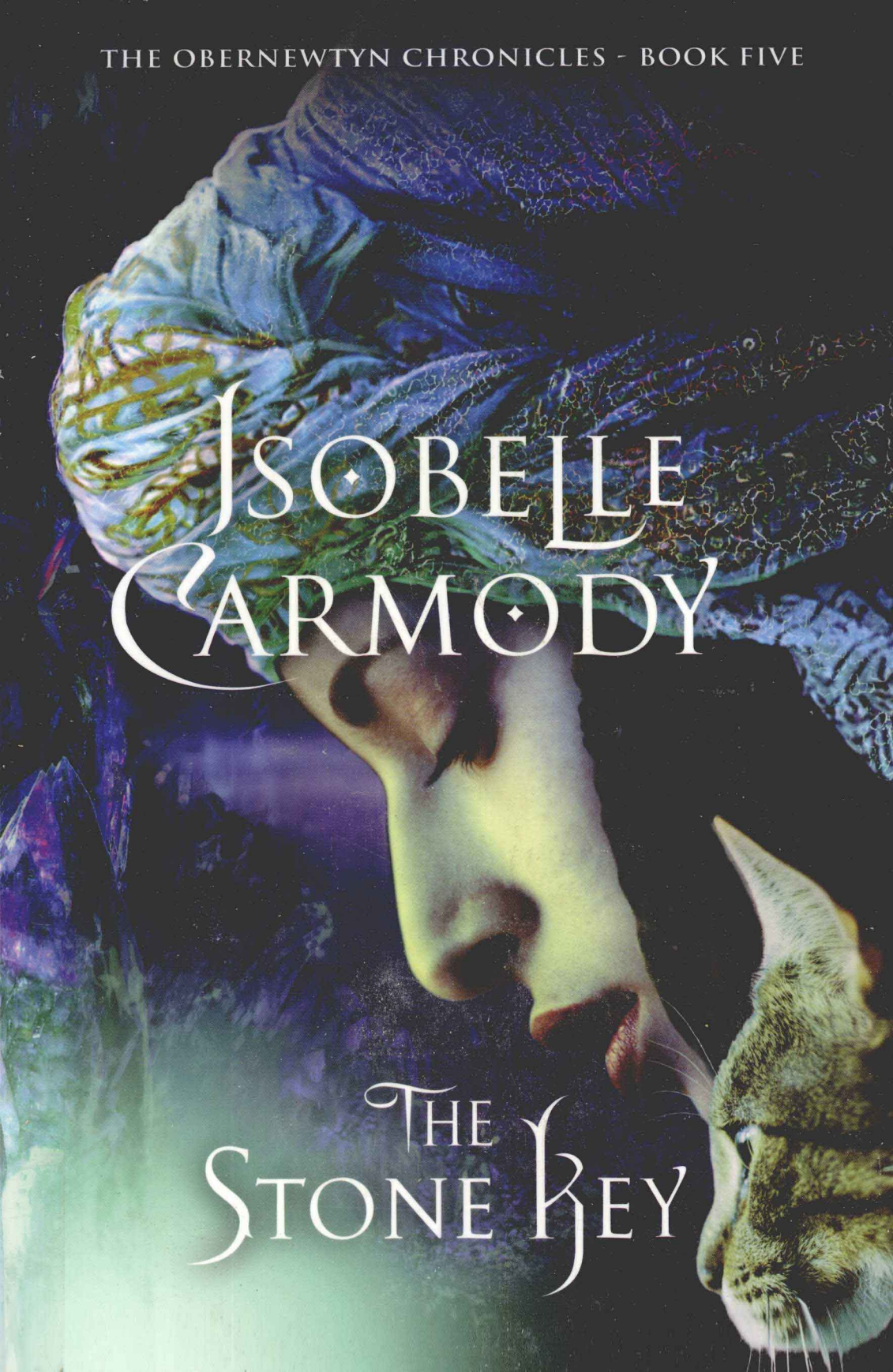


THE OBERNEWTYN CHRONICLES - BOOK FIVE

A woman's face is shown in profile, looking down, with her hand near her chin. A cat's head is visible in the lower right corner, looking towards the woman. The background is dark and textured, with blue and purple hues. The woman is wearing a blue, patterned garment.

# ISOBELLE CARMODY

## THE STONE KEY

ISOBELLE  
CARMODY



THE  
STONE KEY

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*...we travel the path of waves which is full of  
contradictory currents and mysterious diversions ...*

*for my brother Ken  
who climbs mountains when you least expect*



# THE STONE KEY

Isabelle Carmody began the first of her highly acclaimed Obernewtyn Chronicles while she was still at high school, working on it while completing a Bachelor of Arts, and then a journalism cadetship. The series, and her short stories, established her at the forefront of fantasy writing in Australia.

She is now the award-winning author of several novels and many short stories for children and adults.

Isabelle divides her time between her home on the Great Ocean Road in Australia and her travels abroad with her partner and daughter.

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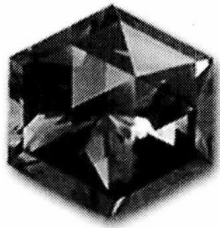
*This book was written in La Creperie in Janovskeho, Prague, and in The Bay Leaf, Seagrape, and Café 153 in Apollo Bay. Thanks to Cathy Larsen for her persistence and generosity in her quest for a new look for the Obernewtyn Chronicles and for the new map, and to Nan for being all that she is, editor and friend. And a special heartfelt thank you to the faithful readers of this series for waiting, patiently and impatiently, for what turned out to be, after all, not quite the last book.*



PART ONE



THE SONG  
OF FREEDOM







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 land, Tor, Gelfort and Emeralfel, and to the Blacklands that bordered the White Valley. It looked untouched and impenetrable, but I knew how many secrets lay hidden there.

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 my 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 fear of me that we had been unable to manage a single conversation since she had awakened.

The truth was that I had proposed the expedition as much to get away from Dragon as to fulfil my promise to return the Twentyfamilies gypsy healer Darius to his people. Then 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 go 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 that 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. 'If you are irritated by my thoughts you could stay out of my mind,' I sent back 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 bleakness 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. Empathy was the one Talent I lacked entirely, and its want made me awkward with emotions and reluctant to trust my own feelings, 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.

'I/Gahltha am! 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 Gahltha as I explained I would 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 soldier-guards who 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 how seldom I had ridden of late. My duties as guildmistress at Obernewtyn left little time for self-indulgence. fleetingly, 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, Gahltha stopped and reared 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 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 for wagons had been created from scree.

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 invade 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. Being in our care all through the wintertime had