

The Guardian of Isis

by *Monica Hughes*

AWARD EDITION

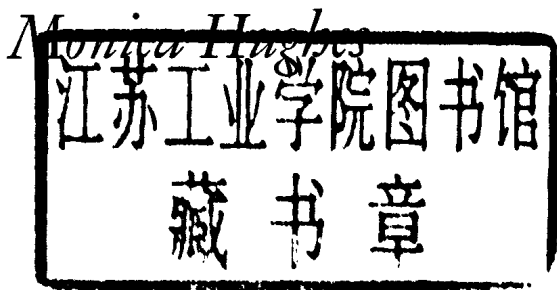
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THE GUARDIAN OF ISIS



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Introduction

A stellar cruiser, blinking into real space five parsecs from Earth, in the neighbourhood of the constellation Indus, picked up a message beamed from the fourth planet of the F-type star Ra. The message confirmed the cruiser's space co-ordinates, and continued with a warning to the ship to keep its distance and under no circumstances to approach or land on the fourth planet of the star system. Quarantine conditions in effect, the message went on: original Earth population in Primitive Agricultural Phase, not to be disturbed.

It was the Earth-year 2136 A.D. The message had been beamed out into the lonely reaches of space since soon after the settlement's first beginnings. It would be beamed, if the Guardian deemed necessary, for a thousand years more . . .

Chapter One

“JODY!”

The voice echoed from the great cliff wall of the mesa and bounced around his ears like fifty irritating aunties calling him. Jody hunched his shoulders and went on with what he was doing.

At the head of the lake, where the river entered, still foaming from its furious descent from the high country, the water shot over small rocks and ledges in a miniature version of the Cascades, the triple waterfall that blocked the north end of the Valley. All through the winter Jody had thought about the river, falling from the heights and pounding the basin at the foot of the Cascades with such force that the rocks trembled and the air was filled with spray and thunder. So much *power*, all going to waste.

“JODY!”

—If you could make the water *do* something as it fell from the high country into the Valley, something like turning a wheel, then you could do . . . do what? What use was a wheel turning and turning by itself, way up at the head of the Valley? Jody felt as if he was on the edge of a tremendous discovery. It hovered inside his head, tantalisingly just out of reach.

He squatted at the water's edge, his eyes on the bamboo model he had lashed together, watching the water fill the miniature troughs he had painstakingly made from split stems. The wheel spun. The troughs filled, fell, and emptied . . . If he had a long shaft instead of just an axle, then the shaft would spin too. He could feel the idea coming closer. It was like one of the big white cactus moths that were so hard to catch. They fluttered from cactus bloom to bloom, until you could just about put your hand on their fragile wings. And then . . .

“Jody N’Kumo!” The voice was almost in his ears, and he rocked forward and nearly fell into the water. The thought that had been just within his grasp fluttered off into the dark insides of his mind.

“Oh, bother it! Auntie, why did you have to do that?”

“Why didn’t you answer me then? I called enough times. Till I’m hoarse. What are you up to anyway?” She peered over his shoulder and clicked her tongue against her teeth. “Toys! And you a Third. I don’t understand you, boy. Here we are only one day away from Thanksgiving and all of us working from Ra-up to Ra-down, and you’re playing with toys!”

“It’s not a . . .”

“It wouldn’t be so bad if you were only a Fourth, but you’re not. You’re a Third and that means responsibility. All the Fourths look up to you.” Auntie had started out moderately enough, but now she began to scold herself into a passion. “It’s too bad. Really it is. Even the smallest ones are busy husking winter-berries for the pies, and here is Jody N’Kumo, grandson of the sister of the President, mooning with his toys by the river!”

“It wasn’t like that,” Jody muttered.

“And don’t stick your lip out that way, or you’ll trip over it,” she snapped. Hands on hips, apron blowing in the wind, she stood over him as he scrambled to his feet. The stream shot over the smooth slab of rock and hit the blades of the tiny water-wheel, so that it spun faster and faster. He bent to pick it up.

“You just leave that be. It won’t run away. You can come back and play later, *after* the work is all done, if you please. Here’s your lunch.” She handed him a large-woven grass bag and a packet wrapped in pandus leaves. “All the Fourths with legs long enough for it are walking across the Valley already. You’ll have to hurry to catch them up. Be sure to check every trap and snare, or it’ll be a thin Thanksgiving we’ll have this year. Have you got your sling?” She barely gave him time to feel for the loop of smooth leather at his belt before she was off again. “Bring home a couple of plump purple-furs or a rock-bunny, and maybe I’ll forget to report to the Council that you’ve wasted the better part of the morning playing.”

“I wasn’t . . . Oh, all right, Auntie. I’m off.” He jumped from stone to stone over the flashing river and began to run across the short wiry blue-grass that covered the stony slopes below the mesa.

Jody seethed inside as he ran, the empty game bag bumping at his belt, the lunch packet hitched to the other side for balance. Nobody took him seriously. Nobody was a real friend. To the

elders and the Council he was the troublesome N'Kumo boy who was always asking questions instead of doing his allotted tasks. To his father he was a shame, to his mother a constant source of worry. She was the one who suffered the most from the waspish tongues of the aunties, those old biddies with nothing better to do than to spy on other people's children and make mischief. It wasn't fair . . .

Even among the younger people in the Valley Jody saw himself gloomily as of no account. His Grandfather was the youngest of the Firsts, and since Jody was the youngest child in his family, almost an afterthought, he was far and away the youngest of the Thirds. He was the only one among them not married, and therefore not entitled to attend Council meetings, nor to vote or have his opinions listened to by anybody.

The Fourths, fifteen of whom were in fact the same age as Jody, kept their distance and were never really that friendly. After all, he was a *Third*, the same generation as their parents and aunts and uncles! Yet he was for ever condemned to do the same chores and perform the same rites as them, just because he was too young to be a man.

Jody sighed and looked across the wide, grass-filled Valley. Taller than head-high, the grass hid the Fourths from him, but he could see the red plumes shake and nod as the boys searched this way and that for forgotten traps and snares. Only the boys. The girls would be stuck at home, with the delightful chore of plucking and drawing the birds already collected for the feast, and scrubbing and preparing the vegetables.

The thought of the girls cheered him up a little. He might be the lowest form of life on Isis, but at least he hadn't been born a girl. With a sudden insight he glimpsed the life that made the aunties bitter and waspish, that made his mother look occasionally at Father as if he were an enemy. Why were women inferior? The never-before-asked question came to him so suddenly that he broke stride and stumbled on a tussock of grass.

If the legends *were* true, unlikely though it seemed, and the people of Isis *had* come through the sky from a star called Earth, then it must have been both men and women who came. Surely the journey would have been as difficult—as unimaginably difficult—for men and women alike? So why were women now of such little account on Isis? What had gone wrong?

It was just one more of the many questions to which Jody had no answer. One more question that he knew by now not to ask. He recovered from his stumble and jogged doggedly on towards the western end of the Valley. Let the Fourths beat through the grass-land after forgotten traps and snares. It was in his mind to keep to the short grass at the Valley's rim, where running was easy, and reach the far end, where the tall red-grass ended, before them.

It had been a bad spring. There had been only grudging rains the previous summer and the grazing was consequently poor. During the short days of winter the hunters had watched their precious game scramble up out of the Valley into the mountain passes, braving the cold and the unbreathably thin air, to seek unknown valleys beyond, where the grazing might be better—valleys that were taboo, where the hunters might not follow them.

Jody thought it was stupid to hold Thanksgiving in the spring, when there was nothing to eat but scrawny meat and the end of the winter's supply of dried fruit and nuts, withered vegetables and grain. By midsummer there would be feasts worthy of the name. Fat fish and fowl. Juicy swelling summer-berries. Even the occasional comb of wild honey. His mouth watered at the thought and his stomach gave a sudden twinge.

He hunkered down on a smooth rock, warm with Ra's heat, and spread out his lunch on the pandus leaves. Not much for a growing boy, almost a man. Everything must be going into the larders for tomorrow's feast. A hunk of bread, none too fresh. A wedge of cheese, bloomy with mould at its outer edge. A handful of wizened winter-berries. He finished the bread and cheese in two good bites, and after he had rested he kept the berries in his hand to munch as he walked slowly along. They were sour and good for thirsty mouths, which was just as well, since the auntie who had sent him off in such a hurry had forgotten to provide him with a water-bottle.

He tried not to think about being thirsty. There was nothing he could do about it. There were no springs or rivers at this side of the Valley, which lay, as wide and flat as a plate, tilted ever so gently up to the jagged rim of the western mountains towards which he was walking, mountains which joined hands with other mountains to form an impenetrable circle around their

home.

The only notable feature in the great wide plain was the mesa, its cliffs rising sheer to its flat top and the mysterious Thing. The only water was the river which fell from the mountains to the north, widened into the lake, and then vanished into the Place of the Wall. He ate another berry and told himself that he was not really thirsty. He would not think about water. He would think about his water-wheel . . .

Jody jogged on towards the westward rim of the Valley. The inside of his mouth felt gummy with thirst, and the constant wind that swept down out of the mountains had dried his lips to horn. Cautiously he licked them. Ow! Already a crack. He touched it with his finger and smeared blood. But thirst or not, he had done what he intended to. He had reached the end of the high grass before the others.

He had reasoned, back at the river, before even the old auntie had stopped scolding him, that he could never catch up with the Fourths, but that the noise they made, ranging to and fro through the long grass in their search for snares, would disturb any game that might still be lingering in the dry Valley. He gathered a dozen smooth round stones, slung them loosely in his kerchief and tucked the knot into his belt. Then he squatted on a smooth rocky place where his foot would not catch in an unexpected tussock. He fitted the first stone into the soft leather cradle of his sling, and waited.

Time had no particular meaning on Isis, except for the scolding kitchen aunties. Time was light and dark. Time was the hunger before a meal. Time was the distance between the longest and the shortest day, between the time of feasting and the time of going without. Jody squatted peacefully on his rock, his clothes blending into the reddish-purple of the stone, his eyes and teeth whitely contrasted against his dark skin. Time passed, and nothing moved but Jody's shadow as Ra swung over towards the western mountains.

As the grass at the edge of the Valley began to tremble he was on his feet. The sling whirled with a noise higher and shriller than the wind, and the first stone flew faster than the eye could follow. It caught a purple-fur squarely on the side of its head. It rolled over and lay on its back, paws curled against the pale mauve of its stomach, a tiny trickle of blood vanishing into the

red rock.

Out of the grass burst others, rock-bunnies, stilt-legs, more purple-furs. He whirled, aimed, threw, reloaded, whirled, aimed and threw with a breathless mindless precision, until the kerchief at his belt was empty of stones and the grassland was quiet. Only then did he spare a glance for his catch.

Three purple-furs, all of them as plump as could be expected in the spring, and two rock-bunnies, long-eared, short-tailed: delicious roasted on a spit. They seemed to be quite dead, but he expertly broke their necks to save them possible pain, and stowed them in the grass bag the auntie had given him. It was so full that he could hardly draw the string at its neck, and had to leave a rock-bunny's head poking out, ears high, a comical expression of surprise on its face.

As he swung the heavy load to his shoulder a young roan-buck stepped cautiously out of the long grass. Its coat shone in the afternoon light and its nose twitched moistly as it caught Jody's scent. He was glad that he had only a sling, and had not brought a spear or a bow and arrows. He was glad that his game-bag was full. Deeply happy, he watched the buck step delicately past him, its tiny shining hooves picking their way unerringly between the tussocks of wiry blue-grass and across the shale.

The buck leapt from rock to rock, moving steadily upward towards one of the mountain passes that scalloped the horizon between the high peaks. Jody watched it until its roan coat was lost among the red and purple shadows, and he frowned. That was another of the puzzles of Isis: that the animals seemed able to move over the mountains from valley to valley, while the people could not.

Up there, where the buck had vanished, the air was so thin that a man would become dizzy and faint, and he might, if he were not brought quickly down to the Valley, go swiftly to That Old Woman, the Ugly One. He had never tested the truth of the story, nor had anybody else, since the mountains were taboo. But he couldn't help wondering: did a man get sick and die because he broke the taboo? Or had the taboo been put there in the first place because of the mountain sickness?

Long ago, near the Beginning Time, so one of the stories went, the President himself had climbed the heights, not of the mountains, but of the forbidden mesa. It was hard to imagine

President Mark London breaking any of the Laws, much less one of the sacred taboos. As for imagining him as a little boy, that was downright impossible.

His own grandfather, the first Jody N'Kumo, had been full of mischief and naughtiness, he had heard, and that *was* possible. For Grandfather was almost beardless and his hair grew in peppercorn clusters even tighter than Jody's, though now it was grey instead of black; and though his body might be crippled his eyes still held a twinkle in their depths, like the twinkle of a small boy up to something interesting.

But President London! The President was tall and straight, with shoulder-length white hair and a glistening beard that swept his chest. *His* eyes never twinkled, and his bushy brows knotted together in a most terrifying frown whenever he was displeased. He frequently frowned when he saw Jody. He was exactly like the picture of the Lord God in the frontispiece of the Holy Book. Sometimes the younger children got the two muddled—God and President London.

So it was hard to imagine the President breaking a taboo, but apparently it had happened once in the Long Ago. He had climbed to the top of Lighthouse Mesa, which was one of the forbidden places. Then the wrath had struck him and he had fallen towards certain death on the rocks that lay splintered about the foot of the mesa. But, so the story went, he had cried out "Save me!" as he fell, and lo, the Guardian of Isis, the Shining One, had suddenly appeared and stretched out his hand, and the President—no, the boy Mark London—had remained frozen in mid-air halfway between the top of the mesa and the sharp scree at the bottom. Then the Guardian had floated up in the air and picked the boy Mark up in his golden arms and flown down to the village with him.

Jody shivered with awe at the memory of the story, even though it was broad daylight, and stories like that only sounded really scary when they were told around the fires in the dark of a winter's night. The south-eastern face of the mesa was close by him now, on his left as he jogged towards home with his warm load of game. Perhaps it was on the very spot where he ran now that the Shining One had appeared.

Thinking so much about taboos and sacred things was scary, and Jody hastily turned his thoughts to the game that bounced

heavily on his shoulders as he ran. The purple-furs would go in a stew, he reckoned, flavoured with herbs; and since they were his kill, the skin and bones would be his. The fur, too delicate and soft for clothing, he would give to his mother to cut into thin strips and weave into a bed cover, warm as Ra and as light as the feathers of a lark, for the sharp winter nights. The bones would make tool handles, buttons, buckles, even coarse needles for heavy work, though his mother and sisters-in-law preferred the bones of the large striped trout for most of their sewing needs.

As for the rock-bunnies, they were big enough to roast whole, spitted over a fire; and from their fur he would have his mother make a warm cap with ear-flaps, and a pair of mittens. The winter was hardly ever cold enough for such clothing, and he knew she would stare; but Jody had another dream, a dream that one day he would somehow be able to dodge the taboos and find a way of climbing out of the Valley and seeing for himself exactly what lay behind those high forbidding peaks that surrounded them.

It had never been done. It could not be done, they said, even if it were allowed. Even the top of the Cascades, where Ra's bow danced on the water, was too high for a man to stay for long. But the dream persisted, and through the years of his growing Jody had made his body strong, stronger than any of the others. He swam to and fro across the lake until he was as fast as a fish. He climbed the lower slopes that were not taboo, until his legs were knotted with muscles as hard as the mountains themselves and his sinews were like whipcord.

Bracketed by the Thirds who were married and masters of their own destiny, and by the Fourths, still only children, he lived in his dreams. And the practical side of his mind, the side that had invented the water-wheel, puzzled out ways of capturing the valley air and storing it in flasks like water, and using it to breathe up in the mountains where the air was so thin. Surely it was possible? Something like that must have been done on the long voyage through the sky from Earth—if the stories were true. They must have carried air with them. After all, that was a voyage that wasn't completed in a day, if indeed it had really happened.

Jody ran with his heavy load of game towards the village, his

shadow rippling along before him. He turned towards the north to reach the place where the river, pouring down from the Cascades, entered the lake. The stepping stones were close to the place where he had been working on his water-wheel, but there was no time to stop and rescue it now. Ra dropped abruptly behind the western rim of the mountains, and as he balanced from rock to rock across the river he heard the supper bell. Bother it! Now he was going to be in trouble again.

Since the community numbered over eight hundred people there were two dinner times. At the first session sat the elders and the Council, and those women who were Firsts, though of course *they* were not on the Council, and the Seconds and Thirds. At the second session the Fourths ate, helped by those women from among the Thirds who happened to be on kitchen duty that particular day.

When Jody had planned his strategy of crossing the Valley ahead of the Fourths and picking off the game that they disturbed in the long grass, he had entirely forgotten that they did not have to be home for supper until long after he did. In fact, if they *were* late, nothing much would be said. Mealtimes with the Fourths were a brawl anyway, what with little kids running around and people coming and going.

But First Supper was a formal affair. If he could have sneaked into the kitchen and grabbed something to eat on the sly he would have done so; but the cool larders lay to the north of the great dining hall and could only be reached by walking the full length of the room. He gulped, gave his game bag a hitch onto his shoulder, pushed open the door and marched into the room.

Any hope that the Council might be late in sitting, or that everyone would be too busy eating to notice him, faded as the door swung to behind him. The President had just finished what must have been an extra long grace, and the door clicked shut in the small silence that followed his prayer. Everyone looked up. Jody felt three hundred and seventy-eight pairs of eyes on him.

Only one pair mattered. They were steel grey, deeply set under a bushy tangle of white brows, and right down the length of the hall they held him, as if they were a pair of pincers. The President did nothing to break the silence. He raised one bony finger and beckoned, briefly.

“Boy.” It was an accusation.

“Sir?”

“Are you not a Third?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Are not the Thirds privileged to eat with the Firsts and Seconds?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You would prefer to eat with the Fourths, perhaps?”

It was a horrible threat. Jody glanced around. Everyone kept their eyes glued to the plate in front of them. Everyone except Grandfather. Grandfather N’Kumo was looking at him. Was that a twinkle in his eye? Meanwhile this catechism could go on all night, while the food cooled on the platters and the resentment against Jody as the cause of it rose thickly enough to cut with a knife. Better to brave it out and get the punishment over with . . .

“I am very sorry I am late, sir. I went clear across the Valley after purple-furs and rock-bunnies. Got five too, fat ones. The load made me slower than I expected on the way back.” He swung the game-bag from his shoulder with a groan and let his body sag with a weariness that was only half make-believe.

There was an interested stir in the silence. No words. No actual movement. Only an inward twitching as the kitchen aunties mentally adjusted the Thanksgiving menu to include the extra bounty.

The President was no fool. In his long stern rule over Isis he had made of women little more than servants; but unless they were pleased they could be the very devil, and their displeasure showed first in the quality of their cooking. Tonight’s supper, for instance, a meagre stew of winter vegetables, said as loudly as words that the women were tired out and discouraged at the poor showing that tomorrow’s feast was going to make. Five fat animals would make all the difference to their mood, even if not to the actual food going into eight hundred hungry bellies.

He allowed his steely gaze to soften a trifle, and, though he did not smile, his jaw relaxed and he nodded to Jody. “Put your game-bag in the larder and wash quickly, boy. You’re a disgrace in a civilized room.” He picked up his spoon and began to sup the watery stew, a signal that the others might also begin to eat.

Chapter Two

After scrambling through his supper at the farthest end of the great hall, Jody was set to skinning the rock-bunnies and purple-furs and preparing them for the feast. By the time they were lying in dishes of herbs on the stone shelves of the larder, and he had roughly scraped the hides and left them for the women to finish, the stars were out and it was time for evening prayers.

With a sigh Jody washed his hands and put his bloody apron to soak in a tub of cold water outside the kitchen quarters. There was never enough time for the things he wanted to do, but he simply couldn't risk being late again. He'd have to leave his model water-wheel where it was. It wasn't really a problem. He had fastened it securely below the little rock shelf, so it couldn't wash away; and nobody else would touch it. Nobody would ever touch something belonging to another person without a very good reason. It simply wasn't done.

He walked along the neat pebbled path from the kitchen to his home house. It was one of the original houses, built in the Long Ago out of some strange stuff as hard as stone and as white as the winter covering of the far mountains. It was in the front row and faced directly onto the lake, level with the big hall, the hospital and the work-rooms.

As the community had grown from its first tiny beginnings, row after row of houses had been built behind the original ones, mostly simple huts of bamboo lashed together with grass ropes.

The people had made an attempt at building with stone, but it had not been very successful. The ground had shaken, many years ago when he was just a little boy, and the stones had tumbled and killed the people living in one of the stone houses. Isis had shaken again, only four days ago, though not as hard, the old people said, as the time before. Nobody lived in the stone houses now, so it hadn't mattered when the last remaining stones of the abandoned houses had fallen in.

After That Old Woman had taken the family on whom the stones had fallen, President London had declared that stone

would no longer be used in building. This bothered Jody. He found himself thinking all sorts of things, like, why had Isis shaken in the first place? And why had the stones fallen like that? Surely there must be a way of gluing the stones together with something, or wedging them in such a way that if the gods under the ground took it into their heads to shrug again the stones would hold tight instead of tumbling apart. But now, because President London had put a taboo on stone-building, there was no use asking questions and nothing he could do about it anyway.

Jody's house was special because Grandfather, and Grandmother too until recently, lived there, and they were Firsts. There was a fireplace in the living room and two rocking chairs as well as the upright chairs, benches and table that all the families had. As Jody arrived, clean but out of breath, Grandfather was picking up the family Bible from the little table beside him. Across the hearth was the empty rocker where Grandmother used to sit, her knobby fingers nimbly knotting a net bag. Grandmother had been frail for many years, but from Ra-up to Ra-down her fingers were never still, making grass bags, fishing nets, bird traps, and knitting socks for the fast-growing children of the settlement. It had been the saddest day in Jody's life when That Old Woman had taken her to her home in the north.

Grandmother had been the President's sister. It was another heaviness that he had to bear, being the grandson of the President's sister. But it wasn't *her* fault. She wasn't a bit like him and Jody had loved her most dearly.

Jody's two elder brothers, Jacob and Benjamin, lived with their wives and babies in the same house; and all of them, even though they were married people with children of their own, did what their parents, Isaac and Ingrid, told them to. When Jody married, his wife would come to live in this house too. It was his home. It would be his for the rest of his life, unless the unlikely of all unlikely things happened and the taboo was lifted so that some of the overcrowded community could look for a new home somewhere else on Isis.

Jody knew that if that ever happened he would be one of the ones to go, come what may. The very thought of it made him tingle with excitement. But it would probably never happen. The Council had been arguing about it for years. The Valley was

getting crowded: there was no gainsaying that. And game was in shorter supply every year. But in the end nothing changed, except that the laws got even stricter and the women worked even harder. Surely it hadn't always been like that?

He was lucky to have such a nice home and such good grandparents and parents. They weren't all like that. Jody settled down on one of the benches and listened as Grandfather began to read.

After the reading and prayers they all went to bed. Since Jody was the only "single" he had a room to himself, which was a delightful luxury. It would be his alone until he was married, or until the babies grew too big for their parents' room, whichever happened first. But for the moment it was his alone. He liked to lie awake at night, listening to the silence. That was the time when most of his ideas and inventions came to him.

He lay now, his hands behind his head, and thought about his water-wheel. What was it for? the auntie had asked. It was a troubling question, one that had kept him awake for several nights. What he needed was something to turn the round-and-round motion of the axle into something else—something useful. For instance, if the axle were rough instead of smooth at the end, and it were pushed up against something else rough, would the other thing move? Or would all the power and movement of the water be lost somewhere on the way?

If *it did* work, he could make the movement of the water do all sorts of interesting and useful things. He could make a spinning wheel spin faster and smoother. He might even make a machine that would grind the grain into bread flour. Rubbing the grain between two rough stones was exhausting work and took up so much time. Surely everyone would be happy and proud of him if he could invent a way to make life easier for the women?

Jody woke with a start and an idea in his mind that was so real he could touch it. Ra had not yet risen, but he could see the vague outline of his window, the foot of the bed, and the chest beyond it. He threw on his shirt and breeches and slipped bare-foot out of the house.

It was so simple! The end of the axle of the water-wheel