

**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**

What If
the Stories
Are True?

Once a Castle

— A CARRICK HALL NOVEL —



SARAH ARTHUR



Once a Castle

A CARRICK HALL NOVEL



BOOK 2



SARAH ARTHUR



WATERBROOK



A WaterBrook Trade Paperback Original

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Maps of Wolvern Hills and Writbard Bay © 2025 by Luke Daab

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For Abbie, the Elspeth to my Tilly:
Thanks for being my only sister.
Always. For keeps.

THE WOLVERN HILLS

TABLE MOUNT

GIANT'S BEACON

VALLEY

CREVASSE

CARRICK HALL

WOLVERN COLLEGE

TO LIZARD BEACON



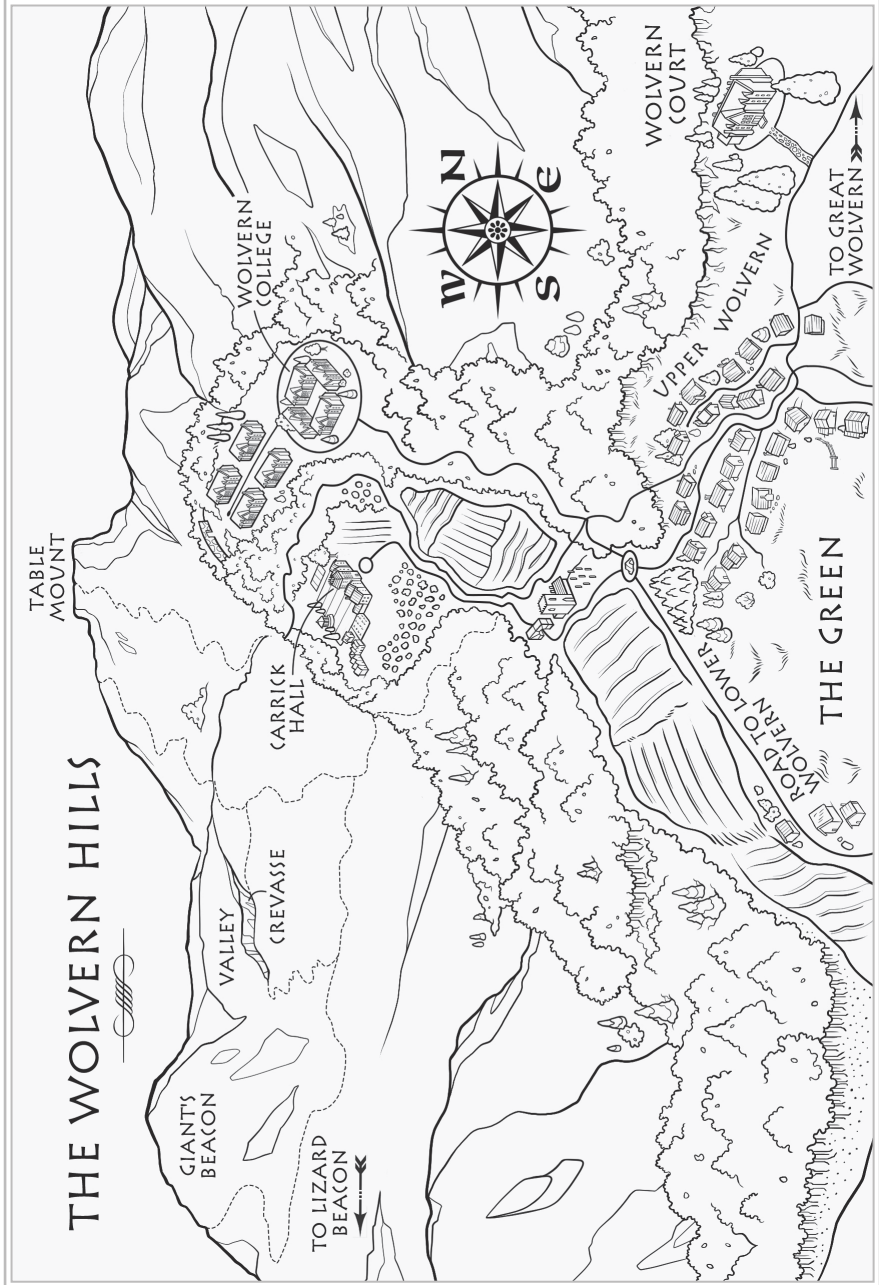
WOLVERN COURT

UPPER WOLVERN

THE GREEN

ROAD TO LOWER WOLVERN

TO GREAT WOLVERN

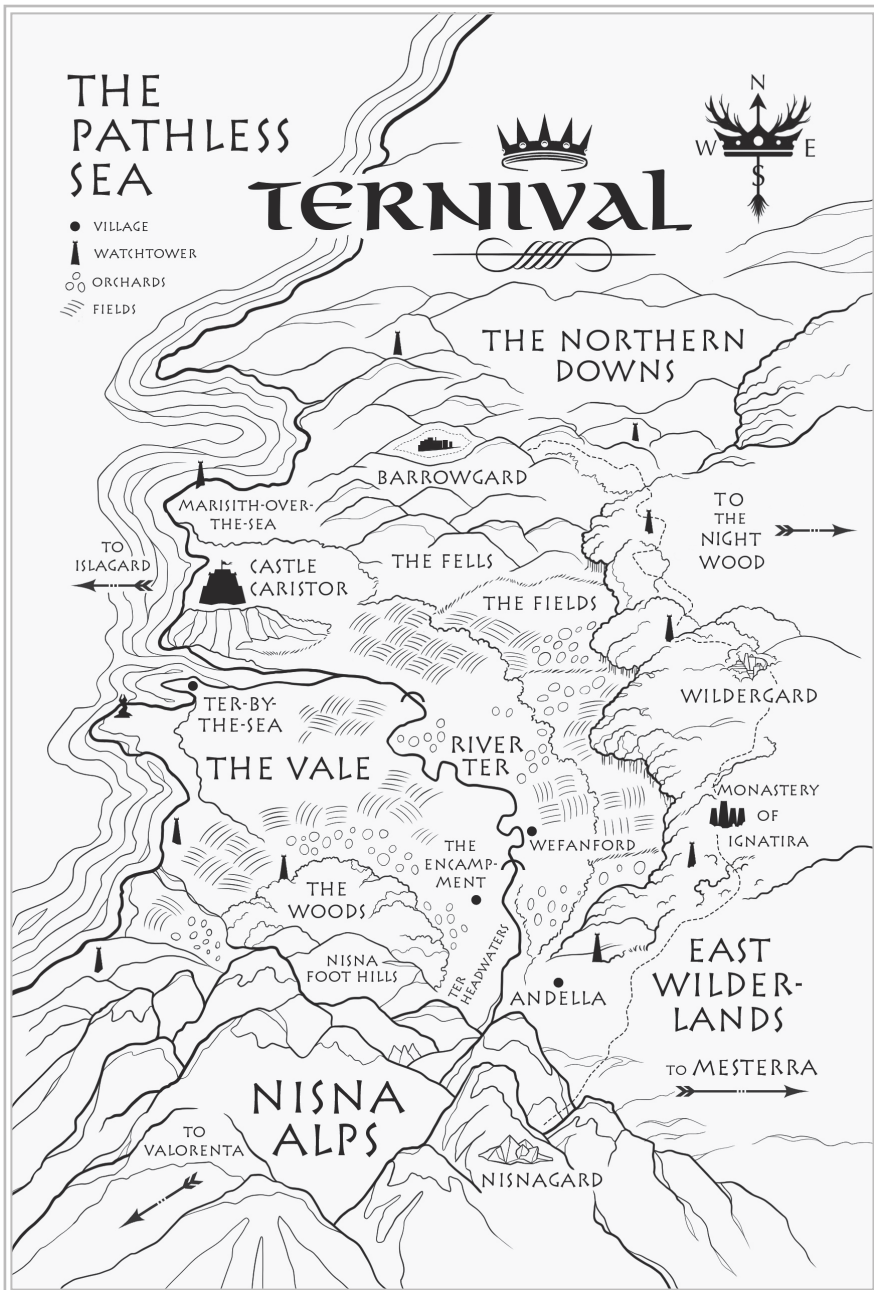


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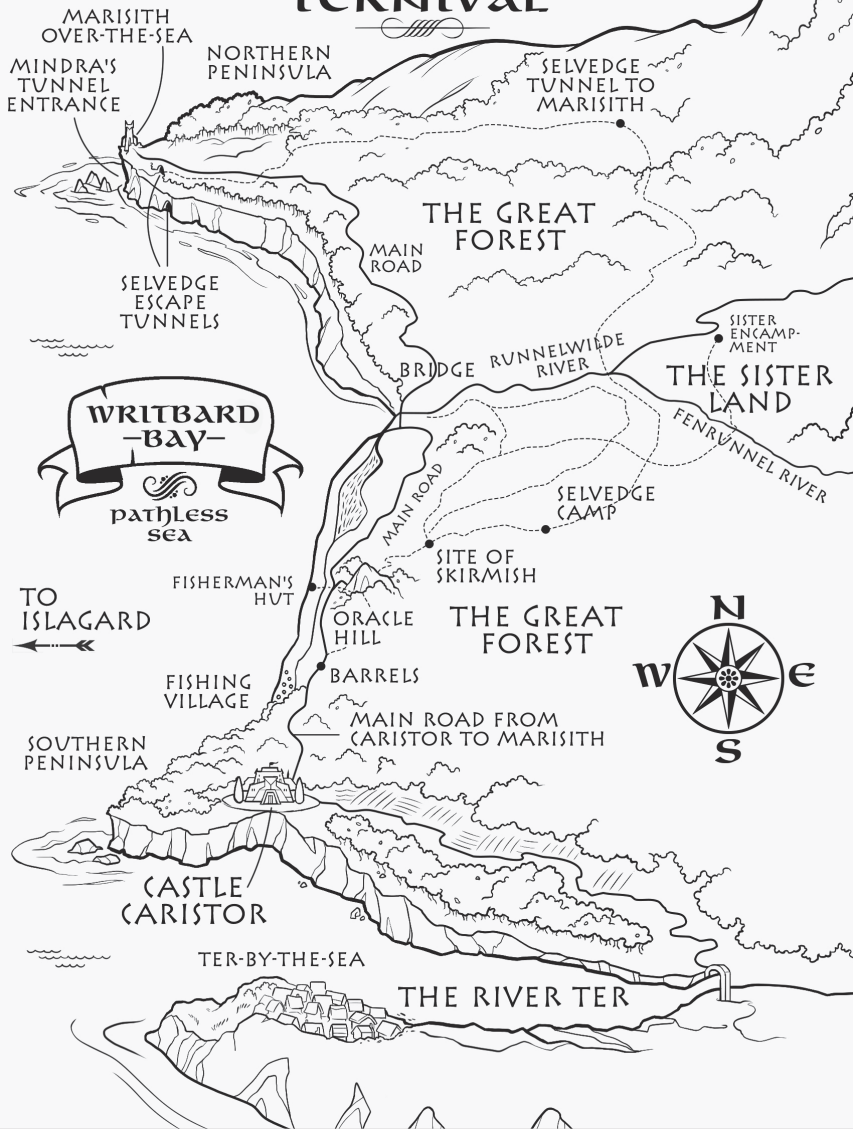
TERNIVAL



- VILLAGE
- ⚓ WATCHTOWER
- ORCHARDS
- ▨ FIELDS



WRITBARD BAY TERNIVAL



Cast of Characters



From Tellus (Earth)



THE ADDISON FAMILY

Frankie oldest of five siblings; postgraduate student at Cambridge

Tilly (Matilde) second-oldest sibling; works at Mrs. Rastegar's tea shop

Jack middle sibling

Elsbeth second-youngest sibling

Georgie youngest sibling

Holly (née Stokes) Mum; housekeeper at Carrick Hall

Jim Dad; head gardener at Carrick Hall

THE RASTEGAR/TABARI FAMILY

Professor Rastegar owner, New Warren's bookshop; previously Iran's foremost expert on Shakespeare

- Mrs. Rastegar** owner, Much Ado About Cream Puffs tea shop;
maker of world-famous pastries
- Arash Tabari** the Rastegars' grandson
- Mahsa Tabari (née Rastegar)** the Rastegars' daughter; Arash's
mum; expert weaver

THE JOYCE FAMILY

- Eva Joyce** American graduate student; heiress to Carrick Hall
- Gwendolyn Joyce (née Torstane)** Eva's mum; owner of Carrick
Hall; archivist at Whitby College in Chicago
- Robert Joyce** Eva's American dad; professor at Whitby College

AT CARRICK HALL

- Ivy Fealston** retired housekeeper
- Paxton** handyman and former chauffeur

THE HEAPWORTH FAMILY

- Lord Edward** old family friend of the Torstanes; expert on me-
dieval tapestries; father to Edward IV (Eddie), Charles, and
Aurora
- Charles** middle sibling; star cricket bowler
- Aurora** youngest sibling; Elspeth Addison's best friend

From Ternival and Beyond



KEY CHARACTERS

- The Fisherman** lives in a hut on Writbard Bay between Marisith
and Caristor

- Zahra** the fisherman's granddaughter; only child of his late daughter
- Goodwife (Goody) Pearblossom** seller of vegetables and herbs from the village of Ter-by-the-Sea
- Bem** Goody Pearblossom's daughter
- Goldleaf** dryad; guide and mentor

THE SELVEDGE ARMY

- Lord Bayard** Chief Sentry of Ternival
- Starwise** centaur; counselor to the Chief Sentry
- Fangard** captain of the royal hounds; protector of Caristor
- Vahrberg** dwarf chieftain of Nisnagard
- Hotosho, Leonora, Rushyon** wolfhound scouts
- Lepp** young sentry; wounded in the attack on Caristor
- Smithfield** older sentry
- Barkwhistler** feisty groundhog with a unique vocabulary; sometimes called a whistle-pig

FROM TERNIVALI LEGEND AND HISTORY

- Magister** the World-Weaver; creator of Tellus, Mesterra, and countless other worlds
- The Great Stag** powerful being who watches over Mesterra and all its realms, especially its sovereigns
- The Engela** spirit beings who inhabit Inspiria, Magister's realm/palace beyond all worlds
- Children of Tellus** humans from Earth
- First Queen of Mesterra** former gardener at Carrick Hall and aunt to Stokes; summoned by Magister to steward Mesterra at its creation
- The Wood-Carver** husband to the First Queen

Mindra the Enchantress ancient enemy to all Children of Tellus; seeks the crown and gems of the First Queen; takes the form of a human

Stonefist one of Mindra's giants

The Three Queens Children of Tellus (Florence, Claire, and Annabeth) who restored the crown and gems and defeated Mindra. Their disappearance years later—together with the crown—has been a source of Ternivali speculation ever since.

FROM VALAN

The Weaver tapestry maker; stumbled through a portal into Valan with his wife and son

The Weaver's Son first sovereign of Valan

The Sentinel Valani prince in disguise; eventually king of Valan

Eryliessa refugee princess from Tarani; married the sentinel

Mirza great-grandson of Eryliessa and the sentinel-prince; aided Tarani in its war against a witch-queen; eventually king of Valan

Ziba wife to Mirza

Pejman oldest son of Mirza and Ziba

Navid middle son

Shahin youngest son



PART ONE

The sense that in this universe we are treated as strangers, the longing to be acknowledged, to meet with some response, to bridge some chasm that yawns between us and reality, is part of our inconsolable secret.

—“The Weight of Glory” by C. S. LEWIS, 1941

And you? When will you begin that long journey into yourself?

—Attributed to RŪMĪ, thirteenth century



Chapter



1

The castle had appeared out of nowhere.

Jack Addison had hunted for geodes in this valley before, at least a hundred times. Normally the place contained only some scrubby underbrush and one small lake fed by a burbling stream, all encircled by stony bluffs. But today, at the far end of the lake, stood a castle.

And not just any castle. Boxy and unadorned, with sheer stone walls rising to high battlements, it had the same twelfth-century features as a fortress he'd visited on a class trip last term.

But this was no ruin. It was fully intact. In fact, it seemed to be inhabited. A wisp of smoke spiraled lazily from the highest battlement. A strange rumble echoed across the water, like someone rolling a cart across a stone courtyard. Back and forth, back and forth.

Jack began to edge around the lake toward the castle, following what looked like the familiar path. He felt slightly dizzy, like maybe he'd cracked his head harder while rock climbing yesterday than he'd realized. This couldn't be the same valley. He'd taken a wrong turn somewhere.

But no. There was the scree of fallen rocks where he'd found that

simply spectacular geode last summer. There was the boulder where he'd eaten leftover fish-and-chips on Sunday. He'd chucked the newspaper into the shrubs, he remembered now. If it was the same valley, wouldn't it still be there?

It was. After a brief scramble, he found the newspaper balled up nearby. Another wave of dizziness swept over him. He glanced back and forth between the smoke curling from the battlement and the paper in his palm.

Same newspaper. Same valley. But castles didn't just grow from the ground.

One lone arrow slit toward the topmost battlement seemed to stare at him like an unblinking reptilian eye. It made him feel small and vulnerable, which he didn't often feel these days—a mighty growth spurt after his thirteenth birthday had taken care of that. But now he felt tiny as an insect, easily crushed.

The rumble grew louder for a moment, paused, then resumed, a little deeper now. Jack stayed put, watching warily, until curiosity drove him forward again.

Now he was in the castle's very shadow, its grim exterior rising to an impossible height. As he drew nearer, a nauseating smell hit him: an organic sourness that reminded him of wet dog and sweaty PE clothes, but worse. The rumble shook the ground beneath him, with more pauses filled by a strange whooshing, like enormous bellows.

For about ten seconds he considered retreating up the path that had brought him here. He'd climb back to the ridgeline that connected the high summit of Giant's Beacon to Table Mount and descend from there to Carrick Hall, his parents' workplace. He'd enter the normal chaos of the estate's kitchen, study his maps at the table, and regain his bearings over tea and scones.

But the castle wall was almost within reach now. Just a few more steps and he could confirm whether or not it was real. Plus, he was

beyond range of the arrow slit, which gave him a sudden boldness. He reached out.

Real. He could feel the grit under his fingers, the clammy coolness. He could feel the rumble, too, vibrating through the rock, and smell the stench. The sound, at least, was coming from somewhere on the other side of the castle.

Jack stepped gingerly through the rubble at the base of the wall and made his way around the building, deep in shadow from the bluffs. As he turned the corner, he expected to find a portcullis or some other entrance, but instead, the route was blocked by what looked like massive lumpy earthworks, or like a section of bluff had crashed down against the castle wall. He could see no way around it either. The shadowed mound extended all the way to the bluff. He'd have to climb over it or take the long way around.

He decided to climb. But as he approached the mound, the stench grew so strong that he nearly retched. The rumble increased, like the earth itself was moving.

And then it was.

Right before his eyes, the top of the mound rose like an inflating zeppelin, with a thunderous rumble, and fell with a mighty whoosh. Then up and down again, up and down. For all the world as if the ground was snoring.

Jack froze. Heart racing, he scanned the mound from one end to the other. It couldn't be.

But it was.

Stretched out full-length on the valley floor, next to a castle that had appeared out of nowhere, lay a sleeping giant.



Arash would've warned the kid if he could.

From behind a large boulder, Arash had been watching the sleep-

ing demon for at least ten minutes before the other kid had appeared. It was Jack Addison, from school. The stocky redheaded loner who was too cool for everyone. The outdoorsman who Arash had often seen wandering the Wolverns, like himself, except without a metal detector.

Clearly, the kid had no idea what was lying there.

Arash watched, horrified, as Jack walked right up to the gigantic demon. As if he meant to climb over it. *Stop. Run.* But the words wouldn't come. Not in English. Nor Farsi. Nor any other language he knew.

Plus, yelling would awaken the demon—and then what?

Jack suddenly backed away, realization dawning on his freckled face.

And that was when the demon stirred.

“Fee, fi, fo . . .” it mumbled, its voice like rocks tumbling over and over. “I smell . . .” The voice tapered off into a huge snore. Then the demon rolled over.

The entire valley shook. Boulders the size of postboxes careened down the cliffside. Dust filled the air, leaving a film on Arash's glasses. Then a great section of scree slid past his hiding place near the crevasse and roared to the valley floor. The noise rumbled across the Wolverns like a thunderstorm, leaving a silence broken only by an extended snore. The demon slept on.

But Jack—where was he? Crushed, surely. The demon had rolled away from the kid, but the falling scree had filled the passage from the cliffside to the castle wall. If Jack had even survived, his path was now blocked.

Arash wiped his glasses and looked again. Still no sign of Jack. Trembling, Arash propped his metal detector against a nearby rock, adjusted his backpack, and made his way downward along a dry streambed toward the valley floor. It was slow going. The treacherous

scree offered almost no solid footing. But before he'd gone more than a dozen steps, he heard muffled coughing. To Arash's relief, Jack staggered out from behind a pile of rocks, covered from head to toe in fine dust. He looked like the walking dead.

Jack stopped short at the sight of Arash. As they stared at each other, Arash pointed back over his own shoulder, toward the crevasse, then turned and began retracing his steps. Jack followed. When Arash reached the opening of the crevasse and began scrambling up into the narrow cleft, he looked back.

Jack had paused. His breath was coming fast, in shallow gasps. Arash motioned him to keep going. Jack gaped at him hollowly, then shook his head.

Puzzled, Arash looked up. Was there a snake or something? All he could see was the narrow slash in the rocks with perfectly spaced boulders for climbing, as if some ancient inhabitant had carved it for just this purpose. Hundreds of feet above them, a ribbon of blue sky shimmered.

Arash beckoned again. The kid shook his head—belligerently, this time—then turned and began picking his way back down the scree. Back toward the castle and the sleeping demon.

“Stop at once!”

They were the very words Arash wanted to yell. But they hadn't come from him. They'd come from another voice, cold and furious and female, somewhere high in the tower.

Both boys froze.

“Awake, worthless pile of filth!” bellowed the voice.

The huge demon stopped in mid-snore and rolled over again, grunting. The ground trembled, and more rocks clattered down the cliffside, whizzing past Arash's head. Jack pitched forward to his knees, arms flailing.

“Smell that?” the enraged voice continued. “Children of Tellus, I'd

wager my throne.”

Jack stared at Arash, panic in his eyes. Then he clambered to his feet and half ran, half stumbled toward the crevasse.

Chapter



2

“Giants again,” said Tilly’s little brother Georgie. He sat contentedly at the breakfast table in the Addisons’ cottage, slurping chocolate milk through a straw. Loudly. As only a nine-year-old can do. “That’s what thunder is, you know. When giants play at ninepins.”

“No, silly. That wasn’t thunder.” Tilly play-swatted the back of his head as she walked past his chair. “Just the crews getting ready down at the green. How much chocolate powder did you put in there, anyway?” She stood in front of the mirror and twisted her long dark hair into a messy topknot. She could just picture her sugar-hyped little brother terrorizing the village of Upper Wolvern while she was at work—on midsummer festival weekend, no less.

“It was, too, thunder,” said Georgie, scowling. “Giant thunder.”

“Your bow is all crooked,” said their middle sister, Elspeth. The twelve-year-old came up behind Tilly and untied her apron strings with fastidious fingers.

“Wh—stop!” Tilly said, pulling away. “I’m fine.”

“No, the bow was lopsided. You know how Mrs. Rastegar is. She’ll want it to be just right.” There were times when Elspeth’s per-

fectionism was helpful—say, when cleaning Carrick Hall with their mum. But now was not one of those times.

“Well, hurry up, then,” Tilly snapped. She stood, arms out, as Elspeth smoothed the strings and began a carefully executed bow.

“There’d better not be storms today. I need Eva’s flight to be on time.” Frankie, their oldest brother, strode into the kitchen. Tall, lean, and almost painfully nerdy, he wore his red bow tie and best blazer, with his fancy leather briefcase slung over one shoulder. Eva, his girlfriend, had given him the briefcase upon his acceptance into the doctoral program in theology at Cambridge. Elegant lettering, stamped across the front, read *Franklin J. Addison*.

He snatched a piece of toast from Georgie’s plate and then stood next to Tilly at the mirror, straightening his bow tie with the other hand.

“That was mine!” Georgie protested.

Frankie took a huge bite. “There’s more.”

“The stag is watching, you . . . you *toast troll*.” Georgie stabbed a finger toward the framed sketch that hung over the kitchen sideboard. A leafy dryad and bright stag ran through a tangled forest toward the safety of a castle. Frankie himself had drawn it for his siblings as a Christmas gift several years before. To most people, it was just a fairy tale scene. But to the Addison siblings, it was part of a larger story—one that had come crashing into the real world. Many times, actually. And it could crash through again.

Frankie clutched his chest as if he’d been mortally wounded, then tossed the toast back onto his brother’s plate. Georgie scowled and took an extra loud slurp of milk.

“Gah—Georgie! That’s so annoying.” Elspeth yanked Tilly’s bow with frustration.

Tilly pulled away. “Stop. It’s *fine*,” she snarled. The two sisters glared at each other. Elspeth tossed her dark hair—as long as Tilly’s,

if not longer—and plopped down at the table, arms crossed, face turned away.

Tilly sighed. When had they stopped getting along? They'd always been close, the only two sisters of the five siblings. From the time Elspeth could walk, she'd been Tilly's little companion, following her around like a smaller version of herself. But right around Elspeth's twelfth birthday, something had changed. She seemed determined to argue with Tilly about *everything*. But there was no time to fix whatever weirdness was going on right now.

"Where's Jack, anyway?" Frankie said.

"Up in the hills," Tilly replied. "He left early, I think."

"Playing at ninepins with giants," Georgie added with another slurp. "That's why it's so rumbly up there."

"Will you *stop* with the *slurping*?" hissed Elspeth.

"Well, I'm off," Frankie announced. "Train for London leaves in twenty minutes. Say goodbye to Jack for me."

"And say hi to Eva!" Tilly said.

"You can tell her yourself, remember?" Frankie smiled at her. "We'll be back later tonight. After we meet with the publisher for lunch, we'll wander a bit, have an early supper on our own somewhere. And then catch the six-fifty from Paddington Station. Eva wants to see Mrs. Fealston, of course."

"Oh, right . . ."

Mrs. Fealston, the ancient retired housekeeper of Carrick Hall, wasn't doing well these days. Not at all. Nobody wanted to admit it, but if Eva Joyce, heiress of the estate, didn't visit the manor house before returning to America, she might never see the beloved old woman alive again.

"I wish this was Eva's home already," Georgie said wistfully. "Do you think, this time, you'll pop the question?"

Frankie's neck turned crimson.

“Georgie!” Tilly admonished.

“What?” Georgie protested. “She’ll say yes.”

There was a brief pause. “Well, I’m off,” Frankie repeated in a strangled sort of voice, then dashed out the door.

“What if she says no?” Elspeth looked at Tilly, wide-eyed.

“She won’t,” Tilly reassured her.

“But how does Frankie know? How does anyone know?”

“Maybe you just do.”

“Oh, like you and Charles?” Just like that, Elspeth’s tone had shifted to sarcasm.

Now it was Tilly’s turn to blush. Heat raced from her neck to the tips of her ears. “Of course not. Nothing like that.”

“I wager ten pounds Charles turns up at the tea shop this morning.”

“To drop off his sister for weaving lessons,” Tilly retorted. “And to pick up his dad’s usual weekend order of pastries.”

“So why doesn’t Lord Edward do that himself?”

“What’s gotten into you?” Tilly exclaimed. “Are you replacing Jack now as Smart-Aleck-in-Residence?”

Elspeth crossed her arms again and looked away.

“Right. I’m off too,” Tilly said. “Georgie, behave yourself. No more chocolate milk. And if Jack isn’t back before Elspeth’s lesson, you’ll have to come with her.” Then to Elspeth: “See you at the shop.”

As Tilly opened the door, a faint rumble rolled down the valley from the hills.

“I told you it was giants,” Georgie said with a satisfied smirk.

He bent his head toward his straw—but quick as a flash, Elspeth snatched the glass away.

Chapter



3

When the giants came, it wasn't from the north, as expected. Sentries had been standing guard along the northern downs for years, waiting for the familiar rumble of massive feet. Yet the fells and fens had remained quiet.

No. This time, the giants came from the Pathless Sea. At night. By the light of a half moon.

First it was just a whisper of unrest, out over the dark water. Zahra, the fisherman's granddaughter, sat up straight in the rickety boat and peered due west. This close to midsummer, sunrise over the mainland behind them would arrive early, in just a few hours, but the western sky was still dark. And yet something moved against the horizon. Something massive, obliterating the stars.

"Grandad," Zahra said.

He dozed at the oars. "Mm," he grunted.

"Something's in the west, over the sea. Coming this way."

"Ay." The old man shook himself awake. "Clouds, no doubt. This fine weather couldn't hold."

"Nay, Grandad. Something's out there, moving. Do you hear it?"

They sat perfectly still, ears trained from long practice to notice

the least change in the air, the waves. There it was again, a strange rumble like breakers rolling over a sandbar. Otherwise, dead calm on every side.

The darkness against the western stars grew. It drew closer. First in a mass, now three distinct sections, like mountains or towers.

Suddenly the fisherman's body went rigid. "Haul in the nets, lass," he hissed. "Now!"

Zahra sprang to the side of the boat. They didn't often go night fishing anymore—not since Grandad's recent bouts of weakness, anyway. But it was a quiet night, and Zahra was nearly full-grown, able to haul in the nets and take her grandad's place at the oars when needed. Now she scrambled to bring in their catch—a good catch on an ordinary night—while the fisherman set the oars.

"But what is it, Grandad?" Zahra asked, her heart thundering. "Not a storm, surely? Nor ships, by the size of them."

"Hsst, lass! Not a sound. To shore with us, and quickly."

Zahra had barely dragged the nets above the waves before her grandad turned the boat and began long, sure strokes, skimming across Writbard Bay. It was all she could do to bring in the fish without the usual whacks and wallops of a good haul.

Over her shoulder, she could make out the three masses drawing steadily toward shore. It couldn't be a kind of creature or pod of creatures, could it? There was an intention in their movements, almost like striding. Purposeful. And by Zahra's reckoning, they were headed not for the lonely shingle where the fisherman's hut hugged the shore of the bay but rather for the southern peninsula. Where Castle Caristor stood.

Against the stars, one of the towering masses paused. Zahra wasn't certain, but a glowering malevolence seemed to turn in the boat's direction.

"Garn," came a mighty voice over the calm, calm waters. "D'ye

hear that? Oars, methinks.” A loud snort followed. “Fishermen, by the smell of ’em. And right close.”

Zahra’s throat squeezed tight. Grandad pulled the oars ever harder, silent and strong.

“Steady on, Stonefist,” came a different voice. “No time for a snack. We’ve espied the castle. Why nibble when ye can feast?”

“But me belly’s a-shrinkin’,” whined the first voice.

There came a smack like a clap of thunder and a smothered roar of rage. “That’ll learn ye to follow yer belly,” growled a third, even fiercer, voice. “Steady on, and keep it quiet.”

The three figures pressed on toward the tip of the southern peninsula while the fisherman powered the boat to shore. Within minutes, the weathered little craft scraped against the shingle, and grandfather and granddaughter leaped out. The fisherman took five steps, then sank to his knees.

“Grandad!” Zahra cried, grabbing him by the shoulders.

“Listen, child,” gasped the old man. “Fly to Lord Starwise, as fast as ever you can. He’ll be atop Oracle Hill on a night like this—already guesses that trouble’s afoot, no doubt. Tell him he must warn the castle.”

“But is it . . . Are they . . .”

“Ay, lass. *Giants are upon us.*”



Neither boy ever forgot that race up the crevasse.

Arash never forgot, because halfway up he realized he’d left behind his metal detector. His brand-new Garrett Infinium LS. One of the first-ever models that worked underwater. It’d been a surprise birthday gift from his mum and grandparents, who’d probably scrimped and saved for more than a year. According to the catalog, it was worth more than his grandfather’s car. Guilt and shame might’ve over-

whelmed Arash in this moment, if it weren't for the sheer terror of trying to survive.

So, he launched himself upward. He reached the top in under five minutes and collapsed near a shelf of rock, out of sight from the valley.



Jack, too, never forgot that race. It beat any recurring nightmare he'd ever had about getting stuck in an elevator or dragged underwater or swept along in the crowded London Underground. Normally he loved bouldering in the free air—just not in tight spaces. Never in caves or tunnels. And especially not in crevasses like this, which might close on him, pin him under a hundred ton of rock, crush the life from his lungs.

But he couldn't go back. The unthinkable waited down there. So somehow Jack kept climbing. Right hand up, grasp the ledge, then left knee up, and pull. Left hand up . . .

At one point, the crevasse became so narrow that the sides brushed against his shoulders. He closed his eyes. *Blue sky. Table Mount in high summer. The open fields near Carrick Hall. Swallows winging overhead, free and beautiful.* He deliberately dragged each breath in and forced it out, counting to twenty. Then thirty.

Eventually his breathing slowed. The rumbling below had stopped. The raging voice was now out of earshot, and the other kid had vanished over the clifftop. For all Jack knew, the kid was halfway to Upper Wolvern by now. Good. The last thing Jack needed was an eyewitness to his crippling claustrophobia. No doubt, the story would be all over the village by supertime anyway.

Or no. The kid wouldn't tell. Jack had recognized him immediately: Arash Tabari, a classmate at Wolvern and grandson of the older couple who owned some shops in the village. Until a month or so ago, he'd played cricket for Wolvern, but otherwise Jack knew little

about him. Arash kept his head down and his mouth shut. Come to think of it, Jack had never heard him speak a word—ever.

Plus, no one would believe a story like this.

Then again, Elspeth might. Even at twelve, she still accepted fairy tales as historical fact—including the stories that Frankie (Frankie—the grown-up!) told them about adventures in other worlds. And little Georgie, of course, believed everything. Then there was sixteen-year-old Tilly, Jack's oldest sister, who was so completely guileless that once, when they were small, Jack had convinced her to hide in the Hall's larder for hours because giants were on the loose.

No. It was Jack himself, the middle child, who normally wouldn't believe a story like this. Not unless he saw it with his own eyes.

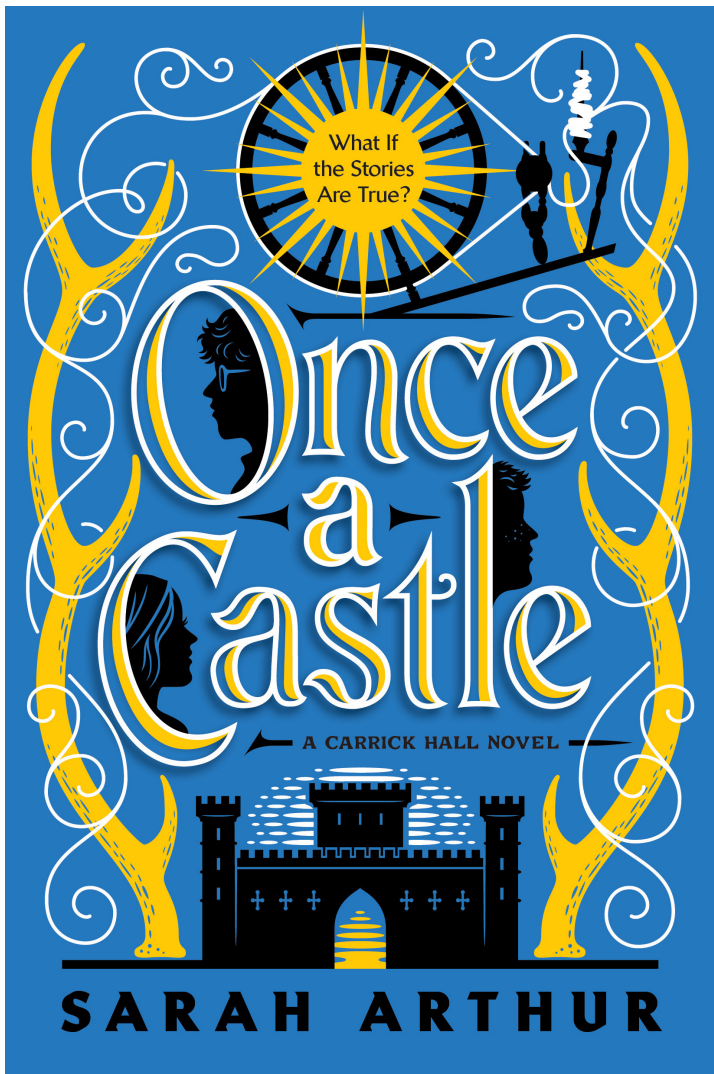
Well, he'd seen it now.

He resumed climbing. Higher, higher, one ledge at a time, till he pulled himself over the top and collapsed in the open air.

He heard rustling. There was Arash, eyes wide, seated against a shelf of rock next to one of the many cairns that dotted the Wolverns. Neither of them spoke. They sat, chests heaving, staring into the sky.

But then, far below—from the valley that shouldn't have contained a castle and a giant—came another rumble.

They leaped to their feet and ran.



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