

## The Breath of War

By Alette de Bodard



Going into the mountains had never been easy. Even in Rechan's first adult years, when the war was slowly burning itself to smouldering embers, every Spring Festival had been a slow migration in armed vehicles, her aunts and uncles frequently stopping in every roadside shop, taking stock of what ambushes or roadblocks might lie ahead.

The war might be over--or almost so, the planet largely at peace, the spaceports disgorging a steady stream of Galactic and Rong visitors onto Voc--but the pace was just as frustratingly slow.

They'd made good time at first: coming out of the city early in the morning and becoming airborne at the first of the authorised takeoff points, the steady stream of soldiers repatriated from the front becoming smaller and smaller as they flew higher, like insects on the intense brown of the road; zigzagging on the trails, laughing with relief as they unpacked the fried dough Rechan had baked for lunch, almost forgetting that they weren't setting on an adventure but on something with far longer-reaching consequences.

And then the flyer's motor made a funny sound, and the entire vehicle lurched downwards with a sickening crunch that jolted Rechan against the wall. And before they knew it, they were stranded on a dusty little road halfway up the mountains, leaving Rechan's niece Akanlam bartering with a local herder for a repair point.

By the sounds of it, the bartering was not going well.

Rechan sat against a large rock outcropping, rubbing the curve of her belly for comfort; feeling the familiar heaviness, the weight of the baby's body in her womb like a promise. *You'll be fine*, she thought, over and over, a saying that had become her lifeline, no matter how much of a lie it might be. *You'll be fine*.

"We should be able to solve this," Mau said. The stonewoman's face was as impassive as ever. Her eyes didn't crinkle as she spoke, her mouth didn't quirk; there was only the slow, quiet sound of her breath.

"You think so?" Rechan shook her head, trying not to think of her dreams. It was so many years since she'd carved Sang--so many years since she'd gone into the mountains with little more than rations and carving tools--but, with the particular link that bound a woman to her breath-sibling, she could feel him every night: blurred images of him hovering over the plateaux, never venturing far from the place of his birth. A relief, because he was her only hope.

On Voc, it took a stoneman's breath to quicken a baby at birth--and not any stoneman's, but the mother's breath-sibling, the one she had carved on accession to adulthood and entrusted with her breath. Without Sang, her baby would be stillborn.

"We'll find a vehicle," Mau said.

Rechan watched her niece from a distance. The discussion was getting animated and Akanlam's hand gestures more and more frantic. "Help me up," she said to Mau.

The stonewoman winced. "You shouldn't--"

"I've spent a lifetime doing what I shouldn't," Rechan said; and after a while Mau held out a hand, which she used to haul herself up. The stonewoman's skin was *lamsinh*- the same almost otherworldly translucency, the same coolness as the stone; the fingers

painstakingly carved with an amount of detail that hadn't been accessible to Rechan's generation. Mau was Akanlam's breath-sibling; and Akanlam had put into her carving the same intensity she always put in her art. Unlike most stonemen, nothing in her looked quite human, but there was a power and a flow in the least of Mau's features that made her seem to radiate energy, even when sitting still.

"What is going on here?" Rechan asked, as she got closer.

Akanlam looked up, her face red. "He says the nearest repair point is two days down."

Rechan took in the herder: craggy face, a reflection of the worn rocks around them; a spring in his step that told her he wasn't as old as he looked. "Good day, younger brother," she said.

"Good day, elder sister." The herder nodded to her. "I was telling the younger aunt here--you have to go down."

Rechan shook her head. "Going down isn't an option. We have to get to the plateaux."

The herder winced. "It's been many years since city folks came this way."

"I know," Rechan said, and waited for the herder to discourage her. She'd gotten used to that game. But, to her surprise, he didn't.

"Exhalation?" he asked. "There are simpler ways."

"I know," Rechan said. He'd mistaken Mau as her breath-sibling and not Akanlam's--an easy mistake to make, for in her late stage of pregnancy, having a breath-sibling at hand would be crucial. "But it's not exhalation. She's not my breath-sibling; she's *hers*."

The herder looked from her to Mau and then back to Akanlam. "How far along are you?" he asked.

Too far along; that was the truth. She'd waited too long, hoping a solution would present itself; that she wouldn't need to go back into the mountains. A mistake; hope had never gotten her anywhere. "Eight months and a half," Rechan said, and heard the herder's sharp intake of breath. "My breath-sibling is in the mountains." Which was... true, in a way.

The herder grimaced again, and looked at the bulge of her belly. "I can radio the nearest village," he said, finally. "They might have an aircar, or something you can borrow, provided you return it."

Rechan nodded, forcing her lips upwards into a smile. "Perfect. Thank you, younger brother."

#

The village didn't have an aircar, or a cart, or any contrivance Rechan could have used. They did have mules and goats, but in her advanced state of pregnancy she dared not risk a ride on an animal. So they radioed the next village, which promised to send their only aircar. Rechan thanked them, and hunkered with Akanlam down in the kitchen to help with the communal cooking. There was a wedding feast that night, and the community would need the travellers' hands as much, if not more, than their money.

Mau came by the kitchen later, having spent the afternoon gossiping with the village elders. "They say there's rebel activity on the plateaux," she said, handing Rechan a thin cutting knife.

"Hmm." Rechan took a critical look at the seafood toasts on the table. Half of them looked slightly crooked; hopefully in the dim light the guests wouldn't mind too much.

"Herders don't take their beasts into the mountains, and especially not on the *lamsinh* plateaux. They say people go missing there. Crossfire, probably. They say on quiet nights you can hear the sounds of battle."

Rechan thought of her dreams--of Sang's savage thoughts, the thrill of the hunt, the release of the kill, permeating everything until she woke up sweating. What kind of being had he become, left to his own devices on the plateaux? "You're not trying to discourage me, are you?"

Mau shifted positions; the light caught her face, frozen into the serene enigmatic smile that had been Akanlam's as a child. "Ha. I've since long learnt how useless that is. No, I just thought you'd like to know exactly what we're going into."

"War," Akanlam said from her place at the stove, her voice dour. "The last remnants of it, anyway."

The Galactic delegation had arrived a couple of days earlier, to formalise the peace agreement between the government and the rebels; the spaceports were being renovated, the terminals and pagodas painstakingly rebuilt. "I guess," Rechan said. "It always comes back to the mountains, doesn't it?" She shifted positions, feeling the baby move within her, a weight as heavy as stone. "Legend says that's where we all came from."

"The prime colony ark?" Akanlam scoffed, chopping vegetables into small pieces. "That was debunked years ago."

A cheer went up outside. Rechan shifted, to see onto the plaza. A gathering of people in silk clothes, clustered around the lucky trio. She was young, even younger than Akanlam; wearing a red, tight-fitting tunic with golden embroidery, and beaming; and her groom even younger than her, making it hard to believe he had cleared adolescence. The breath-sibling was a distinguished, elderly gentleman in the robes of a scholar, who reminded Rechan of her own grandfather. He was standing next to the bride, smiling as widely as she was. The sunlight seemed to illuminate his translucent body from within: it had been a beautiful block of stone he'd been carved from, a white shade the colour of Old Earth porcelain; likely, so close to the plateaux they could pick their blocks themselves, rather than rely on what the traders brought them.

By their side was someone who had to be the bride's sister, carrying a very young infant in her arms. The baby's face was turned towards the couple, eyes wide open in an attempt to take everything in; and a little brother in fur clothes was prevented, with difficulty, from running up to the bride. The baby was three months, four months old, perhaps? With the pudgy fingers and the chubby cheeks--her own child would be like that one day, would look at her with the same wide-eyed wonder.

"Life goes on," Akanlam said, her face softening. "Always."

"Of course." That was why Rechan had gotten herself inseminated, against the family's wishes: she might have been a failure by their standards, thirty years old and unmarried--for who would want to marry someone without a breath-sibling? But, with the war over, it was time to think of the future; and she didn't want to die childless and alone, without any descendants to worship at her grave. She wanted a family, like the bride; like the bride's sister: children to hold in her arms, to raise as she had been raised, and a house filled with noise and laughter instead of the silence of the war, when every month had added new holos to the altar of the ancestors.

"I'll go present our respects," Akanlam said.

"You never had much taste for cooking," Mau pointed out, and Akanlam snorted.

"Elder Aunt cooks quite well," she said with a smile. "Better to leave everyone do what they excel at, no?"

"You impossible child," Rechan said as she so often did, with a little of her usual amusement. Akanlam was the niece with the closest quarters to her own; and she and Mau and Rechan often got together for dinners and after-work drinks--though none of them ever let Akanlam cook. As Mau had said: not only did she not have much taste for it, but left without supervision she'd burn a noodle soup to a charred mess before anyone could intervene. She did mix superb fruit chunks, though. "What are you going to do when you get married?"

"You're assuming I want to get married," Akanlam said, without missing a beat. "And even if I did, I'd stay with you. You're going to need help with raising those children of yours. How many did you say you wanted?"

"I'd be lucky to have one," Rechan said, finally. But she'd dreamt of a larger family; of the dozens brothers and sisters and cousins of her youth, before war carved a swathe through them--a horde of giggling children always ready to get into trouble. If she could find her breath-sibling again... "And I'm old enough to do what I'm doing."

"Oh, I have no doubt. But it's still a job for two people. Or three." Akanlam smiled. "I'll see you outside."

After Akanlam had gone, Mau swung from her wooden stool and came to stand by Rechan. "Let me have a look."

Rechan almost said no, almost asked what the point was. But she knew; too many things could go wrong at this stage. It wasn't only birth without her stoneman that could kill her baby.

Mau's hands ran over the bulge of her belly, lingered on a point above her hips. "The head is here," she said, massaging it. "He's shifted positions. It's pointing downwards, into your birth canal. It's very large."

"I know," Rechan said. "My doctor said the same after the scan. Said I'd have difficulty with the birth." There were new systems; new scanners brought by the Galactics, to show a profusion of almost obscene details about the baby in her belly, down to every fine hair on its skin. But none of them had the abilities and experience of a stoneman.

"Mmm." Mau ran her hands downwards. "May I?" After a short examination, she looked up, and her face lay in shadow.

"What is it?" Rechan asked. What could she possibly have found?

"You're partly open," Mau said, finally. "You'll have to be careful, elder aunt, or you're going to enter labour early."

"I can't--" Rechan started, and then realised how ridiculous it would sound to Mau, who could do little more in the way of medical attention. "I have to get back to the plateaux."

Mau shook her head. "I didn't tell Akanlam--because you know this already--but the path gets impracticable by aircar after a while. You'll have to walk."

As she had, all those years ago. "You're right," Rechan said. "I did know." She braced herself for Mau to castigate her, to tell her she couldn't possibly think of taking a mountain trail in her state. But the stonewoman's face was expressionless, her hands quite still on Rechan's belly.

"You'll have to be careful," she repeated at last.

She couldn't read Mau at all. Perhaps it came from never having lived with a breath-sibling of her own. "You never told me why you came," Rechan said. "Akanlam--"

"--came because she's your niece, and because she knew it was important to you." Mau nodded. Was it Rechan's imagination, or was the baby stirring at her touch? Mau was Akanlam's breath-sibling, not hers. She could deliver the baby, but couldn't give it

the breath that would quicken it--yet still, perhaps there was something all stonewomen shared, some vital portion of the planet's energy, a simmering, life-giving warmth, like that stone she'd touched all those years ago before she started her carving. "I came because I was curious. You're a legend in the family, you know."

Rechan snorted. "The one without a breath-sibling? That's hardly worth much of anything."

Mau turned, so that the light caught on the stone of her arms, throwing every vein of the rock into sharp relief. "But you do have a breath-sibling, don't you, elder aunt?"

How much did she know, or suspect? Rechan's official story had always been she couldn't remember, and perhaps that had been the truth, once upon a time, but now that they were in the mountains again--now that the sky lay above them like a spread cloth, and the air was sharp with the tang of smoke--memories were flooding back.

"I know the story," Mau said. "They measured you when you came back down, attached electrodes to your chest and listened to the voice of your heart. You had no breath left in you; even if they gave you *lamsinh*, you wouldn't have been able to bring a carving to life. You'd already given it to someone. Or something." Her gaze was shrewd.

So that was it, the reason she'd come with them: knowledge. Akanlam was happy with her art gallery and her shows; but of all the curious apathy she could show with life, none of it had gone into her breath-sibling. "You were curious," Rechan said.

Mau smiled, that odd expression that didn't reach her eyes. "You carved something in the mountains--came back covered in stone dust. What was it, elder aunt?"

#

She remembered her last trip into the mountains as if it was yesterday: going barefoot in the morning, with a curt message left on her parents' comms unit. She'd taken the set of carving tools that had been given to her on her sixteenth birthday--the straight cutter, the piercer, the driller, and all that would be necessary for her exhalation ceremony. It was a beautiful set, given by Breath-Mother: the finest hardened glass, as translucent as the best *lamsinh* stone, and hardly weighed anything on her back. As she walked away through the sparse scattering of buildings on the edge of the city, she heard, in the distance, the rumble of bombs hitting the Eastern District--the smell of smoke, the distant wail of militia sirens--and turned her head westwards, towards the mountains.

The mountains, of course, weren't better--just further away from any hospital, Flesh-Mother and Father would say with a frown--more isolated, so that if you were captured no one would know where you were for days and days. They'd have a block of *lamsinh* brought to her for the exhalation; everyone did, paying militia and soldiers and the occasional daredevil to cart the life-sized stone into the city. She just had to wait, and she'd be safe.

Rechan could not wait.

She was young, and impatient; and tired of being cooped up for her own safety. She should have been off-planet by now, sent off to Third Aunt for a year's apprenticeship in the ship-yards; except that the previous summer all spaceport traffic had been halted when a bomb exploded in the marketplace; and the apprenticeship went to some other relative who wasn't from Voc, who didn't have to cope with bombs and battles and food shortages. By now--if it hadn't been for those stupid rebels--she could have had her hands in motor oil; could have climbed into pilots' cabins, running her hands on the instruments and imagining what it would be like, hanging suspended in the void of space with only the stars for company.

Life wasn't fair, and she certainly wasn't going to wait any longer to become an adult.

#

There probably was a divinity somewhere watching over thoughtless adolescents; for Rechan had made it into the mountains, and to the plateaux, without any major trouble. She hitched a ride on a peddler's cart--so many things that could have gone wrong there, but the peddler was nice and friendly, and glad for the company--and then, when there no longer were villages or people, she walked. From time to time, she'd had to duck when a flyer banked over the path. At this height, it had to be rebels, and they'd kill her if they found her, as they had killed Second Uncle and Seventh Aunt, and Cousin Think and Cousin Anh; all the absences like gaping wounds in the fabric of family life. Demons take the rebels, all of them; how much simpler would life would be if none of them were here.

And then she stood on the plateaux--her feet hurting, her bag digging into the small of her back, her breath coming in fiery gasps--and it didn't matter, any of it, because there was the stone.

She'd only seen the blocks the traders brought down. The one for her cousin's exhalation had been roughly the size of a woman; of course, with *lamsinh* at such a dear price, people would buy only what was necessary. But here were no such constraints. The stone towered over her, cliffs as tall as the Temple of Mercy, broken bits and pieces ranging from the size of a skyscraper to the size of her fist; colours that ranged from a green so deep it was almost black, to the translucent shades Flesh-Mother so valued, the same colour used for all the family's breath-siblings--all the stone's veins exposed, streaks of lighter and darker nuances that seemed to be throbbing on the same rhythm as her own frantic heartbeat.

She walked among them, letting her hand lightly trail on the smooth surfaces, feeling the lambent heat; the faint trembling of the air where the sun had heated them through, like an echo of her own breath. People had always been vague about exhalation: they'd said you'd know, when you saw your block of stone, what kind of breath-sibling you wanted to carve, what kind of birth master you wanted to give to your children yet to come. But here she didn't just have one block of stone, but thousands; and she wandered into a labyrinth of toppled structures like the wreck of a city, wondering where she could settle herself, where she could make her first cut into the incandescent mass around her.

And then she rounded the edge of the cliff, and saw it, lying on the ground.

It was huge, easily ten times her size, with streaks the colour of algae water, and a thousand small dots, almost as if the stone had been pockmarked; a pattern of wounds that reminded her, for some absurd reason, of a tapestry that had used to hang on Seventh Aunt's wall, before the bomb tore her apart in the marketplace.

In all the stories she'd heard, all the tales about girls running off to have adventures, there was always this moment; this perfect moment when they reached the plateaux, or when someone showed them a block of stone, and they just *knew*, staring at it, what it would look like when whittled down to shape; when they'd freed, measure by agonising measure, the limbs and head and body of their breath-sibling, the one who would be their constant companion as they travelled over the known planets. In the stories, they didn't carve; they revealed the stone's secret nature, gave it the life it had always longed for.

Rechan had never given that credence. She was the daughter of an engineer, and believed in planning and in forethought; and had brought sketches with her, of how her

own stoneman would look, with delicate hands like her mother, and large strong arms that would be able to carry her to hospital if the delivery went badly.

Except that then, she stood in front of the stone, and saw into its heart. And *knew*, with absolute certainty, that it wasn't a stoneman that she needed or wanted to carve.

#

Later, much later, when she thought about it all, she wondered how she'd endured it--months up in the plateaux with scant rations, sleeping rough, sheltering under the rock face when the rain came--day after day of rising and going back to her block of stone; carving, little by little, what would become her breath-sibling.

She did the outside first: the sleek, elegant hull, tapering to a point; the shadow of the twin engines at the back, every exhaust port and every weapons slit rendered in painstaking detail. Then she turned inwards, and from the only door into the ship, made corridors inch by agonising inch, her tools gnawing their way through the rock. All the while, she imagined it hanging in space--fast and deadly, a predator in a sea of stars, one who never had to cower or shelter for fear of bombs or flyers; one who was free to go where she wished, without those pointless restrictions on her life, those over-solicitous parents and breath-mothers who couldn't understand that bombs happened, that all you could do was go out and pray, moment after moment, that they wouldn't fall on you.

It was rough carving. She didn't have the tools that would be available to the generation after hers--not the fineness of Akanlam's carving, who would be able to give Mau fingernails, and a small pendant on her chest, down to the imprint of the chain that held it. She carved as she could--hour after hour, day after day, lifted into a place where time had no meaning, where only the ship existed or mattered; stopping only when the hunger or thirst brought themselves to her attention again, snatching a ration and then returning, hermit-like, to the translucent corridors she was shaping.

Until one day, she stepped back, and couldn't think of anything else to add.

There was probably something meaningful one was supposed to say, at an exhalation's close. She'd read speeches, all nonsense about "your breath to mine" and meters and meters of bad poetry. It didn't seem to matter very much what one said, truth be told.

"Well," she said to the ship, laying a hand on the hull, "this is it." Winter had come by then, settling in the mountains, a vice around her lungs; and her breath hung in ragged gasps above her. "I'm not sure--"

The stone under her hand went deathly cold. What--? She tried to withdraw her hand, but it had become fused to the *lamsinh*; and the veins shifted and moved, as lazily as snakes underwater.

There was a light, coming from the heart of the stone, even as the breath was drained out of her, leaving her struggling to stand upright--a light, and a slow, ponderous beat like a gigantic heart. *Breath-sister*, the stone whispered, and even that boomed, as if she stood in the Temple of Mercy, listening to the gong reminding the faithful to grow in wisdom. *Breath-sister*.

Her hand fell back; and the ship rose, casting its shadow over her.

He was sleek elegant beauty--everything she had dreamt of, everything she had carved, all the release she sought--and he didn't belong on Voc, anymore than she did.

*Come with me*, the ship whispered; and she had stood there in the growing cold, trembling, and unable to make any answer.

#

"A ship," Mau said, thoughtfully.



Rechan shivered. It had made sense at the time. "I named him Sang," she said at last. Illumination, in the old language of the settlers--because he had stood over her, framed by light.

"I didn't even know you could carve ships."

"Anything living," Rechan said, through clenched teeth. She was going to feel sick again. Was it the baby, or the memories, or both? "Stonemen are tradition, but we could have carved cats or dogs or other Old Earth animals if we felt like it."

"Whoever you'd want assisting at the birth of your children," Mau said with a nod. She smiled, her hand going to the impression of the pendant on her chest. "I suppose I should be grateful Akanlam followed tradition. Being an animal wouldn't have been very--exciting."

*But you wouldn't know*, Rechan thought, chilled. You'd be quite happy, either way. That's what you were carved for, to give your breath to Akanlam's babies, and even if you hadn't been born knowing it, everyone in our society has been telling you that for as long as you can remember. How much responsibility did they have for their carvings? How much of themselves had they put into them; and how much had they taught them?

And what did Sang owe her, in the end--and what did she owe him?

"Your ship is still up there," Mau said. Her voice was quiet, but it wasn't difficult to hear the question in her words.

"Yes," Rechan said. "The crossfire you heard about, it's not between the rebels and the government soldiers. It's Sang mopping rebels up." It hadn't been what she'd dreamt of, when she'd carved him; she'd wanted a spaceship, not a butcher of armies. But, consciously or unconsciously, she hadn't put that into her carving.

"The ship you carved?" Mau lifted an eyebrow.

"I was young once," Rechan said. "And angry. I don't think I'd carve the same, if I had to do it again." Though who could know, really. She'd always wondered what would have happened, if she'd answered the question Sang had asked; if she'd said yes. Would she still be on Voc, still going over the bitter loneliness of her life? Would she be elsewhere on some other planet, having the adventures she'd dreamt of as a teenager? If she could do it again...

"Anyway," she said, "I don't have much choice. If we don't reach the plateaux in time..." She didn't dare say it, didn't dare voice the possibility; but she felt as though someone had closed a fist of ice around her heart.

#

They were halfway to Indigo Birds Pass, where they would have to abandon the car, when the noise of a motor made everyone sit up.

"That's not good," Akanlam said. "We're sitting targets here." She didn't stop the aircar, but accelerated. The noise got closer, all the same: not a flyer but a swarm of drones, dull and tarnished by dust. They banked above the overhang ahead and were gone so quickly it was hard to believe they'd been there at all. Akanlam made a face. "Rebels. Our army has Galactic drones."

"Let's go on," Rechan suggested. They would get to the pass in half a day. Surely that was enough time, before the drones sent their analyses onwards to their masters. Surely...

Not half an hour later, the drones came back, and hung over the aircar for what seemed like an eternity. Rechan found herself clenching Mau's hand, so hard that the stone hurt her fingers.

When the drones left, Akanlam killed the motor. "That's it. We have to go on foot. Under the cliffs, where they'll have trouble sending flyers. Come on."

Mau shot Rechan a warning glance. Rechan spread her hands, helplessly. Yes, she had to be careful, but what else could she do?

"There's a path," Akanlam called from the shelter of the overhang. "A goat trail, probably, but it'll be sheltered. At least for a while."

Rechan slid down from the aircar and walked to the overhang. There *was* a path, twisting along the side of the mountain and vanishing between two large stones. It was steep and thin, and one look at it would have made her doctor's face pale.

But there was no choice. There had never been any choice: everything had been set from the moment she'd walked into the insemination centre; or perhaps even earlier, when she'd lain in the silence of her room and known that she couldn't bear it forever. She laid her hands on her belly, whispered "hang on" to the unborn baby, and set her feet on the path.

She'd forgotten how tiring it had been, ten years earlier. Her breath burnt in her lungs after only four steps, and her legs ached after eight; and then there was only the path ahead of her, her eyes doggedly on every rock and particle of dust, making sure of her step--perpetually off-balance, struggling to keep the curve of her belly from betraying her as rocks detached under her feet--she mustn't trip, mustn't fall, mustn't let go...

After a while, the pain came on. At first, she thought it was just the aches from the unusual exercise, but it didn't abate, washing over her in a huge, belly-clenching wave, cutting her breath until she had to halt. Touching her belly, she found it hard, pointed, and the baby a compressed weight under her hands. A contraction. She was entering labour. No, not now--it was too early. She couldn't afford--couldn't lose everything--

"Elder aunt?" Mau was by her side, suddenly, her hands running over her belly.

"It's starting," she said.

"Yes." Mau's voice was grave, expressionless. Rechan didn't want to look at Akanlam, who'd always been bad at disguising her emotions. "It's your first one, elder aunt. This can go on for hours. There is still time, but you have to walk."

"I can't--" she whispered through clenched teeth, bracing herself against the next contraction. "Too--tired--" And they were going to reach that plateau, and she was going to find there was no ship, that her dreams were lies, that it had never been there--how she wanted to be the ship now, hanging under the vastness of the heavens, without heaviness, without pain, without a care in the world..

Mau's hands massaged her, easing the knots of pain in her back. "One an hour at first, elder aunt. Or more apart. There is still time. But you have to walk."

"The drones?" she asked, and it was Akanlam who answered.

"They haven't come back."

*Not yet*, she thought, tasting bile and blood on her tongue. She hauled herself as upright as she could, gently removing Mau's hands. "Let's walk," she said, and even those words were pain.

There was a divinity, watching over thoughtless teenagers; there had to be one for thoughtless adults, too; or perhaps it was her ancestors, protecting her from their distant altar--her thoughts wandering as she walked, step after step on the path, not knowing how far the ending lay, not caring anymore--step after step, with the occasional pause to bend over, gasping, while the contraction passed, and then resuming her painful, painstakingly slow walk to the top.

She found her mind drifting--to the ship, to his shadow hanging over her, remembering the coldness of the stone against her hand, the breath that seemed to have left her altogether; remembering the voice that had boomed like ten thousand storms.

*Come with me, breath-sister.*

*Come with me.*

He was there on the plateau, waiting for her, and what would she tell him?

They climbed in silence. There was just Mau's hands on her, guiding her, supporting her when she stumbled; and Akanlam's tunic, blue against the grey of the rock, showing her the way forward.

She was barely aware of cresting a rise--of suddenly finding herself not flush against a cliff face, but in the middle of a space that seemed to stretch forever, a vast expanse of *lamsinh* rocks caught by the noon sun--all shades of the spectrum, from green to palest white; and a trembling in the air that mirrored that of her hands.

"There is no ship," Akanlam said, and her voice was almost accusatory.

Shaking, Rechan pulled herself upwards. "He'll be deeper into the plateau. Where I carved him. We have to--"

"Elder Aunt," Mau said, low and urgent.

What? she wanted to ask; but, turning to stare in the same direction as Mau, she saw the black dots silhouetted against the sky--growing in size, fast, too fast..

"Run".

She would have, but her legs betrayed her--a contraction, locking her in place, as frozen as the baby within her womb, as helpless as a kid to the slaughter--watching the dots become the sleek shape of flyers, hearing the whine of the motors getting louder and louder..

Run run run, she wanted to shout to Mau and Akanlam--there's no need for you to get caught in this. Instead, what came out of her was a scream: a cry for help, a jumble of incoherent syllables torn out of her lungs, towards the Heavens; a deep-seated anger about life's unfairness she'd last felt when carving the ship. It echoed around the plateau, slowly fading as it was absorbed by the *lamsinh* stone.

Her hand was cold again, her breath coming in short gasps--and, like an answer to a prayer, she saw the ship come.

He was sleek, and elegant, and deadly. Banking lazily over the plateau--illuminated by the noonday sun, as if with an inner fire--he incinerated the flyers, one by one, and then hovered over Mau and Akanlam, as if unsure what to do about them. "No you don't!" Rechan screamed, and then collapsed, having spent all her energy.

Breath-sister. The ship--Sang--loomed over her once more.

She'd forgotten how beautiful Sang was; how terribly wrong, too--someone that didn't belong on Voc, that shouldn't have been here. He should have hung, weightless, in space; instead he moved sluggishly, crushed by gravity; and his hull was already crisscrossed by a thousand fracture lines, barely visible against the heat of the stone. The *lamsinh* was weathered and pitted, not from meteorite strikes but from weapons--in fact, dusty and cracked he looked like a rougher, fuzzier version of the rebel flyers he'd incinerated.

*You need me*, the ship said, and came lower, hull almost touching her outstretched hands. *Let me give you your breath back*.

It was wrong, all wrong--everything she had desired, the breath she needed for her baby, the birth she'd been bracing herself for--and yet... "You shouldn't be here," she said. "You're a spaceship, not a flyer." She was barely aware of Mau standing by her side, looking up at Sang with wide eyes; of Akanlam, spreading her tunic on the ground.

*I waited for you.*

"You can't--" But he could, couldn't he? He could do exactly what she'd thought of, when she'd carved him--all her anger at the war, at the rebels, at the unfairness of it all--

year after year of hunting down rebels because that's what she'd wanted at the time; not a breath-sibling to help her with a birth, but someone born of her anger and frustration, of her desire to escape the war at any cost.

*Come with me.*

She'd wondered what she would do, were Sang to ask that question of her again, but of course there was only one possible answer. The world had moved on; she had moved on; and only Sang remained, the inescapable remains of her history--a sixteen-year-old's grandiloquent, thoughtless, meaningless gesture.

"You have to go," she said, the words torn out of her before she could think. "Into space. That's what I carved you for. Not this--this butchery."

The ship came close enough for her to touch the exhaust ports: there was a tingle on her hands, and a warmth she'd forgotten existed--and, within her, for the first time, the baby quickened, kicking against the confines of her womb. She ought to have felt relief, but she was empty--bracing herself against the next contractions and trying to crane her head upwards to see Sang.

*You need me*, he said. *Breath to breath, blood to blood. How else will you bear your children? Come with me. Let's find the stars together.*

"I can't. You have to go," she said, again. "On your own."

"You will not come with me?" The disappointment, in other circumstances, would have been heartbreaking.

"Go, Sang. When this is over--go find the stars. That's all you've ever dreamt of, isn't it?"

The contractions were hitting in waves now--one barely over before the next one started. *Your child is coming*, Sang said.

"I know." Someone--Akanlam--grabbed her, laid her on the ground--no, not on the ground, on the tunic she'd spread out. It was becoming hard to think, to focus on anything but the act of giving birth.

*What will you do, for your other children? You need me.*

She did; and yet... "I'll find you," she said, struggling for breath. "If I need you." Of course she wouldn't; even with her link to him, all she'd have to go on would be fuzzy dream-images; she wouldn't leave Voc, wouldn't venture among ten thousand planets and millions of stars in a fruitless search. But it didn't matter. Sang would finally be free.

Sang was silent, for a while. *I will come back*, he said.

He wouldn't. Rechan knew this with absolute certainty--Sang was the desire to escape, the burning need for flight that she'd felt during her adolescence. Once he found space, he would be in the home he'd always been meant for; and who could blame him for not looking back? "Of course," she lied--smoothly, easily. "You can always come back."

There would not be other babies beyond this one, no large family she could raise; not enough to fill the emptiness of the house. But did it matter, in the end? She'd had her wish, her miracle--her birth. Could she truly ask for anything else?

*I am glad.*

"So am I." And it almost didn't feel like a lie. Rechan relaxed, lying flat on her back; and she settled herself down to wait for the beautiful, heartbreaking sound of her child's first breath.

END

Originally published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, issue 142, March 2014  
Cover credits: Ferdinand Dumago Ladera, ["Sojourn"](#)