



A sneak peek at *The Stone Key* by Isobelle Carmody.

Chapter 1

It ought to have felt momentous, going through the pass and seeing the highlands spread out in the pink-gold morning light, momentous because, for the first time, I was riding down to a Land that was free, and where I need not hide who or what I was.

Yet it was impossible to feel complacent or even secure because soon, for the first time, Landfolk would vote for their leaders, who might undo all that the rebels had achieved since the Council had been overthrown. And where would that leave Misfits like me? The hatred and prejudice against us, which the Council and Herder Faction had encouraged, had not ended with their reign. The wrong leader could easily fan the flames of resentment and unease into a fire that might yet consume us. But as the rebel leader Dardelan had so often said, there could be no freedom if people were not able to choose their own leaders.

I let my eyes rove along the neat line of trees that bordered Bergold's orchards on the left side of the road, trying to take comfort in their order. But my eyes were drawn inexorably to the other side of the road, where the ground dropped away steeply and suddenly into the dense, complex wilderness of the White Valley. I could see clear across the green treetops to the mountains that separated highland from low; Tor, Gelfort and Emeralfel, and to the blacklands that bordered the White Valley in the west. Yet I knew how many secrets lay hidden under that vegetable serenity.

It was the way of things, I thought morosely, and it was better not to forget it.

I lifted my face to the sky and closed my eyes, trying to focus on the warmth of the sun and on the sweet, green smell of spring, but too many worries crowded in – the looming elections, of course, and the forthcoming trial of the rebel Malik, as well as whatever was going on in Saithwold, but most of all, I was troubled by Maryon's insistence that Dragon accompany us to Sutrium. The girl had been willing because both the healer Kella and the old herbalist Katlyn were going. But Dragon's presence meant that I must constantly face her fear of me. This was painful because she had loved me once, but the invasion of her mind, which had been the only way to save her, had destroyed her trust in me. It had been a shock to discover that, upon waking from her coma, Dragon had forgotten our friendship; forgotten my rescue of her from the Beforetime ruins where she had dwelt as a lonely urchin. I had believed Kella and the other healers when they said Dragon would remember in time, but she had not done so. She knew only that I was the bringer of pain, and so great was her loathing

of me that I had been unable to manage a single conversation since she had awakened.

The truth was that I had proposed the expedition as much to take me away from Dragon as to fulfil my promise to return the Twentyfamilies gypsy healer Darius to his people. Maryon had cut through the discussion about what other uses could be made of the expedition to announce her support for it because she foresaw trouble looming on the west coast, and I would be needed to deal with it. Naturally she had offered no explanation and no details. She had added, almost as an afterthought, that Dragon must be taken to Sutrium.

I felt a surge of anger and fear at the memory of her foretelling, for it had been just such a journey to Sutrium that had initiated the events that left Dragon in a dangerous coma. Yet a cooler voice reminded me that, without the coma and my journey into her mind to free her from it, I would not have realised that Dragon was the daughter of the murdered queen of the Red Land. And much as her fear and hatred distressed me, I now knew that something was locked in Dragon's memories which I would need to complete my secret quest to destroy the Beforetime weaponmachines. Perhaps this journey to Sutrium was to be the means of learning what it was.

'Why cannot ElspethInnle just accepting? Why always thinking/gnawing, trying to change the shaping of things?' Maruman sent the acerbic query to me without shifting his languid position on Kella's lap in the wagon alongside which I rode.

'If you are irritated by my thoughts you could stay out of my mind,' I sent tartly.

The old cat did not condescend to answer but Kella gave me a sidelong look. She had no farseeking abilities, but her healing empathy meant she could not help but feel the emotions flowing between Maruman and me. She turned away at once, not wanting to pry, but the bleak sorrow in her expression told me that her own thoughts were no more happily disposed than mine. Doubtless she was thinking of Domick. He and Kella had been in love, but the coercer's spying during the rebellion had so tormented and divided him against himself, that he had finally rejected her and Obernewtyn, before disappearing under mysterious circumstances. Kella blamed herself, and I thought it was as much guilt as the desire to heal that was taking her to Sutrium. But I said nothing. After all my efforts, empathy was the one Talent I lacked entirely, and its want made me awkward with emotions and reluctant to trust my own, let alone anyone else's.

Besides what could I say to comfort her, unless it was true that misery loved company.

'One cannot flee from/avoid difficulties of life, ElspethInnle, but perhaps it is possible/necessary to outrun them for a time,' Gahltha sent. I felt a rush of affection for his

passionate nature, and laid my hand on his sleek black neck. The flesh quivered with impatience.

The wagons are not made for speed, I sent regretfully.

Gahltha is! We will gallop away and then return, he responded eagerly.

With a laugh, I told Kella that we would scout ahead. Gahltha neighed to Welt and Belya, who drew the wagon, then cantered to the lead wagon where the young farseeker Zarak sat on the foremost bench with Louis Larkin. Zade and Lo whinnied a welcome to the black horse as I explained I meant to ride ahead for a time. Dragon was in the back of the wagon with the plump old herbalist, Katlyn and one of the two injured soldierguards that we were transporting to Sutrium. The other lay on the floor of the second wagon.

'It is a perfect day for a ride,' Zarak said wistfully.

As though his words were a signal, Gahltha sprang away. If I had not learned from hard experience that he loved to leap into a gallop like this, I would have tumbled backwards over his rump. I tangled one hand in his mane and caught the thick black whip of my plait with the other. His joy steamed off his body as heat and a kind of vibration that filled me with an answering exhilaration. How many times had we ridden like this in the high mountains, sharing the rush and the wild freedom of our speed?

My muscles soon protested, reminding me that in recent times we had seldom ridden. My duties as guildmistress at Obernewtyn left little time for self-indulgence. Fleeting, all the weight of that role pressed on me anew, but then the sheer physical demands of the ride emptied me of thought. I let myself merge with Gahltha until I was no more than an extension of the powerful black horse racing along the road.

It was a reckless pace but the way was clear well ahead and there were seldom walkers on the lonely stretch between the turn-off to Bergold's orchards and the pass into the mountains. Aside from the fact that the ground and walls of the pass were streaked with poisons dangerous to the naked flesh, there was also the rumour that plague had destroyed Obernewtyn, which had been enough to discourage the curious. Of course the rebel leaders now knew that Obernewtyn was intact and home to our Misfit community, and I had no doubt that knowledge of our refuge was spreading into the wider community. Even so, I doubted we would have many casual visitors.

Rounding a slight bend in the road, the black horse **stopped** and reared up suddenly, almost unseating me. I lurched violently onto his neck, and saw that a whole section of the ridge had broken away to crumble down into the White Valley, taking a chunk of the road with it. What remained was

narrow and badly eroded on one side, and though it would still serve a walker or a careful rider, the wagons could not possibly pass along it. I threw my leg over Gahltha's back and slipped to the ground, aware the landslide must be recent since the messenger from Sutrium had not mentioned it when he visited Obernewtyn a mere seven days ago.

'Damn,' I muttered. In drier weather we might simply have run the wheels along the verge, but this soon after thaw, the ground was soggy and the wagons would sink to their axles. I sent Gahltha back to warn the others and began to cast about for boughs and flat stones.

After the black horse had galloped off, I laboured in silence, laying a border to increase the width of the road on its inner edge. The passage between Guanette and the mountain pass that led to Obernewtyn had been eroding ever since I had first travelled along it years back as a sentenced Misfit. Since we had taken over Obernewtyn the Teknoguild had spoken many times of the need to repair it but they had done nothing for fear of drawing unwanted attention to the valley. For this reason, travel into the White Valley had always been limited to small expeditions on foot or horseback. It was only in recent times that discreet ramps had been created from scree for wagons.

It was hot muddy work, but I found myself enjoying the simplicity of the makeshift repairs. I tried to imagine a life in which no more than this was required of me and then realised that such an existence could seem desirable only to one who did not have to do it all the time. The truth was that I enjoyed being mistress of a guild at Obernewtyn, despite all the meetings and negotiations and the sheer amount of talk it required. My role would change now, though, for there was no longer any need to rescue Misfits.

When the wagons arrived, Louis, Kella and Zarak alighted at once to sigh and shake their heads, before unhitching the horses. Dragon climbed down too, casting me a look of violent blue-eyed dislike. As Maruman leapt down beside her and pressed himself against her legs, I wondered somewhat bitterly why she did not feel any antipathy for the old cat, since I had only been able to enter her mind with his help.

Katlyn and Darius elected to remain in the wagons and watch over the soldierguards, but Garth descended after an argument with himself over whether or not to bother. Once he saw the broken road though, he began to mutter about this shoring-up technique and that stress.

It took us two hours to widen the road enough for the wagons to pass. Katlyn suggested we eat midmeal before continuing, but I did not want to stop until we had reached the White Valley. The habit of caution was strong, and given what the Sutrium messenger had said about robber bands

terrorising remote holdings, I deemed it wiser not to break that habit just yet. Admittedly the messenger had been referring to the upper lowlands, but it was possible that robbers might roam higher.

When we set off, Dragon sat beside Louis Larkin, with Maruman perched contentedly and rather smugly on her lap. Zarak now rode Zade, for despite being a mare, Lo was large and strong and she had no difficulty in pulling a wagon alone. Leaving Zarak and Zade to accompany the lead wagon, I dropped behind to speak to Kella, but she had climbed into the back to help Darius tend to the injured soldierguard whose bandages had been dislodged.

My feelings towards the soldierguards were ambivalent. Having them in our care all through the wintertime had forced them to see us as other than the monstrous freaks that the Council had painted us, but these men had killed people and horses I had known and cared for. Rushton, ever focused on the present, had said the most important thing was that they had agreed to tell the new Council of Chieftains exactly what had happened in the White Valley, when Malik had betrayed us. It had also been Rushton who had suggested that since I required two wagons, I should use them to take the soldierguards to Sutrium. They were not entirely recovered, but the fact that both Kella and Darius would travel with us, meant they would be well cared for, and by travelling now, they would have time to recover from the journey before the trial.

Garth spoke, interrupting my thoughts to suggest that, given the delay, we might as well spend the night at the Teknoguild encampment in the White Valley. 'You will never reach Rangorn before night now, and Maryon did not urge particular haste, did she?'

'Maryon would never be so hasty as to urge haste,' I said ironically. 'She said only that there was danger on the West Coast and that I am needed to deal with it.'

'I do not see how, since the ships that the rebels were building to get to the West Coast have been destroyed. Dardelan's message said there is now no chance of landing a force on the West Coast for at least another half year.'

'Not a force,' I said, 'but I am sure that Dardelan's request for a plast suit means he will try to send a spy across the Suggreddoon.' We were transporting two of the fragile plast suits, which the Teknoguild had made with some difficulty during the wintertime; one was for Dardelan and the other was a gift of thanks for the leader of the Twentyfamilies gypsies. Swallow had requested it when Rushton asked what reward he wanted for thwarting Malik's murderous intentions.

Garth was regarding me narrowly. 'You are thinking of offering yourself as their spy?'

I hesitated, but Garth, unlike the other guildmasters, regularly flouted the unspoken convention that the leaders of guilds ought not to put themselves into dangerous situations. 'It would make some sense of Maryon sending me to Sutrium,' I finally said.

The Teknoguildmaster grinned. 'Very noble of you to ensure the veracity of the Futuretell guildmistress's prophecy.' Then he grew serious. 'I daresay the others would protest, but it does make sense. After all, you are powerful enough to coerce the guards on the other bank, so you wouldn't be killed as soon as you climbed out of the water, and you can farseek Merret or one of the other trapped Misfits immediately to find out what has been going on there.'

'If they are alive,' I thought. I had once asked Maryon how they fared and had been rewarded with a futuretelling involving a ship fish and sickness. A simple yes would have been nice.

Garth continued. 'I must say I am curious to learn how the Herders managed to sneak a ship into port, burn the rebels' half-constructed ships to the water line and sneak out again, all unnoticed. And what was the use, since the rebels will simply build more ships anyway?'

'We will know better once we meet Brydda,' I said.

'Why don't you ask Brydda to ride to Saithwold with you? I doubt anyone would have the courage to hinder the Black Dog, even Chieftain Vos.' Garth stumbled a little over the unfamiliar title. Under the old regime, town leaders had been called Councilmen, but the messenger from Sutrium had informed us that the rebel leaders who had replaced the Councilmen were henceforth to be known as Chieftains. As their leader, Dardelan was to be known as High Chieftain.

'Maryon did not foresee trouble in Saithwold, but it is true that Vos has no love of Misfits and Khuria's letters to Zarak certainly suggest that something is going on there,' I said. 'It may be an idea to stop at an inn on the road and see if we can glean any gossip about Saithwold.'

'We can be sure that Vos is unhappy with Dardelan being made High Chieftain,' Garth said dryly.

'I wonder how Malik took it,' I said.

Garth laughed. 'I think it is safe to assume that he loathes it, not only because he coveted the position himself but because he knows that Dardelan means to allow us to make formal charges against him before the elections.'

I frowned. 'Do you think Malik knows the soldierguards intend to testify against him?'

Garth gave me a sardonic look. 'I think that Dardelan's sense of fair play would ensure it.'

I sighed, realising he was right. The new High Chieftain's first decree after being elected ultimate leader of the rebels had been that, after a year, he and all the rebel chieftains would step down from their positions to allow the free election of chieftains by Landfolk. Rushton had thought this sensible as well as honourable, but like most of us he thought Dardelan ought to have kept power for a longer period to ensure the stability of the new regime. Others felt that Dardelan ought not to have given such an undertaking at all, until the West Coast, which was still under Council control, had been secured. But the young rebel was as determined as he was honourable, and the elections were looming.

'Dardelan is not completely naive,' I said. 'Otherwise he would not be insisting on our laying the charges before the elections.'

Garth grunted. 'I think it is only concern for justice that motivates our young High Chieftain. I am sure he would say that justice delayed is justice denied. If he were a little more pragmatic, he might have kept the details of his proposed Beast Charter to himself until after he was elected High Chieftain. He is well liked, and by circulating the Charter of Laws and allowing people time to comment on it and absorb it, he has won a lot of support for it and himself. But circulating the Beast Charter before the election was a mistake. It has alienated most of Dardelan's supporters and enraged his enemies. It might well cost him the election.'

I said nothing. Just before thaw, Dardelan had sent out riders to post copies of the Beast Charter throughout the Land. The charter proposed, among other things, that no beast should be owned by a human, and that all beast labour should be voluntary and paid for in kind if not in coin.

'Surely when it comes time to elect their chieftain, people will remember that it was Dardelan who led the rebels in the virtually bloodless coup that rid the Land of Council and the Herder Faction,' I said.

'Of course, but people always worry about the future,' Garth said. 'Make no mistake, Dardelan will be judged by the Beast Charter, because if he is elected, it is likely to become law.'

'At least all Misfits will vote for Dardelan,' said Zarak stoutly. Zade had slowed so that he could walk alongside Gahltha.

'He knows that we would vote for him if we could,' I corrected. 'Unfortunately Dardelan has to be voted Chieftain of Sutrium by the people of the town and its surrounding region.'

'So we will nowt vote in this election?' Zarak demanded indignantly.

'We would vote for the Chieftain of Darthnor, but Dardelan wants to establish Obernewtyn as

a settlement in its own right before the elections. If that happens, we will vote for our own chieftain.’ Rushton had been ambivalent about Dardelan’s proposal. Having our own chieftain would give Misfits a voice in the running of the Land, but it would also necessitate the Chieftain of Obernewtyn travelling regularly to Sutrium to take part in Council of Chieftains meetings. It was as obvious to Rushton as to the rest of us that he would be our choice as chieftain, and just as obvious to us that he did not relish the thought. There had been some discussion of the matter in a meeting of guildleaders. Some said that the proposed new settlement would cause unTalents to resent us even more than they already did. Others worried about transforming what had been our refuge these long years into a village. The meeting had ended without Rushton making a decision, but he would have to do so before he rode down to Sutrium for the ceremony to formalise the Charter of Laws, which was to take place just before the elections. Dardelan wanted us to lay charges against Malik straight after the ceremony, and before the elections.

‘Complicated,’ Garth grunted, his thoughts no doubt running along similar lines. I said, ‘In any case, to respond to your suggestion, we will stay the night in the White Valley.’

‘Good,’ Garth said. ‘There are a few things I would like to show you, for I know you have an interest in the past that our good leader does not share.’ His expression changed and before I could think of a way to extricate myself from the conversation, he added reproachfully, ‘I must say that is why I was so disappointed to have you vote against opening Jacob Obernewtyn’s tomb. Surely you want to know more about the Beforetime Misfits who once dwelt at Obernewtyn? Or how Hannah Seraphim is connected to Rushton?’

I suppressed a sigh. Garth was aware of my interest in the Beforetimer who had established Obernewtyn, but he did not know why I was interested in her, and of course I could not tell him. I said, ‘I am not convinced that opening Jacob Obernewtyn’s tomb will add to the sum of our knowledge about the Beforetime or indeed of anything. I see no evidence to suggest there would be diaries or journals kept there.’

‘If it is no more than the resting place for a body, why create such a solid structure, and why set it on an obscure path where there are no other graves?’ Garth reasoned. ‘Do you know that it was even marked on Beforetime maps we found of the grounds of Obernewtyn? And it may be that not only do the records we have been searching for lie with Jacob Obernewtyn’s body. Hannah Seraphim’s body might be there as well.’

‘In the same grave?’ I demanded sceptically.

‘The Beforetimers did sometimes bury bondmates together, an’ even whole families, though of course nowt at the same time,’ Zarak broke in with slight apology. ‘But if they put more than one person in a grave, there should ha’ been two names on it and the dates of the birth and death of each.’

Irritation flickered over the big Teknoguildmaster’s ruddy face. ‘If Hannah Seraphim died during or soon after the Great White as we surmise, I doubt there would have been a stone carver handy to chisel another name into the gravestone. And if Hannah is not in that grave, then where is she?’ This last was directed sharply at me. Before I could frame an answer, Garth looked back at Zarak. ‘Besides, the Beforetimers did not always date graves. Jacob Obernewtyn’s was undated.’

‘Maybe dates seemed pointless after the Great White,’ I murmured, but neither of them heard me.

‘Maybe Hannah Seraphim was away from Obernewtyn when the Great White came,’ Zarak said. ‘She might have been visitin’ the Reichler Clinic Reception Centre under Tor mountain. There would ha’ been a lot of coming and gannin’ betwixt the two places.’

‘Anyway,’ I cut in quickly, wanting to end the discussion, ‘even if I had voted to open the grave, Garth, you would still have been refused by all of the other guildleaders, just as on every other occasion you raised the matter since the grave was found.’

Garth scowled. ‘True enough. If Maryon would just ...’

‘She is entitled to her opinion and her visions,’ I said evenly. Inwardly I cringed at my hypocrisy, for I had often wished the Futuretell guildmistress would keep her thoughts and visions to herself.

Garth was not diverted. ‘The trouble is that the others are overly swayed by her opinions because they imagine them to be based on futuretell visions which she chooses not to divulge,’ he growled. ‘Without her influence, I am sure I could have convinced the guildmerge to see it my way.’

‘Maybe she *is* basin’ her resistance on things she has foreseen,’ Zarak suggested.

Fortunately at this moment we reached the scree ramp down to the White Valley. Zarak dismounted, pulled aside the woven foliage that obscured it and scrambled down. The two wagons followed slowly, steadied by Zade and Belya, and checked by ropes belayed around tree trunks, paid out slowly by Gahltha, Lo and the big piebald Welt. When the others were all safely down, I drew the foliage screen back in place.

Once I had joined the others on the floor of the valley I felt less anxious, though I was never

able to feel entirely at ease here. Nor was I alone in this. The White Valley was generally regarded as being cursed by numerous tormented Beforetime wraiths, and maybe it was, I thought soberly. I did not know what had stood here in the Beforetime or what had become of it, but the valley attracted trouble like a lodestone attracts steel. The renegade Herder, Henry Druid, and almost all of his armymen, had established a secret encampment here, and most had perished in a terrible firestorm. I, too, would have died here, if not for the intervention of the mysterious Agyllian birds who had taught my body to heal itself. And it was here in the White Valley that Malik had betrayed us.

But cursed or not, the White Valley was undeniably beautiful. The trees were a delicate haze of bright new green around damp charcoal black trunks and branches, and shoots and buds were bursting out of the dark rich earth on all sides. The ground was soft, so we kept to the stone-studded track laid by the teknoguilders. This soon brought us to an avenue where the branches of trees had been interwoven overhead, creating a green tunnel. This was new, and I guessed that Garth had commanded it to conceal the track, part of which had been visible from the ridge road. If anything the Teknoguildmaster was more concerned now about Landfolk stumbling onto the site of his guild's research than before the Council had been overthrown.

We were all walking now, excepting Katlyn and Darias, and the two soldierguards, for the wagons were hard to haul over the uneven track. Louis Larkin was walking behind them with Dragon, while Garth strode ahead, eager to reach the settlement his guild had begun to establish at the foot of Tor. His intention was to make legal claim on the land where it stood, which included the cavern leading to the submerged Beforetime city under Tor.

'I always think of Jik when I come here,' said Zarak, catching up with me. 'If I had nowt been farseeking without a guide an' without permission, I would nivver have made contact with him, and we nivver would have brought him out of his cloister in Darthnor. He would nivver have come here to die.'

'You think he would have fared well among Herders?' I asked. 'It may be that something more dreadful would have happened if he had remained in the cloister.'

'More dreadful than dying in a firestorm?' Zarak asked in a low voice.

'Jik was terrified of being taken to Herder Isle because he said the priests knew about Misfits and experimented on them. Maybe if he had stayed in the cloister, that was what would have happened to him.'

Zarak was silent for a time, then he said, 'Why do ye suppose they take some Misfits an' burn

others like they did seditioners?’

‘Jik said they were always more interested in children with Misfit powers, and that some abilities interested them more than others.’

‘Maybe they wanted to train them to catch us,’ Zarak suggested.

‘Maybe they tried,’ I conceded. ‘I am sure they would have found some way to justify using Misfits even though we are supposed to be inhabited by demons.’

Zarak made no response and when I glanced at him he was looking at me. For a moment I saw myself reflected in his eyes, a long lean woman with a tight-bound plait and overly serious moss-green eyes. I said gently, ‘Do not blame yourself for Jik’s death, Zar. Many things happened to bring him here, not simply the foolish disobedience of one young farseeker.’

‘Do ye remember that dog Jik insisted had to be rescued with him?’ Zarak said suddenly, half smiling. ‘He was th’ ugliest creature I ever saw.’

‘The Herders breed them to look like that,’ I said. ‘His name was Darga.’

‘Yes, that was it. I had forgotten.’ Zarak gave me a look of curiosity, which I pretended not to notice. It was generally assumed that Darga had perished with Jik in the firestorm, but the Agyllian birds that saved my life claimed he lived and that he would return when it was time for me to leave Obernewtyn to undertake the final stage of my quest to destroy deadly weaponmachines left by the Beforetimers.

I had been waiting so many years for that moment that I sometimes wondered if it would ever come.

Zarak had drawn ahead, no doubt discouraged by my silence, but soon Kella took his place. I glanced at her, wondering if she would regret her decision to leave Obernewtyn to run the healing centre she had established in the old Sutrium Herder cloister during the rebel uprising. She and Dardelan had developed a genuine liking and respect for one another during that time, so it was hardly surprising when he asked her to come and run it and establish a teaching centre for healers. But Kella’s acceptance had startled me.

The Healer guildmaster had been enthusiastic about his guilden’s new venture, and Rushton, too, praised it as an excellent way of further impressing ordinary Landfolk with the usefulness of Misfit abilities. I seemed to be alone in feeling that Kella’s departure marked the end of an era that would never come again. Of course it was time for us to grow and live in the Land openly. Wasn’t that what we had fought and longed for? Yet my heart ached for the old days when Obernewtyn had

been our secret refuge, just as it had been for the Beforetime Misfits.

Kella gave me a quizzical look, no doubt sensing something of my feelings.

‘I was just thinking of the Beforetimers,’ I told her quickly.

To my surprise she bridled fiercely. ‘We are not like them. We would never do to our world what they did to theirs.’

‘*Would we not?*’ I wondered morosely. Or was it only that we had not the ability to destroy as efficiently as they had done?

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