

THE STONES OF SHARNON

by

Ann Miller

Something's gone wrong. I should have been recalled by now; drawn back through the Gate, debriefed. Yet here I am, still on this strange and terrible world where people have the mental power to literally move mountains; where animals possess intelligence and abilities far beyond what is normally expected; where what you see isn't always what you think you're looking at.

Yes, I realize that "any technology, sufficiently advanced, can appear as magic," but I don't speak of wondrous technology. I speak of witchery.

As I plodded along the trail, returning to my camp near the Gatepoint after buying a few supplies I hoped I wouldn't need at a nearby farmhold, I admitted this wasn't the first and only case of delayed recall. Timelines can get out of sync between Gates, no matter how carefully calibrated. It had even happened to me once before, which had turned out to be one of my best finds. It was this world making me jumpy—the thought of continuing my charade among people with such awesome powers, among things so alien to me.

Oh, God. The Gate. Please, tonight, the Gate.

As a Mineral and Energy Scout—one of the few females in the profession—I'm fully aware of the risks I take with each assignment to scout a strange world for those things prized in the galactic community. But that profit-sharing is

what keeps us going back for the one big strike, gamblers and prospectors that we are. I sought an energy source here. I got a lot more than I bargained for.

There's a limit to what can be learned through a Gate, hence our value as Scouts willing to brave relative unknowns to find what the galaxy so badly needs, and is willing to pay well to obtain. We'd researched enough about this world to learn many of the inhabitants have telepathic abilities—a gross understatement as it's turned out—and to find out some details about the geography and history; enough to formulate a mind-implanted cover story. But from what I've discovered, the protection of the implant is questionable. There are those here who could strip away such a cover as easily as peeling ripe fruit.

My telltale buzzed, sending its subaural message that someone or something large enough to trigger its sensors was ahead on the trail. Twilight was approaching even though the late sun still clung to the horizon, glowing blood-red. I reached inside my leather vest for my hand-pulser, just in case, and approached the curve of the trail cautiously.

Sounds of a struggle reached my ears before I got within eyesight, and I broke into a trot. I could always duck into the bushes if inadvisable to join the fight.

A large man sat astride a prancing gray horse, helmed and mail-shirted, while creatures humanoid in form but animal-featured battled with a man and a woman. One of the beasts grabbed the young woman, yanking her toward the mounted warrior, and her cloak flew open to reveal she was pregnant. Though her defender put up a valiant fight, he was no match for the half dozen creatures attacking, and in spite of her stubborn struggles with her captor, she wasn't much help in the battle.

Well, maybe my pulser could even the unfair odds a bit. Aiming, I pressed the button, expecting the beast grappling with the girl to crumple, stunned. Instead, with an unearthly scream, it burst into flames, igniting from within to send orange and red shafts of light shooting from its eyes and mouth and it . . . it disappeared! A strange warmth

pulsed against me beneath my vest, but I had no time to investigate the cause.

"Witch!" roared the mounted man, and aimed a dull silvery rod at me. Shedding my pack I rolled, firing my pulser, rewarded with another brilliant display of fireworks as a second beast exploded in flames that weren't flames—flames of light. From my side vision, I saw the girl scramble to the edge of the road, trying to elude the grasp of a beast. I flamed it, then aimed for the horse's rider. He was faster. Such a blow struck me, from within not without, that I fell forward into the dust of the road, gasping in agony at the brilliant searing pain filling my head, consuming me, destroying me . . .

Joggling awoke me. I'd been thrown across a horse's back and the pace was quite brisk. I raised my head with a moan and a woman's voice said, "Lenil, she wakes!"

The joggling stopped and strong hands lifted me from the horse and held me as I stood beside the animal, trying to sort my bearings. The pain was gone, which was very important to me at that moment. I looked into the face of the young man whose hands braced me. He was tall, slender but broad-shouldered, with ebony hair and eyes of midnight black. Those dark eyes swept over me, taking in my short-cropped reddish hair, light amber eyes closely matching my hair color, the scattering of freckles across my face put there by a dozen suns.

"We thank you for assisting us," said the woman from her seat atop the horse. "Are you seriously injured?"

"I don't think so," I replied, pressing my hand to my head. The man released me, seeing I could stand. "Did I get that man on the horse?" I recognized the mount I stood beside as that same animal.

"No, but his evil servants carried him away bearing Lenil's sword in his side," she told me. I looked up at her. She had the same black hair as the man, but her eyes were a clear gray. They favored so strongly I wondered if they might be brother and sister rather than husband and wife.

"However, I doubt he is dead," the man added, and I

looked back at him. "For my aim was deflected by one of his serving beasts. My thrust only served to unseat him so that we might take his mount."

"It also served to confuse the beasts, allowing us to escape," she pointed out loyally.

"I am Varela," I offered then, knowing one couldn't always simply ask another's name. There was so much, *so much*, to trip me up. "I have no hold or kinsman, being but a simple wanderer."

"I am called Lenil. This is my cousin, Riatha," the man supplied in return.

"We are twice cousins," Riatha added, "as our mothers are sisters and fathers are brothers."

"We must hasten," Lenil urged. "Here, mount behind Riatha, and I will lead . . ."

"I can walk. I'll just . . ." My hand went to my shoulder where my journey pack strap should be and found nothing. I quickly looked to the horse to see if it might hang there, but no pack. It was gone, and with it, my only hope of ever getting off this magic-riddled world. For inside my pack were not only my reports encoded on my mag-cubes, but my Gate-finder. It didn't actually find the Gate; it answered the seeker-probe from the other side. No Gate-finder, no going back.

I tightly reined my rising panic. "I carried a pack. It had a strap for my shoulder, and was made of leather. Did you . . . is it . . ." I couldn't force the question out, too afraid of the answer.

"We did not see such a pack," Riatha said, exchanging a look with Lenil. "We were intent only upon escape. Was this pack very important?"

"Very. I must go back for it. It contains something vital to me."

"It will not be there," Lenil said, shaking his head. "For the beasts will scavenge, even as they scuttle away, dragging their wounded. Accompany us, Varela. Godron and his beasts will pursue us and you cannot hope to stand alone against them."

He had a point. My sword was gone; my pulser was gone, and my journey pack and all in it. If that bunch would pursue Lenil and Riatha, then I wouldn't have to search for them, but could prepare myself to confront them and reclaim my pack. I glanced around in the gathering twilight.

"My camp is back this way a short distance," I told him. "It's getting dark, and in her condition, your cousin needs rest, especially after what she's just been through." I glanced up. Riatha's pale, pinched face seemed to confirm my words.

"True," Lenil agreed with a nod. With a last longing look at the trail ahead, he turned aside to follow me to my camp. I'd only left behind my sleeping mat and cloak and a couple of skin jugs, as most of what I had was in my journey pack, including my supper.

The camp was undisturbed and I drew out the mat and my cloak from their hiding place and unrolled the mat for Riatha. Lenil offered her water from a jug, then wrapping in her cloak, she lay back gratefully and heaved a tired sigh. Soon her breathing grew even and slow.

Lenil tended the horse, staking it to graze, then built up the fire and struck a flint to it. It was a good thing he had the flint. My lighter was in my pack. He leaned back against the tumbled rocks that protected my little camp and gazed at me from hooded eyes.

"I can tell by your coloring you aren't of the Old Race, as are Riatha and I. Yet I sensed . . . a surge of Power as you joined the battle. Could it have been your weapon you used upon the beasts?"

"I don't think so, Lenil," I replied doubtfully. "It wasn't even supposed to do that, but to deliver unconsciousness only."

"Perhaps it was the nature of the beasts that caused it to function so."

"Yes, that could explain it. What *were* those . . . things, and the man who led them?"

"The foul servants of Godron, a lord of the Dark."

"They seemed to be trying to take Riatha."

"Yes. He desires what grows inside her."

"Then it's his baby?" I sat cross-legged beside the small fire, feeding it dry sticks, and at my question he shifted his position, jackknifing one leg and propping his arm on it. His hand knotted into a fist and once again that measuring look swept over me.

"Our mothers carry the bloodline of the Old Ones. Riatha displayed talent and upon her sixteenth year was sent to receive training in those ways of Power. She should have gone before, but my aunt—her mother—could not bear to part with her as Riatha is her only surviving child, as I am my mother's. Our families were struck by a fever when Riatha was but an infant and I was a child of six years."

That made him twenty-two or -three. I'd thought him older. There was something mature about his face and manner that belied such young years.

"Though Riatha was well guarded upon that journey," he continued, "Godron and his forces overpowered her guards and took her. Godron has long coveted Riatha, once attempting to obtain her father's blessing to wed her. Godron, evil servant of the Dark that he is, knowing Riatha possessed talent, plotted to produce an heir to help him rule in the ways of Darkness. It mattered not to Godron that to bed a woman usually takes away her talent. Thus he forced his unholy seed upon her and, by following vile and evil rituals, intends to insure the child will serve the Dark."

I handed across a water jug and he sipped thoughtfully, his eyes reflecting the fire's golden flames. "I—a man—was visited by a True-dreaming after Riatha's kidnapping. It was made known to me that the babe she carries is female, and within this babe is not only the Dark of Godron but the Light of Riatha. The dream revealed that Riatha must undergo purification at the Stones of Sharnon, a place of ancient power lost in the mists of time and shown to me in the dream. The Dark will be stripped from the unborn child, and she will be born of the Light and of great Power."

"That's what you were trying to do when you were attacked? Take Riatha to these stones to save her baby?"

He nodded, and looked down at the jug he held as if he

wished it contained the strongest of spirits. I knew how he felt. The weight of my lost pack sat inside my chest like a rock.

His dark eyes met mine. "It took long and long to prepare her rescue, and now she nears her time. We must reach the Stones of Sharnon before she births or . . ." He seemed unable to continue, looking over at his sleeping cousin. "We *must* reach the Stones of Sharnon." With a tired sigh, his gaze again shifted to me. "We should rest. The way is difficult and we will need our strength."

I tongued the tooth that set the telltale but received no confirming buzz. Again I pressed the tooth. Nothing. Oh, great. Whatever Godron had hit me with must have burned it out.

"Lenil, should we stand watch? I'm mind-blind and unable to sense danger."

"Yes. I have a small sensing ability, but not enough to trust in these circumstances."

"I'll take the first watch," I volunteered.

"Very well." He moved close to Riatha and stretched out on the ground, rolled up in my cloak, and pillowed his head on the horse's saddle pad.

I judged three hours from the near-full moon's travel and woke Lenil to take my place. I wrapped in my cloak and lay down, positive I wouldn't sleep for all the despair and bleak thoughts swirling through my head, but my next awareness was of Lenil waking me. I found it difficult to stay awake my second watch. I fed the fire, listened to the soft shuffling of the horse nearby, and tried to blank my mind from all that useless fretting and worry. Finally it was time to wake Lenil again, and I slept dreamlessly until he woke me to a pearling sky.

We broke camp and I offered Riatha water while Lenil saddled the horse. Today we'd have to take time to find food, as a pregnant woman simply can't be dragged over hill and dale without eating, no matter how important the mission. Lenil set Riatha upon the horse and we quickly moved out. We reached a small village shortly before noon

where Lenil bought travel provisions and two swords, purchasing them right off the owners as the little village boasted no swordsmith or weapons shop. Too bad I couldn't buy a new pulser.

From a nearby farm, Lenil bought two sturdy, shaggy ponies that would bear us much more swiftly than our own feet. Shortly thereafter we stopped in a small glade and ate some of our provisions, filled our jugs at a trickling spring, and allowed Riatha to walk about and stretch cramped muscles.

I felt caught up; drawn along. I should be honing my sword, plotting an ambush or something. Instead I fled from the very ones who had what I wanted most. At least I *hoped* they had it. They could easily discard it, not recognizing its contents as anything of value. Which, of course, it wasn't to anyone but me.

Lenil set a punishing pace and soon we reached a mountain range and started scaling the narrow, steep path. Lenil rode the gray horse and Riatha and I followed on the ponies. We made camp in the pass itself that evening. Lenil gazed back down the steep way we'd ascended, searching for signs of a campfire indicating our enemies were in pursuit, and I went to stand beside him.

"They are there," he assured me. "But without a campfire to signal us of their presence."

We had a fire of our own, positioning it out of view of any watchers below. Lenil handed around rations and I moved away from the fire to sit on a rock and brood alone. I took out my slim dagger that I carried inside my inner vest pocket and cut a piece off my stick of jerky. Recalling that sensation of warmth I'd felt during the battle, I realized it had issued from the area of my dagger's pocket. I'd traded for that slender weapon at a fair I'd run across in my scouting. I don't know why it intrigued me, not being particularly attractive. I studied it in the moonlight. The handle was smoothly carved of some dull, dark stone and the blade was etched with faint markings. I didn't see how it could have been the warmth's source.

Slicing another bite from my jerky stick, I chewed thoughtfully, staring back down the night-shrouded trail. Maybe they weren't in pursuit. Maybe Godron had died and absolutely nobody followed us. Which meant that I was traveling farther and farther away from my Gate-finder.

Perhaps in the morning, instead of going on, I should secure myself in a place of ambush and see if they followed, and if not, go back to hunt them. With a sigh, I wiped my dagger against my breeches and replaced it in my vest pocket, then rejoined Riatha and Lenil at the fire.

The morning found me riding right along with my trail-mates, as though their quest were mine. And maybe it had become mine. Who knows.

Step after jarring step our mounts carried us down the narrow, winding path. Though I kept a close watch, I never spotted anyone descending behind us. But most of the path remained concealed from me at any given point.

By the time we reached bottom it was past noon and Riatha looked ready to fall from her pony in a swoon. "Lenil," I called out, nodding in her direction. He caught my meaning. We stopped beside a nearby stream but barely took time to eat journeycakes and let the horses drink before pushing on. Riatha, for all her apparent exhaustion, seemed eager as Lenil, so again we climbed onto our mounts and set out.

At twilight we entered a clearing to see a circle of dark gray monoliths, giant sentinels brooding over a small overgrown ruin that may once have been a temple. The stones themselves drew Lenil and he went directly to them, dismounting and approaching without taking his eyes from them.

". . . as it was in my dream . . ." he murmured, then quickly he turned and lifted Riatha from her pony. She sagged in his arms.

"Oh, Lenil, I think . . . it is my time," she gasped, a grimace pulling her delicate features.

"Then we must hasten." He strode toward the circle of stones with her in his arms.

I walked closer to the monoliths, staring up at them. The

tops were smooth, rounded, and set into each one was a large dull stone similar to my dagger's handle. Runes, holding no meaning for me, etched the monoliths' surfaces.

"The Keystone," Lenil said to his cousin.

"It's here, secured in my cloak . . . ahh . . ." Her words ended in a groan as a contraction caught her in its grip.

"Riatha, it's not here! Riatha . . . here, stand a moment . . ." Frantically he searched the rather bedraggled cloak, then seized her by the shoulders, almost shaking her. "It is missing. Did you place it elsewhere?"

"No!" She grabbed the cloak, searching. "During the struggle, it must have . . . ohh . . . when we were attacked . . ." She moaned, clearly caught up in labor.

A look I've rarely seen on any being's face swept over Lenil's lean, handsome features. I recalled the sentence that had remained unfinished and knew he'd have to kill this child if it was born without purification.

"But it must be here!" Riatha insisted, her small hands frantically patting the garment. "I *feel* it!"

Once again I felt that warmth against my chest where my dagger rested, and I took it out to see that the handle was no longer dull and dark, but a glowing blue. Amazed, I held it away from me by the point and the glow increased, sending out shafts of blue light to touch those like jewels on each monolith. As they were so touched, they emitted their own blue glows.

Both heads swiveled to me at once, as if drawn on a string.

"Lenil, look! Varela possesses a thing of Power . . . she holds a Key!"

"Varela!" Lenil cried. "Varela, come to us!"

Gathering her last ounce of strength, Riatha straightened and sketched a sign in the air before me, leaving tracings that burned blue and red in the air for several seconds. The runes on the stones glowed in response, and the markings on the dagger's blade radiated in kind. I held the dagger high, and they each placed their right hands over mine where it clasped the point of the dagger. Curving blue

shafts of light swept from stone to stone, returning as if to feed from the dagger, finally enveloping the three of us.

Lenil chanted words I didn't recognize and a blinding blue flash transported us inside the circle. A stone bier occupied the center, and quickly Lenil placed his laboring cousin upon it.

"Give me the dagger! Help her!" he commanded, and I sprang to comply.

Removing my own cloak, I made a bed for the coming child, then locked hands with Riatha. Lenil chanted ritual words and made ritual moves, but I was soon too busy with Riatha and the emerging baby to follow his actions. I laid the wet and crying newborn upon Riatha's stomach and Lenil severed the cord with the glowing dagger. With that action, we were engulfed in a second blue flash that bore us outside again. Riatha lay on the ground with the baby resting on her stomach, the two of us kneeling beside her. I quickly swaddled the baby in my cloak and nestled it in the crook of Riatha's arm. Her face seemed to glow in the moonlight as she looked up into Lenil's eyes.

"Thank you, my cousin, my friend. Thank you for the life of my child . . ."

"Indeed, it is truly your child now," came Godron's snarl as he stepped from the shadows, accompanied by a large group of his ugly servants.

Lenil lunged, but two of the beasts seized his arms and held him fast, as if to force him to watch what would happen.

Godron spared me a glance. "Ah, the witch." I feared he'd use that rod on me again, but instead he sketched a sign in the air before me. I realized he thought to immobilize me, to force me to watch also. However his signing failed, though I froze and pretended.

"This mewling creature serves me no good now," Godron sneered, looking down at his own tiny newborn with nothing but contempt. He drew forth his sword and tested its sharpness against his thumb, then, snatching the baby

from Riatha's arms, placed the sword as if to sever its little head!

The dagger lay close to Riatha's feet where Lenil had dropped it when the beasts grabbed him. With a move inspired more by panic than anything, I snatched it and flipped it with all my training and skill. It went true, burying to its hilt in Godron's throat, eliciting a scream that ended in a gurgle. The baby slipped from his grip and I leaped for it, but Riatha had gained her feet in spite of just giving birth, inspired by fear for her child's life, and swept the falling baby into her arms.

The beasts restraining Lenil loosed their grip and all howled eerily, fell onto all-fours, and, changing into the hairy animals they really were, loped away into the darkness.

Lenil embraced Riatha and the baby, pressing his face to her hair. I stood over the prone Godron, surveying my handiwork, and incidentally checking him for my journey pack. He didn't have it.

"You weren't a very nice person," I said, and stepped on his chest to withdraw my knife. I bent and wiped it clean of his tainted blood on his own breeches, then held it up in the moonlight to look at it. Once again I saw the dull handle, the scratched blade, as I remembered with awe the flashes of brilliant power that had sprung from it.

Lenil came to stand beside me and caught up one of Godron's wrists. "Help me drag this carrion to the woods."

I grabbed Godron's other wrist and together we dragged the corpse to the clearing's edge and shoved it with our feet into the bushes for the night things.

We camped there by the monoliths, sleeping without a watch, those great Stones serving as our Guardians; waking only when the new baby demanded nourishment from her mother.

The morning dawned clear and cool and I rose at first light, searching the area for my pack. Since Godron hadn't had it, I'd hoped one of the beasts had worn it and dropped it when transformed. I found Godron's mount—he'd ac-

quired another—and no journey pack hung from the saddle pad. I led the horse back to the clearing.

“Your pack?” Lenil inquired as I approached.

I shook my head. Lenil came to me and placed an arm around my shoulders, nearly undoing me. Tears filled my eyes and my throat clogged so that no recognizable words would emerge.

“We shall search as we retrace our path, as we must to reach our home,” he comforted.

But no journey pack littered the side of the road. We eventually reached a fork in the road that would lead to their family hold, and we stopped for a rest break and allowed the horses to graze. I sat down beside Riatha as she laid her new daughter to her breast.

“What will you name her?” I asked.

“Oh, we shall have to hold a Naming,” Riatha replied, smiling radiantly at me. “She is a very special child. And I . . . I have felt a stirring since that time in the Stones, as if my talent might live again.”

“That’s wonderful,” I said, smiling, knowing how important it was to her—probably vital on this world. I drew out my dagger. “In that case, you should have this.”

A tiny gasp escaped her lips and her hand reached for it even as she said, “But I cannot accept such a valuable thing from you.”

“Its value lies in the talent to use it. I’ve owned it quite a while, and knew nothing of its Power.”

Lenil joined us. “It must be what I sensed when you joined us in battle on the trail.” He took the knife to study it. “Are you sure you wish to relinquish it?”

I nodded. “It’s meant for someone like Riatha . . . not me.”

Lenil handed Riatha the dagger and she held it on the baby’s stomach. Momentarily the handle awoke and swirled like stirred blue paint; like a great velvet galaxy of space and stars. Riatha raised her eyes to mine. “Or for someone such as this one,” she said softly.

“See?” I told her, smiling. “Didn’t I tell you?”

Lenil regarded me sideways. "Sometimes your speech is strange. I feel you must come from a very distant place."

"Yes. Very distant." I picked a strand of grass and drew it between my fingers. "I entered this world through a Gate to . . . explore. My key to returning was in my journey pack. Without it, I can't go home." I rose, wandered off to stare out over the forested hills, wishing I knew what to do. I could continue hanging around the Gatepoint, but to what purpose without the Gate-finder? Sooner or later something would trip me up on this treacherous world. Sooner or later.

"Varela?" Once again Lenil's strong arm clasped firmly about my shoulders. Riatha came to my other side, holding the baby who now slept.

"You bravely came to our aid," she said. "Your dagger gained us entry to the Stones of Sharon so that my baby could be born of the Light, then you killed him who would have killed that very child. You did these things instead of searching for your pack, and as a result, you cannot go home."

I gazed down at the ground and shrugged.

"We wish to extend to you our kinship," Lenil took up. "To give you our oath of sword and shield, blood and bread, which by your actions you've already given us. Come with us to our hold and be our kinswoman."

I looked from one to the other, warmed by relief and a deep gratitude. "Thank you. Already I feel a closeness to you from sharing the trials we faced. I don't think I could find a better family anywhere in the galaxy."

They smiled at me, then at each other. "Well. It is settled," Lenil said with satisfaction, turning to fetch our mounts.

I swung up onto the back of Godron's horse, a sleek black animal that, like the gray one, carried no taint of his evil, and seemed amiable to belonging to me. I held for a moment as they rode off ahead of me, down the road that would lead to my new home and family.

Such is the life of a Scout, gamblers every one. Some you

win, some you lose. And who knows? Someday I may attend a fair, or meet a trader, and there'll be my Gatefinder. But by then, it probably won't do me much good, as any seeker-probe would be long gone. At least with Lenil and Riatha, I won't be stumbling around alone on this weird world, committing perhaps fatal blunders.

With a last glance in the direction of the Gatepoint, I turned and rode after my companions.

Afterword

Long, long ago in a galaxy far far away—my junior high school library—I found The Stars Are Ours by Andre Norton and it changed my life forever. Through that book, she first showed me the way to the stars, and from it, I discovered Witch World. Now I have the privilege of sharing in that universe in a unique and special way.

Why this story? Because after sweating in a vacuum for a week, unable to string together two coherent words, I realized I had to stop trying to write Andre Norton's story in Andre Norton's words and write my story in my words on her world. "Stones of Sharnon" grew from the self-question, how would it feel to find myself on the Witch World? Scary, that's how—thus Varela, my intrepid Energy Scout, trapped on the wrong side of a Gate. I am proud she lives in this book.

Ad Astra.

—ANN MILLER