

An Extract From:

The White Road of the Moon

by

Rachel Neumeier

For more information, visit
www.rachelneumeier.com

Chapter One

There were more than twenty-four hundred people in the town of Tikiy-by-the-Water, but only one of them was alive.

Meridy Turiyn had been alive for just over fifteen years when she came down the mountain path from the village of Tikiy-up-the-Mountain. She came in a rush down the steep trail, with little care for any twisted roots and loose rocks that might wait for an unwary foot. She was too angry to take care, but luck or the hand of the God or perhaps simply the sharp reflexes of youth protected her from anything worse than an occasional stumble or missed step. She was forbidden to visit the ghost town of Tikiy-by-the-Water, but she was angry enough to ignore that prohibition.

Aunt Tarana hated any reminder of ghosts or ghost towns, any tale of enchantment or witchery, any echo of history or poetry. Aunt Tarana was a practical woman. That was what she said of herself. At every possible opportunity, it seemed to Meridy, she declared in her loud, firm voice: *Whatever else, anyone can attest that I am a practical woman.* Aunt Tarana had definite ideas about how practical, decent women behaved. She believed that a decent woman kept a neat home and respected her husband; she cultivated appropriate friends and tithed to the local sanctuary; and if she must dabble in an occupation, she made certain it was a respectable one, such as making cheeses or raising bees or making strings of the tiny prayer-bells that folk hung from their eaves in hopes of favor from the God.

Most of all, a decent woman kept her mind and the minds of her children fixed firmly on the ordinary, everyday, practical world that everybody could see. *Don't you go teaching my girls any of that fancy poetry, or telling them ridiculous stories about things that likely never were and certainly won't ever be again.* That was what Aunt Tarana had said to her sister, Meridy's mother Kamay, when Meridy was only five or six. Meridy still remembered that, vividly. Aunt Tarana had been furious because Kamay had led all the girls out into the frigid midwinter night to show them how on that night the moon set directly behind the Anchor of the World, so that the vast mountain was limned with silverglow against sky and shadow. That moment had been

beautiful and rare, and Aunt Tarana had ruined it, dragging her daughters away inside, refusing even to *look* at the Anchor.

Aunt Tarana had been angry at Meridy's mother all the time, and after that Meridy had known it. Tarana had been angry at Kamay for wasting the family's good coin on expensive books, and for insisting on gazing into thin air at things no one else could see, and for bearing an indecently black-eyed daughter to a man she never named. Most of all, Aunt Tarana had been angry at Kamay for having the temerity to die and leave her, Tarana, to bring up the child. All this Meridy knew.

Kamay had died when Meridy was only eleven, of a fever that rose and rose and would not break.

A witch might have lifted that fever, but Aunt Tarana said a witch would let Kamay die so as to bind her ghost. Witches had no power to bring the *ethereal* into the *real* without a ghost to help, and so every witch alive wanted to bind ghosts, and that meant they wanted people to die. Witches were all just a step away from being murderer, Aunt Tarana said. She said that was why the decent folk of Tikiy had driven out any witches that dared openly practice their witchery. Meridy couldn't help but understand that Aunt Tarana more than half believed Kamay should have been driven out, too, even though she'd never done anything wrong in her whole life except hear the quick dead, which anyone might, and occasionally admit to a glimpse of the *ethereal*. And, of course, bear a black-eyed daughter, a daughter uncommonly dark, even for a village in the shadow of the Wall where for hundreds and hundreds of years a trace of Southern blood had been no rare thing. Meridy couldn't help but understand that this was her mother's greatest offense of all.

It wouldn't necessarily have taken a witch to heal Kamay. A priest, witch-eyed or not, might have lifted the fever, for any priest might serve as a conduit for the God to reach into the mortal world, just as a ghost made a way for a witch to reach into the realms of dream and memory. The nearest sanctuary was in Sann, not so very far away, but Aunt Tarana wouldn't send for help. She said priests were almost as much a danger to the dying as witches, even the ones who weren't witches themselves. She

said decent people kept to the practical world and didn't clamor at the God for every little thing.

Aunt Tarana didn't trust anyone who might touch the magic and dreams and memory that lay in the *ethereal*. She never trusted anyone who could bring dreams or hopes or prayers across the boundary into the *real*, the living world of solid weight and present time. Not even if they did it to heal the sick.

So Aunt Tarana insisted the fever would lift on its own. But it did not.

In tales, the prick of a rose thorn might cause a person to fall into an enchanted sleep so that her soul drifted free and untethered; the fragrance of a rose might recall the soul and wake the sleeper. But even if such tales were true, it was not the season for roses. Meridy tried rose pomanders and rose jam, but nothing she did helped at all. The roses failing, she hoped to hold her mother's soul beyond death as a witch could, by binding her soul to the *real* and preventing it from taking the White Road into death. But despite her black eyes, Meridy couldn't do that, either. Her mother died, and though Meridy watched by her bedside and refused to leave her, she never even glimpsed her departing ghost. There was nothing she could do.

Afterward, Aunt Tarana sold all her mother's scrolls and books to the first peddler who came through Tikiy. *I have to have you here with my girls, I suppose, but I'll have none of those notions of my sister's*, Aunt Tarana had told Meridy. With her whole world broken into bewildering pieces around her, Meridy had been too shocked to protest, and so she had nothing left of her mother's save the stories her mother had told her, the wonder and magic she carried in imagination and memory.

You should be grateful, Aunt Tarana had told her. *High time someone took you in hand and taught you to behave like a respectable girl. No decent man likes a woman who puts on airs and talks a lot of nonsense about poetry.* But Meridy found it impossible to be grateful.

Aunt Tarana's husband had passed into the realm of the God a year or so before Meridy's mother, and so it was a household of women and girls. Aunt Tarana's

daughters, all older than Meridy, first resented her because they all had to share between just two rooms, and one more girl meant that much less space for the rest of them; and then they detested her because she could quote all the classic epics in the original Viènè; and more than that they hated her because her dark coloring made it obvious her nameless father had been a man carrying a lot of Southern blood. Most of all, they feared her because of her black eyes,

At first Meridy was too numbed by grief to notice that her cousins hated her, and then later she despised them and didn't care what they thought, any more than she cared what Aunt Tarana thought.

She hadn't realized she needed to care, until today. She *ought* to have realized. She knew, she *knew* that Aunt Tarana was always sweet as clover honey when she was getting ready to do something awful. Four years of living in her aunt's home had been more than long enough to teach her that. And yet she hadn't guessed, even though Aunt Tarana had spent the morning making molasses toffee, which Meridy especially liked, and had allowed Meridy to help. But even the molasses candy hadn't warned her. She had been taken completely by surprise.

Though she shouldn't have been surprised at all. Of course nothing could be more likely than that Aunt Tarana would take the chance to hand her black-eyed niece over to any craftswoman who needed an apprentice at the first moment after Meridy turned fifteen, by law old enough to sign marriage lines or inherit property or bind herself to an apprenticeship contract. Aunt Tarana didn't care what happened to Meridy, just so long as she could be rid of her inconvenient niece once and for all and forget she had ever had a sister.

So Meridy was supposed to be packing her few belongings and making ready to present herself to Tikiy's soap-maker at noon tomorrow.

The soap-maker was an grim old woman, twice Aunt Tarana's age, with no living children of her own. Her house was up at the highest edge of the village, where the trees and meadows gave way to bare rock, because although the finished soaps were fragrant with lavender or roses or verbena, the actual process of making soap was

unpleasant, stinking work and no one wanted to live too near a soap-maker's house. Though Meridy did not know the soap-maker well enough to like or dislike her, she couldn't imagine living in the old woman's cottage or helping her with her work. She could guess too well what her apprenticeship would be, especially since the soap-maker was also a laundress. Meridy would spend all the days of her apprenticeship carrying endless buckets of water and even more endless bundles of firewood. She would burn wood down to ash to make the lye, and boil the fat of sheep or pigs or the occasional bear for hours and hours to render and clean it. She'd stir huge caldrons until her arms ached, she'd burn herself with lye, her hands would turn red and rough from washing other people's worst-soiled clothing, and at the end of every day, what would she have to show for her labor? *Soap.*

In the old days of great deeds and sorcery, before the witch-king Tai-Enchar had betrayed the High King in the hour of his greatest need and shattered the whole kingdom with his greed and pride and ambition, Meridy would have . . . she would have found an injured horse and healed it and ridden north out of the mountains . . . no, not just an ordinary horse, a fire horse, that legend claimed only kings and heroes and Southerners could ride. If Meridy had to so obviously bear the stamp of Southern blood, why shouldn't she have some benefit from it? She'd have found a beautiful red-gold mare with an injured foot, tamed her until she would take meat gently from Meridy's hand and never try to bite. Then Meridy would have ridden her away from Tikiy, straight across the breadth of the land. She would have presented herself to the High King, won a place in his court, learned all the ways of memory and dream and magic, and become not merely a witch, but a sorceress. Everyone would have known her name, and they'd have known her mother's name, too. Kamay Turiyn would have been remembered forever. Everyone would say, *Oh, yes, just a modest village woman from the far south, but she taught her daughter everything she needed to know to rise in the world.*

Two hundred years ago, all that might have been possible. Well, probably not the fire horse, but the rest of it. Meridy could picture it all perfectly in her mind: the High King and his court bright and vivid in Moran Diorr, the gracious City of Bells. She had told the old stories over to herself a hundred times since her mother's death. *By*

the grace of the God, the high kings ruled for a thousand years. That was how the old stories began. It was an age of greatness, it was an age of heroes.

But then Tai-Enchar had ruined everything.

If Meridy had been at the High King's court, maybe . . . well, no doubt she'd have drowned with everyone else when Tai-Enchar's treachery broke open the great storm of sorcery and Moran Diorr sank beneath the waves. The sea had rolled in and silenced all the bells, and everyone died. Even so, she wished she had lived in those days, the great days, the days of High Kings and great sorcery and crashing battles, when men - yes, and women, too - did great deeds, and the things they did *mattered*.

But there was no High King anymore. Moran Diorr had drowned, and the Kingdom had shattered into all the little warring principalities. The stories of the old Kingdom were all the more bitter because now, in this lesser time, there was no place for great deeds and shining magic. Meridy had been born too late, and now there was nothing in her future but a hard, boring, tedious apprenticeship to the soap-maker.

She came down through the ruined outskirts of Tikiy-by-the-Water, half tumbled out into the sun-struck glade where once the green had spread, and caught her balance against the broken gatepost that marked the entrance of the center of the ruined town. She was breathing hard, partly with anger but mostly with the exertion of her fast descent down the mountain trail, and so she leaned there for a moment, catching her breath and looking for the storyteller who had his place here by the gates. She let her gaze soften and unfocus, blinking the bustling town of the past into place over and through the dead remains of the present.

The storyteller, Ambica, looked up from his bench just inside the gates, in the shade cast by a graceful beech. Neither bench nor tree were actually there, of course. But they had been there once. What Meridy saw was the memory they had left behind.

Before his death, Ambica had sold stories to passersby as other men might sell their cheeses or their skills at pot-mending. But he had not lived his life here in the shadow of the mountains. If one believed his tales, Ambica had been everywhere and done

everything. He'd been a living man at just the time Meridy most longed for, the time of High King Miranuanol, before Tikiy-by-the-Water had been destroyed by the retreating Southerners, as so many small towns and villages had been destroyed during those last furious days of the war. Now those towns and all their people existed merely as memories and dreams of what they had once been. Though High King Miranuanol had saved the rest of his Kingdom. He had spent all the strength of the Kingdom to drive the Southerners back into the southern desert for *just long enough*, and then he and his sorcerers had raised the great Wall to stand forever between the Kingdom and the South. If Meridy had been lived in those days, she could have learned to be a sorcerer and helped raise up the Wall and the great Anchor, and even if Tai-Enchar's treachery had killed her, too, at least it would have been a glorious death.

And maybe she'd have become quick, like Ambica, and lingered to see the new age dawn.

Though this last wasn't necessarily a comfortable idea. Being anchored by a ghost town mean you'd never be able to leave it, and being anchored to the living world by one's husband or sister or whomever might not be quite so confining, but it meant you'd have to stay by your anchor. In Tikiy, that meant you'd probably never travel more than a few days' walk from your home. Besides, everyone knew the lingering dead couldn't touch or affect the *real* world unless they were bound by a witch. And a witch could compel a ghost against her will, so if the witch were evil, that would be terrible.

Even so, sometimes Meridy couldn't help but think it might not have been so bad to become quick instead of taking the White Road of the Moon, the God's Road - to linger for a short time or for ages - if only she could have *lived* first. Lived through great and exciting days, played a part in stories that would be remembered for hundreds of years.

At least, with her mother's blood and her black eyes, she could not only hear Ambica and listen to his stories, but also glimpse the world that had once been.

The story-teller knew he was a ghost, but he claimed to be in no hurry to take the Moon's Road. There were so many ghosts here that they had no trouble maintaining their bustling town, so they forgot they were dead and lingered in their common memory of Tikiy. Ambica knew he was dead, but he lingered, too, half in the memory of the town and half in his stories of a world long vanished.

The stories he told were set in the world before the Southern Wall had been raised up. The world was a smaller place now, filled with smaller people, like Aunt Tarana, who had never in her whole life been farther from Tikiy than the trading post on the Yellow River Road and who thought the most important thing in the world was seeing her daughters well married to craftsmen instead of muddy-handed farmers. And disposing of her black-eyed niece in the most expedient manner possible.

Meridy was still too angry to think about that.

She moved to sit on the blanket spread before Ambica's bench - bright in memory, half visible to Meridy's black eyes, barely there to any touch - and smiled back. It was easy to smile at Ambica, even when she was angry. He was so good humored himself and always pleased to see her, and that made it hard for Meridy to hold onto her bad temper. Even today. That was why she'd come down the mountain. Well, and she had always found the presence of the dead far more welcome than the living. Especially *Aunt Tarana*. Especially *today*. She tried to scowl at Ambica, but she could feel it was no use.

"Ah, Mery, bramble-child!" he said to her. He called her by little-names sometimes, as though he was no older than she, especially when she was in a temper. No one else ever did. Meridy would not have answered anybody else who tried. He patted her hand. "I had a story for you, one I've never told you before, a good one, all bright courage and noble sacrifice and tragic death, but there's no time, no time. You've someone seeking you."

"Seeking me?" Meridy thought she must have misunderstood. The lingering dead of Tikiy did not think enough about the living to seek out anyone.

“Ah, well, seeking any witch, I think,” Ambica amended. “A ghost, he is, seeking you or one like you: someone with eyes that see behind the world. Fretful, he was. I told him you’d do. I told him there’s not much your black eyes look past. I said I’d send you along, bramble-girl.” He patted her knee with one bony hand, smiling at her as though he’d done her a favor.

Meridy stared at him. “You’re telling me a *ghost* came here from *somewhere else*, deliberately *looking* for a witch, someone who can bind ghosts?” This seemed so unlikely that she could hardly frame the questions that pressed suddenly behind her teeth.

The quick dead, the ghosts that turned away from the White Road of the God and lingered instead in the *real*, were usually bound to the place of their death. If they left it, then unless a living person anchored them, ghosts would forget themselves, and then eventually shred away on the wind, lost to the world and the God alike. A wife, a brother, a child; any of the living might anchor a man after he died, even though they couldn’t see him and could hardly hear the thin, breathless whisper of his voice. But if anchored by a wife or brother or child, a ghost could always turn away from the world and take the God’s Road. That choice was always there for such a ghost. No ordinary person could hold one of the quick dead back from that choice once a ghost had decided to depart the *real* and go to the God.

It was different for a witch, because a witch could anchor one of the quick dead, bind him, and use him as a conduit between the *real* and the *ethereal*. That was the source of all a witch’s magic, so witches sought out the lingering dead and bound them whether they wished to be anchored or not. Meridy could not quite imagine why a ghost would deliberately risk such servitude by seeking out an unknown witch.

Getting to her feet, Meridy stared away, into the ruined town and the half-glimpsed memory of the town the ghosts of Tikiy remembered, layered one above the other, looking for someone she did not know. Someone she did not recognize.

“Go on, bramble-child,” Ambica urged her. “But be careful! He’s got depth to him, that one. He’s carrying a story on his shoulders, and not a light burden or I miss my guess.”

“Yes,” Meridy said again, not really listening. She *was* curious, about this ghost and about the anchor who must have brought him here. So she made her way straight into the ghost town. Or as straight as she could while picking her way through crumbled streets and around ruined homes.

* * * * *

She found Ambica’s stranger in one of her favorite spots in the whole town: seated upon the crumbling base of the central fountain. He sat there, appearing quite at his ease for all Ambica had said he was fretful. He seemed a boy about her own age. That surprised her. The ghosts of children rarely lingered. But he was obviously a ghost and obviously someone she had never before seen, so who else could he be but Ambica’s impatient stranger?

Meridy paused between part of a broken wall and a tree that had grown up through the remnants of a foundation, just to study him. The ghost boy was leaning back on his elbow, staring down into the depths of the dry fountain, one hand resting on the head of a big brindled hound. The dog was also a ghost, but no more familiar to Meridy than the boy himself. As dogs were sacred to the God, after death they went as they pleased between the world of men and the God’s realm. But this one clearly belonged with the boy.

Where shadows fell across boy and dog, they were hard to see, even for her, but the noon sunlight caught out the boy’s head and shoulder in more detail. The light glistened off dust motes in the air, delicately limning the place where he almost was. Even at this distance and only half-visible, his expression was abstracted.

Then the boy looked up and saw her. He straightened, gazing right at her, meeting her eyes. The dog, too, sat up alertly, pricking its ears.

Meridy stepped forward, glancing around for the boy's anchor. But she could not see anyone living. She didn't understand how the boy could have come here by himself, but if a living person had brought him, then where was that person? Tension clenched her stomach. Meeting someone like herself, maybe a witch . . . someone older, someone who knew things and wanted things and had perhaps even come here *looking* for her, or for someone like her. It was bound to be complicated.

But she could see no one but the ghost boy and his dog.

Meridy cast a quick glance around the town square, but she saw only a few townsfolk, familiar ghosts all, going about their simple days. They paid no attention to her, absorbed in their own memories; she was too familiar to them to draw more than an occasional indifferent glance. She saw no one else, no one living who might anchor a ghost, no one who might pose a challenge or a threat.

The ghost boy had risen to his feet. He was clearly waiting for her to join him at the fountain. At last Meridy allowed curiosity to lead her forward.

It became more possible to distinguish details of the ghost's appearance as she approached the fountain. The boy was tall, by his height and the cast of his features of pure northern blood. His clothing was not village clothing: the dyes must have been clear and strong to produce those echoes of blues and violets, and the style was not familiar, his shirt close-fitted at the wrist and neck and loose everywhere else.

His expression was both tense and contained. He had a measuring look about him, as though he had set himself to judge her, and Tikiy, and all its other ghosts; as though he had a *right* to judge them all. He looked both somehow less solid and at the same time more vivid than the ghosts Meridy knew, and she thought Ambica was right: there was a depth to him. Although he had died young, this one was an *old* ghost. The dog was clearly his dog. She wondered if they had died at the same time, and how it had happened.

The dog dropped its head and laid back its ears in a friendly way. Its tail stirred, though of course the dust and dead leaves did not shift in answer.

Close by the boy's hand, on the cracked tiles of the fountain's rim, lay a rose. The pink and white tiles were an echo of the wealth Tikiy had once possessed, though the colors were faded now, with ferns growing in the cracks between the tiles. In contrast to the tiles, the rose looked perfect. Too beautiful, too perfect to be real, the rose was blood-dark against the cracked tiles of the old fountain.

If enough of the ghosts of Tikiy had been near the fountain, their gathered memories could have restored it to the beauty it had enjoyed in their day and Meridy might have seen it as they saw it. But there were no ghosts nearby, save for this one she did not know. A ghost boy, a crumbled fountain, and a single perfect rose lying on the broken tiles.

The ghost boy gave Meridy a careful, gauging look. Then he picked the rose up and offered it to her with a courtly gesture. Resisting the urge to touch it, Meridy put her hands behind her back. It was an *ethereal* rose, of course, and would melt away if she touched it. But it was beautiful. It looked, in fact, exactly like the sort of rose that might restore the soul to someone who was dying. If she had been able to make one like it out of dreams and memory... the shadow of old grief brushed her, but she was old enough now to know that the stories about roses were just stories, and fever was fever. After a minute, she sat down on the rim of the old fountain and let the ghost thread the rose into her hair. His touch was cold and light, almost imperceptible, like being brushed by a dream of cobwebs. If Meridy kept her hands away from the rose and pretended that it wasn't there, it would probably last a little while before fading.

The ghost boy stood up, glimmering in the sunlight, and told her, in the feathery, breathless voice of the quick, "There's an injured man in the woods. Down by the ruined mill."

Meridy looked at him carefully. "Your anchor?"

The ghost shrugged. His tone was cool, assured, unimpassioned, by no means the tone of any boy his apparent age. “Does it matter? He's hurt. Perhaps he's dying. Will you leave him there to die?”

This boy had come here looking for her. He had gone to a good deal of trouble, in fact, to find help for this man who must be his anchor. He'd made her an *ethereal* rose, even. That spoke well for the man. Whatever he was to this boy, whether he was a witch or a priest or a sorcerer, Meridy couldn't believe he was wicked. She was fairly certain she didn't want to meet a priest, who might well, considering her black eyes, try to pen her up in some sanctuary and make her take vows to the God. On the other hand . . . curiosity tugged at her. And the boy was right. She had no reason to care about this stranger, but if the man was hurt, she couldn't refuse to help him, either. She flinched from imagining what it would be like, to lie helpless in the cold woods and know that you were dying.

She stood up.

The ghost boy immediately faded out, becoming nearly imperceptible even to her. Impatient, that was clear. Intolerant of questions. “Hurry,” his airless voice murmured.

Meridy shrugged to show that she didn't care one way or the other, and headed for the mill. Fine. She would bring this man to the town inn and make a fire. He might die anyway, if he'd been lying alone too long and was too sick or too fevered, but at least he could die where it was warm. She could even go back up the mountain and find the priest, if she had to. So she walked down through the woods toward the old mill, pretending not to hurry but walking fast for all that, following the flickery corner-of-the-eye motion of the ghost boy.

The White Road of the Moon is published by Knopf and available from March 2017.

Visit www.rachelneumeier.com for more about Rachel and her writing, and to read excerpts from her other books for adult and young adult fantasy readers.