Chapter One
Winter 1347

William crouched behind the fallen oak tree and listened. Close by, someone or something was whimpering in pain.

‘Oh, for pity’s sake . . . my leg.’ Soft groans, a snuffling grunt, and then, ‘My leg! Oh, my leg, mylegmylegmyleg, my leeeeg . . .’

Cautiously, William got to his feet and peered over the trunk of the tree. He could not see anyone. He stared around the woodland clearing uneasily. Frost rimed the hanks of dead grass and thin branches of hazel and elder bushes. Nothing moved. The whimpering stopped and William had the uncomfortable feeling he was being watched.

‘Who’s there?’ he called. He waited for several moments, and then called a little louder, ‘Do you need help?’
There was no reply.

William climbed over the tree. He lost his footing on the icy bark and fell, landing heavily on his hands and knees.

‘Kill me, why don’t you?’ a voice said, weak with pain and despair. ‘Land on top of me and finish the job. What is one hob more or less?’ The voice trailed away into a low moan.

Startled, and more than a little alarmed, William scrambled to his feet and stared around. There was a movement in the grass by his feet. He leant down to take a closer look. The first thing he saw was a pair of large green eyes, flecked through with splinters of gold. The eyes stared back at him warily. Then he saw a small, pointed face, the skin as brown as a beechnut, pointed ears that ended in tufts of reddish brown hair and a small, thin body no bigger than a cat. A long, thin tail curled and uncurled around the body. He was a creature the like of which William had never seen before.

For a few moments, William’s mind went blank. He stared down into the large, watchful eyes and felt the hairs on the back of his neck hackle. This was neither animal nor man, but he could speak. What manner of creature could do that? Fear stroked a cold finger
down his spine. His mouth had gone dry and his
tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. Part of him
wanted to turn and run, but another part of him was
rooted to the spot by curiosity.

And then William saw the blood, and the crude
iron trap that gripped the creature’s leg in its rusty
jaws.

‘Oh, no,’ he breathed, horrified. ‘Stay still and I’ll
try and free you.’ Whatever the thing was, he could
not leave it to suffer like that.

Pushing his fear aside, William looked around for
something to prise the trap open with. He grabbed a
fallen branch and carefully wedged it between the
jaws, taking care not to touch the creature’s injured
leg. Slowly, he began to force the jaws apart. The crea-
ture gasped and, glancing down, William saw him
clamp his mouth tightly shut against the pain.

‘I’m sorry,’ William muttered. ‘It’s going to hurt,
but I can’t help that.’

The creature nodded and closed his eyes, and
seemed to brace himself for William to continue.

Watching the small pain-twisted face, William
leant his weight on the branch. The rusted hinge
squealed. William gritted his teeth at the noise. The
creature gripped his leg with his paws and eased it out
of the trap. His fur was matted with blood and the leg was twisted at an unnatural angle. William let the branch go and the trap bit into the wood, almost snapping it in two.

‘Your leg is broken,’ William said, ‘and that cut is very deep. If you let me take you back to the abbey, Brother Snail will be able to help you.’

The creature shook his head. He rocked back and forth, keening under his breath with the pain. ‘No, no, no, no.’

‘But you can’t even walk by yourself, and you won’t last long in this cold. The abbey is not the warmest of places, but it’s better than freezing to death out here and Brother Snail is skilled at bone-setting.’

The creature sat hunched on the frosty ground, his long thin arms wrapped tightly around his trembling body. The wound oozed dark blood. ‘No.’

William shrugged helplessly. ‘You don’t really have a choice, unless you have someone else who can help you.’ He looked around uncertainly. Were there more of these creatures in Foxwist Wood? And what had it called itself? A hob? ‘Is there anyone?’

The hob shook his head again. ‘Nobody.’

‘Then it’ll have to be Brother Snail at the abbey.’

‘Mends hobs, does he?’ The hob squinted up at
him, a pinched expression on his face. William had the feeling the creature did not greatly trust humans. ‘Likes hobs, does he?’

‘I don’t think he’s ever met one,’ William said, after a moment’s thought. ‘But I know he will do what he can to help you, whatever you are.’

The hob seemed to consider this. He winced as another wave of pain hit him and that seemed to help him make up his mind. ‘Very well,’ the creature gasped breathlessly, ‘I will come with you.’

William hid the firewood he had been collecting under a low sweeping branch of the fallen tree. As soon as he had made sure the hob was in the capable hands of the abbey infirmarer, he would hurry back to retrieve it. This part of Foxwist Wood was on abbey land, and villagers from Weforde and Yagleah were not allowed to gather wood here, but that rarely stopped them. Any doubt he might have had that the villagers used the wood as their own was banished by the sight of the iron trap. They were not permitted to hunt in Foxwist either but a handful of them clearly did, safe in the certainty that Prior Ardo would not do a thing about it.

The hob could barely manage to struggle to his feet, so William picked him up and carried him.
The track to the abbey wove its way through the wood and dipped down into a shallow valley. A river meandered through low-lying flood meadows, a glint of pewter shining in the winter sun between the reed beds. On a rise of ground beside it stood the grey stone buildings of Crowfield Abbey.

The abbey was small and as poor as grave dirt. It had been William’s home for a year and a half now; long enough for him to know there were few amongst the monks who would look upon the hob with anything less than deep suspicion. He would need to smuggle the creature into Brother Snail’s workshop without being seen. Luckily, as he crossed the bridge over the river, the bell for tierce clanged out clear and sharp, calling the monks to the church. Tierce, closely following High Mass, would be short, with just a few psalms sung, and immediately afterwards, the monks would file into the chapter house to deal with the matters of the day. That would keep them safely out of the way and busy for a goodly while, long enough for William to settle the injured creature in the workshop and hurry back to Foxwist to collect the firewood.

They reached the gatehouse and William pushed open the wicket door to one side of the main gate. He peered around the edge of the door and saw that the
yard between the gatehouse and the kitchen was empty, except for a few hens scraping about on the frozen mud. Wrapping a corner of his jacket around the hob, William hurried over to the kitchen door, slipping and skidding on the icy puddles, and let himself in.

So far so good; as he had hoped, there was nobody around. The kitchen was empty. It would be a while yet before Brother Martin started to bake the day’s bread and prepare the pottage for dinner.

The thought of food, even Brother Martin’s vegetable pottage, made William’s mouth water. Hunger rarely left him and he often daydreamed about the hare stew and mutton broth his mother used to cook, before a fire at the mill had claimed the lives of his parents and younger brother and sister. Quickly, he put the memory of that terrible night out of his thoughts. His old life had died in the fire with his family and now he had to make the best of this new life. It wasn’t what he would have chosen for himself, but at least he had a roof over his head and food in his belly and for now, that was enough.

A fire burned on the hearth in the middle of the room, directly below the soot-blackened smoke hole in the roof. The kitchen was one of only a couple of
rooms in the whole abbey that had a fire, and it was never allowed to go out. William paused beside it for a moment, wishing he could stay longer, but he could not risk the hob being discovered. A broken leg would be the least of his worries if Brother Martin caught sight of him.

William opened the door to the cloister and listened. The sound of singing came from the church, thin and distant; too few voices lost in the huge stone emptiness of the abbey church. He hurried along the cloister alley to the narrow passage between the church and the chapter house, and out into the monks’ graveyard. A path led away to his right, to the vegetable garden and the dovecot. Beyond it, fringed by reeds, was the abbey fishpond, and to one side of that, half hidden beneath the branches of a blackthorn tree, stood a small reed-thatched timber hut. It was here that Brother Snail prepared potions and salves from the plants he grew in the abbey garden and gathered in the fields and woods around the abbey.

Peter Borowe, Crowfield’s only lay brother, was busy pulling up leeks in the vegetable garden, working them loose from the frozen earth with a hoe and throwing them into a nearby basket. He straightened up and waved when he saw William. His face and
hands were red from the cold. He leant his elbow on the top of the hoe and blew into his cupped fingers to warm them.

William swore under his breath, but he waved back as he made his way quickly along the path to the door of the hut. He lifted the latch and went inside, closing and bolting the door behind him.

He was reasonably sure Peter would not follow him, but with Peter, you could never be entirely certain what he would do. A grown man of twenty years, he had the simplicity and mind of a child. The world he lived in was very different to the real world around him and sometimes he forgot what he was supposed to be doing. He liked William because he was one of the few people at the abbey who took the time to sit and talk to him, but right now that was the last thing William wanted.

‘You should be safe here,’ William said, setting the hob down carefully beside the stone-lined fire pit in the middle of the floor. The fire was covered with a large pottery **couvre-feu**, a domed lid with holes poked through it, to stop stray sparks landing on the wooden floor or a basket or sack and setting fire to the hut.

William wrapped a rag around the handle on top of the lid and lifted it aside. He added a few pieces of
wood to the embers.

‘Can I trust you to watch the fire,’ William asked, ‘while I go back and fetch the wood? I won’t be long. You can rest here in the warm.’

The hob nodded and looked around, his eyes full of curiosity in spite of his pain. ‘I will watch your fire. Where is the snail brother? The one you said would help?’

‘In church, for tierce.’

The hob frowned. ‘What is a tierce?’

‘It’s not a what, it’s a when. It’s one of the times during the day when the monks go to the church to pray and sing.’

The hob slowly eased his leg into a more comfortable position. ‘Why?’

William was a little startled by the question. It was not something he had ever thought about. He had always simply accepted the monks’ routine of prayer and work. ‘That’s just what they do. They’re monks,’ he added with a shrug, as if that explained everything. It clearly didn’t, not to the hob anyway.

‘Are they singing because they are happy?’

‘I suppose so, in a way. They’re praising God.’

‘And they can only do that by singing?’ The hob put his head on one side and gazed up at William.
‘Of course not,’ William said. ‘They pray and work and copy holy books with writing and small pictures in them.’

‘That is what their god wants them to do for him?’ The creature sounded surprised. He was quiet for a moment. ‘What does he do with all the books?’

William felt a flicker of impatience. He had more than enough work of his own waiting for him; he did not have time to try and explain things to the hob that he did not fully understand himself. ‘The monks don’t give the books to God, and before you ask anything else, I have to go. Wait here and don’t touch anything. I will be back as quickly as I can.’

The hob lay down on its side and curled its tail over its body. ‘Very well.’

William hesitated for a couple of moments. Was it safe to leave the creature here? What if Peter came in unexpectedly and startled it? What would it do?

‘It might be a good idea, if anyone comes to the hut, for you to hide,’ he suggested.

‘Humans cannot usually see me,’ the hob said, ‘unless I choose to let them, or if they have the Sight.’ The creature closed his eyes. William felt a flicker of worry. The hob was in terrible pain and he had lost a lot of blood. What if he died before Brother Snail
could do anything to help him?

*Well, everything dies, sooner or later,* William thought, a bleakness of spirit wrapping itself around him like a fog. When your time came, that was that. It was just the way of things.

William pulled up his hood, tucking the long strands of his untidy blond hair inside, and walked to the door. What had started out as an ordinary November day had taken a very strange turn indeed. He just hoped he hadn’t made a mistake in bringing the creature to the abbey.