

THE ALTON GIFT

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

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Darkover Landfall | Two To Conquer

THE ALTON GIFT
MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY
AND
DEBORAH J. ROSS



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DEDICATION

To all those faithful lovers of Darkover who now rest in peace.

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INTRODUCTION

My own personal “voice” in the Darkover novels has always been the very first character I created for them: Lew Alton. Lew Alton was the hero of the very first pre-Darkover fantasy sketch I wrote as a young girl. It is very difficult to detach my own viewpoint from Lew’s...I admit I have been curious from time to time to know how Lew, who is not, at least on the surface, a very attractive character, would appear from the outside. It is rather difficult for me to see him except from inside his own skin and I have backed away, before this, from trying to see him through other eyes.

—Marion Zimmer Bradley

I think the only way to write about characters created by someone else is to fall in love with them yourself. Just as each loving relationship is unique, so is each creative vision. For everything that is good and true in these pages, I thank those whose vision formed a foundation for my own. The lapses and shortcomings are my doing.

—Deborah J. Ross

PROLOGUE

Four years after the death of Regis Hastur and the departure of the Terran Federation, in the Hellers Mountain Range...

The great red sun of Darkover rose above the mountain peaks, casting a sullen light through the banes of ice-crystal clouds. Although the worst of the winter storms had passed, the wind still carried an edge like a knife. A man in his middle years paused in his climb up the rock-tumbled slope and drew his threadbare cloak more tightly around his shoulders. A gust tore away his breath.

Turning his back to the wind, he looked down at the sheltered dale, with its cluster of stone cottages, livestock pens, barns for feed storage, stream, and fishpond. His people had farmed here, from time before memory, tending their flocks, fishing the streams and gathering nuts from the forest-lined slopes, trading furs and cheese in Nevarsin for those things they could not make themselves. Once, the community had supported a dozen families or more.

Now, Garin thought with inexpressible sadness, *there are only a handful of us*. A single curl of smoke rose from the cottages, the pens stood empty except for a pair of aged chervines, and the roof of the largest barn had fallen in on itself.

Garin lifted his gaze to the hillside, once thick with trees bearing nuts, amber-resins, and aromatic wood, now a tangle of blackened splinters. Some of the damage was old, from the fires a generation ago. Garin had been only a child, but it seemed as though the whole Hellers range had gone up in flames. The Hastur-lord, Regis, had sent food and seedlings to reforest the slopes. Lean years followed, but the trees had thrived and the goat herds increased. Garin had married a girl from Rockraven, near the Aldaran border, and settled happily to raising their children.

Then, three summers past, fires came again, as they always did. Only this time, no help had arrived, no firefighting chemicals, no crews sent by the Comyn. Garin and the other men defended their homes as best they could. They saved the village and the better part of the livestock, but they lost the forest.

The goats died, one by one, then the entire herd, and those who ate the meat sickened. Garin's brother, Tomas, wept over the graves of his two sons and said it must be a curse sent by the gods. Garin had replied, who would seek to punish little children in this way? Things would get better. The

must.

He clung to that hope even as his own youngest daughter slipped away, and the others grew thin and weak. Last winter, they slaughtered half the chervines for food, but it was not enough. With the cold and damp came lung fever. The last of the grandparents died, and so did Garin's wife.

Now only ten of them remained, none either very young or very old. They had some apples and little salted fish, nuts, and dried beans from last summer. There was nothing left to plant, for they had eaten most of their seed crop.

Better to go now, in the spring, while we still can. The thought tore at Garin's heart, that he might never again see the dale alive with flowers and laughter, sun sparkling on the water, kid-goats and children gamboling on the hillsides. He had come up here to take his farewells alone, to steel himself for the journey ahead.

We may die on the road, but we will surely die if we stay.

In the cottage, where they had gathered for warmth and a last meal, Garin found a flurry of activity. Lina straightened up from tying a knitted scarf on one of the smaller children, a boy about six. She mothered them all, although only two of her own, a shy girl of ten and the adolescent boy out with the livestock, were still alive. Like the other two surviving women, she was a widow, and Garin's kinswoman. In short order, she had all the children dressed, each with a bundle and pack and walking stick.

Outside, Lina's son, Raymon, had laden the two chervines with tents and blankets, water skins, all their remaining food, and a small bundle of furs for trading. Garin shouldered his own pack, and they set off. Two of the children sniffled, and one of the women sobbed as the trail twisted through a cleft in the hills and the village was lost to sight.

As they traveled beyond the places they had known, the land grew wilder. They passed stretches of burned-out forest, earth etched with erosion gullies, mud slides and rock falls, and once a tangle of animal bones heaped together like deadwood. Some of the younger children woke screaming from nightmares for several days afterwards. Sometimes the trail was washed out or obscured by debris. Once they got lost trying to find it again and passed the night in tents under a splintered rock ledge, listening to the winds howl down from the peaks.

"Is it banshees?" Elena, the littlest girl, asked Garin.

"If it is, they're far away," he answered. "They live above the snow line, so we're safe down here." Yet, with so many strange, unseasonable happenings, who could say? He tucked the girl into Lina's arms and went to arrange for Raymon to keep alternate watch with him during the night. What they would do if a banshee did attack, he didn't know. They had no weapons against such a predator.

They made slow progress because of the children, but after four or five days the land seemed less barren. They came upon a travel shelter in a bit of scrub forest. Raymon set traps, and they breakfasted on rabbit-horn simmered with parched grain from the shelter's stores. Garin didn't begrudge their lat

start that morning, for full bellies eased fear as well as hunger.

Through the morning, they traveled through sparse, oddly stunted forest. Here and there, the whitened skeleton of a fully grown tree rose above the others. Garin wondered what blight had fallen upon the land, but he said nothing. He was lost in his thoughts when Lina, who was walking behind him, carrying little Elena, cried, “Look! There, up ahead—what is it?”

Garin shook himself alert. The trail curved beneath starkly bare, overhanging branches where leaves mounded against the boulder-strewn slope. Where Lina pointed, he made out a lumpy dark mass, sprawled half on the trail.

For an instant, he thought it might be a child dressed in stained fur. As he approached, he saw it was some kind of animal. He slowed his pace, cautious.

Lina came after him, leaving the children behind. “Is it a wounded *kyrri*?”

Garin frowned. He’d never laid eyes on one of the nonhuman creatures, but he’d always thought of them as smaller and covered with thick gray fur. “This is something else.”

At the sound of Lina’s voice, the creature stirred, its ribs shuddering. It gave a twittering cry, like a frightened bird. Lina flinched. Garin tried to push her behind him, but she followed close. Together they took another step.

“It’s all right, we mean you no harm.” Garin tried to make his voice gentle and soothing. If the creature was wounded, it might lash out in terror.

They drew closer, and he saw ribs stark through pale skin covered with sparse, coarse hair. In a convulsive movement, the creature rolled toward them. Reddish eyes glinted up from a broad, chinless face. Tears streaked the creature’s cheeks, and it squinted in the brightness of the day. It opened its mouth and gave another high, chittering cry. At the same time, it extended one arm, too long and thin to be human, toward them. At the sight of the elongated fingers, the unmistakable gesture of appeal, Garin’s heart lurched.

“It’s—I think it’s a trailman,” he breathed.

“What’s it doing here, so far from its home?” Lina muttered. The trailmen kept closely to their own territory, the forests between the Kadarin River and the Hellers.

With a whimper, the creature let its arm fall gracelessly to the ground. Garin started toward it.

“Don’t touch it!” Lina cried, seizing his arm. “It looks sick. It could give you the fever!”

“I don’t think so.” Garin’s heart pounded in his ears, but he could not tear his gaze away from the poor creature. “There’s been no trailmen’s fever since the time of our fathers. Some *Terranan* magic brought an end to it. This one must be starving. See how thin it is? Its forests must have burned, like ours.”

“What can we do for it? We have worries of our own. The children depend on us.”

“We can live in other places,” he said. “The plains, the Lowlands, Nevarsin, or, Aldones help us, even Thendara. But these beasts,” he paused, corrected himself, “these *people* have nowhere to go. They cannot live without their trees. What if one of our own were dying alone in a faraway place? Surely, this one deserves our pity, if not our aid.”

Lina glanced from Garin to the trailman. A mist passed over her eyes. She said in a choked voice, “I am ashamed of my selfish words. I thought only of our own sorrows. Would it accept food from us? Do you think?”

Garin thought for a moment, then asked Raymon to bring him some dried apples and the smallest water skin. The boy came quickly with the food. Telling Lina to stay behind, Garin approached the trailman.

“See, I have brought you food and water.” Garin crouched down beside the creature.

The trailman had stopped whimpering and seemed to be breathing with difficulty. A film coated its red eyes. Its arm stretched toward Garin, palm upraised.

Garin did not think the creature could lift the water skin, even if it knew how to drink from it. He would have to cradle its head and hold the spout to its mouth.

He took a piece of apple, moistened it from the water skin, and placed it in the open hand. The skin felt dry, like old leaves. “Food. Eat, eat. Good.”

The trailman did not respond except for the slow, hesitant ripple of its chest. Garin held the apple in front of the flat nose, hoping that the smell would rouse the creature. Nothing happened. His gut clenched. He had nursed enough of his own kinfolk through starvation to recognize the final stages.

The breaths slowed, the pauses lengthening. A fine quivering came and went in the little muscles around the mouth, then ceased. The trailman lay utterly still.

Garin refused to leave the body for wild beasts to scavenge. With the help of Raymon and Lina, he carried the trailman a little way off the trail. They laid it in a rocky depression and covered the body with what loose stones they could gather.

They went on in silence for a while.

The trail dipped downward, the hills opened out around them, and they reached the Nevarsin road. A short time later, a caravan came into sight, a dozen wagons pulled by shaggy-coated mules, and a small herd of sheep. The caravan halted when they saw Garin and his people. A man on a sturdy brown horse rode out to meet them. He carried a thick cudgel.

In a sudden sweat, Garin stepped away from the others. He held his hands away from his body so that the mounted man could see he was unarmed. “We are innocent travelers, not bandits!” he called out.

The rider nudged his horse forward. The animal responded placidly, clearly more accustomed to pulling a cart than engaging in battle.

“Who are you, and what are you doing on this road?” the man asked. “What do you want?”

Garin swallowed a prideful retort. They were outnumbered, and if it came to a fight, they had no chance with only himself and one half-grown boy. These looked like honest folk. If he bespoke them gently, they might let the family travel with them and share a little food...

He told their story simply: the fires and floods, the hunger, that last terrible winter, and, finally, their decision to leave their home.

The rider nodded thoughtfully, lowering his cudgel. “I’ve heard that tale, or close enough to it, ten times over since I’ve been on the trail. Name’s Dougal, by the way. M’wife and me, we farmed a smallhold up toward Stormcrag. The big fires missed us, but the last five years it’s been one thing after another. Used to be, the lords’d mount fire-watch and send over Tower-made chemicals, and everyone’d turn out to help. Now it’s every man for himself.”

Garin nodded in sympathy. A look passed between them, the wordless understanding of country folk. Except for the unfamiliar accent, they might have been neighbors.

Dougal jerked his chin over one shoulder. “M’wife died in birthing, so I headed out. Met these people on the trail, decided we’d be safer together. All kinds of *reish* abroad these days that’d cut your throat for a morsel of bread.”

Garin shuddered. “We’d be grateful if you’d let us travel with you.”

“No need to ask.” Dougal’s weathered face crinkled in a wide grin. “Looks like some of your youngsters are fair done in. We’ll let ’em ride in the wagons for a bit. Your woman there looks like she hasn’t had a decent meal since last fall.”

Garin turned back to the others and gestured them forward. “It’s all right, they’re friends. We’ll be traveling with them for safety. Dougal, where are you headed?”

“Nevarsin village, m’wife’s people. There’s bound to be work in the city.”

That sounded hopeful. If they could earn enough to buy seeds and a few goats, they might be able to return home.

Lina drew up to them, little Elena in her arms. She looked up at Dougal and said, “We are grateful for your company.”

Dougal blushed and ducked his head. Garin, watching them, thought that neither one would be lonely for long.

Together, they went on to Nevarsin, the City of Snows. Before they reached the outskirts, little Elena had begun to cough. When Garin touched her skin, she burned as if on fire. Lina, half out of her mind with worry, urged Dougal to hurry, for they could do little for her on the trail. At Nevarsin, there would be healers, warm food, blankets, safety.

The aged man posted at the city gates directed them to the Guildhall of the Society of Renunciates, who maintained a hospital for travelers. The Renunciates, hard-faced women with

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