

The White Road: The Nightrunner Series, Book 5

By Lynn Flewelling

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Dissolute nobles, master spies, and the unlikeliest of heroes, Alec and Seregil have survived exile, treachery, and black magic. But the road that lies ahead is the most hazardous they've ever traveled. For with enemies on all sides, they must walk a narrow path between good and evil where one misstep might be their last.

Having escaped death and slavery in Plenimar, Alec and Seregil want nothing more than to go back to their nightrunning life in Rhíminee. Instead they find themselves saddled with Sebrahn, a strange, alchemically created creature—the prophesied "child of no woman." Its moon-white skin and frightening powers make Sebrahn a danger to all whom Alec and Seregil come into contact with, leaving them no choice but to learn more about Sebrahn's true nature.

With the help of trusted friends and Seregil's clan, the duo set out to discover the truth about this living homunculus—a journey that can lead only to danger or death. For Seregil's old nemesis Ulan í Sathil of Virèsse and Alec's own long-lost kin are after them, intent on possessing both Alec and Sebrahn. On the run and hunted, Alec and his comrades must fight against time to accomplish their most personal mission ever.

From the Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Lynn Flewelling est nee en 1958 a Presque Isle dans le Maine, ville qui, contrairement a ce qu'on pourrait croire, n'est pas pres de la mer mais au fond des bois. Apres des etudes de litterature, d'histoire et une ecole veterinaire, elle a travaille comme employee a la morgue, peintre en batiment et journaliste avant de trouver sa voie et d'ecrire des series de Fantasy a succes.

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Chapter One

Safe Harbor

DYING—even for just a little while—took a lot out of a person. Alec and his companions had arrived in Gedre last night and Alec had managed to stay on his horse as they rode up from the harbor to the clan house, but he'd spoiled it by fainting in the courtyard. Mydri had taken one sharp look at him and packed him off to bed in a room overlooking the harbor. And when their host saw Sebrahn, Riagil í Molan had ordered that the *rhekaro* stay hidden, too. Given Sebrahn's strange appearance, Alec could hardly blame him.

Winter rain lashed against the window across the room and the wind moaned in the chimney. Gedre harbor was barely visible, the ships anchored there just dark smudges in the mist. After their stormy crossing from Plenimar, it was rather nice to be in a soft bed that didn't roll under him. He had no idea what time it was. When he'd awakened, Seregil was already gone, no doubt to speak with his sisters or their host, the *khirnari*.

Sebrahn was curled up on the cushions of the window seat, gazing out—though at what it was impossible to say. The rhekaro might haveAlec's childhood features, but it was impossible to pass him off as an ordinary child. His pale, silver-white hair hung nearly to the floor behind him. His white skin looked ghostly in the grey light, and his silver eyes were the color of steel. Riagil's wife, Yhali, had replaced the rags Sebrahn had arrived in with soft Aurënfaie tunics, knitted stockings, and shoes that fit him, though Sebrahn seemed confused by the latter and kept taking them off. Just as any little child might do—

But he's not a child, is he?

Pushing that thought away, Alec reached for the mug Mydri had left on the bedside table and sipped the medicinal broth. His hand shook a bit, spilling a few drops down the front of his nightshirt.

He and Seregil had been in desperate condition when Micum and Thero had found them in Plenimar, but Sebrahn had been even worse. He was made of magic and had used a staggering amount to kill their pursuers in the Plenimaran wilderness, bring Alec back from Bilairy's gate, and heal both Seregil and Alec. For the

first few days of the voyage they feared that the wizened, depleted little rhekaro might have used himself up. Too weak to get out of his bunk, Alec had fed Sebrahn several times a day, squeezing blood from his fingertip onto the rhekaro's little grey tongue.After a few days of this Sebrahn grew more alert and continued to improve. And today he seemed nearly himself again.

Alec wondered how long Riagil and Mydri were going to keep him shut away up here. His long linen nightshirt was fresh, but he hadn't had a proper bath since they'd escaped from the alchemist's villa almost two weeks ago. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, which hung halfway down his back—lank and dirty. His fingers caught in snarls and tangles. Stretching out one long blond strand, he wondered—not for the first time—whether he should just cut it off, as Seregil had sacrificed his during their escape. Sebrahn was squirming around now. One by one, the borrowed shoes fell to the floor. The alchemist, Charis Yhakobin, had created the rhekaro to be nothing more than a sexless, voiceless tool—one whose unnatural flesh and strange white blood could, according to Yhakobin, be distilled for some kind of potent elixir. But Sebrahn and his illfated predecessor had been much more than that. Sebrahn might be sexless, but he was not voiceless, or mindless, either.

"What do you see?" asked Alec.

Sebrahn turned to look at him. "Ahek."

Alec chuckled. His name had been Sebrahn's first halting word. Since then, he'd managed a few more for people, things, and a few actions. Understanding was another matter. Strangely, it didn't seem to matter whether you spoke Skalan, 'faie, or Plenimaran to him. Tell him cup, *tyxa*, or *kupa*, and if there was one in the room, he would fetch it. Sebrahn left the window seat and joined Alec on the bed, leaning against his side. Alec touched the rhekaro's soft, cool little hand, noting the thin scars that ringed the base of several fingers where they'd grown back after Yhakobin cut them off for some experiment.

Why didn't you sing to save yourself?

Alec gathered him close again, his heart beating a little faster. "No one is going to hurt you again, or take you away. If they try, we'll leave."

Sebrahn looked around the room, then pointed out the window and said in his raspy little voice, "Leeeve."

"That's right. On a ship. Can you say 'ship'?"

Sebrahn was not interested.

"Chamber pot."

The rhekaro slipped off the bed and pulled the required vessel from under the bed. Alec made use of it and had Sebrahn put it back for the skutter to deal with. Now what? There didn't appear to be anything he could do but watch the rain. It was a relief when he heard someone coming up the stairs to his door.

Micum looked in and grinned. "That's a long face!"

"Where is everybody?"

Micum came in and pulled a chair up beside the bed. "At breakfast. I came up to see if you're awake.

Hungry?"

"Not really."

Micum held out his hands, and Sebrahn abandoned Alec for the big man's lap.

"Traitor," Alec grumbled. Sebrahn had warmed to their tall, red-haired friend during the voyage. Sebrahn reached up to touch Micum's thick, grey-streaked moustache, apparently puzzled that the big man had something on his face that his two beardless protectors didn't.

"Uncle Micum," Alec said with a smile.

Micum laughed and kissed Sebrahn's hand, just as if he were one of his own brood. "I like the sound of that. What do you say, little sprout?"

Sebrahn didn't say anything, just leaned against Micum's broad chest and fixed his gaze on Alec. It was too easy to imagine anything he wanted in those eyes. What Sebrahn was really feeling—or if he could—remained a mystery. Alec and Micum were in the midst of a game of cards when Seregil came in with the wizards. Magyana looked most of her two centuries today; under a fringe of grey bangs, her lined face was pale and tired, but her eyes were kind as always. Thero, still in the youth of his first century, was tall and dark, with a thin beard and dark curling hair pulled back from a long, somewhat austere face. But his pale green eyes were warm, too, as he took in the sight of Alec and Sebrahn.

"We need to talk," Seregil said, sitting down on the bed beside Alec.

"I'll leave you to it," Micum said, putting Sebrahn on the bed and rising to go.

"Please, stay," said Thero. "We have no secrets from you in this matter."

This sounded serious, and all the more so when Magyana threw the latch and cast a warding on the room to keep out prying ears.

"Now then, this creature—" she began, her lined face somber.

"Please don't call him that," said Alec. "He's a person and he has a name."

"He is not a person, my dear," Magyana told him gently.

"You may be right about the rest of it, but he's not human, or 'faie, either."

"There's something we need to tell you," said Thero.

"What is it?"

"Thero sensed it, but not clearly, when he first saw Sebrahn in Plenimar," Magyana explained. "It's true that the rhekaro has been given the semblance of a child, but another form radiates beyond the physical. I don't understand it, but what I see around him is the form of a young dragon."

Alec stared hard at Sebrahn, squinting his eyes, but saw nothing unusual. "A dragon? That's impossible!

Sebrahn was made from bits of—me!" Seregil was frowning at the younger wizard. "Why didn't you tell us, Thero?"

"I wasn't sure what I was sensing. It's Magyana who sees it clearly."

Magyana took Alec's hand in hers. "Seregil has told me something of how Sebrahn was made. I believe you can tell me more. Do you know what materials he used?" Alec shifted uneasily; it was a time he didn't really want to remember. "Sulfur and salt, tinctures—"

"Nothing of dragons?"

"I saw dried fingerling dragons hanging in his workshop, but I didn't see him put any in."

"Very well. What else do you remember?"

"There was something he called the 'water of life'—some kind of silver, I think."

"Quicksilver?" asked Magyana.

"Yes, that was it. He put that all in with my tears, blood, shit and piss, hair, and my . . ." He faltered, blushing under the weight of their collective gaze.

"His semen," Seregil finished for him. "How in Bilairy's name do you get a dragon out of all that?"

Thero shrugged, his pale green eyes serious. "We don't know yet. But they did."

"It was my Hâzadriëlfaie blood that *Ilban*—" Alec faltered, horrified to have the slave word for "master" slip out so easily. "That's what Yhakobin claimed he needed the most. He said that it was the only thing that would work to make a rhekaro. But since I'm *ya'shel,* he did a long purification process first, trying to get rid of my human blood, he said."

"Ah, that would explain it," Magyana murmured. "I thought you looked different, more 'faie."

That was a sore topic. "I had to drink tinctures of metals and wear amulets; seven of them, I think: tin, copper, silver, gold—I don't remember the others. And he kept taking drops of my blood and making them burn to see what color they were. When it got to the right shade, he used more of my blood to make the mixture do whatever it did."

"Right out of his chest," Seregil growled. "They tapped him like a keg and hung him up to bleed on their mess." He paused, then leaned over and pushed the hair back from Alec's left ear, showing them the small blue dragon bite tattoo on his earlobe. "Could this have something to do with it?"

Magyana raised an eyebrow. "It's possible, I suppose. But it's such a tiny bite. There wouldn't have been anywhere near as much venom from it as there was from yours, Seregil."

The dragon that had bitten Seregil had been the size of a large dog, and the *lissik*-stained teeth marks spanned the back of his hand and the palm. His arm had swelled up like a sausage and he'd been damn sick for a few days, but lucky to survive all that with no more long-term damage than the mark.

“If that’s what Yhakobin really wanted, then he’d have used Seregil instead,” Alec mused. “Besides, he didn’t know I had the mark until after he’d bought me, and didn’t know what it was once he did. I told him it was just decoration.” He looked to Thero. “What about the Orëska? Nysander knew about the Helm. Maybe there’s some wizard guarding this rhekaro secret, too.”

“It’s doubtful,” said Magyana. “Skala barely existed when the Hâzad went north. And even if there is someone, it’s quite possible that he or she is sworn to utter secrecy, as Nysander was. Or dead. We lost so many during the assault on the Orëska House.”

“Maybe so, but don’t you think that somewhere, down in all those vaults, there might be *something* about this?” Seregil gave her a winning look. “If anyone would know where to look, it’s you. You know those cellars better than anyone.”

“I’ll look around as soon as I go back, but it’s likely to take a long time, since I don’t know what I’m looking for. There are a few people I could speak with, but you shouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“It would be an easier task for two people,” said Thero. “I had a message spell from Prince Korathan’s wizard, Norubia, last night. The prince is losing patience waiting for us to come back and account for ourselves. If I don’t bring you back, then I’d better have a good story. Otherwise it’s likely to raise questions you don’t want asked.”

“I hate to put you in that position,” said Seregil. “But there’s no way we can take Sebrahn to Rhíminee. It would be damn near impossible to hide anyone with a ‘dragon aura’ or whatever it is in a city full of wizards, and if Queen Phoria ever got wind of what Sebrahn is capable of, she’d have him and Alec caged like a pair of chukarees to use against the Overlord’s armies in her endless war.”

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