Fairy Gold

The old stories warn that the Elderkin are very careful about observing the exact terms of contracts and agreements, enforcing them strictly even after the payment is made. Those who give false value in a bargain with the Elderkin may find that the treasure they received in payment has been transformed into trash.

CHAPTER I: Turn of the Seasons

Wherein the Traventine Household Is Introduced and There Is Much Restlessness

Winter in the imperial city of Karnburg was long and damp and dark. As the coldest season approached, the early snows turned to muddy slush where the streets were cobbled, and slushy mud elsewhere, and the snow on the rooftops was stained by the smokes of cook-fires and forge-fires and fires for heating long before it had time to melt and drip smudgy water all over everything. There was little to attract three children peeking out through frost-fogged windows.

The children's home did not have a door that led directly to the outdoors – at least not one meant for the use of respectable people. Their home was a set of apartments at the north end of a long building that formed one wing of Karnburg Palace. To go outside properly, you opened the entryway door, stepped across the Threshold, walked out into the North Gallery, and continued all the way to the far end. Then you passed through an archway into the Grand Entry and went down a huge, slippery, ornately carved stone staircase to the East Door, where the doorwards might be nice or might be mean, depending on which ones were on duty. The doorwards opened the big doors, and finally you stepped out into the weather, whatever it might be.

There were fireplaces and candles in the North Gallery and a huge chandelier in the Grand Entry, but the chamberlains in charge of the common areas of the Palace placed a high value on frugality. The elegantly stacked logs in the fireplaces rarely needed replacing, and the candlewicks carried dust more often than flame. Like the winter, the North Gallery was generally long and dark and damp, despite having windows that looked east over the Palace gardens.

It was not much more cheerful in the rooms that had been the Residence during his lifetime of Prince Leon-Alexander von Falkenburg but were now formally designated the Wolfsberg Residence, after one of his estates. They were more commonly spoken of as the Traventine Residence after the homeland of the Prince's widow. Officially, the Residence was the home of Leon-Alexander's widow, Childe Silvia of Traventi, and their three children, not their prison, but sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. During Leon-Alexander's lifetime, Childe Silvia had referred to the Residence as 'home' as often as not, but now that she was widowed it was always just 'here' or 'the Residence': 'home' was the House on the Rock in Traventi, which she had not seen since before her wedding.

If a chamberlain or someone who answered to them was in the North Gallery when the children passed through, there were almost always complaints about the noise they made. Even when they walked very quietly. Even though there was hardly anyone to be disturbed, since there were only three residences that opened into the North Gallery. The Residence Next Door had been locked and empty for as long as any of the children could remember, and Residence nearest the stairs was the home of a widowed Countess, the Graefinwitwe von Steinach, and several companions who were lesser Noble widows. They sent their servants out with treats when they noticed the children at all.

Walking through the North Gallery to reach the world outside the East Door was almost not worth the bother. The grounds inside the Palace Wall surrounding the imperial residence of His Excellency Friedrich-Augustus included gardens that were impressive mainly because they were nearly as large as all of the small churchyards and tiny kitchen gardens sprinkled through the walled city, combined. The Palace gardens were arranged more for being looked at – preferably from some window or other, or by people in fancy clothes who stayed strictly on the paved paths – than for doing things in.

The Karnburg Palace Gardens were especially not arranged to provide a space for children's games. Most people who lived or worked in the Palace did not consider that a problem.

Even though Her Excellency Aurelia was His Excellency's second wife, His Excellency Friedrich-Augustus von Falkenburg was so old that all of his children with Her Excellency had grown up long ago, and so had most of the grandchildren in his first family with Her Late Excellency Theodora. The Latest Heir of the Falkenburg Line was still a child, but Friedrich-Karl, the grandson of His Excellency's eldest son and Direct Heir, lived with his parents in a smallish palace with its own gardens in the less crowded suburbs outside the City Wall. The only children who lived inside the Karnburg Palace – other than servant children who had work to do – were the three small children of His Excellency's recently deceased younger son, products of an alliance that was not greatly favored at court.: Philip-Augustus, Franz-Karl and Sophie-Alexa.

The three children were carefully watched by the various Court factions, but a suggestion that their own children should play with Leon-Alexander's family would have horrified most of the Noble members of those factions. The imperial authorities had arranged Leon-Alexander's marriage to Childe Silvia of Traventi to acquire a territorial claim to the independent Duchy, but Childe Silvia and Prince Leon-Alexander were among the few who were happy about the marriage. The people of Traventi were Elderkin: part-human descendants of eldritch beings. They were feared by many in the Empire, and viewed as properly less than livestock by the religious doctrines of an influential minority.

Even during the Prince's lifetime, the imperial authorities had been much quicker to claim the benefits promised to the Empire by the Traventine Marriage Contract than to acknowledge the responsibilities to Silvia and to Traventi that they had formally accepted. Now that Prince Leon-Alexander was dead, many who served and worked in the Palace chose to view those responsibilities and agreements – however carefully written down in the Marriage Contract – as optional.

The Prince's eight year old heir, Philip-Augustus, had been announced as the new Count of Wolfsberg, but the estates and wealth that should have accompanied the title were buried in disputes over trusteeship and management. Unlike the customs in her own land, where she was a government official as well as Heir, Childe Silvia – being a

woman, a foreigner and an Elderkin – had no standing within Imperial law to serve as trustee for her son's inheritance.

The Falkenburg Privy Council was supposed to approve a proper trustee who could accompany her and provide the needed formal authority, but they kept finding reasons to delay their choice of that protector. This also complicated the financial affairs of the Residence and was annoying enough that the children saw sparks start dripping from the end of her braids whenever Childe Silvia needed to deal with practical matters. Besides being a Widowed Countess – a Graefinwitwe – in the Falkenburg Domains, Silvia was the Childe of Traventi, Heir in her own right to the rule of her homeland, the Sovereign Duchy of Traventi of the Elderkin, where her mother was Duke and ruled with the Council just as a male Duke would.

While the Privy Council felt free to ignore the requirements of law, custom and the Marriage Contract, the Elderkin were bound more tightly by exchanged words, written or spoken, than fleshier creatures. They had no such luxury of interpretation, though Elderkin words also bound Worldfolk tighter than the Worldfolk preferred to acknowledge. Being Count of Wolfsberg officially – but not usefully – did nothing improve either Philip-Augustus' temper, or his health. He lacked the support of a Notary's oaths and was more openly impatient than his mother.

Childe Silvia's daughter Sophie-Alexa – half the age of her eldest brother – had spent most of her short life in the rooms of the Residence. She was as quiet and unpredictable as if she was being raised in some isolated farmstead instead of an Imperial Palace. Her chief attendant, Nurse Rosa, was a Karnburger woman who had begun to learn Elderic partly in an effort to encourage the little girl to speak more in any language at all, Allemanic or Elderic. The world famously went strange around silent Elderkin.

The middle child of the household, Franz-Karl, was the considered the oddest of the three by nearly everyone in the Palace outside the Residence. The other children shared their Falkenburg father's fair coloring and blond hair and wore proper black Court mourning, and while their Elderkin eyes had the wide, oblong pupils of goats, at least they were a proper blue. Franz-Karl shared the family features, but had his mother's golden-tan skin and brown hair streaked with green. And his eyes... his eyes showed very little white around pools

of brown so dark there were few who could confidently say what the shape of the pupils was: round, oblong, or vertical like a cat's. Instead of wearing the black of Allemanic mourning, he followed Traventine mourning customs and wore very plain, undecorated garments in a dull, muddy hue they called color-of-sorrow, with plain buttons of bone or ivory.

Leon-Alexander's funeral had been marred by a burst of Elderkin activity that centered on his younger son, so the boy had been sent away to his Traventine kin to be gotten under control. He had returned a fully sworn Notary... and equally fully qualified to permanently stand as his mother's heir in the line for the Duchy.

If and when Philip-Augustus became a Notary and was added to the formal line of succession, he would be his brother's heir, not his mother's, so the inheritance of Traventi was most likely severed from the County of Wolfsberg. Philip-Augustus was not pleased with that outcome. At all. He had heard a great deal about the Allemanic rules about male inheritance and primogeniture from his tutors and was quite fond of them, even though they seldom applied in Traventi, and only applied erratically in the Karnburg district of the Eastlands, which surrounded the Palace.

The imperial officials who had instigated Leon-Alexander's marriage primarily to give the Empire a claim on Traventi were even less pleased. Their chagrin was increased because Franz-Karl's new status derived from strictly following the terms of the Marriage Contract, and if they complained too loudly the results might be even worse. Further, on his return, Franz-Karl – well-coached in his role as a Traventine Notary – had pointed out, emphatically, that the Contract had been breached, repeatedly, by the Imperial side. Notaries who were also minors were barred from exchanging oaths – even the oaths of hospitality – across a broken contract, so Franz-Karl's position in the Palace was not clearly defined. He said himself that he was neither a guest nor a resident, but merely present.

Philip-Augustus knew better than to try to bully a Notary, and Franz-Karl stood between him and their little sister, but that did not improve anyone's temper. The world went strange when Elderkin were crowded together, and it was worse when they were unhappy. With its residents unhappy, the Residence was not a large enough space for the

Elderkin it held, even though they were far fewer than the number the Marriage Contract specified. It was not a comfortable situation

Walking through the North Gallery was not comfortable, either, but it led toward the open air outside the walls of the West Palace. It helped that Franz-Karl had his own staff outside the authority of the Palace, so there was always a grownup available to go places with them.

Franz-Karl's legal and diplomatic status in Karnburg and within the Palace Walls remained a tangled mess. He was a child and a Falkenburg, officially something like eighth or ninth in line for His Excellency's crown as Archduke of the Eastlands. No one could dispute that, much though some might have preferred to. But he was far too Elderkin. Some people called him 'the Changeling'.

Then the shock of his father's sudden death had awakened the powers of an Elderkin Binder in Childe Silvia's second child and younger son, and he had returned from a hasty trip to her eldritch homeland of Traventi confirmed both as Her Royal Grace's direct heir in line for the Sovereign Duchy, and as a sworn Notary. Being a Notary provided some protection against sorcerous accidents and also made him an official of the Traventine government. By the laws and customs of the Allemans and Falkenburgs, Franz-Karl was a minor child in his mother's household due to his youth. But Traventine law held that anyone who tried to command or speak for a Binder with the Manifest weight and control to qualify as a fully-sworn Notary was likely to deserve what would happen to them.

As a full Notary, Franz-Karl could speak for Traventi – more as an envoy than as a judicial advocate – though the Palace officials usually ignored him. And as a Traventine official he was provided with a small – very small – staff. And his grownup Elderkin attendants answered only to him – not to his Mother, and certainly not to his older brother as the patrilineal head of their Household – whatever the Imperial and Palace officials might think.

Franz-Karl's Notarial staff did not particularly mistrust Childe Silvia or the direct members of her household, who were mostly Elderkin, or from Traventi, or both. But many of the tasks required for life in the Residence were performed by Palace servants and overseen by Palace officials, and the Palace swarmed with factions. Even men and women who were not themselves partisans of factions that were opposed to Traventi or covetous of it, might be commanded or suborned by those

who were. At the end of their journey from Traventi, Franz-Karl and his attendants had settled into the Wolfsberg Residence in much the way an embassage might settle into a public inn while traveling: anything private or precious or personal was kept under lock and key, or careful observation, or both, and packing for a visit elsewhere consisted largely of tightening the straps on the luggage.

Franz-Karl's personal and Notarial household included just two attendants, neither of them female despite possible ritual complications due to that absence. He had refused to bring any decent Traventine woman out into a land where she would have no right to govern her own person and property. Franz-Karl did not understand the problems faced by his mother and her ladies in attendance before he visited Traventi, where things were different, but he had heard too much weeping and seen enough that the idea of taking an Elderkin woman to Karnburg gave him bad dreams several nights in a row.

Friedrich Boukolyos, called Fritzel, was a Traventine from a Notarial family, but he carried less Manifest weight than a Notary: the world bent around him less. His formal rank was Tiarna, which still officially counted as Noble. Fritzel's official job was to serve as Franz-Karl's aide and look after his books and papers and education, and his unofficial job was to look after Franz-Karl's safety.

Like most Elderkin with moderate amounts of Manifest ancestry Fritzel could not quite pass for a Worldfolk human, even when fully clothed. Fritzel was a very young man – he had not yet legally been an adult for a full year – but he was very tall and very wide and very strong. The bones and muscles of his head and neck and shoulders expected bull's horns, and when he let his voice drop into his chest it rumbled like thunder. But he was young enough that he had not yet sprouted the bull's horns that marked most of the adult men in his family: his least human features when clothed were eyes as dark and lacking in whites as any bull's. He was a champion in an antique, ritualistic style of wrestling, and a favored pastime when he was off-duty was attending lectures at the University.

Franz-Karl's other attendant, who looked after the Notary's clothing and personal and household possessions, was known as Tam. Tam was a narrow Elderkin with a puff of oddly textured crimson hair and gold eyes with vertical slits for pupils. Tam used male language references in the Allemanic and Remoran languages used in Karnburg –

where women's legal status was impaired – and indeterminate ones in the Elderic spoken in Traventi. The title for Tam's job in Traventi would have been Tirewoman, regardless of the shape of the person filling the position, but in Karnburg, they used Valet, which was foreign enough to annoy almost everyone but gave Palace Officials fewer excuses for being rude. Some people were made nervous by glimpses of teeth when Tam laughed.

When the Residence started feeling tiny, unless the weather was being especially unfriendly, Fritzel escorted the children and Sophie-Alexa's Nurse Rosa through the public spaces of the West Palace and out into the Palace Gardens. Usually that was not a problem. The servants taking care of the Palace were fine, especially if the children avoided doing stupid things that made the servants' jobs harder. The doorwards were usually fine, especially after that one time when Fritzel turned one upside down and dunked him in a water trough 'to cool his hot head'.

The Graefinwitwe von Steinach and her ladies were better than fine: when they were visible at all they generally offered the children sweet drinks and little jam-filled pastries that needed to be eaten up before they went stale: they were not quite the ritual offerings of Traventine Hospitality, but they were near enough that it felt like having proper neighbors. Once, the ladies brought out a shuttlecock and some rackets that had been found stored in the bottom of some old chest and gave them to the children as a gift.

When there was trouble in the North Gallery, it was usually because of minor Palace officials: bored junior Chamberlains who were inspecting things that were fine, or nervous supervisors who were watching the servants doing work that the supervisors did not really understand, so they made a fuss to show that they were Nobles in charge of things, not servants, themselves, and certainly not Elderkin.

One of the most annoying was Ritter Philemon von und zu Ostwald, who was the junior Chamberlain in charge of the North Gallery and the adjoining Residences. He was a member of the Pristinist sect, so he believed that women were unimportant and Elderkin were less important than that. Being in charge of some Residences full of women and Elderkin annoyed him, and he went out of his way to annoy everyone back.

One day in late Autumn when the children were on their way back in from the Garden, von und zu Ostwald blocked them from

walking into the North Gallery after they reached the top of the Grand Staircase. He pretended that he was part of the doorway and was too busy to notice them, but whichever way they turned to try to go around him, he just happened to move in a way that blocked them.

He should not have done that. Nurse Rosa was a commoner, and Philip-Augustus's tutor was a commoner, and Fritzel's rank of Tiarna was about the same as Ritter, so blocking them was merely rude. But the children were two Princes and a Princess of the Imperial House of Falkenburg, and Franz-Karl was a foreign Prince and an ambassador – sort of – so the chamberlain should have stepped aside to let them pass. Even if he was a rude person. Even if he had been a lot higher in rank than a Ritter and assistant chamberlain. And he should have bowed while doing it, as well.

After the third time von und zu Ostwald stepped into his path, Philip-Augustus made a sort of huffing, snorting sound and said firmly, in very clear Palace Allemanic, "Kindly step aside, sir." His tone was not even very sarcastic.

The chamberlain whirled to face them and raised a hand for a backhand blow. He was holding something that might have been a measuring stick. It was not sturdy enough to be much of a weapon, except that they were gathered at the top of a long flight of slippery stones stairs with lots of knobby stone decorations along the balusters. Nurse Rosa gathered Sophie-Alexa into her arms. Philip-Augustus's tutor flushed and looked worried, but he moved to stand between Philip-Augustus's back and the staircase.

Franz-Karl's attendant Fritzel – Tiarna Friedrich Boukolyos – stepped forward to grasp the Chamberlain's wrist gently using one thumb and forefinger. For a long moment Fritzel held the Ritter's arm as immobile as if it had been nailed to a tree, then he released him and the chamberlain stumbled back. Fritzel was always very tall and very wide and very strong, and he somehow looked even larger and stronger during that long pause. He let his voice drop from his usual baritone speaking range to its natural deep rumble, and said in pure, unaccented Diplomatic Remoran, "By Heaven and all the Saints, I promise that if you ever lay a weapon or a violent hand on any of these children, I'll toss you down these stairs." Then he repeated the warning in slightly accented Court Allemanic – it was still less accented than anything the

Chamberlain spoke – in a voice that was so deep it was heard with the bones, not the ears.

The Chamberlain stepped aside, trying to pretend that he was not hurrying. He still did not bow.

The other chamberlains and supervisors must have heard about what happened. They were less annoying after that, standing at a distance and speaking more politely to the children when they passed through the Gallery. When he was present at all, von und zu Ostwald himself always seemed to be busy in the area of the Gallery that was farthest from where the children and their attendants were standing or walking.