

# THE WHITE ROAD

by

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The early winter sky was a dirty gray the day Nordendale's men returned from the war. They had marched and ridden out, banners unfurled, helms gleaming in the sun, but returned as stragglers, grimy with the dirt of the road and battle, their uneven column stretched for a quarter of a mile. They returned victorious, having helped drive the Hounds of Alizon from High Hallack, but their haunted eyes, the wounds they bore, the very stoop of their shoulders, witnessed that even in victory, they had lost.

Their lord and his heir were dead. The Dales they returned to had felt the sting of the invaders' attack; the harvest was poor and fields lay untilled. Not one family had emerged unscathed from the final battle at Ruther's Pass.

Saren left her work in the inn when the call came to join the other watchers, her hair tied back in a long braid, wearing men's clothing that hung a size too big on her bony figure. Having turned sixteen this past autumn, she had known nothing but times of trouble in the Dales. The war had dragged on for a score of years, coming to a head only this past year when Wereriders from the Waste, the men of High Hallack, combined with fleets of the Sulcar, to finally put an end to the Alizon menace.

As she watched Gully, with his arm in a sling, avoiding

her gaze, the haywright Capper was carried on a stretcher for he had lost both legs. Big Ran Jenner passed, reduced to a frame as skinny as her own. Theodric's son Nichol came walking alone, carrying his father's axe.

There were no cheers raised to greet them. Only eyes as haunted as those of the returning men, eyes searching the ragged ranks, turning away when a loved one was not to be seen.

Saren turned away herself. A sick feeling rose in her, but it was revulsion at herself. The face she missed was that of her betrothed, Erard, and her first thought had been, by the Hunter's Cup, I'm free! Only gladness quickly soured into guilt. It did not matter that their marriage had been arranged to serve their fathers, nor that—the Moon knew why—Erard himself seemed pleased with the bargain. A man had died in defense of his land and that was no cause for joy. Was she so small-minded that she set another's life against her own happiness?

"Your pardon . . . ?"

Saren started at a touch on her elbow. A stranger regarded her with an apologetic look. But a few years older than herself, he was worn and thin, his clothing threadbare, leaning on a crutch. One leg was shorter and thinner than the other. Another victim of the war.

He pointed to the battered sign hanging above the door. "Is this still an inn?"

"The Herdsman's Halt," Saren replied. "Finest in the Dale. The only one in the Dale, actually."

A brief smile touched the stranger's lips. "Can I get a meal—and a room for the night?"

Saren nodded. "You've picked a poor time of year for traveling," she said, stepping aside to allow him entrance.

The smell of food mingled with that of sour ale and old body odor in a dark room where a broad hearth formed most of a wall. A trestle table with benches, an ale barrel by a smaller table stacked with plates and tankards, and a pair

of wooden settles near the hearth were the only furnishings.

"I thought it a good time." Awkwardly he shook out his cloak and laid it across the back of one of the settles, then dropped down. "What with the invaders finally defeated."

"I meant the weather."

He shrugged. "I had nothing before I marched to war and less now. Winter, summer—it makes no difference when you have no home."

"But you can at least camp out-of-doors in the summer."

"One can camp out-of-doors in the winter as well—it's just harder." He stretched out his crippled leg, moving it with his hands into comfortable position. Looking up, he caught her half-shamed glance. "I got this three years ago," he said. "There's not much work for a soldier who can no longer march."

"You were a lord's man?"

"No. I sold my sword as a guardsman in Jorby for a while. Later I rode with Elsdon. Then I got this." He touched his leg. "A wise woman took me in and let me stay on while I mended—fetching and carrying and the like. The work, little though it was, kept my leg from stiffening worse. It was she that told me. . . ." He paused and that half-smile touched his lips again. "Your pardon. I talk too much sometimes. But mine has been a lonely road. I fell in with your men, and they weren't much for talking."

What did the wise woman tell you? Saren wondered, intrigued. But aloud she only observed: "We never had much—and have less now."

The stranger showed a coin in the palm of his hand. "I can pay."

"I didn't doubt that."

She regarded him contemplatively, wondering at the things he'd seen and done. If she'd been born a man, instead of being locked into a Dalesgirl's narrow life—if she'd been free to wander and see the world . . .

The stranger mistook her look. "Did you lose someone?"

"My betrothed."

"I'm sorry."

As she was not, she thought again. Erard's father had a farm and liked his drink. Her own father had seen the profit to be gained in an alliance with a family able to provide cheap provisions for the inn and needed a future for a gawky daughter. A simple bargain had been struck, with her like a coin.

All over now. Her father had died last year, defending the lord's cattle against a far-ranging band of the invaders. Her betrothed fell at Ruther's Pass. All bargains were finished and there was no one but her mother left to make new ones. But Saren didn't intend to be a coin anymore. If a crippled man could travel the Dales in winter, then so could she. She could . . . She blinked, realizing that the stranger was still watching her.

"We've fresh stew," she said quickly, "and home-brewed ale. Will that do?"

He nodded. "I'll take them here by the hearth if I may. My bones need warming."

Saren brought him a plate of the stew and drew an ale from the barrel, then left him to eat while she returned to her chores.

The next morning she watched him go, trudging off under another dirty gray sky. He went up dale, toward the mountains where only herdsman tended their sheep, instead of south toward the sea where life was somewhat easier. Where had his wise woman bid him to go? she wondered, fingering her braid.

Perhaps he meant to turn off to Grimmerdale. There was a place of mystery there—one of the Old Ones' ruins, standing stones called the Circle of the Toads. But he had not seemed the kind to trust such a chancy site and it was

not a place that a wise woman would bid a Dalesman to seek. Then where? If he went far enough he'd come to the Waste and there was nothing there for anyone.

Saren put his destination out of her mind and concentrated on her own troubles. She could go—there was nothing stopping her. Only go where? Be what? If she was a man . . . She touched her braid again and thought, who was to say she couldn't look like one? She didn't have a woman's shape and with her hair cut short . . . A pleased cat's smile touched her lips. Oh, she liked it.

She rounded the back of the inn and set about her morning chores, humming a tune under her breath. Her mother gave her a frown. Saren paid her no mind. To her mother, she was only free labor. This last day Saren meant to go about her chores, but come tomorrow, her mother could look for new help and would find that it did not come cheap.

It was snowing when Saren slipped out of the inn that night. She closed the door cautiously behind her and turned her face to the sky, letting the snowflakes melt on her skin. She could not have asked for a better night. Even if there was pursuit—though it was unlikely that anyone would search for a runaway inn-brat—this snowfall would cover all tracks.

Shouldering her bag, she set off, taking the same path that the crippled stranger had followed earlier. The bag was stuffed with provisions and a change of clothes, a blanket tied on top and a water sack hung below. A heavy load, but she was a strong girl, used to hard work.

Her journey up the Dale passed in the utter silence of a snowfall. The snow tapered off toward the earlier part of the morning, but it looked as though it would stay, for the temperature had dropped. Wind was busy sweeping drifts into hollows and up against the sides of outcrops and trees. Saren's calves ached. She had not thought she would get

footsore so soon—after all she was used to being on her feet all day—but she'd been up early and worked hard all day and evening, then left without getting any sleep.

She marched resolutely until the trail dipped into a small valley thick with pines. Slipping and sliding down the incline, she soon padded noiselessly under their snow-hung boughs, across a carpet of pine needles. When she reached the far side of the little forest, where the trees thinned out as they began their march up the slopes once more, she let her bag fall and leaned against a tree.

Before she remembered her short supply she wolfed down two dried apples. There were a few coins in the purse at her belt—taken from a pot in her mother's room, fair payment for years of work, she had decided—however in the wilderness, places to buy provisions would be far and few between. She would have to set snares and live by her skill, see how much she remembered from all the tales of travelers and trappers and the like that she'd listened to over the years.

Seran wasn't worried. Filled with her newfound freedom, all guilt forgotten, she had no room for worry. Everything was too new. She was warmly dressed—from the fat herdsman's hat on her head, complete with ear flaps that tied under her chin, to her thick cloak and the boots of sheepskin with the wooly side turned in. She had provisions and a few coins. And, by the Hunter's Cup, she had her freedom! Only one thing remained to completely sever the past.

She drew her sharp knife and, removing her cap, began to saw away long locks of hair. Sharp though the blade was, it still pulled at times, but, eventually, her hair lay in a tangled pile on her lap. What remained on her head was barely an inch or two at its longest. She shivered as the cold touched her scalp and quickly replaced her hat. Digging a hole in the frozen dirt with her knife, she buried the hair, covering it with pine needles. Now her freedom was

complete. Unrolling her blanket, and well bundled against the cold, Saren fell into a deep, well-earned sleep.

She met the road that led to Grimmerdale around mid-morning, pausing there to munch a stick of dried meat. Had yesterday's stranger taken that route? Considering his crippled leg, she did not think he could make very good time and had half expected to come upon him today. Well, if he'd gone to Grimmerdale, he was welcome to it. Saren meant to see something of the world beyond Nordendale's closest neighbor. She passed the road by to continue north.

Just before night settled, she came upon a herdsman's croft set snugly into the side of a hill. The stone walls and turf roof almost appeared to be a part of the land itself. If it had not been for the telltale smoke from its chimney and two men chopping wood outside, she might well have passed it by. She called out in a friendly fashion, taking care to keep her voice somewhat gruff, and was cheered at their welcome.

Father and son, she decided. Wiry, dark-haired men, bearded like goats, in big sheepskin coats. The older man named himself as Forwood, his son as Abear.

"My name's Sardul," Saren told them. "I'm from Jorby originally, but what with the war . . ." She gave a weary shrug.

"That's two of you then," Forwood said, "and in as many days! Is the whole coast moving to the mountains?"

"Two of us?"

Forwood nodded. "There was another lad here yesterday—older than you—with a crooked leg. His name was Carnen—do you know him?"

"Yes . . . yes, I met him—in Ulmsdale, I think it was. I didn't know he'd come this way."

"Looking for a white road," Forwood said.

His son laughed. "And a good time he picked! All roads are white, this time of year."

Saren laughed with them, but she wondered. How had the stranger—Carnen, she corrected herself—managed to come so far, so fast?

"You'll be wanting to stay the night?" Forwood asked.

Saren shook off her thoughts and nodded. "I've coin," she began, but the herdsman shook his head.

"Give us a hand with this wood," he said. "That'll be payment enough."

Saren set her bag down by the croft's door and accepted an axe. The herdsman returned to their work and Saren bent to the task with them, though her mind was more on what Forwood had told her about the crippled stranger than on the work at hand. *Looking for a white road*. Carnen himself had begun to tell her something about what a wise woman had told him. This white road? It did not make any sense.

She met Forwood's wife Signe and their toddling daughter Torrie, both as dark and slender as their menfolk. After a meal of mutton stew, they sat around the croft's wide hearth, drinking mulled home-brewed honey ale and talking. Saren passed on what news she could, gleaned from customers of the inn, but found that Carnen had already told the most of it. When Forwood began on stories, she settled back, pleased to have someone else do the talking, and listened with delight, and some small dread, as he told of That Which Runs the Ridges, and then a tale of snow faeries that made them all laugh.

"Are you looking for a white road, too?" Signe asked as they went to their beds later.

Saren looked up from unrolling her blankets by the fire and shook her head. "I don't even know what that is."

"Some remnant of the Old Ones, I think," Abear said. "That's what I learned from Carnen. They used a pale



stone for their roadworks—did you never see them down by the coast?”

“Not that I remember. We were told to avoid such places.”

Forwood nodded. “It’s well you did. They’re chancy at the best of times.” He scratched at his beard and gave Saren a considering look. “Are you looking for a place to winter, Sardul?”

“Well . . .”

“We don’t have room here, but Bindon has a bigger place—about three days’ march north. He might take you on. Tell him I sent you, lad. Maybe it will help.”

“I . . . thank you.”

The herdsman said a gruff goodnight as the family went to their beds, leaving Saren the hearth. She stretched out on her blankets, but found sleep elusive, for she kept wondering about Carnen’s swift traveling and this white road he seeking. When she finally slept it was to dream fitfully of wise women and ancient ruins, of a crippled man and something that called out to her from a circle of stones to which a white road led.

It snowed again overnight and the day dawned cold with threatening gray skies. Saren took a north trail through the white slopes, blinking at the brightness of the snow. Winter had come to stay.

She passed a number of herdsfolk’s crofts during the morning. A word or two with the friendly folk told her she was on the right trail. Carnen had passed ahead of her, still traveling quickly for all that he had a crippled leg. What Saren tried to decide now, as she continued to tramp northward, was why she was following him.

*Looking for a white road.*

*Some remnant of the Old Ones . . .*

What promise had Carnen’s wise woman given him? What did he look to find at the end of his white road? She

thought of the dreams that had troubled her sleep last night. Something had called to her from a stone henge. It had promised her . . . what? A whisper of summer air in the middle of winter. A hint of wonder. Some marvel stood behind the stones, if she could only find the right road.

Back in the Herdsman's Halt, Saren had heard many old tales. Danger lay in wait for those who meddled with the Old Ones' places of mystery, more so than any gain. Bargains were kept in those sites, but not always in a manner that the seeker had expected.

I'm not a seeker, Saren thought. I'm just . . . curious.

*At the end of a white road*, the memory of last night's dreams whispered to her. *In a circle of stones* . . .

She began to feel as though she'd been ensorcelled. By Carnen, perhaps, or by whatever lay at the end of the white road. What she *should* do was turn around and make for the coast. Instead she trudged on through the snow until night fell, and she couldn't have said why she was continuing. Saren only knew that it was something she had to do.

She slept in a hollow that night, curled in her cloak and blanket, face hidden from the cold. Though it snowed lightly around midnight, she was caught fast in her dreams unaware.

Again she dreamed of the road, her footsteps ringing on its surface. That white ribbon of stone sounded hollow underfoot as it ran on through a shifting dreamscape. Saren glided along as might a ghost, or one of the great silver cats that haunted the mountains. Until, suddenly, the henge loomed before her. The sense of a green promise, summer scents and birdsong, came from between the stones, but all she could see inside was a thick gray mist.

A wooden crutch lay on the pale stone at her feet. She thought of Forwood and his tales. That Which Runs the Ridges. Monsters. All the unknown. Underneath this promise of warmth, she sensed something menacing. Only

there couldn't be any horror in there! A wise woman had told Carnen to seek it out. A wise woman would not knowingly send someone into danger.

*Yes, the voice of her fear whispered inside her. But that wise woman sent him, not you.*

It was cold. Her teeth chattered. And there was the promise of warmth beyond that swirl of mist. She took one step, a second. The mist clung to her face like cobwebs. A third step on and it began to clear. The cold disappeared. She saw a woodland glade, held fast in summer. Her mouth formed a delighted "O," until, rising from the fresh green sward underfoot, pushing aside the sod with bone finger curled like claws, came dead men.

Fear held her motionless until the first fleshless hand rasped across her boots. She cowered away, her skin crawling with revulsion. Something snapped underfoot with the sharp crack of shattered bone. The clawing hands of the dead clutched, and she flailed at them only to—  
—wake up screaming.

The echo of her scream rang in the still mountain air as she sat up, hugging herself. The cold had settled deep in her bones and she shivered as much from it as from the terror she'd woken from.

"Dream," she muttered through chattering teeth. "J-j-just a dream."

Building a fire she huddled over it, waiting for snow to melt in her pot so that she could make tea. Not until the scalding liquid spread its warmth through her was she able to relax. Sweet Gunnora, the dream had been vivid. She was not used to nightmares. This had seemed a warning. She knew as well, without knowing how she knew, that the place she had dreamed of was real and that she would find it. What she did not understand was why.

It was close to dawn now, so rather than trying to sleep longer, she rolled up her blanket, doused the fire with handfuls of snow, and was on her way when the sun came

creeping up above the horizon. She learned that Carnen was still ahead of her from a family of herdsfolk she met later in the morning, but Carnen himself and his white road continued to elude her until she stopped at yet another croft late in the day.

"Bindon's holding is a day and a half's journey from here," the father of the household told her. "But there's nothing in between. Just . . ." He hesitated.

"Just what?" Saren asked.

The herdsman looked uncomfortable. "A road," he said. "Left over from the time of the Old Ones."

"Where does it lead?" Saren asked.

The man shook his head. "No one knows. No one's been fool enough to follow it."

"All the same," Saren said. "I have to go on."

"There's a storm brewing," the herdsman warned.

"I'll be careful."

"It's not care that's needed to survive a storm in these mountains," he told her. "It's shelter and warmth. Blind luck won't get you through."

Saren thought of Carnen who was still ahead of her and of the dreams that held both threat and promise.

"I'll have to trust to luck," she said. "It's all I've got."

The herdsman shrugged. "Well, luck go with you then—with the both of you. I warned your friend as well, but he wouldn't listen either. With a crippled leg, he won't make Bindon's keep by nightfall—that's for sure."

"Thank you for the tea," Saren said. Before the herdsman could continue with his warnings, she set off, leaving him standing and shaking his head as he watched her go.

She found the road of the Old Ones before midnight. The storm still gathered in the night skies above her, clouding the stars. Wind flung sharp pellets of snow against her skin so that she wore a strip of cloth torn from her blanket as a protecting scarf. Drifts filled hollows, making

for deceptive footing. But she found the road. Weary, she sighted down its length, scuffing the toe of one boot against the snow until she'd cleared a slab of the flat rock that formed the road's length.

Easy to find, she thought.

If it was so easy to find, what made it special? Anyone could seek it out, even a crippled man in the first storms of winter. But that didn't gainsay the threat that might lie at its end, for how many *would* follow it? Only the brave or fools sought out the places of the Old Ones. Or those with hidden knowledge. Carnen might have such, gleaned from his wise woman. What did she herself have? A dream—half promise, half warning. Sighing, Saren set off.

The way was easy to follow, even when the storm blustered about her. Thick flakes drove in swirling gusts all around, but something about the road kept Saren from straying. The cold wasn't as easy to deal with. Her limbs went numb, as much from the bitter chill as weariness. She shuffled forward bemused, half asleep. When the snow let up, the cold crept through the layers of her clothes. She unwrapped her blanket with stiff fingers and wore it as a second cloak.

It was hard to see with the cloud cover hiding the stars and all around the wind-driven snow. When the wind finally died down, the girl stopped. The mountains were gone. Instead, she was on a vast plain, an empty white expanse stretching out as far as the eye could see. She scuffed at the snow, clearing a spot. The road was still underfoot. The sky had cleared. Stars speckled the night sky, but the constellations they formed didn't seem familiar.

Carnen's white road. It had taken her . . . elsewhere.

She shivered with the cold and the strangeness, then sighed, shuffling on. The past was gone. Nordendale, her mother, the inn. The crofts of the herdsfolk and the mountains. What lay ahead, she didn't know, but it had to

be something. Perhaps better, perhaps worse than she'd known, but with the past gone, she had no choice but to go on.

Her mind drifted to the memory of the men of Nordendale returning home from the war and she felt a kinship with them now. Soldiers were coin, spent on a battlefield. Her own life had been a kind of dying as well; a coin, its value lying in what it could be bartered for, not for what it was itself. This kind of thinking made her head ache. And Carnen, she wondered. Was he some wise woman's coin?

She paused again, slowly lifting her head. The wind blasted her face with a sharp sting of snow, and a headache made it hard to concentrate. She blinked, eyelids moving so slowly she was sure they were almost frozen, rimmed with frost. The henge stood in front of her, tall and brooding.

The stones were darker than she'd dreamed them, more foreboding. A summery scent came to her from between the stones where a mist crept to the breath of a different wind than the one that tugged at her clothes. She looked down at her feet and saw Carnen's crutch lying there.

She bent down and picked it up. Was he inside now, a wise woman's coin spent? Another whiff of summer escaped the space between the stones. Apple blossoms, a faint smell of roses, the scent of grass and wildflowers and green growing things. Strawberries and lilacs.

She stepped forward, determined to see. The mists clung to her as she stepped between the stones. She shivered, anticipating the touch of bones.

Once inside she had a momentary glimpse of the summer glade shown to her in her dream. Apple trees were in blossom, yet the trees bore fruit at the same time. Rose bushes bore both bud and flower on their thorny branches. She heard a birdsong, sweet and clear. At her feet, yellow and red and pale blue flowers grew in a circular scatter amongst the grass.

She took another step forward, then everything flickered. A rushing sound filled her head. Scent and sight vanished. She gave a guttural cry as weariness came over her in a rush. She tried to use Carnen's crutch to keep to her feet, but it slipped from under her when she put her weight on it and she pitched forward into the darkness.

When Saren woke it was to find herself in a long dark hall, a gloomy light entering windows set high in its walls. A hearth stood at its far end, cold ash inside. Two carved chairs on the dais were both empty. Three trestle tables ran the length of the room with rough benches along either side. Moldering tapestries hung from the walls, too time-dimmed to show patterns.

Saren pushed herself up from the stone floor to sit on her haunches. A winter chill still lapped her round and she trembled despite herself. Where was she now? In some ruined keep of the Old Ones? Dreaming? Dead?

The hall's one door creaked open. Saren scrambled to her feet, backing away. She tripped against the dais and fell backward, quickly pulling her legs under her. Crouching there, biting at her lower lip, her gaze centered on the slowly opening door.

It had not been foolishness that brought her here, she thought, watching that door. It had been utter madness. True, Carnen had preceded her, but she didn't doubt that his wise woman had let him know what to expect. There would be formalities to observe, certain approaches that the seeker after the Old Ones must take, secret knowledge—none of which she had. Where Carnen must have had some idea as to what he faced—by the Hunter's Cup, he'd know *why* he was on the road in the first place and what he sought at its end—she was only muddling along. Toying with disaster. And now—

Her worst fears were realized as the door opened wide enough for the hall's inhabitants to enter. Raw fear clawed

through her. She knew now where she was. In a hall of the dead.

Corpses, like those of her dream, shuffled in to take seats at the tables. Some were newly dead, their wounds still inflamed. Others were white-fleshed and swollen—corpses that had lain a week or so in their graves. The worst were those whose flesh was so moldered that the white bone showed through tattered skin. Bone white figures with skull faces.

Sweet Gunnora, she moaned. I never meant . . .

“Meant what?” one of the dead demanded. It stepped close to the dais and bent down until its ravaged features were only inches from her own. A maggot hung from the corner of its mouth, wriggling into the flesh. “Never meant to wish me dead?”

“I . . .”

Bile rose in Saren’s throat as she recognized the creature for her betrothed Erard. Behind it another figure approached and this one she recognized not so much from its features—for there was little recognizable in that skull-face with the tatters of flesh and scalp still hanging from it—as from the clothing she’d last seen it wear when it was alive. Her father.

“Is this how you repay the years of love I gave you?” the dead thing demanded. “To come here in your flesh and mock me?”

“You . . . you never loved me . . .”

“Small wonder. What father was ever cursed with such a poor excuse of a daughter? One that would steal coins from her own mother.”

Fear and sickness warred inside Saren, but she shook her head slowly. “*I* was the coin,” she said.

“Hard times,” Erard said. “War makes for hard times. We all had our part to play, our coin to spend and be spent in turn.”

“No!” Saren cried. “It wasn’t for love of Nordendale



that I was to be spent, but for my father's greed and whatever use you meant to make of me."

"Witch blood," Erard said. "A wise woman told me you had witch blood and that if our lines joined, I would prosper. Yet you denied me, Saren. You let the war take me and spend my life in battle with your ill-wishing."

"I never ill-wished you! I never loved you, but I never wished you harm."

"You never sprang from my loins," her father said. "A bard spilled his seed in your mother, but I wed her all the same. I raised you as though you were my own, but what return did you give me?"

"Lives are not to be bartered and sold."

"No?" Erard asked. "Then what are they for?"

More of the creatures were pressing forward now to hear her answer. Saren stared at their ruined visages, fear thrumming in her. Her head spun with what she'd just heard.

*Witch blood.*

*A bard spilled his seed in your mother.*

A bard's witch blood. Was that what the road had recognized inside her and used to draw her into this trap?

"Tell us," one of the dead demanded. A half-fleshed face pushed forward, ravaged fingers held out to her. Fat white grubs fell to the floor as it moved its arm.

"What are lives for?" another asked.

"Coins to spend—what else!" a third cried.

The voices came hard and fast, in jeering demand that made her press her hands against her ears. She wept and her tears froze on her cheeks. The stink of rotting flesh and the proximity of the dead made her empty stomach lurch and boil with acid. Thin fingers plucked at her.

She screamed when the dead flesh and bone touched her face. The corpses began to pull her into their midst and she huddled into herself more. Dead hands grabbed at her arms, jerking them from her ears. She flailed at the

creatures. Where she struck them, bones shattered, arms were tugged from shoulder sockets to fall to the floor.

“What is life?” her father demanded.

“We had life,” another of the dead told her, “but our coin was spent and we have nothing now.”

“If not coin, what is it?” Erard shouted at her.

“A gift!” Saren wailed. “A gift—do you understand? Not coin to be spent. Not something to be bartered for profit. But a gift, freely given!”

The grip of the creatures loosened and she was able to pull free and stumble to her feet. She staggered back a pace or two and stared at them. Mist roiled about their feet. The rotten smell of opened graves was thick in the air.

“Nothing is freely given,” one of the corpses said. “There is always a payment needed or else why are we here? Why do we die? What sent us here?”

Saren shook her head, trying to clear it. How could she be here, discussing such concerns with the dead? By the Hunter’s Cup, she *had* gone mad. But she thought on what the corpse had asked her and an answer came slowly all the same. Right or wrong, she did not know, but it was all she had.

“Did you never give a bouquet of flowers to a loved one?” she asked.

Here and there, gruesome heads nodded.

“And when the flowers withered—did that make less the moment of giving? A life is like that gift of flowers. While we bloom, we make the best of the promise in it. When we die, it’s not a gift taken back, but a natural part of all.”

“Words!” her father spat. “In this place—”

“You’re in this place because you can’t see the gift!” Saren broke in. “Because life is just coin for you and nothing more. That is what you made of the gift’s promise, so you must abide by it.”

The creatures began to advance on her again, muttering and waving their stick-thin arms at her. She backed away

against the wall and could go no farther. There sounded a rushing sound, as though a great wind blew. Dizziness swept over her, corpses and hall spinning in her sight. She lowered herself until she was sitting on her ankles, back against the wall. She tried to stay erect, but she couldn't.

The dead creatures came boiling up over the lip of the dais, but Saren fell over on her side, great clouds of darkness swimming in her sight and taking her away once more. But just before she was gone, before the dark took her or the dead touched her, she saw a woman's face in her mind's eye. It was a broad, serene face, blue-eyed and framed by a spill of corn-yellow hair. There was a hint of a green dress on a rounded shoulder, a breath of summer fields that cut across the grave stench in the hall.

"Oh, well-spoken, daughter," the woman said.

Then the darkness swept up and took Saren away.

When Saren's eyes fluttered open, she found herself warming by a friendly fire blazing merrily away in front of her. The hall was gone and she was inside the henge, stone under her blankets. The tall pillars didn't seem so foreboding in the flickering light. Sitting beside her was the crippled stranger that she'd followed from the Herdsman's Halt, always a day or so out of step with him.

Seeing him, she felt a sudden calm. She sat up, held out her hands to the fire, and studied her companion. He was sitting in a way that made her think that perhaps the crutch she'd found hadn't been dropped so much as thrown away because it wasn't needed any longer.

"Hello, Carnen," she said.

"And you're the girl from the inn," he replied. "I didn't recognize you when I first found you here. What brought you?"

"Your white road."

"But I said nothing of it to you."

Saren shrugged. "You told the herdsfolk and they told

me.” She pointed at his leg. “You seem to be in better shape than when I first met you.”

“It was a charm of Andnor’s,” he explained. “The wise woman I told you of. Each step I took on my search helped to ease it—the charm being completed if I reached the end.”

“So that’s why you made such good time—your leg kept getting better.”

He nodded. “And you—was it your witch blood that brought you?”

Saren lifted a hand to touch her cheek, then let it drop to her lap. She told him of her experience, following the road. “But I don’t feel as though I have witch blood.”

“I saw it in you when I first met you—a small trace, but there nevertheless. Without it, you wouldn’t have survived the white road.”

The henge they were in, Saren realized, was not the one the road had led her to. This one stood in the mountains, high on a ridge. The night skies were clear above them, dotted with familiar stars. The slopes were white with snow, but the henge itself was clear.

“Was it all a dream?” she asked. “The plain, the other henge, the . . .” She shivered. “The hall of the dead?”

Carnen shook his head. “The stoneworks of the Old Ones are connected. It is possible to step from one to the other in the blink of an eye. The road tests us, you see. That’s what Andnor told me. I . . . I went to my own hall of the dead, though it was different from yours.”

“And the woman in green—the one that called me daughter?”

“I never saw her,” Carnen said. “I saw a man—a man with stag antlers springing from his brow. He never spoke at all.” He poured tea from a pot by the fire and handed it to her. “What will you do now, Saren?”

“If life’s a gift,” she said, “then I want to use its promise wisely. I want to . . .” She looked at him across the top of

her mug. "To follow a green road, I think. One into summer. I want to give of myself to others, freely, with no bartering and no coin. I'd like to tell stories, maybe, or learn to play an instrument. Become a healer. I don't know. I just want to do something useful."

Carnen lifted his mug. "I think I'd like to travel that green road with you—if you wouldn't mind the company."

"Together, instead of me trailing a day or so behind you?"

Carnen smiled.

"To the green road, then," Saren said, clinking her mug against his. "Good fortune to us both!"

"Good fortune," Carnen repeated and they drank to the toast.

In a green wood, in a place Saren might have called "elsewhere," a corn-haired woman sat back from a pool that held an image on its surface, an image of a henge and two well-worn travelers toasting each other. She looked at her companion, a tall, broad-shouldered man with stag's antlers sprouting from his brow.

"There's one for each of us now," she said.

The antlered man nodded. "And there will be more. The Dark has had its time, holding the land in the thrall of war. I think its coin is spent."

"For a while at least."

"And our coin?"

The woman in green put a finger against his mouth and shook her head. "We have no coin—only gifts," she said. "And a gift can only prosper."

"Is that a promise?" the antlered man asked.

"A hope," she replied. "Nothing more." Looking at the two figures still reflected in the pool, the longstones rearing above them, the light of their fire flickering against the gray stone, she sighed. "I pray it will be enough," she added.

\* \* \*

## Afterword

*“The White Road” is set in the dales of High Hallack, soon after the end of the Kolder War, but it isn’t a direct sequel to any existing Witch World novel or story. Instead, I was trying to capture the flavor of Andre’s “coming of age” stories as a tribute to all the years of pleasure I’ve had from her writing.*

*I discovered her work at that perfect time—my early teens—and retain a fond memory of her books to this day, particularly those that fit into the Witch World series. Being asked by Andre to contribute a story of my own to that mythos and getting to work with her in the editing stages of the story has easily been one of the high points of my professional writing career. I just hope that in “The White Road” I’ve managed to capture some measure of the wonder that I found in her writing as a small repayment for all that she’s given me.*

—CHARLES DE LINT