



# Contemplate the Eternal

*Alex Jacobs*



*In the mountains of the north there is a tribe whose name, like many others across the land, simply translates as, "the people." One would assume from such a generic name that they are a generic people and one would be correct in all but two aspects. The first is that, while their housing, their tools, their cuisine, their stories, their tales, their ways of making war, are all similar to the others of the mountains save for small differences; they are unique in that they and they alone have discovered a most particular method of drying the berries of a particular bush so as to create what no other tribe has thus far: a dye of purest, emerald green.*

*The second is the word, "are." For they are now a people who were.*

— The Cost of Grace, Unknown author

The loudness of the currents hurt Seiji's eyes.

No, that wasn't quite right. They were loud and his eyes could pick up little but darkness, but the flowing water echoed in his ears in a way that he saw the world in front of him, as bright and clear as midday and as dark and colorless as a charcoal sketch.

The waves moved and their echo whispered through the depths, thunder in his eyes and lightning in his ears, not his ears, his skin. He heard, saw, felt, with every part of himself. His skin, yes, but something deep inside him. Had he ever really seen before?

He sensed—he gave up trying to come up with a better word—his beloved approach, her smooth legs propelling her effortlessly through the water. Clad only in the sea, she glided without resistance. He could feel the lightness of her bones, the thickness of the pearls that adorned her neck. He marveled at his awareness of the small fish below her jaw, scarcely half the size of one of his new claws, as it flit in and out of her teeth, cleaning out bits of the snapper they had together feasted upon earlier.

When he'd first turned she'd still used the sounds of her mouth to speak. It had terrified him, but not so much as later when she'd introduced him to other methods. Now her mouth was still—the sound would interfere with their sight, at any rate—and when she spoke it was with fire. No, not fire, lightning he realized. Something inside her and him as well, that carried through the water to him.

*Do you miss them?*

Seiji shook his head, an invisible gesture but one she would feel as surely as the currents flowed.

*My place is here.*

She approached, hovering in front of him, then reached out to touch his face. Sharp talons gently caressed his scales, traced the outlines of fins. Once upon a time, Seiji would have been horrified by his transformation. Now these parts of him felt as natural as not breathing.

*Is it?* she asked as she turned and swam away. Startled, Seiji followed, albeit somewhat less gracefully. The robes of his former clan dragged around him, but his beloved went slow and waited for him.

They made for a current and let it carry them through the depths. Underneath the ships on the surface with their sails unfurled, around hot vents in the seabed where creatures stranger than any on the surface had ever dreamed of made their home, past forests of brightly colored coral where a panoply of life and death played out in a more intricate cycle than Seiji could have described if he lived a thousand years. And then he realized that he just might.

They came to the wrecks.

The design was not like any ship of the Empire Seiji had seen. The hulls were longer and narrower, with a long, thin beam underneath. The sails had long since rotted away (why hadn't the wood, he idly wondered?) but the masts that held them were taller and arranged in a unique fashion. Seiji had been no sailor but he knew enough to know this ship was different.



And she began to sing.

*Sing of the tides and the times before  
And palaces once we called home.  
Deep beneath the great green foam  
That comes where the wave meets the shore.*

*Sing through the years as if they were none  
Of loving and longing and loss.  
Spare us and sing not of the cost  
But of back when we swam in the sun.*

*Sing of our daughter, her hope and her lover  
And the world that for him she denied.  
Of years staring out at wave pools and tide  
And all that he demanded of her.*

*Sing of a battle, victorious and gloried  
Two kingdoms that might be joined.  
Of the fate now denied for Shiba purloined  
It, Tsumaru but more captured territory.*

*Sing how she fled from her "husband," that villain,  
As far as she could 'cross the sea.  
But with foreign ships he'd never set her free  
Even at cost of a killing.*

*Sing how they fought, and Tsumaru victorious  
Of Shiba's fleet sunk down below.  
Of his shameful retreat, this god once so notorious  
And the fish whose name you now know.*

Seiji hovered there, letting the words which danced like lightning in his mind wash over him. Was it true? The story of Shiba and Tsumaru was not one of the better known in the Empire but it was hardly obscure. Legend had it that after the kami fell, Shiba - founder of the Phoenix clan - had been ordered by his brother-Emperor Hantei to seek a wife. Lady Dōji of the Crane had urged Shiba to marry for love, while Lord Hida of the Crab had urged him to find a wife who could be a partner to him in battle as well as in building a family. Shiba had sworn he would find a wife who embodied all the qualities they described.

And then he had met Tsumaru, an exotic woman who claimed to be from a far off land and begged Shiba's help to defeat a foul creature attacking her home. She had been... of course, Seiji realized. She'd turned out to be from the Ningyo, the strange aquatic creatures, half-man half-fish who lived below the ocean. Shiba and Tsumaru had defeated a creature attacking her underwater home.

And Shiba and Tsumaru had fallen in love. They'd married. She gave up her home to be with him.

Or had she?

Now Seiji's beloved was telling him differently. Could this song be a truth long denied in the Empire? Or is it just another form of propaganda? Still, it's plausible. The Phoenix would confess in private conversation that Tsumaru hated the mainland. After Shiba died in the Shadowlands, Tsumaru fled back to her kingdom. But, the Phoenix sending in a fleet to chase her down? They would never admit to that. No Phoenix would repeat these stories, that was certain, and no one else could without provoking outrage and possibly war with the Phoenix.

*Why tell me this?* he asked.

His beloved took his hand and guided Seiji down to the ocean's bottom. There, in the sand, she drew characters he recognized. Characters for words he'd thoughtlessly read aloud before realizing their contents. The characters



from the shrine on the cliffs.

No, not a shrine. A memorial, to Shiba and his broken oath.

He'd read Shiba's wedding vow, offering himself to Tsumaru and all the people of the sea. And instead of embracing the transformation, Shiba had simply taken her. Just as the Ningyo had now taken him.

He was not Phoenix, true. This was not the oath of his people, his clan. But it had been his Empire. How could he claim the virtue of justice if he would not repay this ancient debt?

*You will stay then?* she asked.

With a flash of his talons, Seiji cut free the mon from his robes, watching it float lazily in the water. *I am yours*, he answered.

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"You are sure this will work?" Rei asked.

"Of course not," Jianyu answered. "Asking the kami of water and air to cooperate is difficult under the best of circumstances. Go watch a typhoon if you want to know what it looks like when they're playing. And you're asking for something a good deal more specific than to simply enjoy each other's company."

"Then how-"

"Courage. Duty. Sincerity. Pick one. I've given you a chance, Mirumoto-san. Find whichever virtue will let you make the most of it." He shoved a vial into her hands. "But don't push your luck with it. I saw how Hitori treated you after Seiji's disappearance. I don't much like the thought of what he'd do to me if I went and got you drowned."

*For Lady Dōji's culture to propagate, we have seen all the others that must be sacrificed. It is not our place to argue which is more worthy, merely to note their loss. Nonetheless, it does warrant a warning: if an entire people may be sacrificed for the sake of cultural 'progress,' think very carefully what will happen to the poor soul who speaks out against that culture.*

— The Cost of Grace, Unknown author