

Child of the Dark Star



Moyra Caldecott

CHILD OF THE DARK STAR

MOYRA CALDECOTT

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THERE WAS A PLANET ONCE, CALLED EARTH.
ITS PEOPLE, SCATTERED LIKE SEEDS BEFORE THE
WIND,
CAME TO REST ON AGARON . . .

Had this moment of destruction come, then, from such
a small beginning? Could even an Astrologer have
foretold that a girl gathering crops in a field, filled with
the love of her unborn child, would lead to the scene
now before him . . .

Or is there ever a beginning?

Hope, like a small leaf unfurling from a dark and
wrinkled seed, pushed out from his aching heart . . . If
there is never a beginning will there ever be an end?

Chapter 1

Untimely Birth

The land lay stained and blotched with shadow. Only the high ground still caught the full rays of the setting star, the Red Star, star of guardians and governors, and of hunters.

Firilla knew that she should go back to the farmhouse before the dread Dark Star swallowed all the light and left the fields, the hills and the valleys in icy desolation. But the zorrel crop was good, and her foster-father Bridin needed all the coin he could earn to build the new barn he needed. Firilla was with child, her infant due at the next turning of the heavens, when the dark would have left and the glow of the Blue Star would illumine everything with a soft and beautiful light.

‘Just one more row,’ she thought, ‘and I’ll go back.’

The soil was already becoming hard and cold and the tough, prickly little plants more difficult to pluck. Her hands were stained with the juice that flowed from their fluted stems, and the hem of her skirt was dusty and full of marra burrs, the seeds of the pesty little

weeds that always sheltered under the red zorrel. But she sang as she worked, happy to think that her child, conceived at the highest point of the White Star's influence and due to be born under the Blue Star, would have a good chance of being a priest-seer of exceptional ability.

She was smiling when a chill shadow touched her.

She looked up startled, the smile fleeing from her eyes. A giant garrar beast was there, hovering immediately above her, its huge wingspread cutting out what was left of the light, the heat of its breath scorching her skin.

She screamed and ran, dropping her load, stumbling over the furrowed field, the zorrel thorns catching at her legs. She tripped, and in steadying herself found a sharp stone which she seized and flung with all her might at the winged beast. It must have struck home, for the creature shrieked. Firilla scabbled frantically for another sharp stone. The garrar was wounded, and it was angry.

It swooped, and Firilla, with the strength of a mother desperate to protect her young, rammed a stone into the creature's beak as it opened to tear at her. But as she turned, feverishly trying to avoid its claws, the weight of the child within her making her clumsy and slow, the talons closed over her and the garrar lifted to the sky in triumph, Firilla gripped in its claws.

With extraordinary clarity, as though the pain and the terror had sharpened her senses, she saw the landscape slide beneath her: crop-fields in neat

triangular segments spreading from the central villages like spokes of vast wheels, and outside the cultivated circles the wild, waiting-to-reclaim-the-land tangled forests of tree-garths, their branches interlaced so tightly to feed off each other that no light reached the ground and only blind creatures hunting by dark could survive. Occasional flashes hurt her eyes as the wheeling flight of the garrar caused her to catch the reflection of the dying star in the smooth mirror of the waterways. But these soon disappeared as the open land disappeared. Beyond the forest, even darker and more sinister, a ridge of jagged mountains rose. For the villagers they had always been a source of legend, a place of thunder, remote and inaccessible – and Firilla saw with horror that her captor was making straight for them.

Strangely, she could hardly feel the pain now, nor see as clearly. It was as though darkness was rapidly spreading from the huge circle of the horizon until her vision constricted to one small brilliant point, and then that, in its turn, was snuffed out.

She did not see the scarlet figure of the hunter as he drew the gut string back and aimed his shaft, nor did she sense the rush of air as the wood and metal found its mark; only the spin and spiral as the garrar fell, still tenaciously gripping her.

Swiftly the hunter sent another arrow to the garrar's heart, and then, sure that it was dying, climbed down the cliffside from where he had first seen the beast and its burden. Precariously he held to root and outcrop,

finding hand and footholds where he could. When he reached them the garrar was dead, its slimy blood soaking the soil. Mercifully the girl had been flung free in the beast's last convulsive twitching and was lying some distance from the body, her fall broken by a mezmer bush, most of its white puff-balls snapped clear and filling the air with a miasma of fine seed-dust.

The young hunter, barely able to control the nausea caused by the smell of the garrar's blood, and afraid that the hallucinogenic effect of the mezmer seeds would get to him and destroy his resolve and sap his strength, dragged the girl hastily clear, ripping her clothes on branches as they went. She was bleeding badly and several bones were clearly broken, but she was alive.

He lifted her over his shoulder and staggered off, determined not to stop until he was out of sight and upwind of both the carcass and the debilitating seeds. He knew the garrar's mate might well be near and all his skill as bowman and strength as a man might be needed.

At last he found a safe place. It was beside a stream, and he bathed the girl's wounds, marvelling at the miracle of her survival. Her hair was harvest colour, brown and red-gold, her lashes long, her nose and mouth, as he wiped the blood from them, small and fine. Through her torn clothes he could see that her body, though at the moment distended with pregnancy, was young and beautiful.

She opened her eyes, staring with amazement into his. For a moment there was no fear, then memory returned. She started, her face darkened, her grey-green

eyes anxiously seeking what she dreaded over his shoulder.

‘It’s dead,’ he told her quietly. The shadow lifted from her face as the darkness lifts from the land at the rise of the White Star.

He squatted down beside her. Was it the effect of the mezmer seeds that made him feel as though, looking deeply into her eyes, he had always been with her? Tentatively he put out a hand and brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. She turned her head as though to hide a twinge of pain. The shadows were returning.

‘What can I do?’ he asked. He could see that she was trying to lift her head, though the effort was almost too much for her. He put his hand at the back of her neck and gently helped her. She looked down at her body. The leather of his shirt had been slit into strips and both her legs were bound to sticks.

‘Broken,’ he said as she stared at them.

She looked at her torn clothes, the hump of her unborn child. Pain came in a dark and uncontrollable wave, distorting her features. ‘What is it?’ he asked sharply.

‘My child . . .’ she whispered. ‘My child must not be born now!’

The pain had passed, but she knew what it meant. Her eyes, filled with horror, looked at him, and he understood. The Dark Star’s shadows were closing in on them and any child born now would be born under its baleful influence. ‘Can’t you . . . can’t you . . . hold it back?’ he cried, though he knew that she couldn’t. He

could see her lips, almost blue with cold, moving as though she were praying. He broke into a sweat; he was a bowman-hunter born under the Red Star, trained to bring death, not to attend birth. He crouched beside her helplessly as she doubled up with another contraction.

‘What must I do?’ he pleaded. ‘Tell me . . . tell me . . . what must I do?’

‘Build fire,’ she murmured as the wave of pain spent itself and withdrew. ‘Build it close.’

She was shivering in the rags the garrar claws and mezmer branches had reduced her to, and he had already used his shirt to bind her legs. He set about gathering wood, relieved to have a task, stumbling on the rocks in his haste and the growing dark, never going far from her, returning every few moments to look anxiously at her. The pains were frequent and severe, but she seemed calmer, knowing that what could not be avoided must be faced. The stubborn instinct of the mother, to bring her child to birth no matter what the circumstances, sustained her.

His hands were shaking as he mixed the fire-powders from the two pouches at his belt, and at last flame leapt in the darkness and took the kindling he had gathered.

Suddenly she screamed, unnerving in the silence, and with a last push brought her child into being. It lay between its mother’s legs, in darkness, the flickering glow from the fire making a play of grotesque shadows. He stared fascinated, horrified. A child of the Dark Star!

‘Help me,’ the woman cried, as he did not move. ‘Cut and bind the cord. Keep the child warm.’ Obediently he did as he was told, gathering the child up, wiping it clean with rags from its mother’s dress, and handing it, squalling, into her arms. She wept as she kissed her son’s tiny forehead.

The young man stared at her, shaken, doubt in his eyes as he watched her caress.

‘You’re not going to keep him! Surely you’re not thinking of keeping him?’ She did not reply, but when he looked into her eyes he knew his answer. ‘But . . .’ he whispered, ‘but . . .’ He shivered as the dark stirred dangerously around him.

She looked up beyond the red sparks of the fire that spiralled above them into the vast realms of sky through which those other stars, the distant points of brightness that gave no light to the world, mysteriously and magnificently took their course. Was there no higher court to which she could appeal, beyond the rigid laws of the Seven Stars of Agaron?

‘I will keep him!’ she whispered fiercely. ‘The Lord of Darkness has no right to him.’

The young man, Glidd, was confused. Seeing Firilla propped against a rock, holding with such love the soft and innocent creature at her breast, he found it hard to believe that the boy was destined to become one of the dreaded outlaw caste of those born under the Dark Star.

‘The White Star of his conception and the Blue Star that was foretold for his birth will hold him in their influence,’ she pleaded as Glidd stood silent, wanting to

believe that this were possible. The child's actual birth-time had been an accident and it may be that his destiny had already been fixed under the Birth-Star assigned to him. But only an Astrologer would be able to tell them for sure, and decisions had to be made at once.

Glidd walked away from Firilla and wrestled with his conscience. She had been through a great deal and could not be expected to be thinking clearly. He remembered nights at the lodge when he and his friends had discussed just this kind of situation, not dreaming that one of them would be called upon so soon to make an actual decision.

How much easier it had been to talk! He had seen too much of the ravages of bandits, the cruel wantonness of the marsh-dwellers, to rest easy in his mind if he let the child live to grow up as one of these, and yet . . . and yet . . . As a young boy he had been with his father when he had left his own newborn brother to a slow and painful death in the desert . . . No parent who so exposed a child born under the Dark Star considered themselves to be guilty of their death, nor, if the child survived, would accept responsibility for its life.

Glidd paced back and forth as the woman dropped her cheek to the soft head of her child and dozed off. He knew very well what he should do – and to do it quickly would be merciful.

He drew his dagger and approached the sleeping child, but as he drew back his hand to strike, the baby stirred, its tiny fingers uncurling, its mouth pursing,

sucking on a dream of milk. Glidd paused, and on that pause the whole shape of the planet's future hung.

Firilla jerked awake, her eyes blazing with extraordinary strength and anger as she saw the knife. No sound was made, but between them at that moment a force that seemed to belong to neither of them was at work.

Glidd tried to bring his knife down upon the child, but he could not. He knew already that it was too late and was startled to catch in the girl's eyes a look of ferocious triumph totally out of keeping with the impression he had formed of her. But even as he caught it, it was gone, and she broke down and wept.

'I'll prevent him from doing harm. I swear it! Let me keep him!'

'How can you swear that?' he said sadly, putting his knife away.

'I will watch him and guide him every moment of his life. I will not let him go to the marshes, nor to the villages or the towns. We will live here in the mountains. No one will know. No one will be harmed.'

He wanted to believe her, but his heart was heavy with foreboding. He bowed his head. 'It is your child. Your decision.'

She dropped her cheek to her child's soft head with relief. 'My prayers will always be with you,' she murmured.

'And mine with you,' he said gently.

* * * *

He did not leave her alone with her child in the mountains as she requested, but stayed with them and found food for her. He built her a rough shelter against the weather and the smaller wild creatures of the place. When he had seen her settled on her bed of leaves, a store of berries and his freshly filled water bottle beside her, he left her to return to his lodge, promising that he would return with other comforts she would need, and special herbs for her wounds.

For a long time he kept looking back, hesitating to leave her, and she lifted her head, straining to follow him with her eyes until there was no trace of the torch he carried. Only then did she fall back upon the leaves, trying to blink the tears away, not knowing if she would ever see him again, the soft breathing of the baby in her arms the only thing keeping her from despair.

Firilla had never known the fear of darkness so overwhelmingly before. As a child it had always been held at bay by the circle of firelight, by her family and friends gathered round her, by the walls of her home and the thin fabric of her windows. She had shuddered at tales of what happened under the Dark Star, but always from the safety of her home. Now she was vulnerable to it, utterly exposed, the huge rocks of the mountains surrounding her, pressing towards her with their heavy, silent shadows, their dark presence oozing into every chink of her shelter, every pore of her being.

She held the child so tightly she almost squeezed the life from him. Her tears fell on his head. 'Please let him return,' she whispered, shivering, thinking of Glidd.

At last she slept. She woke and suckled her son, and slept again.

How much time passed she could not tell, but at last she heard Glidd calling, and then saw the light he carried. When he was near enough to hold it over her to see her face he was shocked at the desperation he saw. He knelt beside her. 'It's all right,' he murmured. 'It's all right. I'm back. You're safe.'

Safe? With the Dark Star like a huge incubus in the sky above them, and the Lord of Darkness himself abroad and on the prowl?

Chapter 2

The Crown of Garrar Feathers

Glidd built Firilla, and the boy they had named Bardek, a sturdy cabin, half against the mountain rock, and half free standing. At first he spent a great deal of time back at the lodge with his friends, but gradually he spent more and more time with Firilla and Bardek, and she made no protest when at last he drew back the furs he had provided for her and climbed into her bed beside her.

Together they watched the growth of Bardek closely, teaching him all that they thought he should know of their planet. The only lie they deliberately told him was that he was conceived under the Green Star of his mother and born under the Red Star of Glidd.

Seemingly all went well, for the boy was bright and quick of eye and mind. Under Firilla's tutoring he learned about the growth and care of plants. In the Long Dark when they stayed indoors as much as possible he listened fascinated to the stories and myths that had been handed down through the generations, some so

ancient that they were from that Other Place, Earth, the sad and distant planet that had ceased to be. Together they taught him writing, and sometimes he wrote stories of his own on the parchment Glidd brought back from the city, or painted strange devices on the vellum they had made themselves from the skins of the animals they hunted for food. Bardek learned to make inks from certain plants and to gather the quills dropped by whains. He grew as agile as a mountain creature and soon knew every rock and cranny in the whole range of the Kariva mountain chain, as happy to follow Glidd in the hunt and to fetch what had fallen to his arrow as to work with his mother in the garden or to sit dreaming over an ancient legend.

Firilla watched him time and again set off with Glidd to learn the art of the bowman, content that she had made the right choice in preserving his life, her love for both of them growing every day.

But one day Bardek set off by himself in search of feathers for a new set of arrows he was fletching, and was away so long Firilla began to fret. She pleaded with Glidd to search for him. ‘He can’t be lost,’ said Glidd, ‘he knows these mountains better than a fear-all.’

‘The Dark is coming.’

Glidd smiled and kissed the top of her head. ‘You and the fear-alls have much in common,’ he said tenderly. ‘I’ll have to make you a hat of their white fur, and you can call them brothers.’

‘You may mock, but he often dreams when he should be alert. Garrars may be out. He’s never been alone in the dark.’

Glidd sighed and fastened on his arrow belt and his bow. The knife he always wore on the hunt he lashed to his leg.

‘You may need light if he is far afield,’ Firilla called, and rushed to give him a slow burning berga bough and his double pouch of fire powders.

Firilla watched him go and her heart stirred uneasily. She sensed that something was reaching for them that she did not want to face. These days she rarely climbed the ridge to look to the west where the heavy rain fell and the forests of Tree-garths separated her from her former home. She had accepted that she could never see her family and friends again, and contented herself completely with her love for Bardek and for Glidd. The only horizon she looked to was the eastern one, where the city of Bar-geda lay beyond the plains of Marvara. It was there that Glidd sometimes went for provisions or for entertainment. When he was gone, she and Bardek would watch for the tiny plume of dust in the dry landscape that would indicate his return, Bardek as eager for his presence as she was, asking questions without ceasing about the city and what Glidd could be doing there.

As he strode across the mountainside in the deepening shadow, Glidd called the boy, and his voice flicked from rock to rock and then, dying, rumbled underfoot in the cracks and deep hidden caves of the mountain. A

furry white fear-all scuttled from almost under his foot, terrified. Above wheeled the feathered whains, crying out to each other, dreading the coming dark.

Bardek did not usually stay out so long, and for all his mocking Glidd was as concerned as Firilla. 'Bardek!' he called. 'Bardek!' But no voice than his own came back to him.

He had determined to give up the search, convincing himself that Bardek must surely have returned home by now, when he came upon him in a place where the rocks formed a natural amphitheatre. There, standing on top of a rock, his arms lifted as though delivering an oration, stood Bardek. On his head was a crown of tall black feathers.

Glidd felt suddenly chilled. The boy was looking at something Glidd could not see and his face was flushed, almost feverish.

'Bardek.' Glidd brought out the name gruffly, but he had to say it three times before the child looked at him, and then he looked puzzled, as though he did not recognise Glidd. Only gradually did the flush leave his face and pleasure come to his eyes.

'Glidd!' he cried, and jumped off the rock.

'What were you doing?' Glidd demanded, trying not to let the anxiety he felt show in his voice.

'I was making a speech,' Bardek said happily. 'I was pretending to be a priest.'

'Priests do not wear crowns of black feathers,' Glidd said sharply.

‘Oh,’ said Bardek, reaching up and taking the crown from his head, ‘I found these. Aren’t they beautiful?’ He held them up proudly for Glidd to see. The last light caught the surface of their blackness and a kind of red fire seemed to flash from the surface of them. ‘They must be garrar feathers, but I never knew they could flash like that,’ he said.

The boy looked so cheerful and innocent Glidd was reassured that he was unaware of the significance of a crown of black feathers. ‘The garrar is a beast of ill omen. Throw them away, boy, they will do you no good.’ Glidd knew that Firilla would instantly see a dark meaning in this incident, and decided not to tell her of it.

‘I want to keep them,’ protested Bardek. ‘They’re beautiful.’

‘No,’ snapped Glidd.

He had never spoken so harshly to the boy before and Bardek looked at him in some surprise. His eyes clouded. ‘I want to keep them,’ he repeated.

‘They will frighten your mother. Throw them away. A garrar did her great harm once.’

‘But they are not attached to the garrar. They are just feathers!’

‘Nothing is ever *just* anything,’ Glidd said firmly. ‘Throw them away.’

‘I’ll hide them here so that mother never sees them, but I’ll not throw them away.’

Glidd hesitated. He could see the stubbornness in Bardek’s eyes, and he knew that the boy had a kind of

strange strength sometimes, in spite of his youth, that he hesitated to challenge. 'All right,' he said unwillingly, thinking that a compromise was better than a defeat, and planning to return without the boy and destroy the crown. He watched carefully as Bardek found a crevice in which to hide his trophy, and marked its position.

'What speech were you making?' he asked curiously as they made their way back to Firilla.

'I can't remember!' the boy laughed. 'Although it seemed a great speech at the time. I was trying to rouse them to some kind of action . . . but what it was I just can't think!'

'Who are "they"?' Glidd asked, stopping to light the torch. Carefully he took a pinch of the two fire powders, mixed them together on a rock, and lit the berga bough from the sudden flare-up.

'It's a funny thing,' Bardek said thoughtfully. 'I've never seen any people but you and mother and yet . . . and yet . . .'

'And yet what?' Glidd looked at him closely.

'I do see others . . .'

'Where?'

'They just sort of . . . appear and . . . disappear . . .'

'What do they look like?'

'Oh, just people. Different kinds of people.'

'Are you sure you don't fall asleep and dream?'

'It doesn't feel like dreaming.'

'Dreaming very often doesn't!'

'There is always one . . . more important than the rest . . .'

said Bardek thoughtfully.

‘Describe that one.’ Glidd almost held his breath.

‘He . . .’ The boy’s voice trailed away for a moment and there was a frown on his brow. ‘It is really strange. Sometimes I feel he is inside me and at other times . . . outside.’

‘Does he wear a crown of black feathers?’ The anxiety was unmistakable in the man’s voice.

Bardek suddenly laughed. ‘I just found those old feathers lying about and tied them with a piece of my sandal thong. Why do you make such a fuss about them?’

Glidd bit his lip. He could not tell Bardek of his true Birth-Star and of the dark god who governed those born under it.

* * * *

As soon as the light began to return Glidd hurried back to the rock amphitheatre. But there was no sign of Bardek’s feathers. Glidd stood on the spot where Bardek had made his speech, and looked out towards the plains of Marvara which stretched, in varying shades of blue, to the small blur on the horizon that was the distant city of Bar-geda. Two great columns of rock in the foreground framed it, and, as it shimmered in the light of the plain, it seemed to float above the land, insubstantial, unreal.

He frowned. Was he making too much of the crown of garrar feathers?

Chapter 3

The Temple of White Crystal

When he reached adolescence Bardek's pleas to be allowed to accompany Glidd to Bar-geda became so insistent that they knew they could not put it off any longer. If Glidd did not take him, he would go by himself.

And so it was agreed that the three of them should go together.

On the plains of Marvara they made camp twice. They stopped first for Glidd to show Bardek the honeycomb holes of the desert fagans, those small and cunning creatures who lived by stealing from the nests and stores of other animals. Glidd broke open one of their hideaways and revealed an extraordinary and intricate construction inside built from different shapes and sizes of spotlessly clean white bone, so delicate and fine that had it been larger the greatest architects would have been proud to have designed it. The floor was lined with feathers and fur for comfort.

The second time they stopped was beside a worked-out mirror-stone mine. The mineral had been taken and the land left scarred with pits, the residue a dull pink, and the bedrock, showing ribbed through the rubble, almost black. Glidd showed Bardek where he had once found a chip of mirror-stone left behind when the miners had departed, and while he and Firilla prepared food the boy searched, hoping to find a piece for himself. He had almost despaired of success when a silver glint caught his eye and he pulled aside a chunk of black rock to expose a small piece still attached to the ore. Excitedly he dug it out and rubbed it against his sleeve. It shone magnificently, and reflected in it he could see his face multiplied a dozen or more times. He stared at the images. ‘Which one,’ he thought, ‘which one is the one that is the real me?’ He had often felt as though he were a stranger – even to himself – as though he were acting out some other person’s life.

‘Bardek!’ Firilla called. ‘Bardek!’

Bardek? The name had been given him and for most of his life had contented him. He used to imagine meeting someone on the mountain, someone not even Glidd knew about, who would ask who he was. ‘Bardek,’ he would reply. ‘Bardek.’ And the stranger would be satisfied. He had been given a name and he thought he now knew who Bardek was. But the name was only a device of convenience – if anything it prevented one looking for Oneself . . . or of truly seeing another . . .

No – not in the name lay the Self, but in the purpose for which a person was born. Bardek smashed the

mirror-stone against a rock and kicked the myriad fragments of the face that mocked him . . . Why did he have these thoughts . . . Why? Glidd and Firilla did not question in this way. They lived their lives and were satisfied with eating and sleeping and loving each other and him. But for Bardek there was always something more . . . just out of reach . . . something he had to do . . . someone he had to be . . .

As they drew nearer the city Firilla became more and more uneasy. She had grown used to the quiet and the solitude of the mountains and feared to face crowds again. She looked anxiously at Bardek, wondering what effect the new environment and the new experiences would have on him.

Bar-geda was set in a spider shaped valley, the body of it closely packed with tall buildings and threaded with market streets, the limbs running away between the seven hills that dominated the periphery. Of these seven, three were natural and four were man-made. On six of them were strange and complex buildings, splendid and beautiful, but on the seventh was nothing but an immensely tall obelisk of black obsidian.

The most magnificent building of them all was the one on the highest natural hill. It was perched precariously on one side over a precipice and rose as though part of the rock itself, its tall white crystal walls fluting upwards to the sky in gleaming towers of needle like slenderness. Sometimes, as light caught the different facets, colours flashed and sparkled over the city like

light ripples on water. This was the Temple of the White Star, the Star of mystics, clairvoyants and poets.

The second most impressive building, also on a natural hill, was the Blue Temple with its rounded domes in a countless array of sizes. This was Firilla's favourite and, after the Temple of the White Star, the one most respected by the community. Its domes were of translucent blue, casting brilliant and flickering webs of blue light over everything near it. Within its glowing depths the priestesses could sometimes be seen looking like water creatures swimming in a blue pool. Children born at the time of the Blue Star's greatest influence had a good chance of becoming priests or philosophers. Firilla had never ceased to remember that this should have been Bardek's Star.

Glidd's temple, the one serving the Red Star, the Star of the governors, the guardians and the hunters, was on one of the artificial mounds and was altogether smaller, a series of red cubes arranged in a very orderly way, one upon the other, the stone opaque.

The Green, the farmer's temple, was almost hidden amongst tall trenoids, its walls covered in a delicate lace of tendrils. The Indigo, in glass and metal, looked like a great feathered whain about to rise for flight; its legs tall metal columns holding the raised body above the flat-topped mound; its wings, shaped disks of shining metal, spread out on either side; its body every shade of purple, lavender, blue or indigo glass. Artists and musicians were its special charge. The rectangular yellow temple on the fourth man-made mound was for those who were

happier working with their hands than their creative imaginations, for those who preferred to follow others than to make decisions for themselves.

The final hill, the last of the natural ones, was the one with no temple at all, only the obelisk of black glass from the fiery heart of a volcano rising like a sword of black light to pierce the sky. In a sense it served as a kind of time-dial, its ominous shadow marking the turn of the heavens above the city, constantly reminding the people who passed under it that the Dark Lord was always there, and that his time would come.

Firilla and Glidd had chosen to bring Bardek to Bargeda at the time of the Festival of the White Star, feeling that this would be safest for the boy, with the influence of the Star of his conception at its strongest and that of his actual birth its weakest. Firilla had never been to the capital city before and clung to Glidd's hand so tightly she almost stopped the flow of blood to his fingers, but eventually, in spite of her fears for Bardek, she began to relax and respond to the excitement and joy of the celebration. Bardek was full of wonder, taking in everything that presented itself; the tall buildings, the narrow streets, the stall holders calling out their wares, the crowds dressed elaborately in their caste clothes, some with decorative emblems to mark the specific nature of their official role in society.

Ribbons of white paper were strung from roof to roof, window boxes of white flowers were scenting the air, and trailing vines of the white-leaved jabasco plant

were gracefully hanging from many of them almost to ground level.

Glidd watched Bardek closely and scarcely noticed the crowds that pressed past them in the narrow streets. To his surprise the boy asked no questions, though everything he saw must have been full of mystery for him. He wondered if the people Bardek now encountered in the flesh were at all like the ones he had spoken to in 'imagination'.

Once deep in the city the hills with their extraordinary temple diadems were hardly visible. Only occasionally, rounding a corner, a flash of crystal light startled them, but was soon lost as their progress took them further under the overhang of balconies and into arcades and courtyards.

It was in a courtyard that they came to rest at last, sitting on a slab of veined and beautiful stone edging a fountain. It was an oasis of quiet in a desert of sound. Beside them the falling water hushed softly, exotic flowers in carved pots grew quietly. The noises of the city drew back, and waited, just beyond the range of their conscious attention.

'What do you think of it?' Glidd asked smiling, feeling a kind of pride and excitement in the city, as though it were his own and he were giving it as a gift to his friend.

Bardek's eyes glowed. 'It's wonderful!' he cried. 'What I would not give to live here forever!'

'No,' his mother said sharply. 'We have no place here.'

‘Why not?’ Bardek asked eagerly. ‘There are shelters enough for a thousand mountain people.’

‘You don’t understand. This is not our place.’

Glidd noticed the growing sullen shadow in Bardek’s eyes and was quick to change the subject. ‘I’m hungry,’ he said briskly, standing up and stretching. ‘What do you say to a meal, my friends?’ He could see the beginning of tears in Firilla’s eyes and took her arm, turning her away from her son. ‘A meal we don’t have to cook on our own fire,’ he added, ‘and meat we’ve not hunted.’ Bardek relaxed and smiled; he had not noticed how hungry he was until food was mentioned. ‘And then we must find a place to sleep,’ Glidd said.

Glidd led them through the streets he knew to an inn where the food was good, and Firilla joyously ordered valley fruit and leaf salad to make up for all the years that she had been living on a sparse mountain diet. This time it was nostalgia that nearly brought tears to her eyes, and she spoke longingly of the village and the fields she had once known. Glidd had brought her seeds and she had grown many things in her mountain home that did not normally grow there, but most needed the rich loam of the river plains and had sent up shoots in the mountains only to wilt and die.

‘Try this!’ she cried. ‘And this!’ She piled her son’s bowl high with many amazing things, until he had to demand that she stop.

‘Even I can’t eat as much as that!’ he laughed.

Glidd was happy to see that conflict had been averted, and called for wine. The boy’s cheeks were

flushed already with the food and the pleasure of being in the city, but the wine was silver and cool, light as water from an ice-melt in the mountains.

The inn had a room for them and after the meal Firilla insisted that they lie down and sleep, thinking that perhaps the sooner they were refreshed the sooner they could set off for their quiet home again. But Bardek lay awake, biding his time, knowing that only when they were asleep would he be free to explore the city on his own. He felt that he had invisible wings itching to be used and he would go mad if he were not allowed to stretch them soon.

He shut his eyes and flung his arm out over the side of the bed trying to convince the others he was asleep. It must have worked because he could no longer feel Glidd's eyes upon him, and when he ventured to open his own and lift his head, the man was sleeping, Firilla curled round on her side with her head on his shoulder and his cheek resting on her hair.

When Bardek was sure of their steady breathing, he rose quietly and left the room, glad to be free of the oppressive curtained darkness. The Temple of the White Star, palace of crystal on the highest hill, fascinated him, and he was determined to have a closer look at it.

He walked purposefully through the streets he had earlier wandered along so slowly, and followed every gleam and glint of white crystal he caught through the gaps in the buildings. But it was not as easy to find as he had thought. There seemed to be no logic to the streets and they changed direction frequently for no apparent

reason. More often than not he found himself in a cul-de-sac and had to retrace his steps as though the city were a labyrinth designed to prevent him reaching the White Temple. He walked until he was weary and yet still seemed to be no nearer the outskirts of the city where he knew the white hill to be.

At first he was too shy to ask his way of the busy townspeople, but at last he stopped a boy and stammered out his question. He was given complicated instructions, which, after many left turns and right turns, led him back to where he had been before. Disheartened, he almost decided to turn back. It was taking longer than he had anticipated, and he was worried about his mother waking and finding him gone. But would he find his way back?

A woman holding a small child by the hand came hurrying round the corner. Bardek decided to make one more attempt. To have come so far without seeing the White Temple would be unendurable. 'I . . . I have lost my way. I wonder if you could . . .'

The woman was impatient, but she told him where to go. He fancied she looked at him strangely while he spoke, and at one point he thought she was going to warn him about something but thought better of it. After she left Bardek began to notice that the streets were emptying, the people seemed to be hurrying to find cover as though they knew something he did not. As he walked he searched his memory for all that Firilla had told him about the Star system. He could only remember being told good things about the White Star and its

Temple. 'Of all the Stars that rule our planet,' she had said, 'the two most honoured are the White and the Blue. Those conceived and born under their influence are very fortunate.' When he had asked under which Star he had been born his mother had burst into tears and it had been Glidd who had answered for her.

'You were conceived under the Green, but you were born under the . . . Red.'

'The Star of bowmen, of guardians, of governors?'

Glidd had nodded briefly and turned away. 'Your Star, Glidd?'

'Yes.'

'Why does she weep?'

'She loves you. She weeps for the dangers bowmen and guardians have to face.'

'Why should I be a Bowman or guardian? I could be a governor.' He knew the casting of horoscopes was more complicated than ordinary people believed, and within the period of a Star's influence there were many variations only Astrologers could trace.

Glidd had ignored his remark. 'When you are grown I will take you to my old lodge and you will become a hunter-bowman, and provide food for the villages of the dry lands where the burrs can't graze.'

'I will not leave my mother,' he had said then, fiercely, loyally. 'I will care for her until she is dead.' But he had been very young when he said that, and now, although he loved her still, he found her gentle tyranny irksome, and here he was upon an unknown road in an unknown city seeking . . . he knew not what.

As he turned a corner he staggered suddenly, as though he had been hit in the face.

He shut his eyes instinctively and covered them with his hands as a light that was stronger than he could have imagined beamed into them. Scarcely aware that he had moved he found himself crouching against a wall with his head buried in his arm, but even through the layers of flesh and bone he could feel the probing of the light.

‘How can people endure it?’ he thought, and then remembered the emptying of the streets, and that every house had its blinds down. He was torn between a strong desire to go back and an even stronger determination to go forward. ‘The influence of the White Star is good,’ Firilla had taught him time and again. ‘Under its light are born the Seers, the mystics, those who are as far beyond us in wisdom as we are beyond the little six-legged fear-alls that hide under the rocks.’

Why should the light now drive fear into his heart? No shadow could feel more menacing, nor darkness more sinister.

‘I’ll open my eyes and face it!’

Bardek felt challenged. Was it a weakness in himself that he could not look at it?

In the mountains the time of the White Star was bright, but never as bright as this. He remembered how when its rising was due the three of them invariably gathered to watch, and more often than not he had found tears in his eyes from the sheer beauty of it as it rose above the horizon. For a long time before its rising a pale silver flush mingled with the dim golden light of

the Yellow Star's setting. Then there was a brilliant silver rim, brighter than mirror-stone, that shone along the whole length of the horizon. Suddenly one part of it grew thicker, brighter. They held their breath. Then an overwhelming splendour burst into a million dazzling beams that sparked from cliff face and summit.

It was true that when it was fully risen he could not look at it directly, but the light of it that touched everything into sparkle and shine was good, and he had never feared it before.

'The White Star is the only one we can't look at directly,' he thought now. 'But surely the Star itself can't be closer in the city than it is in the mountains?'

He eased his arm gradually from his face, but felt impelled to keep his eyes still tightly closed. Was it his imagination or was the light less strong already?

He waited, eyes closed, having the strange sensation that where his eyes normally were there were now two deep pits, not dark as pits should be, but filled with a swirling interplay of lights of every colour. He seemed to be looking inwards rather than outwards, and found himself straining to see into the pits of light as though he expected something to emerge from them.

Suddenly he cried out as the light seemed to stop swirling for a moment and a hint, a flash of something, appeared to him. What was it? A shape . . . a figure . . . a figure reaching out to him . . .

Desperate to see more clearly and impatient with the indistinctness of the vision, he opened his eyes.

He found himself looking directly at the Temple of the White Star, his eyes smarting and watering with the strain of looking at so strong a source of light. He kept blinking them and straining them to stay open for longer and longer periods of time until at last he could see the temple without too much discomfort. It was still a distance from him, but he could see it full and clear, crowning the hill, catching the light of the Star, focusing it and reflecting it, magnified across the land. It was built of crystal, a cluster of tall forms, each reflecting surface catching the light at different moments.

Bardek began to notice that the pain in his eyes was growing less. He wiped them with his sleeve, and looked again with amazement at the building. Tower upon tower of transparent crystal sparkled against the sky while occasionally lights of other colours glistened for an instant and were gone. He had never dreamed of such beauty. He moved forward. To reach the Temple and bathe in its light had become the most important and urgent thing in his life. He left the town behind and started to climb the steep hill. At first it was easy, but he soon found that he had to pause for breath. The trenoids that clustered around the hill frequently hid the Temple's crystal towers, their spiralling tendrils and the shimmering splendour of their variegated leaves forming a colourful curtain between him and the object of his quest.

He looked back at the town and saw that the streets were no longer empty. The unendurable brilliance had left them and the people who had chosen to draw their

blinds and sleep through the experience were awake and busy with their affairs. Bardek smiled slightly, recalling that while Firilla was afraid of the dark here it seemed they were afraid of the light. He did not blame them, for he was still shaken from his own encounter with it.

He thought about Glidd and Firilla and felt again the pressure of time upon him. But he had come too far now and he was determined not to return to them until he had explored the temple. He tried to shut his mind to the worry he knew Firilla would be feeling if she had noticed that he was missing.

He moved forward and upward.

As he reached higher up the hill the way became steeper and steeper, and he found himself sometimes on his knees, reaching for the exposed fibrous roots and the scaly trunks of the saplings, testing them before he put his weight on them, using them to haul himself up. There seemed to be no path, but certain places were more open than others. He wondered if just around the other side of the hill there were not steps, or even a road, leading to the Temple, but if there were it would probably be guarded. He preferred to stay where he was and avoid being seen.

Suddenly he was at the top.

The trenoids and their undergrowth had hidden the fact that he was so near, and his surprise as he stood upon flat ground and stared at the open and magnificent scene before him took his breath away.

The Temple was surrounded by gardens of flowers and by fountains. Every kind of white flower he had ever

known and many that he had never dreamed of budded and bloomed, all poised on perfection as though there were no tomorrow of falling petals and browning leaves. Tall showers of water caught the light and sparked with a myriad fleeting colours. He could see the Temple through the veil of drops, its gleaming crystal almost indistinguishable from the water. Cautiously he looked around to see if there were any guardians to challenge him, but the place seemed deserted. He took one step, then another. At last he strode boldly forward. As he reached the line of fountains he could feel the cool prickle of the water drops on his skin. He shivered with pleasure. The struggle up the hill had made him sweat uncomfortably; dust and broken pieces of bark-scale had clung to him and made him feel dirty and sticky. The cool spray washed over him and he emerged at last through its fine veil refreshed and invigorated.

Beyond the fountains there was nothing between him and the transparent walls of the Temple. Curiosity drove him on but the knowledge that he was trespassing in a sacred place made him advance with the caution of a hunter.

He stopped within a few paces of the walls and found that he was looking into a great hall, all the inner walls of which were as transparent as the outer ones. Beyond it he could see passages and chambers disappearing into the distance. The immediate hall was completely bare save for a tall plinth of white marble at the centre of which was a gigantic skull carved out of rock crystal. The floor in particular caught his attention:

an intricate geometric design, each piece of stone a different shade of white, each complex arrangement of crystal slab leading the eye back to the centre, back to the skull. The front of the skull's face, where the eye and nose sockets were, was of totally clear crystal, blank and empty, but in the cranium fine cracks in the rock gave the impression of floating filaments of shimmering mystery. He thought of the sky on a deep dark night, the time of the Dark Star, when there was no great source of light, only those floating filaments of distant shining mist and minute specks and points of brightness. It seemed to him that in looking into the domed skull he was looking into the mighty universe beyond their small planet, and had a strange cold moment of wonder whether in fact the universe was contained in man, or man in the universe.

Before he had time to follow this thought through, he noticed a movement deep in the building. He had thought at first that the whole place was deserted, but now he could see, faintly at first, but growing clearer all the time, a procession of people coming towards the hall he was watching, down a long, long corridor. They came slowly, and it was some time before he could make out the details of the procession, but he knew they must be priests. By the measured order of their progress he was sure also that they were engaged in ritual. A fine, clear chanting was in the air as much outside as inside the building. Bardek looked quickly round for shelter. He wanted to see what was going to happen more than he had ever wanted anything in his life, but he did not want

to be seen. If he retreated beyond the veil of the fountains, he would not be able to see what was going on in the hall. He decided to lie flat on the cold white paving stones behind a bed of tall lilies and take a chance that he would not be noticed.

The chanting stopped and he raised his head in alarm. Had he been discovered? But he had no need to worry; the chanting had stopped because the procession had reached its destination. The figures of the priests were grouped in a wide circle around the skull, their eyes closed and their heads tilted slightly as though listening to something he could not hear.

After a long time the silence and the stillness became unbearable. Bardek, cramped and uncomfortable on the hard stone, his limbs itching to move, began to wonder if he should get up and creep away while the priests eyes were closed, but then he noticed that someone else was entering the hall and curiosity made him forget his discomfort.

A tall priest led the way, followed by three figures. Forgetting his vulnerability, Bardek began to creep forward, straining to see more clearly. They were certainly not moving with the measured tread of the first group. The tall one in front, dressed in stiff folds of gleaming white, a crown of crystal on his head, necklaces of silver and diamond hanging from his shoulders almost to his waist, was presumably the High Priest. He began to lead his little group in what was at first a wide arc around the still and silent priests, narrowing on each turn to join the circle already in position. Bardek

gasped: the two outer figures were holding a third between them, and the third was struggling to escape.

‘Surely,’ he thought with horror, ‘I’m not going to witness a sacrifice!’ He had heard that in ancient times under the Dark Lord there had been sacrifices – but in these times, and in such a place? Hardly breathing now, he forgot caution and crept nearer the crystal wall to see and hear more clearly.

The tall priest came almost face to face with him, and it seemed to Bardek that his heart jerked sickeningly. Now he was surely finished, the man had looked straight at him! But it seemed he had not been seen. Bardek could not believe it; the eyes of all the priests were open now and many must surely have noticed him, but not one showed any sign that he had. Was it possible that the light of the White Star and the nature of the crystal combined in such a way that those inside could not see out?

Bardek thought for a while, then stood up and peered boldly through the wall. As the moments passed and he was still not discovered he began to forget his own danger and concentrate on the scene before him.

The three figures behind the High Priest had now come clearly into view and were breaking into the circle of priests to be nearer the central plinth and crystal skull. The men were drawing back to let them pass.

As the prisoner struggled, the cloak that had hidden his features fell away and Bardek was startled to find himself looking at a girl no older than himself.

For a moment, with the falling of the cloak, she managed to break away from her captors and run to the outer wall, beating at it with her clenched hands, a few inches of crystal all that separated her from him. He could see into her eyes and was overwhelmed with pity for the desperation in them. At that moment he decided he would do everything he could to help her escape.

He started beating with his own fists on the wall, shouting blasphemies at the priests for holding such a young girl captive. To his surprise the sound his fists made seemed to have penetrated to the hall, because the circle broke up in confusion, and the whole throng crowded to the wall, peering myopically, trying to see who was causing the disturbance on the outside. Even the girl was startled, and instead of taking the chance of the diversion to escape stood foolishly staring at the wall.

Now that he was certain they could not see out of the Temple, Bardek felt extremely bold and shouted abuse and demanded that they release her. For a moment he fancied they might obey him, they were so surprised by his intrusion, but the moment passed and the priest who seemed to be in charge raised his arm and commanded them back to their places. They obeyed instantly, and the girl was seized, and vanished from his sight within the circle of men, her cloak still lying on the magnificent floor.

In spite of the fact that he had heard nothing but good about the Temple of the White Star, the girl's feelings of terror and longing for escape so communi-

cated themselves to Bardek that he was convinced she was about to be sacrificed. He ran around the building searching for a door, but the bland crystal seemed endless, stretching up almost as far as he could see, and on no surface could he find a break of any kind. The whole Temple appeared completely sealed within itself.

Whenever he saw someone moving within the chambers he passed he beat on the wail and called, but no one saw him. Some looked up, momentarily puzzled, but soon went back to what they were doing and ignored the intrusion.

Surely there was a door . . . a window . . . an air vent of some kind? There must be some way of moving from the outside to the inside. But if there was, Bardek could not find it.

Frantic and frustrated, he found himself at last back where he had started, at the Hall of the Skull. He stood helplessly with his arms against the wall, peering in, expecting to see the girl's body dismembered and bleeding on the floor. Instead he saw her standing tall and proud, her arms lifted above her head, her voice ringing with strength and power, the priests kneeling before her, their heads lowered in respect. He was so amazed at the sight he did not hear what she was saying. A great feeling of desolation came upon him. He understood nothing. The girl was elated, powerful, triumphant. Had he imagined her eyes full of fear and despair? He stood for a while staring at the scene and then, filled with weariness and a sense of anti-climax, he turned and plodded back through the falling water and

the white flowers to the trenoids that rimmed the hill. Slithering and sliding he was soon down to the valley, only a few scratches and a tear in his breeches to show for his adventure.

The way back to the Inn seemed longer than he remembered, but he did not once think about the direction. Some skill below the level of consciousness guided him back to where Firilla was weeping and Glidd was tight-lipped and angry. He would not tell them where he had been or what he had witnessed, but when they said that they were going straight home to the mountains he agreed eagerly, not even asking for a rest before the journey.

Firilla and Glidd looked at each other, surprised, but they asked no questions.

* * * *

Bardek's eyes almost filled with tears when he at last saw the wooden house nesting against the rock with his mother's varied and colourful flowers surrounding it. Home! He was glad to draw its familiar cloak around him . . .

Chapter 4

The Garrar Fight

For a long while after this Bardek was reasonably content with his life in the mountains. He found as he grew older that there was still a great deal to learn, not only about the bowman's craft, but about nature. More and more he would go off by himself, spending a great deal of time observing the creatures of the wild, tracking, studying, thinking.

Glidd spoke of taking him to his old Hunter's Lodge that lay to the south in the foothills. 'I've taught you all I know and it's time for you to meet others of our caste. You are good with the bow, but you will find many who are better. The competition will be good for you.'

He told Bardek of the tournaments that were held, when bowmen from all over the mountains and the plains gathered at one or other of the lodges to compete against each other. His eyes shone when he thought of the time when he, on the verge of manhood, no older than Bardek now was, had won the coveted trophy.

Firilla was against it and needed some persuading, but at last she gave in and agreed that Bardek could go if Glidd promised to stay with him.

Just before they were due to go, Bardek returned to the place that had been his favourite as a child, the natural amphitheatre of rock from which he could, on a clear day, see the distant smudge on the horizon that was Bar-geda, framed between two great columns of rock.

He sat on the flat rock he had so often used as a platform for his orations when he was younger. He thought of Glidd and how agitated he had been to find him crowned with garrar feathers. He wondered if the crown was still where he had hidden it from Glidd. It was so long since he had looked at it that small rock plants had grown over the boulder that served as a door. He had to scratch them away before he could pull it out and feel in the cavity behind. The crown was still there, somewhat bedraggled. The black feathers that had once shone and flashed with red light were dull and shabby. He turned it round and round in his hands, sad that time had robbed it of its glamour. It even seemed smaller than he remembered, and when he lifted it to his head to try and recapture something of the pleasure he had had at his first crowning, it did not fit.

He sighed.

His thoughts drifted back to Bar-geda and his experiences there. When he first returned to the mountains he had deliberately busied himself so that he would not think about the disturbing events at the

Temple. As time passed, the memories had become so faded they no longer presented a threat to his peace of mind. But now, sitting alone on the mountain, in this particular place where so many strange thoughts had come to him in the past, knowing that he was on the verge of another great change, his thoughts went back to the girl.

He frowned. The memory of her was vivid, almost as though he were in her presence again. He found himself remembering things about her that he had not realised he had noticed before. Her beauty was astounding. No one he had ever seen or dreamed of could compare with her. Her eyes haunted him, deeply grey-green with golden flecks, the lashes even longer than Firilla's. Her hair was silver – not white as he had seen the hair of very old people, but pure silver like the light of the White Star itself. Her body was perfect and there were things about it that had passed him by before which now tormented him. He longed to see her again, to take her out of the Temple, to be with her.

In imagination he walked around the Temple again, searching for an entrance or an opening of some kind. He could not believe that there were none. Was he the victim of an illusion?

He stood up suddenly, determined to return to the city and the Temple and make one more attempt to reach her. Glidd and his Lodge would have to wait.

The procession of Stars had passed many times since he was first at Bar-geda, and it was the time of the White Star again, but past its zenith and well on the way

to setting. He wondered what happened to the White Temple when its special Star had set. Did it grow dull and lifeless? Was it then possible for the people inside to see out through the walls? Would the ritual still continue and the mysterious frail prisoner be led in, weeping, only to transform into a powerful Being in front of the crystal skull?

Bardek knew that if he had to face Firilla or Glidd now his resolution would waver. He decided to go straight to the city. He took off the crown of garrar feathers and plucked one out from the others, using the quill of it to write a message for Glidd on a flat pad of compacted soil. He marked the place with his red bowman's scarf, weighting it with small pieces of rock, the crown lying discarded and forgotten beside it. He stayed only to gather a pouch full of mountain roots and berries he knew were good and nourishing to eat and to fill his water bottle.

* * * *

Firilla and Glidd did not miss Bardek until the time for sleep, and even then they saw no cause to worry. He had seemed content for a long time now and often spent time alone in the mountains.

But when they had been asleep for some time Firilla was woken by a storm. The lightning seemed to tear the sky apart, and the thunder to shake the mountain rocks until they rattled. Firilla turned closer into the arms of her lover and would have slept in spite of the noise had

she not remembered Bardek. She looked to his bed; it was empty.

‘Glidd!’ she cried, shaking him awake.

Half dazed he saw her white face staring at him in the sudden illumination of a flash of lightning.

‘What is it?’

‘Bardek. He’s still not back!’

Glidd groaned and rolled over on his elbow to view Bardek’s sleeping corner. ‘The Dark Lord take him!’ he cursed under his breath.

Firilla heard him and looked horrified, tears springing to her eyes. ‘Why do you say that? Are you mad?’

Glidd, now fully awake, was contrite. ‘I didn’t mean it love; no harm will come to him.’

‘Pray to the Lord of Light, the White Star itself, before your evil message leaves this room,’ she cried, her face pinched with anxiety.

Glidd made the sign of the White Star and said the prayer she wanted, but it did not seem to comfort her. She was still trembling, her eyes dark with distress.

‘You’ll not come to my bed until my son returns safe,’ she burst out, sobbing. He looked at her with amazement. ‘You have cursed him and exposed him to evil. If he falls under it, I’ll never forgive you.’

He had never known her so bitter, so vindictive. ‘Firilla!’ He tried to put his arms round her but she drew back.

‘No. Not until he is safe.’

‘This is nonsense. I didn’t really curse him. It was an idle phrase people use all the time. It means nothing!’

‘It means a great deal.’

The house shook with a gigantic clap of thunder and, forgetting her vow, she screamed and clung to Glidd. For a moment he thought that he was reprieved, but his relief was short lived. As soon as the sound grumbled off into the distance she sprang away from him and drew the bed clothes up round her, looking at him fiercely over the top of her drawn up knees.

‘I’ll go and look for him if it’ll make you happier,’ he said. ‘But you’ll see – no harm will have come to him.’

She did not answer, but stared at him with dark eyes, watching as he stood up and put on his clothes, watching as he walked to the door. Before he left he looked back, hoping to see a change in her expression. But there was none, and he knew that she had meant her threat.

The thunder and lightning had spent itself now and heavy rain fell like a waterfall upon the house. He looked ruefully at it. It was madness to go out and look for Bardek. The boy would have had the sense to get under cover at the first sign of the storm and would return when it was over. But Firilla was in no mood to be told this, so he walked out into the violent downpour, thinking of some harsh things to say to Bardek when he found him.

Miserably he trudged away from the house and within moments was drenched. He ducked under a ledge and sat crouched and brooding for a while, thinking of his bed, sure that it would not be long before he would be back beside Firilla.

But when the rain abated and some time had passed and there was still no sign of Bardek, Glidd set off to look for him, an instinct telling him to go to the amphitheatre of rock where he had found him once before. The way was long, and with the rock and soil so wet, dangerous. 'He is probably home already,' thought Glidd bitterly, but there was enough unease in his mind for him to check the amphitheatre before he gave up. He prayed that he would find the boy there, for he did not look forward to returning without Firilla's son.

Water was running wild. The wet walls of rock gleamed with it. Cracks rushed with it. Muddy pools were collecting everywhere. Glidd slipped and slithered on the track, nearly falling to his death several times.

The air had a great clarity now and although the White Star was near its setting and the light dimmer than it had been, the colours of the mountains and the plains were brighter, clearer, sharper, than they usually were, tinged with indigo and purple. He was confident that he would find Bardek whistling along the path to meet him at any moment. He whistled himself a while, the light clean air lifting his heart in spite of what had just happened with Firilla.

He reached the amphitheatre of rock and found it scoured clean by the recent storm. Bardek was not there.

Glidd called long and loud, using the echoes to carry his voice round the mountain further than it would normally have reached, but no answer came back to him. Only his own voice, mocking.

Caught on a low shrub he found the bedraggled and broken crown of garrar feathers, and further down the ravine where water from the amphitheatre had spilled violently over, he saw the gleam of something red. The rain had washed Bardek's message away, but his scarf was found by a horrified Glidd, soaked and muddy at the bottom of a steep drop of rock.

Trembling with the fear of what he might find, Glidd lowered himself down the dangerous cliff, pausing every now and then to call the boy. His heart ached, his fingers bled as he tore them on the rocks, the curse he had spoken without thinking returning to haunt him. Would all the prayers in the world to the Lord of the White Star cancel out that careless phrase, spoken half asleep?

Firilla's eyes seemed to be everywhere, accusing him. How could he return to her with the bones of her son and say honestly that he had no part in killing him?

He reached the scarf at last and used it to bind his knee, which had received a severe jarring on a rock. There was no sign of anything else of the boy's, but the ravine went further. Glidd struggled on in despair, his mind in conflict, one part of it refusing to believe that this was actually happening, the other seeing images of the boy's broken and bleeding body at every turn.

The thought crossed his mind that he would not return to face Firilla, but he loved her too much to do that to her. Whether she took him to her bed or not, she would need help from him if Bardek was dead. She might never forgive him, but she would need him.

The crown of garrar feathers kept coming to his mind and he wondered what part the Dark Lord had played in Bardek's disappearance. Surely it was no coincidence that the boy's fall to death was from the place where he had found the crown?

He searched long and thoroughly, but he found no more trace of Bardek. At last, wearily, he struggled back up the mountain and returned to Firilla.

She was waiting for him away from the house, standing on an upthrust rock, her feet planted well apart as though she had been standing there for some time, scanning for her lover and her son. When she saw Glidd returning alone, his clothes torn and muddied, his face tired and drawn, her own face tightened and the eyes that questioned him were as cold as rock.

'Isn't he home, yet?' Glidd asked, knowing by her expression that he was not.

She said nothing, but looked at him with terrible eyes and then she turned from him and ran back to the house, going straight inside and shutting the door.

'Firilla!' he called, his heart aching with sympathy for her. Exhausted as he was, he forced himself the last few paces to the house and put his hand to the door. It was not locked. 'Firilla,' he said gently, 'I didn't find him dead.'

But she would not look at him.

'Firilla, he will be back soon. I'm sure of it.'

But still she did not speak or turn to him. It was as though the woman he had known so long and loved so well had left, and only the shell of her body remained.

The mountain that had been so full of noise when the storm raged was deathly silent now. For some reason even the whains were still and the shuttered house was the most silent place of all.

Glidd turned sadly away and went outside. The storm had flattened Firilla's garden, and where tall stems had supported proud and beautiful flowers, where leaves and berries had flourished green and purple, all was broken, limp, sad, like the heart of the woman who had called them from the rocky soil and cherished them so tenderly to life.

* * * *

On his journey, Bardek had seen the black clouds lowering over the mountains, felt the ominous oppression of their weight upon his back, and when the storm broke he found a place to rest and eat where he could watch the display of light and dark doing battle on the distant peaks.

He wondered about Firilla and Glidd and felt regret that he would worry them, sorrow that he had to leave them, but his obsession with the girl was stronger than regret or sorrow. Was it desire that drove him on? Did he want the girl with the silver hair as Glidd wanted Firilla and, if so, what difficulties would he have to face to win her as his woman?

The storm itself did not reach him, but the effect of it did. He was resting in a dry, quiet gully when a roaring, rushing, grinding sound reached him. Puzzled, he sat still for a while trying to place it amongst the

sounds he knew. When he could not he climbed the gully wall to get a better view of the land in the direction from which it was coming.

It was this that saved his life, for within moments of his leaving it the gully became a seething, roaring mass of turbulent water, the force of it carrying great boulders before it, which would surely have destroyed him if the water had not.

Bardek was astonished and shaken. He knew that storms brought sudden streams and waterfalls to life in the mountains, but he had seen nothing like this. Malevolently the brown and frothing mass hurled itself at the banks of the gully, breaking off great chunks of the walls, the rock and soil and twisted debris adding to the volume every moment. The noise was deafening and he was suddenly separated from the path he had intended to take by an impassable and violent river. He moved back hastily, fearing the undercutting of the banks as the water hurtled against them. The whole landscape around him was changing. The plain, which must have been honeycombed with dried, underground watercourses, was now becoming pitted with caverns as the fragile roofs of rock above them collapsed. Bardek could see that he would have to change his path, but he did not once consider returning home.

Picking his way carefully, he walked along the bank, hoping to find a convenient place to cross, not realising how subtly the river was altering direction and how irrevocably he was being led away from his destination.

At last he was too weary to continue. He told himself that the river which had started so suddenly must surely disappear as suddenly. As he could not find its end, he would wait for it to pass. He found a bush with a twisted trunk and sat propped against it, preparing for a long wait. The light changed subtly, exquisitely, each rocky outcrop passing through a complicated range of tones, the scene before him not the same from one moment to the next. How far away the horizon was in this flat place! How every detail loomed in his attention and then faded as the last rays of the White Star picked out a different object to illumine, one moment the angular lines of a rock, the next the soft curves of sand-fall and wind-flower.

He looked at the mountains in the distance, his mountains, and saw how insubstantial they appeared, each range behind the other glowing through as though transparent. His eyes grew heavy, the music of the water sounds around him lulling him, soothing him, sleep falling on him like a soft dark cloak.

He heard what was at first a slight note of change in the sounds of the desert, which wove into his dream as though it were part of it . . . but then it became so insistent, so loud, he could not ignore it. He woke in time to see the ground around him collapse and to feel the harsh buffeting of the flood that carried him away. As he lost consciousness in its icy grip he remembered that he had heard of underground rivers whose black water had never seen the light, nor nourished plant or

quenched the thirst of man. Was it into one of these that he was falling?

When he regained consciousness the river had disappeared, but so had the desert plains and the mountains and the distant city. He sat up, startled. He was in darkness, but it was not the darkness of the Dark Star. It was the darkness of a windowless chamber.

He peered around, straining to catch the outline of some familiar object, half hoping that Glidd had found him and carried him safely home, yet disappointed if this was the case that his adventure was over so soon. Becoming aware of a sliver of light to one side, he stood up shakily, wincing as he moved, every part of him aching and stinging, his head throbbing. His clothes were torn and caked with dried mud, and he could feel that blood had congealed beside his left eye. He felt along a rough wall of reeds and straw until he reached the crack of light. It was, as he had hoped, a door. It gave easily to his push, revealing an astonishing and bewildering scene. The light was dim, the White Star almost set, the Indigo not yet fully risen. He could see that he was surrounded by huts similar to the one he was in, dank hovels made of blackened reeds, each held high above the surface of dark and stagnant water by tall stilts, a low mist slithering between them. Here and there islands of floating detritus gave off a noxious smell.

That he had been washed away from the plain and all that was familiar to him was clear, but how he came to be in a house in a village in the marshlands was not

so clear. Someone must have found him and brought him here, and yet there seemed to be nobody about.

Marshlands! He started. Glidd had once told him of people he called 'the marsh-dwellers', people of the Dark Star, misfits and criminals, hopeless savages, wild and cruel robbers and murderers. His heart beat uncomfortably. What was to be done? Perhaps it would be possible to leave before anyone returned. He noted with dismay the long drop to the water: the ladder that gave access to most of the other huts was missing from the one he was in.

Suddenly there was a sound from the left and he turned his head in time to see a small flat punt emerging from behind one of the houses, propelled by a youth of about his own age, crudely and raggedly clad, hair dirty and matted. Bardek stood back in the shadows watching, not sure if he wanted to be noticed or not. He was just deciding to risk asking a question or two when a loud noise above the houses distracted him. It was a terrible sound, the wild screech howl of the garrar. Bardek had heard it sometimes in the mountains, but always from a distance, and even then it had made him shudder.

It seemed near, as though it were just above the hut in which he was standing, and so loud it was probable that there was more than one of the fearsome beasts.

Bardek saw the youth in the craft look up in terror and even as he feverishly worked the punt pole in an attempt to slide under the cover of the houses one of the garrars swooped, while its mate hovered shrieking in

anticipation of the coming meal. Bardek saw the youth beat ineffectually at the creature with his pole, his face twisting in agony as one of the great talons tore into the flesh of his shoulder. Luckily for the youth the garrar's wingtip touched one of the stilts of the hut and it momentarily lost purchase. In the brief respite this afforded, the victim managed to get the tip of his pole into the eye of the beast and it retreated with a scream of pain, its wings flapping wildly.

So huge were the beasts and so violent the beating of their wings that the sludgy marsh water was churned up around the punt, even the houses rocking perilously in the turbulence.

Bardek seized everything loose he could find within the hut and hurled it out at the monsters, wishing desperately that he had his bow or spear. He shouted and roared as he threw, trying to create as much of a diversion as possible, thinking that he was safe in the hut. But his missiles were no more than slight irritants to the garrars and barely distracted them from their cruel game.

If only he had fire!

Glidd had taught him that when he was holed up in a mountain cave far from home, and darkness brought the danger of beasts of prey, he was to make fire at the entrance to the cave and this would frighten off marauders. He remembered that he had fire powders in his breeches pocket and felt anxiously for them, afraid that either he had been robbed or that they would be too wet to use. But the powders were still there safe in their

little flasks and dry enough. With trembling hands he mixed them in a bowl he found on the dirty, greasy floor, and when the flame at last had taken shape he rushed to the door. The youth was still alive, crouching in his frail craft under the overhang of one of the houses.

But the garrars had not given up. The one with the blinded eye was tearing and beating at the house above the boy with a kind of crazed vengefulness, while the other was making low flying swoops, trying to grab him as it passed. The youth had lost the pole and was desperately beating the air with his fists, blood pouring down his body from the wound in his shoulder.

Bardek ripped a piece of straw lining from the reed walls and set it alight. At first he waved it like a torch, but as this had no effect he flung it with all his might at one of the beasts. It missed and fell with a sharp spatter of sparks into the water, hissing as it touched, black and acrid smoke rising at once to join the dark and fearsome scene.

Bardek ripped and pulled at the walls of the hut, lighting bundles and hurling them, his throat and eyes smarting from the smell of mouldy burning straw. One bundle hit the wing of a garrar and caused it to veer and screech and miss its mark.

He was so excited at his success and so anxious to get the next fire stick on its way he upturned the bowl with his foot, and within seconds the whole hut was on fire. Horrified, he was caught between two possible deaths, each as painful as the other. The inside of the

hut was rapidly becoming a furnace while outside the furious garrars were swooping and screeching.

He could not stay in the hut. That was certain. He leapt from the door. The fire death was a certainty, but with the garrars there might be a chance. As he hit the water he shut his eyes, taking a deep breath before he went under. He struggled with water weeds and old rotting logs, but eventually came to the surface.

As he shook the strands of reed and mud from his eyes he was shocked to see that he was almost surrounded by fire. The fire sticks he had thrown must have hit some of the other houses, for they, as well as the one he had been in, were in flames. He felt someone seize his arm and turned to find the youth he had been trying to help was now helping him. He was trying to haul him out of the water on to the punt.

Thankfully, he clutched the sides and clambered out. The garrars had been frightened off and fire was their enemy now. The two knew that their only chance was to work the water with their arms and try to pull away before the burning houses collapsed on top of them. The stranger could only use one arm, the other hanging loose from the garrar wound, but Bardek was strong and fear made him stronger. He paddled with all his might and mercifully the light craft responded. They slid out of reach just as the huts collapsed behind them. Showers of sparks rose to the sky and the water heaved and surged like an evil broth as the logs that had held the huts upright plunged into it. Their boat almost capsized, but somehow Bardek kept it the right way up

and drove it further and further from the danger. When they were sure they were safe they stopped paddling and lay gasping in the punt like stranded water creatures.

Gradually, as their breath came more evenly, Bardek began to be aware of new sounds coming from the direction of the fire. There was still the awful crackling of the flame as it consumed the wooden houses, but now the sound of angry shouting mingled with it – a fleet of small boats was just discernible through the black smoke. The villagers were returning to find their homes nothing more than greasy ash floating on the scum and slime that already covered the water.

Bardek looked at his companion. He was looking back at the towering column of black smoke that rose from behind the high reeds. His face was turned away so that at first Bardek could not see his expression, but when he turned Bardek was startled by the fear in his eyes. There was no trace of sorrow.

‘They are not your people? Your family?’ he asked.

The boy shook his head vigorously and then the pain almost made him lose consciousness. Bardek reached forward and steadied him. What was to be done? If that wound was not attended to the youth might lose his arm, possibly his life. He looked at the water. It was not clean enough to wash the wound, yet the stranger was pleading with him to take him away, and seemed as afraid of the people in the boats as he had been of the garrar beasts. For the first time Bardek noticed a rag bundle in the bottom of the punt, fallen half open to reveal the gleam of precious metal. The

village had been deserted; was his companion a thief? That such a collection of huts could contain anything worth stealing was a surprise, but Glidd had told him that the followers of the Dark Lord had elaborate rituals of worship just as they did for their own Holy Ones. Such rituals might well call for the use of precious artefacts.

‘Where are your people?’ It seemed the only hope would be to return the boy to the care of his own family.

The young marsh-dweller muttered something and then slid forward in a faint, almost into the water. Bardek caught him and held him up, trying to think. He could see that to go back to the burning village and ask the help of the villagers would be useless. But to go on through this weird, festering, watery place without knowing where he was going was dangerous. The marshlands, the water lands, were hostile places. He had been brought up to believe that they were the domain of the Lord of the Dark Star and that no good could come out of them.

While he considered the alternatives, Bardek pulled at the water and the reeds with his aching arms and moved the boat slowly, painfully, forward, away from the village. Gradually the smoke disappeared behind them, the sounds grew fainter until he could hear nothing but the slight slurp of the boat through the water. He had never seen such a flat place. Even the desert plain he had just crossed had gullies and rocky outcrops to vary the surface, but here the reeds rose

above the water at a constant height and, beyond them, the sky seemed to go on forever.

After a while he found himself moving into mist and tried to turn round. But the reeds had closed in behind him and he could not manoeuvre the boat round. He thought longingly of Firilla and Glidd in their warm and comfortable house and began to shiver as the damp mist penetrated his clothes and fear of the unknown grew in his heart. The marshlands were uncannily quiet, and he felt increasingly that he was alone in a vast water world that had no end and no beginning, with a boy who was about to die. His former life seemed like a dream, the only reality the effort he was putting into his aching arms to pull at the sluggish water. The crowding reeds became each moment taller and thicker and more oppressive. At last he stopped working with his arms and moved back into the boat to crouch beside the boy, his head against his chest, anxiously listening for a heartbeat. The punt, which had been moving very slowly forward under the impetus of his last push, stopped with a jerk. Startled, he looked up. At first he could not make anything out, but then realised that the punt had come to rest against a causeway made of logs lashed together and piled one upon the other to raise it above the surface of the water. Joyfully he thought of what this could mean. People. Villages. Help.

He wedged the punt against one of the logs and started to haul the unconscious youth out of the boat. He was heavy and the craft rocked sickeningly with Bardek's clumsy attempts, but at last he had him in his

arms and managed to lift him on to the wooden platform of the causeway. Unfortunately the effort he put into this destabilised the punt and it shot backwards, depositing him into the muddy water. He floundered at first, flailing uselessly with his tired arms, but at last managed to grip one of the protruding lower logs and haul himself out of the water.

The boy lay awkwardly where he had been left, while Bardek lay beside him, panting after his exertions. He was so tired he would have been content to rest there forever . . . but he began to shiver uncontrollably . . . soaking wet, with the eerie mist that was slinking from the surface of the marsh curling round them with cold and clammy tendrils. He forced himself to move, rubbing his own limbs to get the circulation going, and then those of his companion. The boy opened his eyes and groaned. Bardek at once leant closer and peered into his face, meeting the young man's eyes for an instant before he slid back into unconsciousness. Bardek could see that if they were to survive it would be up to him. He lifted the youth as best he could on to his shoulders and, staggering under the weight, set off along the causeway. The path was very narrow, with logs frequently missing. He had to watch his step. The mist was becoming thicker and more impenetrable and Bardek was very near to despair. Would he ever reach habitation, and even if he did, would it bring shelter – or death?

Suddenly, he thought he saw a glow through the mist off to the right. Treading cautiously, he established

that the causeway branched at this point and that one of the branches led toward the light. The relief made him hurry and he lost his footing. With a thud he and his burden fell to the slippery path.

The light went out.

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About Moyra Caldecott

Moyra Caldecott was born in Pretoria, South Africa in 1927, and moved to London in 1951. She married Oliver Caldecott and raised three children. She has degrees in English and Philosophy and an M.A. in English Literature.

Moyra Caldecott has earned a reputation as a novelist who writes as vividly about the adventures and experiences to be encountered in the inner realms of the human consciousness as she does about those in the outer physical world. To Moyra, reality is multidimensional.

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