually Efran's daughter.

Martyn put a hand to his head. "I don't know if I can keep all that straight."

"I know," Minka laughed.

They were at the far side of the lake now, almost directly under one of the two faerie trees. About a dozen people were lazily fishing in the early afternoon. So Minka and Martyn dismounted to begin leading their horses around the lake. What had started out as a jagged line through which Efran escaped had been gradually widened to 20 feet, then 40 feet, then 150 feet across at its widest point.

“Such a pretty lake, especially with the faerie trees. So tranquil.” Minka breathed in the fresh autumn air.

“Do you feel something?” Martyn asked.

Minka frowned at him. “I don’t like that question. The last time I heard it. . . . Look at the faerie tree.”

Martyn turned toward the spreading tree behind him, whose green and copper-colored leaves were shivering at the end of quaking branches. “It’s shaking,” he said.

“So’s the water,” Minka said. They both looked at the waves rising on the lake. People who had been fishing began grabbing up their gear and leaving.

“Come away from the shore,” Martyn said, leading his horse, which had flattened its ears.

“Yes,” Minka agreed. Her horse pulled away, rearing. Martyn caught at the reins, but the skittish animal bolted to run back toward the switchback.

“Get up on my horse,” Martyn instructed, grabbing her by the waist to lift her toward his saddle.

A great wave erupted from the lake, knocking all of them down. The horse staggered up to run off riderless; Martyn hefted himself up to lift Minka, semi-conscious, and run with her away from the shore.

An enormous dark gray shape intervened. Martyn fell, dropping Minka, but she was fully awake by then. He threw himself atop her as the huge plated body of the Leviathan, Symphorien, dropped between them and escape, closing around them completely. The winglike fins drooped down, one across its body, the other underneath it. The four legs with clawed feet spread out, the foreleg and hindleg of its right side on the ground, while the other two legs hung suspended in the air above them. Last, the spiked tail came whipping up out of the water, curling over the ridges on the spine.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 17

“Minka! Minka!” Efran cried as a unit of soldiers pounded toward the lake on horseback. But before they could even get close, the Leviathan’s head reared up, issuing a blast of steaming water from her siphons that had the horses rearing or falling. Meanwhile, the spiked tail whipped up threateningly as one fin-like wing spread over the little humans near its belly. When the soldiers careened to a stop, fighting to control their horses, the great gray head dropped back down for the expanded tail to resume bringing up water over the rapidly pulsing gills.

Martyn turned to shout, “She’s all right, Efran! We’re just stuck here for a moment.”

“What’s happening?” Efran cried. Neither party could see the other for the mass between them.

“I don’t know yet!” Martyn called. “Stay back; don’t aggravate it further!”

“Minka? Let me hear your voice!” Efran called.

“Yes, Efran, I’m all right!” she called. “Something’s wrong with her!” For Minka was watching the great head

loll on the ground, jaws open. The Leviathan lay on her side, gills working hard under the cascade of water. The tail waved in distress over her back.

“What? What is it?” Efran called.

“I’m looking!” Minka shouted.

“What do you think it is?” Martyn asked, coming up to look at the great spiked breast that towered above them.

“Well,” Minka said, looking down the body. “She came back to the hilltop to make a nest.” So Minka walked down to look under the lifted tail. There, she saw the egg passage—the cloaca—gaping open, but nothing coming out.

“Minka,” Martyn said warily, a hand on her arm as she bent to look in the passage, extended to a width of about four feet.

“Oh, there it is. Do you see, Martyn? There’s an egg stuck,” she breathed.

Martyn’s jaw hung open. “I . . . don’t know if there’s anything we can do about that.”

“Well, we have to try,” she said, bending to take off her boots.

“Minka! Don’t,” Martyn said.

Efran called, “Martyn! Minka! What’s going on?”

Martyn raised his face to call, “Just seeing if we can help her, Efran! Minka’s all right; she’s just looking.”

When he turned back, Minka had crawled into the passage on her hands and knees—fortunately, in her pants. “Minka!” he hissed. “If anything happens to you—”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, looking back at him. “Don’t you see, she came out looking for help? Let me see if I can do anything for her.” Already dripping, both of them received the spray from her tail washing her gills.

He leaned back, groaning, then shouted, “We’re just looking, Efran! No problem!”

“Minka?” Efran called.

“Wait a moment, Efran. She’s busy!” Martyn called, then winced.

Minka had crawled up into the cloaca to lay a hand on the obstructing egg, and immediately determined that it was an oval shape lodged crossways in the passage. So she tentatively began pulling on one side and pushing on the other.

“How is she busy, Martyn?” Efran called.

“Looking to see how she can help it. Her. With her—problem!” Martyn called. “She’s concentrating!” And he looked back in the passage again, wincing to see her shadowy form moving from one side to the other. “Hurry, Minka,” he groaned through gritted teeth.

When her efforts produced no results, Minka determined that she had to get her hands further around the egg on one side. So she dug her way gently as far as she could on the left-hand side of the egg, and pulled. That seemed to produce a little movement, so she dug her hands back farther in the same spot and pulled again with all her strength. That produced more movement.

As she dug her hands in on the same side to pull again, the egg suddenly shot forward to knock her down before coming to rest on her legs. She managed to twist so that she was lying prone, but could not free her legs. Now the egg could not move because she could not move. “Martyn!” she cried. “Pull me! Pull me out!”

When he began to dart into the cloaca, she ordered, “Take off your boots.” Grunting, he yanked them off, then climbed in to take her hands and pull.

But her legs were lodged so tightly under the egg, he could not pull hard enough on her arms to free her. Fortunately, both the egg and the passage were elastic, so that her legs were not crushed. Martyn crawled up to wrap his arms around her rib cage and pull, walking backwards on his knees. She moved by inches, and the egg behind her followed. He pulled again, then heard something crack. “What was that? Are you hurt?” he gasped.

“Just pull, Martyn,” she whispered.

He pressed forward to take hold of her lower down, below her rib cage, and began easing her out inch by inch. With each inch, she was able to work more of her legs free from under the egg. But the pressure was building from behind it, and he heard her gasping. Still he kept pulling, and she kept coming. He heard Efran calling, but could not answer.

Finally, Martyn stepped back onto the ground out of the cloaca so that he was able to reach in and grasp the back of Minka’s thighs. With that, he pulled her out bodily, and the egg immediately followed.

He carried her off to the side to set her gently on the ground. “How badly are you hurt?” he asked.

“Not much,” she said quickly. “Look.” He turned, and they both watched two more eggs come out in rapid succession. They were oval, light gray, each about five feet long.

Over the next few minutes, Minka and Martyn watched the cloaca close up. Then Symphorien got to her feet, stretching and shaking a bit in a clear indication of relief. Martyn and Minka huddled together in awe at her size upright—there was no place they could have run out of her reach, had she wished to do anything to them. The men watched tensely as well, working to control their panicky horses.

Symphorien gathered the three eggs in her claws and slipped back into the water. The parties on both sides of the lake watched without a sound as the ripples faded. Martyn got up to look around for his boots, then sat to put them on. Minka’s boots were nowhere in sight.

Then Efran kicked his horse to run around the lake with thirty men behind him as Martyn lifted Minka to her feet. Efran reined up and threw himself from the saddle to take her in his arms. At her muffled cry, he let go again. “Where are you hurt?”

“Just—a little bit—here,” she said, patting her left side.

Efran momentarily froze, searching for how to lift her, then he picked her up with her right side against him. “Come, Martyn; tell me what happened,” he said, turning to walk rapidly toward the switchback with Minka, still wet, in his arms. She laid her head in contentment on Efran’s shoulder, her arm curled around his neck.

Martyn fell in beside him and began, “Well, Minka saw that it—she—was hurting, and, saw that an egg was stuck, so. . . .” A number of men dismounted to walk their horses behind Efran and Martyn to listen.

Efran stopped on the road once or twice as Martyn mentioned her crawling into the Leviathan’s cloaca and then getting stuck under the emerging egg. “I hurt her pulling her out,” Martyn said. “I’m afraid I cracked at least one of her ribs.”

Minka said stubbornly, “You did what you had to do. And Symphorien has three lovely eggs. We had to help her, Efran; that’s why she came out of the lake—to get help.”

He exhaled, “I suppose so.” Pressing his cheek to her head, he added, “Of course, you would be the one to crawl up her—”

He couldn’t quite get the word out, and she laughed, then groaned, “Ow.”

When they reached the fortress, Efran carried her up to Wallace’s suite on the second floor. Martyn came up too, to wait in the receiving room while the doctor examined her. Wallace told them, “Yes, it appears she has at least one cracked rib, but it doesn’t look to be serious. She’ll be feeling it in the next few days, however. No riding for about six weeks. And you can’t lie on her, Efran.” Wallace looked at him severely, and Efran glanced away in discomfort.

She insisted on walking down the stairs herself, and asked for a tub to be filled in their quarters. While men were filling it, Efran asked her, “Do you want anything from the kitchen?” In his mind, the first treatment for any ill was good food.

“Oh, custard or cobbler, after I bathe,” she said. “Thank you.”

He studied her. “Are you sure you’re all right?—other than your ribs?”

“Yes, fine. I’m very happy to have helped her,” she sighed. “That can only be for good.”

“Yes,” he said tentatively. “So now we’ll have four of them knocking about the hillside.” She suddenly raised her face, then grinned at him. “Yes,” he said, tight-lipped. “I hear the bells.”

While the fortress residents discussed Minka’s acute midwifery skills, Efran summoned Lwoff from the armory to hear what he thought. Lwoff told him and Minka, “Sure, Cap’n, ’twere a bit of good work for the Lady Minka to get ’er to rights. The beastie had a prior claim on the hill, somehow—she’s probably hunnerds of years older than the fortress. A nod to that claim is only right, and mercy begets mercy. Leviathan is now obligated to the lady.”

Efran looked tentatively to his wife, who looked away.

Cyneheard, having been assigned to Captain Towner’s unit, had completed his first full day of training, so Efran summoned Towner for a report. Towner said, “He’s your typical university man, Captain—overeducated and underdeveloped—but he has a good attitude and a willingness to work. If you hadn’t told me he was Webbe’s son, I wouldn’t have believed it. But we can make use of him; we’ll see where he fits.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Towner,” Efran said in satisfaction. The possibility existed, of course, that Cyneheard was *not* Webbe’s son, especially as there was no physical resemblance at all. But Efran only smiled.

That evening, Efran lay in bed quietly suffering. Minka leaned over to play with his hair, and he looked at her. “Is your hair bothering you?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said.

“You know you can get it cut,” she said.

“I keep forgetting,” he said.

“Would you like me to send Routh up to the workroom again?” she asked.

“If you can find him,” he said.

She tried not to smile. “I’m sorry you can’t lie on me. Will it hurt you if I lie on you?”

“No,” he said quickly. She climbed on him, laughing into his lips, and he smiled.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 18

First thing the following morning—October 18th—Efran took breakfast to Minka in their quarters. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“All right,” she said. “I can’t pick up Joshua, but I hope not to lie in bed any more.”

“Good,” he said, kissing her lightly. “I’ll be up in Estes’ workroom if you need me.”

“Don’t worry about me,” she said firmly, so he went out.

Not to say that Minka lied, but, she lied. Her sleep had been uneasy, and she awoke early to intense pain in her left ribs. She could eat only a little of the eggs and ham that Efran brought her, and when she tried to rise, the pain flared up, so she lay still. And after Efran had left, all she could do was lie there.

Kele, the fortress’ first faerie, came at once to see her. “Oh, my, how you hurt! Let me see—” Kele walked around Minka’s ribcage on very light feet, spreading her hands over the cracked rib. “Is that any better?”

“Some,” Minka said, not entirely honest.

“Oh, no, this is something beyond my ability to heal. You must stay still and quiet. What can I do for you?” Kele asked.

“Oh, Kele, if I can’t get up to check on Joshua, please do that for me. Please see that the nursery attendants are taking good care of him.”

“All right. There now, dear.” Kele passed a hand over her Minka’s face, so that she did relax a little.

From that point on, Minka was alone with her pain. But she found a surprising benefit: it opened the door to prayer. Her prayers just flowed upward on the waves of pain, so she prayed much for Efran, Joshua, Ella, and for Geneve, Tess, Barr, Wyeth, Cyr, and everyone else she could think of. Also, the bells rang with the sweetest sounds. They were quiet when she wished them to be quiet, and rang when she needed to hear them. And that’s how her day went.

Shortly after leaving Minka that morning, Efran received two pairs of messengers from two different parties at the same time. He put Justinian’s recognizable men in the small dining room with refreshments and the second pair who wore EurAsian uniforms in the receiving room with ale and flatbread. Then he opened Justinian’s letter:

“To my scrumptious puddino:

“So much exciting news, I hardly know where to start. So we’ll start with Surchatain Blairgowrie’s son Eadgifu returning brokenhearted to the family nest after discovering that his (still unnamed) lovely maid of a wife, having discovered that he was not so much a person of power as a person of power-in-hopeful-waiting, declined to wait and departed with the contents of his purse. The royal parents, Blairgowrie and our own Adele, are having the marriage annulled. Whether they are pursuing their original plan of marrying Eadgifu to Ellacombe is unknown, but we’d best not rule it out.

“To everyone’s relief, our dearest Adele has dropped her demands to nationalize EurAsian furriers and instead is suggesting gifts from EurAsian jewelers to insure that they stay open for business. Surchatain Blairgowrie is handling the interesting new challenge with the skill that earned him high office: he has put his darling wife in charge of planning his latest fête to honor her, which should keep her busy for the next few weeks, at least.

“Meanwhile, the dominant members of the Standing Committee of Citizens of Westford, Lords Reinagle and Bowring, have appealed to Surchatain Blairgowrie for help in containing the antics of one-time Surchatain Webbe, who is reportedly bewildering Westfordians with demands for personal services of various degrees of morality or possibility. Meanwhile, the untitled citizens of Westford are uneasy that their lordships must resort to a potential enemy to contain a mostly harmless eccentric. Also, Webbe the Destructor (as his new title affirms) holds without wavering that all four of his children are home where they belong.

“One last note for the kitten of reMEOWn: word has it that Blairgowrie and Adele are going to request a meeting with the Gargoyle in which they will offer him some worthless papers in exchange for gold. This itself will be a pretext for another objective which may involve that of the first paragraph. Caution is warranted.

“Waiting anxiously to see your sweet face again,

“Your Own Justinian”

Efran then opened the second message, that from Blairgowrie, which read:

“To Efran, Lord of the Abbey Fortress and Lands

“From Surchatain Blairgowrie of EurAs

“My wife and I are presently incognito at the Porterhouse Inn in Westford, hoping to receive an invitation to visit your legendary Fortress and offer you a possibly quite lucrative proposal.

“Am counting on your instinct for advancement which has served you so well!”

“As has my more acute instinct for adders,” Efran murmured. “Blairgowrie must think I don’t know who his wife is.” He told Beardall, “Ask Captain Barr to send a pair of scouts to the Porterhouse—Blairgowrie and Adele are supposedly there right now. I want to know if they are, and how many men are in their bodyguard.”

“Captain.” Beardall saluted, then hustled to the courtyard to appropriate a horse.

Efran then handed the letters to Verrin. “Take these to Commander Lyte. Tell him I’m going to meet Blairgowrie and Adele at the Porterhouse, and I want him to have at least twenty men standing by to intervene if they bring men out of hiding to supplement their bodyguard. I’ll inform him when I’m on the way. After he sees the letters, route them on up to Estes and DeWitt.”

“Yes, Captain.” He took the letters to run out for another horse.

Efran told a third man to lodge Justinian’s messengers at Croft’s Inn for the time being. Then he went up to the second-floor workroom to brief Estes and DeWitt on both letters, and then wait.

In a while, Barr’s scouts Coxe and Shane returned. “Captain,” Shane saluted. “We confirmed that Blairgowrie and Adele are at the Porterhouse, as well as another woman who is dressed just like her.”

“Ah,” Efran said, while DeWitt barked in laughter and Estes shook his head. “I wonder how she imagines to work a switch. Never mind. And their bodyguard?”

“Four, Captain,” Shane said. “We rode around a bit looking for more. Didn’t see any, which means nothing.”

“True. Thank you. Shane, ask Captain Barr to get two more men in addition to you and Coxe to ride to the Porterhouse with me in uniform. And stop by to tell Commander Lyte we’re about to be off. Coxe, come with me so that I don’t forget Blairgowrie’s messengers locked up in the receiving room,” Efran said.

“Captain,” Coxe saluted with a laugh. Efran stopped by his quarters to check on Minka. As she appeared to be asleep, he changed quietly into a red uniform in the outer room.

Shortly, Efran, Coxe, Shane, Melchior, and Truro were riding down the switchback with Blairgowrie’s messengers. As they passed the main east-west road leading to the lake, Efran glanced over. He hoped Symphorien and her babies were doing well. He still rather resented her inconveniencing Minka.

Efran’s party rode at a fast lope, which brought them to the Porterhouse in just half an hour. They gave up their horses to the hostler, then Efran took his men into the tavern to wait. “Tell Blairgowrie I’m here,” he told the Eurasian messengers, who saluted unhappily. This was not what they had been instructed to do.

Efran had Shane and Melchior sit in a booth with him while Coxe and Truro sat at a table nearby, all of them in Abbey red. Then he ordered ale and the stew of the day for his party. They began eating heartily enough, but pushed the bowls away before they were half empty. After Madea’s fare, everything else was insipid, if not rank.

“What is puddino?” Efran asked abruptly.

The men looked at each other, and Truro said, “Isn’t that a special kind of pudding?”

“Probably. That fits,” Efran said, half-smiling.

Shortly, Blairgowrie appeared at the tavern door, looking around. Then he came over to the booth where Efran was relaxing with an inferior ale to Goadby’s. “Lord Efran. You’re here.” Blairgowrie’s musical voice made it sound like the opening notes of an opera in which the leading baritone dies.

“Yes. Have a seat, Blairgowrie. Move down a bit, Shane,” Efran said.

Shane scooted down and Blairgowrie sat reluctantly. “I was hoping to meet at the Abbey.”

“Why?” Efran asked, upending his bottle. He winced slightly and put it down.

“Just to . . . see the progress you’ve made in these last few months,” Blairgowrie said, a hand smoothing back his silver hair.

“Oh, you can do that anytime; you don’t need me. Just ride on down and look around,” Efran said.

“Yes, well, I thought you’d be interested in this.” Blairgowrie withdrew a folded paper from an inner pocket to hand it to him.

“Then let’s have a look,” Efran said amiably, unfolding it. He read for a moment, then looked up. “Gold certificates?”

“Yes, it’s a far more portable, secure way to store and especially transport gold,” Blairgowrie said, assuming his persuasive voice.

“All right,” Efran said in disinterest, handing the paper back. “Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?”

“Well, yes, but—we really need to talk at the Abbey,” Blairgowrie said.

Efran leaned forward confidentially. “I felt I’d better warn you,” he said in a low voice.

“About what?” Blairgowrie said in tentative alarm. He and Efran’s men leaned in slightly to him.

Efran glanced around to see that no one besides his own men was within hearing range, then whispered, “It’s a trap.”

“What is?” Blairgowrie was definitely alarmed.

“Certain lords of Westford may come to you with a request for ‘help’ with a certain other party, when in fact, they wish to draw you into a vulnerable position and. . .” Efran trailed off ominously, glancing around again. Blairgowrie was very still.

“The thing is,” Efran continued in a whisper, “the man is as sane as you or I but crafty. Oh, so very cunning,” Efran laughed quietly. “The act is to put you off your guard, to make you lower your defenses so as to fall right into their hands.”

Blairgowrie hissed, “You are saying that the three of them are in it together? That Lord Re—”

“Shh!” Efran hissed. “I won’t risk my own neck if you choose to be careless. But I wouldn’t take on that alliance for anything in the world,” he said solemnly.

As Blairgowrie sat staring at him, Efran stood, and his men did likewise. “I actually like you, Blairgowrie. And you did take Adele off our hands. So, fair warning.” He turned to walk out, his men behind him.

When they passed through the lobby, a woman with a veiled face turned from a counter and said, “Efran.”

He pretended not to hear her, and kept walking. She yanked the veil away in frustration.

Efran and his bodyguard retrieved their horses from the stableyard, looking around surreptitiously. But nothing showed out of the ordinary, so they mounted and rode away.

Some minutes later, they encountered Lyte’s troops coming out from concealment along the road. Efran gestured them south, so they all rode back. Passing the quiet construction site of the new Goadby’s plant, Efran groused, “I’m offering fifty royals to anyone who gets Goadby his blasted precious stone.” The men smiled, some shaking their heads. Riding next to him, Melchior glanced aside at two Abbey soldiers on the sidewalk—one of them a woman.

Geneve and Bennard, on the sidewalk in front of Barracks #1, watched the troops returning from their latest mission, whatever it was. The Captain looked pensive as always; his men were laughing and talking among themselves as they trotted toward the switchback. Efran raised a hand to make the whole group behind him, about forty, stop for a woman to cross the main road with three children. She looked up to speak to him and he leaned down to reply, smiling.

When they were safely across, Efran looked back over his shoulder and Geneve could read his lips as he said, “We need crossings.” Then he spurred forward, as did the men behind him.

Bennard and Geneve both sighed. They’d once been eligible for such prestigious assignments with the Captain, and were anxious to be so again. “Well then, here we are,” Bennard exhaled. “Did you finish Barracks Two yesterday?”

“No, I’ve a bit more to do,” she said despondently.

“Very well, then, off you go. I’ve a meeting with the construction supervisor at Barracks Three,” he said importantly. “So when you finish, you’ll report to me there for your next assignment.”

“Will do,” she sighed, turning. But he cleared his throat and she looked back. He stood waiting, chin down, lips pursed. Uncomprehending for a moment, she stood still, but as he waited, she raised her hand in a salute. Satisfied, he waved her away.

Blankly, she pulled the cleaning cart after her—the symbol of her complete debasement paraded to anyone who happened to be passing at the time. So she stepped up her pace, drawing it quickly into Barracks #2, empty and disordered from men quickly getting ready to do more important things.

As she began pulling out cleaning rags from the cart, she glanced down at the army uniform she wore that she had so carefully washed last night, being anxious to present a professional appearance regardless of her task. She laughed dryly; it was useless today. Her brother Gabriel had been so afflicted by her disgrace—especially by the

comments other men made about women in the army—that he had stopped going into the dining hall altogether.

She straightened, closing her eyes in deep remorse. “I humiliated my brother who did nothing but support me. I threw away marriage with a good man for a pipe dream. I stepped all over him in order to get—this.” Tears brimming in her eyes, she looked around at the reward of her selfish ambition. “And when I finish this job, there will be another just like it, and another, and another.”

She finally realized that Gabriel was right: her chance had passed. There were far more qualified men here now than even when Efran had accepted her for service five months ago. Looking up to the ceiling beams, she shook her head. “And I can’t do anything about it.”

Hearing bells ring exuberantly, she let down, laughing. “Oh, that’s lovely. I wonder who they found that can ring.” She paused, taking in the sweet, clear tones, then pulled the great laundry hamper from the corner to begin picking up dirty clothes.

Someone abruptly entered, and she lifted up. It was a Polonti, one of the men who had just returned with Efran from the Porterhouse Inn. As he was studying her, she eyed him back. He was the typical craggy-faced Polonti, a large man of about 35. Geneve did not know that he had been one of Master Crowe’s lieutenants. Having learned well from the master, this man was particularly gifted in persuasion. “You are Geneve, Gabriel’s sister,” he said.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 19

“Yes, I am,” Geneve said, reddening slightly. “I’m on housekeeping duty today.” It was a frank and humbling admission.

He drew closer, and she looked at his deep brown eyes. “There are better jobs for you than this. Come with me. I am Melchior.”

“I—don’t want to get in trouble,” she said hesitantly, gesturing to the cart.

He turned, smiling. “You won’t. Come with me.”

She dropped the cleaning rags and went to his side. They departed the barracks to walk south down the main road. He took her to a hastily erected building beside the idle Goadby’s construction site and behind the well. A harried man looked up from parchments scattered across a table in front of him. “Hello, Melchior. I am about to kill myself.”

“What is the problem, Lemmerz?” Melchior asked, well knowing what it was.

“The dam’ stone! The tivoli! Goadby wants it for the trim, but it’s got to go in first, all of it,” Lemmerz said, waving to a sample on the table. “We can’t even bring the main stone on site till we get the tivoli. Woehrle in Euris says he’s got it but I can’t get him to send it down to us!”

“Geneve will get it for you, Lemmerz,” Melchior said.

The harried supervisor stared at her. “Really? If you say she will, Melchior, then I can count on it. I’ll go authorize the lumber.”

He went out as Geneve, panic-stricken, looked up to Melchior. “You will do this,” he said, patting her shoulder with a bear paw. Then he walked out.

Open-mouthed, Geneve stood at the table to watch the rickety door close behind him. Then she turned to the only other person in the room, a man lolling in a chair against the wall. He lifted his shoulders amiably.

She asked, “Who are you?”

“Construction supervisor’s assistant Eudes,” he said. “And you’re Geneve. Paperwork on the stone is on the table there.”

So she turned to the table to begin sifting through the papers. They were intermingled with silver pieces and one or two coppers, thrown on the table as spare change. First, she put the papers in order by date. Then she read each one, beginning with the earliest of two months ago, in which Woehrle confirmed that he had the quantity of tivoli stone requested, eight pallets, and promised delivery immediately. Lemmerz had sent him a down payment of twenty royals, for which there was a receipt. Following that were copies of letters sent by Lemmerz requesting updates on the promised tivoli. Geneve didn’t see any replies from Woehrle.

But she did find one letter from a supplier in Westford, Otton, who said he had the stone. But she saw no more correspondence to or from him. She held up his letter to Eudes. “Otton says he has tivoli. Do you know anything about this?”

He shook his head, shrugging. She looked around, thinking. “Do we have any money here?”

“Yeah, forty-five royals in that box there,” Eudes said, nodding to a corner of the room.

“Do you know how to get to Otton’s stone yard?” she asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“Are there any horses here?” she asked.

He got up to look out the door at a makeshift stable. “Ah, two.”

“Good,” she said, shaking in fear. “Saddle them, please.” He got up to do that while Geneve put Otton’s letter in her jacket pocket with a trembling hand and began rearranging the rest of the paperwork in some kind of order. The coins she put in a pile.

Eudes stuck his head in the door. “Horses are ready.”

“Good. Take the box,” she said, nodding to the royals in the corner. He went over to heft it and take it out the door. Geneve picked up the sample stone from the table and followed him.

At the small stable, he found a pouch for her sample stone, but had to carry the box in front of him on his saddle. They mounted and rode out at an easy lope until they reached Westford. She looked to him for direction, and he nodded, “Follow me.”

They rode to far northwest Westford, where the stone yard was evident long before they drew up to its rusty iron gates. A man came out from an office to meet them as they dismounted. "Welcome to Otton's Stone Supply. I'm Otton; what can I do for you?" he asked, looking between the man with the obvious money box and the woman in an Abbey uniform.

They dismounted, and Eudes tied off the horses at the gates. "Hello, Otton. I am Geneve, representing Lord Goadby's construction supervisor Lemmerz. This is Eudes. We were told that you have tivoli stone like this in stock." She pulled the sample out of the pouch to show him. "Do you?"

"Certainly. Come look," he said, gesturing with the sample stone. Geneve and Eudes, with the box, followed him to a section of the yard where he pointed to a row of pallets packed with stones. "Here 'tis." He held the sample against the pile on one pallet, which matched exactly.

"We need eight pallets," she said.

He grimaced slightly. "Only got six here, but I can get more."

"All right. Give me your six," she said.

"Ten royals a pallet," he noted.

She paused, then said, "I have forty-five royals here that I can give you today for your six pallets. Then I will pay a premium of fifteen royals a pallet if you can get me two more."

He eyed her briefly, then gestured. "Come to the office." Nodding, she and Eudes followed him.

In the office, Otton counted out the royals from the box, which actually amounted to forty-seven. Then he drew up a bill of sale for six pallets of tivoli stone to be delivered immediately to the Goadby's construction site on the Abbey Lands. This he gave to Geneve, along with her receipt of 47 royals for six pallets of tivoli stone.

As Otton called to his sons to begin loading their stone carts, he paused to tell Geneve, "I don't actually know when I can get you more stone."

"That's all right; we'll take this for now," she said, knowing the next step. He nodded as his burly sons emerged from the living quarters above the office to begin harnessing draft horses to a cart. Geneve watched a moment to see one cart being loaded while two more horses were harnessed to a second cart.

"Eudes, please stay here and watch until they get the first two carts off," she requested.

"Sure," Eudes said.

"On second thought, please stay until they get it all loaded. I want to know that we get all he's got here," she said.

"Sure," he agreed.

Geneve then mounted and rode back down to the Abbey Lands. Returning to the construction site, she unsaddled the horse and groomed him properly, then went into the office to search through the papers and sit with blank parchment, quill and ink.

As she was writing, the door opened for Lemmerz to enter. Upon seeing her, he asked, “Having any luck, Geneve?”

She glanced up to say, “Eudes is supervising the loading of six pallets of tivoli coming shortly. I’m working on getting the last two pallets now.”

“Six pallets? Coming today?” he asked in shock.

“Yes,” she said, eyes on the parchment.

“Then we need mortar and laborers now,” he said.

“I suppose so,” she said, and he hastened out.

Geneve finished her letter, which said:

“To: Woehrlé’s Stones of Eurus

“From: Geneve, representing Lord Goadby’s construction supervisor Lemmerz

“Sir, I find a receipt indicating that my supervisor Lemmerz gave you 20 royals as a down payment for eight pallets of tivoli stone on August 12th of the year 8154. Yet as of this date, October 18th, we have received nothing from you. As our need is urgent, we require either two pallets of tivoli stone or a refund of our 20 royals immediately. Hoping to do business with you in future, we remain your respectful customers.”

Geneve wrote out a copy of this letter for their records, then folded the first and scooped up a handful of silver to take both to the notary office, where she had to wait in line. While she was within, the first two cartloads of stone arrived at the construction site, and Eudes pointed out where they were to be unloaded. The laborers who began appearing helped unload the stone, and the carts headed back up to reload.

The great half-casks for mixing mortar arrived to be filled with water and dry lime mortar mix. More laborers appeared, and word went out like lightning that construction of the Goadby’s plant was back on.

In the notary office, Geneve laid the folded letter on the counter as she asked Ryal, “Your office dispatches messengers, don’t you?”

“Yes. Where do you need it sent?” Ryal asked, reaching for a messenger pouch.

“Eurus,” she replied.

“Oh, dear, I’m afraid that’s expensive. Twenty silvers,” Ryal said apologetically.

“Wait. I have that.” She dug in the pocket in which she had deposited her handful of coins, and found that she had 25 silver pieces. Twenty of these she pushed forward on the counter; the rest she returned to her pocket.

“Very good,” Ryal said. After writing out a receipt to give her, he scooped half the coins into a drawer and the other half into the messenger pouch with the letter. “It will go out tomorrow morning. The fortress dispatches our messengers.”

“That will do nicely. Thank you, Ryal,” she said, folding the receipt.

“You’re welcome, Geneve,” he said, and his smile was warm. He went to the back room to give the pouch to Soames to run up to the fortress.

Having done all she could do for now, Geneve stepped out of the notary shop feeling accomplished. Just beyond the community well, she saw the level line being stretched across a wall for the first row of stones. Returning to the construction office, she was mildly startled upon seeing the stonemason Ernst there with Lemmerz. Both men turned to her as Ernst demanded, “Where did you find the tivoli?”

“At Otton’s in Westford,” she replied.

The men looked at each other, crying in unison, “Otton’s!”

Ernst told Lemmerz, “But I thought you checked with him.”

“Yes, right early,” Lemmerz said. “But he said he didn’t have enough. I didn’t question him further; just went on to Woehrle, who promised all of it quickly.”

They looked at Geneve again, and she confirmed, “Otton said he only had six pallets, so I gave him the forty-seven royals in the cash box for those. Then I just now wrote Woehrle demanding he give us two pallets or a refund for the twenty royals you paid him in August.”

The men studied her, and Ernst said, “Hang on to her, Lemmerz.”

Lemmerz said, “Look, Geneve, I know you’re in the army now, but I need you here full-time. Come early tomorrow; I’ll keep you busy, and—how is a royal a week?” She opened her mouth, but he said, “All right, two a week. I can’t pay more until I check with Lord Goadby.”

“Two a week is fine,” she said, almost disbelieving. At her current level in the army, she was paid 15 silver pieces—half a royal—a week.

The door opened again to reveal two tall Polonti on the doorstep, with a third behind them outside. The three already in the small office watched Lord Efran bend his head to enter as Stites followed. Efran glanced around at them, then asked Lemmerz, “How did you get the stone?”

“Geneve did it,” he said, still in shock. Whereupon Efran turned the light of his beautiful smile on her.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 20

“I only got six pallets of stone,” Geneve said hastily. “I’m trying to collect the other two now.”

Efran laughed, shaking his head, then told Stites behind him, “Pay her.”

Stites stepped up to hand her a pouch. Its unexpected weight caused her to almost drop it. “What—?” she gasped.

“Fifty royals. For finding the stone. A rash oath I made just today which the angel of the Lord required me to make good,” Efran said humorously.

“But—I—” She let the pouch drop onto the table. “I’m only trying to do a good job.”

“And you did. Melchior, carry that for her,” Efran tossed off as he and Stites left the office.

Melchior entered, smiling, to lift the pouch. “Let’s go,” he told her. Almost helpless, she followed.

They went around the construction to stop on the sidewalk of the main road. “Where do you live?” Melchior asked.

“Oh, I don’t want to stay there anymore,” she muttered, closing her eyes.

“I have a nice house,” he said. “It’s small, and empty, but you could fill it well with fifty royals.”

Geneve looked astonished. “You expect me to just move in with you?”

“Oh, no. Here, men who want advancement need to be married to the women they live with,” he said, draping the pouch strap over his substantial shoulder.

“Are you asking me to marry you, then?” she asked cautiously.

“Sure. Why not?” Melchior said agreeably, as if it were her idea.

She laughed, then asked sternly, “Do you have a common-law wife somewhere?”

“I don’t *think* so,” he said, squinting.

“How many children do you have?” she demanded. He raised his shoulders in a gesture of ignorance.

Her laughter this time was of disbelief. “Then what do I do when your wife and children show up here to throw me out of the house I filled with my money?”

“Oh, I don’t have a *family*,” he said, comprehending the gist of her objection. “Not like Nares did. No, I never had anyone all to myself. I would like someone all my own.”

He looked downcast, and her heart went out to him. But she said sternly, “If we were married, I would expect you to be all *my* own. You couldn’t touch another woman.”

“Oh, no. I’ll not risk the Captain’s chastisement. And Minka’s the only girl here prettier than you,” he said baldly.

“Wha—? Minka’s prettier than I am?” she demanded.

“Just a little,” he said, holding up his beefy thumb and forefinger a fraction of an inch apart.

She laughed because she couldn’t help it. “Well, you’re not anywhere close to Efran, you know.”

“Oh, but I’m working on it. See?” And he spread his lips in emulation of Efran’s heart-fluttering smile.

Geneve laughed so hard that she fell into his chest. He put his large Polonti hands tenderly on her shoulders, and she realized how much she missed that closeness. Pulling away with a low moan, she looked aside for a moment, then turned her eyes up to him.

She saw that hunger again. Polonti men were always hungry. “Show me your house,” she said.

“Eh, it’s way over there,” he said, waving to the west. “We’re right here by the notary and the fortress, so we can get married and get your things and then I will show you the house.”

“Do you have a house at all?” she asked suspiciously.

He looked confused. “Why would I tell you I did if I didn’t? That is crazy. Then I would have no place to take you after we were married.”

She laughed again, thinking back to this morning when she had nothing before her but menial work during the day and listening to Wyeth and his new wife making love at night. Now, she had the chance for so much more. And—he is the one who made it possible.

Regarding his flat, craggy face, she whispered, “All right.” And he drew himself up to bestow his Efranesque smile on her again, so that she was reduced to helpless giggles.

They went into the notary’s office. Ryal came from the back to see them, and Geneve collapsed in embarrassed laughter on the counter. Ryal looked at Melchior, who said proudly, “We are here to be married, Ryal.”

Ryal leaned down to try to see Geneve’s face. “Again, Geneve?”

She nodded, then raised up on her elbows. “That makes the third time in three months, doesn’t it?” she said.

“Are you sure about this?” Ryal asked.

“Yes,” Melchior said happily.

“Gooood,” Ryal said slowly to him. “Geneve?”

“Yes, Ryal. I think I’ve got it right this time,” she sighed.

He looked at her uniform. “Are you still in the army?”

“Yes,” she said, declining to tell him of her immediate plans to resign. Her being a soldier meant that she was exempt from the 30-day waiting period to get remarried.

“Very well, then,” Ryal sighed. At his side, Giardi handed him the book of marriages, smiling. And Geneve happened to have five silvers for the marriage license fee.

While they were in the notary office, the last of Otton’s tivoli stone was delivered to the Goadby’s site (Otton having borrowed carts and horses from a nearby merchant to get it all out quickly). Eudes reported that the total actually amounted to 6 1/4 pallets, but as Otton was glad to get rid of it, he would not ask further payment.

At the fortress, Efran was turning down the corridor to check on Minka when he paused. He was feeling an acute need that could no longer be ignored, common among Polonti. It was the need for strenuous physical exertion, and one reason for their legendary hardiness.

In the army, he had addressed this need by starting fights in between grueling marches. At the fortress, he had worked on the wall. Now that neither was feasible, he went to the most likely source: the sparring groups. Since Wyeth's was closest, Efran ambled up to him. "How goes it, Wyeth? Who wants to spar?" he asked amiably, looking around.

Dead silence answered him. "Anyone?" he asked plaintively.

"No, Captain," Wyeth said. The men in rows before them were silent. In fact, a number of the men would have been happy to engage him, but none wanted to tell him that Commander Lyte had prohibited sparring with Captain Efran, and anyone who did it anyway could expect to be dismissed from the army.

In dismay, Efran looked back to Nyland's group behind him. Nyland turned around to shake his head.

Dismally, Efran left the sparring field to depart the fenced grounds and look around the hill. From the top, he began working his way down the northwestern hillside. This was a satisfying exercise on a number of levels: it was good practice in steep descents, which had to be done according to technique to avoid damaging the knees; it enabled him to see what was out here, and it entertained plot residents who wondered what in the world the lord of the fortress was doing up there on the hillside.

When Efran reached the east-west road at the base of the hill (the Coastal Highway South, which terminated west of the Lands at the Passage), he turned around to climb back up. This was even better exercise, which helped him appreciate the genius of the fortress' location. The only plants that thrived on the hillside were briars, brambles or nettles that punished anyone looking for a handhold to ascend. The ground itself was dry, sandy, and rocky, rolling away under his feet.

Climbing back up the whole way took twice as long as coming down, which afforded Efran valuable thinking time, as well. Adele had another scheme brewing, which Blairgowrie appeared to support. While she had not yet attained the bounty she expected from her attacks on the Abbey, her sheer perseverance gave Efran new opportunities to fail.

What was her specific target this time? The Treasury? Joshua? Ella? Minka? Efran himself? Something else? Here, Justinian's letters were valuable in at least dropping clues about what to expect.

When Efran got tired of thinking on his climb up, he started noticing small holes and depressions in the ground here or there. Assuming that they were homes to snakes or spiders, he avoided them as he could. But on the higher portion of the slope, he stepped on an unseen weak spot, and his foot shot down clear up to his hip. Repressing panic, he leaned forward uphill as far as he could to draw his leg out. When fully free, he leaned over to look down into the hole, and dimly saw fractured reflections of light playing on water some distance below—how far, he couldn't judge. He pondered that for a moment, then resumed his climb.

By the time he had ascended to the hilltop, it was late afternoon. Satisfied with the exercise, he trudged back inside the fortress. In his chambers, he called for a tub to be filled. Then he went back to the bedroom, and his stomach dropped to see Minka in bed, still in her nightdress. She turned her head, and her face was pale. "Hello, Efran. Please check on Joshua." Her voice was breathy, unsteady.

"Minka." He fell on his knees beside the bed. "What—what—"

“It’s just what Wallace told us, Efran. Just a little pain. But I haven’t checked on Joshua all day,” she said faintly.

“I’ll go get him,” he gasped, his heart pounding. He turned to run out around the man bringing in the tub, then constrained himself to walk the corridor to the nursery. Leaning in, he looked at the attendant who had his son on the changing table.

Joshua raised a hand, gurgling at him, and the young girl looked over her shoulder. “Oh, you’re in good time, Lord Efran. He’s just had a bottle and a snack.”

“Thank you,” he said, reaching over the half-door as she lifted the baby to his hands. Joshua patted Efran’s dusty, sweaty shirt in approval as Efran trotted up the stairs with him to the second floor.

Turning into Wallace’s quarters, he waited in the receiving room until Leese, the doctor’s wife, came out with a look of concern. “Hello, Efran. What is the problem?” she asked, looking at the attentive baby.

“Minka,” Efran gasped. “She’s so much worse; hasn’t been out of bed all day. Please ask Wallace to come look at her.”

“He’s out seeing a patient right now, Efran. I’ll come down and have a look,” Leese said. Efran nodded unhappily, as that was better than nothing.

He preceded Leese down the stairs and to his quarters, where men were filling the tub. They paused while Efran went quickly to the bedroom with Joshua as Leese followed.

Minka turned her head, looking first at Joshua before saying, “Hello, Leese.”

“How are you feeling, Minka?” Leese asked, gently sitting on the bed.

“Just a little pain. Wallace told us to expect it,” Minka breathed.

“I’m sure. I’m going to lift your nightdress to look. Can you raise up?” Leese asked. Belatedly, Efran turned to shut the bedroom door behind him.

“Yes,” Minka said, gasping as she pushed up from the mattress. Efran fidgeted, anxious to help, but not seeing how.

Leese lifted the nightdress over Minka’s abdomen and chest, and Efran caught his breath at the large bruise on the front left of her ribcage. She gasped when Leese touched it, and Leese said, “I’m sorry, Minka; I need to feel for breaks.”

“Yes,” Minka said, breathing hard. Holding Joshua, Efran trembled.

Minka steeled herself while Leese’s fingers probed her ribs. Then she let down the nightdress to say, “I’m sorry you’re uncomfortable, Minka, but it should pass. I don’t feel any breaks. So just stay quiet and drink lots of ale.”

“Thank you, Leese,” Minka said, attempting a laugh.

“I’ll tell Wallace when he gets back,” Leese said on departing.

Efran nodded blankly at her, then knelt beside the bed, still holding Joshua. “What can I do? Are you hungry?” he asked.

“A little. Why don’t you go ahead and bathe?” she suggested.

“Yes,” he said. Glancing around, he asked, “Where—where do I put Joshua?”

“You could bathe him, too,” she mentioned, smiling.

“Oh,” he said at this novel idea. “Yes, I’ll do that. Don’t go away.”

“I won’t,” she said.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 21

Efran bathed himself and his son, who thought that was the greatest thing ever. Efran held him on his knees to wash him down as he splashed and screamed happily when the water hit his face. When done with him, Efran put him on the floor while he bathed himself in record time. Meanwhile, Joshua promptly started creeping naked to the bedroom.

“Wait—Joshua—Minka—” Efran scrambled to dry himself as he pursued his son. Minka laughed weakly when Efran entered the bedroom to find the baby trying to climb up onto the bed. “He needs—do we have—”

“He has fresh wraps and clothes in the chest,” Minka said, nodding to the other room.

“Good. All right, come, you,” Efran said, hefting the baby underarm, at which he kicked and screamed in delight.

When they were both reasonably presentable, Efran carried him to the dining hall to request plates and ales for himself and Minka. Slightly hampered by the number of people wanting to talk to him, Efran mostly asked that they remind him of their concerns later. But when Estes came up to ask about Minka, Efran took a great deal of time to tell him of her setback and his personal anguish at not being there for her or even aware of her suffering for most of the day. Estes patted his shoulder in reassurance and suggested he go back to her now.

So when Efran returned to their quarters with Joshua on one arm and clutching bottles of Goadby’s in the other hand while an assistant carried plates of venison roasted with zucchini in cheese, Minka was sitting up in bed.

Ella, left without chaperons at dinner, had to make do with men all up and down the row of tables at which she sat. So Toby and Alcmund, on either side of her, were required to fill the rôle of guardians tonight.

Meanwhile, having successfully obtained a marriage license, Melchior took Geneve to his house, which was exactly as he had said: nice and mostly empty except for a very comfortable bed, which he had sacrificially bought in farsighted hope.

Over the next few days, Efran put everything else on hold to anxiously attend Minka. But with the bed rest, she improved, and Efran checked her bruises every day to see that they were fading.

Geneve resigned from the army, which crushed Bennard when he found out. She used Lemmerz' funds to buy gallons of bright yellow paint and hire laborers to work at night. So on the morning of October 21st, residents awoke to three yellow pedestrian crosswalks punctuating the main road (now simply "Main") on which the new Goadby's plant sat. Since they were exactly like the crossings in the upper-level business districts of Westford and Eurus, Abbey Lands residents used them at once, nodding to each other at this verification of their rise as a city and not a mere town.

Then, in the late afternoon of October 22nd, a shipment of two pallets of tivoli stone arrived from Woehrlé in Eurus with apologies. Geneve received a bonus authorized by Lord Goadby himself, and Melchior was very pleased to ask for a day off from duty to help his wife shop for home furniture and accessories. Gabriel reappeared in the dining hall with a vengeance, shoving certain persons and telling them that if he ever caught them with a Goadby's in hand, he'd knock out their teeth.

By October 23rd, Minka was feeling well enough to mostly resume her normal day. Having heard about Geneve's success with the stone and her marriage, Minka went up to the third floor to look in the abandoned, disheveled room with the key in the lock. So she got maids to clean and restock it, then put a sign on that door saying, "AVAILABLE. See Minka." The key she kept.

However, Minka still couldn't lift or carry Joshua. This grieved her, as she strongly believed he was too smart and adventurous at almost 10 months old to be kept cooped up in a nursery all the time. So Efran took care of that by taking Joshua with him everywhere, especially outside.

Efran put Joshua in a sling draped over his back so that the baby could either look over his shoulder or put his head down on Efran's back when he tired, his head supported by the sling. Efran took Joshua in this manner out for *aiké* archery practice, finding that the baby didn't interfere with his shooting at all. Efran also took him out to the woods to find Pia, his Polonti wild child.

Since Pia preferred the hilltop to any place inside year round, she always had a pair of Polonti soldiers attending her. Goss and Krall were her old standbys, but so many new Polonti wished the honor of warding her that other men were rotated in. That way, one or other of her old friends could resume regular duty on most days.

Pia was also working with Efran to help him relearn the language and traditions he had discarded when he joined the army of Westford as a 14-year-old. Having Joshua with him during these lessons just gave the little one a head start. Pia believed, as Minka did, that he absorbed more than any of them knew. Following, Efran carried Joshua on his back for his descent down the hillside and up again, just for fun.

Then when Efran was asked to come inspect the progress of construction on the new Goadby's plant, he took Joshua with him as well, but changed his position for riding. Once mounted, Efran hauled Joshua forward over his shoulder to carry him horizontally, so as not to put undue strain on his little neck. After dismounting, Efran carried him on one arm, slinging him on his back as needed. Some people were startled by Efran's cavalier handling of his young son, but he was never dropped. Nor did he cry or fidget; he was quiet and attentive—though on long outings, he did fall asleep.

About that time, a few men complained to Efran that outsiders were slinking in to court Ella. When questioned further, they admitted there was only one they knew of, but that was one too many. For while the man wore Abbey clothes, his accent was definitely Eurussian. His name was Hamon, and that was all anyone could get out

of him. But he was a handsome young Southerner, which guaranteed suspicious resentment among Ella's Polonti suitors. Ella tolerated him, as she did everyone, showing no preference for anyone in particular at this point. Her Abbey admirers wanted Efran to intervene before she showed it to Hamon.

Efran discussed the problem with Estes, DeWitt, and Commander Wendt, but they had arrived at no decision when a sentry said, "Captain, Verrin asks to speak with you."

"Verrin. Yes, he's one of Ella's young men. Send him in," Efran said.

Verrin entered and saluted, his face dark. "Captain, that EurAsian Hamon was here again today. And when no one was watching, he found Alcmund and struck up a conversation with him. When I saw them talking, I started over, but Hamon saw me coming and slipped away."

"I see," Efran said quietly. "Where is Ella now?"

"Working with the horses, Captain. Plenty of people around her. I asked Tourjee to keep an eye on Alcmund," Verrin said.

"Thank you. Does anyone know how this Hamon is getting in? Does he just walk through the gates?" Efran asked.

"I don't know, sir," Verrin said. "It's hard asking the gate sentries, 'Why are you letting in a good-looking Southerner?' Some men believe he's sliding in at the kitchen gate with tradesmen or grocers."

"Could be. Thank you, Verrin. You're dismissed," Efran said. After Verrin saluted and left, Efran looked over at Estes and DeWitt. "What do you think?"

DeWitt said, "I'd talk to Ella, first; find out what he's said to her." Estes nodded.

"Agreed," Efran said. So he asked the sentry to have Ella sent to the small dining room when she came in from her stable duties. "And Minka," he added. "Find Minka," he amended.

Shortly, she was brought up to the workroom, sighing, "When you bring Joshua back to the nursery, he just sleeps until you come get him again. I don't know whether to be glad or depressed; I hardly know what to do with myself."

The men smiled, but Efran asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Better," Minka said, "but Wallace still won't let me ride."

"Then we'll abide. We've had a situation come up with one of Ella's men. I'm having her brought to the small dining room to ask her about it, but wanted to let you know about it, as well," he said. She sat while he told her all about Hamon and his talking to Alcmund today.

As he was explaining the situation to her, a sentry came to the door to salute and say, "Lady Ella is in the small dining room, Captain."

"Ah. Thank you. We'd best go on down." Efran rose, extending a hand to Minka. She still was not bouncing like she used to.

When they arrived in the small dining room, Ella looked to her father anxiously. “What have I done wrong?”

He paused. “Why do you think you’ve done something wrong?”

“Why—you brought me here but there’s no refreshments!” she pointed out, aggrieved.

Efran laughed and Minka chastised him, “Brute.”

He said, “It’s so close to dinner—but here.” He went to the door to ask the sentry, “Please bring us ales.”

“That’s fine,” Ella said, sitting. “But what did you want to talk to me about?” She was still a little wary.

“Tell me about Hamon,” Efran said, sitting beside her. Minka sat at the foot of the table.

Ella squinted slightly. “He’s—one of the men. Not Polonti. He shows up to talk. Why?”

“What does he talk to you about?” Efran asked, accepting an ale from the sentry and handing one to Ella. He extended one to Minka, who shook her head.

Opening the bottle, Ella shrugged. “Small talk. Horses. The Abbey. You.”

“Does he ask about your brothers?” Efran asked, taking a swig.

“I don’t think so. To be honest, I haven’t paid that much attention to him. But, again, why?” she said.

“He’s EurAsian, which has upset your Abbey suitors. But he also found Alcmund to talk to him specifically today. Those two factors together make him suspect,” Efran said.

Ella studied him. “Do you think Adele sent him?”

“It’s possible. Did he tell you anything of his situation, his work, family or background?” Efran asked.

She winced. “I’m sorry; he might have. I didn’t pay strict attention to everything he said.”

“Why not?” Efran grinned.

“He’s—not my type,” she admitted, blushing. Minka smiled.

“Well then, you won’t object if we find a way to exclude him?” Efran asked.

“No,” she said with a slight yawn, and Minka laughed.

Efran nodded. “That answers my questions, thank you. We can go in to dinner now. Bring your ale; that’s all you get tonight.”

“Yes, Papa,” she said, rising with the bottle. And they went out to the large dining hall.

The following day, October 24th, Efran put a sentry at the grocer’s gate off the kitchen with instructions to stop any single young Southerners whom no one in the kitchen knew. He gave likewise instructions to the courtyard

gate sentries, with the additional information that they were looking for an outsider who was courting Ella. Efran just wanted to talk to him; that's all.

But Minka thought more might be gained in talking to Alcmund. The problem was, he was still ambivalent about talking to anyone except Toby. So Minka made sure she had Toby with her when she went looking for Alcmund.

They found him digging in the dirt, which is therapeutic for anyone. Minka squatted beside him. "Hello, Alcmund. Oh, it looks like you're loosening the dirt for planting. That's so important, to give the seeds a chance to sprout." She glanced up at Cyr working nearby, who looked over to grin at her. Minka smiled back warmly.

"What have you found there?" she asked Alcmund. He had paused to pick up something small.

"Snail," he said.

"I see. What are you going to do with it?" she asked.

"Can I keep it?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. So he put it in his pocket. Toby shook his head briefly, but said nothing.

"Alcmund, you remember the big boy who came over to talk to you yesterday? Is he a friend of yours?" Minka asked.

He shrugged. "Not really. That was Eadgifu."

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 22

Eadgifu was Blairgowrie's son, and Adele's stepson. Minka paused to tread carefully. "Will you tell me what he said to you?"

Alcmund sighed. "He asked if Ella and me want to come on a jaunt with him."

"Do you want to?" Minka asked quietly.

"Not really," he muttered.

"Why not?" she asked.

"He's not a friend, or anything. I think he likes Ella, but I don't know what he'd want with me," he said, eyes on the dirt.

Minka considered that for a moment, then asked, "What do you want to do while you're here?"

He looked up at her with large eyes. "I want to see the Leviathan!"

She laughed. "I'll tell Efran, and if we see it come up again, I'll come get you."

"Me too?" Toby asked excitedly.

"Of course, you too," she said with a fond hug. Standing, she said, "I guess I had better go let Efran know. Thank you for telling me, Alcmund." He nodded, almost smiling, and she went back into the fortress.

She climbed the stairs slowly to the second floor. The pain wasn't nearly as bad as it had been six days ago, but it was still constraining. She entered the workroom as Efran, Estes and DeWitt looked up—Joshua as well, playing on the floor. Minka went over to Efran's lap and he held her, murmuring, "You're still hurting."

"Just a little bit," she said.

"That's what you keep saying, but I won't believe you until you start throwing yourself into my lap again," he grouched. Joshua was chugging over on hands and knees. He pulled up on the chair for Efran to lift him with one arm and sit him beside Minka.

"Well, Alcmund says that the big boy who came over to talk to him is Eadgifu," Minka said.

Three male heads lifted in comprehension. "Of course. What did he want?" Efran asked.

"He offered to take Alcmund and Ella on a 'jaunt,'" Minka said. "Alcmund was not impressed."

"Smart boy," DeWitt observed. "He's probably not Webbe's, either."

There was some snorting in response, then Minka rose from Efran's lap. He reluctantly let her go. "I think I'm going to lie down for a little while," she said, and he looked at her in alarm.

Some commotion in the corridor caused her to step back from the doorway, and two soldiers hauled in a young man who was futilely struggling. Recognizing him at once from what Minka had just told him, Efran grinned. "Eadgifu! I'm glad to see you. Thank you, gentlemen; just sit him in that chair and stand by."

The two Polonti soldiers, both quite young, pushed Eadgifu down to the seat indicated and stepped back. "What's your name?" Efran asked one.

"Jehan, Captain," he said, saluting.

"And you?" Efran asked the other.

"Coish, sir," he replied, also saluting.

"Excellent. Jehan, tell me how you caught him," Efran said. Minka sat at the far end of the table, mostly out of sight.

"Sir, Coish is on guard duty at the kitchen gate when this one comes up with a sack of eggplant on his shoulder, but everybody knows eggplant is grown here. So Coish stops him, but he tries to run; Coish brings him down and he fights, so I come assist," Jehan explained with a heavy Polonti accent. During this explanation, Eadgifu was staring at the faerie tree trunk growing up from the table through the ceiling above and down through the floor below.

“Very good,” Efran said. “Now then, Eadgifu. Tell me about it.”

The young man turned his blue eyes to watch Efran pick up his son from the floor. Eadgifu had light blond hair, a strong jaw, and straight nose. He was quite handsome, actually, though not Ella’s type. “About what?”

Efran shook his head. “I have all the time in the world, and I will keep you here until you talk to me.”

The young man sighed, looking around. His eyes swept over Minka at the end of the table, but she was looking down, so his gaze passed on to DeWitt and Estes, both watching attentively. This was the first time Efran or his administrators had seen him, but Minka recognized him.

She had not remembered until now that Blairgowrie had been a clerk along with Graduliere under her father Lightfoot in Eurus. Blairgowrie had remained in Eurus to tie up loose ends from her father’s councilorship when most of the rest of his staff had made the move with him as he became Surchatain of Westford. But her father had been so quickly deposed and then murdered three months into his rule that Blairgowrie never had the chance to join him there.

Now, 15 months after Lightfoot’s death, Blairgowrie had attained his ambition of being Surchatain, only over the greater city of Eurus.

And, Minka remembered Eadgifu very well. At this time, he was about Adele’s age, 21. In Eurus, Minka had been mesmerized by him when she was an awkward 12-year-old, and he 16—five years ago. Yes, she remembered him.

Minka listened as he said idly, “Eh, Father just wanted to see if I could make contact with Ella. Talk to her. You know.” He reached out to touch the trunk of the tree, and found it to be real. He studied the branches snaking over the ceiling to find points of entry upward.

Efran was silent for so long, watching Eadgifu, that he affected dozing off. Joshua, on Efran’s lap, really did fall asleep. Then Efran asked quietly, “What does Adele want?” That was the question on which everything hinged.

Eadgifu barely cracked an eyelid to shrug in ignorance. “All right. We’ll wait,” Efran said. Holding this young man gave them any number of leverage points with his father—and Adele. “What rooms have we got available on the third floor?” he asked Estes.

Estes replied, “Minka’s the one keeping up with the room situation, I think.”

As Efran turned, Eadgifu’s head snapped back to her. “Minka?” he mused. “Sybil. You’re Sybil!” he said in a voice of malicious delight. He laughed, “Oh, I hope you filled out from the scrawny thing you were when I had you down without a scrap on.”

Those around him were shocked into immobility. Efran watched him with expressionless eyes until Eadgifu belatedly realized that he might have said too much. Efran looked around him to ask her, “Did he rape you?”

“No,” she whispered. “Just—toyed with me.”

“Oh oh. You’re not Captain Efran, are you?” Eadgifu said with the air of someone who has picked up the wrong fork at dinner.

“Yes, I am,” Efran said in a bloodless whisper, unblinking.

“Oops,” Eadgifu laughed. “Pardon my coarseness. You still married to her? I thought she was, like, an assistant sitting there.”

“You did,” Efran said in that same toneless voice. Minka glanced up at him. This was something she had never seen in him before—it wasn’t anger or even glassy-eyed rage. It was indefinable, as if there were so much happening behind his eyes that he shut down all outward expression.

“Yes, I honestly did,” Eadgifu said in a very sincere voice. He turned to her to say, “Sorry about that, Sybil.” When she did not look at him or respond, he puckered his lips. “Oh, now that’s pretty cutting.”

No one spoke or moved while Efran examined the ceiling with eyes of stone. His arm tightened slightly around Joshua, who was still asleep. But Eadgifu stood to begin, “Well, if we’re all done here—”

“Sit down,” Efran whispered, eyes still on the ceiling. Jehan and Coish immediately came forward to push on his shoulders, forcing him back down.

Eadgifu looked back at them, raising his hands in a mute demand that they withdraw. As he was now sitting, they did. Efran continued to look at the ceiling, squinting slightly. His teeth were clenched; his jaw rigid; his hand tightening slightly on his son. Minka studied these tiny signs of conflict in alarm. DeWitt and Estes were watching him as well.

Finally, Efran lowered his head in submission. “As You will,” he whispered. He looked up suddenly at the sound of bells. Estes and DeWitt startled, hearing them. Minka heard them, but kept her face down. The bells were tolling a dirge.

Efran turned to Eadgifu with, “You are going to die shortly, but I will have nothing to do with it. Consider the state of your soul.” He then told Jehan and Coish, “Walk him down Main and past the stone bridge. Escort him off the Abbey Lands entirely. You’re dismissed.”

The two saluted, then pulled Eadgifu up by his arms. “Just a minute!” he ordered as if he were in charge. He turned to ask Efran, “You’re just letting me go?”

“You are going to die. I will not have you doing it on my lands,” Efran said.

A smile creased the young, handsome face. “Well, that’s good of you, Captain. Thank you very much.” Eadgifu made a mock salute, but the soldiers who had his arms turned him out. And despite his demands, they did not let go of him. They were following the Captain’s orders to the letter.

When they were gone, Minka, DeWitt and Estes studied Efran, who had resumed breathing like a human being. “That’s the closest I’ve ever come to killing someone in cold anger apart from duty. The Lord told me no. I—struggled with that command, but, He told me I must get him off Abbey property. Come, I need to see that he leaves.”

Standing with Joshua asleep on his arm, Efran reached a hand to Minka. She came to his side, his administrators following. They went down the corridor to the second-floor balcony that faced north. Here, they had a clear view of the switchback and Main, with the stone bridge marking the northern boundary of the Abbey Lands. They waited silently, watching.

In a little while, they saw the two Polonti with the young man between them come out of the courtyard to begin

descending the switchback. He was continually struggling against their hands, but they would not allow him the dignity of walking down by himself: they were following orders.

In coming off the switchback, they did not detour to the sidewalks along Main; they walked their prisoner between them down the center of the road. Traffic was forced around them both ways, but they would rather cause carts to move aside than risk losing the man on a crowded sidewalk before they got him off the Abbey Lands.

The four on the balcony (not counting the sleeping baby) watched Eadgifu's escort take him up and over the old stone bridge. When they had descended, and were clear of the bridge, they finally released his arms. He shook them off with irritation, then raised his hand to the group on the far-off balcony. And he turned to begin walking north.

The sky darkened as a large cloud moved across it, blocking the sun. People on the Abbey Lands below cried out, some falling down, before those on the balcony could see what it was. They all looked up as a great dark shape split the sky in two. Symphorien had left her nest to begin winging north.

She followed Main, approaching the stone bridge. Seeing her, the two Polonti on the bridge crouched down to watch. The tiny figure on the northbound road looked back over his shoulder to see Leviathan on the wing, her great green eyes focused on him, and began running in terror. As she drew nearer, she dived, and reached a clawed foot down to grab him up. His screams were heard even to the balcony as she lifted off with him and disappeared into the distance.

Long minutes passed, and Abbey residents slowly began resuming their errands. Those on the balcony had begun to turn into the corridor when some below started shouting. The balcony watchers turned back to see a black dot in the northern sky grow larger.

Soon there were screams below as the dot enlarged to the shape of Leviathan coming southward. But the screams subsided when it became evident that she was maintaining her altitude and not diving toward anyone on the plots. She carried nothing in her claws.

She approached the hill, but flew directly over the fortress without slowing. No one on the balcony had to see her dive over the cliffs to know that she was returning to her nest.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Chapter 23

Efran, carrying Joshua, descended the stairs along with Minka, DeWitt and Estes. Before they could reach the back door, a number of people rushed in. They all had to stop behind Arne, whose great bulk blocked the corridor when he stopped to salute Efran. "Captain,—"

But small people got in around him. Toby and Alcmund were the first to reach Efran and Minka. Toby shouted, "We saw it! Did you see it? The Leviathan took off over the cliff and the fortress and then just now came back again!"

Alcmund had pulled Minka down to his level to take her face in his hands. He said, "I saw it, Minka. I saw it. The Leviathan is the Angel of Death. I saw it again, and it didn't get me this time, either."

“Oh, Alcmund.” She put her arms around him, and he held her tightly. “You are safe here. This is your safe place,” she whispered.

“Uh, yes, Captain. I’d just like to report that the Leviathan did indeed fly up over the fortress and then return back over the cliff,” Arne said sullenly.

“Thank you, Arne. Dismissed,” Efran said. As the corridor crowd dispersed in wonder, still talking, Jehan and Coish approached the Captain. They saluted prior to giving him the complete report of what they had seen, being closer than anyone. Efran bent his ear to Jehan’s whispers.

That evening at dinner, everyone was still talking about seeing the great sea monster on the wing. Efran and Minka were quiet, listening to the talk around them. Joshua, on Efran’s lap, was groggy from his nap but willing to eat bites of whatever Efran gave him.

As he and she listened, it became apparent that only those on the second-floor balcony were high enough to see that Symphorien had dipped to pick up someone on the northbound road, and to know who that was—except for Jehan and Coish. They also knew.

The moment they had seen her coming, they knew who her target was, and merely knelt to get out of the way. Watching the sea creature fly as gracefully as she swam, they marveled at her power, noting that she caught up her prey without piercing him with her claws. And on the way back to report to the Captain, they discussed whether he was such a powerful *aina* to have commanded such a great creature to do this. It was obvious that someone had.

As for what the *hupo*—idiot—had said about the Lady Minka, they both put it out of their minds so as to never think of it again, much less speak it.

In bed that evening, Efran lightly touched her ribs. “How are you feeling?” he whispered.

“Better,” she said. “I actually forgot all about it this afternoon,” she added with a weak smile.

After a moment, he asked, “Do you want to talk about it?” He wasn’t asking about her ribs, and she realized that.

“No.” She almost shuddered.

“How old were you?” he asked.

“Twelve,” she sighed. He’d only ask what was important to him to know.

He struggled, wanting to know more, but unwilling to press against her wishes. So he rolled onto his back, fighting down the anger again. “Well, whatever Symphorien did, he’s certainly dead.” She nodded, and he added in a lower voice, “Still, I would like to know.”

Late the following day, Minka received a letter from Justinian. She took it to the workroom so that Efran could read it aloud to her, DeWitt, Estes, and the Commander. As she handed Efran the letter, she backed off to a chair. But he looked at her and patted his leg, so she dropped into his lap as she used to do, and he sighed in relief.

He brushed back her hair, then broke the seal and opened the letter to begin reading:

“My dearest Minka,

“Just a quick letter to let you know what has happened here, of which we are all in shocked disbelief. You must suspend your better judgment in reading this and know for a certainty that I am telling you the unbelievable truth.

“This afternoon, October 24, Blairgowrie and Adele were hosting a garden party for all the elite of Eurus. Marguerite and I were there, though we both worked very hard to stay out of Adele’s line of sight. We were all talking, eating, mingling when the sky above us was darkened as in an eclipse. We all looked up to see a monstrous black shape with a dragon’s head and neck, the fin-like wings of a venomous fish, and the tail of a scorpion above us.

“We were all too stunned to cry out, but the thing hovered above us with a person in its claws—someone screaming and struggling in the grip of this great beast. Then we all watched in horror as it opened its claws. Nothing happened at first, for the one in its grip was clinging to the claws about forty or fifty feet above us. The monster then shook its claws, and the person dropped screaming to hit the ground directly in front of Blairgowrie.

“Adele, at his side, fainted, but he failed to catch her because he was gazing down at the broken body of his son Eadgifu. I don’t know if you’ve ever met him, but he is—was—a very fine-looking young man.

“No more. I will not attempt to describe to your tender eyes what he was reduced to at the very feet of his father. But the winged horror wheeled in the air and blocked the sun once again as it returned in the direction whence it had come, which appeared to be from the south. Did you see anything like this in the Lands?

“Needless to say, the garden party was over. Everyone quickly left, including Adele, when she finally awoke. Blairgowrie remained frozen in position staring down at the body until his staff covered it and his butler drew him away to bring him inside. He was given a great brandy snifter twice over, but from what I heard, he was dressed for bed and put therein without ever changing expression or closing his eyes.

“So, whatever they had planned for Efran or for Eadgifu is now terminated. The young man was the only son of his father, who had great designs for him. Whether Blairgowrie himself can continue to rule is uncertain, as aspirants to the throne are already circling in the air, and unless he snaps out of his shock immediately to put all doubts to rest, he will be dragged out and likewise dropped. Adele will probably attempt to take his place, but if she is wise, she will flee. She is an adder, but her competition for the throne are buzzards, who dine on adders as an afternoon snack.

“Anxiously awaiting to hear that all is well at the Abbey,

“Your Own Justinian”

This chapter in the story of the Abbey of St. Benedict on the Sea concludes on October 25th of the year 8154 from the creation of the world.

Can you pull in Leviathan with a fishhook
or tie it down with a rope? . . .
Will it beg you for mercy
or ingratiate itself to you?
Will it agree to be your slave for life?
Can you make a pet of it like a bird
or put it on a leash for the young ladies? . . .
If you try to lay a hand on it once
You'll never do it again!
Any hope of subduing it is vain;
the mere sight of it is overwhelming.
No one is powerful enough to defeat it.

Who then is able to stand against Me? ([Job 41:1-10](#))

NOTES:

Whatever you call it—intuitive, reflexive, instinctive—*aikē* shooting does exist. See [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#) (Bonus: ancient sling shots).

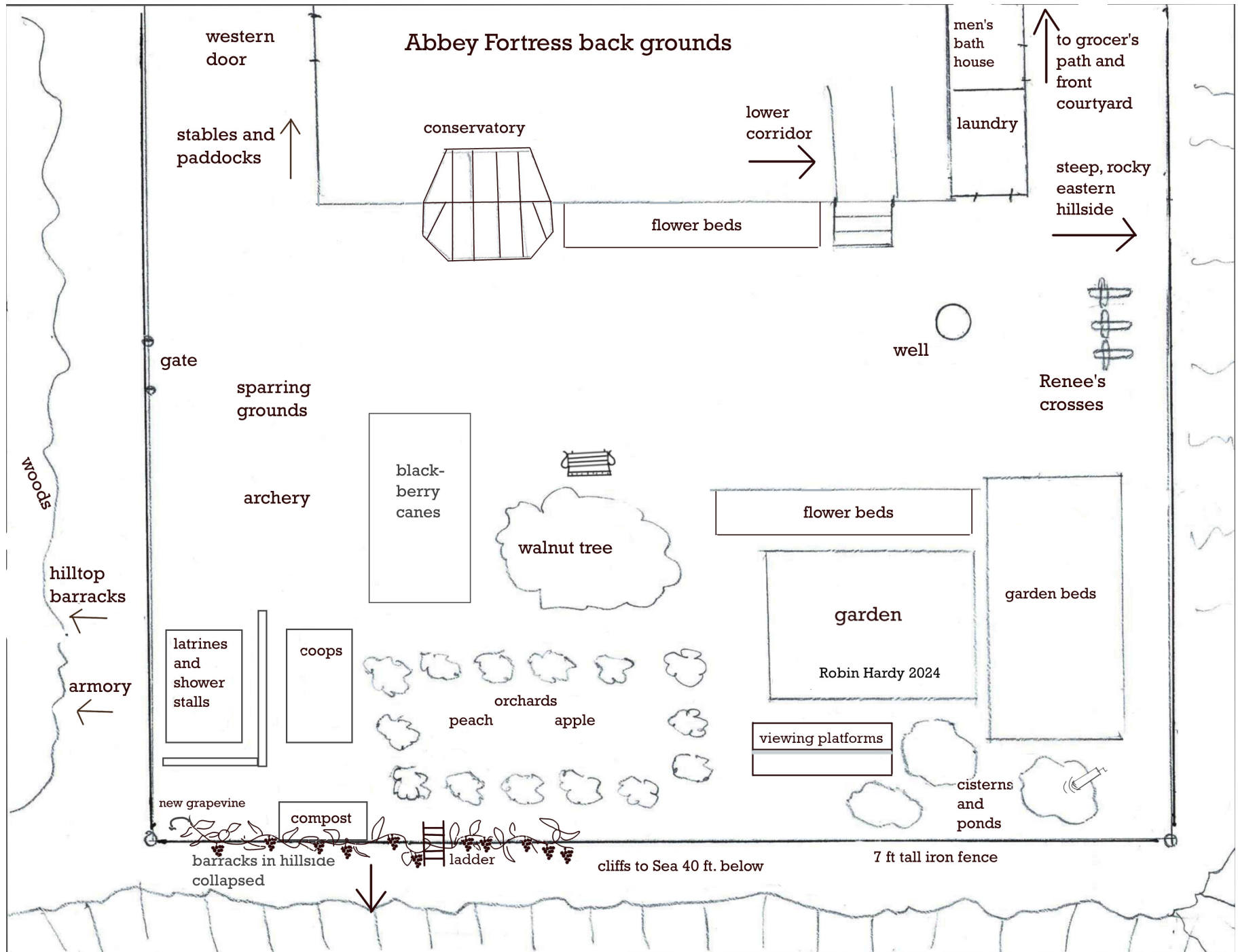
[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Pronunciations for *Lord Efran and Leviathan* (Book 11)

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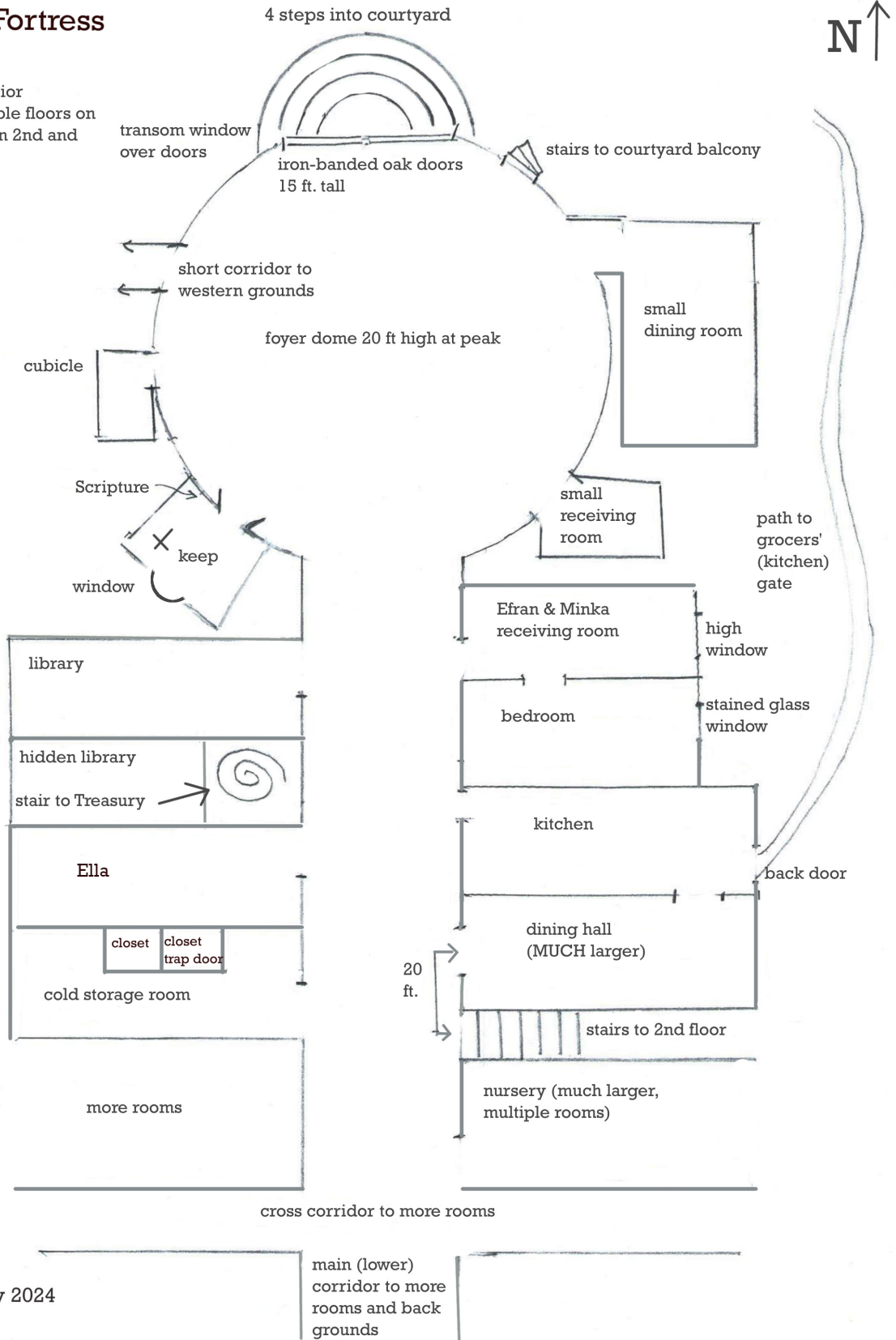
Adele—ah DELL
aike—AY kay (shooting by instinct)
aina—AY nah
 Alberon—AL ber on
 Allyr—AL er
 Ares—AIR eez
 Arne—arn
 Beardall—BARE duhl
 Bennard—beh NARD
 Bethune—beh THUNE
 Blairgowrie—blair GOW ree
 Bowring—BOWE ring
 Chatain—sha TAN
 Chataine—sha TANE
 cloaca—klow AY kah
 Clonmel—KLON mell
 Cyneheard—SIGN herd
 Cyr—sear
 Doane—rhymes with *loan*
 Dobell—DOH bull
 Eadgifu—ee YAD gif oo
 Efran—EFF run
 Ellacombe—ELL eh cohm
 Elvey—ELL vee
 Enguerrand—ENG oo rand
 Erastus—eh RAS tis
 Estes—ESS tis
 Eudes—youds
 Eurus—YOUR us
 Eurussian—your uh SEE un
 fête—fate
 fricassée—FRIK ah see
 garderobe—GAR de robe
 Giardi—gee ARE dee (hard g)
 Giardini—gee are DEE nee (hard g)
 Goadby—GOAD bee
 Goss—gahs
 Graduliere—gra DUE lee air
 Greves—greevs
 Hamon—HAY mun
 Handschuh—HAN schoo
 heinous—HAY nuhs
 Huish—whoish
hupo—HOO poh (idiot)
 incognito—in kog NEE toh
 Jasque—JAS kee
 Jehan—JAY han
 Justinian—jus TIN ee un
 Kaas—kahs
 Kele—kay lay

Kelsey—KELL see
 Leila—LYE la
 Lemmerz—leh MERZ
 Leviathan—leh VIE ah thun
 Loizeaux—lwah ZOH
 Madea—mah DAY ah
 Marguerite—mar ger EET
 Mathurin—mah THUR in
 Melchior—MEL key or
 meritorious—meh reh TAW ree uhs
 Minka—MINK ah
moiwahine—mo wa HEE nee (queen)
 Nares—NAIR es
 obeisance—oh BAY sense
 Palestrina—pal es TREE nah
 perpendicularity—pur pen dik you LAIR eh tee
 Pia—PEE ah
 Pieta—pie ATE ah
 Pleyel—PLAY el
 Polonti—puh LON tee (singular, plural, and language)
 Polontis—puh LON tis (the region)
 Reinagle—REN ah gull
 Reine—rayn
 Rinkart—RING kart
 Routh—roth (rhymes with *moth*)
 Rowe—rhymes with *how*
 Serrano—suh RAHN oh
 Stephanos—steh FAHN os
 Stites—stights
 Surchatain—SUR cha tan
 Surchataine—sur cha TANE
 Sybil—SEH bull
 Symphorien—sim FOR ee in
 Tiras—TEER us
 tivoli—TIV uh lee
 Tourjee—TUR jee
 tsunami—soo NAH me
 Venegas—VEN eh gus
 Venegasan—ven eh GAS un
 Verrin—VAIR en
 Webbe—web
 Woehrle—WURL ee



Abbey Fortress Interior

white stone interior throughout; marble floors on 1st floor; wood on 2nd and 3rd floors

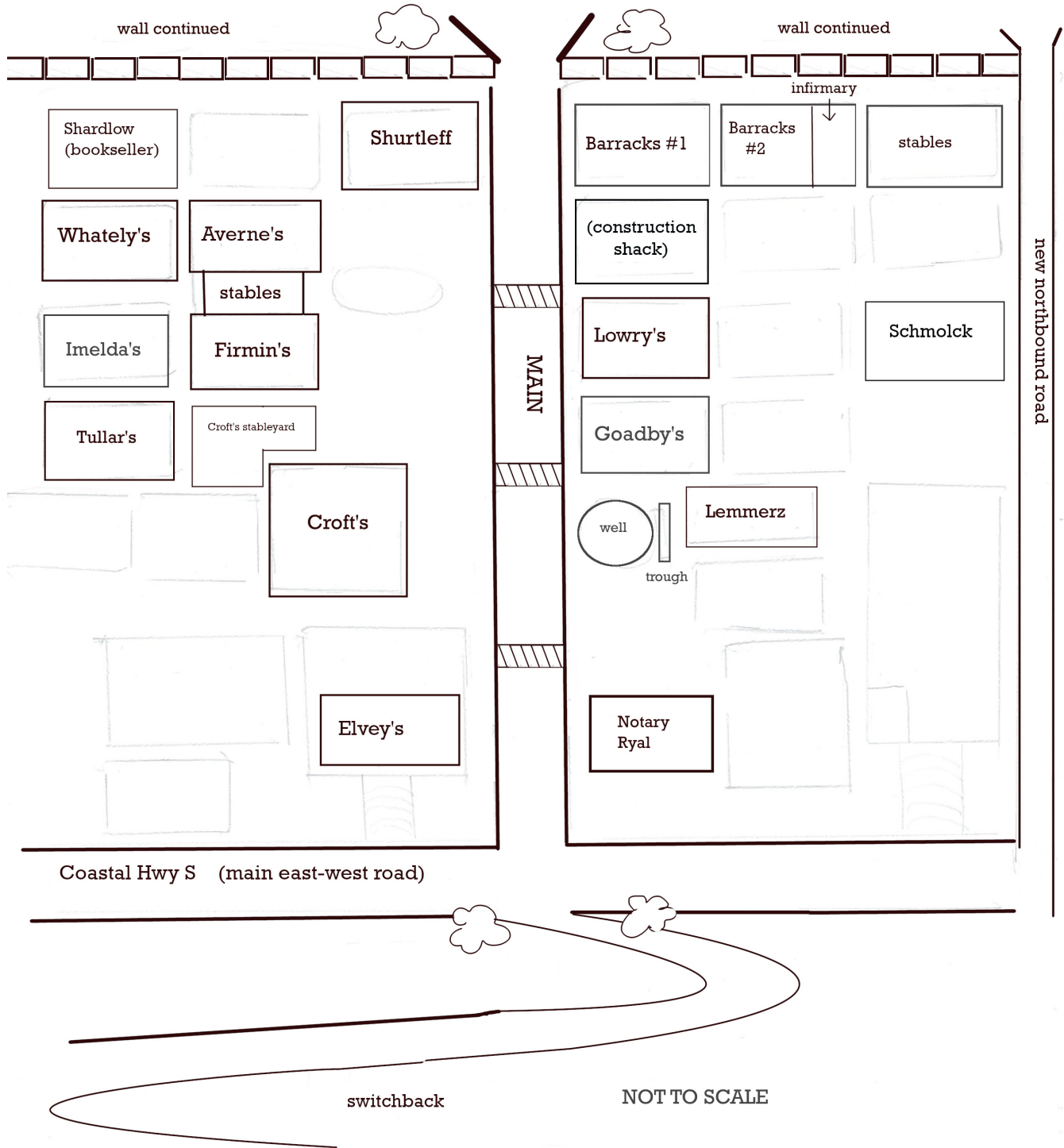


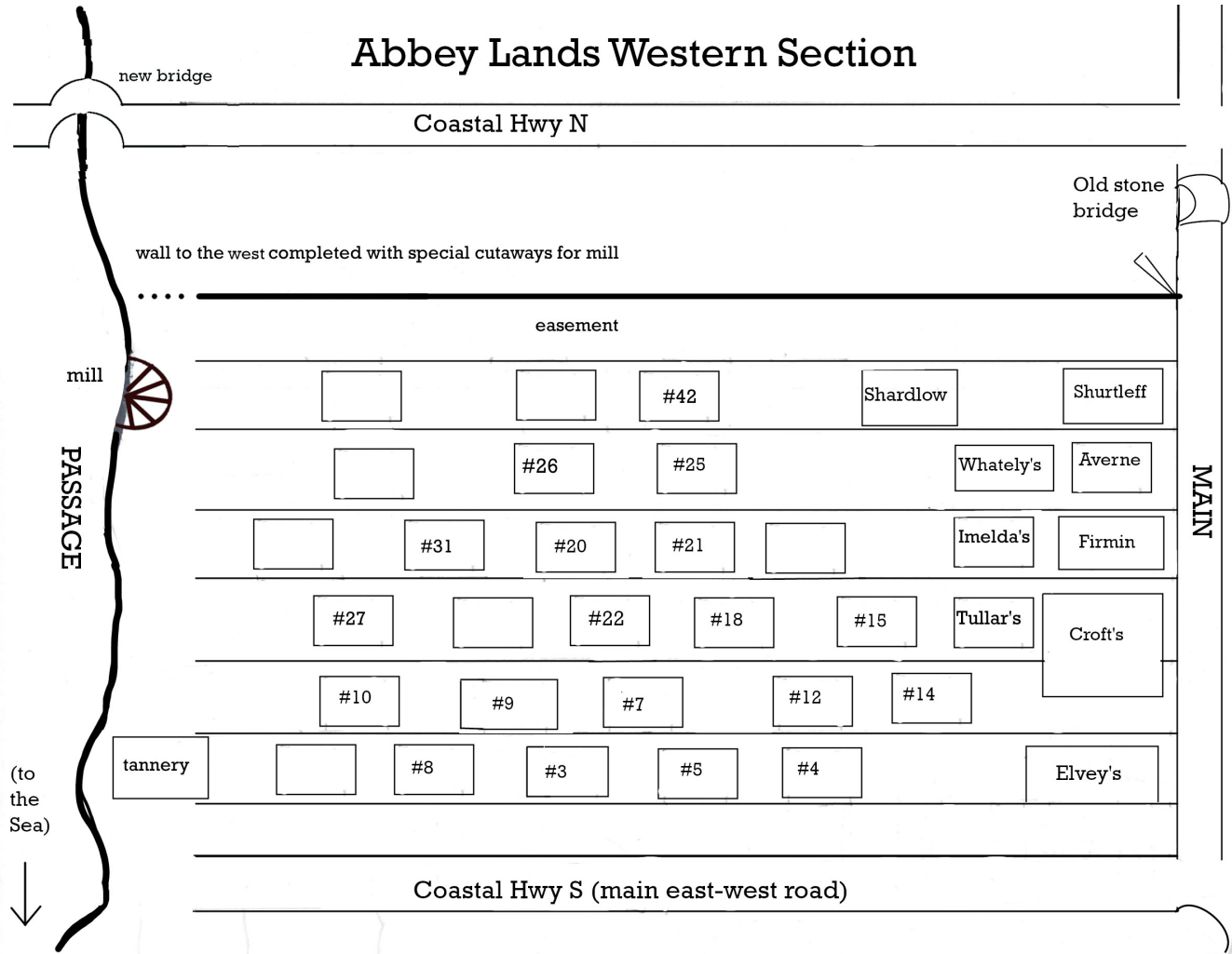
NOT TO SCALE

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main (lower) corridor to more rooms and back grounds

Abbey Lands Main Road





Abbey Lands Western Section

Coastal Hwy N

Old stone bridge

wall to the west completed with special cutaways for mill

easement

mill

PASSAGE

MAIN

(to the Sea)

Coastal Hwy S (main east-west road)

rocky NW hillside

switchback--4 bends on west side, 5 on east

KEY

- 3 - Dix's Plant Shop
- 4 - Burns' Pottery Shop
- 5 - Good Spices
- 7 - The Greenery
- 8 - Fontane's Chandlery
- 9 - Estes' and Kelsey's house
- 10 - Gorsch Weaving
- 12 - Woolens by Bess
- 14 - Harper's Hunting Shop
- 15 - Fine Porcelains
- 18 - Divinely Scented Soaps
- 20 - Howe's house (grows barley)
- 21 - Cary's house (trap door)
- 22 - vacant
- 25 - Knapp (rice & crayfish)
- 26 - Connor and Lyra's house
- 27 - Nares' house
- 31 - Melchior & Geneve
- 42 - Hassler's Tool Sharpening



7 ft tall iron fence

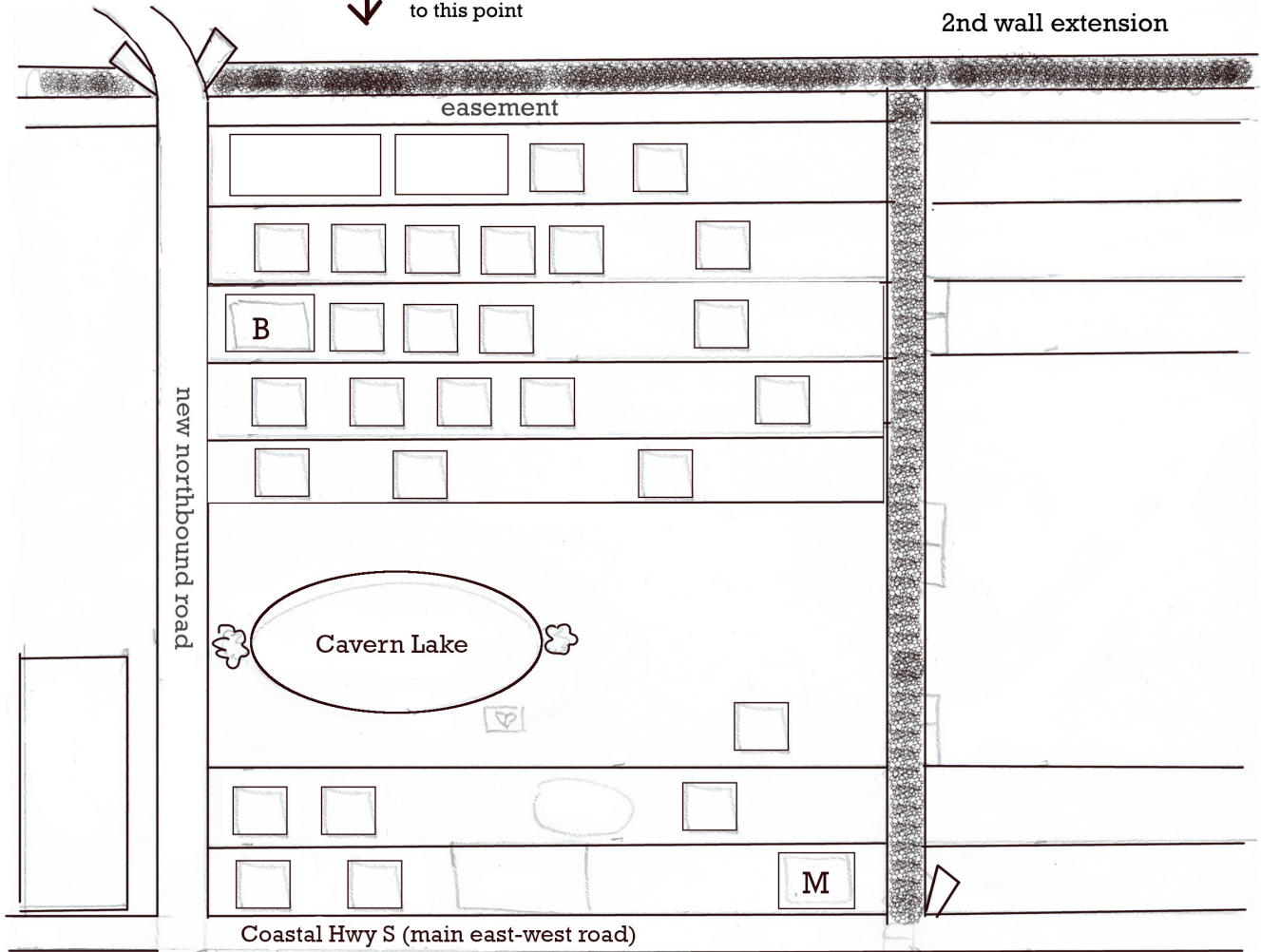
FORTRESS

road curves to intersect Main past the old stone bridge

East Central Abbey Lands

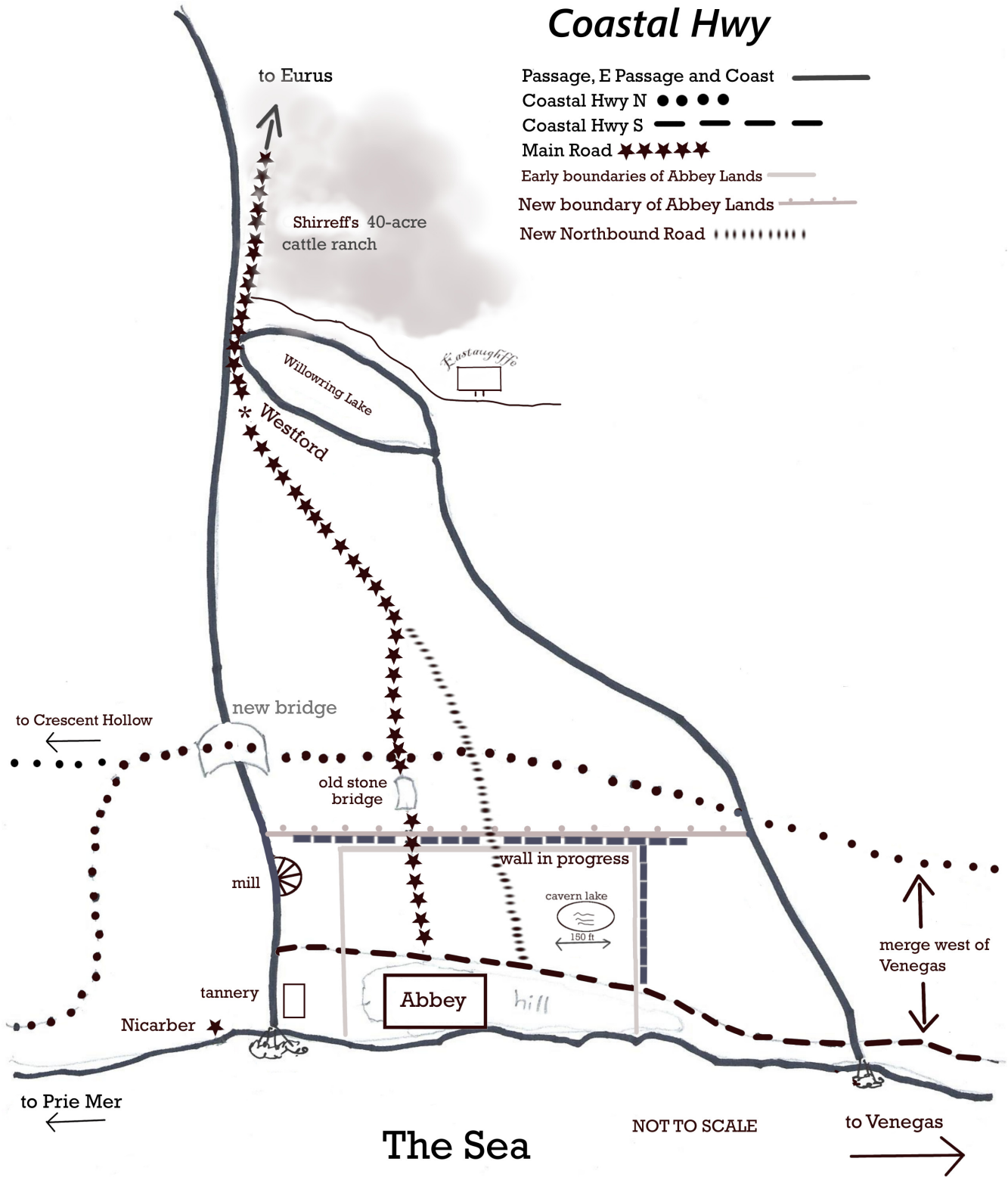
↓ 1 mile from wall gates to this point

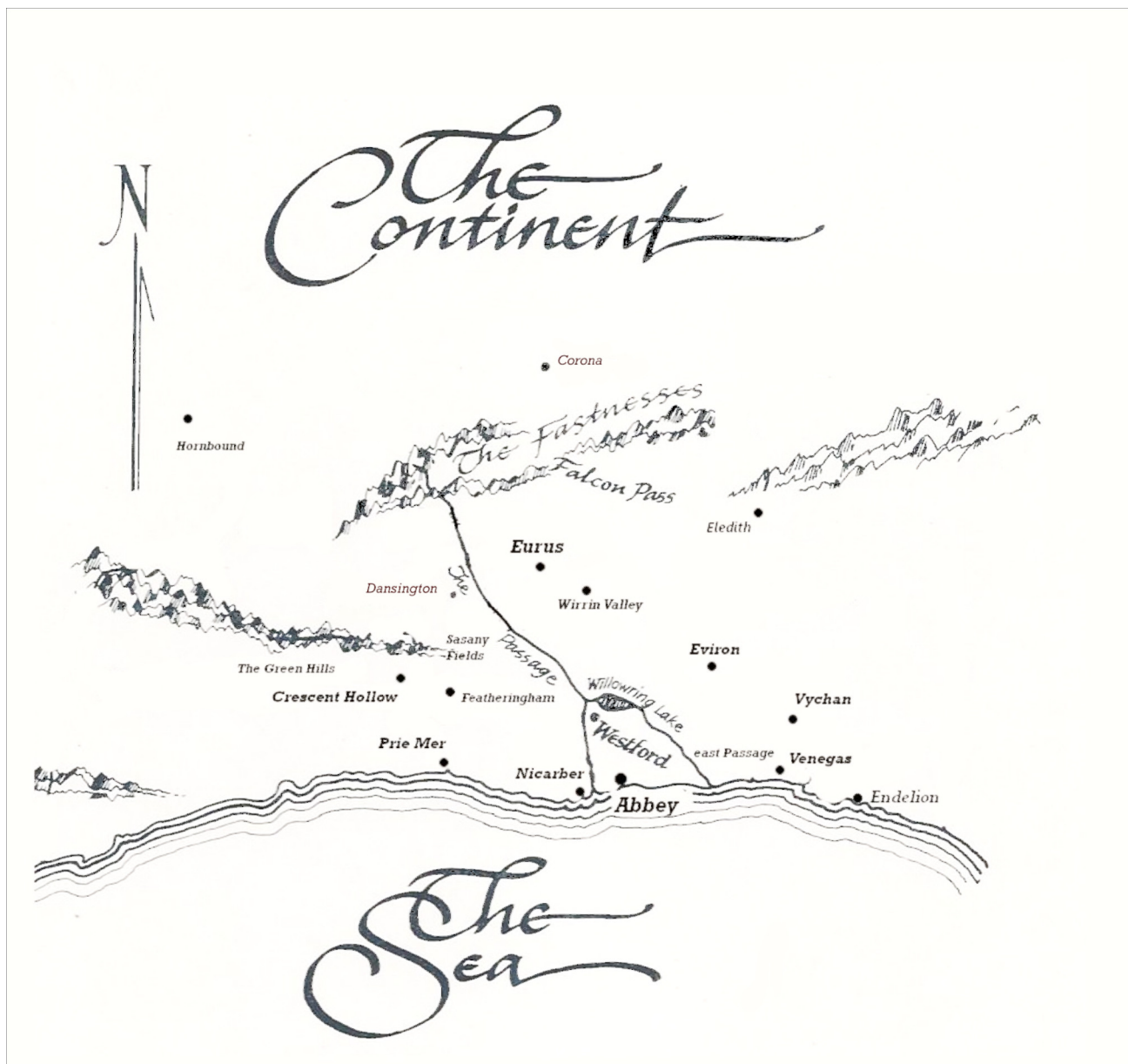
2nd wall extension



- A
- B - Laborers' Hall
- C
- D
- E
- F
- G
- H
- I
- J
- K
- L
- M - Meineke

Coastal Hwy





Efran Meets Leviathan (Book 11:
Lord Efran and Leviathan)
See the Notes--Robin Hardy



Well, I got to use the [dragon](#)¹ I was going to use for Sivalik after all—only this time, it's a female. And she's considerably smarter than Sivalik. Quibblers who note the discrepancies between my description of Leviathan and this rendering will just have to allow for the artist's creative freedom. [This](#)² photo for Efran scrambling away from her is perfect, especially as he looks like he's laughing.

Finally, this amazing [photo](#)³ made for a perfect backdrop except for one tiny detail, which Leviathan took out:



Robin Hardy
May 1, 2024

PS. I am not claiming copyright for this illustration.

1. Created by [ractapopulous](#) on Pixabay
2. From Snowdonia Mountain Guides
3. The cliffs of Moher, County Clare, Ireland were photographed by [Michal Osmenda](#) of Brussels, Belgium on Wikimedia Commons.