Duke of the Elderkin

Maximianus the Frog, Duke of the Elderkin, did not rule Traventi.
Principal Speaker Abrexta led the Council of the Three Valleys,
And the Frog was defender of Traventi, and consort of Abrexta,
Though the noble Abrexta could not lawfully wed the slave-born Frog.

After they had murdered the Frog, envoys speaking for the Remoran
Principiate demanded some payment beyond blood for the end of tribute
from Traventi. Refused other pay, they asked that the head of the
Council should at least discard the title Principal.
Abrexta agreed, to end the bargaining and the war.
She mocked her enemies by adopting the title of her victorious general.
And changed the law regarding marriage of the slave-born.

CHAPTER I: Cracked Windows

Wherein the Traventine Residence Needs Tending

Franz-Karl did not drag his feet as he approached the room that had been his parents' study. Shod or barefoot, he could walk or run or jump or dance as well as anyone, but the ankle high boots he wore were carefully constructed to suggest to onlookers that they enclosed human-shaped feet, and he had learned the habit of lifting them carefully and setting them down carefully nearly as soon as he had learned to walk.

The reluctance that did not show in his stride was because being alone in the study was going to be very strange. Not at all a good kind of strange.

All of the people who should be waiting on the other side of the door were gone.

His Papa who had used the room to deal with outsiders and outside matters was more than a year dead.

Papa's aide Ernst had nearly lived in the study when he and Papa were at home in the Residence. But he had missed Papa's funeral and never returned to the Residence afterward, so Franz-Karl was almost certain he was dead, like Papa and all of the others.

His Mama had spent time in the study, especially when Papa was gone, trying to manage the Residence household in a Palace that denied her the authority to do so because she was foreign and a woman and Elderkin. The children were allowed to play there when she was busy with the papers and ledgers, as long as they played quietly. Her funeral, shared with her daughter, Sophie-Alexa and immediately following that of her elder son, Philip-Augustus, was so recent it was just beginning to be sensible to count the time in weeks rather than days. Franz-Karl had tended his brother and sister during the Great Sickness, and still woke listening for them more nights than not.

Part of Franz-Karl kept expecting that they were hiding in some part of the Residence that he had not entered lately – like the study – even though he had attended all of the funerals except Ernst's, and he knew that the only place they were waiting was in the memorial tokens in the Household Shrine, or perhaps on the Paths to the Halls of Judgment.

The study, as expected, was empty when he opened the door. Not unfurnished – it was full of furniture and books and papers and things – merely uninhabited.

The room was a mess. Most of it was not untidy in a jumbled way, though it was sadly in need of dusting and polishing. Even before his Papa's death, the Palace authorities had never assigned quite as many servants to the Residence as were needed to tend to things properly. In the past year, things had gotten steadily worse and then, once the Great Sickness arrived and the surviving people in the Palace and Residence were busy either being sick or tending the sick – or both – the study had been largely ignored.

Beyond that ordinary mess, there were more problems. When Franz-Karl's Mama – her late Grace, Silvia, Duke of the Elderkin of Traventi – had received the news of her daughter's murder, the reverberation of her death curse had cracked every window pane in the Residence and many in the rest of the West Palace. The windows were not broken in a way that left holes that you could put a finger through, and most of them did not whistle even on the windiest days. But when there was a hard rain driven by wind, the windows remembered to weep for Her Grace's sorrow, and the drips that came inside sometimes moved along unexpected paths along the walls and window frames.

The Residence majordomo's first note, sent to the offices of the Master of the Household for the Palace – who by custom and lawful

contract were responsible for arranging repairs within the Palace walls – had gone completely unanswered. The second time the Residence staff sent a note, a week after the first, they had insisted on a receipt from the junior chamberlain who had accepted the document, and received one. They were still waiting for a reply.

The damaged windows were what the Residence staff and inhabitants were dealing with this afternoon. After days of less annoying weather, today there was a hard rain falling and a strong wind from the west, and all of the grownups were trying to slow the damage due to windows that leaked like colanders and were getting worse as the winds shook the damaged panes in their frames.

Franz-Karl was recently seven years old as the Allemans counted age and eight years in the world as Traventi viewed things, and he was too short to reach things, and not strong enough to move things, so he was not much help. And since he was now the Duke of Traventi and a reigning monarch, it would be three kinds of scandal and a vast humiliation for the staff and for Traventi if one of the stuffier Palace officials managed to cross their consecrated Thresholds unnoticed and caught him trying to do housework.

The Residence staff had very politely suggested that it would be helpful if His Grace would inspect the study. The room faced east, away from the driven rain, and was also quite far from Her late Grace's chamber, so the windows there were not cracked very badly. No one expected serious problems in the study, but ignoring it would be imprudent. So His Grace Franz-Karl, Binder, fully sworn Notary, and Duke of Traventi, had taken himself out of the way of his busy attendants to the study.

The day was damp and gloomy for early May, and there was no fire in the room. The fireplace held no logs or kindling, just old ashes and cold cinders, who knew how old. Franz-Karl thought about summoning a servant to clean out the fireplace and set a new fire. But everyone was busy, both his Household and the few Palace servants that were allotted to them. And he was dry, and warmly dressed for the season. And the day was not so gloomy as all that and Elderkin eyes were sharp in dim light, so if he found something to read – as his attendants likely hoped – he could manage well enough without needing a lamp or a candle.

He looked around the rest of the room. There seemed to be little danger of serious damage, even if the wind changed direction. During the

days since Her Late Grace's death, all of the books and papers usually stored on the banks of shelves that flanked the windows had been gradually migrating toward the rest of the room, where they rested in heaps on other shelves and tables and chair seats and any other surface that would hold them safely away from the windows and above the floor. They seemed safe enough from drips, though they left few places to sit.

Besides the things that belonged in the room, there were three dispatch cases from Traventi on one end of the crowded main work table.

One was open and partly empty, and a second was still closed and full. They had both been addressed simply to "The Duke of Traventi". The opened one had contained the Traveling Seal of Traventi and some other bits of regalia and holy items – now mostly stored safely in the Household Shrine – along with instructions for what to do with them, and some reports on the state of things in Traventi at the time the dispatch was sent. The closed one was probably more reports and letters.

The rider carrying them had set out from the House on the Rock just after the death of Her Late Grace the Duke, Franz-Karl's Grandmother. The rider – an Elderkin called Halcyon who bore feathers instead of fur or hair – had traveled swiftly and changed horses often, and escaped the worst attentions of the Great Sickness, but he had still arrived too late for Her Late Grace Duke Silvia, Franz-Karl's Mama, to receive the regalia. The regalia had been received into Franz-Karl's hands as Duke.

Halcyon had not entirely escaped the Sickness. He was being tended at the Traventine embassy at Greenoak Square, and was reported to be recovering well. As hoped by the Council of Traventi, it seemed the Great Sickness had found a feathered Elderkin tough to chew.

The third dispatch case had been sent later, carried by a courier named Claudius, along with a packet of messages to various merchants and bankers. That third case was addressed specifically to His Grace Duke Franz-Karl, not to just to the Duke.

So two of the cases that had arrived remained unopened. Officially, that was because – with books and papers piled everywhere in the study – there was no clear space to spread out their contents. But if His Grace the new Duke, Franz-Karl, was properly honest, the main reason the dispatch cases remained unopened was because he was certain that the dispatches they held were filled with names, and he already knew

too many names of those who were now journeying to the Halls of Judgment but had too recently walked the Living World.

He was also sure that there were going to be letters in those packs that were sent by people who died before their letters reached Karnburg, letters sent to his Mama, who had also died before the letters reached Karnburg. Thinking about reading letters between dead people who had never seen the letters was just too creepy to bear. Especially when the dead people were not strangers.

He almost regretted visiting Traventi the previous summer and meeting so many people. Too many of the names in the dispatch cases might have faces and voices in his mind.

Burning letters for the dead was supposed to carry them to the Paths to the Halls of Judgment. That was tempting.

But some of the letters would need to be read by a living Duke. Any living Duke. Even a small one. And Franz-Karl would need to read them to figure out which ones were for the Duke and which ones belonged to his Mama, before he burned anything. He knew that there were probably papers that he should sign buried in the heaps of names. He should at least try to dig them out and sign them before more dispatch cases arrived that were addressed directly to him as Duke Franz-Karl. The Council would expect him to be taking care of things.

And the Residence would need emptied cases to send back answers to Traventi, if there were any living, healthy riders left to carry them.

He picked up a pile of papers resting on a foot stool and added them, precariously, to the top of a pile in the seat of an upholstered chair. Then he sat on the footstool, which was not very near the work table and dispatch cases. If he turned his head one way, he could look toward the windows, and if he turned his head the other way, he could glare at the dispatch cases on the work table.

He did not see any obvious problems at first, though the cracks in the window panes – all of the window panes – looked shiny in a sort of shimmery way that made him suspicious. He sat still on the footstool and tried to listen past the noise of the rain and wind outside. For a long while, he heard nothing that mattered.

Plip.

Franz-Karl moved the footstool nearer to the north end of the wall with the windows. He listened again, carefully, breathing as quietly as he could manage.

Plip.

The trail of drips was not difficult to see once he knew roughly where to look. The whole city and Palace of Karnburg were heated and fed using wood and charcoal – with mined-coal added by some of the city's artisans – and lit by burning tallow or plant oils or wax: eddies of smoke from the fires and lights left a thin film of soot everywhere, often glued in place by candle grease or other gunk. The film was difficult to reach or clean in tall palace rooms that allowed much of the smoke to eddy above the heads of the inhabitants, so it accumulated with the passing of months and years. Outdoors, even newly built structures were beginning to be coated in soot by the time they were complete enough to be used.

The Palace authorities – the chamberlains and stewards who gave orders, not the servants who did the work – had assigned far too few servants to work in the Residence for so long that the layer of smoke and grime was much thicker there than in the rest of the Karnburg Palace: the drips from the windows left streaks in the grime like spring floods in Traventi carving new river channels.

There were not just channels on the glass panes and wooden window frames in the study. Some trails went farther.

When he looked carefully, Franz-Karl found a small damp spot growing on the floor, just where the end window met the shelves that filled the space between the window and the corner of the room, with tiny wet streaks and small puddles on the moldings that framed the shelves above it. The leak was nowhere near the floor: the ends of the shelves were wet as far up as he could reach.

When he looked straight at the bank of shelves, they looked empty. But when he looked beside them at the window, there was something there, off to the side. He stretched out his hand without looking and rested it on something large that sort of squirmed for a moment, then went still and became a dark, visible lump at the edge of his vision, pretending to be ordinary.

When he looked directly at what his hand rested on, he saw that there was a large leather case, strapped and buckled shut, still resting on one shelf a few feet above the floor, with a tiny puddle beginning to

spread on the shelf beside it. He tried lifting a corner, but it was too heavy for him, and too far above the floor. It was also unwilling to slide on the shelf to move away from the drippy window. The straps were stiff, and unbuckling them where it was sitting might let water in without letting him get the contents out: one corner of the case near the window frame was looking a bit soggy, and he did not want to make it easier for the water to get inside places that it did not belong.

Franz-Karl walked out of the room, and called, "Roland? Itron Gwenlian? Somebody? I think I need a grownup..." before returning to frown at the damp spot... and the case... and the world in general.

"Your Grace?"

Franz-Karl turned. Graefinwitwe Wiborada, an elegant lady in an elaborate mourning gown – black, in the Allemanic style of mourning, not the drab, muddy Traventine color-of-sorrow – was standing with a bunch of cloths in her hands. That was so embarrassing, he could hardly think of what to say: "Graefinwitwe! You don't need to..."

The widowed Countess and her companions were not exactly members of the Residence household, but they were not quite guests either: they had been carried across the holy Threshold into the Elderkin territory of the Residence while too ill to consent or protest. There were about a thousand years of rules and laws and treaties and a couple of antique pontifical decrees regarding their situation. There were all sorts of rules about what kinds of tasks the Threshold Ladies could decently be asked to perform.

Beyond that, Elderkin had some odd vulnerabilities – by Worldfolk standards – so Traventine laws were ... very twitchy ... about consent, and anything that might remotely resemble enslavement. Guests or not, the Duke of Traventi should not treat people under his roof badly. Especially not the Duke.

Franz-Karl was sure that a grownup Duke would know what the right thing to do was. But he was at least a decade from being a grownup Duke. He stepped between the lady and the main part of the room and bowed uncertainly.

"Nonsense, Your Grace," The Graefinwitwe said, with a gesture that shooed away his protest. "It's a poor neighbor that won't lend a hand during flood time. What do you need?"

After a long moment,, he let his shoulders droop and led her to the corner. “This case is not empty. And I think that puddle is starting to soak through.”

“Tsk.” She blotted the puddle with one of the cloths in her hand, which gave them more time to try other things.

The Lady tried lifting a corner of the case, much as Franz-Karl had, and with just as little effect. She went to the door, stuck her head out, and called, “Henrietta!” then returned to the corner and blotted the shelf and case again with the cloths before beginning to tug on the stiff straps and buckles holding the case closed. The buckles seemed no more eager to cooperate than the case as a whole.

Henrietta was another of the Ladies that had been Stolen across the Threshold, but it was clear that she had already been working. Her long sleeves had been rolled up and tied back with cloth ribbons, and her skirt and petticoats were pulled up to ankle height and covered with a big apron that showed streaks of dust and sooty slime.

The women were tall enough to reach it, but the case still would not move even with both of them pushing and pulling it. Henrietta managed to pull one of the straps part-way out of its buckle, but it gave a sort of twitch and slipped back to where it had been.

Franz-Karl felt tired, watching the Ladies struggle with the stubborn case, but the buckle’s odd twitch gave him an idea.

The case and buckles were not acting as if there was a Lock Binding. He would have recognized a Lock Binding: he had a Gift for Locks and had received some lessons from an expert. But there were many kinds of Bindings: a case in an Elderkin household – especially one that had been hiding from sight – might not be locked, properly speaking, while still being Bound shut.

The case and buckles were acting as if their owner had ordered them to wait. They were probably waiting for a dead person, most likely his Papa or his Mama, since this was their study only a little while ago. He did not think the case could have hidden from them – certainly not from his Mama, who had been a heavy Binder and Notary, even before she became Duke, and had a Gift for Noticing.

Seeing what the problem was did not mean that he could do anything about it, even though he was Duke now, and a Binder and Notary himself. Elderkin children in Traventi were wrapped in the Child Blessings so that they would grow up healthy – and sane – and not harm

themselves or others by trying to use Gifts before they were old enough to do it safely.

The Blessings tried to limit the use of Bindings, too, which was tricky because the Blessings were Bindings themselves, even though no one ever used that word about them. Franz-Karl did not really understand Bindings: his Mama had not had time to teach him much, and the Residence was not allowed to have anyone else in it that could teach him properly. He thought that a lot of Bindings were just asking the Living World to do you a Favor, and if you were a person that the Living World noticed, and you asked properly, the Favors tended to happen. If you paid attention to the old stories, the only things that could limit Bindings were agreements between a Binder and the Living World about what words counted as asking for Favors, or the Living World not understanding what the Binder was asking for.

Franz-Karl had been stuffed into the list of people who could become Duke very young because he was qualified, more or less. On the one hand, he was a Binder: someone the Living World noticed, and he was also a fully sworn Notary who had Bound himself with sensible rules so that Bindings stopped happening willy-nilly around him. On another hand, there was his parents' Marriage Contract that tied Traventi to the Empire with links of promises and blood and heritage, demanding that any child of the marriage who qualified should be added to the Ducal inheritance list immediately.

Now Franz-Karl was Duke, while he was so young that he still had most of his baby teeth and the Child Blessings had hardly begun to wear off. And the Child Blessings were not happy at all about some of the things he could do as a Notary, and even less happy about some of the things he needed to do as Duke. That was scary: there were a lot of old stories about the terrible things that could happen when Binders went wrong.

He thought about some of the things the old stories talked about. The case and buckles might have been sealed using Gifts, not Bindings. Elderkin Binders were rare: much more rare than Elderkin with Gifts because Bindings required a greater weight of Manifest heritage, though sometimes Gifts needed less training. But the Scholars said that Bindings could do anything Gifts could do – or undo – if you figured out how to ask the Living World for the Favor. And Dukes in Traventi were

always chosen from Binders who carried such a heavy weight of the Manifest heritage that the Living World would not ignore them.

Franz-Karl took his memorial token out of his pocket. The token was carved from animal bone and shaped like a smallish pocket watch, and about a year ago it had been made to hold a lock of his newly-dead Papa's hair. Now, after so many of his relatives had died of the Great Sickness – and fires and accidents and all sorts of other causes – he would have rattled when he walked if he tried to carry a token for each of them. So the one token held a few hairs each from the recent dead... and a few from some not so recent: Franz-Karl had included hairs from some of the oldest memorial tokens in the Household Shrine that still held hair, way up near the top of the iconostasis display wall. He was nearly certain that the Great Sickness had help killing people, and he was very certain that he was going to need all of the help he could get from the Ancestral Guardians. Without it he might be joining them too soon.

Franz-Karl thought for a few minutes, deciding what to do. Then he walked forward between the two Ladies and pressed the memorial token against the side of the case. He spoke to the case in Diplomatic Remoran, because that was what his parents usually spoke to each other and to their children. He did not use Elderic because if the case belonged to his Papa it might not understand the language of the Elderkin of Traventi. And he did not use Alemannic, even though it was the main language of the Palace and the city, because he did not think that anything magical would like Alemannic: lots of the people who spoke Alemannic were very mean about magical things.

"I'm sorry," he said, and there was a feeling of something huge turning to look at him. "I don't think whoever you are waiting for is coming back. I think they are here in the token. Please let us move this case somewhere safer."

For a moment, nothing happened. Then, suddenly, the case slid along the shelf as easily as if the shelf was greased: Henrietta, who was pushing on it, had to grab the shelf to not fall over, and Graefinwitwe Wiborada nearly got her fingers pinched. The two Ladies wrestled the pack away from the shelves and onto the work table, where it rested unevenly on top of the three dispatch cases, rocking a little.

Franz-Karl felt a wave of cold that moved the wrong way: instead of chilling his skin and moving inward, this cold started in his bones and moved outward. He shivered hard and his teeth started chattering. He

nearly dropped the memorial token, but managed to push it into a pocket.

Henrietta said something Franz-Karl was too cold to listen to and hurried out of the room.

Graefinwitwe Wiborada picked Franz-Karl up as if he was her own child and carried him to his room, where she handed him into the care of his valet, Tam.