

THE KEEPING PLACE

Isobelle Carmody



WITHOUT INTENDING IT, my mind reached out to her.

Immediately, I felt her awareness of me, but before I could address her mind it spat out a rush of images that flowed so fast I felt my breath taken out of me.

I tried to deflect her rage, but to my helpless horror, it drove down like a dark fist into the very deepest part of my mind, where my ability to kill lay coiled and almost forgotten.

I felt her shock as it stirred.

“No!” I cried in my mind, and thrust her violently from me.

ISOBELLE CARMODY



THE OBERNEWTYN CHRONICLES

Obernewtyn

The Farseekers

Ashling

The Keeping Place

Wavesong

The Stone Key

The Sending

Red Queen



THE GATEWAY TRILOGY

Night Gate Winter Door



LITTLE FUR

The Legend Begins

A Fox Called Sorrow


A Mystery of Wolves

Riddle of Green

ISOBELLE
CARMODY



THE
KEEPING
PLACE

Random House  New York

For my many-talented sister Ellen

◆ CHARACTER LIST ◆

Alad: Beastspeaking guildmaster

Angina: Empath guilden and enhancer; twin brother of Miky

Aras: young Farseeker guilder

Ariel: sadistic enemy of Obernewtyn, previously allied with the Herder Faction

Atthis: Elder of the Agyllians, or Guanette birds; blind futureteller

Avra: leader of the Beastguild; mountain mare; bond-mate to Gahltha

Bodera: ailing rebel leader in Sutrium; father of Dardelan

Brocade: rebel leader in Sawlney

Bruna: Sadorian; daughter of Jakoby

Brydda Llewellyn (aka the Black Dog): rebel leader allied with Bodera and Dardelan

Cameo: true-dreaming Misfit, killed by Ariel and his allies

Cassell: rebel leader in Halfmoon Bay

Ceirwan: Farseeker guilden

Daffyd: former Druid armsman; farseeker; unguilded ally of Obernewtyn

Dameon: blind Empath guildmaster

Dardelan: rebel leader; son of Bodera

Dell: Futuretell ward

Domick: former Coercer ward and bondmate of Kella; living in Sutrium

Dragon: powerful Empath guilder with coercive Talent; projects illusions; in a coma

Druid (Henry Druid): renegade Herder Faction priest and enemy of the Council; leader of a secret community that was destroyed in a firestorm

Elsbeth Gordie (aka Innle, the Seeker): Farseeker guildmistress; powerful farseeker, beastspeaker, and coercer, with limited futuretelling and psychokinetic Talent

Enoch: a coachman; ally of Obernewtyn

Faraf: pony ridden by Elsbeth in the Sadorian Battle-games

Fian: Teknoguild ward

Freya: beast empath; enhancer with a powerful effect on others' Talents

Gahltha: Beast guilden; bondmate to Avra; a formidable black horse sworn to protect Elspeth

Garth: Teknoguildmaster

Gevan: Coercer guildmaster

Guaine: daughter of the Druid; beloved of Daffyd

Grufyyd: bondmate to Katlyn; father of Brydda

Gwynedd: rebel Norselander; second to Tardis

Hannay: Coercer guilder

Idris: young rebel formerly of Aborium; trusted companion to Brydda

Iriny: halfbreed gypsy; half sister of Swallow

Jacob Obernewtyn: Beforetimer; wealthy patron of Hannah Seraphim

Jakoby: Sadorian tribal leader; mother of Bruna

Javo: Obernewtyn's head cook

Jes: Elspeth's older brother; Talented Misfit killed by soldierguards

Jik: former Herder novice and Empath guilder with farseeking Talent; died in a firestorm

Kasanda: deceased spiritual leader of the Sadorians; left signs for the Seeker to help in her quest

Katlyn: herb lorist living at Obernewtyn; bondmate to Grufyyd; mother of Brydda

Kella: Healer guilden with slight empath Talent; former bondmate to Domick

Lina: young, troublemaking beastspeaker

Louis Larkin: unTalented highlander; inhabitant of Obernewtyn; honorary Beastspeaking guilder

Lukas Seraphim: first Master of Obernewtyn, which he built on Beforetime ruins; Rushton's grandfather; deceased

Madellin: ailing rebel leader in Port Oran

Maire: gypsy healer; grandmother of Swallow and Iriny

Malik: rebel leader in Guanette

Marisa Seraphim: second wife of Lukas Seraphim; researcher who knew location of Beforetime weapon-machines; deceased

Maruman (aka Yelloweyes): one-eyed cat prone to fits of futuretelling; Elspeth's oldest friend

Maryon: Fururetell guildmistress

Matthew: Farseeker ward

Merret: Coercer guilder with beastspeaking Talent

Miky: Empath guilden; twin sister of Angina; gifted musician

Miryum: Coercer guilden

Pavo: former Teknoguild ward; died of rotting sickness

Powyr: rebel sea captain

Radek: rebel leader in Morganna

Reuvan: rebel seaman from Aborium; Brydda's right-hand man

Roland: Healer guildmaster

Rosamunde: one-time lover of Jes; unTalented inhabitant of Obernewtyn

Rushton: Master of Obernewtyn; latent Talent

Salamander: secretive, ruthless leader of the slave trade

Sallah: rebel mare; companion to Brydda

Selmar: Talented Misfit and one-time ally of Rushton; killed by Ariel

Swallow: Twentyfamilies gypsy and heir to D'rektaship

Tardis: rebel leader in Murmroth

Yavok: rebel leader in Aborium

Zarak: Farseeker guilder; previously a Beastspeaking guilder

Zidon: horse ridden by Malik in the Sadorian Battle-games



PART I



THE WINDING PATH

IT WAS A chill, moonless night, the only light a raw glow from the fire in a stone-lined pit that reflected dully on the cobbles around its edge. Everything that lay outside the reach of the fire's brooding lume was lost in that blackest shadow that seems to attend any night light. Sometimes it seems to me that the dark is drawn to the light, as a moth to flame. Maybe it is the nature of all things to be pulled toward their opposites.

I dragged my eyes from the hypnotic lurching of the flames, determined to read on while he was yet undisturbed. Holding the pages instinctively to the light, though the marks on them would have been all but invisible even in daylight, I ran the tips of my fingers over the rough lines of holes in the paper. I had learned the code of prickings much as I once learned the code of letters, and I knew the words they shaped, yet skimming over what I had read before, I seemed that other meanings hovered above them.

Perhaps this was only because he who had made them did not see the world with his eyes but with his other senses. I could smell and hear and taste, too, of course, but not as well as Dameon. Since he lacked sight, his other senses had gained strength to compensate.

When he had pricked the pages he had been sending me, had Dameon realized more than the words he set down? Knowing him, I could not doubt it, for he was ever subtle. As an empath, he had the power to read emotions and transmit them, yet I had always attributed his keen perception to his blindness rather than to his Talent. Of course, it was impossible to try to separate their effect on him, for together they made Dameon what he was.

I missed the empath, and perhaps that was what made me strive for the essence of him within his letter, carrying it about with me despite its bulk and snatching what moments he might to read a few lines. With him gone, it was as if Obernewtyn had lost something vital to himself, some necessary spark so modest as to reveal its importance only in its absence. I do not know what name to give to it. Miky said we lacked our heart without him, and Angira said it was the soul we missed with their master away. Rushton called Dameon his conscience and regretted the loss of his sharp-honed ethical sense. But I thought it had some finer shading than all of those things. To my mind, Kella told it best when she said she missed Dameon's sweetness.

"Funaga-li need names for all things, even that which cannot be named," Maruman said from where he lay on the bench seat behind me.

The old cat used the derogatory form of *funaga*, which was the thoughtsymbol beasts used for humans, but his mental voice lacked its usual bite. No doubt because he had been lolling in the sun all afternoon.

"Maruman does not loll," he sent indignantly. I turned to find his single yellow eye regarding me bale-fully but the rest of him—his many scars, his battered head and torn ear, the empty socket of his ruined eye—was hidden in my shadow and the general darkness.

He was bad-tempered and difficult at the best of times, yet there was no beast so close to my heart. His had been the first mind I touched with my own. Later, he had followed me to Obernewtyn, convinced that I was destined to lead beasts to freedom from humans. I had long argued with him that I was not the Innle, or "Seeker," of beastlegend, but I had been

called by that title now in too many strange circumstances to reject it outright. Nonetheless, sometimes wondered why, desiring freedom from humans, beasts would want a human savior.

“One does not want a tree or the sky, but they are. No more do beasts desire a funaga to lead them. But we accept/know/see what is /will be. Unlike the funaga always asking whywhywhy,” Maruman sent rudely. “Funaga-li rushrush body and mind here/there/otherwhere to prove they exist.”

I made no response other than to give the old cat’s intrusive probe a mental shove to shove it outside my mindshield, much as I sometimes pushed him from my lap when my knees had grown stiff from his weight. But he was right. We humans did seem to love our busyness for its own sake. Possibly it was the nature of our kind, for though our thoughts did flurry here and there, from that frenzy came whatever shaped us.

I smiled at myself wryly, for was I not guilty now of another human trait, which was to take ourselves too seriously, ever devising clever ways to prove to ourselves that all we do is vital simply because we do it?

My smile faded, for it came to me that this very characteristic was responsible for the doom that the Beforetimers had brought to their world. “Their” world—I always found it difficult to think of them as our ancestors, even though all who live in the time after the Great White were descended from the survivors of the holocaust and dwell in what little remains habitable of their world.

What we knew of them was incomplete and difficult to understand, being gleaned from ruinous bits and pieces left over from their time, most of it utterly disconnected from whatever context gave it meaning. We knew that they were very numerous and had divided themselves into a number of great nations. We knew their civilization had spanned the world and they had ruthlessly used nature for their gain and their amusement, to the detriment of all nonhumans.

We knew from the Teknoguild’s researches that they had created machines that enabled them to think with incredible speed, fly and speak from one land to another, and build the cities of shining towers. This ability to make machines whose powers exceeded their own had been the secret of their might, but it had led them into folly, for they had made weaponmachines that had finally put an end to all their terrible cleverness.

I wondered what had possessed them to create the means of their own doom. How had they not lived in terror that the machines would be used? The Teknoguildmaster Garth said it was pride that led them to create such things and believe they could control them, but that did not explain *why* to my satisfaction. For their wars, Rushton said. To be sure they would win. But what good was a weapon that destroyed everything, including its user? There could be no winner in such a game. Yet they had made them and used them, and so had they severed themselves from us and become naught by the mythical beings of stories and nightmares.

Some said it did not matter that our memory of them was fragmented and fantastical, since their time was gone forever, along with all they wrought.

I wished that were truly so.

Chilled by where my pondering had brought me, I folded Dameon's letter into my pocket, arched my back to stretch the ache from it, and gazed about the company beginning at last to assemble. I could see only the parts of them that faced the fire, and at first glance it seemed that disjointed fragments of people and beasts were about me. Things that held the light caught my eye: the gleaming gold of the Beastspeaking guildmaster's armband; the shining curls of the empath-enhancer Freya; the pale shimmer of Avra's mane and ear tips; and the ruff of the white ridgeback she-dog that sat between them.

I studied her with interest. The ridgeback had come to the mountains at the melting of the wintertime snow that each year blocked the narrow trail connecting us to the rest of the Land. She had led a great limping horde of half-starved domestic animals. One of the coerced on duty at the pass had notified Obernewtyn of their approach, and Avra had hastened out to meet the unlikely company.

The mountain pony explained that Obernewtyn was a secret refuge for humans and beasts. The newcomers could find food and healing there, and other help if they wanted it. At first the travelers had refused the invitation, patently dismayed to learn that the freerunning barud the white she-dog had promised them was occupied by humans. Avra had explained mildly that the humans who dwelt in the valley did not interfere with them. As the travelers were exhausted and in need of food and treatment, she argued persuasively, they might just as well come to Obernewtyn and see for themselves.

It was the Beastspeaking guildmaster, Alad, who told me their story. They had all come from a farm just below the Gelfort Range. One day, the white ridgeback, Smoke, had turned on her master and killed him. Then she had convinced the other animals to come with her to seek the fabled freerunning barud.

It was a remarkable journey they had made, all the more because the beasts had no survival skills, being bred and reared by humans. But for the will and determination of the she-dog, they would doubtless have been recaptured or killed by wild beasts, or they would have perished simply because of their inability to shelter and feed themselves. She had made them travel at night, fighting off predators, hunting for food, and forcing those who could not eat meat to forage for roots and grains to sustain them. When they would have given up, she drove them with threats that she would eat them if they fell by the wayside. Arriving in the White Valley at last, they managed to eke out a bare existence waiting for the pass to thaw.

After their initial disappointment, the beasts began to see that Obernewtyn was not like any funaga place they had known. They were nursed back to health by our healers, and they learned the fingerspeech devised by the rebel Brydda Llewellyn, through which humans could mimic the gestures and movements that animals used to communicate at the most rudimentary level. When Avra finally offered the choice of remaining and working as freerunning beasts and members of Obernewtyn's community, with the right to speak in Beastguild, many chose to stay. For those few who wanted to leave, the Beastguild appointed teachers to show them how to survive in the wild.

The ridgeback had been among those who stayed, though she was clearly capable of defending for herself.

Without intending it, I reached out to her with my mind. Immediately, I felt her awareness of me, but before I could address her mind, it spat out a rush of images that flowed so fast

took my breath away.

I saw a man cut the throat of a cow. The red line at its throat was like a gaping mouth, and when the beast fell, a bloody froth stained the snowy ground. I heard the keening anguish of its newborn calf and felt the departing mindforce of the dying cow brush me, felt the sweet sigh of its farewell to her calf and the watching dog. The man turned to lift the tottering calf's head back, baring its throat, and I felt the hot, terrifying fluidity of the dog's fury roar through her veins.

I tried to deflect her rage, but to my helpless horror, it drove down like a dark fist into the very deepest part of my mind, where my most lethal ability lay coiled and almost forgotten.

I felt her surprise as it stirred.

"No!" I cried in my mind, and thrust her violently from me.

I stared across the fire pit into her eyes, which were so pale a blue as to be almost colorless.

"The master-li killed the bovine and would have killed her calf because it lacked an ear," she sent in a powerful mental voice. "I do not know why. All beasts know not all of a kind are born alike/exact. None can know what darkness/madness drives the funaga."

"Why did you show that to me?" I sent, shaken to the depths of myself by the hot, hungry power that she had almost roused.

She ignored my question, sending, "Oldstories tell that the Innle who will lead beasts to freedom from the funaga has the power to kill by will alone."

"I have that power, but I do not use it," I temporized.

"I felt/smelled the use of it on you."

"Once only. Knowledge of it first came when the life of my mate was in danger, and I used it to save him. But not now/nevermore."

The dog gave the mental equivalent of a shrug. "It is nature to defend one's mate. It is nature for some beasts to kill and for others to be killed. The funaga are meateaters, and killing is nature for them, but they seldom hunt their meat with courage. They trap/breed in a chain/fence until the killing, which is done without respect/dignity. Beasts eat flesh, but the funaga do what no beast would. Funaga eat freedom."

"No funaga here eats flesh. We/I think it is unnatural for our kind of funaga to kill for any reason. Is it not unnatural for your kind to kill in revenge/anger? Nature wills beasts to kill for food/protect the young. That cow was not your kind."

"She was not. I am unnatural, as are all beasts who dwell with the funaga-li. I am what the master/ funaga-li made of me."

"Why did you come here?" I asked. "Why do you stay?"

She turned her pale eyes on me. "I came to seek my death."

"We all journey toward the longsleep, for that is where the road of life leads," Gahlth sent, his cool mental probe cutting between us. "But now Avra would speak, and we must listen."

As the black horse moved to stand behind me, I reached up to lay my hand against his long

neck, disturbed by the white dog's chilly pronouncement. The pulse of Gahltha's blood be soothingly against my palm, muted by his shaggy winter coat. The she-dog could not know but upon his arrival at Obernewtyn, Gahltha had shared her hatred of humans. Much had befallen him since then that had humbled him and soothed his rage, and he had appointed himself my guardian whenever I was away from Obernewtyn. Despite a hostile beginning, we have grown very close.

Avra began to address the beastmerge, and I noticed Alad lean near to Freya to translate softly. Though she could sense the emotions of beasts and communicate her feelings to them, Freya was no beastspeaker. If it was not beastmerge, Avra would, out of courtesy, use the signal language, but it was clumsy and limited compared to mindspeech. As it was, Avra leaned to Freya to Alad and spoke mind-to-mind with the rest of us.

"Greetings. We welcome to this merge Elspethlnnle, Alad Beastspeaking guildmaster, and Freya. Greetings also to those beasts who come new to this barud." Her gentle eyes fell to Smoke. "You have come far. We are glad/enriched by your coming." Then, to my astonishment, she asked if the dog wished to lead the Beastguild.

I saw the look of dismay on Alad's face, but none of the animals seemed even surprised.

"The whitecanine is strong-minded," Gahltha sent privately to me. "More than Avra, and she offers her place. It is the beastway for the weak to yield to the strong."

"I will not lead," the she-dog responded gravely to Avra, "but I will stand with/by you."

Now there was a reaction. Gahltha sent that with these words, the she-dog had virtually appointed herself Avra's second-in-command.

The mare ignored the murmurous buzz and merely inclined her head gracefully. "Let it be that you will always run by me. Be strong when I falter. Lead if I fall."

"I will run by/with you, lead if you fall, but I think you will not, for the heartfire burns bright in you. I will be a gladshield to it."

Even I knew that this was a very fine compliment, and Gahltha snorted softly in pride, for Avra was his mate.

"I name you Rasial, if you will accept my naming," Avra sent. "Cast off the funag leashname."

The white dog bowed her great head, and Gahltha told me with some amusement that the word literally meant "white shield" in human speech but could also be interpreted to mean "silver tongue."

"Enough sweetsaying," Maruman sent in irritation. "Speak less and say more."

There was a ripple of sound from the assembled company that was akin to laughter to humans.

"Peace, yelloweyes," Avra sent gently. "Things should not be said in haste, for swiftsaying means little-thinking."

She went on to speak of the truce among beasts that existed within the walls of Obernewtyn and asked that those not present be reminded that any who would hunt must do so beyond the barud walls.

One of the younger horses sent that Obernewtyn was becoming crowded, and before long they would have to turn beasts away.

“Before that day, Innle will lead us from this place to the freerunning barud where the funaga dwell,” a little goat sent piously.

Some of the animals looked at me fleetingly and to my discomfort, Alad gave me a amused grimace. He knew that Maruman had named me Innle, but he had no reason to believe I was the hero of that name foretold in beastlegend.

The merge moved on to discuss farms where beasts were raised in large numbers for butchering, and a mental cry went up to rescue those condemned to such places.

“I would speak, who am newnamed Rasial,” the she-dog sent, and a respectful silence met her scything mental voice. “To save one beast or ten is useless. More will be bred to take their place. Avra has told me that you have a network of beasts throughout this land and that you perform rescues of beasts. We must use this network to destroy these deathfarms.”

I agreed that the deathfarms should be targeted but warned that open sabotage would rouse the fury of the Council.

“If they learned beasts had worked against them, they would rise up in fear and rage and destroy many beasts, and those that did not die would be chained and punished.”

“Do you say we should not act against the death-farms?” one of the younger horses demanded with some anger.

“I say only that your sabotage/rescues must seem mischance with no one to blame, be it you or funaga.”

I offered the help of the Farseeker guild, but there was a murmur of discontent at this. Some of the animals muttered that I was implying they could not act without human help. I pointed out that every human rescue and expedition we had undertaken had been accomplished with the help of beasts, so why should beasts not be repaid with our assistance?

Avra spoke then of gelding, and the meeting fell into uproar, for the practice of rendering beasts incapable of bearing young was horrendous to all of them. Freya rose and, using the signal language, explained that her father had been a horse trader. She had traveled about the Land with him before they parted company and had seen horses gelded.

“Beasts are bred for selling by the funaga-li, who desire strength or what they think of as the beauty of a certain color or other attributes. They think of breeding as an art.”

Avra questioned Freya closely about the beast sales, learning they were held in the upper lowlands during harvest season and were attended by many hundreds of folk who traveled from as far away as the west coast. Once sold, most equines were gelded so that breeding could be controlled by the Council. I was interested to hear that pureblood gypsies also attended these harvest fairs but would buy only ungelded beasts and paid very high prices for them.

Rasial asked how one distinguished a Council funaga-li from another funaga, but no animal could answer. I sent that there was no way to tell, for Councilmen were merely powerful humans descended from those who had united to take control of the Land after the Grey White. Their original aim had been to establish order, which later grew into a determination

that humans would not again go the way of the Beforetimers.

“Do they not?” the she-dog asked bitterly.

“They do, who most claim to prevent it,” Alad sent sadly. “But we here at Obernewtyn oppose them and so do many funaga who are not Talented. If the Council fell, things might be different.”

“If funaga fight funaga, whoever wins will still be funaga,” Riasal sent.

They began talking about which beasts should labor in what manner during the planting season at Obernewtyn. It went on so long that I fell asleep.

The night was darker than any night I had known, and silent but for the sound of liquid dripping into liquid.

Then the sun came near to rising above a distant horizon, and I saw by the dawn’s gray light that I was standing on a high, rocky plateau. Below the place where I stood, trackless Blacklands stretched on all sides.

I heard a cry in the distance and saw something rise above the horizon. It flew, and yet no bird was ever made that size or shape. I squinted my eyes and thought it looked red.

Could it possibly be a red-plumed Agyllian—those which Landfolk call *Guarnite birds* and which Maruman called *oldOnes*—the very birds that now guided me in my destined task to destroy the Beforetime weapon-machines?

“It is no bird.”

I looked down to find Maruman standing beside me, swishing his tail back and forth and gazing at the horizon. I knew now that I was dreaming, for he was in a shape he often took when he entered my dreams of his own will—far larger and stronger than in his true form, with slash marks on his coat. He looked very similar to those great cats that Beforetime books called *tygers*.

“Mayhap this dream form is truer than that other shape I bear,” Maruman sent, and he let out a roar that seemed to shake the stone under us.

“It is louder, in any case,” I sent. “What are you doing in my dream?”

“The oldOnes sent me. They say you must not walk dreamtrails without me, Elspethlnnle. I must guard you on them, as Gahltha guards your waking trails.”

“I do not walk the dreamtrails. I do not even know how to find them. I am only dozing a little and dreaming aimlessly.”

“Dreams may have purposes the dreamer cannot fathom. They are gateways to dreamtrails and may lead also to longsleep,” Maruman sent. “Wake now and be safe.”

“Soon,” I told him. “Do you know what that was, flying above the horizon? You said it wasn’t a bird.”

“Is great winged beast, and its madness goes out from it along dreamtrails like a wind that shudders all it touches. Do not think of it, for doing so will summon it.”

“Haven’t I already summoned the beast, since it was in my dream?”

“You did not summon me, yet I came. Dreams touch other dreams, and things may travel

from one to the other unbidden. That beast rides its madness like it rides the air, and it enters into those dreams which draw its notice—as will yours, now you think of it.”

“I don’t understand. How did I draw its notice in the first place? How could I have been thinking of its before I saw it?”

“Perhaps it thinks of you,” he responded, but distantly, as if his mind wandered elsewhere.

I felt my arm being shaken, and all at once I was awake. Alad was smiling apologetically down at me, and behind him the yard was almost empty. Little remained of the fire but a few glowing coals in the pit.

“The merge is over, Elspeth,” he said.

I rubbed my eyes and shook my head to restore my wits. “I wanted to hear what went on but I did not sleep well last night.”

“Do not apologize. I have slept ill of late, too. Maruman is wisest of us.”

The old cat was still sleeping. Now I could see him in the ember glow. He looked very small and frail, and his whiskers shone gray.

“He walks the dreamtrails, as is his wont,” Gahltha sent, coming over with Avra. “Do not fear for him, Elspethlinnle, for he has long walked those strange ways.”

“I am wakeful. I will watch over the yelloweyes,” Avra offered.

I glanced at the mare’s swollen belly and did not wonder at her wakefulness. She had to be very near to foaling.

“Will you walk back to the house with me?” Freya asked diffidently.

I nodded, and we left the courtyard just as a light snow began to fall.

WE ENTERED THE gate to the greenthorn maze that separated the main buildings of Obernewtyn from its farm and fields, walking somewhat awkwardly beside each other on the narrow track that ran between two thick-packed banks of snow. The nights were still painfully cold. I pulled my coat around me and sank my face into the collar.

Our progress was noisy for the ground was covered in a crust of ice that cracked loudly when it was broken. For some way we did not speak but only watched where we walked. It was very dark, and aside from the possibility of slipping, greenthorn stings were unpleasant.

Fresh snow fell like a dusting of flour on the black earth and on the evergreen foliage of the bushes flanking either side of us. The moon rose when we were halfway through the maze, and our shadows appeared on the path before us, deep blue and sharp edged. There was less need to watch our steps so intently, and Freya asked, “Do you miss Rushton?”

“He only just left, so it is less a matter of missing him than knowing I will miss him,” I said wryly. “Certainly I already miss him as Master of Obernewtyn.”

“I suppose it is no pleasure to have to stand in his stead,” Freya said. “I would not like the responsibility.”

“I doubt Rushton likes the responsibility of being master here, if it comes to that.”

“But he is Master of Obernewtyn, and it is not his nature to question what is,” Freya murmured. She knew him well because she had spent much time trying to help Rushton reach his latent Talent.

I glanced sideways at the empath-enhancer, and it struck me that something was troubling her. My instinct was not to pry, yet this rose out of my discomfort with emotions. I had always found them cursed awkward things, but these days I was trying to be as receptive as a nonempath could be. The fact that I had noticed Freya’s mood proved that at least I was honing my awareness somewhat. Nevertheless, I struggled a little with my own reticence before speaking. “Are you happy here?”

A fleeting smile bestowed on her plain features a quicksilver beauty. “If I could not be happy here, then I am incapable of it.”

“And yet?” I sounded abrupt rather than sympathetic and regretted my clumsiness.

Freya sighed and blinked snowflakes from her lashes. “When Avra asked me to speak about those days traveling with my father, it all came back to me.”

Freya had been sold by her father because her gift for soothing horses—the very Talent by which he had made his livelihood—had caused the Council to mutter of the black arts.

“Many poisons rise at night and seep away by morning,” I said.

We came in mutual silence to the end of the maze path and parted in the cobbled area beyond its gate. The snow had stopped falling and was melting on the stones as I entered the Farseekers’ wing of Obernewtyn. Mounting the stairs to my turret room, I felt as if I would sleep for a year.

Yet it seemed but a few minutes before Ceirwan was waking me with a tray of hot tea and

toasted bread, and a list of matters to be dealt with at the Farseeker meeting to take place that evening after nightmeal.

“I thought ye mun want to go through th’ agenda an’ add a few things after last night’s beastmerge,” he said. “I’ll pick th’ list up later.” I nodded sleepily, and he fussed about for some time with papers and the fire before opening the door to go. Maruman entered as he left, slinking across the room and leaping onto the window ledge.

I rose and splashed my face with icy water, then brought my tray to the ledge. Maruman refused any of my food, saying he had drunk his fill on the farms.

I ate, looking out upon the patch of garden clasped within the elbow of the rambling west wing of Obernewtyn. Over it, I could see a segment of the gray stone wall that surrounded our land, and past that, because the land sloped up, the mass of the forest that lay around us in the mountain valley. Most of the trees were still bare, and above them rose the high mountains—shoulder upon shoulder of them, still clad in their wintertime pelt and seeming almost to float in the sky.

They looked so pure and untouched, and yet the snow concealed the streaks of blackened earth left by the holocaust poisons, where still, centuries after, nothing could grow. In many places, the poisons were so virulent as to sear and blister the flesh at a touch, and more than the briefest exposure to them ensured a painful death. The world was full of such tainted places, some vast beyond imagining.

Mammari reached out a lazy paw and batted like a kitten at a strand of my hair caught up by the wind. I felt a rush of tenderness for him but resisted the urge to run my fingers over his soft belly fur, for he little liked to be petted as if he were a tame beast.

Thinking of beasts reminded me of Dameon’s letter. In it, he urged me to press Alad to send a beastspeaker to Sador to teach humans and beasts there Brydda’s fingerspeec. Unfortunately, the empath knew only a little of the signals and movements that made up the language, as it was ill designed for a blind man’s use.

I ought to have mentioned Dameon’s request at the beastmerge, I thought, and sighed. So much time was spent in meetings and merges, and in hurrying to yet another meeting to speak of what had been decided at the one before.

I pulled my shawl tighter, enjoying the delicate pink-gold quality of the light. It contained the promise of the brief, sweet season of spring. Each year, I both desired and dreaded the end of wintertime and the thawing of the pass that was our only access to the rest of the Land, for though it meant the end of the bitter cold, it also meant we were again accessible to our enemies.

It was the fear that we might be found and attacked by the Council that had led us the previous year to seek an alliance with their sworn enemies, a Landwide network of rebels. They had largely rejected us as freaks and mutants, so we had tried to prove our worthiness as battle companions, only to demonstrate to the rebels and to ourselves that our Talents did not incline to aggression or violence.

This had been a revelation, and instead of lamenting our inability to be warriors, we had rejoiced, determined to henceforth concentrate our resources and abilities on seeking nonaggressive means of defending ourselves from the Council.

We had parted from the rebels without anger, and I had been sure that we would see Brydda Llewellyn from time to time. Not only because he was our friend, but also because his parents had moved to Obernewtyn. But none of us had known what to make of his mission, requesting that Rushton meet with the rebels in Sutrium. Rushton had gone out of friendship and curiosity, and because a journey to Sutrium was an opportunity to talk to the coercer Domick.

Domick had been changed terribly by his work as our spy within the Councilcourt, for this role, he had been forced to witness and accept torture and other horrors. He had become strange and remote and had severed himself from his bondmate, the Healer ward Kella. Just before the wintertime, we had received a letter in which he formally withdrew from the Coercer guild and from Obernewtyn, saying he could not accept our new oath of nonviolence. "It would be like a lamb declaring to a pack of savage wolves that he was a pacifist. What of the wolves care!"

Despite his estrangement from us, Domick had continued to send regular messages about matters he uncovered in his spying. I suspected he kept Brydda informed, too, for he had always respected the big rebel. But his messages had grown more and more cryptic.

None of us who had seen Domick in recent times could doubt that he needed healing. He had become a living symbol of what it meant to act against our natures. Rushton intended to bring him back to Obernewtyn, but I did not think Domick would come.

Thinking of Rushton made me feel his absence, despite what I had said to Freya. I missed him, not in the same way as I missed Dameon, but as if I hungered for food or water or some other essential need of life.

Rushton would be amused to hear himself compared to bread or water, and the thought of his laughter assuaged some of my longing for him. He would understand my missing Dameon for they had been close friends. So much so that Rushton had seemed to understand, far more than I, why Dameon had chosen to remain in Sador when we left to return to Obernewtyn.

I felt a sudden coldness, for the sun had shifted as I sat there. I pulled my shawl about me and resumed my seat by the hearth. Ceirwan had lit a little blaze to warm the chill from the stones, and I added a few sticks of wood. Then I took Dameon's thick letter and flattened it on my knees, and once again the dry whisper of my fingers over the paper rose into the air.

These Sadorians have memories that go back beyond the Great White. They are not passed on as written words in books but as spoken chants. This is a risky way of saving memories, it seems to me. But Sadorians do not believe the past should be remembered too well. The Temple overguardian says that if it is adored overmuch, the present is deemed less important.

I suspect this philosophy of holding lightly to the past arose from the Sadorians' own history. Their ancestors came from some distant place called Gadfia, where a savage Lud was worshipped. The Gadfians thought that if they were killed fighting for their Lud, they would be taken directly to dwell with him in splendor. Since there were many of them and they were very poor, I have no doubt heaven often seemed more attractive than life. Perhaps for this reason they held life very cheap. The only reason humans existed was to worship Lud and to force others to worship him, so men were counted important because they were warriors. Women were only the means of getting sons. They were considered much as the un Talents of our Land think of beasts and were owned utterly by the man to whom their father gave them. Daughters were considered worthless except as material for barter or to seal alliances, and many

were killed.

Eventually, a group of defiant women and the men who dared aid them fled and journeyed to the desert country where they now dwell. They feared pursuit, so they dwelt as nomads to ensure they could no more be sieged or tracked than could the grains of sand that shift on the side of the desert dunes. I think much of their philosophy of leaving the earth untouched grew out of their fear of being followed. But their beliefs are no less profound for all that. They came to love the desert's barren emptiness, because there were no marks of human dominance on it.

In the end, it was the Great White that prevented immediate pursuit. The Sadorians think of it almost as the saving of them, because Sador was virtually untouched, though lands on all sides of it were laid waste. Unlike the Land, Sador was completely isolated by Blacklands and mountains and sea. No refugees came there, and they lived untroubled by the outer world. The Sadorians think of that time, which we call the Age of Chaos, as a golden time, but their chants reveal that they suffered internal struggles. They split into tribes, and there were skirmishes and a number of bloody engagements and then something worse. It seems there was a Beforetime weapon of some description, either found by the Sadorians or brought with them when they fled Gadfia, and this was used to devastating effect.

Left alone, the Sadorians may have gone the way of the very Gadfians they had fled. But their isolation was not to last. Eventually, during the one season that the tribes converged on the coast for fishing purposes, they were descended upon by five ships full of Gadfian warriors.

The Sadorians were completely unprepared. Many were killed, mostly men, and over a hundred women stolen. But the invaders had underestimated the Sadorians, for the tribes managed to prevent one of the ships from leaving, and they used this as a pattern to build two of their own. Eventually, the newly united Sadorians took warriors from each tribe and set off in search of the Gadfian settlement. They found the Land at this time, but for months all else they saw was Blacklands, including what had been Gadfia.

The Sadorians at last found small settlements along the coast, separated by Blacklands. A raid was made on one of them, and the Sadorians learned that these settlements were called New Gadfia. The men there were desperate for sons to carry on their holy war, for since the Great White, they had been unable to conceive healthy children—and as a result, they had beaten or stoned their own women to death for imagined offenses against Lud.

Of course, both the men and the women of Gadfia had been afflicted by the poisons of the Great White, so the stolen Sadorian women had also produced deformed babies. Unable to accept that their own monstrous seed was to blame, the men decided that Lud was offended by their use of unbelievers. The Sadorian women who had not been slain must be “instructed” in the faith. The birth of a deformed baby was taken as proof that Lud had rejected the mother. Already, many had been killed along with their poor, misshapen babies.

Horrified, the Sadorians attacked the three largest settlements on three consecutive nights and took them without losing a single person. They tried the leaders before a court of women and carried out executions. The Sadorians continued to plunder the smaller settlements, until they had rescued every last surviving Sadorian, and more women besides, many of whom were pregnant.

They returned to Templeport in triumph almost two years after they had first set out. The gravid women could not travel, and so the cliffs, riddled with caves and tunnels, became the first and only permanent dwelling in Sador. All of the children born of the stolen women were deformed and many died. Those who did not were cared for tenderly and later became the first Temple guardians.

Now I wonder if the slaver Salamander sells human cargo to whoever remains in New Gadfia, for the Sadorians did not destroy all the settlements nor kill all the men. Of course, lacking children, they ought long ago to have died out, but what if they gave up stealing women and bought children instead, to raise as their own? As Gadfians? The thought chills me.

I stopped reading, for a vision of the Farseeker ward, Matthew, rose in my mind. Dameo

had been thinking of him as he bent over the page, and a wave of sadness flowed through me. Matthew's abduction by slavers had been a grievous blow, and my only consolation was that though I mourned him, he was not dead.

I read on, but to my disappointment, Dameon wrote no more about slavery.

Elspeth, there are times when I am lost in these people and their lives. I work alongside the Temple guardians, caring for the sick, aware of the tragic irony that they themselves are dying slowly. Fian is sometimes shocked to see their deformities, and his emotional reactions tell me some are truly dreadful. I do not see them. I know the guardians only by their gentle hands or soft voices, and so they are fair to me. Fian says that after a little, he cannot see ugliness in them either, but I do not wonder why they keep themselves covered when they move among outsiders. Even now that they have lost interest in Sador, the Herders might be driven by their fear of mutants to force the Council to attack the Earthtemple if they learned the guardians are all deformed. I have still not been able to find out why it is so. Guardians are celibate by choice and so do not bear children, which means the deformities cannot be hereditary.

Their recent history is one of gentleness and wisdom, and this is due at least in part to the influence of a woman they rescued from the New Gadfians—whom they call Kasanda. She was very ill when they brought her to Sador, for she was not young and had been savagely beaten over and over. Not for failing to bear a normal child—she was too old for that—but for defending the women. I wish I could learn more of her. She was no Gadfian; that much is clear. She had a profound effect on the Sadorians, teaching them to heal even as they healed her, but whence came the knowledge she taught them of healing and of other things? What did she say to unite the tribes and draw them finally away from the warlike path of their ancestors, and how did she convince them to establish the cliff caves as the Earthtemple? For that was her idea as well. The Sadorians will not speak of her to me, and I do not know why, for they are entirely open about all else. I have even been taken to their precious spice groves.

He went on to describe the immense trees and the many uses of the spice they produced. I let my fingers slide over the long description, eager for more of the mysterious Kasanda. In the labyrinthine tunnels of the Temple the previous year, I had been shown a chamber that housed a series of relief carvings of the Beforetime made by this Kasanda. Seeing them, I had understood for the first time that the Great White had not been a terrible accident but the inevitable conclusion to the arrogant, greedy, self-centered age of the Beforetimers.

The stone carvings had been true works of art, but I had been struck by their resemblance to the wood carvings on the front doors to Obernewtyn and wished the latter had not been burned, so I could compare them. I had intended to look into their history, but more immediate matters had always demanded my attention.

“It is your path/purpose to bring the funagaglarsh to the longsleeper, Elspeth!” Maruman interrupted the flow of my thoughts pointedly. *Glarsh* was the beast thoughtsymbol for “machine.” I felt there was reproach in his single yellow eye.

“I have sworn to find the glarsh and bring them to the longsleeper, but the oldOnes have bidden me wait,” I sent.

Maruman merely laid his chin on one paw and closed his eye.

I shrugged. I needed no reminder of the dark road I must walk, for it was foretold that if I failed, one would come whose destiny was to resurrect the Beforetime weaponmachines and their deadly potential, bringing the poor, battered world to a final doom. I could not imagine why this Destroyer would wish to unmake the world, since it must mean his own doom as well. Perhaps, like the Gadfian fanatics Dameon had spoken of, he believed his reward would

come after death.

Or maybe he was no more captain of his fate than I of mine.

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