

The White Babe

by Jane Yolen

art: Val Lakey Undahn

Jane Yolen's hundredth book, *Sister Light, Sister Dark* (out from Ace Books sometime next year), will be set in the same milieu as "The White Babe." Recent publications by the current president of the Science Fiction Writers of America include *Favorite Folktales from Around the World* (Pantheon's Folklore Series) and the novel, *Cards of Grief*.

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition.

[Notes](#)

*And the prophet says an white babe with black eyes shall be born unto a virgin in the winter of the year. The ox in the field, the hound at the hearth, the bear in the cave, the cat in the tree, all, all shall bow before her singing, "Holy, holy, holiest of sisters, who is both black and white, both dark and light, your coming is the beginning and it is the end." Three times shall her mother die and three times shall she be orphaned and she shall be set apart that all shall know her. —*So goes the Gammian prophecy about the magical birth of the White Babe, layering in all kinds of folkloric absurdities and gnomic utterings to explain away the rise of a female warrior queen. These "hero birth" tales arise long after the fact, and it is no coincidence that one tale resembles another. (C.F. the birth of Alta's Anna, or *the white one*, motif #275f in Hyatt's *Folklore Motif Index of the Dales*.) This one points to the birth of White Jenna, the Amazonian queen of the Dark Riding, a figure of some staying power in the myth sequences out of the early Garunian period during and after the infamous Gender Wars.

1. THE WHITE BABE

The Myth:

Then Great Alta plaited the left side of her hair, the golden side, and let it fall into the sinkhole of night. And there she drew up the queen of shadows and set her upon the earth. Next she plaited the right side of her hair, the dark side, and with it she caught the queen of light. And she set her next to the black queen.

"And you two shall be sisters," quoth Great Alta. "You shall be as images in a glass, the one reflecting the other. As I have bound you in my hair, so it shall be."

Then she twined her living braids around and about them and they were as one.

The Legend:

It happened in the town of Slipskin on a day far into the winter's rind that a strange and wonderful child was born. As her mother, who was but a girl herself, knelt between the piles of skins, straddling the shallow hole in the earth floor, the birth cord descended between her legs like a rope. The child emerged, feet first, climbing down the cord. When her tiny toes touched the ground, she bent down and cut the cord with her teeth, saluted the astonished midwife, and walked out the door.

The midwife fainted dead away, but when she came to and discovered the child gone and the

mother dead of blood-loss she told her eldest daughter what had happened. At first they thought to hide what had occurred. But miracles have a way of announcing themselves. The daughter told a sister who told a friend and, in that way, the story was uncovered. The tale of that rare birthing is still recounted in Slipskin—now called New Moulting—to this very day. They say the child was the White Babe, Jenna, Sister Light of the Dark Riding, the Anna.

The Story:

It was an ordinary birth until the very end and then the child hurtled screaming from the womb, the cord wrapped around her tiny hands. The village midwife echoed the baby's scream. Although she had attended many births, and some near miraculous with babes born covered with cauls or twins bound together with a mantling of skin, the midwife had never heard anything like this. Quickly she made the sign of the goddess with her right hand, thumb and forefinger curved and touching, and cried out, "Great Alta, save us." At the name, the babe was quiet.

The midwife sighed and picked up the child from the birth hide stretched over the hole scraped in the floor. "She is a girl," the midwife said, "the Goddess' own. Blessed be." She turned to the new mother and only then realized that she spoke to a corpse.

Well, what was the midwife to do then but cut the cord and tend the living first. The dead mother would wait for her washing and the mourning her man would make over her, with the patience of eternity. But so as not to have the haunt follow her down the rest of her days, the midwife spoke a quick prayer as she went about the first lessons of the newborn:

*In the name of the cave,
The dark grave,
And all who swing twixt
Light and light,
Great Alta,
Take this woman
Into your sight.
Wrap her in your hair
And cradled there,
Let her be a babe again,
Forever.*

"And that should satisfy her," the midwife mumbled to herself, knowing that to be a babe again, to be cradled against the breast of the eternal Alta, was the goal of all life. She had faith the quick prayer would shrive the poor dead woman at least until the candles could be lit, one for each year of her life and an extra for her shadow-soul, at the bedfoot. Meanwhile there was the child, blessedly a girl, and blessedly alive. In these past years of hard living it was not always so. But the man was lucky. He had only to grieve for one.

Once cleansed of the birthblood, the midwife saw the babe was fair-skinned with a fine covering of white hair on her head and tiny arms. Her body was unblemished and her pale blue eyes looked as if they could already see, following the midwife's finger left and right, up and down. And if that were not miracle enough, the child's little hand locked upon the midwife's finger with a hold that could not be broken, not even when a suck was made for her using a linen cloth twisted about and dipped in goat's milk. Even then she hung on; though she pulled on the makeshift teat with long, rhythmic sighs.

When the child's father came back from the fields and could be torn from his dead wife's side long

enough to touch the babe, she was still holding the midwife's finger.

"She's a fighter," said the midwife, offering the bundle to his arms.

He would not take her. It was all he could do to care. The white babe was a poor, mewling exchange for his lusty redheaded wife. He touched the child's head gently, where beneath the fragile shield of skin the pulse beat, and said, "Then if you think her a fighter, give her to the warrior women in the mountains to foster. I cannot bide her while I grieve her mother. She is the sole cause of my loss. I cannot love where loss is so great." He said it quietly and without apparent anger, for he was ever a quiet, gentle man, but the midwife heard the rock beneath the quiet tone. It was the kind of rock against which a child would bruise herself again and again to no avail.

She said then what she thought right. "The mountain tribes will take her and love her as you cannot. They are known for their mothering. And I swear they will bring her to a stranger destiny than her tiny gripping hand and her early sight have already foretold."

If he remarked her words, the man did not respond, his shoulders already set in the grief he would carry with him to his own grave, and that—though he knew it not—soon enough, for as they said often enough in Slipskin, *The heart is not a knee that can bend.*

So the midwife took the child and left. She paused only long enough to cry out the village diggers and two women to bathe and shroud the corpse before it set badly in the rigor of death. She told them of the child's miraculous birth, the wonder of it still imprinted on her face.

Because she was known to be a stubborn woman with a mind set in a single direction—like a needle in water pointing north—none of them gainsayed her going to the mountain clans. They did not know she was more frightened than even she herself knew, frightened of both the child and the trip. One part of her hoped the villagers would stop her. But the other part, the stubborn part, would have gone whatever they said and perhaps they guessed it and saved their breath for telling her story afterwards. For as it was said in Slipskin, *Telling a tale is better than living it.*

And so the midwife turned toward the mountains where she had never been before, trusting Great Alta's guardians to track her before she was gone too far and clutching the child to her breast like an amulet.

It was luck that an early spring melt had cleared most of the paths to the mountain foot or the midwife would never have gotten even that far. She was a woman of the towns, her duties bringing her from house to house like a scavenger. She knew nothing of the forest perils or the great tan-colored cats that roamed the rockslides. With the babe swaddled and wrapped to her breast, she had started out bravely enough and managed surprisingly well, getting to the mountain foot without a scratch or slip. Many a strong hunting man had not done as well that year. And perhaps it was true, as the villagers said, that *Fish are not the best authority on water.*

She sheltered the first night among the twisted roots of a blasted tree, giving the child suck from a milk crock with a linen teat dipped in. Herself, she ate cheese and brown bread and stayed warm with half a skin of sweet wine she carried. She ate unsparingly for she thought she had but a single overnight to go before she reached the holds of the mountain clans. And she was sure the women of the mountains—whom she had long desired to visit, that longing compounded of envy and fear—would give her plenty of food and drink and gold to sustain her when they saw what it was she carried to them. She was a townswoman in her thinking, always trade for trade. She did not understand the mountains or the people who lived there; she did not know that they would feed her independent of all else but her need

and that they had little use for gold so never kept it.

The second day was bright and pearly. Clouds lined only the horizon. She chose to walk along the bank of a swift-flowing stream because it seemed easier than breaking a new trail. If she had noticed the scat and could have read it, she would have known this was a favorite run of mountain cats, for trout were plentiful in the stream, and foolish, especially in the evening in the presence of bugs. But she was a woman of the town and she could read print only, a minor learning, and so she never heard the cat on her trail nor noticed its scratchy warnings on the trees.

That second night she stashed the babe in a high crotch of a tree, believing it quite safe there, and walked down to the stream to bathe in the moonlight. Being a townswoman and a midwife she valued cleanliness above all other things.

It was while she was bent over, dipping her hair in the cold water of the stream and muttering aloud about how long the trip was taking, that the cat struck. Swiftly, silently, surely. She never felt more than a moment of pain. But at her death the child cried out, a high thin wailing. The cat, startled, dropped its prey and looked about uneasily.

An arrow took it in the eye, its death more painful than the midwife's. It whimpered and trembled for several moments before one of the hunters cut its throat in pity.

The babe in the tree cried out again and the entire wood seemed to still at the sound.

"What was that?" asked the heavier of the two hunters, the one who had cut the cat's throat. They were both kneeling over the dead woman seeking in vain for a pulse.

"Perhaps the lion had cubs and they are hungry?"

"Do not be foolish, Marjo, this early in spring?"

The thinner hunter shrugged her shoulders.

The child, uncomfortable in its makeshift cradle, cried out again.

The hunters stood.

"That is no lion cub," said Marjo.

"But cub nonetheless," said her companion.

They went to the tree as unerringly as woodsense could lead them and found the babe.

"Alta's Hairs!" said the first hunter. She took the child from the tree, unwrapped it, and gazed at its smooth, fair-skinned body.

Marjo nodded. "A girl, Selna."

"Bless you," whispered Selna, but whether she spoke to Marjo or to the dead midwife or to the ears of Alta, high and far away, was not clear.

They buried the midwife and it was a long and arduous task for the ground was still part frozen. Then they skinned the cat and wrapped the babe in its warm skin. The child settled into her new wrapping and fell asleep at once.

"She was meant for us," said Selna. "She does not even wrinkle her nose at the cat smell."

"She is too young to wrinkle her nose."

Selna ignored the remark and gazed at the child. "It is true, then, what the villagers say, *When a dead tree falls, it carries with it a live one.*"

"You speak too often with another's mouth," said Marjo. "And a village mouth at that."

"And you speak with mine."

They were silent after that, neither saying a word as they trotted along the familiar paths toward the mountains and home.

They expected no grand reception at their return and got none, though their coming had been remarked by many hidden watchers. They signaled their secret names with careful hand signs at every appointed place, and the guardians of each of those turnings melted back into the forest or the seemingly impenetrable rockface without a sound.

What messages, what bits of news were passed to them as they traveled through the night came to them in the form of bird song or the howling fall of a wolf's call, where bird and wolf were not. It told them they were welcome and recognized and one particular cry told them to bring their bundle at once to the great hall. They understood, though no words, no human words, were exchanged.

But before they reached the hall, the moon slipped down behind the western mountains and Marjo bade farewell to her companion and disappeared.

Hefting the child in its cat cloak, Selna whispered, "Till evening, then." But she said it so softly, the child in her arms did not even stir.

The Song:

Lullabye to the Cat's Babe

*Hush little mountain cat,
Sleep in your den,
I'll sing of your mother
Who cradled Fair Jen.*

*I'll sing of your mother
Who covered Jen's skin.
Flesh of your flesh
Did sweet Jenna lay in.*

*Sleep, little catkin,
Perchance you shall dream
Of rabbit and pheasant
And trout in the stream.*

*But Jenna will dream
Of the dark and the light
Your mother will shelter her
From the cold night.*

The Story:

There were cradles scattered around the Great Hall, some of oak with the grain running like rivers to the sea, and some of white pine, so soft the marks of a baby's nails could be seen, like runes, on the headboards.

But for some reason Selna did not put the child in any of them. She kept it on her breast when she showed it in the Great Hall and all the rest of the day, hoping the steady beat of her heart would comfort it.

It was not unusual for a new fosterling to be kept, swaddled, at one breast or another. The women of Alta's-hame shared the care of them, though Selna had never before shown any interest in fostering. The stink of the babes and their high, cranky crying had always put her off. But this one was different. She smelled not of sour milk and spittle but of mountain cat, moonshine, and blackthorn, that being the tree she had been wedged in when the cat had struck her mother. She had cried only twice, each time at a death, which Selna thought an omen. Surely the child must be hungry or fearful or cold. Selna was ready to put her away at the first sign of fretting. But the babe had stared at her with eyes the color of a spring sky, as if reading her very soul. And so Selna had kept her heart to heart far into the morning. By then everyone had noticed and commented so that she could not—for fear of being shamed—let her small burden go. Physical abuse had never bothered Selna. Indeed she was proud of her ability to withstand the worst punishments. She was always in the forefront of any battleline, she was the last to the fire, the first into a cold stream. But she could never stand the tauntings of the women in her Hame.

By mid morning, though, the child was hungry and let her know with small pipings, like a chick in the henyard. She fed the babe as best she could with one of the Eastern bottles so prized by the kitcheners. Both she and the babe were thoroughly splattered in the process, and so Selna took the child down to the baths, heated the water well below her usual steaming, and holding the naked child against her own bare shoulder, plunged in.

At the water's touch, the child cooed contentedly and fell asleep. Selna sat on the third step of the bath so that only their heads showed above the water. She stayed until her fingers had wrinkled and the water began to grow chill and her hand around the child cramped. Then she got out reluctantly, dried the sleeping babe, and wrapped toweling around herself for the long walk back to her room. This time there were no comments even though she passed many of her hamemates. Whether she willed it or not, the child was hers.

The History:

The women of the mountain warrior clans did not take fostering lightly. Once a child was chosen by her foster mother, the woman had full charge of the child's care. A kitchener's child grew up amongst the great pots; took her first steps on the tiled kitchen floor; ate, napped, and slept out her childhood sicknesses in a special children's nook in the kitchen.

So, too, a child chosen for rearing by one of the warrior/huntresses was carried about in a special pack wherever her foster mother went. Lowentroutr finds evidence of this in the famous Baryard Tapestries (his essay "Packchildren of the Western Holds," Nature and History Vol. 39, is especially interesting). There is a leathern pack unearthed from the famous gravemound at Arrundale and preliminary examination leads to speculation that it may be one of the Amazonian child-carriers. (For more about this dig, see Sigel and Salmon's video "Graverobbing Among the Dales.") Such burdens did not hamper the women warriors either in battle or on the hunt, according to Lowentroutr, and textual evidence supports his claim. The three scrolls ascribed to the Great Archive of G'run Longbow graphically depict the battles in which the mountain clans took part. One in particular speaks of "the double heads of the amazons" and, in another place, "the precious burden carried by (them)." And most striking, "She fought, all the ways her breast

to the foe for as not to expose the one at her back.” Vargo argues that the word “at” simply refers to another fighter since fighting back-to-back was a familiar style in swords-battle. She further states that if a pack-child had been meant, the word “on” rather than “at” would have been used. However, Boyle, whose seminal work on Altalinguistics has just been published, points out that in the old tongue on/at/upon and by are used interchangeably.

The Story:

“You will have to name her, you know,” Marjo said that night, lying on the far side of the bed. The lantern hanging above them cast shadows on the wall and floor.

Selna looked at the child sleeping between them. She touched the soft cheek with a tentative finger. “If I name her, she really is mine forever.”

“Forever is longer than either one of us shall last,” said Marjo, her finger stroking the child’s other cheek.

“A child is a kind of immortality,” Selna murmured. “A link forged. A bond. Even if she is not of my blood.”

“She will be,” Marjo said. “If you claim her.”

“How can I not—now?” Selna sat up and Marjo followed suit. “She looks to me first, whoever holds her. She trusts me. When I brought her into the kitchen at dinner and everyone wanted to touch her, all the while her tiny head swiveled around to see me.”

“You are being sentimental,” said Marjo with a laugh. “Newborns cannot swivel their heads. They cannot even see.”

“She can. Jenna can.”

“So—you have already named her,” Marjo said. “And without waiting for my approval.”

“You are my sister, not my keeper,” Selna answered testily. At the sharpness in her voice, the child stirred between them. Selna smiled a lopsided apology. “Besides,” she said, “Jenna is just her baby name. I want to name her Jo-an-enna in full.”

“*Jo* for lover, *an* for white, *enna* for tree. That makes sense for she was found in a tree and her hair—what there is of it—is white. I presume that *Jo* is because you love her, though I wonder at how quickly such a thing came about. You usually do not *love* so quickly. It is usually your hatred that is quickly aroused.”

“Do not be an idiot. *Jo* is for you, Marjo,” Selna said, “and well you know it.” She reached out to touch her companion across the child.

Marjo’s hand met hers halfway and they both smiled.

The child between them cooed.

In the morning Selna took Jenna to the infirmarer, Kadreen, who checked the babe from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet.

“A strong one,” said Kadreen. She did not smile but then she rarely did. It was said she had stitched too many wounds and set too many bones to find life amusing enough for a smile. But Selna knew that even as a young woman, before she had chosen her calling, Kadreen had not found much to smile at.

Perhaps, Selna thought, the calling found her *because* of that.

“Her fingers grip surprisingly well for a newborn. And she can follow the movement of my hand. That is rare. I clapped my hands to test her hearing and she startled at once. She will be a good companion for you in the woods.”

Selna nodded.

“Make sure you feed her at the same time and she will sleep through the night within the first moon’s change.”

“She slept through the night last night,” Selna said.

“She will not again.”

But despite the infirmarer’s warning, Jenna did sleep soundly through that night and the next. And though Selna tried to feed her on the schedule dictated by Kadreen’s long experience with infants, she was always too busy to do so. Yet the babe seemed to thrive on the erratic meals and, in the woods, strapped to Selna’s breast or back, she was as quiet as any seasoned hunter.

Selna boasted of her fosterling at every opportunity until everyone but Marjo grew weary of it.

“You are in danger of becoming a bore,” said Donya, the head kitchener, when Selna dropped off a fine roebuck and seven rabbits after a two-day hunt. “She is a fine babe, no doubt. Strong and quite pleasant to look upon. But she is not Great Alta. She does not walk across the Lake of Sighs nor ride the summer rainbow nor leap between the drops of falling rain.”

“I did not say she was the goddess,” mumbled Selna. The child at her breast laughed delightedly as she tickled it under the chin with one of the rabbit’s feet. Then she looked at the kitchener squarely and roared. “And I am *not* a bore.”

“I did not say you were. I said you were in danger of becoming one,” said Donya calmly. “Ask anyone.”

Selna glared around the kitchen but the girls all dropped their eyes and suddenly the room was quiet of voices. All that could be heard were the *snick-snack* of kitchen knives at work. Donya’s young ones knew better than to tangle with one of the warriors. Selna, especially, was known for her hot temper though she, unlike some of them, seldom bore a lasting grudge. Still, not a one of them envied her fosterling that temper when it roared.

Selna shook her head, still angry, and turned back to Donya. “I shall want the rabbit skins,” she said. “They will make a soft lining for the pack. Jenna has fine skin.”

“Jenna has a baby’s skin,” said Donya evenly, ignoring Selna’s scowl. “And of course you shall have the fur. I’ll also save you the deerskin. It should make a fine pair of leggings and many mocs.”

Selna smiled suddenly. “She will need many mocs.”

“But not right away,” Donya said, with a laugh.

There was a titter around the room as her own fosterlings enjoyed the joke.

“What do you mean?” The anger was back in Selna’s voice.

Donya set down the heavy crockery bowl and wooden spoon, wiped her hands on her aprons, and held out her arms. Reluctantly Selna recognized the signal and unstrapped the babe, handing it over to

Donya.

Donya smiled and rocked the child in her arms. “This is an infant, Selna. A babe. Look around at my own maids. Seven of them. And once they were each this size. They walked at a year, only one sooner. Do not expect too much from your child and she will grow in your love. When her moon time comes, she will not turn from you. When she reads from the *Book of Light* and calls her own sister into this world, she will not forsake you. But if you push her too much, you will push her away. A child is not yours to own but yours to raise. She may not be what you will have her be, but she will be what she has to be. Remember what they say, that *Wood may remain twenty years in the water but it is still not a fish.*”

“Who is becoming the bore now?” asked Selna in a weary voice. She took Jenna, who was still smiling, back from the kitchen and went from the room.

* * *

That night there was a full moon and all the dark sisters were called forth. In the great open amphitheater the circle of women and their children was complete.

Selna stood in the circle’s center below the altar which was flanked by three rowan trees. Marjo was by her side. For the first time in almost a year there was a new fosterling to celebrate, though two of the gardeners and one warrior had each borne a babe. But those infants had already had their consecration to the goddess. It was Jenna’s turn now.

The priestess sat silently on the backless throne atop the rock altar, her own dark sister throned beside her. Their black hair braided with tiny white flowers, lips stained red with the juice of berries, they waited until the crowd of worshippers quieted. Then they leaned forward, hands on knees, and stared down at Selna and Marjo, but only the priestess herself spoke.

“Who bears the child?”

“Mother, I do,” said Selna, raising Jenna to eye level. For her the word mother had a double meaning for the priestess had been her own foster mother, who had grieved sorely when Selna had chosen to follow the warrior way.

“And I,” said Marjo.

They stepped together up onto the first altar rise.

“And who bore the child?” the priestess asked.

“Mother, a woman of the town,” said Selna.

“She died in the woods,” Marjo added.

They mounted the second step.

“And who now bleeds for the child?” the priestess asked.

“She shall have my blood,” said Selna.

“And mine.” Marjo’s voice was a quiet echo.

They reached the third step and the priestess and her dark sister rose. The priestess took the silent babe from Selna’s hands, turned, and placed the child upon the throne. Marjo and Selna were beside her in one fluid movement.

Then the priestess dropped to her knees before the child and, taking her long black braid, she wound it about the child's waist. Her sister, on the other side of the throne, did the same. As soon as they were done, Selna and Marjo knelt and offered their hands, wrists up.

Taking a silver pin from a box mounted in the arm of the throne, the priestess pierced Selna's wrist where the blue vein branched. At the same time, her sister with an identical pin did the same for Marjo. They held the warriors wrists together so that the blood flowed each to each.

Next the priestess turned and pricked Jenna lightly, above the navel, signaling to Selna and Marjo silently with her free hand. They bent over and placed their wrists side by side on the baby's belly so that their bloods mingled.

Then the priestess and her sister drew their twined braids over the steady hands. "Blood to blood," the priestess intoned. "Life to life." The entire congregation of Alta's-hame repeated the words, a rolling echo in the clearing. "What is the child's name?"

Selna could not keep from smiling. "Jo-an-enna," she said. The priestess spelled out the name and then, in the old tongue, gave the child her secret name that only the four of them—and Jenna in her time—would know. "Annuanna," she said. "The white birch, the Goddess tree, the tree of everlasting light." "Annuanna," they whispered to one another and the child. Then the priestess and her sister unwrapped their hair and stood. Holding their hands over the two kneelers and the babe, both priestess and sister spoke the final prayer.

*She who holds us
in her hand,
She who molds us
in this land,
She who drives
away the night,
She who wrote
the Book of Light,
In her name, Blessed be.*

The assembled women all came in perfectly on the responses. When they were done, Selna and Marjo stood together, Selna holding out the infant so that all could see. At the great cheer that arose below them, Jenna woke up, startled, and began to cry. Selna did not comfort her, though the priestess looked sharply at her. A warrior had to learn young that crying brought no comfort.

Back inside, after the magnificent feast that followed the baby was handed around the table for all to see. She began in the priestess' arms and was handed over to the plump arms of Donya who dandled her expertly but "as routinely as a bit of mutton just off the spit," Selna commented testily to Marjo. Donya handed the child to the leaner arms of the warriors. They chuckled and clucked at Jenna's chin, and one dark sister threw her up into the air. She screamed with delight, but Selna pushed aside the circle of companions angrily to catch the child on her downward flight.

"What kind of a misbegotten son-of-a-son are you?" she cried out. "What if the light had failed? Whose arms would have caught her then?"

The dark sister Sammor shrugged her shoulders and laughed. "This late mothering has made mush of your brains, Selna. We are *inside*. There are no clouds to hide the moon. The lights of Alta's-hame never fail."

Selna tucked Jenna under one arm and raised the other to strike Sammor but her hand was caught from behind.

“Selna, she is right and you are wrong in this. The babe is safe,” Marjo said. “Come. Drink a toast with us all to forget and forgive, and then we will play at the wands.” They brought their arms down together.

But Selna’s anger did not abate, which was unusual, and she sat outside the circle of sisters when they threw the wands around the ring in the complicated patterns that trained them for sword-handling.

With Selna out, Marjo could not play either, and she sat across from her sister and sulked as the game went on. It became more and more complex as a second, then a third, and finally a fourth set of wands were introduced into the circle. The flexible willows flipped end over end in the air, passing from woman to woman, from hand to hand, and soon the dining hall was quiet except for the *slip-slap* of the wands as they hit palm after palm after palm.

“The lights!” someone shouted, and a cheer went up from the watchers around the ring. Sammor’s sister Amalda nodded and two of the kitcheners, new enough to the sisterhood that they stuck together as close as shadows, rose to stand by the torches that illuminated the circle.

The game went on without stopping, the wands slipping even more quickly through the air. Not a hand had missed since the throws began. The whizzing of the wands as they passed one another was punctuated by the slapping of palms.

Then without warning both torches were doused in the waterbuckets, and the dark sisters in the circle disappeared. The circle was halved and there was a clatter of wands hitting the floor. Only Marjo, who sat beyond the range of the two doused torches, and the dark sisters of the watchers who stood far from the game, remained for the lights from the kitchen shone upon them.

Amalda’s voice counted out those who had lost their wands. “Domina, Catrona, Marna.” Then she turned and nodded for two new torches to be brought.

The relighted circle arranged itself, as dark sisters appeared again. The losers—Domina, Catrona, and Marna and their dark halves—went into the kitchen for something to drink. Playing at the wands was thirsty work. But Selna stood, the child at her breast, and spoke so loudly no one could miss it.

“It has been a tiring day, sweet Jenna, and time we were both in bed. I will put out the light tonight.”

There was a gasp hard around the circle. To put out the light was to send your sister back into the darkness. To announce it so, was an affront.

Marjo’s mouth grew tighter, but she said nothing as she stood with Selna and followed her out of the room. But Sammor spoke to their departing backs.

“Remember, Selna, that it is said *If your mouth turns into a knife, it will cut off your lips*” She did not expect an answer and, indeed, got none.

“You shamed me,” Marjo said softly when they reached their room. “You have never done such a thing before. Selna, what is wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong,” Selna answered, arranging the baby in her cot, smoothing the blanket and touching the child’s white hair with a finger. She began to hum an old cradle song. “Look! She is already asleep.”

“I mean, what is wrong between us?” Marjo bent over the cot and stared at the sleeping child. “She

is a sweetling.”

“There, you see? Nothing is wrong between *us*. We both love her.”

“How can you love her after so short a time? She is nothing but a bit of flesh and coos. Later she shall be someone to love—strong or weak, bright-eyed or sad, handy with her hands or her mouth. But now she is only...” Marjo’s voice stopped abruptly in mid-sentence for Selna had blown out the large candle over the bed.

“There is nothing wrong between us now, sister,” Selna whispered into the black room.

She lay down on the bed, conscious of Marjo’s empty half for her sister could always be counted on to talk and laugh and come up with a quick answer before they slept. Then she turned over and, holding her breath, listened a moment for the baby’s breathing. When she was sure the child was safe, she let out the air with a loud percussive sigh and fell asleep.

The History:

The “game of wands” has come down to us in a highly suspect form. It is played today only by girl children in the Upper Dales where the chorus, sung in modal tuning by watchers (usually boys) standing outside the circle goes:

*Round and round and round the ring
The willow sword we now do fling.*

The concentric circles of players sit on the ground facing one another, wands in hand. Once made of willow (which no longer grows in the Upper Dales though evidence of a different floraculture proves willows may have been plentiful a thousand years ago), the wands today are manufactured of a plastine that is both flexible and strong. At a drum signal, the wands are passed from hand to hand in a clockwise manner for seven beats, then returned for seven beats. Next the wands are flipped between the circles in preset partnerships for seven more beats. Finally, to the accompaniment of the choral singing of the watchers, and an ever-rapidly increasing pattern beat out on the drum, the wands are flipped across the circle, first to the partner, and back, then to the person directly to the partner’s right. The wands must be caught in the sword hand, which gives left-handed players a decided disadvantage in the game. As soon as a player drops a wand, she is “out.”

Lowentroun points to the famous “insert piece” of the Baryard Tapestries, which had been found in the vault of the eastern potentate Achmed Mubarek thirty years ago as proof positive that the “game of wands” played by warriors in the mountain clans and the nursery circle game are one and the same. While it is true that the “insert piece” (which has been repaired inexpertly by many Eastern hands—some say as many as thirty times as evidenced by the different colored threads) shows concentric circles of women warriors, they are holding swords, not wands. One of the so-called players is lying on her back, sword in her breast, obviously dead. She is ignored by the other players. Cowan argues forcibly that the “insert piece” has been too mangled over the years to be plain in its correspondences, but that it is more likely a picture of a specific form of execution as the “insert piece” occurs in that section of the tapestry which deals with traitors and spies. Perhaps the true meaning of the “insert piece” will never be known, but Magon’s shrill argument that the inner circle consisted of the “dark sisters” or “shadow sisters” who could be seen by the light of the moon or the heavy tallow candles (still popular in the Upper and Lower Dales) and the outer circle was that of the “light sisters” harkens back to the last century when the Luxophists sought to resurrect the “Book of Light” practices. Those practices had been

banned for at least seven generations and the "Book of Light" has been so thoroughly discredited by Duane's brilliant "Das Volk lichtet nicht" I need not reiterate her arguments here.

Some confusion over the intricately engraved silver rings found in the Arrundale grave mound still exist. Sigel and Salmon call them "wand holders," giving credence to Magon's shaky thesis, but there is even more evidence that these artifacts are napkin rings or possibly pack cups for long trips, and that is convincingly argued in Cowan's "Rings of the Clans" in Nature and History, Vol. 51.

The Story:

Selna's shameful behavior became the talk of the Hame. Though sisters had quarreled before, little fiery arguments that sent a moment of heat and light, and then died down without even embers of memory, what Selna did was unheard of. Even the priestess' records mentioned nothing like it, and the Hame had seventeen generations listed and eight great tapestries as well.

Selna stayed in the bright sunlight with her child during the day and at night, babe bound fast to her breast or back, avoided the well-lighted rooms of the Hame. Once or twice, when it was absolutely unavoidable, and Selna had to come into a torch-lit room, Marjo crept behind her, a thin attenuated figure. Gone was the dark sister's robust laughter, her hearty ringing tones.

"Selna," she would cry to her sister's back with a voice like a single strand of sigh, "What is wrong between us?" It was a ghost's voice, hollow and dying. "Selna..."

Once, in the kitchen begging some milk for the babe, Selna turned for a moment when Marjo called. She put her hands over the child's ears as if to block out the sound of her sister's voice, though it was so low by now it could scarcely be heard. Behind her, Donya and her own sister Doey and two of the older girls watched in horror. They saw in Marjo's wasting figure their own slow deaths.

Marjo's eyes, the color of bruises, wept black tears. "Sister, why do you do this? I would share the child with you. I have no wish to stand between."

But Selna turned slowly and deliberately away from the pleading figure, back toward the kitchen's light. When she noticed Donya and Doey and the two girls standing there, stricken, she bowed her head and hunched her shoulders up as if expecting a blow. Then she turned and went back without the milk into the darkest part of the hall.

On the thirteenth day of her shame, the priestess banished her from the Hame.

"My daughter," the priestess said, her voice heavy, "you have brought this upon yourself. We cannot stop what you do to your own dark sister. Once you accepted the teachings of the *Book of Light* we could instruct you no more. What falls between the two of you is your own concern. But the Hame is shattered. We cannot continue to watch what you do. So you must leave us and finish out what you have so ill begun alone."

"Alone?" Selna asked. For the first time her voice quivered. She had not been alone for as long as she could remember. She clutched baby Jenna to her.

"You have thrust your own dark sister from you," said the priestess. "You have shamed us all. The child stays here."

"No!" Selna cried, turning. By her side, the gray shadow that was Marjo turned, too. But they ran into a wall of six warriors who pinned them against the wall and took the babe, despite Selna's screams

and pleading.

They took Selna out into the bright day which meant she would be truly alone at the start of her journey, with only the clothes she wore. Her bow, sword, and gutting knife they threw after her, tied in a heavy bag that took her near an hour to unknit. They said nothing to her, not even a word of farewell, for so the priestess had instructed them.

She left Alta's-Hame by day, but she returned that night, a shadow among shadows, and stole away the child.

There were no guards by the infant's cot. Selna knew there would be none. The women of the Hame would be sure she would never return, so shamed and low had they left her. They would trust in the guards of the outer gates. But she was a warrior, the best of them, and often she and Marjo had played among the secret passageways. So silently, Selna stole back in, more quietly even than a shadow. She doused three lights along the hallways before Marjo's pale voice could alert the sleepers.

Jenna woke and recognized her foster mother's smell. Giving a satisfied sound, she fell asleep again. It was that small wisp of sound that confirmed Selna's determination. She raced down the secret ways and was at the forest's edge before it was dawn.

As she slipped along the old paths where the rocks were worn smooth by the passage of so many feet, the birds heralded her arrival. She found the large boulder off to the side of the path where she had left her weapons. Shamed as she was, she would still not have raised her sword or bow against her Hame mates. Leaning back against the rock, into a niche that seemed to exactly fit her body, she slipped her tunic down to her waist. Now that she was truly the child's mother, she could nurse it as well. She gave the baby her breast. For a few moments Jenna sucked eagerly, but when no milk came, she turned her head to the side and wailed.

"Hush!" Selna said, sharply, taking the child's face between her fingers and squeezing. "A warrior must be silent."

But the baby, hungry and frightened, cried even more.

Selna shook the infant roughly, unaware that tears were coursing down her own cheeks. Startled, the child stopped crying. Then Selna stood up and looked around, making sure no one had been alerted by the child's cries. When she heard nothing, she sat back down, leaned against the rock, and slept, the baby in her arms.

But Jenna did not sleep. Restless and hungry, she caught at dust motes in the rays of the sun that filtered through the canopy of aspen and birch.

At last she put her tiny hand into her mouth and sucked noisily.

* * *

It was hours before Selna awoke and when she did the sun was already high overhead and a fox was puzzling on the edge of the small clearing, its sharp little muzzle poking into the undergrowth. At Selna's waking, it looked up, ears stiff with warning, then turned abruptly and disappeared into the shadows.

Selna stretched, and looked at the babe sleeping on her lap. She smiled, touching Jenna's white hair. In the sunlight she could see the infant's pink scalp under the fine hair and the beating of the pulse beneath the shield of skin.

“You are mine,” she whispered fiercely. “I shall care for you. I shall protect you. I shall feed you. I—and no others.”

At her voice Jenna awoke and her cry was cranky and thin.

“You are hungry. So am I,” Selna said quietly. “I shall find us both something to eat.”

She pulled her tunic down, and bound the child to her back, slipping the ribbands under her own arms, tight enough so that the child was safe, loose enough so that they both could move. Holding her bow and sword in her left hand, she slipped the gutting knife into its sheath over her right shoulder where she could reach it for a fast throw. Then she began loping down the forest paths.

She was lucky. She found tracks of a small rabbit, stalked it easily, and brought it down with a light arrow at the first try. Fearing to make a large fire still so close to Alta’s-Hame, she nevertheless knew better than to eat a rabbit raw. So she dug a deep hole and made a small fire there, enough to at least sear the meat. She chewed it, then spit the juices into Jenna’s mouth. After the second try, the babe did not refuse the offering and sucked it up eagerly, mouth to mouth.

“As soon as I can, I will find you milk,” Selna promised, wiping the baby’s mouth and then tickling her under the chin. “I will hire out to guard one of the small border towns. Or I will find the High King’s army. They like Alta’s warriors. They will not refuse me.”

Jenna smiled her response, her little hands waving about in the air. Selna kissed her on the brow, feeling the brush of the child’s white hair under her nose, as soft as the wing of a butterfly. Then she bound the baby on her back again.

“We have many more miles to go tonight before I will feel safe,” Selna said. She did not add that she wanted to stay the night in the forest because the full moon was due and she could not bear to speak to her pale shadow and explain all that she had done.

The Legend:

In the dark forest near Altashame there is a clearing. Under a stand of white birch grows a red-tipped iris. The people who live in Selkirk, on the west side of the forest, say that three ghosts may be seen on the second moon of each year. One is a warrior woman, a dark necklace at her throat. The second is her shadowy twin. And the third is a snow white bird that flies above them crying with a child’s voice. At dawn the two women strike one another with their swords. Where their blood falls the iris spring up, as white as the bird, as red as the blood. “Snow-iris” the folk of the East call the flower. “Cold Heart” say the folk from the South. But “Sister’s Blood” is the Selkirk name and the people of that town leave the flowers alone. Though the juice from the iris heart binds up a woman in her time of troubles and gives her relief from flashes of heat, the Selkirk folk will not touch so much as a leaf of the flower, and they will not go into the clearing after dark.

The Story:

At the edge of a small clearing, a short run to the outskirts of the town of Seldenkirk, Selna rested. Leaning against a small oak which protected her from the bright full moon, she caught her breath and dropped both bow and sword. Her breathing was so labored at first, she did not hear the noise and then, when she heard it, it was already too late. Strong, callused hands grabbed her from behind and twisted a knife point into the hollow below her chin.

She stopped herself from crying out in pain, and then the knife slipped down and carved a circle of blood like a necklace around her throat.

“These be the only jewels an Alta-slut should own,” came the gruff voice behind her. “You be mighty far from your own, my girl.”

She fell to her knees, trying to twist and protect the child at her back, and the movement frightened the man who jammed the knife deep in her throat. She tried to scream but no sound came out.

The man laughed raggedly and ripped her tunic down the front, exposing her breasts and belly. “Built like a boy,” he said, disgustedly. “Your kind be good only dying or dead.” He grabbed her by one leg and pulled her out from the forest onto the softer grass of the moon-lit clearing. Then he tried to turn her from her side onto her back.

She could not scream, but she could still fight him. But another woman screamed from behind, a strange gurgling.

Startled, he looked over his shoulder, saw a twin of the first woman, her own throat banded by a black line of blood. Turning back, he realized his mistake for Selna had managed to get her hand on her knife. With the last remaining strength in her arm, she threw the knife at his face. It hit him cleanly between the eyes. But Selna did not see it for she had already rolled over on her stomach and died, her fingertips touching Marjo’s.

The man tried to get to his feet, managed only to his knees, then fell on top of Selna, the handle of the knife between his eyes coming to rest in baby Jenna’s hand. She held on to it and cried.

They were found in the morning by a shepherd who always took his flock to that clearing where the spring grass was sweetest. He arrived just before sunrise and thought he saw three dead folk by the clearing’s edge. When he got to them, pushing his way through his reluctant sheep he saw that there were only two, a woman, her throat cut, and a man, a gutting knife between his eyes. A silent infant was holding on to the bloody knife handle as if she herself had set it on its deadly path.

The shepherd ran all the way back to Seldenkirk forgetting his sheep who bleated around the ghastly remains. When he returned, with six strong ploughboys and the portly high sheriff, only the man lay there, on his back, in a circle of sheep. The dead woman, the babe, the knife, and one of the shepherd’s nursing ewes were gone.

The Ballad:

The Ballad of the Selden Babe

*Do not go down, ye maidens all,
Who wear the golden gown,
Do not go to the clearing
At the edge of Seldentown,
For wicked are the men who wait
To bring young maidens down.*

*A maiden went to Seldentown,
A maid no more was she,
Her hair hung loose about her neck,
Her gown about her knee,
A babe was slung upon her back,
A bonnie babe was he.*

*She went into the clearing wild,
She went too far from town,
A man came up behind her
And he cut her neck aroun',
A man came up behind her
And he pushed that fair maid down.*

*“And will ye have your way wi' me,
Or will ye cut me dead,
Or do ye hope to take from me
My long lost maidenhead?
Why have ye brought me far from town
Upon this grass green bed?”*

*He never spoke a single word,
Nor gave to her his name,
Nor whence and where his parentage,
Nor from which town he came,
He only thought to bring her low
And heap her high wi' shame.*

*But as he set about his plan,
And went about his work,
The babe upon the maiden's back
Had touched her hidden dirk,
And from its sheath had taken it
All in the clearing's mirk.*

*And one and two, the tiny hands
Did fell the evil man
Who all upon his mother had
Commenced the wicked plan.
God grant us all such bonnie babes
And a good and long life span.*

The Story:

The priestess called off the banishment for four of the hunters had found Selna's body hand in hand with Marjo. The hunters had melted quickly back into the forest when the shepherd had appeared, waited out his discovery, then taken Selna, the babe, and the ewe back to Alta's-hame.

“Our sisters are once more with us,” the priestess said, and she made Alta's mark—the circle and the crux—on Selna's forehead, when she met the hunters with their sad burden at the great gate. “Bring her in. The child also. She now belongs to us all. No one of us shall mother her alone.”

“The prophecy, mother,” Amalda cried out, and many echoed her. “Is this the child spoke of?”

The priestess shook her head. “The *Book* speaks of a thrice-orphaned babe and this sweetling has lost but two mothers, her first mother and Selna.”

“But Mother,” Amalda continued. “Was not Marjo her mother as well?”

The priestess' mouth grew tight. “We may not help a prophecy along, sister. Remeber that it is written

that *Miracles come to the unsuspecting*. I have spoken. The child will not have one mother here at Alta's home hereafter but a multitude." She twisted her long braid through her fingers.

The women murmured amongst themselves, but at last they agreed she was right. So they set Selna's corpse into the withy burial basket and brought her into the infirmary's room. There they washed and dressed her body, brushed her hair until it shone, then twined the top withes of the basket closed.

It took six of them, one at each corner of the basket and two at head and foot, to carry the burden up Holy Hill to the great mazed cave, Alta's Rock, where the bodies of generations of sisters lay wrapped and preserved, under blazing torches.

Though they went up to Alta's Rock at noon, they waited until night for the ceremony, eating sparingly of the fruits they had brought with them. They spoke quietly of Selna's life, of her hunting skills and her fearlessness, her quick temper and her quicker smile. And they spoke as often of Marjo, not the pale shadow, but the hearty, laughing companion.

Kadreen remarked that it was Alta's luck that had led them to find Selna's body.

"No, sister, it was the skill of my sisters and me. We trailed her through several nights, and if she had not been out of her mind, we would never have picked up her trail for she was the best of us," said Amalda.

Kadreen shook her head and placed her hand on Amalda's shoulder. "I mean, sister, that it was Alta's gracious gift that we have her body with us at Holy Hill, for how many of our own lie far away in unmarked graves?"

When the moon rose, the group on the Hill was almost doubled, the children alone without dark sisters.

Marjo's body appeared in its own basket by Selna's side, the withy latticework as finely done as her sister's.

Then the priestess, her voice ragged with sorrow; began. "For our sisters who are united even in death," she said, then breaking a moment out of the ritual whispered to the two corpses, "There is nothing wrong between you now."

Donya drew a loud, groaning breath, and the two kitchen maids burst into tears.

The priestess sang the first of the Seven praises, with the others quickly joining in, singing the parts they had known from childhood.

*In the name of Alta's cave,
The dark and lonely grave...*

When the seventh was done, and only the last lovely echo lingered in the air, they picked up the baskets and carried Selna and Marjo into the cave.

Donya and her dark sister were the last, Donya carrying the white-haired babe who was so full of ewe's milk, she slept peacefully on the kitchener's ample breast.

The Myth:

Then Great Alta said, "There shall be one of you, my only daughter, who shall be thrice born

and thrice orphaned. She shall lie by a dead mother's side three times yet shall herself live. She shall be queen above all things yet queen she will not be. She shall carry a babe in her womb for each mother, yet mother them not. The three shall be as one and begin the world anew. So I say and so shall it be."

And then Great Alta picked out of the light a weeping child as white as snow, as red as blood, as black as night, and suckled her until the child was still.

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