

“Elephants in the Mist”

Eleanor heard something rustle as it moved through the untrimmed bushes and grasses in the overgrown garden. She hastily closed her book, and put it inside the hollow bower seat of the summerhouse, piling the cushions up on top, in case the Baron’s men were searching for illegal books again. Her aunt and uncle were craft associates and hence allowed to own a small personal library of reference books dealing with their profession but most of their books had been “reallocated” to a central depot from which they might be returned one day after they were possibly copied. Most of the books. Not all of them. Some had been sacrificed. Others had been hidden like her small secret cache, which contained fiction, poetry, and science books, which the “Orthodox Catholic” Church had proclaimed to be “unsuitable for young women”. Unless they were members of a full Associate family.

Eleanor’s family were Craft Associates, a status that was the Protector’s concession to those with valuable skills, who were not warriors or fighters, but had necessary skills, surviving doctors, nurses, technicians, engineers, scientists, people whose skills and knowledge were irreplaceable.

People who might be able and capable of deciding to move beyond the Protectorate’s domains if pushed too far.

Her official library was a shelf holding a bible, a prayer book, a reading and arithmetic

primer, books with craft instructions, and a few botany texts and herbals. Her secret library had science fiction and fantasy novels, banned by both Church and Protectorate for depicting “unnatural relationships and roles”, a category, which seemed to range from actual pornography through to any book dealing with politics and democracy, or depicting women as having rights to be something apart from a wife, concubine, mistress or field worker. The collection of Wonder Woman comics and Elfquest graphic novels inherited from her mother were illegal items in the Barony of Gervais and the Realm of the Protector’s Associates along with “Women of Science” and similar texts. Unless you were an Associate. A statement Eleanor had heard far too often.

The rustling continued as something or one moved through this corner of what had once been a large garden surrounding a rundown nineteenth century mansion. It had been converted to a tourist bed and breakfast attached to a herb farm. The herb farm had now become their major source of income and limited status. Their training as botanists, and biologists, with university degrees, in biology, along practical farming experience, and knowledge of which medical herbs **really** worked, had let her aunt and uncle and deceased parents, narrowly escape becoming collared serfs.

This part of the garden at the back of the house near the river had become somewhat overgrown with a tangle, trimmed irregularly, once or twice a year, of mint, and rose vines, and other plants that had overgrown a pergola and bower, and were now competing with tussocks of grass, and a thicket of bamboo. In the middle of this was an pond, slowly becoming choked with reeds, once occupied by spoiled goldfish, and now colonized by

frogs, turtles, and a few surviving descendants of the original fish, now much smaller and duller in coloring than their glorious and highly colored ornamental ancestors, whose descendants had rapidly dwindled, after they lost the protection of wire netting taken and recycled into covers for young plants. Kingfishers and ospreys loved young goldfish.

Something large was now moving through this feral entanglement towards Eleanor's refuge, a summer house with a large open verandah, that had once been leased out for dance parties, afternoon teas and evening events, and noted for its view over scenic gardens sweeping down to the river. Careful plantings of trees and hedges had concealed the working parts of the small estate from the gardens and house. These were now part of a feral tangle separating the garden from aquaculture ponds, medicinal herb fields, vegetable gardens, stables, sheds, and yards, a large barn, and various outbuildings. Most of the workers were in the kitchen or the prep rooms on this cool misty morning, processing medicines, perfumes, and scented oils, and packing them for the spring tribute shipment. A task Eleanor had been spared because she was supposed to be memorizing a list of rare plants.

Eleanor went out onto the verandah of the summerhouse. The large something was heading towards the summerhouse as if coming up from the river. All the outer paths through the garden had been blocked with hidden wires attached to small metal bells, whose positions were changed regularly. None of them had rung. Whatever was out there had the intelligence to avoid the pathways and instead work its way through the plants. Had one of the dogs followed her to the summerhouse hoping she had a hidden treat? The

dogs and cats usually managed to avoid the security system of bells and the various traps set out for deer and rabbits and other animals trying to raid the gardens and fields.

The bushes parted and Eleanor saw two beings crossing the relatively clear space that had been a lawn once. Something very large and grey was being lead by a strangely dressed person. Eleanor had been about seven when the Change stole the Fires and she remembered with some effort denim, khaki, and camo. She blinked. The strangely dressed person seemed to be wearing medieval clothes dyed and embroidered in camouflage patterns. He or she was wearing hose dyed in a pattern of dark green khaki and brown ochres along with canvas sneakers painted in camo patterns. The stranger also wore a hooded jacket under a camo military vest with a mixture of real spring greens and flowers and ones made of fabric sown or inserted into the sleeves and back. The something very large and gray was an Indian elephant carrying baskets and baggage on its back and both of them were delicately slowly and silently walking towards one of the ponds.

Eleanor had only once seen elephants in the flesh when her mother took her on a trip to Portland Zoo before the Change. Since then there were only pictures and photos studied in those rare moments she had time to visit the library downstairs before many of the books were taken and afterwards a few glances at books in her secret cache. There were stories that many of the zookeepers in Portland had scattered across Oregon fleeing into the wilderness to escape those who saw their charges only as food. There the legend claimed they had joined forces with workers and animals from all across and along the

West Coast from private game and safari parks and various wildlife refuges to protect the green. Every now and then people claimed they had seen antelopes or chimps and other exotic beasts and hunters did brought in hides of tiger and lion and even zebra occasionally. There were stories about some of the tigers and lions wearing collars and that hunters who shoot or trapped **those** animals afterwards had trouble finding wild game or disappeared if they returned to certain areas to try for more hides. There was a whisper that those areas were indicated by certain signs carved or painted onto trees. The usual sign being a green arrow or the silhouette of an archer. There were also rumors that hunters who released any exotics they caught in traps found it easier to capture smaller game and might have interesting if illegal visitors who brought them herbs and forest produce such as berries and mushrooms or wild porcine meat.

Eleanor raced towards the strangers and cried out,

“Hello! Stop! Who are you?!”

“Hush little one and tell me where we are. I think we got lost in the morning mist!”

answered the human. The elephant gave a soft barely audible rumble of agreement.

“This is the Grimke estate in the Barony of Gervais. I’m Eleanor and we are free folk of skills and certain privileges.”

“Didn’t you leave out proven loyalty and other catch phrases?” replied the human

lowering her hood to reveal a middle aged woman with short hair and an amused expression on her face that suggested limited respect if any for the “Exalted Associates and Barons of the Realms”.

“You’re not from around here are you?” asked Eleanor, venturing closer to the Elephant, longing to touch it.

“Oh definitely not!” responded the woman cheerfully, “we’re wanderers over hill and dale, me and my large friend. I am Hope and this is Faith, of the Earth keepers. Not a tribe or a commune or a clan, neofeudal, neopagan, or otherwise, but maybe Taoist or just Zen Catholic!”

Faith the elephant waggled her trunk and made a definite rumble of agreement.

“Hush Faith, you heard the young lady, this is Gervais territory!” scolded Hope, who then turned to Eleanor and asked, “You weren’t planning to tell anyone we were here? We just want some water and fresh greens and we’ll be on our way quickly before the last of the morning mist leaves and back into the forest. Just a hour or less please!”

“You’re going?” moaned Eleanor, “why I wont ... couldn’t we ... hide you and ...”

“Baron Gervais would love to have any one of my people for dinner in the worst possible way ...and I do mean the worse way ... as entertainment ..., theatre of torture, not main

course. Even Eddie's worst enemies would never accuse him of cannibalism. Lots of other things though. Eddie's border guards surprised and broke up one of our trading caravans and we've had to scatter and run." Hope gave Eleanor a hard look.

"I just want Faith to stay because I've never seen, well not seen an elephant since before the Change and I and my family are free crafters, not slaves or barons!" protested Eleanor.

"Crafters hey and with that coloring," asked Hope, eyeing Eleanor's light brown but darker than tan skin, "What did your parents do before the Change?"

Eleanor struggles with rarely used words more than read than heard.

"My aunt was an ag-gro-no-mist for the State Agriculture department and my uncle was a bi-o-lo-gist and bi-o-kem-ist who got some money from patents. My mother was an ef-no-bo-tanist and herbalist who taught community college classes and my father was a botanist but from Jamaica. They had a co-op until... how did you get an elephant?" asked Eleanor. Until was a word that led to uncomfortable memories of loss and attack and she would rather think about elephants.

Other people were thinking about elephants too. Specifically young half grown elephants, whose demands for attention, company and food, were unsettling the Gervais Barony stable yard and its staff.

Eddie was frowning and cursing inwardly as Mac roared at the staff.

“You gotta feed my new baby! There must be something she likes!”

The stable yard staff, from lowest kennel boy, to the Master of Horses, were ringed around an irate recently captured elephant, who was throwing food samples back at them or onto the ground. They were finding out the hard way, elephants even when weaned do not have quite the same food preferences as horses and oxen. An animal who had been raised on wild greens including berries and flowers, and the finest and most delicate shoots its mother and aunts could teach it to eat, was not partial to hay or oats.

Eddie's henchman was still yelling cheerfully.

“Don't you worry Baby! Mac'll look after you! Gosh my very own Ellie! Isn't it wonderful Eddie? Look our own elephant! Eddie you're not smiling? Look Eddie Clyde likes Baby!”

Clyde of the Dale was Mac's warhorse, and was currently snickering disrespectfully at the humans over the fence of the yard connected to his stall enjoying the show. He was a macho stallion of probably German warmblood stock with possibly more than a dash of Shire or Clydesdale and looked like he had charged off a Frank Frazetta painting. Clyde had a temperament that matched and a reputation for biting and kicking, until he met Mac, whom he had apparently decided was his one true love. Mac to everyone's surprise

had succeeded “gentling” and harnessing the big brute and training him for battle. The infamous seemingly barbed bit Clyde wore with his war harness actually had barbs that pointed outwards.

The training process admittedly had involved a lot of bribes of honey sweetened porridge and apples, and possibly Clyde’s giving serious contemplation to Mac’s physical brute strength being a match for his own, after seeing what Mac did to a feral dog pack who had tried to hunt in the Gervais meadowlands. They had tried to attack mares that Clyde considered to be part of his herd. They had fought off the dog pack together, Clyde with his enormous hooves and Mac by swinging a war club until the pack fled back to the forest yelping in pain and terror.

Mac was one of the few humans strong enough to handle Clyde and hold him still, while the farrier treated Clyde’s over grown hooves and shod him, an action which also seemed to have improved Clyde’s disposition. Now he at least gave warning snaps and only tried to bite Eddie and some of the slower clumsier stable hands.

Eddie was just about ready to start biting his hat. The pain from his bruises didn’t help. They had finally tracked and cornered some of those infernal Keepers only the damnable beasts they rode on had charged through their trap. Who’d have thought that as well as elephants they would have saddle broken zebra, water buffalo, and bison, and stranger things like attack trained eagles and owls, and positively vicious dachshunds and corgis who had the uncanny ability to bite even in darkness whatever parts of a soldier were

NOT covered by armour. Being nearly trampled as well as bitten and having no captives to interrogate hadn't really made his night or next day.

The Keepers had a settlement shared with the local farmers in the Baskett Slough area, near Rickreall, on a low plateau, known as the Butte, which was surrounded on most sides by what had been a wildlife refuge of wetlands full of birds and fish. It had begun as a stockade modeled on British hill forts where valuable stock were guarded at night and had grown since into a regular free market.

Armiger wanted the Baskett hill fort as a frontier base near Bearkiller territory. As the Baskett Slough Republic had loosely but not formally aligned itself with the Bearkillers, or the Corvallis Council, or the McKenzies, Armiger had no excuse to attack it yet and the more sensible Associates were rather reluctant to invade as its market was one of the few neutral areas open to all of the states and realms of the West Coast even to bandits provided they turned in their arms at the gates. All of those lands needed an place to exchange goods and information of proven and dubious provenance where various individuals could have strange relations so the Dachshund Republic as it was also known due to its banner of a dachshund rampant survived for now.

The ancient marshlands had returned since the Change encouraged by the locals blocking certain drainage canals and deepening and widening others into water barriers with steep embankments on the far side. With lakes, ponds, and marshlands surrounding the Butte on three sides, and grasslands and farm fields crossed by drainage canals, stockades,

fences of thorn, and embankments surrounding the immediate area beyond, that particular Mini- Republic could withstand a siege especially since the farmers had somehow gotten of and sensibly planted seed stock for American wild rice and Asian rice in part of the wetlands and high protein crops like buckwheat and amaranth along with vegetables on the slopes of the butte and other areas of their tiny realm.

Eddie was not looking forward to writing a letter to Armiger informing him all he had was one juvenile elephant, who confused had run the wrong way and gotten tangled in a net that was part of the trap. Eddie also now had the problem of one instantly besotted Mac who had seen the elephant and decided it was now his. Eddie could usually persuade Mac to leave the thinking to him. He had for most of their lives after all. Oddly considering Mac's capacity for violence, when off duty, Mac was not really quite the bully he was rumored to be. He could cheerfully cut the arm off an enemy or watch them be interrogated by Eddie but had a soft spot for very small children and unfortunately young teenage blondes.

His alleged interest in recreational rape had been hyped by rumors started by Eddie.

Truth of the matter was that Mac had limited amatory and courtship skills and that the sort of girl he liked weren't those with a taste for rough sex or the patience and skill to teach Mac the difference between a rough quickie and truly passionate lovemaking.

Eddie had made sure any women who might have been able or willing to teach Mac to had limited access to Mac. It was far more amusing for Eddie to watch Mac work himself into a lather of frustration and frighten the serving girls when he made a clumsy lunge for

one and bruised their arms grabbing at them. Sometimes worse things happened.

Eddie also had to regularly change Mac's personal serving staff, female and male, since they soon figured out they could get away with all sorts of mischief, thievery, and pillaging of stores, using Mac's rank, providing Mac had a clean bed, good cooking, and got sung to sleep, or told a bedtime story, or had an occasional whore smuggled in to satisfy him and keep him calm. Mac's valet, his one permanent staff member, was an irritant Eddie had not been able to get rid of. Alfred who was a former male pediatric nurse had been studying psychology before the Change and knew how to handle and not abuse the particular knots in Mac's psyche that made him a part time monster.

Eddie however preferred to tighten those knots and make use of them though truth be told even Eddie had a soft spot for Mac. Mac kept his promise to obey him and had saved his life several times and was perhaps the only one who remembered Baron Gervais had once been skinny little Eddie Liu who'd learnt street fighting by his side.

Eddie certainly remembered the big slow boy Mac had been who seemed to be "developmentally delayed" but perhaps actually had some kind of autism or very severe dyslexia. Mac had an uncanny talent for observing opponents' tactics and learning them to add to his own fighting style but socially he interacted with people as if he was a large shy child who rarely spoke and didn't seem to understand much of what happened around him. Most people were surprised to discover he could read at all possibly because of his preference for picture books of animals. Eddie remembered Mac crying just after the

Change when he realized he couldn't watch the Discovery Channel anymore.

Eddie however preferred his wildlife converted into fresh protein and grimaced watching the young elephant throwing its tantrum. Silently he prayed to Lady Luck and then swore. Alfred had entered the stable yard carrying a large platter of sliced and peeled fruit arranged artistically around a pile of halva style semolina pudding studded with raisins and topped with some kind of fruit puree. Alfred was also an excellent and creative chef and served as Mac's food taster. A fact which annoyed Eddie who would have dearly liked to arrange for accidents involving anything from mugging to food poisoning for Alfred. Alfred strived elegantly and continuously to keep Mac's alcohol and drug intake down to protect the other servants.

"Sir may I suggest you try these. Elephants have a sweet tooth like humans?"

"Alfie! Clever Alfie! YES! Elefant try this fruit!" bellowed Mac.

Mac seized the platter and held it up to the top of the fence. A trunk moved over it like some strange alien probe. Samples were extracted and tasted and then the rest of the platter was hovered clean in a very short time.

And Eddie winced again from envy and frustration as a mollified young elephant allowed Alfred and Mac the privilege of approaching and patting him and giving him an wash and rub down. He stalked off angrily looking for a servant to torment.

Closer to the river Eleanor was watching Hope and Faith prepare to depart and was begging them to come again or stay a little longer.

“Its really very safe here even though we’re near the debatable lands!” pleaded Eleanor.

“Yes I know Child but I have to swim Faith across the river soon. We’re heading west and then south with a supply of rare herbs and scavenged items from out east.”

Hope looked at her as if searching for something.

“Child I might be back this way again or maybe send some friends. If they can stay in your summer house without anyone knowing something could be arranged?”

Eleanor radiated delight.

“Oh yes come again please!”

And they did.

Here endeth part one!