

2 · The Orphan Keeper's Assistant

Once upon a time, the Enchanter decreed that all who had disease or defects that could not be cured would be cast outside the city and left to die. All the unwanted and all the odd were cast out, and all those who belonged to no one—except orphans. Orphans were kept because they were useful to the Enchanter.

In the blazing sun, a young woman picked her way across the garbage dump outside the Enchanted City. She wore sunglasses, a wide-brimmed hat to protect her pallid skin, and a large, round button that read: “WE LOVE CHILDREN / Orphan Keepers’ Association.”

She kept slipping on the mounds of garbage. Even behind sunglasses, her eyes were bothered by light. “Whoops! Down again. Watch out! Light’s white,” she mumbled to herself. “Smats! Huffypuffy. Garbage dumps are stuffy.”

Stained and filthy from her falls, she approached Stonegate Entrance to Great Park. She thought she would rather do anything than go on this wild orphan chase. “Miss a day’s sleep. Smudges!” How was she supposed to get these gates opened? She’d never been in this dreadful park before, but this was where the Burners said the orphans had gone.

She rattled the iron gate, noticed a curled potato skin caught on her sleeve, and swept it away. She rattled again. Nothing budged. She tried to crawl over the gate, but her legs kept slipping and her button caught between the thin rails. She

finally stood back and hollered, “Does anybody h-e-a-r ... m-e-e-e-e-e?” Her hat bobbed back and forth. She shifted her bulging basket of a purse and shouted again. “Does anybody h-e-a-r ... m-e-e-e-e-e?”

No answer.

She tried another idea. “I am the Orphan Keeper’s Assistant! In the name of the Orphan Keeper, open! I am hunting for orphans!”

The gates creaked open. She was impressed by the power of the name she had shouted, never suspecting for a moment that the gates always opened for hunters.

Once inside, she followed a path, huffing and puffing all the way. *Whoo! What a jungle. All those trees! Better they were chopped down for fuel. ... What’s all that noise?*

In the distance she noticed a crowd of people in a large field. Some seemed to be dancing. A young man juggled several balls in the air. Then he dropped one. An older man was walking on a tightrope. All were working hard, but they were laughing and seemed to be enjoying themselves. What a strange place!

Orphan Keeper’s Assistant hurried on, ignoring brightly colored flowers waving on long, green stems and majestic, four-legged creatures, their ears poised to catch any sound. Thankfully, her eyes were shaded by sunglasses; she squinted behind them to keep out the bright light and this dreadful profusion of shape and color.

Orphans were on her mind. *Oh, bother! Orphans and*

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outcasts. No sane person cared for either. She knew that better than others. Hadn't she been the daughter of an outcast before earning a useful place in the Enchanter's service?

"Nha-a-a, nha-a-a, nha-a-a," the children of Enchanted City had all teased when she was a little girl. "Your mother's an outcast, an outcast, an outcast!"

Her mother had come down with an incurable disease, a malady called heart sickness, and been cast out. Then when her father died, she had become an orphan.

The double chin of the Orphan Keeper's Assistant folded into her neck and her shoulders shuddered at the memory. She hated outcasts! Nobody wanted an outcast.

The path she followed led to Caretaker's Cottage, all gingerbread trim and fieldstone. A young man, tall and handsome, stepped out the door just as she arrived. He was wearing a long, navy cloak with a silver clasp on the shoulder. She knew from her training that it was the uniform of a Ranger, one of the many watch-keepers for the man who called himself the King.

"Can I help you?" the young man asked. His eyes twinkled with light, though his lips were unsmiling.

You certainly can, you nice thing, you, giggled the Orphan Keeper's Assistant inwardly. But she said, "Smats and smudges! Get me out of this light. I'm a perfect puddle in the heat. Is Caretaker home? And what's a 'mercie'? 'See mercie,' the Orphan Keeper said to me. 'Get orphans from mercie.'"

The Ranger took her bulging purse, held open the door, and explained, "Mercie is Caretaker's wife. Caretaker is not here today. Step inside. ... Mercie, someone from the Orphan Association."

The Orphan Keeper's Assistant took off her sunglasses. She saw an old woman standing in front of the fire, older than

anyone she had ever known. The elderly lady was stirring the contents of a pot over the fire in the hearth. She wore a long, blue cotton dress, covered by an apron pinafore. Tendrils of white hair curled and fell from beneath a snood. She turned and smiled at the visitor, and all the wrinkles on her face creased upward.

"Welcome, hunter," she said. "I am Mercie, Caretaker's wife. We are servants of the King." Her back was straight, and the hand she extended in welcome to her visitor was as smooth and unlined as a girl's.

Odd, the Orphan Keeper's Assistant thought. Mercie seemed both very young and very old. The Orphan Keeper's Assistant felt nervous and confused. *Keep your eye on the odd ones. Be official*, she chided herself. She heard the Orphan Keeper's warning: "Bring 'em back alive. If you fail, you'll have a Burner on your tail."

"I am the Orphan Keeper's Assistant," she announced loudly, hoping everyone in the room would be impressed. She hooked a thumb under her official button and pushed it out from her blouse. Opening her basket, she produced a signed document. "I have a warrant for errants, here. Signed by Orphan Keeper herself. Two runaways last seen at Stonegate Entrance. One called Scarboy."

Her eyes were beginning to adjust to the dim light inside the cottage, and what she saw astounded her. Two girls cleared dishes from the extended table, feeling the surface with their hands. Counting with their fingers. They were blind.

Skinny sticks of children ran in and out. *Who would want such skeletons?* Orphan Keeper's Assistant thought. Three children were playing a game on the floor, one with crutches, one not moving. *What kind of hole is this? Who wants outcasts? Yuck!*