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WORK SAMPLE  
Genre: Fantasy Adventure

## **Chapter One**

It was the fifth of the month, and Elsie was planning a change.

Here in Otter's Glen, a tiny outpost along the banks of the Sage River in the heart of Westis, the fifth of the month was right around the time that the "baby boat," as it was called, floated into town.

Some months, it arrived on the sixth, or the seventh - and occasionally, it didn't show up at all. But Elsie had assured herself that it would appear, having recognized in herself a fear that was tugging at the edges of the wanderlust she had determined to indulge. If the boat was missing this month, she couldn't promise herself that she would make it on board next month. But this day, this fifth of the month, April to be exact, she was determined to leave. Her possessions were tied up in a canvas-and-rope sack she had purchased from a traveling merchant, her rented room left bare and tidy, her rent paid through the end of the month, arrangements made for the children she would be unable to care for any longer. There would be no loose threads to trip over on her way out.

And so she waited, adrift with little to do but remain prepared, and so she wandered the shores of the river, wide and slow-moving in these parts, her shoes tucked into her bag and her naked toes navigating the green, weedy sludge of the river's edge. Every few moments found her eyes scanning east, down the river, looking for the red-painted hull of the baby boat making its way toward Otter's Glen for its April visit.

It wasn't actually called the "baby boat," of course - the name stenciled on its hull in gleaming white letters was "The Children's Refuge: Orphanage & Adoption Center of The Crossing," but no one called it that. To Otter's Glen, it was simply the baby boat - a slow-moving barge that appeared monthly, for the most part, carrying Serosian midwives trained in fertility and delivery, as well as Arven practitioners trained in the prevention and termination of pregnancy. Some, suffering from complicated symptoms, infertility, or simply an unwanted pregnancy, would travel from miles inland to the various riverside towns in which the boat stopped during its travels up and down the river.

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And then there was the nursery, of course - the lower level of the ship where infants and nursemaids lived. A floating orphanage, complete with quarters for women, mostly the young women who lived on the boat for a season, helping care for the children in exchange for a safe or discreet place to deliver. When the baby boat was in town, babies could be relinquished for adoption elsewhere, typically the wealthier areas of Southen and The Crossing, or selected for adoption, though this was rarer in the wilds of Westis.

Elsodie was not pregnant. Though she was twenty-three, she found boys uninteresting and kept herself busy elsewhere, leaving the other girls of Otter's Glen to entertain them. But she did intend to take up residence in the nursery, exchanging one small, spare room for another, and serving as a nanny in exchange for room and board on a vessel that could take her far from Otter's Glen, into The Crossing and even the foreign lands of Eastis.

By now, it was late afternoon, and the canvas bag resting against Elsodie's back was damp with sweat. Her gaze darted upriver less frequently now, as she paced the river's edge, wading deeper into the water to cool off. She wore a simple dress of pale blue linen, falling just below her knees, and she was careful to keep the hem dry even as she waded back and forth. Her thick, unruly brown curls were tied back with a white kerchief, which was also beginning to dampen and cling. For practicality, Elsodie kept her hair short, cropped just below her ears - but this length meant that her waves framed her face in such a way that it looked quite round, and had the effect of making her look much younger than she was. In Otter's Glen, this rarely posed a problem - she had worked as a nanny and nursemaid to the village's children since she was twelve, and all the folk in town knew her to be reliable and skilled at the work despite her age. But when it came to the strangers on the baby boat, Elsodie wished to present herself as mature and experienced, and so her hair was tied back with the intention of aging her face as much as possible.

Elsodie tugged a finger between her kerchief and hairline, trying to clear a path for a breeze without mussing the careful placement she had tied and re-tied in the mirror before leaving her room for the last time. She thought she might soon give up on her shoreside waiting, and pacing, and return to town, seeking a cot in one of the homes where she frequently nannied, when she heard the unmistakable sounds of a riverboat heading her way. She leaned out, past the overhanging trees and vines at the water's edge, to look. It was the baby boat, moving toward the stack of flat stones that served, for Otter's Glen, as a dock.

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What Elsodie expected to be an interview in which she was called upon to demonstrate her virtues in the art of child-minding turned out to instead be a rather confounding conversation in which the older woman in charge of the boat seemed unclear on Elsodie's motives. A young woman, neither wishing to become or unbecome pregnant, seeking passage in the nursery? It seemed much of their labor was provided in exchange for services by women who intended to deliver on the boat, either because they feared complications that called for the expert touch of the boat's staff, or because they intended to relinquish the baby immediately into the orphanage after its birth. But Elsodie was able to clarify her intentions to the ship's organizing captain, and by nightfall she was settled into her new quarters, unpacking her bag's-worth of possessions as the riverboat pulled slowly away from the town she had spent her entire life in.

Had Elsodie been on the deck, watching, she may have seen the soft lights of Otter's Glen recede behind the trees, the dusk-blurred forms of women she knew well washing laundry against the rocks now that the night had cooled, or even the silhouette of the town's many otters dancing in the river's shallows. But she was busying herself with the future, which as of now seemed bounded by four wooden walls, a porthole window and a door so short she needed to duck under its beam whenever she entered. It was smaller than her room in the boarding house of Otter's Glen, and she shared it with another girl, but at this moment, the swaying motion of the floor beneath her feet and the shoreline passing by out the tiny window seemed to signal that her world was about to expand to become larger than Elsodie had ever previously imagined.

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Elsodie's roommate, she learned after a quick dinner of cold roast chicken and flaky biscuits, served in the ship's kitchen, was a girl named Nev. Nev was from The Boils and had long, black hair she wore in thin braids that fell down her back. She was quiet and studious, and seemed uninterested in Elsodie, who knew better than to pester the person she was to share a cramped room with two stacked hammocks and a single sink with. So she slept early the first night, climbing into her hammock just after dinner, having nothing else to do.

The next morning, Elsodie was awoken by a small silver chime, attached to a chain that ran through all the rooms. She would learn that it was connected to a handle in the narrow hallway outside, and the night staff pulled it to alert the day's crew to their shift's beginning. Nev rose slowly, staying in her heavily blanketed hammock as she brushed and plaited her hair, leaving the sink and the room's space free for Elsodie. Accustomed to the rhythms of a life dictated by

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children, Elsodie did little by way of morning preparations, preferring simply to wash her face, run her fingers through her hair, chew some watermint from a tin in her bag, and pull on a fresh dress before making her way upstairs.

She found herself following a small crowd of women back up to the kitchen, where breakfast was a basket of boiled eggs and a giant pot of porridge.

“You’re the new girl, yeah?” It was the first time anyone had spoken to Elsodie since she came aboard. She turned to see a woman, perhaps in her thirties, pregnant and plump all over. “Maryah says you’re here for helping - asked me to show you around. You eaten yet?”

Elsodie nodded, though she had only just arrived, not wanting to lose her opportunity. She grabbed two boiled eggs on her way out, pocketing them for later. “My name’s Sharaha, but everyone just calls me Haha. Like the laugh, get it?”

“That’s sweet.” Elsodie smiled, thinking anyone whose nickname was literally the sound of laughter would be a wise friend to make. “I’m Elsodie.” Her name had been shortened in a number of ways over the years, mostly by children who struggled with it, but none of them stuck well enough that she found herself introducing herself by anything other than her given name.

“Anyhow, this here’s the deck,” Haha said, gesturing around the upper deck of the boat with one arm, the other resting on her belly. The morning sunlight was sharp and bright, though the air was still cool, and Elsodie felt prickles forming on her exposed skin. “You won’t find many folks up here during the day, unless they’re carrying like me and need some air.”

Elsodie followed Haha’s waddling walk down the wooden staircase that led to the first below-deck level. A wide wood-paneled hallway ran the length of the boat, covered in dark green carpet and lit with glowing magical lamps embedded in the ceiling. “Here’s Maryah’s quarters,” she said, pointing to a double doorway, which was open. On the other side was a cozy office with two plush sofas, a desk, and a thickly carpeted rug on the floor. “She meets with folks wanting to adopt, or surrender, or needing medical help. Back through there are her private rooms - but no need to bother Maryah, really. She don’t do much with the babies or the day to day. Manages things, more like. Writing letters, making sure the midwives have what they need, that sort of thing.”

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Haha continued down the hallway, passing a number of doors, some painted or otherwise decorated; others left plain. “Up here’s the doctor’s rooms too, private quarters plus birthing rooms and the like. Ladies who’re sick, right about to give birth, or recovering stay here, near the doctors. Not much to do with you, I suppose, Maryah said you’re here to help with the babies. But best to know where things are.”

“Where do you stay?” Elsodie wanted to ask what Haha was doing on board the ship, but had learned the polite ways of a village girl, one of which included asking nosy, pointed questions in a sweetly oblique way. The gossip in Otter’s Glen was as plentiful as mossy water, and far better loved, but it was simply not done to freely admit to its spread, let alone enjoyment.

“Ah, you wanna know how I got myself here.” Haha pointed playfully at Elsodie. “Me, I’m downstairs with you lot for now. See, my first two babies died in the comin’ out, and it broke my heart. I said to myself, Haha, you’re gonna be a mama, if it takes all the magic of the Five to do it. So next time I got pregnant I shacked up on the baby boat, and I’m gonna deliver with the finest midwives here. I don’t have the kinda money to pay what Maryah charges, so I’m helping out on board ‘til it’s my time to take one of the mother’s beds.”

Elsodie was heartened to find that Haha would be working alongside her. The two made their way down to the lowest level of the ship, which smelled of soap and baby spit and milk and soiled linens - all smells Elsodie was well accustomed to, though in a concentration she had never experienced before. The narrow stairway gave way to a wide room, nearly half the ship’s footprint, where blankets, toys, cots, and cribs were strewn about in the ordered chaos that children require.

Infants were napping, toddlers were running about, and older children sat in clusters, reading or playing. The odd child was wailing, but there were plenty of nurses and nannies on hand to attend them, and the atmosphere was pleasant, if subdued. An older woman, her belly bulging, nursed a pair of twins in a high-backed chair; a teenage girl sat on the floor, gently rocking a cradle next to her; a young woman about Elsodie’s age was trying to wrestle a spirited toddler into a diaper. Elsodie glanced around for Nev, but her roommate was nowhere to be found.

“You’ll have plenty of time here, let’s finish the tour.” Haha gave her a gentle nudge, and Elsodie realized she had simply been standing at the foot of the stairs, taking in the nursery. They crossed the large room and went through a door in the middle of the back wall - a door whose handle was

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placed far higher than a normal knob. Haha, a rather squat woman, had to extend her entire arm to open it.

And then they were back where Elsodie had found herself this morning - in the narrow hallway lined with doors to the girls' quarters, which took up the second half of the ship's footprint on the lower floor. "This here's the bathroom," she said, pushing open a door that was broader than the others to show a small, modest bathroom. "Better get to it before the bedtime rush."

Haha waddled further down the hallway, gesturing at various doors. "This is my room, in case you need anything. This here's the room for night staff -" Haha opened another door, revealing a cozy room with a magic kettle, a pile of books, and a floor covered with pillows, some of which were stacked against the wall - "when you take night shift and you wanna bring a fussy baby so's it doesn't wake up the rest, or you just need a quiet spot away from all the nonsense that'll find you."

Elsodie wasn't sure what kind of nonsense Haha suggested she might want to escape from, but she was already feeling claustrophobic on the ship, with its thin hallways and staircases that were nearly ladders, and a new face behind every door and corner. She was relieved to find that her need for a solitary space, something that was easy to find back in Otter's Glen, was a need shared by the other women on board, and provided for.

"Well, that's the boat - sorry I didn't introduce you around, but some of the faces are new every day, and my memory's not the best since this little one took up in me. You'll meet everyone soon enough."

"I can't thank you enough, ma'am."

"Oh please," Haha said with a roll of her round eyes. "Call me Haha. I ain't anybody's mama - not yet."