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opening extract from

Star Dancer

written by

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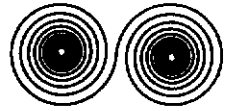
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1. Star Child



The stars danced all that night, but the midwife did not stop to watch.

The baby's wet, black head was already pushing and twisting its way into the world. At last the cord was cut, the tiny thrashing limbs bathed and wrapped in a woollen shawl. The woman took the squealing bundle to the door of the cottage and held the infant high to see the lights sparkling in the dark.

'There,' she said. 'That's for you, my dear, to welcome you to the world.'

Terrified, the exhausted mother tried to sit up. 'Get her away from there, Gilda! She hasn't been named yet. The spirits might take her!'

'Easy, Nessa, she'll be fine, we're inside the house. You know that spirits can't get past an oaken threshold.' The

midwife shut the door, brought the child back and placed her in her mother's arms. 'What are you going to call her?'

Nessa sighed. 'Clesek wanted a boy – he was going to be Alwar. But now . . . well . . .' She smiled down at the tiny round face with its mop of dark hair. Huge eyes looked back at her, amazed.

'She's a pretty little thing,' Gilda said.

'She is indeed.' Nessa stroked her baby's cheek. 'I'll name her "Tegen" – *pretty thing*.' She held the child to her breast and settled back on her straw mattress.

Gilda looked down at the mother and baby. She liked moments like these. All was well. She could go to her own bed now without worrying. If the Goddess willed, they would both live. She tucked her wild curly hair behind her ears and smiled. 'Let her feed. Then you should both get some sleep. I've left a basket of dried moss and clean linen for her mess. I'll come back tomorrow. Is there anything else you need before I go?'

Nessa glanced around the tidy cottage. The fire in the centre was burning well, with a pile of spare wood in the corner. Her bed was warm, and within reach she had an earthenware pot of water and a dish of oatcakes and nuts. 'I have everything, thank you. Can Clesek be allowed back now? I am sure Tegen would like to see her Da . . . Oh, and when you go down to the village, would you ask Witton to come and bless the child for me?'

'Of course.' Gilda smiled. She knew Nessa would not be

at ease until the old druid had given his protection to the baby. 'But no talking when Clesek comes in. You two must rest.' The midwife pushed her feet into her clogs, which had been warming by the hearth, then pulled on her cloak, winding it tightly against the winter winds. 'Goodnight then, both of you. May the Goddess bless you.' She lifted the latch and pulled the wooden door back. 'Just look at that, will you?' she gasped.

Outside, the shower of sparkling lights still moved gracefully across the midnight skies.

Nessa turned her head away and concentrated on her baby. She was always nervous about the ways of stars and spirits.

Gilda called to Clesek in his forge, where he had been banished during the birthing: 'It is a girl child, but they are both well and strong. You will be blessed with a boy soon, of that I am certain.' Then she turned away briskly. She did not want to be blamed, as some men believed, for the birth of a girl.

Gilda did not need a lamp, for the brilliance of the night lit her way. The path from Clesek and Nessa's cottage down to the village where she lived was long but not steep, winding through leafless oak and hazel woods alongside a chattering stream. The sound kept her company. The wind was getting up and had a bitter edge. At a twist in the path

Gilda stood on an outcrop of rock overlooking the Winter Seas below; the black waters were roughened by the icy air and the few muddy islets were charcoal smudges in the ebony landscape. Above, the stars were being rapidly covered with a thick pall of clouds as the silvered night was plunged into darkness.

'It's almost like the stars don't want to be seen tonight,' she muttered to herself. 'I am sure the child is important, but how? Perhaps something secret is going on.'

Ahead she could faintly see the Tor, peat-black as the Goddess's breast, a lonely island rising out of the seas. Tonight there were lights on the top of the sacred hill. So the druids were watching too? Then the spirits *were* about. Nessa had been wise to be worried. Gilda guessed there would be no point trying to find Witton tonight. He would not want to be summoned from his magical doings to bless a girl child, even one born on such a night.

Icy splats of rain caught Gilda on the cheek. She tried to wrap her cloak more tightly and yawned. There was still a fair step to go before she found her own fireside and bed.

Witton was cold too. He was getting old. His bones creaked and ground painfully as he led his druid brothers along the maze-path down the Tor. But his heart was light. The stars had danced.

Just after sunset, while Nessa cried out with birthing

pains, the wise ones had gathered to celebrate Imbolg, the festival of spring. Then, as the night deepened, dancing lights appeared between the legs of the nine-pointed star pattern of the 'Watching Woman', symbol of the Mother Goddess. The spectacle grew and moved slowly on, leaving a thousand tiny sparks leaping and scattering across the sky. Below, the miracle was reflected in the dark-mirror waters.

The druids watched in awestruck silence.

For months, signs and divinations had warned of great evil to come. But there was a promise too: an untimely shower of stars would mark the birth of the one who would stem the tide. But even the wisest of the druids' sign-readers, the ovates, could not tell what the threat was, or who the child would be.

But it did not matter. The Goddess had kept her promise and given birth to the protector of the people of the Winter Seas. All would be well.

The druids watched all night, until the glory was swallowed in heavy clouds and the driving rain began. Struggling against the gale, the men processed solemnly down the muddy path to their longhouse on the shore.

Inside, by the glow of the central fire, the company shook off their damp outer cloaks and sat around wooden tables. Waiting women brought horns of warm mead and bowls of spiced porridge. The smells mingled with the aroma of juniper shavings thrown into the fire.

This was a good night.

Witton, the oldest and most honoured of the druids, rose to his feet. He wore no torques or armbands. His shirt and breeches were made from undyed wool edged with a narrow blue band. His ash-coloured beard was long and plaited, and his wide whiskers parted as he smiled warmly at his companions. When he raised his silver-bound mead horn everyone fell silent.

'Brothers, tonight is Imbolg. Spring is born. Tomorrow you will go back to your own village, knowing that, whatever may come, the evil that has been prophesied will never rule in our land. We have a long wait until the child is old enough to stand here with us, as our Generous Chief and our Hero, but until then let us celebrate! The Goddess has blessed us! Her child has been born!'

In the warm red firelight, golden rings and silver armbands glistened as the mead horns were raised. 'To the child!'

'Join me now,' Witton went on, 'in a vow to find the boy and train him.'

The men roared their approval, slapping the tables with their hands.

But seated in the shadows to Witton's left, a white-haired apprentice wearing a silver torque muttered through his teeth: 'He's gone quite mad! Can't he see a *baby* is no protection against the coming evil? We need a grown man, a strong leader . . .' Noticing Witton's eyes on him, the young man smiled and raised his mead horn in mock salute.

His master scowled. 'Hush, Gorgans, or do you think *you* can stand against what is coming?'

'And why shouldn't it be me?' Gorgans hissed. 'No one gives me the respect that I deserve!' He clutched the handle of his dagger. The firelight caught the polished blade.

'Respect has to be earned. Just because you come from the Otherworld of Tir na nÓg does not make you a god,' his master said softly. 'Perhaps you need to train for battle instead of learning the ways of wisdom?'

'You *know* why I don't!' Gorgans snapped. He longed to take a sword and be a warrior, but he dreaded the Sun God's rage against his colourless skin and weak eyes. I will find a way to take the power I deserve, he thought. Even if it means I have to work in the dark.

At the head of the table Witton was still talking loudly, exultant with mead, heat and exhaustion. 'The child's name will be "Star Dancer"!' he roared, raising his drinking horn. 'He will be robed in a chieftain's seven colours of the finest wool, honoured with silver armbands and a golden torque. When the unknown darkness comes, the boy will be ready and his triumph will make the lands around the winter waters safe for a thousand years. To Star Dancer! Long may he live!'

'To Star Dancer!' the men roared, swigging their mead and holding out their horns for the women to fill them again.