

The Songs of Adhartach

Andrey Kot

Reading sample · first two chapters

An Encounter in the Forest

Château de la Roche, Normandy, AD 1312

All her life the daughter of the Norman Count de la Roche had never understood how she had survived those days. Memories of her youth had visited her before, but in recent years they had begun to dog her without letup.

“My end must be near. One comfort: soon I’ll see my brother in the next world,” thought the gray-haired spinster, shaking her head as she wandered alone through the ancestral keep.

The servants, fearing a tongue-lashing from their addled mistress, scurried like mice into the corners and wisely kept their distance. She paid no heed to their bustle, murmuring under her breath the strange names of a vanished age. Her gaze fell on a wall where a tapestry showed a young maiden on a handsome mount. She stopped and leaned closer. A smile of recognition bloomed on her creased face like the first snowdrops through the snow.

She sank onto a chair and drank in the tapestry’s details, her thoughts drifting back into her youth.

Château de la Roche, Normandy, AD 1256

Agnes de la Roche slipped out of the castle on her black stallion, Firefly, in that pre-dawn moment when night had not yet yielded to morning’s might and the castle lay in its deepest sleep.

To avoid questions, the girl rode out toward the forest by the postern gate, where the loyal old Auguste and his sons stood watch.

The sun was only just edging above the treetops, yet the world already seemed to rejoice in the fair day to come.

The forest met her with a heady mix of scents—flowers, the tender leaves on the shrubs, and last year’s fallen leaf-litter.

Agnes loosened the reins. Firefly, sensing his owner’s mood, slowed of his own accord, pricking his ears and drawing the woodland air noisily through his nostrils.

At a broad clearing she dismounted by a lightning-split oak that looked like a giant with its legs set wide.

With a practiced motion she drew from the hollow her weapons: a bow, a quiver of arrows, and a slender Venetian dagger.

She set up a rough target of brushwood to try her aim, then froze—voices sounded in the thicket.

She started toward her horse, but curiosity held her. After a moment’s hesitation, Agnes crept closer.

“It must be some of the servants,” she told herself, slipping behind a boulder near a ravine, breathing the cold scent of damp earth and moss.

Down in the ravine, twenty or thirty paces off, two men were speaking. One sat on a stump; the other bowed before him in a posture of respect.

Road dust filmed the seated monk’s black cloak and white tunic. He was very thin and looked weary, yet his bearing and voice marked a man used to command.

By contrast, the second, a short-bearded fellow, wore the elegant yellow-and-green of a nobleman. A gold chain at his neck and hands heavy with jeweled rings proclaimed his rank.

“Your High—” began the standing man.

“I repeat: call me simply ‘Brother’.” The monk’s voice had a chill of steel.

The nobleman bowed and began again, avoiding a direct form of address:

“So, I am to deliver—” The monk raised a warning hand. The noble nodded, face like stone, and continued: “—to deliver by word of mouth to our acquaintance the following: ‘My dear friend, as we expected, the vines of Languedoc have taken root across all France. Italian wines are falling sharply in price among many of the nobility and even the clergy. I am close to discovering who stands behind this, but I need more time to learn their aims. Much suggests that the harvest feast should begin on Saint Augustine’s Day—August 28.’”

The monk, who had been silently mouthing the message, closed his eyes and sank into thought.

The nobleman paced back and forth.

When his steps quickened with impatience, the monk came to a decision at last:

“Yes, just so. Ride to Chartres with all haste. Opposite Chartres Cathedral, at the inn called The Falcon Hunt, change horses. Ask the innkeeper, Robien; give him the words, ‘The Hound and the Torch’, and he will arrange all. Also bid him advance you fifty livres tournois, and without delay ride for Rome.”

The chevalier bowed and had turned toward the tethered horses when a noise sounded nearby.

Agnes had leaned against a loose stone; it rattled down the slope with a sharp crack, snapping twigs on its way to the conspirators. A flock of crows rose with indignant cawing.

Her heart nearly stopped.

The nobleman drew his sword.

At the flash of steel panic stabbed Agnes like a hundred needles. She bolted for her horse.

She did not see how quickly the “peaceful” monk sprang to his feet, snapping into a fighting stance as a long dagger flashed from the folds of his cloak.

The chevalier lunged after the shadow flickering in the leaves, but the monk’s iron grip checked him.

“Leave it. Other matters await you,” he hissed, dragging him toward the horses.

“Likely some idle local boy,” the nobleman muttered.

“Mm,” said the monk. “I do not believe in chance meetings in a sullen wood.”

He made the sign of the cross over the messenger, who had mounted his chestnut horse, and waited until the chevalier was out of sight. Then the monk gathered the skirts of his tunic and swung onto a piebald nag which, for all its shabby look, set off at a brisk trot on the owner's errand.

Startled by every rustle, Agnes ran to Firefly.

If they give chase, they'll spy me at once on the road to the castle. I must go the long way through the forest.

The road curved like a bow through the trees and then forked: one way led to Chartres and on to Paris—the way the mysterious chevalier would later take; the other back to the main gate of the de la Roche castle.

She put her heels to him.

Suddenly, a league from the forest's edge, a sharp woman's cry tore her from her thoughts.

At a full gallop, Agnes reined Firefly in so sharply that they nearly fell.

Her hand flew to her belt—then she remembered she had left her weapons at the oak.

The cry came again. Agnes gritted her teeth and, dropping to a desperate trot, turned into the thicket.

On the brook's bank lay a bound woman; long red hair spread round her like a crumpled, thin coverlet.

A long track scored the damp earth: she had crawled far to escape her tormentors.

Agnes sprang from the saddle, scooped cold water in her palms, and bathed the woman's face and neck.

The poor soul moaned and writhed, trying to crawl farther.

Agnes murmured comfort as she worked at the bonds, but mysterious captors had drawn the rope cruelly tight. Her hands shook; the knots would not yield.

She set her teeth to the cord—an instant later the freed woman shoved her away, growled, and sprang aside.

"I am a friend. Do not be afraid!" Agnes raised her hands.

For a few moments they stood, breathing hard, staring at one another.

"Where is d'Harcourt?" the woman rasped.

"My name is Agnes de la Roche," she answered as evenly as she could. "Baron Philippe d'Harcourt is our neighbor, though I have not yet had the honor of meeting him."

"Honor? There is no honor in meeting that wretch," the captive sneered.

The flash of anger spent her last strength; she collapsed onto the grass.

Agnes shook her to keep her from fainting again.

"But who are you?"

"Melanie... Melanie d'Eville—" She jerked her head at a sound in the brush.

Someone was moving in the thicket nearby.

"Into the saddle—quick!" Agnes led the horse over.

Melanie managed to rise but fell at once with a dull groan.

Then she muttered something sharp, like an incantation; strength returned for a heartbeat, and she gained the saddle. Agnes sprang up behind her.

They had barely reached the road when a man burst from the trees on all fours.

He was only a little taller than a twelve-year-old boy, but his massive neck, shoulders, arms, and chest spoke of brute, animal strength. His matted black hair hid his features—only a pair of hate-filled eyes.

He whistled toward the brush and drew a hand-and-a-half sword.

Agnes saw the hump on his back, which explained his angular shape and strange, loping gait.

A second whistle answered, and two more men came out onto the road.

The first was tall and thin. He lifted and set his feet high, like a spider closing on its prey. He toyed with his blade, passing it from hand to hand with a predatory chuckle.

The third had a small bald head out of all proportion to his great bulk, and short, plump limbs that looked as if taken from another man and fixed to the wrong body.

Sweat ran down a face set in disgust and annoyance. He panted, chest heaving, hissing and wheezing like bellows. One hand gripped a huge mace resting on his left shoulder; the other pressed to his side.

All three wore the red-and-yellow colors of House d'Harcourt.

The hunchback spoke in a harsh, crow-like voice.

"My lady, a page's garb cannot hide a woman's beauty—and my friends and I, I confess, are great admirers of it." He gave his grinning comrades a mocking bow.

Agnes's cheeks burned at the insinuation.

He noted her discomfiture and smiled coldly.

"Do you truly mean to take what belongs to House d'Harcourt? Leave that—" he paused for the word, "—spawn of the Devil, and ride on if you value your life."

His companions spread to cut off escape.

From the bend a knight appeared on a horse caparisoned in red-and-yellow stripes—bare-headed, yet armed. The "spider" and the fat man stepped back to the road beside the hunchback, and the three advanced.

We are trapped. Agnes went cold and laid the whip on Firefly harder than ever before.

If only we could reach the gate. A league and a half—and we are saved. They will see us and run to help!

The terrified horse sprang into such a gallop that he nearly unseated them both.

He scattered the trio, who leaped aside at the last moment, showering the women with curses.

Agnes glanced back: the knight had given chase. Luckily his mount—a huge destrier—was built for battle, not pursuit.

But relief did not last long.

Firefly had taken the bit and was running blind, refusing the rein.

In vain, Agnes tried to shout over the wind to soothe him.

The castle gate flashed by, and ahead lay a long, stony descent where, at that speed, Firefly would surely break his legs.

“Lord, save and keep us!” Agnes groaned.

Melanie bent to the horse’s neck, cried out, and hauled the left rein.

The horse leaped off his fatal course. She dragged the rein, forcing Firefly to wheel in a circle.

He fought the gallop and bucked—and in one bound Agnes flew from the saddle, dragging the rescued woman with her.

The world blurred for Agnes.

Melanie bent over her savior and rubbed Agnes’s temples with a torn, foul-smelling herb. When Agnes came to, Melanie stopped and slumped to the ground. Exhausted and lathered, Firefly lay nearby, trembling and wheezing.

Servants ran up, set the women gently into a litter, and bore them to the castle.

Lord de la Roche ordered that Melanie be taken to the ladies’ chambers. Frowning, he said to his daughter, “Agnes, come with me.”

Swaying with dizziness, she followed him into the hall.

He studied her a long while in silence.

“Father, forgive me...” she said timidly.

He cut her off with a sharp gesture.

“I cannot express how angry I am at your reckless escapade. Those who let you out will answer for it.”

Agnes folded her hands. “Father, the fault is mine alone.”

“Who is that woman? What befell you both?”

The count paced, trying to master his agitation.

“Do you understand the peril you were in?” He turned on her. His voice held anger—and fear.

Agnes lowered her head. He was silent a moment, considering his daughter.

“I will not deny it—this is a strange business. That guest must be questioned as soon as she is herself. Most likely she is a simple victim of bandits. But that peculiar pair... are they travelers—or spies? The Bretons have long coveted our lands.” He sent for the captain of the guard and ordered the forest combed. “As for you, Agnes—your chamber. No more rides beyond the walls.”

Though the day was well advanced, as soon as Agnes touched her pillow she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

It seemed only a moment before a maiden’s whisper woke her:

“My lady, wake. We must make haste; your father awaits.”

Miranda told her she had slept through the rest of the day and the whole night.

Melanie was waiting in an armchair by the window in the far corner. Sunbeams, broken through the mosaic panes, danced in colored gleams over her fiery hair, arranged in an elegant coiffure.

After rest and a bath, the woman seemed to glow.

She looked a little under thirty—tall and finely made.

Agnes had not imagined eyes so languid and green, fringed with thick lashes. They held mischief and challenge, a woman's guile, and a spark of slyness, as if Melanie were about to laugh.

The guest stretched like a cat and lengthened her neck, where Agnes noticed several moles set in a crescent.

"My dear friend," Melanie cooed softly, "you will let me call you that? I can think of you only as a brave sister sent by God to deliver me from torment."

"I shall be happy to call you my friend," Agnes murmured, abashed by her frankness.

"Yesterday I was too weak to grasp where I was or who stood before me. Today I am happy to thank you for tearing me from the hands of brigands..."

In that instant the spell seemed to lift from the young lady of the castle. An unfortunate woman stood before her, nervously biting her lip. Dark bruises marred her arms, and there was a terror in her eyes she could not quite hide.

"Do not be afraid! You are safe," Agnes smiled. "Shall we go down to Count de la Roche? Dinner awaits."

"I am dying of hunger!" Melanie curtsied.

Hearing their steps, the count turned—and froze, staring at the guest's face.

Melanie halted.

The tableau held a long moment; then the count came to himself and approached.

"Astonishing... you are very like Sibylla de Courtenay."

His gaze dropped to the guest's hands. He paled and muttered, "And that ring."

A strange ring on an elegant finger drew the eye at once: a serpent and a rose twined about a turquoise with a green heart. The light played so brightly in the stone, and the carving of the rest was so deft, it almost seemed the serpent moved.

Strange, thought Agnes, how did bandits not take such a piece? I do not recall seeing it yesterday.

Melanie flushed but said the count was right. She was of that House, and many had remarked on her likeness to her grandmother.

"I received this ring from her as a wedding gift."

The count brightened and, half in jest, added that he was bound now to punish the villains and repay Sibylla for saving his life.

Agnes looked at him in surprise. "You never told me that story."

"Another time. I was hopelessly in love with that noble lady in my youth—before I met your mother, of course."

He turned to Melanie. “Forgive an old man his unmeant rudeness. As years pass, our memories fade and gild themselves. In them people seem fairer, braver, nobler than in daily life. And now I see you are fairer than Sibylla.”

Melanie smiled with mystery.

The count bowed and invited them to table.

The savor of rabbit stew baked in bread filled the hall so temptingly that the ladies fell to with a haste unworthy of noblewomen.

When wine was poured and a pear tart was brought, the lord dismissed the servants and looked at Melanie.

“You wish to hear my story?” she asked.

“To tell the truth, we burn with curiosity.”

She inclined her head and began her tale.

The Mysterious Guest's Story: Murder and Captivity

Château de la Roche, Normandy, AD 1256

As you already know, my name is Melanie d'Eville, and I spring from the great houses of Chartres—de Puiset and de Courtenay.

My mother—a distant descendant of the kings of France—liked, at every convenient moment, to remind her husband of it. My father would answer that he could plainly see a crown upon her brow, only it seemed to be made not of gold, but of horns. To this my mother, very prim, would remark that his knightly tournaments in wine-drinking had blunted not only his sight but his wits; the absence of horns upon his head spoke not of his merits, but of her virtue. For all their sparring, the two of them adored one another.

God gave them no other children, so all their love was mine alone.

Yet in a single year my life changed.

My parents died of a fever, leaving me, a girl of twelve, to the care of my strange grandmother Sibylla, whom you, my lord, have mentioned. I lived in her mountain castle in Navarre, far from the road and hidden from prying eyes by dense ivy and blackthorn, until I turned twenty.

My grandmother was exceedingly reclusive. She would say that above all things she prized solitude, and so left me to my own devices and devoted little time to my upbringing. She was so peculiar that she sent her orders to the servants through me, passing most of her hours in her chamber. Her eccentricity was confirmed by this: though she herself arranged my betrothal to Seigneur Richard d'Eville, viscount d'Avesnes—vassal and cousin to the count de Blois—she would not so much as come out to bless us at the wedding rite, pleading the pains of parting with her beloved granddaughter.

My husband proved a slender, carefree young man; I remember only how terribly shy he was in my presence. The day after our wedding we took our leave: I went to our demesne of Éville, and he rode with the knights on crusade after the king of France—where he vanished, leaving me a young widow.

I hid in mourning for more than five years, until my suzerain and my husband's kinsman, the count de Blois, commanded me to appear at a festal tourney held to announce the betrothal of his daughter Jeanne to the son of King Louis of France.

I will not weary you with the tourney's pageantry. I will say only that it shook me. The thought of entering knighthood by way of killing seemed to me then incomprehensible. Naïve! How many disappointments in "nobility" still lay before me.

And so I was riding home from the tourney to my lands on the Norman border, with two men-at-arms and a maid. We followed the Chartres road till noon, then turned onto a forest track toward my estate. My men begged me to spend the night in Chartres, but I was impatient to be home. Now I think some unseen force was driving me toward ill fate.

Twilight settled gently over the trees.

Suddenly gray shadows flickered to either side of the way. There was a short bark that rose into a chilling howl.

"Wolves, wolves!" my men cried.

The horses squealed and, scenting danger, lunged forward along the road. Part of the pack, no longer hiding, burst from the woods behind us; the rest ran abreast of the horses, appearing and vanishing again in the dark undergrowth.

“Faster, my lady! Full gallop!”

Two great wolves sprang from the brush. One fastened on the hind leg of the horse ahead of me; another dragged the rider from the saddle. The wounded animal staggered a few steps, but a third wolf sank its teeth into a foreleg and brought the doomed creature down.

By a miracle I skirted the fallen horse. My maid was less fortunate: with a cry of despair she tumbled head over heels after her mare, which had tripped over the horse writhing in its death throes.

Hearing her heart-rending scream, the leader of my men, Gilles Poiret, wheeled at full gallop and drove his charger toward the girl, who was on hands and knees.

“Saint Hubert guard us,” Poiret breathed, lowering his lance.

On the way he hooked one of the wolves with his lance and flung it, shrieking and twisting, back into the thicket among its fellows.

Hope flashed in the girl’s eyes. Limping with pain, she rushed to her rescuer, arms outstretched. Another instant and she would have been in the saddle...

The huge pack-leader sprang onto Gilles’s horse and sank its teeth into the unprotected thigh of the rider. The stallion, feeling the predator on his back, reared and threw man and beast; then, wheezing and kicking, he bolted into the forest.

The two foes, each a mirror of the other’s fighting spirit, faced off in the moonlight: the gray-haired man with sword and dagger in hand and a terrible slanting scar across his face; and the scarred old wolf, baring his fangs—the veteran who had won, in deadly fights, the right to lead the pack.

The wolf growled and leaped. He crushed the man beneath him and rattled his fangs across the mail, worrying his way to the throat and tearing without mercy. His beast’s heart sang: “Bite! Gnaw! Drink the sweet blood!”

Then the song broke off. The leader whimpered softly and went still upon his foe.

Bloodied, the man heaved the shaggy carcass from him—still smelling of forest, of the chase, of fierce life—and wrenched his dagger from the beast. Gilles tried to rise, but with the blood pouring from his ragged wounds his life ran out.

He lay there, eyes fixed for the last time on the starry sky, heedless of other hunters creeping near.

A farewell howl went through the wood. The wolves mourned their leader, then trotted after a new one toward fresh quarry.

The forest does not forgive long farewells.

So perished those faithful to me.

By a wonder, a pair of packhorses with my goods and baggage had escaped and were running behind my stallion.

Despair and guilt choked me. I begged God to receive the souls of those who had died for my haste, for my stubbornness. Had I only heeded their counsel, all would be alive!

All at once my horse screamed and began to sink to the ground. In the dark I did not at first see the crossbow bolt jutting from his neck. I rolled into the ferns to hide from the road and the attackers.

I knew their leader. The hunchbacked squire of Baron Philippe d'Harcourt had astonished all at the tourney with his swordcraft—and with his dreadful appearance. He sniffed the air like a hound and said, “She’s close.”

In terror I sprang away, but heavy hands, stinking of sweat and steel, crashed down on me and mashed my face into the earth.

For five nights they carried me who knows where, bound and slung over a saddle. I tried to frighten the brigands with Heaven’s punishments; I offered ransom; it was useless. My captors were deaf to my words. Only the vile hunchback would toss me a crust of bread or a wineskin.

From scraps of their talk I learned they were taking me, by order of Philippe d'Harcourt, to his manor.

Despair gripped my heart: a young widow without near kin would vanish in a stranger’s castle, and no one would ride to seek me. When the remains of my poor companions were found, all would be blamed on the forest’s beasts.

The ropes made every part of me—body, arms, and legs—ache dreadfully. At first the jolting and the head-down ride made me retch; then a kind of half-trance came over me.

The real world mingled with fever-dreams.

I spoke with my long-dead father.

Another time I fought wolves, and Gilles Poiret, maimed and half-wolven, led the pack.

Once even the lord of my captors came himself. Philippe d'Harcourt bent over me and stared with a ghastly smile in which there was not a drop of pity—only the cold curiosity of a hunter studying his prey.

In an instant I seized him by the throat and throttled him with all my strength until a blow to the head struck me senseless.

Most likely all this was the fruit of my madness.

I called for Death and begged her to end my torment.

At last, one morning at a halt, the kidnappers scattered for firewood and left me under the eye of a single bandit. I do not know what moved me—some prompting. Leaning against a tree, I called to him and asked leave to relieve myself.

He set his crossbow aside and bent to loosen the cords at my feet.

“No tricks,” he said. “I can hobble a foal in the dark.”

By good fortune my hands were bound in front. I caught a fistful of his filthy hair and, jerking sideways, smashed his forehead against the trunk behind me. He groaned and went down.

I ought to have looked at once for a blade to cut the ropes, but I was not in my right mind; a single desire ruled me—to get away from that place at once. At first I hopped; then I stumbled and fell into a gully. I crawled, shoved my body forward, and repeated one phrase over and over until I blacked out:

“Survive—and spill all their blood.”