

'THERE IS NO JOY LIKE RETURNING TO THE OLD KINGDOM...' LEIGH BARDUGO

GARTH NIX



Terciel and Elinor

BEWARE THE WIND FROM THE NORTH!



Prologue

The fig tree was ancient and huge, its lower trunk buttressed by enormous roots that rose out of the lawn around it like the fins of some vast subterranean creature, while its upper branches topped out at two hundred feet, a full hundred feet higher than even the red-roofed tower of the Abhorsen's House nearby.

A boy, perhaps eight years old, brown-skinned, dark-haired, thin in the face and everywhere else from lack of food, was climbing swiftly up through the branches of the fig with fierce determination. He was wearing ragged, many-times-repaired breeches and a new linen shirt, far too large for him, that had been cinched in the middle with a silk scarf, also new, to make a kind of tunic, and his bare feet were extremely dirty.

It was very quiet in and around the tree, but the boy climbed in a frenzy, as if he were pursued. Several times he almost lost his grip or footing, but he didn't slow or falter. Finally, as he neared the top and the branches became slimmer and began to bend and creak, he slowed down. Soon

after, reaching a point some twenty or thirty paces short of the crown, he stopped and straddled a horizontal branch, setting his thin shoulders against the gnarled trunk of the mighty tree.

He couldn't see much from his vantage point. The leaves were too thick around him. But there were a few spots where the foliage thinned. Through these gaps he could catch a glimpse of the red-roofed tower house below and the white limestone walls that surrounded the island it was built on, an island in the middle of a broad, fast-rushing river that only a few hundred yards to the south plunged over a massive waterfall.

The boy stared at the mist rising along the line of the cliffs, marvelling again at the quiet, the roar of the falls held back from the island by magic, or so he supposed. It had been noisy enough on the riverbank, and almost deafening when the old woman had jumped across the stepping-stones with him on her back, gripping her so hard around the neck she'd told him crossly to stop choking her or they would both die.

The old woman. She'd said she was his great-aunt, but he didn't think that could be true. She'd repeated this claim to the beadle at the workhouse in Grynhold, and the mayor, so they would let him go, but they wouldn't have stopped her anyway. They were all bowing and begging her pardon and asking if she wanted wine or oysters or cake or anything at all the town might give her.

But all she had wanted was him, and they had been happy to hand him over. No one had asked what he wanted.

There was a rustle higher above, and a crunching, snapping sound. For a moment the boy thought it was a branch breaking, but the sound went on too long. A continuous crunching noise. He stood up and parted the branches

immediately above him. All the boy saw was glaring green, elongated eyes and a broad open mouth full of very sharp white teeth.

He flinched, lost his footing, and almost fell, but sacrificing skin, he managed to keep his grip on the higher branches. He swung there for a heart-stopping second before he scabbled his feet back onto a thicker, lower branch.

Branches creaked above, as if suddenly bearing more weight, and the foliage moved so Terciel got a proper look at what was above him. He was surprised to see it was a man, or sort of a man, because his first, half-seen impression was of something smaller. That said, this man was no taller than Terciel, albeit much broader across the shoulders. He had an odd pinkish nose, and there was that hideous, many-toothed mouth and the huge emerald eyes. Adding to his strangeness, his skin was entirely covered in fine, very white fur or down, which grew longer on his head and chin to give the appearance of hair and a beard. He had been eating fig-bird chicks out of a nest, crunching their tiny bones. There was a feather in the corner of his mouth and a single drop of blood on his broad white chest.

A red leather collar was fastened tight around his neck, a collar that swarmed with Charter marks to make some sort of spell, and a tiny silver bell hung from the collar. The boy could see the clapper swing inside, but it made no sound, at least not one that he could hear.

'So,' said whatever this thing was, spitting out the feather. His voice was that of a grown man, and sardonic. 'You're her new one.'

The boy crouched lower on the branch, ready to drop down to the next branch below, to climb down as fast as or even faster than he had climbed up.

'Don't fret,' said the creature. 'You're safe enough from me.'

'What are you?' asked the boy nervously. He had one foot on the branch below, but he stayed where he was. For the moment. 'I mean who? Sir.'

'Many things once,' said the stranger, yawning. His teeth were even longer and sharper than they had seemed at first, and there were more of them. 'I am a servant of the Abhorsens. Or to be more accurate, a slave. I have had many names. Your mistress calls me Moregrim.'

'The Abhorsen. Her, down there,' said the boy, frowning. He gestured at the house. She'd taken him inside as soon as they arrived and handed him over to two strange magical servants she called Sendings. They were like daytime ghosts, their skin and eyes and hair and everything all Charter marks, uncountable tiny marks in different colours, swarming and crawling about to create the illusion of living people. The Sendings had tried to give him a bath, but he'd managed to escape and climb the tree.

'Yes indeed,' replied the dwarf, his green eyes sparkling with mischief. 'Her down there is the current Abhorsen, and you, I presume, are her latest Abhorsen-in-Waiting. Terciel, that's your name, isn't it?'

'How do you know that?'

'I listen at doors,' said Moregrim blithely. 'And windows. Both the real and the metaphorical.'

Terciel frowned again, not understanding what the strange creature was talking about.

'Tell me,' said the dwarf idly, not even looking at the boy. 'Have you wielded the bells yet? Touched the handles? Worn the bandolier at least?'

'What?' asked Terciel. He still wasn't sure whether to flee

down the tree or not. He had climbed it with the idea of hiding there until nightfall, and then trying to escape this island, but with this magical slave of the Abhorsen's here, that plan had already failed. He looked around, wondering if there was somewhere else he could hide. Apart from the main house and its immediate gardens, there was an orchard, and lawns, and a strange little house or shed to the south, but nowhere that would offer safety from a search.

He tried not to think even farther ahead, to how he might cross the river, so swift, with the vast falls so close. The stepping-stones were too far apart for him to jump. Maybe there was a boat. He was good with boats, a true child of the fishing port of Grynhold. Launched from the northern end of the island, where the current would be weaker, maybe—

'Have you wielded the bells?'

The bells.

The sudden change in Terciel's admittedly already difficult life had started with the appearance of seven bells in a bandolier. One moment they had not been there, and then there they were, in Terciel's most secret eyrie in between the chimney stacks on the roof of the Grynhold Fish Hall. He'd been steeping a stolen piece of salt fish in a rain bucket, heard something strange, and looked away for less than a second. When he looked back, there was the bandolier, with the mahogany bell handles sticking out of the pouches that kept the bells silent, the handles and the leather crawling all over with glowing Charter marks, which slowly faded from too-bright brilliance as he watched, though they remained visible.

Terciel had left the bells and his fish, departing across the rooftop in a great rush that set the roosting gulls flying. Despite having the forehead Charter mark himself, he had never been taught magic, since he was an orphan of

no account, merely a line in the register of the Grynhold Workhouse, an annoyance to the beadle who oversaw the children there, and nothing more than that to anyone else. His parents, who might have taught him Charter Magic, had drowned when he was two, and his much older sister, Rahi, who had looked after him for while afterward, had disappeared before he was four. Or thereabouts. He had no memory of his parents at all, and only a vague recollection of his sister.

Everything he knew about them came from rare answered questions or from overhearing people talk about him, which happened even less frequently. Mostly he was ignored, apart from a cuff to speed him out of the workhouse to the oakum-picking shed, or a cuff to get him back in again at the end of the day, with an occasional caning thrown in if his absence from the daily work was noticed.

All Terciel knew about magic was that the old healer Maralide made Charter marks appear from nowhere, sketching them in the air and on broken skin and bone, and sometimes they healed a hurt or cured a sickness, and sometimes they didn't. And what Terciel knew about magical bells came only from stories whispered at night in the workhouse dormitory, whispers backstopped by the constant gurgle of the north aqueduct close by, whose swift running water kept the town safe from the marauding Dead, terrible creatures who were brought back into the living world by awful necromancers *who used magical bells*.

Seven bells, carried in a bandolier, worn across the chest.

Three days after the bells had appeared in Terciel's eyrie, the old woman had arrived in Grynhold, and shortly after that Terciel had been called to the beadle's office and then when he had fled instead, since he had numerous petty

crimes of fish theft and other misdemeanors that might have come to light, he had been apprehended by an unprecedented collegiate effort on the part of the beadle and her associates, the Grynhold Town Watch, and a large number of fisher-folk who were ashore waiting for the tide to turn before they went out again. It was the last group that had soured Terciel's attempted escape. The fisher-folk had never bothered the boy before, and he had been hiding among the drying nets.

They had dragged him before the old woman, and he had met her piercing black eyes, seen her horrendously white face, so much paler than anyone's ever should be, and then he had looked down to the seven bells she wore in a bandolier across her chest, over an armoured coat of unusual design, made of many small interlocking plates, several scored with the mark of weapons that had failed to penetrate.

Terciel had screamed when he saw the bells, and it had taken the combined effort of the mayor, the beadle, and the woman herself to convince him that she was not a necromancer come to steal his life and use his dead body for some terrible unspecified purpose. They'd explained that bells with Charter marks were special, not the usual necromancer's tools, and they also were *not* the same seven bells that had appeared in his eyrie.

Those bells had come to him specially, the woman said, and it meant he had to go and get them and then he would have to come away with her. That was when she had said she was his great-aunt and her name was Tizanael, and he could call her 'Aunt Tizzy.'

Terciel had noticed everyone else called her 'Abhorsen' and bowed low, something the free fishers of Grynhold didn't do for anyone else.

With the fisher-folk turned against him, there was nowhere

Terciel could hide. He'd climbed the fish hall and carefully picked up the bandolier by the very end of one strap, carried the bells down, and handed them over to the Abhorsen. She said she would keep them until his training began, when they got to the 'House', wherever that was. They'd left soon after, walking out under the aqueduct in the late afternoon, something that filled Terciel with terror. To go beyond the safety of running water, with the night coming on?

But nothing had happened, then or in the next three days and nights. After a while it occurred to Terciel that this was because he was travelling with someone the creatures of the night were afraid of themselves. He wanted to run away but dared not try anything, not when she was so close.

Now he was trapped here, on this island on the edge of a waterfall, and he didn't know what to do.

Moregrim asked the question again, but Terciel didn't answer.

'Could you take my collar off? It itches.'

Terciel shook his head slowly. He hadn't touched the bells and he wasn't going to touch a collar with all those marks glowing and floating upon it, not least when he didn't know what this creature was.

The strange man slid along the branch above on all fours, a curiously nimble movement. Terciel noted his fingers were very stubby and ended in claws, and were covered in the same short white hair that was all over his body. He also appeared to have a vestigial tail.

'Take off my collar!'

Terciel lowered himself to the branch below, and then the next, climbing down as rapidly as he ever had to escape the workhouse, with the beadle shouting at him from the window above.

There was shouting here too, but it came from below.

'Come down at once!'

'I am coming down!' he shouted back. He could see her now, on the lawn below the tree, one hand raised in a beckoning motion. For a second he thought there was a bright star on her finger, before he saw it was the afternoon sun catching the ring she wore at the right angle to make it flash.

'Not you!' called Tizanael, the fifty-first Abhorsen in a line that stretched back over centuries to the very first, whose name had become synonymous with the office. 'Him! Come down at once!'

A white form leapt past Terciel, too close for comfort, gripped a branch with those taloned hands and swung down farther, switchbacking down the branches in swinging falls and crouching leaps, the blocky body moving with incongruous mobility. The boy followed more slowly, losing sight of both the creature and Tizzy as he entered the denser foliage of the lower branches.

When he finally reached the ground, the dwarf was kneeling in front of Tizanael, his head tilted at a very inhuman angle that obviously was no discomfort. The Abhorsen no longer wore the armour, bell bandolier, and sword, but a robe of dark blue embroidered with a multitude of tiny silver keys, a golden rope in place of a belt, with a small dagger in a metal sheath at her hip. She held her left hand high, the silver ring catching the afternoon sun. The small ruby set in the ring glinted red, like a spark caught upon her finger.

'You were forbidden to leave the house, Moregrim.'

'This whole island is often termed the 'House',' said the dwarf, with a yawn. 'I thought that was what you meant.'

'I meant the structure to my left,' said Tizanael shortly. 'I will now be more specific. You are to remain within the

walls of the building I am indicating until I give you leave otherwise.'

She pointed at the whitewashed, red-roofed house with its sky-blue door and the door knocker in the shape of a lion's head, a ring held in its jaws.

'I also did not give you leave to change your shape,' added Tizanael. 'Whether for the purpose of climbing trees or anything else.'

Moregrim emitted a high-pitched hissing noise and stood up. For a moment Terciel thought the strange, short man was going to attack Tizanael, but instead he bowed low. As he straightened up, he changed, suddenly more human-like. Now his skin was as pale as the Abhorsen's, his hair and beard were no longer fur-like, though still luminously white, and he was clothed in a shapeless white smock. The collar that had been around his neck had become a broader red leather belt hitched around his waist, and the small bell swung inside a large bronze buckle. The vestigial tail had entirely disappeared.

Moregrim bowed, turned away, and headed not toward the front door of the house but to an open gate in the wall on the right-hand side, which led to the kitchen garden. When he was about ten paces away, he turned and snarled, green eyes directed piercingly at Terciel.

'She killed Rahiniel!'

Tizanael raised her hand. She did not do anything Terciel could see, but Moregrim writhed and fell over his own feet, rolled twice, and yowled exactly like the cats that frequented the Grynhold Fish Hall, before he got up again and stumbled away through the garden gate.

Tizanael turned to look at Terciel. Her face, as ever, was set. Not angry or antagonistic, like the beadle's so often was.

This was simply an absence of emotion. Terciel had no idea what she was feeling or thinking.

'Who's Rahiniel?' he asked.

'Your sister,' said Tizanael, watching him carefully. 'I believe she was generally known as Rahi.'

'Rahi?'

Terciel took in a slow breath. He could almost remember Rahi. At least, he had the faint recollection of someone wrapping him up in a blanket and kissing his forehead as hail clattered on the roof. It had been cozy and warm, so not the workhouse. That was more likely to have been Rahi than his mother. He had been too little when his parents died to remember anything of them.

But that was his only memory. She had left, and he had always presumed she was dead anyway. What did it matter how she died?

'I did not kill her,' said Tizanael. 'She was my Abhorsen-in-Waiting. It is a dangerous office we hold, and she did not survive one of the many tests we face.'

'That man, or whatever he is, Moregrim. He wanted me to take off his collar.'

'You would not have been able to,' said Tizanael. 'Not yet. But Moregrim lays his plans long ahead. For now, simply remember that if you take off his collar, he will kill you.'

Terciel shrugged, attempting to show he wasn't scared. But he was, and they both knew it.

'You are to be my new Abhorsen-in-Waiting,' said Tizanael. 'That is why the bells came to you.'

'Why me?' asked Terciel.

Tizanael did not immediately answer. Terciel shifted, lifting his heels nervously, as she continued to look at him, gaze unblinking.

'It is a very difficult thing to be the Abhorsen,' she said finally. 'Many different strengths are needed. These tend to occur more frequently in those descended from the first Abhorsen, who was given many gifts by her . . . mother . . . you might say. So the bells often choose one of that line, however distant. Like your sister, Rahiniel, and now you.'

'You're not my aunt,' said Terciel defiantly. He didn't really understand what she was going on about.

'No,' replied Tizanael. 'I am your great-great-aunt. You have something of the look of my brother, Herranael, your great-grandfather.'

'Where's he, then?'

'He is dead,' replied the Abhorsen. 'They are all dead now, of that line, save you.'

Her expression didn't change, nor her tone of voice. She might have been speaking of the weather, or the time of day.

Terciel scowled, and scuffed the dirt with his heel.

'Did they drown?' he asked. His parents had drowned. Most of the orphans in the workhouse had lost their family to the sea.

'No,' replied Tizanael.

'Everyone dies,' said Terciel.

'Yes,' said Tizanael. 'In the right time. And it is my task . . . our task . . . to make sure they stay dead.'

'How?' asked Terciel. He felt suddenly tired, and hungry, and overwhelmed by all things he didn't understand. His entire world had changed, and it seemed unlikely to be for the better, even though his old life had been bad enough.

'I will teach you,' said Tizanael. 'But first, you must bathe, and put on clean clothes, and then we will eat a proper dinner. No more travel bread and water.'

'Salt fish?' asked Terciel.

Tizanael shuddered, the first time he had seen any kind of human expression pass over her statue-like mask of a face.

'Definitely not salt fish,' she said.

Terciel nodded, and walked ahead of her back to the blue door with the lion knocker. It was that simple reaction that convinced him there was hope in this new life after all.

He was so tired of eating salt fish.



Chapter One

The huge greenhouse that generations before had been used to raise bountiful crops of flowers and prize marrows had been remade into a theater of sorts when Elinor was nine years old, and constantly improved since then. Now she was nineteen, the dolls who had once provided her supporting cast had long since been relegated to being her audience, seated in two rows of garden chairs at the south end. They had been replaced as performers by life-sized plasterboard cutouts, repainted as necessary. Elinor still played nearly all the parts and did all the voices.

She was doing one now, standing behind a bright red-and-gold cavalier to deliver the most famous speech from Breakespear's *The Three Noble Kinswomen*, Sir Merivan revealing he was betrothed to all three ladies but would marry none and was in fact in love with the orphan Kit Catchpenny.

'None of thee could but be more than a sister unto me—'
'Elinor!'

The agitated voice of Mrs Watkins preceded her into the glasshouse, the tone unusual enough to wake Ham Corbin,

who had fallen asleep among the audience, despite Elinor's rousing performance over the last hour as the entire cast of the Breakespear classic. He *was* eighty, so Elinor did not take it as a criticism. Besides, he had been primarily a circus performer, and loved only the parts of plays that called for tumbling and swordplay and knife-throwing, all of which he had taught her since he had first come to Coldhallow House, ostensibly as an elderly and thus inexpensive groom but in fact more of an unlikely assistant and sometime foil to his niece, Roberta – though like everyone else, he only ever called Elinor's governess 'Mrs Watkins'.

Elinor sighed and let the rest of Sir Merivan's soliloquy subside back into the lower reaches of her mind. She stepped out from behind the cavalier cutout, revealing herself to be a full head shorter than the knight, as she stood no more than five foot three in her stockings or, as was the case now, in socks. She was wearing her long-dead father's clothes, a subdued tweed suit in brown and green, which matched her eyes. They were brown with flecks of green, and her hair was simply brown, a very undistinguished brown to her own eyes. The suit had been altered somewhat to fit, but was still baggy. Her father had been no taller than her, but considerably weightier and notoriously slow-moving. Elinor was slim, strong, swift, and dexterous, and Ham had said she was the physical equal of any of the circus folk he had worked with, though he qualified this by adding she was not as strong as 'Helena, the Strongest Woman in the World' nor as flexible as a contortionist known as the 'Mirror Snake'.

She looked a drab sparrow among the bright cutouts, Elinor thought, not for the first time. But even though she played all the parts, she never dressed as the flamboyant

characters in her favourite dramas. She wore her father's old clothes simply because they were more comfortable and it was much easier to do all the things she liked doing in trousers rather than in an ankle-length dress and a tightly buttoned jacket, not to mention several layers of flannel underclothing.

It had been a tactical error to step out from hiding, Elinor realised, as Mrs Watkins saw she was once again wearing her father's clothes, with a cloth cap pulled down low over her forehead to hide the unsightly brand there, rather than a bonnet or even a scarf.

'Elinor! You have to get dressed. The doctor is here.'

'I thought he was coming tomorrow,' protested Elinor.

'The pony trap from the station is halfway up the drive! It must be bringing the doctor,' exclaimed Mrs Watkins. 'Hurry! Oh, Ham, not now!'

Ham ignored his niece, throwing four wooden balls in quick succession at Elinor, who caught them automatically and began to juggle, cycling the balls around in front of her face before she threw them back with great speed and accuracy straight at Ham's nose.

He caught the balls with a coughing chuckle and slipped them back into the pockets of his shabby greatcoat. Though it was the tail end of summer and the days still had some warmth, and the greenhouse with its iron-framed glass roof caught the sun, Ham had begun to feel the cold. Great age had not so far lessened his dexterity, but it had reduced his resistance to extremes of temperature.

'You've the sure eye, Miss Elinor,' he said. 'Knives next time.'

'You'll do no such thing,' scolded Mrs Watkins, though she knew full well her uncle would pay her no heed, and

that Elinor had been juggling knives for years anyway. Though not usually when Mrs Watkins could see, to spare her feelings. 'Come on, Elinor. I have put out your Sunday dress and the blue bonnet.'

Elinor hooked her arm through Mrs Watkins's elbow as they left the greenhouse, and gave her a fond smile.

'What would I do without you, Mrs Watkins?'

The governess sniffed.

'Become even more of a hellion,' she said.

'I wish I was a hellion,' said Elinor sadly. 'Wearing men's clothes and staging plays all by myself hardly counts.'

'It would be more than enough if word spread of it,' snapped Mrs Watkins. She was almost dragging Elinor across the courtyard between the greenhouse and the main house now, in her eagerness to get her out of sight before their visitor might see her, though the doctor would come to the front door on the other side.

'How could it?' asked Elinor. She paused, forcing Mrs Watkins to release her arm. 'No one ever visits. I never go out.'

She gestured at the hills around them, good grazing land for sheep, though there had been none there for years and the once well-managed woods on the heights had begun to encroach upon the fields. Elinor's father, the late Edmund Hallett, had been a very indifferent farmer anyway, and since his death eight years before, Elinor's mother, Amelia, had let everything go: the land lay fallow, all the farmworkers and most of the servants had gone, and no social calls were made or allowed.

Now Amelia Hallett herself lay close to death, up on the four-poster bed in the grand bedroom that took up a good quarter of the old house's second floor. Elinor looked up

at the windows there, even now half expecting to see her mother peering down at her, the same distant figure she had always been, leaving Elinor's education and well-being almost entirely to Mrs Watkins, intervening only in usually unwelcome ways on those rare occasions when she roused herself to leave the bedroom or parlour.

Mrs Hallett had taken to her bed three weeks previously, after feeling 'light-headed and odd', and had thereafter quickly lapsed into a state closely resembling death, while not actually being dead. The local doctor having proclaimed himself entirely baffled, he had suggested telegraphing the famous Dr Branthill and that worthy had eventually agreed to make a visit.

Though Mrs Hallett was not in the window, a sudden and miraculous recovery not having occurred, Elinor kept staring up. The weather vane atop the house was screeching as it slowly rotated, the screech almost seeming to come from the bronze owl that sat atop the directionals. The winds were extremely set in their ways here, usually coming from the south or southeast. The weather vane rarely moved much, if at all.

Now it had swung all the way around, and the arrow clutched in the bronze owl's claws was pointing north.

'A wind from the north,' said Elinor softly, almost to herself.

'What's that?' asked Mrs Watkins. She looked up too, and gasped. 'No, that can't be—'

The weather vane screeched and moved again, slowly circling around to point in a more accustomed direction to the southeast. But it didn't stay still, jerking northward for a few seconds before swinging back, as if the wind from the north was simply waiting its turn.

'I don't remember the last time the wind came from the north,' said Elinor. 'The servants all think it brings trouble, don't they?'

'It does,' said Mrs Watkins. She did not sound at all like her usual self. 'I hope not here.'

'What do you mean?' asked Elinor.

Mrs Watkins was still watching the weather vane. It was twitching between south-southeast and nor-nor'-east.

'We're a good fifteen miles farther south than Bain,' she said, apparently to herself, for when Elinor repeated the question, she shook her head and gripped the young woman's arm again and pulled her along.

In the end, it took Elinor fifteen minutes to dress in the ridiculous layers of flannel and corsetry, many-buttoned coat, and flounced long dress that the year-old copies of *The Gentlewoman's Magazine* from Corvere said were suitable for a young lady of middling social status and wealth. Though in Elinor's case both these things were notional. Even before Amelia Hallett had put Coldhallow House in near isolation, her parents had always kept her secluded from local society, such as it was, and she had begun to realise from the lack of upkeep to everything that while the family may have been wealthy once, it was no longer. Or her mother was even more of a miser than she had always seemed to be. As with many other subjects, money was not something Amelia Hallett would discuss with her daughter, even before she became ill and could not talk at all.

The finishing touch was an unfashionable bonnet, pulled low to hide the disfiguring scar on her forehead. Amelia always insisted her daughter keep her forehead covered to hide the brand, and did not care to hear that bonnets had been out of fashion for at least several decades, even in the country.

Elinor accepted it was a disfigurement. She was relieved it was sometimes hardly visible, but it always became more distinct when she was upset or angry, probably something to do with blood flow, and it could not be concealed with paint or powder, somehow always showing through. Elinor could often forget about it, but Mrs Hallett had an absolute horror of the brand, possibly because it had been mysteriously inflicted by her own mother, Elinor's grandmother.

Elinor wasn't clear on exactly what her grandmother had done, or how she'd done it, as her mother refused to discuss the matter. She had no memory of any traumatic pain or, indeed, anything else that might have made the mark. Mrs Watkins had already been her governess then, but she had not seen what happened, having been sent on an errand clearly to get her out of the way. She had returned to find the baby's forehead indelibly marked and Mr Hallett threatening to whip his mother-in-law off the property, forbidding her ever to darken his threshold again, a sensibility shared by his wife.

'Come along, Elinor,' urged Mrs Watkins, returning to check on her charge's progress for the third time and help her with the final buttons. 'The doctor wouldn't take tea or anything, he's already gone straight in to your mother. These city folk, always in a rush!'

Elinor followed her governess, feeling both excited at finally meeting someone new, and nervous, in case the doctor somehow discerned her disfigurement under the bonnet and cried out in disgust or whatever it was her mother was always afraid was going to happen.

But the doctor hardly spared her a glance. He seemed very eager to conclude his visit and be gone.

'I'm afraid I can offer no more promising diagnosis than my esteemed local colleague,' said Dr Branthill hurriedly,

even as Elinor walked into her mother's bedroom. 'I concur with the treatment to date. Continue feeding her. It is a good sign that she can still drink. Clear soups and the like, calf's-foot jelly, tea, a little lime juice. You have done well with the nursing. There is no better course than clean linens, regular bathing and turning, and if you can take her out in the chair when the weather is clement, that I also advise.'

'Maria, my mother's maid, has been responsible for her care,' said Elinor quickly, not wanting to take credit for something she hadn't done, and in all honesty, did not want to do. Her mother had never liked Elinor touching her, had always shrugged off any attempt at a hug or a kiss. Mrs Watkins said this was because Amelia had been forcibly taken from her own mother at birth, and raised by two of her dead father's strict and judgmental aunts in Corvere, so she'd never learned how to love *anyone*, or be a parent herself. This explanation, while it made perfect sense, didn't make it any easier for Elinor.

'Do you see any hope of . . . of recovery?'

'I simply do not know,' said the great man. Many a lesser doctor would have offered some meaningless claptrap that upon close examination would mean nothing. 'She breathes, albeit incredibly slowly. Her pulse, likewise. She lives, but in a very lowered state. The pallor of her skin is curious, but her lips and fingernails blush, showing no trace of blue. Her blood is red, her breath sweet. Her temperature is normal . . . she is not cold, despite what you think you saw—'

'I have seen it several times!' protested Elinor. 'The thinnest layer of frost that forms upon her skin. But when I touch her, it disappears. It only happens at night—'

'Ah, late at night, when you are very tired and of course anxious,' said the doctor hurriedly, making quick motions

with his hands as if to sweep away whatever Elinor had seen or thought she'd seen. 'You are certain she never speaks?'

'No words,' said Elinor. 'Sometimes I have come into the room and thought she was singing under her breath. Or humming. But it is so faint I'm never really sure whether I've heard it or not.'

'While we have made many advances in medicine these last few decades, much continues to be unknown,' said the doctor. He hesitated, then added, 'Particularly when considering the . . . ah . . . oddities of this locale.'

'What do you mean?' asked Elinor.

The doctor gave her a look she couldn't decipher. It wasn't exactly suspicion, nor puzzlement. Something between the two.

'The North,' he said finally.

It was Elinor's turn for a puzzled expression to form upon her face.

'What has that to do with anything?'

The doctor glanced at Mrs Hallett.

'It's not really the North here,' said the governess nervously. 'We're miles and *miles* south of Bain. We don't have . . . the oddities . . . usually.'

'The oddities of the locale,' repeated Dr Branthill, almost to himself. He glanced out the window as he spoke, and hurried to close his bag. Elinor looked out too, and saw the tops of the poplars in the drive were beginning to sway.

Not in their usual direction.

The wind was blowing from the north again. Not fiercely, but certainly enough to set the treetops swaying.

'You are a local woman, Mrs . . . er . . . Wobkins?' asked the doctor.

'Aye,' she answered, not correcting his mangling of her name. She hesitated, then added with a touch of defiance

Elinor had not often seen in someone so concerned with social differences, 'Bain born and bred, as it happens.'

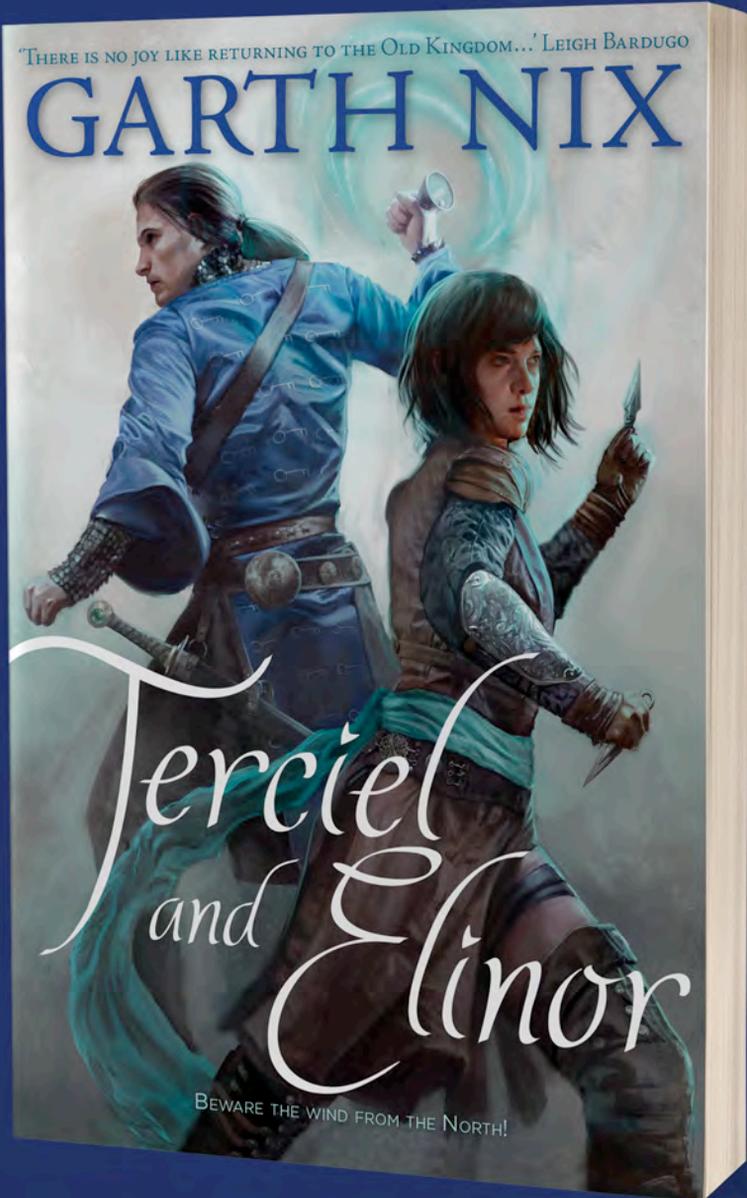
'I too,' replied Dr Branthill, surprising both women. 'Rather farther north, in fact, even closer to the Wall. I do not often come back. I . . . trust . . . trust you recall the childhood warnings pressed into us all. Given the condition of Mrs Hallett, I do not think this is quite so far south as one might hope and . . . and I do not like this wind.'

He no longer looked the picture of the confident medico but rather a slightly apprehensive middle-aged man whose side whiskers were quivering.

'So I am most anxious to get considerably farther south myself before nightfall. I am sorry I cannot offer you any greater certainty or any relief for your mother, Miss Hallett. Good day!'

He was out the door before Elinor had a chance to even thank him, or offer any parting words. She followed him more slowly, only half listening as he clattered down the main stairs, strode swiftly down the gallery, and went out the front door like a jack-in-the-box, shouting for his coachman, who was to take him posthaste to the station and the soonest possible train southward.

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