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THE CROWS HER DRAGON'S GATE

by Benjanun Sriduangkaew

Before the end there would be love-songs to a passion so fierce that the offspring of my body turned into suns; tales of our courtship a wildfire that scorched the world.

The annals of heavens may not always be trusted. They were texts carefully edited, passed to chosen scholars; it did well to remind the warlords—and once empire dreams had come true, the monarchs calling themselves heaven's sons—that above them reigned paradise, and above paradise an everlasting emperor.

Much was elided and confused. But in the beginning, it was mostly that I was young.

The Huang He was new, freshly disgorged from a dragon's gullet, brimming with stomach-lizards and fish with scales thick as lamellar. The heat drew me, as it too must have drawn him. And so I found Dijun by the banks with knees drawn up like a boy, gazing into the waters. In his palms flame detonated into monsters that cavorted to the edge of his nails and spilled onto the grass, turning green to black-brown.

I measured and watched him through the frame of my hands. What did I know of him then? That he was an oddity, not unlike me; that he was without a place at court, without sworn brothers earned through blood and fire. A lack that left him wifeless, for all that women gazed upon him as they would on rare silverwork. They would glance at him, and sigh a little, and look away. Untitled and unpositioned, what husband could he make?

I did not think of positions or titles.

He noticed my approach, and his smile intrigued me, for aesthetically it was most pleasing. Being young I mistook this for something else; being young I thought beauty was all there was.

“Would you like to try?” He held out his hand, where many-eyed beasts spun through their deaths and rebirths, purer each time, finer with each cycle.

“How did you know?”

“Your shadow moves on its own even when heaven’s light stands still. Like calls to like.” Dijun hesitated. “And I find I cannot look away from your radiance.”

I inclined my head. Men offered flattery; women accepted with poise. That was the way of things. We examined one another; he in fascination, I for lack of conversation. Portrait-still, portrait-flattened. To escape that tableau I thought of

heat. It flared out of me, gusting into two wings that multiplied, quartet then decaplet.

I'd thought he would take to it, my natural kindred. He recoiled. "That is wild. Have you never taught yourself control?"

Until that moment it'd never struck me that this required discipline, anymore than did breathing or laughing, or searching for the true face of the sky. "No, why would I?"

He frowned at me. "Unreined it'll bring disaster. This will burn even immortals." Leaning close he gripped my wrists, his breath on my cheeks. "Let me teach you."

I wanted to tell him: no, I had never burned anything, anyone. That I did not want guidance, for this was part of me, like my tongue and my feet, and why did he want to teach me how to use those? I was no infant; I was no child.

But for a reason I wouldn't be able to name until years after—years stretching between us like clouds unrolling beneath chariot wheels—I was silent; I was silenced and could not demur. I let him, could not quite pull away, show me how to coax the flame and bring order that it did not need. I let him teach me what I already understood.

Pulse hot in my throat I went away from him rubbing the places where he'd touched, the fingerprints on my arms.

This, too, was easy to mistake for an entirely different emotion.

* * *

Winter was air sizzling against my skin, snow hissing to steam on my hair, a susurrus in my ears: Xihe, Xihe. Had I a mother she'd have warned me, *Your vanity is how men will ensnare you, little daughter*—but I gestated in the dreams of birds and left them fully grown: a woman's silhouette, no childhood behind and no old age before to give it substance.

I would have liked to be someone's daughter, to call someone my aunt. But all I had was my older self, teeth bared in angry laughter.

Winter was shelter too, for Dijun hated that season. He courted status more desperately than he courted me, and he thought the cold would diminish him. It would not; only why tell him that? This was my place, this was my peace.

In my contemplation I could have missed the girl. Only look another way, sidestep rather than forward, take a different turn—any of this and the storm would have sifted over, burying her fortune. How small that chance; how breakable her life. Humans were so prone to death it was a marvel that they survived to fulfill their allotted span, a fraction's fraction of my own.

Furs in the snow like slain carcasses: she was wrapped in layers of them, had curled in upon herself to retain heat. I brushed away the flakes on her cheeks and lifted her up. So light, so small, as though mortals were made of a substance less dense and less real than mine.

A wolf's den. The beast, litter-mother, towered over me even as it slept. It woke and made room.

At my behest it extended a paw, gathering the girl to its belly like a pup. I left and returned with lychees from my garden, fed from seed to fruit with fire. Stripping it of skin and seed I fed to the mortal flesh like meat, flesh like liquor; blood-red and just as hot.

The girl woke like that in my lap around a mouthful of sweetness, of warmth leaping in the jugular and bounding in the stomach. Flush with this heat she'd changed colors. She spluttered laughter through chapped lips. "They told us death would look like a field in summer, not a giant wolf and a woman."

"There's no field," I said sharply, and did not tell her that the afterlife was far harsher than the wolf. "Nor am I of the world below. What insult. What were you doing in the storm?"

Her name was Lin, and she did not believe I was real, my throat and head bare, my robes summer-thin. With her thumbs

she brushed my braids; with her fists she crumpled my sleeves; with her mouth she insisted I was a fever dream.

When that was past, Lin told her tale. Her mother was a physician, away in the neighboring village. “I was fetching Mother. When I started off,” she said defensively, “there wasn’t yet a blizzard. My friend’s sister got so ill. That’s the only family Jia has got left.”

What did I think? Only: gods were beginning to teach mortalkind the arts of hunting and making, the sciences of crafting and writing, while I stood aside, giving them nothing. Only: through her girlish glibness there was need, afraid of being heard but no less true for that.

“I will take you there,” I said, and impelled by pride added, “for I haven’t saved you only to see you rush to die in this weather. It would have been a waste of my time and investment.”

“This is what near-death sounds like: my mother.” Lin sniffed. “But thank you. I think.”

We did not wait out the storm. In the aegis of my warmth she needed fear nothing of winter, and we raced along the snow. I tucked up my robes to keep pace, the winds like razors on my cheeks. They filled my ears with the beating of wings.

This was better than peace.

* * *

Dijun asked me to marry him, in my garden where I grew tiger lilies with stamens in gold, mandarins that crackled in the mouth, and starlings that thrived on graphite. My self, made old and sagacious by rage, would say: a crime committed against yourself to have so much, to love so much; had you made nothing, had you loved nothing, you would have had nothing to lose.

I was, then, turning my speculations to the sky. Not the one seen by mortals, whose every chi was charted and layered by celestial topography. Their sky had limits; mine, far above even the heavenly court, was endless and true.

Skies had nothing to do with what he talked about, which was what he always talked about. Finding a gap in human knowledge that other immortals hadn't yet filled—law-making, matrimony, poetry—and through that making a name for himself, earning worship and shrines, then a place in palace hierarchy. Between this he also recited poetry wonderfully and played music sweetly. So he interrupted both his own rhetoric and my thoughts when he pressed his mouth—hot as the bubbling lakes around us—to the inside of my wrist.

I looked at him, at my seized hand. “What?”

“I would,” he said against my skin in a voice low and thick, “see you a bride.”

His breath jolted my pulse as his words and gestures had not. It was so sharp, so singular; an arrow's pierce. Later I would think: was this meant, did he know? Of fire quickening fire, as oil in a lamp. A reaction without mind or thought and I was caught up in it, in the insistence of his mouth. "I—" I began, and stopped. My stomach roiled.

"I do not require your answer now, though I've long postponed this. Each day—" His choked hesitation, mirroring my own; for different reasons. "You overwhelm me."

Custom demanded that I respond. An appropriate answer to his question; surely one must exist in the cup of my skull, floating like tea leaves or hiding among the bottom dregs. Not until his leave-taking, graceful and correct, did it strike me there had been no question. Only a series of statements. The imprint of his lips stayed, my skin ridged red around it.

I wanted more than anything to seek another goddess' wisdom. How would I put forward to Xiwangmu, wedded empress, that I had been made uneasy; how to say that without losing some essential piece of myself, becoming an alien unwoman? I did not object to Dijun's lack of rank, so what misgivings did I have? Why would I not want a man this well-made, this adept in his bearing; a voice this rich, a hand this firm?

In search of clarity I descended.

Through piety and deed humans could join heaven, scoured clean of mortality; there were almost as many ways to achieve that as there were to fail. For beasts, the methods were different. For fish of jeweled scales there was the dragon's gate, an arch above the apex of great waterfalls over which they must leap. I had always liked watching these quests to transmute from fish to divine beast, from small bodies to sinuous muscle and horned head. Most did not clear the height, and fewer still arced over the roof.

The handful that did, one in a hundred-thousand thousand, emerged so incandescent that they filled me with certainty that a transformation awaited me; that someday I too would pass through my dragon's gate and become more than a goddess who did not know her way and purpose.

This certainty eased me into an answer for Dijun's non-questions: to see me in bridal dress he should be made to leap. Perhaps I would set him a wall so great, a cataract so fierce, that he would never leap high enough.

Enlisting a child spirit I sent him the message: *I want a light in the night that sheds without heat, winged and strong, tame to me and fierce to all else, and when you have brought me this thing I will consent to be your wife.*

At once he came to me and frowning asked, "This is not a riddle or a metaphor?"

I smiled at him; felt safe in doing so, in the impossibility of my demand. “I am being entirely literal.”

His long lashes beat slowly as he regarded me. “That is a tall order.”

“What treasure worth having is not purchased dear?”

Did I want to be purchased; did I want to be treasured? So thoughtlessly I gave that taunt. But he’d have risen to the task regardless, for the idea of marriage appealed to his need for recognition; it would secure his manhood and therefore his godhood. He might have a splendid mansion now, and all the knowledge he’d gathered, but what of that? All in heaven did. A goddess to wife gave him something to possess, something to master. This nebulous sense of having and achieving would grant him the beginning of status.

In days, so few and so short, he brought me the crane. It was garbed white, the color of death. It was crowned red, the color of weddings.

Dijun knelt to present his gift, not from humility but necessity; he was nearly as pale as its feathers, his eyes glittering above bloodless cheeks. “It fed from my arteries, to have light without heat.”

I did not let on how well the bird pleased me; its beak like butchery, its talons like anger. Expectant, it stretched its long neck in my direction. “Is it to feed from mine also?”

“Then it would be no gift.” His eyes fluttered shut and his head lowered, as though it could no longer bear the weight of being.

Weakness inspired if not tenderness then bravery. I would remember: I was the one who let him into my arms, I and no other. His head was heavy on my knee, his breath stuttered in my palm. Dijun was so breakable that I could have strangled him with my bare hands and exhumed his heart with my nails. Older, wiser Xihe would have done that and ended our misfortune before it could begin. She would have known he’d predicted me and laid down his fragility in my lap, an exquisite trap.

I was not old. I was not wise.

Night fell. We stood on my highest balcony, he and I. Having been satiated on my orchard the crane preened and did not fight when I cast it high. Its light burned silver-white and blotted out the stars. More beautiful to me, by far, than Dijun ever was or would be.

* * *

We did not immediately wed. There were dates to consider, auspices important even to us who were divine. Lacking mother, father, or older kin it was up to me to give myself away in marriage. I felt an accomplice to a robbery of my own home.

That was moot; on the day of my transition from goddess to bride my mansion dissolved to mist, to await shaping by the wishes of the next immortal granted this patch of land. As though that would be recompense, Xiwangmu invited me to her palace where cloud-girls dressed my hair in spirals, pinned it under a buyao heavy with fire opals, and draped my face with a silk veil the color of my lychees. The hue smoothed out the creases of my disquiet until I realized that I would be half-blind until Dijun lifted that trifling bit of cloth, his right as my groom. My own hands were not permitted such.

The cloud-girls assured me that I would be the envy of every goddess and Dijun the envy of every god.

Our nuptials were presided over by the emperor himself, beneath a sky of phoenixes and qilin. One table for gods, one for goddesses; both plied with nine courses of dishes that renewed themselves without cease. A celestial scribe stood in attendance, unspooling an endless scroll, his hand and brush a hummingbird blur to record my entry into the country of wifehood. Dijun held up my veil far enough for me to eat, feeding me pearl-dusted abalone, shed longma scales, iridescent shark fins. Our guests praised his diligence and husbandly virtue: not yet properly wed and already so adoring, so excellent! How fortunate I was, best-blessed of all brides.

He did finally lift that whisper of silk all the way, once my cloud-girls retinue and I arrived at his home.

Stepping over the threshold should have been my metamorphosis, sailing high over the cataract of ceremony and the roof of conjugal feast. It was not, and his home was nothing like mine. A garden easily as vast, with its own lakes; in place of fruits and trees stood obsidian, sculpted expertly—his own work, he murmured in my ear—but they did not move, did not grow. They would not taste sweet if they tasted of anything; they would cut my mouth, draw blood from gums until my palate understood only hurt.

In the enclosure of the marital bed we sat, sipping wine until the celebrants were done wishing us luck and fertility. I'd have liked to have seen more of his house, which he had built like a honeycomb hexagon by hexagon, hanging each wall with long scrolls of verse and proverb, lining each corner with black vases. We finished the last drops. It would have to wait. This night would be passed by means other than wandering from chamber to chamber, touching and admiring new things, meeting with his servants.

Dijun removed jewelry from my head and loosened my hair; each coil fell before him with a sigh. He peeled the complicated robes from me, fastidious as flaying, and when there was nothing more to expose he undid his own.

Seized with an urge for tidiness I gathered the clothes, folded them away on the round table at which we would share breakfast come morning. I caught a glimpse of my nakedness in a mirror, sheathed in nothing but the lingering warmth of his hands. His reflection watched me, and I watched it back—spousal scrutiny mine by right—examining the sweep of his eyebrows, the heavy fringe of his eyelashes, the sure lines of his jaw. I waited for them to ignite in me a reaction stronger than the remote pleasure of viewing an exceptional orchid bloom.

When I turned around, his patience had expired.

He panted into the crook of my neck, whispered flame into my breast, chanted my name into my belly. My hands sought purchase; knowing not what to do with them I arranged them on his sides, where under my fingertips his blood throbbed, an animal fighting to break loose from a net of ligaments. When he pressed me into the sheets my muscles coiled against the coming finality of our union, and I told myself: calm. There was delight to be found in the dictates and practices of desire. Set aside fear; it could not be so terrible.

And it was not. There were moments when his touches surprised, made me shudder from a sharp impersonal thrill. He did not cause me harm. But it obtained over the minutes a mechanical repetition that I soon found unbearable. I wanted to be done; I wanted to be gone. The longer it went, the less I

felt like myself; to be opened like this, to be bared inside-out. The lamplight was as voracious as he, and neither left my skin with a secret to keep.

Above me Dijun shuddered, his mouth sealed against what I did not understand, his perfect face blank and slack. Sweat beaded on his brow and pattered onto me. I turned my cheek so it might not slip into my mouth. He bent to whisper in my ear, hoarse, that I was his.

When his rhythms had quieted and he lay as though one dead, I stepped out into his obsidian labyrinth to watch the crane that'd drunk from his veins and eaten from my hand. Under its light I revised my definition of contentment.

* * *

Lin was beating clothes against river rocks when I found her, side by side with another girl. The sight of me stopped her short, and she let the laundry drop slowly into the washing tub at her feet. She grabbed her friend's sleeve, yanking nearly hard enough to unbalance the other mortal and send them both tumbling into the river. "Jia. Jia! See? I told you I really did meet her."

"I see—oh." Jia's eyes were wide. I was not used to appraisal so direct. Even Dijun's had been circumspect, offered through the filter of his lowered lashes. "I thought you'd gone

mad with fever when you told me you met a gorgeous maiden in the blizzard.”

“I did not say she was gorgeous!” Lin elbowed her friend in the side.

“From the way you spoke it was obvious you thought she was.” Jia grinned at me. “Which you are, if you don’t mind me saying that.”

“You are both mannerless,” I said, though I did not mind. Her flattery was not like my husband’s, given for no motive other than that she thought me pleasant to look upon. “You do realize I am of heaven?”

Lin put her hands on her hips. “I still don’t believe that.”

Her insolence surprised a laugh out of me. On the few occasions I had appeared before humans, none had ever questioned my divinity; one and all they had prostrated themselves in awe. I bent to the tub and exerted the mildest pulse. The waters rippled and in a moment were seething. “Well? I could boil an entire lake, but I don’t do that to amuse a pair of rude country girls.”

“An entire lake,” Lin said with a wistful sigh. “To bathe in *that* during winter.”

To which, Jia: “To see you bathing in *that*, winter or otherwise. You’ll invite me, of course?”

At that the child I had saved from winter turned the hue of cherry blossoms. She flapped her hands at the cooling tub. “The *steam*.”

Jia laughed, throaty, full of knowing. Though of mortal girls I comprehended near nothing, I could guess that they were not simply friends. “Are you sworn sisters?” I said when Jia had disappeared to fetch more dirty laundry. “Or lovers?”

“Aren’t you blunt.” Lin made a face in Jia’s direction. “She’s a lecher, a wanton, and if Mother knows.... You don’t think it strange or—or wrong, or impious, do you?”

“Why would I? Silly child.”

She let out a breath long pent-up. “Good. So what’ve you been doing with yourself? It’s been nearly two seasons.” As though we were old friends, with years of climbing trees and mushroom-picking together on scraped knees and running downriver on bare fish-bitten feet.

Out of me, silence bled from the pinprick she’d made in my shell of empty words, empty acts.

“Did I say something wrong?”

“I’ve been marrying.” For it seemed a process, not a finished result. The idea of its completion filled me with eager dread. “A god.”

“Oh,” Lin said. “I thought you might have chosen a goddess to wife. Well. I suppose that... that doesn’t happen in

heaven. It'd be ridiculous, wouldn't it? Should I offer congratulations? It's just you don't seem happy."

"I'm not unhappy." The lie curdled in my mouth. I longed to spit it out, but like all lies it congealed, stuck. "But I do wonder if I could have delayed the wedding."

"You could have told him 'No, you are ugly as a pig's rear.'"

"Out of all the gods he is the handsomest."

"Then, 'No, you are doltish as an ox.'"

"He is intelligent and learned in the scholarly pursuits." Scrolls in every chamber; all his servants were artists and poets, learning at his feet as he painted portraits of me, composed verses to my loveliness.

Lin's brows drew together. "Does he bore you in bed?"

"You ask too many questions. I suppose Jia does not ever bore you."

"She kisses like summer," Lin said and her gaze became distant, her mind turning fast on its wheels to secrets and embraces.

Did Dijun kiss like summer? I could not fathom what that even meant. "My husband is kind." All of heaven said so; lauded his devotion to me. Was even the emperor so good to Xiwangmu? "Daily he labors to please me."

"But you don't look pleased. He doesn't keep mistresses, does he?"

“We in heaven are above impulses so base.” Yet I wished he was not. I stood and shook myself. Beyond Lin I could glimpse a being more paper than skin biding patiently under bamboo leaves. Its whiteless eyes peered at me. Dijun’s creatures had perfected that art of reproaching me in my husband’s place, without words. My throat tightened. “I should go.”

“Already? I thought you might want to share a meal with us.” Lin drew one of the trousers out from the tub and wrung it. The garment was faded; had never been white. Sideways she glanced, longing, at my robes. Her eyes lingered on the patterned bixi where plum blossoms flowered. “But you wouldn’t want to do that anyway, I guess.”

“It’s not—” I caught myself. To be flustered before a mortal girl. “I have matters of import to attend to. I will come again, and next time... perhaps you and Jia will like something fine to wear. It doesn’t do for me to be seen in such ragged company.”

“Oh, you bite.” Before I could step away, Lin flung her arms around me. She smelled of sweat, youth, and rice. “Do come back. Jia and I will cook for you. It won’t be as amazing as anything you eat up there, but it’ll be our best.”

A few hours later, when I was safely ensconced in heaven, the sky fell and flood claimed the mortal lands.

* * *

His servants gave me such obeisance, fit for an empress. There is no corner in his house, no path in his garden, where I might walk without the rustling of paper robes and paper caps as spirits of lutes and zithers cast themselves low before me. An inkstone that'd gained soul and thought would kiss the tip of my slipper, its muzzle pebble-smooth and cold. None of them ever spoke; across their vests was the word *silence*. Dijun treasured quiet.

I shattered that when I strode into his study, where he sat at his writing desk bent over loose papers, jade tablets, and clusters of threaded coins. "Husband," I said, "why did you have your servant fetch me?"

He looked up, vexation warping his features. Quickly gone; a veil slid shut over that and he was flawless again, as sweet-seeming as he'd been that day by the Huang He. "Xihe! To celebrate—though each time I see you it is a celebration unto itself. Come, see these. I've presented them to the emperor and he was most pleased. A work in progress, these divination charts, but I predicted the flood to the hour."

A fine trembling began deep in my liver. "You knew this would happen?"

"Of course, that's why I sent for you. The cause is still to be determined, a dragon in its death throes perhaps, or two uncouth quarreling gods." He motioned with his hand, elegant

dismissal. “It is beside the point. My labors have caught His Majesty’s interest. At last I may be granted domain, monarch in my own right, and that will elevate you too, my wife. Doesn’t that charm you?”

“Why did you—” If I retched I would disgrace myself. “I was there, I could have saved mortals. The flood’s only water. At a thought I could’ve vaporized it.”

Dijun gazed at me, smiled; gentle amusement. “Xihe, you could not have. The flame in you is splendid, but it has limits. Other gods have given succor to mortals. Don’t trouble yourself with it, and I wouldn’t want to see you strain yourself unnecessarily. You are too young.”

“I could have—” And now I sounded as petulant as he’d made me out to be; I could not have sounded otherwise. He’d done it so neatly, my husband; reducing me to a child.

It was the shattering of a heavenly pillar. I heard it even up here, the howl of its breaking, the scream of its fall. The flood that’d burst through had drowned the sun; so swift and total that all had been washed away, whether dragon corpse or furious deities strangling one another all the way to the depths. Those that could had saved entire villages and towns through sudden relocations of desert, patches of hill, and walls of earth.

His Majesty summoned immortals to deliberate on the matter of restoring order. I did not attend; Dijun would have

persuaded me not to in any case. Instead I sought out mortal survivors. Xiwangmu had in her graciousness sheltered some at her palace, and there were so many that even the vast compound attained the grimy busyness of the densest mortal towns. Memory of heaven would be sieved out of them afterward through a mesh of fine but specific foods: delicacies found nowhere on earth, herbs like emeralds grown to bring forgetting.

My observation of the mortal world had always been at a distance; I'd never been this close to this much humanity. The empress' servants had dressed them in clean clothes, had given them filling meals, but still they clutched each other. None made eye contact with me. They hid when they could, and pressed their foreheads to grass or floor tiles when they could not.

Neither Lin nor Jia was here. They'd been by a river. Floods, even mundane ones, were not things mortals could outrun.

Cloud-girls, the very same who had dressed me a bride, greeted me and informed me that Xiwangmu was occupied with assigning goddesses and acolytes to finding space for the survivors; to seeking out those still stranded on earth. I wanted to ask why I hadn't been sent for, why I hadn't been included. Shame thickened my mouth. Unable to speak past it I allowed

them to lead me to an isolated pavilion, away from the refugees; away from anything that mattered.

They sat me down among blue lotuses; they held up tresses of my hair, exclaiming at the softness and luster. Covering me in their raindrop-beaded braids they mistook my quiet for wifely pining. “He will soon be with you, goddess.” “Doubtless he thinks of you every moment.” “No man may turn his gaze from loveliness like yours.”

I would have laughed in their ice-tipped faces. I would have sharpened my scorn and with it dissolved them to wisps of fog, two cupfuls of water. “You find me pleasing, then.”

“More than pleasing, wondrous Xihe. Oh, if you weren’t made as you are, prone to scorch us with your divinity...”

“...in throes of passion, we would clasp you between us and show you, for all that you are a wedded wife. We can keep secrets, as we keep rain and thunder, storms and lightning, within our bellies.”

“I won’t harm you.”

They glanced at each other, challenging; one knee-walked forward. I bent, obliging, and she took my face in cool hands, pressing sunset lips to mine. I waited, wanted, for it to stir me in some way. It should have. Why wasn’t it? Her waist like a wasp’s, her eyes more enchanting than my husband’s, her kiss inviting. In the end, awkward, I thanked her and prevailed

upon them to bring me stationery. They got me the best, but if they had put before me uncured hide and a rusty knife with which to carve upon it I would not have cared.

So long and closely I had guarded the thought of this behind my teeth, concealed it deep between the ventricles of my heart, that when I began to draw the chariot it startled me how solid it was, how sleek its shape and lines. *Here* the dragons would be yoked. *There* I would sit, the reins taut in my hands. I'd fly so fast, so far. None would keep pace with me.

Once the ink dried I rolled the paper tight, as small as it could get, and clutched it to me as I returned to Dijun's mansion. Calling the crane I brought it to the corner where my orchard tried to grow. So few of my trees and bushes would thrive on Dijun's land, but the handful that did I nursed with all my strength. The flowers and fruits were so prone to bursting into flames that his servants did not dare approach them, for their garments caught easily and my husband disdained slovenliness. I wedged the scroll in the crevice of an orange tree and bade it seal shut.

His courting gift had grown so large it no longer fit in my arms, but it tried to nest there, nuzzling me for warmth as I fed it the ripest of what I had. Stroking its back I wondered if in a thousand years it might learn thought and woman form. Or even sooner; the crane had had an unconventional provenance.

Then I would have a companion, a mercurial girl with yellow irises and crimson eyelids, robed all in white. I smiled into the crane's feathers, which smelled of tangerines. Perhaps it would be like having a daughter of my own. "Would you like that?" I murmured. She would fly with me, and unless she wanted to I would never make her wed. My crane-child.

Dijun came back from the palace exuberant. He did not pass the details to me, but once he'd dismissed the servants he pulled me against him, claspng his mouth to mine. He tasted of victory; his tongue fed me loss.

Each time I would turn tense then uncoil in stages, yielding into softness that he'd take for desire. He would suckle at my breast while I thought of flight and limitless skies. A tedious chore to get through; nothing more. I had even learned to gasp and tremble, for I did not want to face again the anxious brittle questions—*Do I not please you?* which hid *What is it that you think of; has another man caught your eye?* So learned and lovely, my husband; yet so afraid that I would slip loose of his arms, dance free of his house.

The crane snapped forward. Dijun jerked away. His blood, viscous-hot, dripped from the crane's beak.

"Ah," he said, holding his hand away from his silks. "Tame to you, fierce to all else; my gift to you has been most perfect to your tastes."

Sourness rolled over my tongue, the first stepping-stone on the path of silence; silence as he spoke and drew me into a trap where I could not breathe, could not be heard. I tried. Oh, my older self, my mother-self, I tried. “It was born of *your* blood.”

“But shaped by your request.” His edged regard grazed over my skin, fine and honed, and my stomach clenched; had he felt in me that disinterest so near to unwanted? Then he chuckled, loudly false. “Let it be. It is nothing. Shall we dine together? Matters of court have kept me so occupied and I’ve missed you, in all ways.”

In his presence even celestial repast turned to dust in the mouth.

* * *

Once, Dijun incinerated three of his servants for having mislaid his tablets. Spirits with origin in instruments were made of wood; remained wood, bamboo, and camphor. Soon they became ashes and scented smoke. I did not love them, I would never care for them. Yet I knew it was the fear of him that made them dog my steps, report my every move to him in scrolls left by his desk at dusk.

One morning I summoned them and showed them fire. “I will be in my garden,” I told them, “to tend my plants. I will not

have moved, gone anywhere, spoken with anyone. Do you understand?”

They looked at one another, at me.

It was so easy for courage, or cowardice, to fruit cruelty. Discarding Dijun's lessons of control and restraint I opened my hand. Blue heat ambered; paled to white. Soundless even now, they shrank away. “Are you mute? Have you no language? Answer me!”

I singed and seared them. And they finally spoke with throats meant for music, with voices meant to be heard: every word a note, all of them together a song. They said yes. They called me mistress. They swore obedience.

Mount Kunlun reared high enough to elude submersion. I did not entertain illusions; others would have already combed every shadowed pool for mortals. Were Jia and Lin alive, they would have been found. Even so I searched, rattling the minutes in the abacus of my skull, tallying them into the hours I had until Dijun returned home.

The fish-kite was a yellow slash in the sky's watery murk, whipping at the end of a tether wind-pulled taut. I followed it, and thereby discovered the twins.

They genuflected in a fall of bronze headdresses and rustling scales and introduced themselves as Nuwa and Fuxi. They orated and moved in perfect harmony; smiled

simultaneously, perpetually at peace in their oneness. Sister-brother, wife-husband, sharing a single snake tail that served as stomach and tool of perambulation.

Sheltered in their immense coils, Lin and Jia lay asleep. “We have put them to dreams,” Nuwa said; Fuxi continued, “full of easy prey and quiet so they would not alarm and flee. We smelled a goddess on them and have kept them safe. Are they for you?”

“They... are.” I risked touching their scales. “What are you?”

“We are of a kind.” “Disaster has ever been our domain, and it came to us that we are wise to mending the heaven-breach, of restoring mortalkind to this earth. This we would set to for a little boon. Will you grant us this, or bring us to one who may?”

It wasn't for me to grant anything, and they were so large that I could not imagine carrying them back to heaven, let alone with two mortal girls. We managed by and by, and I directed them to Xiwangmu—she had authority I did not, and I wanted least to be given credit for Nuwa and Fuxi. Dijun would never forgive it. Lin and Jia I entrusted to Guanyin. Under my husband's gaze, I was not myself, not my own. The girls, who knew themselves so well, did not need to witness that.

The twins wanted permission to marry. To his credit—or some said discredit—the emperor swiftly gave them that, so long that they did not procreate. They accepted that clause serenely, and set to baking clay that would become humans full-grown: no need for infancy and childhood, no want for the slow process of pregnancy. Fuxi took up my husband's charts and made them fit for mortals so they might predict and avoid the next calamity. Nuwa sheared off the tip of their shared tail, which in aplomb grew into a second snake, black on gold. This creature she coaxed to fill the roaring gulf the broken pillar had left. In days it hardened, scabbing over that wound in heaven's sea.

There remained only the matter of the extinguished sun.

The shape of Dijun's thought on this became evident when he reminded me that in both of us an illimitable flame burned, that we had a duty, and did I not miss our courtship? I avoided him. I considered cuckolding him so he would cast me aside. It would be scarce challenge to find a fisher boy, seduce him, and rut with him, if the idea did not clog my throat with disgust. Dijun excited me little enough; other men interested me even less. Had the cloud-girl inspired some want in me, some longing at all, I would have invited her into my bed and flaunted her before my husband.

I heard that he laid down the rules and ceremony of nuptials for mortals new-made, in the fashion of our own wedding: the veil, the sacred husbandly lifting, the loosening of hair. Man and wife.

But those days softened from desperate to bearable through the liberty I had purchased with wrath. My wanderings were not half so blithe as they had been in my maiden days, but it was good all the same to step free, even under this sky. The flood abated by degrees. At the foot of Kunlun muddy mounds, once huts, began to emerge. A lonely pagoda finial; the head of a statue. I went to the empty place where my house had once stood. I could not transmute it to what it had been; to do so required having one's name registered to that plot on heaven's census, and mine was appended to Dijun's now.

Then came a night when I could not find the crane. This had never happened; it—she—had learned the routine so well, like breathing, like flight. My husband to my relief was absent, which gave me free reign to question the servants. But this time, however I threatened, none of them would answer in words, holding in their collective silence as though it could shield them from my anger. One pointed, paper sleeve charred by my hand, toward the obsidian maze.

On black pavement I found the crane, limp and still. Every bone in her wings had been broken. Dijun was slight, never a

warrior, but I'd felt how unhesitating his grip could be, and bird bones were so fragile.

I did not waste tears. From each branch and bramble in my orchard I stripped orchids and okra, lilies and lychees, sunflowers and starfruits. Hands trembling I fed the crane. Her bones did not mend; her ligaments did not knit. When she had swallowed every fragrant and hot thing, she shuddered: a spasm of gullet and shattered pinions. From her beaks ten black pearls fell into my hand.

She laid her long neck across my knee, for mercy. I gave her that. Once she had gone cold, I flung her up into the sky one last time. Her body, if not spirit, would remember the way.

The pearls I spilled into a silk pouch, which I tied shut and slipped into my robe. I had seen Nuwa make life from craft and memory, children without mating. I knew what I had to do.

* * *

Under blackness crane-corpse lit, I entered His Majesty's palace. It had many gates, many walls, tiered one over another and bisected by a stair that did not end.

Guards in stone and lamellar barred my way. I melted the metal on their glaives, burned black marks into their armor. A storm of twenty wings and thirty taloned feet passed through them, and they gave way.

My wish had been for: impervious, aloof, untouchable. My reality, when I reached the throne room, was one of breathlessness and trembling knees. Kneel and I would have snapped; kneel and I would have fallen, to such depths that no godhood or fire could have saved me. I remained therefore standing. The crows hid my terror, scarlet beaks and dark eyes holding close to me as a shield. My own court. Arrogance, then, would serve me.

The few immortals in attendance pinned me with their scrutiny. Behind him the emperor's throne hissed, scales rustling, claws unsheathing. His Majesty quieted both throne and gods with a motion. "Xihe, we have long missed your grace and company, though we did not expect the size and unusual nature of your entourage."

To ground myself I ought to have murmured ritual greetings, every respectful phrase. All that tumbled out of me was, "Majesty, I have an answer to the question of bringing back daylight."

A sharp intake of breath, by whose cadence and pitch I recognized as my husband's.

"Might we see a demonstration?"

"Outside, Your Majesty. I would not wish to ruin the roof."

Gravely he led; royal body, royal head: the limbs of the court must perforce follow. My husband among them; my

beautiful husband with his traps at the ready, his snares snapping after my heels. I did not look at him, would not look at him. My voice would not be taken; my courage would not be shaken. The crows moved with me and there I took refuge.

In the courtyard I whispered to one of the crows perching on my shoulder. He leaped into the night, strong as summer morning, and blazed. The emperor shielded his eyes with his sleeve. Courtiers drew back from the stab of midday heat. Dijun had gone utter white.

The emperor gave a contemplative nod. "How did you come by them?"

"They are the sons of my flesh and my husband's blood." I did not tell them I had given birth through my eyes. Feathers slick, leaving me like tears. Cartilage passing through my lashes to harden on the other side; blood-brooks on my cheeks. I smiled slowly. "My children, Your Majesty, every last one of them."

Dijun's proximity rippled against my skin. He would claim us all, wife and progeny, and we would return to his mansion, where in his hexagonal rooms my path would wind around itself until the only way was *back*. There he would part my thighs and with a kiss murmur, *More sons, most precious of wives*. "I will want an engineer to help me build a chariot. In this my sons and I will ride, bringing day to mortals and

heavens alike. We will glide high and in this way avoid all earthly frights. No flood will ever again cause winter unending or night everlasting.”

Dijun fell back. He could not object; could not admit he'd been told none of this, that this plan was none of his, that he did not know his wife. The shame would fall on us both but on him hardest for being unable to master me, inkstaining indelibly what he thought the pellucid waters of his honor. I had strangled his words in the crib of his throat. I had given back the silence he'd forced into me with his mouth.

This was my moment of becoming, and I savored it, every bite, more potent than the best of my orchard.

Taming mounts was no difficulty. Carps newly reborn were docile, and drawn to my power they would acquiesce to anything. With them pulling the chariot I brought Lin and Jia to an inland town where survivors—not Nuwa's clay offspring—had gathered to try again and heal. Fuxi and Dijun had laid down the customs of marriage, man to wife, but this small corner I claimed for myself; wife and wife would live without reproach. I visited them often.

My sons grew in bounds, greedy in their eating, until they stood as tall as I. Soon I had to fly with only one of them at a time, for together their joy would crisp and cook the earth to ashes. After the first three dawns they began to speak, a

jabbering chorus of *Mother!* Their first utterance, their first reality. On the easternmost shore, beyond gods and humans, I nursed a tree to grand heights, mulberries like embers on its boughs and leaves that would cut to pieces anyone other than us. Each sunset I watched my crow-children sleep on the branches.

My sons' laughter was music, and they knew no sorrow.

* * *

It was long after the end, and out of ten sons only one remained to me, the last, the youngest; here approached the part of my story which is known best.

Even then it was such a quiet, submerged part. Mortals learned the legend of how ten sun-crows rose and terrorized the earth with their fatal light, how heroic Houyi—heaven's best marksman, Dijun's champion—shot them down. Xihe went barely mentioned: the suns' mother, nothing more, for the function of giving them birth must be fulfilled by some vessel.

I'd told my sons of what Dijun had done to me, to the one who preceded them as my child of the heart, but they were sons, not daughters: a gulf no motherhood could cross. They wanted only to be a family. In the end I could not impose my hate upon them, for I wished their existences unmarred; I wanted them steeped in bliss. They were only mortal. Few

realized that they were not divine, inheriting neither Dijun's agelessness nor mine. They would pass, and some other way would have to be devised to light the world.

Dijun told them: *I sometimes long for a fancy to see the sky subsumed by your wings. The brilliance of you all together, for heaven and earth to behold.*

My sons had been uncomplicated creatures. Born to be loved. If their father expected a little gesture to earn his, why then, they would gladly give it.

The feathers of my youngest were growing rime, aging before their time. Absorbing the work of his brothers was more than he was made for, and in time he would fade. It was terrible for a mother to mourn her children—but when my offspring was mortal and I was not, what was to be done? Life was change.

He fell asleep, my last son. In the sky a dead crane drifted. A footfall; a radiance. "Xihe."

"You ever visit uninvited, husband," I said without looking at him. "It seems you do not understand the meaning of unwelcome."

"You were a delight once."

"These days I'm rather delighted with myself." I turned my attention to scrubbing one of my dragons' necks. "Heavenly etiquette is all that stands between you and the event of your

eyes being pulped between my dragon's teeth. I'd personally gouge them out with my thumbs. Since our wedding night I've longed to do this."

His robes rustled as he backed out of the dragon's reach. "You would not. And could not."

I looked down at my arms, at muscles hardened over centuries. "How precious that you think so."

"In celestial census we remain spouses, Xihe. What would befall you if you attempted to murder your own husband?" He drew closer. "And witness what has transpired after you left me. Your sons dead. You cannot govern yourself, much less them. One child is all you have left to live for."

I could not keep from laughing. "That's what you think?" I stepped into the chariot and tugged the reins. The paired dragons arched and reared. "I live for myself, Dijun. For that I have been made; for that I have been born—for myself, not for you, not even for my sons."

Life was change, and not even the mother of suns would forever stay the same. The limitless skies opened for me. Into them I soared, flames pouring out of me in a roar, a dragon's gate carved into the night.

Mine alone to leap.

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Benjanun Sriduangkaew splits her time between Hong Kong and Jakarta, and has a fondness for airports. She can be found blogging at [A Bee Writes](#).

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BLOOD, STONE, WATER

by A.J. Fitzwater

Tau bit deeper with her paddle, and green water hushed beneath the oka hull. Nhia sat in the bow, as serene as when they had pushed off from Ia that sunrise to a farewell ululation. Her fingertips trailed in the smooth ocean, eyes unfocused on the fins that kept time beneath the oka or searching further forward to their destination five sunrises hence.

Tau fell into a paddling cadence, and Nhia's sweet harmony twined thoughtlessly around her bark-rough voice. Nhia's easy joy sang at odds with the impending rise of the Stone Moon.

Death awaited them at the end of their journey.

Tau risked glances at Nhia's bared breasts. Like many Stone Maidens, Nhia gathered sun to her as she did eyes. Tau reasoned her hands would fit Nhia's small and pert breasts, though her gourd remained empty when it came to touching a Stone Maiden. She had to be content with looking. Nhia was unashamedly content to let her look, needing little prompting to show off her kiho-nut brown skin, unusual light grey eyes,

and virility; she was the only one in a generation born on Ia under a Stone Moon.

Tau resented her own breasts. Her chest ached, and not from exertion. *Kah*, she sighed to herself, twitching her keenly muscled upper arms in an effort to find a more comfortable position for her heavy breasts; the stiff, new kiho fabric wrap, a gathering gift from chieftess Lau'Ia'Maa, rubbed them tender. *At least I will get through the gathering before I am indisposed for this rotation of the great keel.*

The Ia-mother's figure floated in Tau's mind; her heavy breasts, striped by sun, time and nurturing, and her tattooed lips forming the parting words which had sent Tau off with a grin and roll of the eyes. "Everyone is encouraged to ride their own wave, but you can't ignore the plethora of enough potential seed mates awaiting you at the gathering, Tau'hene."

With her gaze straying from the naumu-like water to the figure in the bow, Tau smiled and offered a little kia and curse to virility as she tried to pretend the heat between her thighs had only to do with the sun. She fell into daydream, imagining the child begat from her seed mingled with Nhia's.

The conceit couldn't last. If Nhia was allowed to survive the Stone Moon gathering, her rare seed would be in demand. A maiden would never grant a keel-woman, a common carver

and moon-gazer, the opportunity to procreate with her, Tau decided with a long *kah* of regret.

Both women scented the change in the sea before they saw the shoals of the reeflet. Tau chanted off the fifth verse of the Travellers From Ia cadence and discovered they had missed a sand bar. She added a lilt to the verse as a way to notate the shifting geography.

Nhia balanced easily and eagerly, an image of Ia On The Mountain, one foot braced against the bow head. “I am starving. I have been looking forward to this all morning.”

Tau grunted as she aimed for the narrow opening in the oblong reef. The Water Moon tide had just turned, and the oka shot between the gap in the subsurface rocks. The reeflet was empty of the usual fisher folk spearing peuru worms and gathering mollusks, in respect for the passing Stone Maidens.

“You prepare that fermented wiro-fruit juice, I will be right back.”

Tau had to look away as Nhia stripped off her wrap and slipped over the edge of the oka, a shining eel.

She returned with two peuru still twisting on the end of her spear and a handful of link-shells. Oblivious to the way Tau’s eyes drank in her ocean-dusted skin and dark ropes of hair that clung to her throat, Nhia carefully manipulated the oozing orange innards out of the peuru with her thigh knife

onto a bark shell, expertly avoiding the poison-tipped spines. With a flick of her knife tip, she threw the now-limp worm casings back into the water to be returned to the circle of coral life. The hopeful wind-dancing witi birds knew better than to make a dive for the dangerous husks.

Unable to wait, the women licked the sweet gizzard off their fingers, humming in pleasure.

“Lau’maa believes peuru paste is good for baby making,” Nhia said as they watched their meal turn a deep sun red as it steeped in the wiro juice. Still dangling over the edge of the oka, she kicked her feet in the water. “Maybe I will be lucky this time.”

Tau prodded Nhia with a glance as sharp as the tip of her spear. “This is only your second Stone Moon of fertility. You were too young the last time.”

“Other islands would disagree.” Nhia’s kicking turned the oka in a circle around the rock anchor Tau had thrown in.

“Ia is not other islands, nor any other mother,” Tau growled, cracking a link-shell with the handle of her hip knife and slurping at its waiting treasure.

“Do you remember the last Stone Moon?” Nhia asked, discarding an empty link-shell into the water.

“Of course,” Tau replied. “I may have been young and a little preoccupied with lesser things, but one never forgets their first Stone moonrise.”

Nhia uttered a non-committal grunt and swung back into the oka, enfolding herself in her brightly painted wrap. She then pointed at the freshest carvings along the inner bulwarks of their vessel. “Lesser things? Do you count your sisters and cousins and cadences lesser than moon-gazing now?”

Tau’s face tightened beneath its already fine crust of salt. She scooped up a finger-full of peuru paste, indicating its readiness. “That is not what I meant.”

Nhia laughed and punched her lightly in the bicep. “I fathom, you tide-washed fool. You have always been an easy tease.”

“I wish you would refrain.”

“We all wish for many things, but some are not destined to come to us in any good time.”

Startled by the wistfulness of Nhia’s tone, Tau’s glance was not quick enough to catch her out. Nhia’s interest had been captured by a darting school of coral fish.

They passed the rest of the afternoon in polite but taut snatches of conversation before putting in for the night at an uninhabited islet. They made camp above the tide lines near

the smattering of kiho trees, Tau coal-roasting the moon fish Nhia had deftly speared from the shallows.

After sucking the husk of a spicy wiro-fruit dry, the quiet tension washed away with the tide as they laughed and pointed out stray pips and scales around each others mouths.

“Why did you volunteer to be my keel-woman?” Nhia asked, running her sinuous tongue around her lips to capture the leftovers before stretching her long neck to stare up at the rising Blood Moon as it kissed shoulders with the setting Water Moon.

Tau had to look away. Choosing an empty hardwood slate and a sharp, shaved naumu stone, she judged the angles of the celestials and made quick, deft cuts. “One does not volunteer to be a keel-woman at a gathering. It is an honor to be chosen.”

“Do not take me for some storm-tossed flotsam,” Nhia growled, more teasing than angry. “A chieftess’s daughter comes with privileges.”

“We are all daughters of the chieftess—”

Nhia’s inelegant snort cut off Tau’s protest. “You in more ways than one. I fathom you try very hard not to be, but you are her favorite.”

Tau frowned at her slate; the simple pictographic of the moons, she had cut accurate and neat. Koro would be pleased. “You seem to fathom more about me than I do. I am neither the

oldest nor the youngest, nor the most intelligent, hard-working, nor fecund.”

“Why speak so ill of yourself?” Nhia scolded, sounding much like Lau’maa in that moment, and Tau bit her lips to hide her own smile. “Gazer Koro would disagree. At least the intelligent and hard-working part.”

Nhia made a crude gesture, and they giggled in unison at the thought of the elderly gazer working on the fecundity part. When Nhia gasped out, complete with funny faces and more hand gestures, that she’d seen Koro sneaking into old kiho-weaver Maka’s wari, they fell about in further fits.

When they sobered, Nhia hugged her knees and stared at Tau until Tau gusted a sigh that set sparks flying from the banked fire.

“Perhaps I did suggest to Koro that it would be an excellent chance to document the rising of the first Stone Moon in twelve storm seasons by traveling further to the south and west,” Tau explained.

“And even if that had not made enough of an impression on Lau’maa, it would have given you the chance to show off your superior carving skills. You would gain your very own vessel, even if you were not chosen from the five keel-women candidates.” Nhia’s teeth glinted gold in the firelight.

Now it was Tau’s opportunity to snort. “Superior? Hardly.”

Nhia paused, as if marshalling another of her peuru-sting retorts, but instead she lowered her voice and said, “Your oka is very beautiful. You gave a whole new life and meaning to that wiro-leaf trunk. You must chant me a cadence of its carving some time soon.”

A whisper of impending death raised a ripple on Tau’s skin. She fumbled for another dismissal but finally mumbled her thanks.

It was only after she had settled down in a sun-warmed, grass-lined sand hollow to silently track the path of stars did she ponder what had gone unsaid. Had Nhia guessed at Tau’s feelings, or had she accepted her effect on everyone as a given? Stone Maidens were allowed some arrogance, Tau thought; they had little choice in so many other things.

The two of them played a game with quick glances, Nhia poking at the fire. Tau pondered whether she saw an invitation in the crinkle of Nhia’s eyes. But then it was gone as Nhia hummed a bawdy drinking song and looked away.

Tau attacked her star carvings. Nhia, her Ia-sister, her friend, did not suffer pity gladly.

* * *

“You do not believe in the sacrifice.”

Tau’s head jerked up as she snapped out of a light doze. She rubbed her eyes against the mid-afternoon glare off the

water and tested her thoughts before her thick tongue got the best of her.

Nhia paddled on, face impassive despite the sure-growing ache in her shoulders. Tau had seen her five year-old blood sister Mai'a with a better technique, but Nhia had insisted on learning something from the experience, even if it was about the formation of blisters.

Tau washed the sleep fuzz from her mouth with a swill of fresh water from Nhia's handmade gourd set to double as a gathering gift. "What makes you say that?"

"You have not asked me to turn around and save myself," Nhia replied, matter-of-fact. "It is traditional, you fathom."

"I fathom." Tau splashed some ocean water on her hot face and looked off to the horizon, as if searching for the small atoll that would be their evening camp.

The second day of their journey had been going well until that point. With only a little prompting, Nhia had helped Tau create her oka-building chant. Nhia's sweet voice and her ability to choose just the right words made the felling, hollowing, and carving of the single wiro-leaf trunk over a span of two seasons sound quite the epic feat.

Now she had gone and spoiled what had been a pleasant day on the water by bringing up politics.

“Are you going to ask me turn around? To plead for my life, like all good keel-women are supposed to do?” Nhia stopped paddling and flashed a grin over her shoulder to take the salt-sting out of her words.

Tau made a face and gestured at the paddle, though in truth she did not mind the slower pace Nhia’s efforts set. They were making excellent time and still had three days before the gathering began. Nhia set her face with a patient squint—another gesture eerily reminiscent of Lau’maa, though she was not a blood daughter of the chieftess—as she waited for Tau’s answer.

“Then I must not be a good keel-woman.” Tau busied her eyes and hands by searching amongst the food sacks for a strap of dried eel.

“On the contrary,” Nhia argued, dipping her paddle; the boat slipped through the water more or less smoothly. “You fathom the sea like no-one on Ia, and can chant the traveling cadence word-perfect. You can smell bad weather coming before I even see the clouds on the horizon. You paddle all day without complaint. And you are very pleasant company.”

Tau snorted at the last as she handed over a hunk of eel. “The sun must be cooking your brains under all that hair,” she teased. “Perhaps you should put a hat on.”

Nhia swotted away the favorite childhood insult like she would a salt-fly. “Answer the question.”

Tau stretched eel skin from her teeth until it snapped. “I have forgotten.”

Now it was Nhia’s turn to *kah*. “You are treating me like flotsam again, sister.” The emphasis on endearment was not entirely affectionate. “I see how you simply mouth the oldest of the cadences at island gatherings and flush red when the elders praise Ia’s exploits. I hear the words you substitute during Blood or Water or Stone tellings when you think no one notices.”

Tau’s flushed, her cheeks and ears as hot as bad sunburn cut with salt crust.

Nhia continued, “So you are not a traditionalist. That is fine by me. We can not let our future daughters and sisters drown beneath the tides of the future.”

Tau choked on something between a cough and a laugh. “Storm-washed sky, what do you mean?”

“Do you listen to anything your sisters talk about around the fires late at night?” Nhia *kah’d*, which became quick grunts as she pushed the oka forward by the power of her anger. “Or is your head forever up in the sky?”

“The heat of the fire pit makes me sleepy,” Tau said cryptically, shading her eyes. Another oka had shimmered out of the haze ahead of them.

Nhia sunk her paddle deeper in the water. Tau picked up the spare paddle and joined in the effort.

“Then embers will be lost in the dark, and the ash will be scattered on cold ground,” Nhia replied just as cryptically between grunts.

The other oka contained travelers heading for the gather: a Stone Maiden named Kai’Lei and her keel-woman Keke, from a closely grouped set of islands to sunsetward called Lai’Lei. Tau enjoyed the distraction of throwing chants back and forth between the boats. By the end of the day, five more okas had joined the procession. As sunset cast its wine-colored net, the travelers lashed their boats together and made the best of a night in the doldrums.

Everyone shared the tasks all travelers had had drummed into them from the moment they could chant: someone brought out a large clay brazier, for cooking and cheer; another produced a seven-string luuk, fingering clever chants for each of the evening’s activities; someone else set up a fresh water still, weighting a polished piece of kiho fabric between a folding frame.

Tau, as she erected their sleeping frame in their oka, stretching a large piece battered fabric to shape, bent a surreptitious whisper into Nhia's ear. "There's something strange about that keel-woman from Lai'Lei."

"Who, Keke?" Nhia had always been better with names. "Of course. He is a man."

Tau knocked her head on a post as she shot up straight. She rubbed her head and stared open mouthed. "Fathom that!"

Nhia chuckled low in her throat as she gathered her spear, sighting down its length. "Has the wind swept your brains? You fathom what men look like."

"Koro is different. He is, well, *old*. He is one of us. I do not think of him as male."

Nhia rolled her wrap into a kawat around her hips and upper thighs before sliding into the water. Tau hitched up her own skirts and followed, squinting at the new sister-friend limned by the brazier he was setting.

"But how do I chant in front of him?" Tau asked, stroking in place. "What is he doing as a keel-woman?"

"How do you chant in front of your moon master?" Nhia sucked in air deeply, readying her lungs for a dive. "And I suspect he is more than just a keel-woman."

Tau stared at Nhia as the dying light swallowed her. It was not like her to sound so bitter. Refreshingly sarcastic yes, but never as twisted as a loka root. “What do you mean?”

“Fathom, no? Have you not seen they only carry the essentials in their oka? Their island must be seed-rich. *He* is Kai’Lei’s gathering gift.”

Nhia dived to supply the repast, showing off by swimming deep and long, bursting from the water with a wriggling catch ensnared on her spear. The firelight glinted off her thick-as-night hair, and water ran rivulets along her nut-colored skin as she delivered each fish with a grinning flourish.

Tau’s worrying became boredom as the night wore on. There were no rules about not making friends with the maidens—this was the way many inter-island trade and seed-partnerships were formed—but there was an intricate weave to the relationships that Tau struggled to fathom.

Tau watched Keke across the brazier as they shared their travelers’ banquet gleaned from ocean and varying delicacies from each oka, including gourds of fermented wiro-fruit juice. She tried to make herself feel attracted to him. Male seed was often welcome in some of the more distant communities. She fuzzily tried to recall Lau’s words about men, remembering her fond tone. She still had not decided whether to go back with her gourd filled.

Keke laughed at everyone's stories and sang sweetly, performing a nice moon-welcome hand dance as the two Sisters shimmered toward each other.

But Tau could not do it. His chest and shoulders were too wide, his hips too narrow, and he had the breasts of a man. He would not be a good handful, she mused with a little *kah*.

At least he was as polite as Koro, keeping his genitals tucked behind a pretty hip wrap. She knew what to do with them, but she just could not work up the mental image of doing *that* with *him*. Every time she tried to put Keke in the picture, he kept turning into Nhia. Tau finally gave up, slugged back juice, and held out her shell for more.

During the repast, Nhia's face remained as stony as the impending moon, and her usually enthusiastic voice stayed silent.

Let her sulk, Tau mused. Perhaps a little competition for the gathering altar will rattle her wits.

With her mind tossed like a small storm-tossed oka by the wiro-juice, another thought gripped Tau which she struggled to throw off like a wet mantle: she did not want to go back to Ia alone.

Blinking away the effects of the juice and firelight, she settled into her oka's bow for her nightly observations,

comforted by the gentle slap of water and the creak and scrape of hull.

“Any sign, sky-gazer?” came a low voice, startling her once again with its strangeness. She eked out a smile as Keke clambered across rocking okas. He maintained a respectful distance.

“Look there, on the sunrise horizon.” Tau pointed her sharpened naumu. “Do you see that faint glow?”

Keke’s vigorous nod rocked the boats. “Yes! I have seen that the last few nights.”

“It is she, preparing to sail our skies and stir the seas to rapid fecundity.” Tau had to look away and make another mark on her current slate.

“Very poetic.”

Tau cheeks warmed beneath the salt crust. Lau’maa laughed in her head and whispered that men were just the same as women. Koro smiled down from the Water Moon, his face as seamed as its shimmering surface.

Keke continued, his voice entwining her thoughts. “Do you still believe that Ia fished the first Stone Moon from the ocean, seeding our waters with the bounty that we enjoy today?”

“That is a strange thing to ask a gazer.” Tau chuckled. She made another mark on the inside of her hull, marking the position of a star as it winked into being.

“You fathom so many of the older chants, and you have such a nice turn of phrase,” Keke replied. “You must make a good storyteller.”

Tau grimaced. “I prefer to be as far as possible from fire-light on clear nights.”

Keke’s chuckle demanded nothing. “So it seems.”

Tau decided to take a dive. “Are you here to try and fathom me out? Find out something about Nhia?”

Keke’s full laugh was as deep and booming as a coral roller. “Prickly as a peuru, and just as to the point. I like that. Yes, I fathom I am.”

“She sings well.” Tau scratched absent-minded at the flaking salt crust on her skin.

“I can hear that.” Keke’s chuckle kept moving with the tide.

Tau paused, and then, prompted by the memory of the looks Nhia sent Keke’s way when he was not looking, she barreled on. “Nhia is fertile now.”

Keke’s mouth snapped shut like an uglyfish out of water. Ah, so he did not smell the spiciness of the wiro-leaf she chewed and the peuru coming out in her skin, Tau thought. Perhaps Koro’s anecdotes had some merit—men were not as attuned to a woman’s ripeness.

“Do not fret the knots that tie us all together under Ia’s soft gaze,” Tau assured him. “The others are not long off. Most of them will be ripe by the time the final selection of the gathering is made.”

Keke was silent for a moment. Tau thought him restrained for not questioning who of the maidens she thought would not be ready in time.

He finally looked up, his pretty dawn-green eyes lost beneath the tumble of sun lightened locks. His undemanding gaze unnerved her. “Do you ever wonder if the gathering is—”

He broke off as he slipped over the side of his oka, barely making a sound as his skin met water. “Forgive me, sister-friend, I speak out of turn.”

He finished with a *kah*, then pushed off in a smooth breast stroke.

“Yes, I do often wonder,” Tau said, too softly for him to hear. “More and more, these days.”

* * *

A treasure-trove of wood littered the half moon bay, but this was no mere storm debris. The finely carved hulls of many oka knocked a symphonic counterpoint to the hush of waves, pierce of ululations, and hoarse wail of shell horns. Hands fluttered with the voices and breeze. Smoke from numerous cooking fires and ceremonial braziers promised scents of

mystery and delight. Skin of brown, burnished gold, ebony and copper flashed against a myriad of colored wraps and lush greenery.

The days of the gathering had been spectacle enough to warrant a hundred new chants, but the nights had truly been a wonder. As a keel-woman, Tau had little time to enjoy the pleasures of the evening. Any time left her after primping, oiling, dressing, accompanying, introducing and ego-stroking Nhia was given over to the Stone Moon.

Having escaped the fourth evening banquet and dance, Tau watched the almost-moon's sliver shiver on the horizon. Her nightly observations were an in-held breath, shared with like-minds. This close to moon-rise, many were torn between their duties to their sisters and their gazing; for this moment she had the beach to herself.

The moment the moon breached its ocean womb—surely only two or three nights away, Tau had calculated by celestial angles—someone would die.

“There you are.”

A pair of legs as familiar as her coral-etched shins whisked out of the bushes. “The Blood Moon wanes. You should be getting your rest.”

Nhia gave an inelegant snort and plopped to the sand with the ease of the long limbed, which Tau envied. “The activities in

the next wari made it a little difficult to sing to the Stone Mother.”

Tau choked off her chuckle. “If Kai’Lei is caught—”

Nhia flipped a hand. “No need to dip your oar too deep. Kai’Lei has, shall we say, been going for many long walks. I suspect she might even be sleeping on the sunriseward beach some nights.”

“Keke?”

“He is a very popular person.”

Tau grunted and dug her naumu into the wood, skewering a star into place with more force than its luminosity required.

“He has eyes for you, you fathom?”

Tau’s chin shot up and she stared at her sister-friend defiantly.

“I can smell it on you,” Nhia said, the light from the kissing moons casting hard shadows across the usually pretty angles of her face. “You are close to your Moon. If you so wished, you could beget a welcome seed together.”

Tau used the same shadows to hide her blush. Nhia’s own fertile scent had become hard to shake. Tau’s late-night gazing excursions were also an excuse to avoid the infused air of the snug-thatched wari they shared. She often caught herself bending her face close to Nhia’s hair as she weaved in flowers, tiny shells or beach beads, prettying her for her next test.

Their closeness in fertility made Tau's belly twinge, as if in sympathy or need. She had not decided which.

Tau could not stop a shudder, and a mischievous smile drove a dark slash across the harsh planes of Nhia's face. "Ah, the tide is coming in now. You do not desire him."

"Yes. No. I—" Tau heaved a great sigh and gently put down her shell and naumu. "You are leaning into the wrong wind, sister."

"Then tell me which way it blows."

Tau made a show of brushing sand off her newly carved shells, cutting a look at her sister-friend. Tonight, there was a layer of weariness tripping over wariness, an edge of fear along the usual knife edge of her teasing. Tau wondered if the irrelevancy of the tests imposed by the gathering elders were getting to Nhia.

During each evening's eliminations, the elders eyes slid off Nhia just a shade too fast. She had made it this far, and yet...

No one liked to see the knife lifted the knife above someone they truly care for.

Tau crossed her arms across breasts that protested the harsh treatment. "I do not deny he would be a worthy contributor of seed to Ia's children. However, I—" She *kah'd*, unable finish the thought out loud.

“You are too fertile of mind at this point in your life to carry a parasite,” Nhia finished.

Tau could not help but laugh. “There is no need to put it so crudely!”

“You get the drift.” Nhia’s teeth flashed blue white in the whispering dark.

“Lau’maa will be disappointed if I do not return fecund.” Tau’s laughter drifted with the tide that crept on dark feet up the sand.

“She will not.” The forcefulness of Nhia’s tone made Tau peer again at her sister-friend, noting the strain around her dancing eyes. “If you think that, then you fathom your mother not at all.”

Tau pulled back from the blustery force of Nhia’s new boldness.

“And besides,” Nhia continued, “you have six older sisters, all of whom have willingly shared their seed with Ia, mother bless their wombs.”

She inscribed the air with a quick circular blessing of her fingers. As Tau followed her hand-dance, Nhia grabbed Tau’s fingers and held them against her chest. Tau swallowed her sharp intake of breath.

“And there is something else, I fathom,” Nhia said, voice as rich as koca-bean soup. “Perhaps *someone* else.”

“I—” Tau tried to snatch away her hand, but Nhia tightened her grip and pulled her closer.

This close, Nhia’s pupils were dark moons against her golden skin. Her quickened breath smelled of sugared vilas, the rare aphrodisiac delicacy presented at dinner that evening.

“You can tell me,” Nhia whispered. “I am your sister-friend after all, am I not?”

“Yes.” Tau’s whisper faltered again.

Sand-spackled fingers brushed her cheek, and Tau closed her eyes. Words lodged in her chest as if she had been punched too hard in the fighting dance.

A heart-beat. Two.

A sweet pressure on her lips, raising the pressure in her chest to almost intolerable levels. Tau tasted salt, sand, and sugar; an embodiment of the ripe smell of her torments.

Then Nhia was gone, a slap of bushes, the rustle of sand on skin.

A beat: the hush of water.

Another: sandals on grass.

Tau looked up, hoping Nhia had returned; to apologize, to make good, to continue even though it would risk everything.

A smaller figure. Bathed in the shadows of the trees, only her moue of disappointment visible.

Kai’Lei.

She turned and fled. Tau, not fathoming or caring to who she ran, gave a little *kah* and closed her eyes to the silvered horizon. Death, rebirth; it was life to Stone Maidens, and some would seek out their eternal glory any which way they could, even if it meant betrayal.

A Stone Maiden's sacrifice was theirs to make; to live and die by.

* * *

Tau angled the oka stormward, her paddle biting deep as the rising sun cut naumu slivers off the water into her eyes.

She did not resist the headache. The uncountable cups of fermented wiro-fruit juice the previous night had helped dull the memory of the knife dashing across the throat of the figure positioned in ecstatic adulation across the great round stone.

The carefully carved representation of the great mother-moon had not resisted the chosen's stain. Neither had it broken beneath the weight of portent; change simmered in the blood of the next generation of Stone Maidens, but the change had not come swift enough to belay one more needless death.

Tau glanced at the figure in the bow, crouched against the impending storm, the first of the end season, a break in the perfection that had held its breath over the gathering. With face edged with resignation but not regret, Nhia had been silent since they had cast off that morning, not even calling or

chanting out to the other okas pushing for home. Tau's heart fell as heavy and low as an anchor stone, meeting and warring with the cool ache of relief in her belly.

Kai'Lei had been the maiden to gladly meet the bite of the mother's blade. Her final chant, the perfect combination of sweet traditional sentimentality. There had been no whisper of Nhia's impropriety.

"I can hear your thoughts from here."

Startled, Tau lost her grip. Before she had the chance to reform her thoughts, she had to quickly strip off and dive in to retrieve her paddle.

A smile a shade more cynical than expected greeted Tau as she heaved herself back over the edge of the oka, spluttering and cursing. Nhia quit her rearward rescue-paddling and held her own dripping paddle firmly in her lap.

"And just what do you fathom about my thoughts?" Tau pushed her hair out of her face, muttered another curse, and squeezed water out of her wrap.

"A little moon-broody there, fathom?"

"Stop pushing, or you will be swimming home."

"That would please you." Nhia chuckled, and Tau bit her bottom lip to arrest a smile.

"You can not fathom what would please me." Tau straightened her back and dipped her paddle.

Instead of turning back to her contemplation of the dark horizon, Nhia displayed her teeth and throat in a laugh. “You would be surprised.”

Tau *kah’d*. “Stop dancing around the issue.”

“*You stop.*”

Tau’s paddle clonked against wood, and she squinted at her sister-friend. Ropes of hair slapped her cheeks as Tau shook her head. “That was some final chant you sang, quite the turn-around. Nhia, I cannot fathom even where to begin.”

“Then I will make it easy.” Nhia rushed ahead like the rising wind. “I failed at the gathering, so I must return home with some set to my sails.”

Nhia cut off Tau’s placating noises with a swift flourish of her paddle.

“Let me finish. I did not come with my face entirely turned to the Stone Moon. I knew what I was singing about. The Stone mother should smile upon life, not death.”

Her jaw worked, a spasm and a swallow before she continued. “Most Maidens do not want to die. No matter what you have been led to believe. I want to *do* something with my time, before I take my final dive beneath the waves. I pushed Lau’maa to choosing you as my keel-woman, someone because I knew you would hold me up against a stiff wind. In your sand

rough way, you are far more adept at navigating the shifting tides of fireside talk and story telling chants than I.

“Do not look at me like that. Your mother is shrewder than you fathom.” Nhia’s smile turned softer. “I also had another reason: you.”

Tau had to look away. She pretended to search the threatening horizon though she knew by smell alone how long they had to reach shelter.

“I revere life,” Nhia continued. “We are both fertile. We are ready. We are right. Let us create a child together, while we have this chance.”

Tau rubbed the calluses of one hand against the scars of the other; she could not fathom her hands being gentle enough for such a task as guiding the life of her own seed.

“I will carry the child, as I fathom you dislike the idea.”

“Sister, I cannot ask that of you.” Tau stared straight ahead, mindful of the black clouds stacking up.

“Why not? The child of our mingled seed will be intelligent, inquisitive, and beautiful.”

“But you are my *friend*,” Tau protested, her biceps quivering with more than physical effort.

“Even better.”

“But you fathom I would make a terrible parent.”

Nhia *kah*'d and rolled her eyes. "And where is it writ that you have to parent? You have many wonderful sisters, mothers and aunties who make light work of it, in the Ia way."

Tau tasted the bitter and spice of the idea, like fine wiro-leaf, as Nhia mouthed silently, counting, Tau realized, the heartbeats between the far-off lightning and thunder.

"I went searching for the right person to share seed," Nhia said "but they all came up wanting compared to you. I need to take something back to Ia, to show my worth to my sisters. To them, I must make restitution for my failure."

"You did not fail," Tau said, paddle digging deep in her vehemence. "I will stand face to face across the fire with anyone who disagrees. You represented Ia superbly. Your trade negotiations will keep us well-prepared for many storm seasons. They will be proud of you. *I am proud of you.*"

"And I am proud of *you.*" Nhia favored Tau with a look as rich and thrilling to the senses as unpeeled koca-bean. "You go back to Koro a full prentice, your work welcomed with open hands at the great library. At least you have found your calling."

Tau stopped paddling and uttered a soft *kah*. She took a deep whiff of the storm, squinting against the spitting rain, and quickly ran through the current verse of the travelers' return chant. "Take up your paddle, woman," she commanded gruffly.

“We can make the next islet before the storm hits, if we push hard.”

Nhia’s hands flexed around the wood. “And there we can make a baby while we wait for the storm to pass?”

“We will *discuss* it.”

“Will we discuss how much you love me too?”

Despite the quickly dropping temperature, Nhia shucked out of her wrap. She threw back her shoulders and peeked at Tau from beneath dripping lashes. Her skin darkened with each large drop of rain.

“You have ideas as big as Ia’s Search For the Ends of the Ocean.”

Nhia chanted the first few notes of the cadence, adding a wistful lilt that sung of unseen coastlines and faces. “Some ideas, and dreams, are best when shared.”

“Ia preserve me from baby-foolish sisters!” With a wry shake of her head, Tau set her shoulders straining against the rising waves and wind.

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A.J. Fitzwater grew up in a small town on a fault line at the bottom of the world. She currently lives on another fault line in a bigger city made smaller by said fault line, still at the bottom of the world. When not fighting rambunctious land ogres and soothing her squawk of dragons, she perfects the art of slipping through cracks, literary and otherwise. Her short stories have appeared in indie press magazines and anthologies. For more tales from the writer's journey, read her blog at pickledthink.blogspot.com or find her on Twitter @AJFitzwater.

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COVER ART

“Marching Off,” by Maciej Wojtala



Maciej Wojtala is a Polish concept artist who works in the video games industry. For the last seven years, he has been working at People Can Fly, the studio responsible for *Bulletstorm* and *Gears of War : Judgment*. He creates environment concept art, prop designs, illustrations, and graphic design elements. View more of his artwork at www.wojtala.com.

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