



Sister Light, Sister Dark: Book One of the Great Alta Saga

By Jane Yolen

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Skada was the dark one, able to exist only when the moonlight cast a shadow or lamplight flickered in a darkened room.

This is the story of Jenna and Skada. *Sister Light and Sister Dark*.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Excellent!" --*Locus*

About the Author

Born and raised in New York City, Jane Yolen now lives in Massachusetts. She attended Smith College and received her master's degree in education from the University of Massachusetts. The distinguished author of more than 170 books, Jane Yolen is a person of many talents. When she is not writing, Yolen composes songs, is a professional storyteller on the stage, and is the busy wife of a university professor, the mother of three grown children, and a grandmother. Yolen's graceful rhythms and outrageous rhymes have been gathered in numerous collections. She has earned many awards over the years: the Regina Medal, the Kerlan Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Society of Children's Book Writers Award, the Mythopoetic Society's Aslan Award, the Christopher Medal, the Boy's Club Jr. Book Award, the Garden State Children's Book Award, the Daedalus Award, a number of Parents' Choice Magazine Awards, and many more. Her books and stories have been translated into Japanese, French, Spanish, Chinese, German, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Afrikaans, !Xhosa, Portuguese, and Braille.

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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 caul 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 dark 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 for 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 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 gainsaid 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 afterward. 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 or 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 rock face 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 birdsong 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:

Lullaby 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.*

*Seep, 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.*

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