

The Mountains of Sunset, the Mountains of Dawn

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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The smell from the ship's animal room, at first tantalizing, grew to an overpowering strength. Years before, the odor of so many closely caged animals had sickened the old one, but now it urged on her slow hunger. When she was a youth, her hunger demanded satiation, but now even her interior responses were aging. The hunger merely ached.

Inside the animal room, three dimensions of cages stretched up the floor's curvature, enclosing fat and lethargic animals that slept, unafraid. She lifted a young one by the back of its neck. Blinking, it hung in her hand; it would not respond in fear even when she extended her silver claws into its flesh. Its ancestors had run shrieking across the desert when the old one's shadow passed over them, but fear and speed and the chemical reactions of terror had been bred out of these beasts. Their meat was tasteless.

"Good day."

Startled, the old one turned. The youth's habit of approaching silently from behind was annoying; it made her fancy that her hearing was failing as badly as her sight. Still, she felt a certain fondness for this child, who was not quite so weak as the others. The youth was beautiful: wide wings and delicate ears, large eyes and triangular face, soft body-covering of fur as short as fur can be, patterned in tan against the normal lustrous black. The abnormality occurred among the first ship-generation's children. On the home world, any infant so changed would have been exposed, but on the sailship infanticide was seldom practiced. This the old one disapproved of, fearing a deterioration in her people, but she had grown used to the streaked and swirling fur pattern.

"I greet thee," she said, "but I'm hungry. Go away before I make thee ill."

"I've become accustomed to it," the youth said.

The old one shrugged, leaned down, and slashed the animal's throat with her sharp teeth. Warm blood spurted over her lips. As she swallowed it, she wished she were soaring and eating bits of warm meat from the fingers of a mate or a lover, feeding him in turn. Thus she, when still a youth and not yet "she," had courted her eldermate; thus her youngermate had never been able to court her. Two generations of her kind had missed that experience, but she seemed to regret the loss more than they did. She dismembered and gutted the animal and crunched its bones for marrow and brains.

She glanced up. The youth watched, seeming fascinated yet revolted. She offered a shred of meat.

"No. Thank you."

"Then eat thy meat cold, like the rest of them."

"I'll try it. Sometime."

"Yes, of course," the old one said. "And all our people will live on the lowest level and grow strong, and fly every day."

"I fly. Almost every day."

The old one smiled, half cynically, half with pity. "I would show thee what it is to fly," she said. "Across deserts so hot the heat snatches thee, and over mountains so tall they outreach clouds, and into the air until the radiation explodes in thine eyes and steals thy direction and shatters thee against the earth, if thou art not strong enough to overcome it."

"I'd like that."

"It's too late." The old one wiped the clotting blood from her hands and lips. "It's much too late." She turned to leave; behind her, the youth spoke so softly that she almost did not hear. "It's my choice. Must you refuse me?"

She let the door close between them.

* * *

In the corridor, she passed others of her people, youths and adults made spindly by their existence on the inner levels of the ship, where the gravity was low. Many greeted her with apparent deference, but she believed she heard contempt. She ignored them. She had the right; she was the oldest of them all, the only one alive who could remember their home.

Her meal had not yet revived her; the slightly curved floor seemed to rise in fact rather than in appearance. The contempt she imagined in others grew in herself. It was past her time to die.

Ladders connected the levels of the ship, in wells not designed for flying. With difficulty, the old one let herself down to the habitation's rim. She felt happier, despite the pain, when the centrifugal force increased her weight.

The voyage had been exciting, before she grew old. She had not minded trading hunting grounds for sailship cubicles: the universe lay waiting. She entered the ship young and eager, newly eldermated, newly changed from youth to adult; loved, loving, sharing her people's dreams as they abandoned their small, dull world.

The old one's compartment was on the lowest level, where the gravity was greatest. Slowly, painfully, she sat cross-legged beside the window, unfolding her wings against the stiffness of her wing-fingers to wrap the soft membranes around her body. Outside, the stars raced by, to the old one's failing sight a multicolored, swirling blur, like mica flakes in sand.

The habitation spun, and the sails came into view. The huge reflective sheets billowed in the pressure of the stellar winds, decelerating the ship and holding it against gravity as it approached the first new world the old one's people would ever see.

* * *

She dreamed of her youth, of flying high enough to see the planet's curvature, of skimming through high-altitude winds, gambling that no capricious current could overcome her and break her hollow bones. Other youths fell in their games; they died, but few mourned: that was the way of things.

She dreamed of her dead eldermate, and reached for him, but his form was insubstantial and slipped through her fingers.

Claws skittered against the door, waking her. Her dreams dissolved.

"Enter."

The door opened; against the dimness of her room light shadowed the one who stood there. The old one's eyes adjusted slowly; she recognized the piebald youth. She felt that she should send the youth away, but the vision of her eldermate lingered in her sight, and the words would not come.

"What dost thou wish?"

"To speak with you. To listen to you."

"If that's all."

"Of course it isn't. But if it's all you will allow, I will accept it."

The old one unwrapped her wings and sat slowly up. "I outlived my youngermate," she said.

"Wouldst thou have me disgust our people again?"

"They don't care. It isn't like that anymore. We've changed."

"I know... my children have forgotten our customs, and I have no right to criticize. Why should they listen to a crippled parent who refuses to die?"

The youth heel-sat before her, silent for a moment. "I wish... "

She stretched out her hand, extending the sharp claws. "Our people should never have left our home. I would long be dead, and thou wouldst not have met me."

The youth took her hand and grasped it tightly. "If you were dead-- "

She drew back, opening long fingers so her wing spread across her body. "I will die," she said. "Soon. But I want to fly again. I will see one new world, and then I will have seen enough."

"I wish you wouldn't talk of dying."

"Why? Why have we become so frightened of death?" The youth rose, shrugging, and let the tips of the striped wings touch the floor. The vestigial claws clicked against the metal. "Maybe we're not used to it anymore."

The old one perceived the remark's unconscious depth. She smiled, and began to laugh. The youth looked at her, as if thinking her mad. But she could not explain what was so funny, that they had reached for the perils of the stellar winds, and found only safety and trepidation.

"What's the matter? Are you all right? What is it?"

"Nothing," she said. "Thou wouldst not understand." She no longer felt like laughing, but exhausted and ill. "I will sleep," she said, having regained her dignity. She turned her gaze from the beautiful youth.

* * *

Waking, she felt warm, as if she were sleeping in the sun on a pinnacle of rock with the whole world spreading out around her. But her cheek rested against chill metal; she opened her eyes knowing once more where she was.

The youth lay beside her, asleep, wing outstretched across them both. She started to speak but remained silent.

She felt she should be angry, but the closeness was too pleasurable. Guilt sprang up, at allowing this child to retain desire for the love of one about to die, but still the old one did not move. She lay beneath the caressing wing, seeking to recapture her dreams. But the youth shifted, and the old one found herself looking into dark, gold-flecked, startled eyes.

The youth pulled away. "I am sorry. I meant only to warm you, not to..."

"I... found it pleasant, after so long in this cold metal. I thank thee."

The youth gazed at her, realizing gradually what she had said, then lay down and gently enfolded her again.

"Thou art a fool. Thou dost seek pain."

The youth rested against her, head on her shoulder.

"I will only call thee 'thee,' " she said.

"All right."

* * *

The flying chamber enclosed half the levels of a segment two twelfths of the habitation wide. Its floor and its side walls were transparent to space.

The old one and the youth stood on a brilliant path of stars. On one side of them, the sails rippled as they changed position to hold the ship on course. They obscured a point of light only slightly brighter than the stars that formed its background: the sun of the home planet, the star this ship and a thousand like it had abandoned. On the other side, a second star flared bright, and even the old one could see the changing phases of the spheres that circled it.

The youth stared out at the illuminated edge of their destination. "Will you be happy there?"

"I'll be happy to see the sky and the land again."

"A blue sky, without stars... I think that will be very empty."

"We became used to this ship," the old one said. "We can go back again as easily." She turned, spread her wings, ran a few steps, and lifted herself into the air. The takeoff felt clumsy, but the flying was more graceful.

She glided, spiraling upward on the gravity gradient. To fly higher with less and less effort had been strange and exciting; now she only wished for a way to test her strength to the breaking point. Her distance perception had weakened with time, but she knew the dimensions of the chamber by kinesthetic sense and memory: long enough to let one glide, but not soar, wide enough to let one stroke slowly from one side to the next, but not tax one's muscles with speed, deep enough to let one swoop, but not dive.

At the top of the chamber, she slid through the narrow space between ceiling and walking bridge; she heard the youth, behind her, falter, then plunge through. The old one had laughed when they built the crossing, but there were those who could not cross the chamber without the bridge, and that she did not find amusing.

Sound guided her. Sometimes she wished to plug her ears and fly oblivious to the echoes that marked boundaries. She had considered dying that way, soaring with senses half crippled until she crashed against the thick tapestry of stars and blessed the sailship with her blood. But she wanted to touch the earth again; so she continued to live.

She grew tired; her bones would ache when she had rested. She dipped her wings and slipped toward the floor, stretching to combat the rising end of the gradient. She landed; her wings drooped around her. The youth touched down and approached her. "I am tired."

She appreciated the concession to her dignity. "I, too."

* * *

The days passed; the youth stayed with her. They flew together, and they sailed the long-deserted ion boats in the whirlpools of converging stellar winds. At first fearful, the youth gained confidence as the old one demonstrated the handling of the sails. The old one recalled other, half-forgotten voyages with other, long-dead youths. Her companion's growing pleasure made her briefly glad that her dream of dying properly, veiled and soaring, had kept her from taking one of the boats and sailing until the air ran out or some accident befell her.

* * *

When the features of the new world could be discerned, the old one made the long walk to the navigation room. Her eyes no longer let her feel the stars, and so she did not navigate, yet though the young people could guide the ship as well as her generation had, she felt uneasy leaving her fate in the hands of others. From the doorway, she pushed off gently and floated to the center of the chamber. A few young adults drifted inside the transparent hemisphere, talking, half dozing, watching the relationships between ship, planet, primary, and stars. The navigation room did not rotate; directions were by convention. Streaked with clouds, glinting with oceans, the crescent world loomed above them; below, the ship's main body spun, a reflective expanse spotted with dark ports and the transparent segment of the flying chamber.

"Hello, grandmother."

"Hello, grandchild." She should call him "grandson," she thought, but she was accustomed to the other, though this child of her first child, already youngermated, had long been adult. She felt once more that she should choose a graceful way to die.

Nearby, two people conferred about a few twelfths of a second of arc and altered the tension on the main sail lines. Like a concave sheet of water, the sail rippled and began to fold.

"It seems the engines will not be necessary." They had begun the turn already; the stars were shifting around them.

He shrugged, only his shoulders, not his wings. "Perhaps just a little." He gazed at her for a long time without speaking. "Grandmother, you know the planet is smaller than we thought." She looked up at the white-misted, half-shadowed globe. "Not a great deal, surely."

"Considerably. It's much denser for its mass than our world was. The surface gravity will be higher."

"How much?"

"Enough that our people would be uncomfortable."

The conditional, by its implications, frightened her. "Our people are weak," she said. "Have the council suggest they move to the first level."

"No one would, grandmother." Though he never flew, he sounded sad.

"You are saying we will not land?"

"How can we? No one could live."

"No one?"

"You are old, grandmother."

"And tired of sailing. I want to fly again."

"No one could fly on that world."

"How can you say? You don't even fly in the chamber." He stared down at the shimmering, half-folded sails. "I fly with them. Those are all the wings our people need."

The old one flexed her wing-fingers; the membranes opened, closed, opened. "Is that what everyone believes?"

"It's true. The sails have carried us for two generations. Why should we abandon them now?"

"How can we depend on them so heavily? Grandson, we came onto this ship to test ourselves, and you're saying we will avoid the test."

"The ambitions and needs of a people can change."

"And the instincts?"

She knew what his answer would be before he did. "Even those, I think."

The old one looked out over space. She could not navigate, but she could evaluate their trajectory. It was never meant to be converted into an orbit. The ship would swing around the planet, catapult past it, and sail on.

"We felt trapped by a whole world," the old one said. "How can our children be satisfied on this uninteresting construct?"

"Please try to understand. Try to accept the benefits of our security." He touched her hand, very gently, his claws retracted. "I'm sorry."

She turned away from him, forced by the lack of gravity to use clumsy swimming motions. She returned to the low regions of the habitation, feeling almost physically wounded by the decision not to land. The ship could sustain her life no longer.

The youth was in her room. "Shall we fly?"

She hunched in the corner near the window. "There is no reason to fly."

"What's happened?" The youth crouched beside her.

"Thou must leave me and forget me. I will be gone by morning."

"But I'm coming."

She took the youth's hand, extending her silver claws against the patterned black and tan fur. "No one else is landing. Thou wouldst be left alone."

The youth understood her plans. "Stay on the ship." The tone was beyond pleading.

"It doesn't matter what I do. If I stay, I will die, and thou wilt feel grief. If I leave, thou wilt feel the same grief. But if I allow thee to come, I will steal thy life."

"It's my life."

"Ah," she said sadly, "thou art so young."

The old one brought out a flask of warm red wine. As the sky spun and tumbled beside them, she and the youth shared the thick, salty liquid, forgetting their sorrows as the intoxicant went to their heads. The youth stroked the old one's cheek and throat and body. "Will you do one thing for me before you leave?"

"What dost thou wish?"

"Lie with me. Help me make the change."

With the wine, she found herself half amused by the youth's persistence and naivete. "That is something thou shouldst do with thy mate."

"I have to change soon, and there's no one else I want to court."

"Thou dost seek loneliness."

"Will you help me?"

"I told thee my decision when thou asked to stay."

The youth seemed about to protest again, but remained silent. The old one considered the easy capitulation, but the strangeness slipped from her as she drank more wine. Stroking her silver claws against her companion's patterned temple, she allowed her vision to unfocus among the swirls of tan, but she did not sleep.

* * *

When she had set herself for her journey, she slipped away. She felt some regret when the youth did not stir, but she did not want another argument; she did not want to be cruel again. As she neared the craft bay, excitement overcame disappointment; this was her first adventure in many years.

She saw no one, for the bay was on the same level as her room. She entered a small power craft, sealed it, and gave orders to the bay. The machinery worked smoothly, despite lack of use or care. The old one could understand the young people's implicit trust in the ship; her generation had built seldom, but very well. The air gone, she opened the hatch. The craft fell out into space.

Her feeling for the workings of the power craft returned. Without numbers or formulae she set its course; her vision was not so bad that she could not navigate in harbors.

Following gravity, she soon could feel the difference between this world and the home planet; not, she thought, too much. She crossed the terminator into daylight, where swirls of cloud swept by beneath her. She anticipated rain, cool on her face and wings, pushed in rivulets down her body by the speed of her flight. Without the old one's conscious direction, her wing fingers opened slightly, closed, opened.

She watched the stars as her motion made them rise. Refraction gave her the approximate density of the air: not, she thought, too low.

The ship dipped into the outer atmosphere. Its stubby wings slowed it; decelerating, it approached the planet's surface, fighting the differences of this world, which yielded, finally, to the old one's determination. She looked for a place to land.

The world seemed very young; for a long while she saw only thick jungles and marshes. Finally, between mountain ranges that blocked the clouds, she found a desert. It was alien in color and form, but the sand glittered with mica like the sand of home. She landed the ship among high dunes.

The possibility had always existed that the air, the life, the very elements would be lethal. She broke the door's seal; air hissed sharply. She breathed fresh air for the first time in two generations. It was thin, but it had more oxygen than she was used to, and made her light-headed. The smells teased her to identify them. She climbed to the warm sand, and slowly, slowly, spread her wings to the gentle wind.

Though the land pulled at her, she felt she could overcome it. Extending her wings to their limits, she ran against the breeze. She lifted, but not enough; her feet brushed the ground, and she was forced to stop.

The wind blew brown sand and mica flakes against her feet and drooping wingtips. "Be patient to bury me," she said. "You owe me more than a grave."

She started up the steep face of a nearby dune. The sand tumbled grain over grain in tiny avalanches from her footsteps. She was used to feeling lighter as she rose; here, she only grew more tired. She approached the knife-edged crest, where sunlight sparkled from each sand crystal. The delicate construct collapsed past her, pouring sand into her face. She had to stop and blink until her eyes were clear of grit, but she had kept her footing. She stood at the broken summit of the dune, with the sail-like crests that remained stretched up and out to either side. Far above the desert floor, the wind blew stronger. She looked down, laughed, spread her wings, and leaped.

The thin air dropped her; she struggled; her feet brushed the sand, but her straining wings held her and she angled toward the sky, less steeply than of old, but upward. She caught an updraft and followed it, spiraling in a wide arc, soaring past the shadowed hills of sand. This flight was less secure than those of her memories; she felt intoxicated by more than the air. She tried a shallow dive and almost lost control,

but pulled herself back into the sky. She was not quite ready to give life up. She no longer felt old, but ageless.

Motion below caught her attention. She banked and glided over the tiny figure. It scuttled away when her shadow touched it, but it seemed incapable of enough speed to make a chase exhilarating. Swooping with some caution, she skimmed the ground, snatched up the animal in her hand-fingers, and soared again. Thrashing, the scaly beast cried out gutturally. The old one inspected it. It had a sharp but not unpleasant odor, one of the mysterious scents of the air. She was not hungry, but she considered killing and eating the creature. It smelled like something built of familiar components of life, though along a completely alien pattern. She was curious to know if her system could tolerate it, and she wondered what color its blood was, but her people's tradition and instinct was to kill lower animals only for food. She released the cold beast where she had found it and she soared away.

The old one climbed into the air for one final flight. She felt deep sorrow that the young ones would not stop here.

At first, she thought she was imagining the soft, keening whine, but it grew louder, higher, until she recognized the shriek of a power craft. It came into view, flying very fast, too fast-- but it struggled, slowed, leveled, and it was safe. It circled toward the old one's craft. She followed.

From the air, she watched the youth step out into the sand. She landed nearby.

"Why didst thou come? I will not go back."

The youth showed her ankle bands and multicolored funeral veils. "Let me attend your death. At least let me do that."

"That is a great deal."

"Will you allow it?"

"Thou hast exposed thyself to great danger. Canst thou get back?"

"If I want to."

"Thou must. There is nothing here for thee."

"Let me decide that!" The youth's outburst faltered. "Why... why do you pretend to care so much about me?"

"I-- " she had no answer. Her concern was no pretense, but she realized that her actions and her words had been contradictory. She had changed, perhaps as much as the young ones, keeping the old disregard for death to herself, applying the new conservation of life to others. "I do care," she said. "I do care about you."

And the youth caught his breath at her use of the adult form of address. "I've hoped for so long you might say that," he said. "I've wanted your love for such a long time..."

"You will only have it for a little while."

"That is enough."

They embraced. The old one folded her wings over him, and they sank down into the warm sand. For the first time, they touched with love and passion. As the sun struck the sharp mountains and turned the desert maroon, the old one stroked the youth and caressed his face, holding him as he began the change. The exterior alterations would be slight. The old one felt her lover's temperature rising, as his metabolism accelerated to trigger the hormonal changes.

"I feel very weak," the youth whispered.

"That is usual. It passes."

He relaxed within her wings.

The sun set, the land grew dim; the moons, full, rose in tandem. The stars formed a thick veil above the fliers. They lay quietly together, the old one stroking her lover to ease the tension in his muscles, helping maintain his necessary fever with the insulation of her wings. The desert grew cool with the darkness; sounds moved and scents waxed and waned with the awakening of nocturnal creatures. The world seemed more alien at night.

"Are you there?" His eyes were wide open, but the pupils were narrow slits, and the tendons in his neck stood out, strained.

"Of course."

"I didn't know it would hurt... I'm glad you're here..."

"We all survive the passage," she said gently. But something about this world or the changing one himself made this transition difficult.

She held him all night while he muttered and thrashed, oblivious to her presence. As dawn approached, he fell into a deep sleep, and the old one felt equally exhausted. The sun dimmed the veil of stars and warmed the fliers; the creatures that had crept around them during darkness returned to their hiding places. The old one left her lover and began to climb a dune.

* * *

When she returned, the new adult was awakening. She landed behind him; he heard her and turned. His expression changed from grief to joy.

"How do you feel?"

He rubbed his hands down the back of his neck. "I don't know. I feel... new."

She sat on her heels beside him. "I was hungry afterwards," she said. She held up a squirming pair of the reptiles. "But I didn't have to wonder if the food would kill me." She slashed one creature's throat. The blood was brilliant yellow, its taste as sharp as the smell. She sampled the flesh: it was succulent and strong after the mushy, flavorless meat on the ship. "It's good." She offered him a piece of the meat she held. "I feel you can eat it safely." He regarded it a moment, but took the second beast and bit through its scales and skin. It convulsed once and died.

"A clean kill," she said. He smiled at her, and they feasted. He stood and spread his wings, catching a soft hot breeze.

"We *can* fly here," the old one said. He ran a few steps and launched himself into the air. She watched him climb, astonished and delighted that he needed no assistance. He seemed unsure of distances and angles, unsteady on turns and altitude changes, but that would have improved if he had had the time. She heard him laugh with joy; he called to her.

Wishing she were still strong, she climbed the dune again and joined him. All that day they flew together; she taught him to hunt, and they fed each other; they landed and lay together in the sand.

* * *

Twilight approached.

The old one ached in every bone. She had imagined, as the air supported her, that she might somehow escape her age, but the ground dragged at her, and she trembled.

"It's time," she said.

Her lover started as if she had struck him. He started to protest, but stopped, and slipped his wings around her. "I will attend you."

He walked with her up the dune, carrying the veils. At the top, he fastened the bands around her fingers and ankles. The old one spread her wings and fell into the air. She flew toward the mountains of sunrise until darkness engulfed her and the stars seemed so close that she might pull them across her shoulders. Her lover flew near.

"What will you do?"

"I'll go back to the ship."

"That's good."

"I may be able to persuade a few to return with me." She thought of his loneliness, if he were refused and returned nonetheless, but she said nothing of that. "I respect your decision."

She climbed higher, until the air grew perceptibly thinner, but she could not fly high enough for cosmic rays to burst against her retinas. She took comfort in the clear sky and in flying, and plucked a veil from her companion. After that, he slipped them into the bands, staying near enough for danger. She felt the cold creeping in; the veils drifted about her like snow. "Good-bye, my love," she said. "Do not grieve for me."

Her senses were dimmed; she could barely hear him. "I have no regrets, but I will grieve."
The old one stretched out her stiffening wings and flew on.

* * *

He followed her until he knew she was dead, then dropped back. She would continue to some secret grave; he wished to remember her as she had been that day.

He glided alone over the desert and in the treacherous currents of mountains' flanks, impressing the world on his mind so he could describe its beauties. At dawn, he returned to his craft. A breeze scattered tiny crystals against his ankles.

He dropped to his knees and thrust his fingers into the bright, warming sand. Scooping up a handful, he wrapped it in the last silver funeral veil and carried it with him when he departed.

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