

The Lily and the Bull



Moyra Caldecott

THE LILY AND THE BULL

MOYRA CALDECOTT

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Chapter 1

Encounter on the Mountain

Ierii had climbed much higher than she had intended, and clouds were lowering fast over the mountains, the peaks of solid rock disappearing into the whiteness, suggesting mysterious heights beyond their known limits.

She had been watching her sandalled feet on the rocks, continually sidestepping to avoid the sharp thorns of the bushes, when she suddenly noticed that the sun no longer warmed her skin and that she was cocooned in heavy mist. Her vision now could reach no further than her outstretched hand.

At first she was not worried, even though she had heard tales of people falling to their death in the mountains when the sky was hostile. She turned to descend, confident that she could find the way. She moved swiftly, sure that the quickly falling mist could not have hidden much of the path between herself and her home.

But she was wrong. The more she moved, the more completely she seemed to be enveloped.

She came to the sharp edge of a rock and found that it dropped away abruptly below her. A small stone that her foot dislodged slipped over the edge and was a long time falling.

She paused. For the first time the cold of the mist seemed to be inside her.

She did not remember this rock, this cliff. She shivered, feeling very much alone.

Surely she could not be far from familiar ground?

She tried to walk to the left, but the rocks were impassable. To the right she found a narrow passage, and carefully picked her way, trying fearfully every moment for safer footing.

By the time she found it she was a long way from where she thought she should have been. She remembered advice others had given: take no step upon the mountain if you cannot see. But if she did not move she might be there into the night.

It had become very cold, and her thin clothes were already damp. She cursed herself for being such a fool, setting off so impulsively without checking signs. The mountain always gave signs. The wind spoke. The birds could tell what weather was coming long before it came.

She had wanted to be alone, but not like this.

There were times when she could not stay in the town: times when she felt as though the thin veil that kept her separate as Ierii from the rest of the world no longer protected her, and all the loves, the hates, the pain, the anxieties of others were crowding in on her. At such times she would flee to the mountains, and in the

quiet among the ancient rocks she would find herself again. But now she thought with nostalgia of the busy town on the plain far below her, between the mountains and the sea, and of Thyloss, whom she loved, but who she felt did not yet love her.

She stood still, the cold filaments of cloud touching her skin. But even as she neared despair, in the swirling whiteness that flowed everywhere about her, she felt the sudden haunting warmth of another's presence.

She could see no one.

She called. 'Who is there?'

She listened, but there was no answer. Perhaps the mist had muffled the sound of her voice. Her throat ached with tears she fought to keep from rising.

Then something moved above her, to the right. Anxiously, she strained to see through the mist.

Suddenly it seemed to part and, as clearly as if it were a sunny day, she saw a woman of great beauty standing on a rock, shining from the mist like a white lily from the shade of leaves. She was taller than most women, her hair white as the moon, and her eyes dark and unfathomable. Ierii gasped, her hands at her mouth.

'It is the Lady herself!' she whispered. 'the Mother of the Earth!'

She was filled with awe, her heart beating so loudly and rapidly that she could feel it in her throat.

The woman beckoned, and Ierii moved without hesitation towards her. She found that she no longer stumbled over the stones, nor did the rough little thorn bushes tear at her legs.

She reached out to the woman she had never seen before, trustingly, as child to mother, but the mountain cloud swirled closer and the figure disappeared.

Ierii paused a moment, but the fear she had known before did not return. She moved forward with confidence, finding the ground beneath her feet level and secure.

When she reached the rock on which she had seen the woman standing, she found no one there, but when she looked down to the ground to see if there were any footprints to show that she had not imagined the presence of the Lady, she found the path that she had been seeking.

She wept freely, with relief and joy, and hurried down the mountain, her mind racing with the strange story that she would have to tell Thyloss and her father.

Would they believe that she had seen the Mother of the Earth, she, Ierii, fifteen summers old, not yet fledged to leave the nest and fly into the high realms of the Mysteries?

* * * *

The town, Ma-ii, in which Ierii lived, and the palace it served, were built on a plain on the north coast of the island, a plain that now lay in bright sunlight although the mountains were in mist, the sea heaving quietly beside it, intensely blue.

At about the time Ierii started her descent from the mountain on the correct path, Thyloss, the son of Miron, was busy with other acrobats on the practice

ground training on wooden blocks and bars for the complex leaps, somersaults and manoeuvres they would need when they faced the live bulls on the Field of Challenge. The young prince of Ma-ii, the only son of its formidable queen, was dead. The embalmers were busy in the palace; the acrobats preparing for the elaborate and dangerous funeral games.

Miron, Keeper of the Queen's Bulls, not knowing of the prince's death, had gone from town with several hunters on a routine search for wild bulls for the palace ceremonies, leaving his son Thyloss in charge of the bull enclosures and the men who tended them. It was to Thyloss therefore that the messenger came when there was trouble between two of the bulls.

Thyloss had not been pleased to be left to attend to his father's responsibilities and he uttered an exclamation of impatience when he was called in the middle of his practice. He was about to make an excuse for not going, when he noticed how breathless the youth who had brought the message was and how white-faced he looked. There was no avoiding it, he would have to go.

The narrow stone-flagged streets were quiet, and for the most part coolly shadowed by the houses. It was only when they came to open spaces at crossroads or in the market square that the white blaze of the sun hit the walls and ricocheted into their eyes. Thyloss was hot from his exertions on the training field and felt the sea breeze as it whistled down some of the streets cold and prickly on his skin.

‘Hurry,’ the youth cried anxiously, as Thyloss stopped for a moment at the corner of the Street of the Red Octopus and the Street of the Dolphin, to greet Ierii’s father carrying an earthenware pot filled with shining red flowers and trailing vine-like leaves.

‘Have you seen Ierii?’ the man asked after the formal words of greeting, and Thyloss thought he detected a slight worried look in his eyes. He was surprised, for Dorrان was noted for the calm, unhurried peacefulness of his nature, the gentle way he took all that life had to fling at him. In times past he had suffered much, but lately he and his daughter had lived together in great contentment, each day following the next, apparently in untroubled serenity.

‘No, I have not. Should I?’

‘I feel uneasy,’ Dorrان said. ‘She went to the mountains and the mist is down. I thought she might have returned early and been with you. She has more sense than to stay in the mountains when the mist . . .’

The messenger tugged Thyloss’s sleeve.

‘My lord . . .’ he whispered anxiously.

‘You will probably find her at home mixing her pigments for her wall paintings or wandering on the beach talking to the sea . . .’ Thyloss said cheerfully to Dorrان. There were a hundred places Ierii could be. She was one of those rare, quiet, private people who wandered abroad in the world freely and yet never seemed to touch it at all . . . almost as though, wherever she was, she was only partly there, the rest, the essential part, was in an unreachable world of her own. ‘I must

go,' the young man said in answer to another tug from the messenger and was already walking away as he called back over his shoulder: 'She will be all right. Do not worry.'

After this Thyloss and the messenger ran all the way to the bull enclosures, stopping for no one, though there were many who would have liked to pass the time of day with the handsome young athlete.

They found the area around the black bull's enclosure in an uproar. The air was thick with dust and the sound of hooves thudding and thundering, animals snorting and roaring. This combined with the shouting of the men to make a noisy, wild and confusing scene.

As soon as he appeared an old man rushed forward to meet him. It was Ayan, who, though officially retired as bull trainer and no longer permitted to handle the bulls or teach the acrobats, could not be persuaded to abandon the life he had enjoyed so much. Thyloss could see at once that he was the one most likely to give him a sensible explanation.

'What is it, Ayan?' he asked.

'The Black Thunderer and Grey Wind are at battle, my lord,' the old man said. 'Some fool boy left the gate open. Grey Wind got into the enclosure with the Black Thunderer and . . .'

Thyloss waited to hear no more.

He leapt up onto the wall and looked down into the dusty pen where the two giant bulls were lunging at each other. The most valuable bull of all, the Black Thunderer, the one chosen by Queen Nya-an for the funeral

of her son, was covered with blood and dust and frothing sweat.

The earth shook as the two beasts pulled apart, turned, and charged at each other again and again. Thyloss felt himself choking on the red dust. Dimly he was aware of a group of children sitting in a row on the wall gleefully yelling encouragement to one bull or the other. They were not worried. It was a grand spectacle for them, and they cared nothing for the adult world of ritual and ceremony.

Several terrified youths were darting about the enclosure with long pronged rods trying to prize the two apart, or at least to distract them. The high-pitched warbling whistles that were customarily used to guide the bulls added to the noisy turbulence but had no effect on the enraged contestants.

Thyloss could see that Grey Wind's eyes were red as he turned for another attack. He was not as fine a bull as the Black Thunderer, his coat was not so silky nor his horns so white, but his powerful build was reminiscent of the rocky strength of the southern mountains from whence he came, and he was not going to give in.

The earth shook as the two charged and locked in battle yet again.

No wonder the Bull was believed to represent the destructive power of the earthquake, as well as the procreative power of Life. When Seers on the Island foresaw the danger of an earthquake, a bull, no matter how valuable, was sacrificed with elaborate ritual, the deathblow delivered with the deadly double axe, to

placate the restless forces of the earth. It was only at funerals that the acrobats could show their skills and dance with the beast to show man's defiance of death, and his desire for new life.

As Thyloss stood on the wall of the enclosure, the small children turned their attention from the fighting bulls to him. He raised his voice in a high, long, and penetrating call, and his throat and mouth shaped a sound that belonged to the wild places of the earth.

He called again and again, the animal sound of his voice rising with each call and the final note so strange, so high and so rasping, that the other humans covered their ears and shuddered. The bulls paused in mid-charge and turned towards him with wide and staring eyes.

'Aa-aa-yi-yii-ee!' he wailed again, and leapt high and graceful as a swallow into the dusty pen, his feet scarcely touching ground before he was up again and flying with a leaping somersault over the back of the Black Thunderer.

Confused, the beast turned, but could not find the fleetly moving figure. He snorted and tossed his head.

Grey Wind stood still, breathing heavily, froth dripping from his jaw. Suddenly he turned and lumbered off, trying to find his way out. In the confusion he missed the gate and stumbled into the wall where the children were sitting. As he felt the stone wall smashing into his nose, he roared and snorted, his muscles rippling in preparation for the attack of this new enemy. The children, feeling his hot breath on their legs, and

seeing his red eyes so close, squealed and fell backwards off the wall, a wriggling mass of arms and legs in the muck of the neighbouring empty bull pen.

Thyloss continued his dangerous dance while Grey Wind was distracted by some of the men. Swiftly and gracefully he leapt from side to side, turning the black bull one way and then the other. The animal lunged at his tormentor through the swirling dust, only to find the youth already behind him, mocking him with strange sounds.

The bull workers were no longer in panic. Thyloss knew what he was doing and they respected him. They watched his every move while they held the large nets, waiting for the signal to throw them. They knew that when the time came they must make no mistakes.

‘Now!’ shouted Thyloss.

‘Now!’ echoed old Ayan, his rheumy eyes shining with excitement.

The bull workers rushed forward and flung the swirling nets over the two distraught beasts.

Tired and confused, the two animals did not know which way to turn, the nets entangling them as they were prodded and pushed from every side. At last the pain of their wounds began to tell and their resistance became less and less.

Grey Wind was led away, and the Black Thunderer was released at last to be left the sole occupant of his enclosure.

Then there were words of recrimination among the bull workers, each blaming the other for the incident.

Above this noise rose the laughing voices of the children, who were extricating themselves from the muck and excitedly exchanging their impressions of the adventure.

Old Ayan and Thyloss brought back some kind of order.

Special herbs were called for and were boiled in great cauldrons. The liquid was then cooled slightly and poured over the wounds of the black bull. He did not like the sensation at first, but after a while he must have found it soothing, because he stood still, his eyes half closed.

‘It will clean the wounds and help the healing,’ Ayan said.

‘Will he be ready for the prince’s funeral?’ Thyloss asked anxiously. He was wondering what the Queen would say if the Black Thunderer was not fit for the Challenge. It was the custom throughout the country for funerals, specially of important people, to be the occasion for a display of acrobatic skill against the bulls, the climax being the final challenge of one particular acrobat chosen by the family of the deceased to represent Life, and one particular bull chosen to represent Death, the two performing a deadly dance for the soul of the one whose champion the acrobat had become. It was only if the bull killed the acrobat that the mourning began in earnest. If the acrobat performed the challenge and survived, the funeral became a rejoicing. Life had won. The dead person would be soon reborn on this earth.

‘The bull is healthy,’ Ayan said. ‘the herbs are strong. I see no reason why he should not be ready.’

‘He will still be marked,’ Thyloss said.

‘Yes, he will still be marked,’ Ayan agreed.

They were both silent.

He had been such a perfect bull, the most beautiful they had had in Ma-ii for a long time. Now one of his eyes was cut and the flesh around it was swelling rapidly. If his wounds did not heal well and exceptionally quickly, neither would like to take the responsibility of presenting him to the Queen.

Thyloss thanked Ayan for his help and gave stern orders to the rest of the bull workers, but blamed no one.

Wearily, as afternoon turned to evening, he walked back to his home. He would not be sorry when his father returned from the hunt.

* * * *

On the path that led down from the mountains he met a bedraggled Ierii, her skirt torn and dirty, but her face shining with excitement.

‘Thyloss, I must speak with you!’ she cried.

‘O no!’ he groaned inwardly. He was exhausted. He was fond of Ierii and had been her closest friend for as long as either of them could remember, but he did not want to speak with anyone now. He had forgotten her father’s earlier concern for her, he had forgotten the mist on the mountains, the possibility that she might have been in danger there. He could think of nothing

but a pitcher of water over his head and a long cool drink.

Her dark eyes were looking into his eagerly and intensely. She was going to try to explain one of her strange thoughts to him. He was sure of it. He sighed. Usually he found Ierii's 'strange thoughts' fascinating, and many a time walking quietly along the beach with her, the water of the great ocean washing over their feet and the sky luminous with stars above them, he had felt that he was in the presence of someone very ancient and very wise, instead of a girl younger than himself with thin legs and a haunted, pale face. It was true the thin legs and the pale face were not much in evidence these days and lately he had found his attention distracted from what she had been saying by the full curve of her breast and the shine on her thick dark hair that reminded him of the blue-black sheen on the wing of a bird. But even her beauty, which still shone through now in spite of the dust and the disarray, could not distract him from his determination to cool down and rest.

'Ierii, not now,' he said wearily. 'I have no time now.' He had scarcely paused to listen to her, and plodded on past her as though she were some casual acquaintance whose expectation could be no more than a nod or a wave.

She stood still, gazing after him, the light fading from her eyes. She was hurt and shocked as though, bringing a gift, she had had it flung back in her face.

She bit her lip as she watched him moving gradually further and further from her. She could see that he had

probably been working hard on the practice field for he was wearing only the short leather kilt that the acrobats wore for their work. His bronzed back was straight and strong, but his steps were dragging.

'He is very tired,' she told herself, trying not to dwell on the hurt, trying to find an excuse for his coldness towards her. But he had been tired before and yet he had always found time for her.

She turned for home, the joy of her recent experience marred by sadness.

* * * *

Ierii's father, Dorran, like Thyloss's father Miron, was also a man of considerable importance in the community. He was Chief Gardener for the palace and lived in a beautiful house near its great southern entrance. From the wide northern windows of the upper storey of his home he could see the palace splendidly rising level upon level, the vines and creepers for which he was responsible spilling gracefully from window and balcony.

Gardens were not common in Ma-ii. The countryside was close enough for everyone to enjoy. The houses were built near each other: the streets were narrow and laid out so that the winds that blew so incessantly over the Island would not have free passage, and the shade of the buildings would give respite from the blazing summer sun.

The gardens people had were mostly indoors, in courtyards, on balconies, where they could keep them watered easily and out of reach of the fierce sun.

The palace of Ma-ii was famous for its courtyard and balcony gardens. Ierii's father was justly proud of his work. Ierii had grown up in a house that sometimes seemed like a forest, it was so full of cool green, for her father often grew the plants for the palace in his own home and only moved them to the great building when they were at their prime. Many of the noble families of the district consulted him, and many were the plants he had reared lovingly from seed that he later recognized in houses grander than his own.

The colonnaded paved court where Ierii and her father sat on summer evenings after the day's work was done was vivid with flowers. Creepers with rich and exotic blooms curled around the wooden columns. In every available space earthenware tubs and stone troughs stood, filled with a richly various foliage.

Dorran had even transplanted certain herbs that grew so freely in the mountains to their own little space beside the kitchen, so that Ierii would always have them available for cooking or healing.

Since Ierii was ten she had looked after her father. Her parents had been childless for many years and she had been born when they were already old and had given up hope of ever having a child. Her mother had prayed to the Goddess for a daughter, and had been told by the Seer who prophesied, that her prayer would be

granted, but that she would enjoy the child for no more than ten years before they would be parted.

‘Ten years with the daughter I love will be more to me than all the time the world has known,’ Dorran’s wife had said.

She bore a child, a daughter she called Ierii, which means ‘answer to a prayer’, but after the birth she never knew good health again.

On her mother’s death, Ierii was left the responsibility of her father and her father’s house.

Ierii’s room looked to the mountains and her windows were framed with flowers, her wall rich with painted lilies.

Once one of her father’s visitors had brought papyrus from Egypt for her, and she spent many happy days learning to draw the flowers that grew round her, transferring her designs painstakingly from the small pieces of papyrus to the large empty surfaces of the walls in the house. Her father encouraged her and often asked her to paint an unusual flower for him that he knew he would soon have to relinquish to the Queen.

Unlike most of the other houses in the town, theirs had a small piece of land behind it. There was a well, and at the edge of the garden on the south side there was a small, wild, rocky knoll where Ierii spent a great deal of her time, contemplating the beauty around her and thinking deeply about all that she saw.

Sometimes she felt that she was the most fortunate person in the world to have this private place, this small and secret mountain.

The official religion for some time had placed more and more emphasis on the Cult of the Bull, a representation of the powerful destructive force in nature worshipped in caves and underground chambers, and less and less on the Goddess, the subtle creative force that drove the tender shoot from seed to mighty tree, her representative, the Lady of the Lilies, worshipped in sacred groves and on the tops of mountains.

Somehow the understanding of Wholeness and Oneness had been lost, and the religious rituals which should have increased the feeling that the two great energies of the universe, the destructive and the creative, were dependent on each other, failed to do so. The followers of the Cult of the Bull feared and constantly placated a god they believed to be a Destroyer, while the Cult of the Lady cherished life in all its forms and on all its levels, but failed to satisfy the people who could see, but not understand, the harsh and violent side of the universe, the cleansing, winnowing action of nature.

When Ierii was a young child it was still possible for people to honour both the Goddess and the God, though even then they were thought of as separate beings representing separate and irreconcilable forces. She had once seen Queen Nya-an, chief priestess of the Bull Cult, carried up the Holy Mountain of the Lady, to visit the sanctuary of the Goddess. The child had been impressed to see the Queen step down from the portable throne of wood and ivory, to stand like any ordinary suppliant with hand to forehead before the invisible Presence,

pleading for the life of her son. But though the boy had lived on he was constantly in such sickly health that the Queen's heart had hardened against the Divine Lady and the worship of the Goddess on the mountaintops was discouraged, all public religious rites confined to the palace and the Bull shrines.

The Bull games, as an important part of man's challenge of Death, and the Bull sacrifice offered in times of danger to the Earth Shaker, the Great Destroyer, were so much part of the Island's tradition that no one questioned them. If anyone noticed that the gentler, more receptive and intuitive side of their religion was gradually disappearing, no one proclaimed it from the rooftops. The Queen was hard and fierce, her hand was over Ma-ii like a dark cloud. Her very name, Nya-an, was a name of ominous power. Nya-an, Shadow of the Bull.

From an early age Ierii had watched the Bull games with excitement. The skill and daring of the acrobats were magnificent, and, of course, being in love with Thyloss, they had an added interest for her.

But she had no sense of a Divine Presence at any of the rituals of the Bull Cult. She had no feeling that the ceremonial games were anything more serious than a challenge of skills between animal and man. She hated the Bull sacrifices, and usually managed to avoid attending them. But she had not admitted even to her father the blasphemous thoughts she had about their lack of purpose. It seemed everyone else accepted them

as an important part of their religion. Were there not shrines with horns all about her?

Strangely, her own house did not have one. She thought of this, and wondered about it as she turned for home now, anxious to tell her father about her experience on the mountain.

He would listen, she thought, even if Thyloss had not. She found him digging a trench for some new and unusual plants the latest ship from the East had brought to Ma-ii. He was very excited about them and anxious to get them planted.

‘Look!’ he cried as soon as he saw her, and he held up the roots for her to admire. They were huge, and Ierii wondered what kind of monstrous flower would grow from them.

‘I have promised one to my old friend Ayan,’ her father said. ‘And I shall keep one, but the others, of course, must go to the palace.’

‘The Queen might not like them,’ Ierii said, only half concentrating, eager to turn the conversation to her own experience.

‘She will like them!’ cried her father. ‘She will be pleased to have something no other palace in the country has.’

‘Father,’ said Ierii thoughtfully.

‘Pass me that jug of water,’ the old man said, not noticing that she had something to tell him.

‘Father,’ repeated Ierii loudly and more purposefully, holding the jug for him. ‘What would you think if I

were to tell you that I had seen the Goddess and that she had saved my life?’

‘Not so much,’ remonstrated her father, as she absentmindedly tipped the jug. ‘We do not want to drown them. They come from a very dry country, you know.’

‘Father, you are not listening to me!’ Ierii’s voice sounded so insistent, even the excited old man had to stop what he was doing to look at her in surprise.

‘The Goddess . . . the Mother of the Earth! I saw her!’

‘Where?’ His voice was cautious.

‘On the mountain. I was lost in the mist and she appeared to me and showed me the way down. I might have died.’

‘I told you not to go into the mountains without seeing which way the wind is bending that tree.’ the old man straightened his back and pointed to a small tree on Ierii’s rocky knoll.

‘But, Father – that is not the point! Do you not understand what I am saying?’

He listened to her story then, and thought about what she had said.

He sat on the step and forgot about his new plants. His eyes were withdrawn. He was remembering the time his wife, who, they thought, was past the age of child-bearing, had asked for a child, and had been given one.

The Goddess had already showed interest in Ierii, it was not impossible that she should show it again.

They sat together on the warm stone step for some time, thinking and gazing at the cloud-covered mountains.

Ierii had seen what no one she had ever known had seen.

The Queen might do what she liked about the Cult of the Bull, but she, Ierii, would hold to the old religion, the faith older than time itself, the Spirit that gave birth to the earth, and walked their mountains now clad in the body of a woman, watching over them as mother watches over child. She felt at peace with the Goddess. Afraid of the fierce Lord of the Bulls.

‘Is it not a wonderful thing that I have seen her, Father?’ Ierii asked dreamily, happily.

‘I wonder,’ the old man said musingly.

‘I have seen her, Father!’

‘Mist plays strange tricks,’ he said gently.

‘Father, I saw her!’

‘You saw a woman, my child. How can you be sure that she was the Goddess?’

‘She was so . . . beautiful . . . so old . . . and so young at the same time . . . and the way she appeared and . . . disappeared.’

‘It is possible that it was not the Goddess at all, but . . .’ the old man seemed to be pursuing another line of thought, though he did not continue it aloud.

‘Who, then?’ demanded Ierii.

He shook his head, and his expression showed that he did not want to continue the conversation.

There was something he did not want to tell Ierii.

He returned to his mud and his roots and would talk no more. Ierii went to her room, washed herself with the

sweet well water from the jug that always stood there, and lay down on her bed.

I will go again, she thought fiercely to herself. I will find her. I will bring back a sign that no one will be able to doubt.

The painted lilies on the walls of her room seemed to glow as the last light of the dying sun touched them.

Chapter 2

The Queen 'Honours' Thyloss

The following morning the Queen summoned Thyloss to the palace.

She was not in the megaron, where she usually gave audience, but was in one of her private apartments.

As he climbed the stairs to the upper floor and followed one of her women attendants through the narrow and labyrinthine passages to her rooms, he was nervous. Had she heard about the fight of the bulls? In a close community such as theirs it would not have taken long for reports of such an unusual event to reach her ears.

She was in her day room, the screens that kept the weather out in winter were drawn back and almost the whole side of the room was open to the free-flowing air and a view of the distant sea. The plants that grew so profusely in pots between the columns stirred gently in a cooling breeze.

She was not alone. Her four closest attendants were sitting at her feet. The scent they wore and the scent of the flowers was strong, and Thyloss found himself

swallowing rapidly several times, overwhelmed by female beauty and female presence.

He bowed his head to her with conventional respect, but then held it high. He had never been one to humble himself before anyone. If he was blamed for the injuries to the Black Thunderer, he would accept the responsibility boldly.

The Queen stared at him long and hard. Her eyes, lined and shaped with kohl, were like black glass.

Her women rose and moved around him, gazing at him as though he were on show, whispering among themselves as some particular thing about him caught their attention.

The Queen watched, her eyes narrowed, a faint smile on her lips. His resentment amused her. His tall and handsome body aroused her.

But most of all, his pride and inner strength pleased her. She was tired of men who were afraid of her. Her own husband never spoke to her without lowering his eyes.

‘You are Thyloss, the son of my lord, the Keeper of the Bulls,’ she said at last.

‘My lady, you know that I am,’ he answered, meeting her eyes.

The women around him withdrew slightly, tittering. A flicker of irritation crossed the Queen’s face. She raised her arm and made a gesture of dismissal to them. They left at once, their long skirts swirling as they passed through the door into the adjoining room.

Thyloss felt more at ease when they were gone. They had the bodies of women, full-breasted and seductive, but the minds and behaviour of children.

The woman before him was no fool. She had a formidable mind and an unshakeable will. Her power in the land was considerable.

He met her stare as he would that of a bull he was about to challenge. Her gaze never wavered. He would not break the silence, though he longed for release from her scrutiny. At last she moved, and gestured for him to be seated.

But he remained standing.

The stool was at her feet.

Amused, she nodded.

‘You take a risk, sir. Have you forgotten who I am?’

‘No, my lady. But what you have to say would be better said quickly. We both know that.’

‘And what is it that I have to say?’ she asked mockingly. Thyloss flushed. Why did she play with him?

At last he could bear no more and bowed his head slightly, acknowledging her rebuke and indicating that he was ready to listen. She smiled and rose from her chair.

His eyes followed her as she paced about the room, and he began to wonder if he had been correct in thinking that she had called him to berate him about the Black Thunderer. There was something about her that suggested to him that she was finding it difficult to say what she wanted to say.

He waited.

At last she came to rest in front of him.

She was his height and her eyes looked directly into his.

‘Thyloss,’ she said, using his given name as though she had known him all his life. ‘Thyloss, I have decided to do you a great honour. Three great honours,’ she corrected herself.

He said nothing, but he could feel his heart pounding now.

‘Do you not want to know what they are?’ she asked impatiently.

‘Yes, my lady,’ he said with a dry throat.

She smiled and looked more relaxed.

‘The first honour I give you is to be the one to challenge the Black Thunderer at the funeral of my son.’

With the relief beads of sweat broke out on Thyloss’ forehead.

He bowed.

It was indeed an honour.

He had recently won great acclaim as an acrobat, but he had not realized that he had been accepted as one of the foremost, to be entrusted with the role of Life’s champion at a royal funeral.

A second thought struck him. Did this mean she had not heard what had happened to the Black Thunderer? But he decided not to refer to it unless she did.

‘I am grateful,’ he said in a low voice.

‘So you should be,’ she said brusquely, and then, when the silence became uncomfortable between them once more, she said: ‘Do you not want to hear what else

I have planned for you?’ It seemed to him that her eyes sparkled strangely as she looked into his.

‘Of course, my lady,’ he muttered, uneasily.

‘I have decided the usual funeral rituals are not enough for my son. After the Challenge’ – and a slight edge of wariness had come to her voice as though she realized he would not be so eager to accept this second honour – ‘you will be the one to plunge the double axe into the forehead of the Black Thunderer.’

‘My lady!’ He looked shocked and startled. Not only was it unusual to sacrifice a bull at a funeral, but when a sacrifice was called for it had always been the prerogative of the priestesses of the Bull Cult to perform the ceremony.

‘What do you think of that?’ she said, her eyes sparkling at his discomfiture. She was amused by the conflicting emotions she could read in his face. ‘As my son’s champion,’ she continued, ‘you will challenge the Black Thunderer and win. Death will be defied. The prince’s rebirth will be assured. And then I will give him a gift. I will give him the greatest bull this palace has ever known to take with him on his journey from one life to another. He will ride in triumph through the regions of the Shades and will be worshipped as a god when he returns to earth. He will challenge the Lady of the Lilies once and for all. He will shake the earth with his rage. His strength will be as great as the force that began the world!’

Thyloss looked at her in astonishment.

Was she mad?

Her son? the feeble prince! Who, when he was alive, had been a stupid, snivelling boy who was so dull-witted that he even found it necessary to cheat at games played with counters!

The Queen's face glowed with pride as she thought of her son.

Thyloss lowered his eyes, lest she should see his thoughts in them.

'And . . .' she continued, noticing that her words had had an effect upon him, though she did not read it correctly, 'after the funeral, and the presentation of the gift of the bull to my son's soul, there will be a royal wedding.'

Thyloss looked up, startled.

'Yes, my dear, that is the third honour I do you! You are to marry my daughter Meri-an, heir to my throne.'

She looked at him triumphantly, her eyes blazing with excitement at her vision of the future.

Thyloss was dumbfounded.

Memories came to him of the princess, delicate and pale, and still no more than twelve summers old, sitting beside her mother at palace ceremonies. Whenever he had heard speculations about her marriage it had always been in connection with the princes of royal blood who visited Ma-ii from other palaces. He was amazed that he should be considered for such an honour. His thoughts changed direction with every moment that passed in silence between the queen and himself. He was at once flattered and tempted, and yet at the same time appalled. The constrictions of life as

the consort of a queen would not suit him, and the thought that he would be continually beside that pale, quiet child and no longer with Ierii and his lively friends of the Bull games was a disturbing one.

‘My lady, why do you choose me?’ he asked cautiously.

She smiled, pleased with what she thought was his humility.

‘Because I have chosen you,’ she said with satisfaction, as though there could be no other explanation necessary.

‘But why?’ he persisted.

Her face clouded.

‘Do I, the queen, have to give reasons?’ she thundered.

He was silent.

‘Well?’ she said at last, when he still did not speak. ‘What have you to say?’

He took a deep breath.

Dare he say, ‘No, I will not do it?’

Dare he?

Her cold eyes were watching him . . . snake goddess . . . all destructive powers poised to strike.

Where was the Dove, the woman-mother?

‘I cannot,’ he said in a low voice, too low for her to hear.

‘What?’ Her word cracked like a whip over him.

‘I cannot,’ he said more loudly, lifting his head, gathering strength.

‘Cannot!’ she almost screamed.

He was startled at the change in her, the lack of control. Why was it so important to her that he should dance with the Black Thunderer, take the place of a priestess to sacrifice the animal against tradition and custom, and marry the young princess who would one day be queen?

Why?

‘You will do it!’ she said, her voice the most deadly he had ever heard, her eyes cutting into him in a way that he would not have thought possible.

She was queen.

Not woman.

Snake queen.

Bull queen.

High Priestess of the Dark Lord, the Destroyer.
Wielder of the earthquake and the storm!

‘I will do it,’ he heard his voice saying, though his heart was crying for what he would lose.

He found himself trembling. He, Thyloss, the most fearless challenger of bulls, now stood defeated.

‘Go!’ she commanded, pointing to the door.

He went.

Chapter 3

Second Encounter on the Mountain

While Thyloss was at the palace Ierii made her way back to the mountain. This time she consulted all the signs, and impatient as she was, she really believed that she would not have gone had the omens been against it.

But luckily all was well. The tree her father had told her to use as wind guide scarcely stirred. The birds were flying high and singing freely.

She intended to spend the whole day, for she realized that it might not be easy to find the mysterious and beautiful Lady she had glimpsed so fleetingly. She carried a pouch with bread and fruit. The grapes and oranges would provide liquid if she found no water.

All morning she climbed and at noon she was on a high ridge. She could see the town of Ma-ii lying snugly on the sea plain far below her, the waters of the ocean, deep blue and flecked with white. How lovely the scene was; like a setting for the palace that gleamed jewel-like at its centre. How slow and timeless the pace of life seemed from this distance.

'Forever' seemed an easy concept to grasp.

'Forever' the sea carrying their ships to distant lands.

'Forever' the palace ruling in peaceful wisdom.

'Forever' artists painting, weavers weaving, potters making pots, cooks cooking, smiths fashioning bronze.

Ierii sat awhile and ate some bread and grapes. They were good. The grapes were from the vine that grew on the south wall of their house, and had ripened early with the best of the sun and the least of the wind.

She felt a shadow flick over her and looked up, surprised. She had seen no clouds.

A pair of golden eagles was circling high above her, their wings briefly obscuring the sun as their arc took them between her and the golden disc.

She strained her eyes to see them better, the one lower than the other.

Had they seen her? She felt that they were watching her, and a chill came to her heart.

Mountains, she knew, were places you did not lightly face alone. On the bare rock of the mountain summit you could not hide behind your fellow men, the walls of your home, the regalia of your office. You were exposed, whoever you were, small and frail, to the mystery of all mysteries, the question that seemed to have no answer.

Was it for this reason people had always found it a natural place to worship?

'Mother of the Earth . . . Lady of the Lilies . . . come to me,' she whispered, watching the eagles turn and turn

again, their wings scarcely moving as the currents of air carried them in two slow spirals.

But if she had been the object of their attention, she was no longer. She noticed the spiral did not centre on her and their lowering gaze was fastened on something in the valley beyond her. She shivered slightly with relief and picked up her belongings.

The ridge was high, but it was not where she expected to find the Lady. It dipped slightly to the east and then rose to form a cluster of jagged peaks, pitted with caves and bare of trees. It was there that she estimated she had seen the figure in the mist, and it was there that she would seek the Goddess now.

The sun was hot, but as she climbed a strong wind came suddenly whipping from between the peaks and she found herself having to lean into it to keep her balance. Her skirts flapped, her long black hair was torn from the gold pins that normally secured it, and beat the air like the wings of a trapped bird. Sometimes the long strands stung her eyes and temporarily blinded her.

But she did not give up.

She could not find the exact place where she had seen the Lady of the Mountain and almost began to believe that she had imagined the experience. Tears came to her eyes as she looked at the sun and knew that it was well into its descent and that she must turn back if she did not want to face a night alone on the mountain.

She had no proof to take to her doubting father and to ungracious Thyloss, but from time to time on her

quest she had had the very strong impression that she was not alone, that she was being watched.

Even as she turned to go home, she fancied she heard a movement and felt a Presence.

She turned towards it, but she saw no one.

‘Lady!’ she called, making one last effort.

The echo came back to her, soft as a sigh. She waited. Nothing. No one.

Sadly she picked her way over rock and scrubby bush, back down to the plain and the town, to the noise and the bustle of people.

* * * *

Quiet as a shadow, a figure stood watching her, the late-afternoon sunlight falling on hair that shone like silver.

* * * *

When Ierii reached home, tired and discouraged, she was upset to hear that Thyloss had been to the house looking for her.

‘Oh no!’ she cried, disappointed, for it had been some time since Thyloss had sought her out.

They had been close friends for almost as long as she could remember and had always shared each other’s sorrows and triumphs. But lately a change had come in her feelings towards him. She longed for him as lover, not as friend. Sadly, his feelings for her did not seem to have suffered the same change.

‘What did he say?’ she asked her father eagerly, forgetting her weariness.

‘Nothing. As soon as he heard that you were not here, he went away.’ And then he seemed to recall something. ‘He seemed agitated. He did not even say goodbye to me,’ he added, slightly aggrieved. He had always liked Thyloss and had been disappointed when he had recently noticed his daughter’s yearning for the young acrobat was not being fully reciprocated.

Ierii thought hard. She had not the patience to wait until the morning to speak with him, and she rushed to her room, washed, and put on fresh clothes. She took an outdoor lamp and hurried off down the rapidly darkening streets.

‘Ierii!’ called her father. ‘You have not eaten!’

But she did not hear him.

The house of the Keeper of the Queen’s Bulls was at the eastern edge of the town, not far from the enclosures where the bulls were kept.

Ierii had to pass a great many households settling down for the evening meal. The delicious cooking smells nearly drove her wild. She was hungry. But she was also very anxious to see Thyloss. What could have happened since yesterday when he had treated her so coolly?

He was not at home when she arrived, but his sister thought that he was at the bull enclosures.

‘He is worried about the Black Thunderer,’ she explained.

Ierii looked hungrily past her shoulder at the table laid for dinner, the rest of the family sitting peacefully around it ready to eat.

‘Eat with us,’ the sister said kindly, seeing Ierii’s look. ‘Wait for him. He will probably not be long.’

Ierii hesitated. The food looked very good, but she wanted to see Thyloss.

Thyloss’ mother rose from the table and brought some food to Ierii.

‘Here, my dear, take it, eat . . . but go and find Thyloss. I am worried about him. He has been behaving very strangely today. But he will not tell any of us what the matter is. Perhaps he will tell you.’

She took the food gratefully and ate it as she hurried to the black bull’s enclosure.

When she found Thyloss he was sitting on the wall staring gloomily into the dark.

‘Thyloss,’ she called to him, softly, half afraid she would not be welcome, but this time his face in the flickering flame of the lantern looked relieved to see her.

He leapt down, gracefully, and stood before her.

‘Ierii,’ he said, ‘I need your help.’

She flushed with pleasure, glad of the dark so that he could not see her expression.

‘What has happened?’

‘What has not happened!’ he said despairingly.

He seemed to have forgotten that he had been trying to discourage their friendship since he had sensed the change in her interest in him, and returned to treating her as the good friend she had always been.

He took her over to a fallen tree trunk and they sat down side by side. She shivered slightly with the evening

cold, but was reluctant to snuggle up to him for warmth as she might have done when they were children.

‘What is it?’ she prompted, as he did not seem to know where to begin.

He hesitated a moment longer and then, as the sky darkened, the stars became brighter and more numerous, and their lamp flickered and went out, he told her what had happened at the palace that morning.

She was glad they were in the dark and so she could let her feelings play freely in her face without his taking offence. At first there was pride and joy at the honour of his being chosen to challenge the Black Thunderer, but mingled with it was the fear that he would be harmed, possibly even killed. The mention of the sacrifice of the bull at the end of the funeral bewildered her, but even this was driven from her mind when Thyloss mentioned his betrothal to the young princess. She had seen the princess. She was beautiful beyond words. ‘But cold as ice!’ Ierii added fiercely to herself. ‘Cold! No life in her at all! Besides, she is just a child!’ And she thought of her as she had seen her in processions in the palace ceremonies, a pale shadow behind her tall and magnificent mother. She was like a pearl, a jewel with no fire in its heart.

‘Are you listening?’ Thyloss suddenly said suspiciously. There had been no sound from her for a long time.

‘I cannot believe it,’ she said hastily, trying to control the first stirrings of jealousy before they became unmanageable.

‘I keep telling myself it cannot be,’ Thyloss said. ‘But what am I to do if she really meant it? And why is she doing it? Why? Why me?’

‘I should have thought why she has chosen you was obvious. You are much handsomer than any prince on the Island.’

‘Nonsense. Besides, it is not common for the future queen to marry someone not of the royal line.’

‘It has been known to happen.’

There was silence between them for a while, and when Thyloss spoke again at last, his voice was very troubled.

‘Ierii, what am I to do?’ he said.

‘Do you want to marry the princess?’

‘Of course not . . . I mean . . . I do not know . . . I do not know what she is like . . .’

Thyloss could feel Ierii’s eyes on him in spite of the darkness.

‘Curse it all . . . I do not want to marry anyone!’

His voice was quite angry.

But even more than the marriage, the sacrifice of the bull worried him, and he spoke to Ierii about this now.

She thought about it deeply.

‘It is very strange,’ she said quietly.

She thought about the Goddess she had seen on the mountain . . . the beautiful, strong, compassionate face. She could not imagine her delighting in blood sacrifice.

Could the Queen do what she had planned? Could she, by sacrificing a bull to her puny dead son as though he were a god, change the ancient truths?

‘You would not listen to me yesterday Thyloss,’ she said softly but firmly. ‘Listen now. It may be of great importance.’

She told him about the encounter on the mountain. He was silent, listening very carefully.

‘What are you saying?’ he said at last.

‘I am saying the Goddess is real. I have seen her. Let us go and ask her what to do.’

‘But today you could not find her?’

‘She was there. I felt her Presence. I just could not see her.’

Thyloss thought about it. He really had great respect for Ierii. Even as a very young girl she had ‘known’ things in a way that other people did not know them, and he had learned to listen to her ‘feelings’.

What had he to lose? No ordinary person could help him, except possibly his father, but he was far from home. The prince had still been alive when Miron left for the hunt and since he could not know of the royal death he would see no reason to hurry back.

* * * *

In the morning Thyloss made sure the Black Thunderer was attended to: his wounds were healing rapidly. He left Ayan in charge, and set off to join Ierii.

But it was not to be. On the way to her house he was intercepted and summoned to the palace.

‘I cannot come,’ he said firmly to the messenger. ‘Convey my regrets.’

‘My lady was very insistent. She will not accept refusal.’

Thyloss hesitated.

‘How did she look? Angry or happy?’

The messenger thought about it.

‘Her face was very stiff. I cannot tell. Her daughter was with her and —’ here he hesitated, wondering if he should betray so much ‘— and ... she had been weeping.’

A spark of hope came to Thyloss. If the princess was against the marriage, perhaps her mother would change her mind. He decided it would be foolish not to fan this spark.

‘I will come,’ he said, ‘but you must take a message to someone for me.’

‘Willingly,’ said the lad, relieved that he would not have to convey Thyloss’ refusal back to the Queen.

‘Go to the house of Dorran, the lord Gardener, and ask to speak with his daughter Ierii. She will be waiting for me and ...’ Thyloss looked at the boy with a slight flicker of sympathy. ‘She will probably cry. Tell her as gently as you can that I cannot come, that I am sorry, but that I want her to find the lady she mentioned and ask the questions we arranged to ask. Can you remember all that? It is important.’

‘Yes, of course,’ the boy said.

‘Remember’ – Thyloss looked at him closely – ‘it is important.’

‘I will remember.’

‘Go quickly, then . . . I have already kept her waiting long enough.’

The boy turned at once to go. Thyloss watched him, and then turned with a heavy heart to follow the path to the palace.

* * * *

Ierii was indeed upset, but she did not cry.

The boy did not intend to tell her anything more than he had been instructed to, but Ierii managed to extract from him the fact that Thyloss had been summoned to the palace.

This made her indignant and at first she felt like abandoning her mission to the mountains and abandoning Thyloss to the princess. But . . . her feelings for Thyloss were too strong. She thanked the boy and dismissed him.

She knew her father was at the palace and would be very busy there until after the funeral – and the wedding! She added this thought with a touch of bitterness. He would not have time to wonder where she had gone. She took food, and this time a cloak, in case she could not return before nightfall.

Indeed she did not reach the rocky outcrops and the caves until well into the afternoon. She did not stop there, but continued purposefully towards the summit.

The mountain wind was cold and she was glad of her cloak, but her pouch of food felt heavier and heavier as her limbs became weary. Her desire to reach the summit was now so obsessive that she felt no hunger,

and before long she loosened the thong that held the pouch to her hip and abandoned it on a ledge.

When at last she reached as high as she could go, she stopped and lifted her arms and her eyes to the sky. She said nothing, but let the longing in her heart speak for itself.

* * * *

The sky took her.

She could feel its immensity accepting her into itself.

She was no longer Ierii, and, as though in a dream, took off the wristlet with her seal stone and laid it reverently on the rock.

* * * *

How strange that she had thought Ma-ii and all that happened there so important.

She looked down upon the plain that she had left that morning and found that it had changed.

The town was gone.

Earth covered her home and all that she had known. The sea still lapped the white sands of the shore, but goats cropped yellow daisies in quiet fields that were now where the great palace had once so proudly stood.

She tried to recall names, but they eluded her.

Only the wind's voice was in her ears, and the wind spoke no names.

She shuddered as the vision began to fade and she was aware of herself on the mountaintop again.

But she was not alone. Beside her was the Lady she had sought.

The woman looked at her with great compassion for a time and then stepped forward, stooped to retrieve the seal stone, and bound it gently upon the girl's wrist.

'You are flesh and blood!' Ierii whispered.

The woman smiled.

'Is that such a terrible thing to be?'

'No,' stammered Ierii, 'I meant . . . I thought . . .'

'We think many things,' the woman said gently.

'Who are you?' Ierii pleaded, after the silence between them had helped her to recover her composure slightly.

'Come, I will take you home,' the woman said, taking Ierii's hand and leading her down.

'I do not want to go home yet,' Ierii said. 'I need to talk with you.'

'My home,' the woman said simply.

Ierii was quiet then and followed eagerly. Gradually she gained confidence to give words to her curiosity.

'I thought you were the Mother of the Earth, the Goddess . . .' she ventured.

The woman walked on and did not reply.

'Are you?' Ierii could contain herself no longer.

The woman paused and turned to her.

'My name is Quilla,' she said simply.

The name teased Ierii's mind. She felt that she had heard it before, but could not remember where.

She tried to think as they walked on, but it would not come to her.

At last they stopped before a cave, the entrance to which was protected and half hidden behind a rough stone wall which had probably been built as a wind-break, for the cave entrance faced straight into the path of the prevailing wind. Ierii was astonished that she had missed it the day before.

Inside it was cool and pleasant, with curtains woven from black and white goat hair hung over the walls for extra comfort.

Ierii had not realized that she was as tired as she was until Quilla suggested she should relax on a pallet of soft straw.

‘Rest,’ Quilla said kindly. ‘You have travelled farther than you know. Sleep if you can. I will prepare food.’

Ierii did not want to sleep. She had too many questions to ask, but Quilla touched her head and with her touch drowsiness came over the girl and she could not stay awake.

She woke with a start and found herself still in the cave. Quilla was seated cross-legged before a low fire, gazing into its depths. Night had fallen. When Ierii moved, the woman turned to her and smiled encouragingly.

‘Do not be afraid. You are safe.’

Ierii looked about her, the flames making strange dancing patterns on the uneven walls of rock. The worries about Thyloss and herself that she had so strangely lost when she stood on the mountaintop suddenly came back to her. She sat up.

Could she ask this woman for advice, even though she was not, as she had hoped, the Goddess?

‘Eat first, and drink,’ Quilla said as though she had read her thoughts. ‘And then we will talk.’

The food was good. The broth of herbs and nettles warming and tasty. Ierii began to feel peaceful and refreshed. She found it easy to speak to the beautiful woman.

‘How is it that I have heard your name and yet cannot recall what I have heard?’ she asked at last.

‘I was known in Ma-ii and in all the palaces of the Island once – but that was long ago – when your father and mother were still young.’

‘Did you know my mother?’ Ierii asked eagerly.

‘I have met her, but I did not know her well. You look much like her.’

Ierii flushed with pleasure.

‘Forgive me, Lady . . . but I still cannot recall what I have heard about your name.’

‘You have a friend who is an acrobat I think?’

‘Yes,’ cried Ierii, surprised that she should know about Thyloss.

‘Ask him if the name of Quilla means anything to him. Ask old Ayan, who still works with bulls although he should be living quietly now, an honoured guest of those who want to hear rich tales of earlier days.’

‘Were you an acrobat?’ Ierii asked.

Quilla smiled.

‘Yes, I was an acrobat,’ she said simply.

Ierii was silent. If she had been known in all the palaces she must have been a very famous one. Only the very exceptional were called upon to perform before other thrones.

‘Why do you live alone here, in a cave? You speak of Ayan, yet you should be living in the town, greatly cared for and admired.’

Quilla laughed aloud at this, and rose to put more wood on the fire.

‘You think so?’ she asked, with a touch of mockery in her voice. Ierii flushed. What was so wrong in that?

‘Did you learn nothing on the mountaintop?’ Quilla asked.

Ierii looked puzzled. Quilla could see that she was not yet ready to understand all that had been shown her in the vision. She sat down in front of her and spoke to her gently and patiently.

‘What did you feel on the mountaintop?’

Ierii tried to recall.

‘Why did you put down your seal stone?’ Quilla prompted.

‘Because . . . because . . . I felt that I was no longer Ierii . . . but somehow . . . I could see everything . . .’

‘What did you see?’

‘I saw Ma-ii.’

‘Was it as you saw it when you left it this morning?’

‘No . . . it was as though . . . as though it was buried deep in the earth.’

Ierii’s eyes were bewildered as she again saw the vision she had seen.

‘And where were you?’

‘I . . . I do not know . . .’

‘You must have been there to see what you saw?’

‘I . . . I suppose so. I felt . . . I mean . . . I “saw” . . .
but I could not see myself.’

‘Did you feel sorrow because Ma-ii was no more?’

‘No. I do not think so.’

‘What did you feel?’

‘I do not know how to express it. I saw it – but I thought nothing of it. It was just part of everything – neither good nor bad.’

‘And you were there “thinking” that, “feeling” that, “seeing” that?’

‘Yes.’

‘So Ma-ii was no more. But you were?’

Ierii began to grasp what Quilla was trying to teach.

‘Yes.’

‘That is why you felt no sorrow. You saw Ma-ii and all its splendours as only temporary, but yourself as eternal.’

Ierii thought about how she had experienced consciousness and yet had had no personal identity or body with which to associate it.

‘And what of this boy you love?’ Quilla looked straight into Ierii’s eyes.

‘I did not see him.’

‘Did you feel his presence with you?’

Ierii was trying to remember. It was very difficult.

‘Did you think of him lying under the earth with the buildings of Ma-ii . . . or did you think of him still existing like you?’

‘He was not in the town . . .’ Ierii said hesitantly. ‘I remember!’ she suddenly cried joyfully. ‘Because I had put my seal stone down I was no longer Ierii . . . I was no longer separate from Thyloss or anyone else who is living. I . . . “we” . . . were together looking at the place where the town had been. We felt no regret because what we had lost was only the shadow of what we had gained.’

‘You see!’ Quilla cried triumphantly. ‘You have the answers to all your questions already!’

Ierii looked puzzled. It was true she had fleetingly grasped something very important, but now she was confused.

How did all this help her to sort out the immediate problem?

‘Tell me, what is troubling you?’ Quilla asked.

Ierii poured out the whole story. Her love for Thyloss, his problem with the Queen . . .

Quilla looked very grave while Ierii told her about the Queen’s conversation with Thyloss, and was thoughtfully silent a long time after she had finished speaking.

‘What should we do?’ asked Ierii at last, unable to contain her anxiety any longer.

Quilla shook her head and Ierii knew that she must be quiet a while longer.

'You asked me why I live in a cave in the mountains?' Quilla said at last.

'Yes,' said Ierii.

'There are several reasons, but one of the most important is that I grew weary of living amongst the short-sighted and the blind. There are things I can see as clearly as I can see the flames in the fire . . . and yet no one will listen to me . . . no one cares . . .'

'I will listen! I care!' cried Ierii.

'I know that . . . that is why I showed myself to you . . . that is why I brought you here.'

Quilla seemed to be thinking again, and Ierii did not interrupt her, but waited patiently, pleased by what she had said.

At last Quilla spoke again, but more as though she were speaking to herself than to Ierii.

'The love of Miron and myself plays a role in these events . . .'

Here Ierii jumped with surprise. Miron, the Keeper of the Queen's Bulls, the father of Thyloss?

'Jealousy drove Nya-an to condemn me and banish me . . . and now she seeks my son for her daughter . . .'

Ierii's eyes were wide open.

Thyloss?

Was Thyloss Quilla's son?

But Thyloss had a mother, Miron's wife.

Ierii thought about Thyloss and his family. She had always been surprised how like his father he was but how different from the rest of his family, who were pleasant enough, but ordinary. Thyloss was like a god to

them. Even his 'mother,' Miron's wife, treated him with the respect due an honoured stranger.

Quilla was still talking and Ierii tried hard to bring her mind back to concentrate on the Lady's words.

'She goes too far . . .' she was murmuring. 'She goes too far! She deprived me of the man I love. She cannot have my son! And to use him in such a way! To break with tradition and the laws of ritual . . . and to make him perform a blood sacrifice when no sacrifice is called for. It is wrong! No good will come of it.'

Quilla was in great distress and Ierii was sad to have been the cause of it.

'Perhaps it is the time . . .' Quilla's brow furrowed with anxiety. 'the time I have been warned about . . . the end of Ma-ii . . .'

Ierii looked startled and alarmed.

'My lady?' She could hold still no longer.

Quilla seemed suddenly to remember Ierii's presence and to recover her former calm.

'You must not fear it,' she said gently, looking deep into the girl's eyes. 'You have seen that Ma-ii is nothing. Your life is not tied to it.'

'But it is my home,' Ierii cried, and her heart ached suddenly for her little room of flowers, her garden, the rocky knoll where she had spent so much time . . .

The lady Quilla bent toward Ierii and kissed her softly on the forehead.

'Your only true home is in there,' she said, touching with her finger the place she had kissed. 'And when you

are released from your body, it expands until you are within it.'

She could see Ierii did not understand.

'No matter,' she said with a smile. 'there will be time enough for you to grasp these things.'

Ierii looked at her for a moment in silence.

There was something else that worried her in the woman's words – perhaps that would be easier to grasp.

'My lady,' she said diffidently. 'Do I understand that Thyloss is your son?'

'Did I say that?' Quilla asked.

'Yes, you did.'

'I spoke the truth. He is my son!' Quilla declared.

Ierii caught her breath.

Her head rang with questions, but she could see from Quilla's expression that it would not be right to ask them.

'Thyloss is also the son of Miron. And Miron was once much loved by the Queen. That is why she has chosen Thyloss for her daughter. He is Miron's son and so, with her own son dead, she has chosen the only one who could come near to taking his place.'

'Must he marry the princess, Meri-an?' Ierii asked sadly. 'Is there no way to prevent it?'

'Much will happen in the next few days, child of a prayer, and nothing that is planned by the Queen will necessarily happen exactly as she wishes.'

'Does that mean . . .?' Ierii's face lit up.

'You ask too many questions, and I do not know all the answers. Be at rest now. I am tired.'

Quilla indeed looked tired, and older than she had seemed before.

‘Sleep now – and in the morning return to Ma-ii . . . warn everyone to leave the town and to seek sanctuary in the mountains and beyond . . . the days of Ma-ii are over.’

She raised her hand and touched Ierii’s forehead.

The bewildered girl again felt great drowsiness, and before she could form another question, she was asleep.

* * * *

In the morning she was alone in the cave, the embers of the fire cold.

She wondered if she should wait for Quilla to return from wherever she had gone, but the last words she remembered being spoken were still ringing in her head. ‘In the morning return to Ma-ii . . . warn everyone to leave the town and to seek sanctuary in the mountains and beyond . . . The days of Ma-ii are over.’

She looked at her wrist. Her seal stone was there. She was Ierii, daughter of Dorrán, and she knew that, whether she understood it or not, she was trusted by the Lady Quilla, and must not let her down.

Chapter 4

The Queen and the Black Bull

When Thyloss reached the palace he found that the princess had indeed been weeping.

Queen Nya-an, as before, received him in her private apartments, and he could see as soon as he entered the room that she was very angry. Her eyes were black fire, and there were two spots of high colour on her cheeks. She dismissed her attendants the instant that he entered, but gestured fiercely to her daughter to stay, although it was clear to Thyloss that the girl would dearly love to leave.

He bowed to the Queen, but looked hard at the princess, seeing things about her that he had not noticed before. Her waist was the slimmest he had ever seen, her breasts almost as flat as a boy's. She could not be more than twelve summers old and yet she was to be given in marriage. She was not ready. He knew it, and she knew it. But the Queen refused to see it.

‘It has come to my notice,’ the woman now said, her voice trembling with anger, ‘that you have allowed the Black Thunderer to be wounded and marked!’

‘I did not “allow” it, my lady. It was an accident.’

‘Carelessness,’ she snapped. ‘No excuse whatever.’

‘I am not seeking excuse, my lady. It is done and it cannot be undone. I regret it. But he is mending fast and will be ready for the funeral games.’

‘He will not be perfect! And I demand perfection for my son.’

Thyloss was silent for a moment.

‘Might I suggest another bull, my lady? There are many fine bulls . . .’

‘No, you may not suggest another bull. There is no bull on the Island as beautiful, or as potent, as Black Thunderer. It must be he!’

Thyloss bit back what he wanted to say, and was silent.

She gazed at him angrily for a moment or two and then rose from her chair impatiently.

‘Take me to him!’ she demanded.

Thyloss was astonished. The Queen, who moved nowhere without processions of attendants, and never without giving warning so that her subjects might prepare to greet her with formality, expected him now to take her, like any ordinary woman, to see a sick bull.

‘Why do you hesitate?’ she said coldly. ‘Do you fear that I will see that he is worse than I have been informed?’

‘No, of course not, my lady . . . but . . .’ Thyloss looked helplessly at the princess. She was watching with round eyes the scene before her, but gave him no indication of what to do next. ‘But,’ Thyloss continued desperately, ‘do you not wish your attendants to accompany you?’

She gave him an amused and haughty look.

‘No, I do not wish my attendants to accompany us.’

Thyloss bowed rather clumsily. He was not sure if he should lead the way, or stand back for her. Impatiently she gestured that he should follow her, and she swept out of the room.

He gave a quick look over his shoulder at Meri-an. She gave him a shy and tentative smile. She did not look as unhappy as she had when he arrived. He smiled at her as he turned to follow her mother. He could not think of her as a princess or as his future wife. She was just a child caught, like him, in a situation that was out of her control. It crossed his mind that her name, Meri-an, meant ‘daughter of shadow.’

The bull workers, caught off guard, were sitting on the ground playing the age-old game of tannat, using small white pebbles for counters, the board marked out in the dust of the yard. Startled and confused they leapt to their feet. One of them, ever awkward, fell over, sprawling clumsily before the Queen.

Thyloss was amused. It would be a long time before they sat around again playing games when they were supposed to be cleaning out the bull pens.

Surprisingly the Queen took no notice of them, but stalked straight past, making for the chief bull pen.

The Black Thunderer was snorting softly to himself as he munched on the choice food that had been provided. His wounds were healing nicely, but his face was still marred by the swelling of the flesh around his eyes. It was true that he was not going to be at his best for the funeral.

The Queen walked up and down beside the wall and gazed at him from every angle. Thyloss noticed the fierceness had gone out of her face and it was filled with a brooding tenderness that surprised him. What were her thoughts as she gazed at the great black beast? He could not tell.

Her ways and her thoughts were strange to him. He dreaded coming closer under her influence and power as he inevitably must if he was given the 'honours' she had promised him. He did not trust her.

'He will not be ready,' she said softly. 'He will not be a perfect gift.'

She seemed to be talking to herself, and Thyloss wondered if he dared introduce again the subject of another bull.

'He must be ready,' the Queen said suddenly, looking straight at Thyloss. Her gaze was so penetrating it seemed to have the power to create the situation she demanded, against the laws of nature.

'If you would only look at another bull, my lady,' he stammered, but his voice was low and dry, and she did

not appear to hear his words. She grasped the bar that held the enclosure gate shut.

Before he or any of the others who were watching could stop her she had lifted it up and walked into the enclosure, dropping the catch behind her.

Thyloss started forward, calling out a warning, but she strode towards the beast without taking any notice of him.

There was pandemonium among the bull workers and the few people who had gathered to see what was going on. Some ran for prods and others for nets. Some children climbed on the wall, chattering with excitement.

Thyloss followed her, cursing her in his heart, but saying nothing aloud lest it should rouse her to some further foolishness.

The Black Thunderer looked up at her approach and rolled his eyes and snorted, but did not move.

She walked steadily forward, woman of black hair and black eyes, holding herself proud and unafraid.

Thyloss kept behind her, but out of sight, ready to spring as only he could, if the black bull attacked.

There was now hardly a sound from the gathered crowd. Some held their hands to their mouths. One woman had covered her eyes. All were locked in a kind of fascinated horror as their queen approached the most dangerous bull Ma-ii had ever known.

And then, strangely, instead of charging at the intruder as the crowd expected, the great animal sniffed at

her and together they moved round and round each other in a kind of slow dance.

The woman talked softly to the bull, and the bull seemed to listen.

Thyloss stood, astounded.

The fiery queen was gone . . . soft as silk her voice . . . the dove lady . . . lady of poppies and dreams . . . her voice like distant singing . . .

He had never seen anything like it.

A sigh of awe went through the watching crowd. It was said that she was a goddess? Now there seemed little doubt.

When she finally came out, walking as slowly as she had gone in, every man and woman lifted fist to forehead in a gesture of respect. Thyloss closed the gate behind her and met her eyes. She had a look in them he could not read.

‘He will be ready,’ she said. ‘I make you responsible.’

She did not wait for him to escort her, but left quickly, treading lightly and swiftly the dusty cobbled streets to the palace.

* * * *

When she was out of earshot everyone started talking at once. The remarkable events of the morning would pass through many versions until they finally took their place in legend.

Thyloss was just wishing that his father were home, when he heard a roar and a scream. The crowd had turned again to the walls to see one of the bull workers

being pursued across the enclosure by the Thunderer. Overcome by curiosity to see if the black bull had indeed gone soft, he had climbed over the wall and prodded him. Within moments the great animal was after him, all his old fire and splendour returned. The worker, taken off guard, and not being a trained acrobat, could not move swiftly enough.

The crowd roared to see him lifted by the deadly horns, blood spurting from his side, and roared again to see him flung like a bundle of discarded rags upon the ground, the beast turning to charge again.

Thyloss dashed almost under the hammering hooves to haul the man out, but he could not save him from broken bones and a disfigured face.

‘Mother of the Earth! What is the matter with everyone today!’ muttered Thyloss, as, dusty and shaken, but unharmed, he fell down on a pile of dry straw to rest in the safety and cool of the storage sheds. Ayan brought him water and news of the gored man, who was being attended to by healers.

‘What a fool!’ Thyloss kept saying. ‘What a cursed fool! He is lucky to be alive.’

‘That he is,’ Ayan said, ‘though his livelihood is gone.’

‘Is he so badly wounded?’

‘I would say if he walks at all – it will be haltingly.’

Thyloss sighed and shook his head. What more could happen before his father returned? He had been away before, but never had so many things gone wrong.

‘I wonder how the Queen did it,’ he mused at last.

Ayan pursed his lips disapprovingly.

‘You do not like her, do you?’ Thyloss said, noticing his expression. He had seen this look on Ayan’s face before when the Queen was mentioned.

Ayan did not answer.

‘But you must admit – she was magnificent! So unafraid, so bold. She is a remarkable woman. It made me wonder if she was not indeed a goddess as the people think.’

Miron had never taught his son to look upon the Queen as goddess as other fathers had. What he really believed Thyloss did not know, but he made obeisance to nothing and nobody. His own skill and his own strength were what he relied upon. Thyloss loved and respected his father deeply, and had learned from him to hold his mind open, leaning neither to superstition nor to atheism. There were things Miron could not explain about the world, but hoped one day to understand. Meanwhile he taught Thyloss to perfect the skills he had and learn whatever lessons life had to teach.

‘She is no goddess,’ Ayan said under his breath. ‘If anything other than human, she is a demon.’

Thyloss just caught the words and looked startled.

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Ask your father,’ Ayan said, and walked away before he could be questioned further.

Even more intrigued, Thyloss thought about his father. It was odd that the Queen contemplated having such important ceremonies without the presence of Lord Miron, the Keeper of Bulls.

A thought crossed his mind. Was the timing deliberate?

His father would certainly not approve of her plans, and, he had noticed many times, he was the one man who dared stand up to her and refuse her commands.

* * * *

‘There is one who can help us,’ Ayan said thoughtfully later, as he and Thyloss stood watching the Thunderer in some despair.

‘Who is it? And why have you not mentioned this before?’

‘It is a long story,’ Ayan said, ‘and I was loath to open up old wounds.’

‘There is no time for a long story, or for riddles,’ Thyloss said impatiently. ‘Tell me what I need to know, and swiftly.’

‘There is a woman,’ old Ayan said, his eyes withdrawn on a memory, ‘living in the mountains, a Seer. One who has greater powers than the Queen.’

‘I am listening!’ Thyloss said sharply, as the old man paused.

‘She has been known to heal wounds with the touch of her hand. But . . .’

‘But . . . what?’

‘I do not know if she would do it now.’

‘Why not?’

‘She would not approve the Queen’s determination to sacrifice the Thunderer at the end of the funeral. She was always against blood sacrifice.’

‘Need she know?’ Thyloss was ashamed of his thought, but he was tired and desperate.

‘She will know,’ Ayan said shortly.

Thyloss was silent for a moment. But then he spoke decisively. ‘We will ask her help. If she refuses, we have lost nothing. If she accepts, we have gained a great deal.’

‘I do not know how to find her,’ old Ayan said as though he regretted having mentioned her.

Thyloss had a thought.

‘Ierii is in the mountains this very day, seeking a woman she saw in the clouds. She thinks she is the Earth Goddess . . . but . . . could it be . . .’

‘It is very possible. The woman I speak of has lived in the mountains as many summers as you have been alive. She has become part of the mountains. She comes and goes as the mist. No one sees her, but many feel her presence.’

‘What is her story? Why does she live so?’ Thyloss asked with interest.

Ayan looked at him closely, but did not answer.

‘Tell me.’

‘Nay, I will not tell you, but if you want her help, it is said there is a small grove of trees, halfway up that mountain there.’ He pointed. ‘If you make offering there, not of bulls, or of axes, but of flowers . . . white lilies and purple irises . . . she will answer your call. She serves the Lady of the Lilies.’

‘I will do it,’ cried Thyloss. ‘Direct me to the place.’

‘First you must have the flowers,’ Ayan said.

‘I will ask Ierii’s father for them.’

‘He will give them gladly. He has reason to be grateful to the Goddess. But make sure you have the whole plant, roots as well. Offerings to her must not bring death to any living thing. You must plant the flowers in the sacred grove.’

‘How is it that I have not heard of this Seer who serves the Lady of the Lilies before?’

‘No one speaks of her.’

‘Why?’

‘It is someone the Queen banished from the town about the time of your birth. It is forbidden even to mention her name.’

‘What is her name?’

Ayan was silent.

‘Tell me at least that, my friend, and I will ask no more about her.’

That she served the Lady of the Lilies was enough to cause the Queen, as High Priestess of the Bull Cult, to hate her, but Ayan knew that there was more to the hatred than this. No one would like to be responsible for the Queen discovering her presence so near the town of Ma-ii.

‘Some say she is the Lady Quilla.’ Ayan’s voice was scarcely above a whisper.

Quilla’s prowess as an acrobat was almost legendary. But Thyloss had thought that she was dead. He wanted to know more, but Ayan would speak no more about her. He would only give detailed instructions on how to find the grove.

When Thyloss found Dorrان he was working in the northern courtyard of the palace. He asked for the lily plants and said that he needed them urgently. But he did not say outright what the purpose was, nor did he mention the forbidden name. The Queen's attendants were close by and Thyloss did not want them carrying information back to her.

Dorrان was busy and harassed, but began to understand when Thyloss stressed that it was Ayan who had sent him and that he needed white lilies and purple irises, and that they must not be damaged in any way. Suddenly he straightened his back and looked the boy in the eye.

'You say it is urgent?' he asked searchingly.

'Yes, most urgent.'

The man was thoughtful.

'Did Ayan give you a sign to give to me?'

Thyloss looked puzzled for a moment, thinking back to his last conversation with Ayan.

A sign?

Suddenly he remembered that Ayan had been drawing with a stick in the ground while he had been describing how to find the sacred grove. He had not taken any particular notice at the time, but now a memory of it rose clearly from the depths of his mind.

He stooped down, and in the earth at Dorrان's feet, he drew a butterfly. Dorrان smiled, and instantly with his foot rubbed out the sketch.

'You shall have the white lilies and the purple irises,' he said with sudden warmth. 'Go to my garden. Take

what you need. Be careful to take damp earth with the roots.'

'Thank you,' Thyloss cried, pausing only to press the old man's hand with gratitude before he speeded off.

* * * *

The mountain Ayan had pointed out to him had been in the ancient days a holy mountain, but of late it had been much neglected. Paths had been worn around it when people had gone on pilgrimages to its summit, spiralling round and round. But these were now mostly overgrown.

Thyloss found one, however, that was in such good condition he could not doubt that it was still in use. He wondered that the Queen's spies had not noticed it. Perhaps they had been told that it was just an herb gatherer's path, for the mountain was redolent with the scent of herbs.

Veins of white crystal were fairly common in the mountains of the Island, but this particular peak seemed to consist almost entirely of white crystal. It was also the mountain over which the full moon rose as spring turned to summer. The mountain was steep and craggy near the top and Thyloss was glad he had to climb no farther than the grove.

Having started from the town so late in the day, he did not reach his destination until the sun was already beginning to stain the sky red, but when he did at last, he caught his breath with the beauty of it.

There were many forests of cedar and of cypress on the Island, but this natural terrace, rich in green and leafy growth, seemed more beautiful than them all. There were trees Thyloss had never seen before growing here, and in the shade and flickering light beneath them, fed by a tiny crystal spring, white lilies and purple irises grew in great profusion. Thyloss thought that if he had not been told about the place, but had stumbled upon it unaware, he would not have failed to feel that it was sacred.

Now, with the approach of evening, as the shadows grew darker and the birds stiller, there was a kind of expectant hush about the place. He could believe that there was someone there who could not be seen with ordinary eyes.

He was not sure how to formulate an appropriate prayer. To request recovery for an animal so that it would be fit enough to be killed, seemed suddenly so monstrous and ridiculous to him that he could not do it.

He found himself, instead, saying nothing in words, but offering himself to the Presence as gift.

He began to feel drowsy and strange, and thoughts swam in his mind like fishes. 'There is some reason why I have been called here. There is some reason for my part in all these strange events. Help me to see it, help me to fulfil it in a way that only good may come of it.'

Sleep overcame him. Sleep that was deeper than the shadows filling the chasms and the crannies of the holy mountain.

When he woke, the moon, almost full, was pouring its light down upon him.

He was refreshed and rested, and rose instantly, remembering the flowers he had brought to plant.

But they were no longer beside him.

The damp, soiled cloth he had carried them in was folded neatly at his feet. The flowers themselves were already in the earth, the deep glow of their petals, and the darkness of their shadows, already part of the magic grove. He felt a tingle of excited awe, and then a very natural shiver as the cool night air touched his skin.

He was not at all sure what had happened, but he was certain that it was time for him to leave. He looked back at the grove as he moved away. He could have sworn it glowed in the moonlight in a way the other trees of the mountain did not.

Whatever the explanation, he thought to himself as he picked his way carefully down the steep path, something had happened out of the ordinary. Something would come of it.

* * * *

When he reached the town it was sleeping in moon shadow.

He slipped into his house and crept into his bed, and slept better than he had since the day his father went on the hunt and left him with all the responsibilities of the Keeper of the Bulls.

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.
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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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