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The Swan-Chariot

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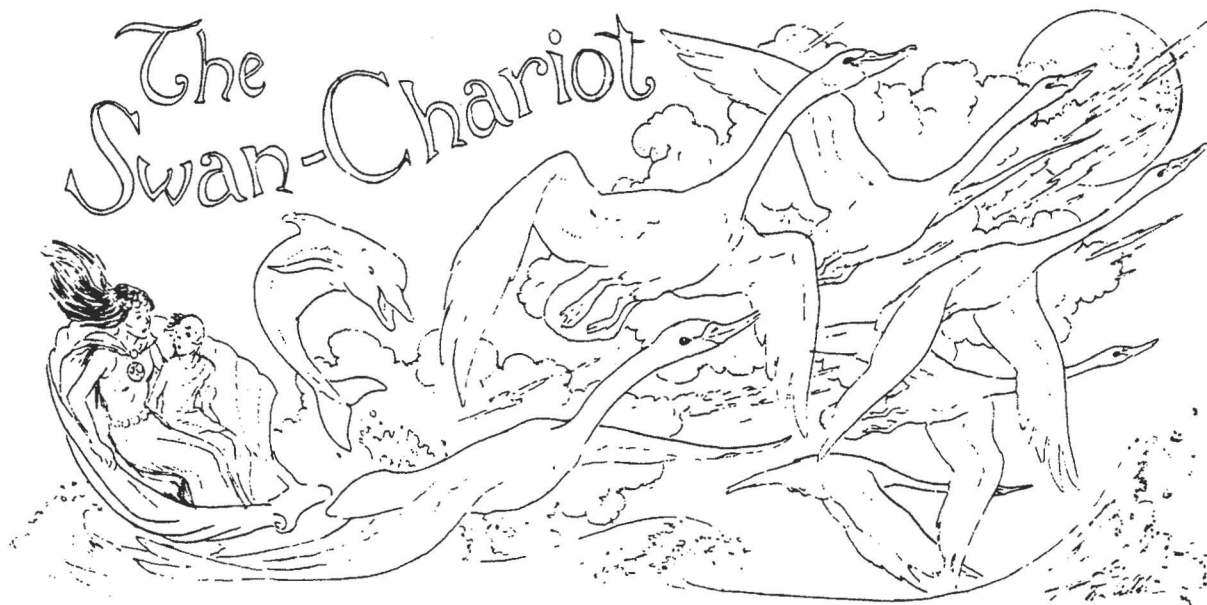


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by Gwentyth E. Hood

The Goddess Nilhima marked me with the gift of the Seventh Level when I was just a boy. This great honor is given only to a handful in a thousand years, and many people, I am told, lie awake at nights tormenting themselves with desire for it. But they are foolish. It is not from stinginess that the Shining-gods ration out their gifts so sparingly. Truly, indeed, I doubt that anyone who understood the gifts of the *Hadorvacheu* would dare to accept them. They are precious, but they come with perils that no human being could willingly choose to face. Could I, should I, have accepted my destiny knowingly? The question is pointless. I was hardly three years old; I did not weigh consequences. I only loved the sweet Healer-Goddess as she showed herself to me, and I gave her the welcome she deserved. Who could have done less? Thus my life was shaped.

When the Maiden-Goddess came to claim me, she, in her unassuming way, crept into a deceptively ordinary dream. I was playing by the seashore, as I often did in waking life. The cliffs, honeycombed with many caves, loomed high above me. Behind walls built partly upon them lay Prince Marhemet's palace, as in waking life.

In waking life, my father was the Prince's steward. I had been born in the Steward's mansion within the palace precincts, and often my nurse Zusani took us children outside the walls to play by the seashore, though not by moonlight as in this dream.

In the vision my sister Lomi, her white bathing dress floating about her knees, was running beside Zusani farther up the beach. I had been left alone to add some western turrets to our sand castle. But soon I looked up from my play and found a beautiful lady standing on the breaking waves before the shore.

The moon shone down upon her, wrapping her in a mantle of soft light. Her dark eyes glistened gently. Her raven hair shimmered under a crown of tear-shaped diamonds, sparkling by their own light. Her robes were sea-green all over, in the simple style which my people, the Archaic Satrians, insist on. But on her breast, where Satrians would only be allowed a single jewel, she wore a cluster of large pearls and rubies intermingled, in a trefoil brooch. Such adornment, as the tapestries in our household clearly showed, was only proper for divinities. The hem of her mantle was embellished with a lacy band of velvet which blended so subtly with her mantle that it was not easy tell where the solid color ended and where the lace began. Her naked feet hardly grazed the crests of the waves. Yet though the foam swelled and subsided, she somehow remained at rest in her own divine balance, which does not depend on the elements of the human world.

Long before I had taken in all these details, I had recognized the gentle Nilhima. Who else wears a crown of tears? Delight overwhelmed me. Nilhima was my favorite of the Shining-gods, and I never tired of hearing her story. It touched me deeply that she alone, of all the children of Faravacheu, had dared to pursue the teacherous Otter-god, Yortnovachu, when he stole the Web of Destiny and dragged it into the Underworld. When Zusani or Lomi told me how the hellish spiked stones of the cavern floor had torn away her sandals and shredded the soles of her feet, I cried as if my own feet were bleeding. But Nilhima did not turn back, that tender goddess who had never before felt pain. On she went, searching every inch of the infernal pits for every last strand of the scattered Web. Her bloody footprints

marked each bypath of *Chadudama*, and tears fell continually from her eyes when she saw the torments that the Shadow-gods devised for us humans.

When Zusani reached the part where Nilhima falls dead from exhaustion at the very base of *Chadudama*, clasping the rescued Web of Destiny to her breast, I too felt as if I were dead. But rescue came, and when her brother, Mutur the Just, brought her triumphantly back to the land of the gods, all my sorrow was forgotten. I listened with boundless satisfaction as Faravacheu, the All-Creator, turned her bloody footprints into rubies and her tears into diamonds.

So I was far from forgetting the crown of tears and the sandals of blood-rubies which Faravacheu had fashioned for her from the fruits of her own labors. In the vision I stared down at the Lady's feet amid the lapping waters until I could just make out the bright red which clung to her soles as tightly as her own blood. I had not really doubted that the sandals would be there, but it was good to have the full picture. Surely I was gazing upon my beloved goddess.

At the time, it did not seem strange that she would come for me. I was a child, and being cared for by those much greater than myself seemed natural. The Goddess smiled and held out her hands, calling to me in the ancient tongue of the Satrians: *lonethu, pa hari*. That means, "Little Ion, come to me." She used my secret name, known only to my guardians and the gods.

I obeyed her, making my way from the sand-castle to the borders of the shore where the groping fingertips of the waves misshaped themselves and melted into flowing sand. Her arms grasped me and lifted me lightly up, setting me down at last on a silken cushion in the midst of a shell-shaped chariot. I had not noticed the chariot before, nor the dazzling half-circle of swans which surrounded it. Having placed me safely within, the lady settled quietly beside me. As if at an unspoken command, the swans began to glide arrow-straight over the waters, just skimming the crests of the waves. Drawn by an invisible harness, the chariot flew so lightly after them that you would have thought it was a grain of sand.

At first, I rode with the Goddess for miles and miles over the dancing waves of her own seas, and no sight could have been lovelier. Dolphins played around us and fish with jewel-bright scales leaped in graceful arches over us. Once a salmon with ruby-scales on its side leaped right into the Lady's lap and lay there, opening and closing its gills. I leaned over, breathless, and the Lady allowed me to stroke its side before she took it in her hands and bent over to place it again in the waters.

But in the end we left the seas under her protection and came to waters beneath darkened dark skies. Here the swans flew up to some height above the crashing waves, drawing the chariot after them. We were heading toward a bay edged with towering grey cliffs. Below us, snake-bodied and dog-muzzled monsters struggled in the surf, half-invisible except when they thrust out their

toothy jaws to seize us. But snuggled against the Lady, I felt no fear of them. The swans' wings slackened, yet the chariot hung in the air through some invisible power. The Lady turned from me with a sad but resolute mouth and fixed her eyes on the top of the cliff, which rose some fifty feet above where we hovered. I followed her gaze.

Two men were fighting. They were not alike and not evenly matched. One combatant was a tall man with narrow shoulders. He wore baggy pantaloons in the Tec-cabi style; his face was a smooth light brown, the color of cedar. Suddenly I recognised him as Prince Bhonei, heir to the Imperial throne. I had seen him once or twice, coming to meet his brother-in-law, our master Prince Marhemet.

His antagonist was one of my own race, a Satrian. He was a head or more smaller, a typical height for a Satrian. Also he had the usual coloring for a Satrian, with white skin, dark eyes, and straight dark hair. But his face was one I did not know. "Muroru," said the Goddess softly, and I shuddered at the name. It means "horrible" in our tongue. Back and forth, back and forth the two fighters surged and swayed, but the outcome was not long in doubt. The Teccabi's movements were frightened, jerky and uneven; he struck his blows wide and repeatedly turned his head in the wrong directions as if searching to find an invisible opponent. The Satrian's movements were calm, serpentine and sure, whether he was dodging or striking. He suffered not a single hit from the Prince, and every blow of his own went home just as he intended. Finally, with one light thrust at Bhonei's unsteady knees, the Satrian sent him toppling over the cliff. In the seas below there was a great rattling, and suddenly the shore was lined with snapping jaws as the monsters sprang out of the water in their eagerness to seize him. But the Prince himself caught sight of the Lady and stretched out his hands to her. "Nilhima! Sweet Nilhima!" he cried. She reached out and touched his fingers, and at that moment he stopped falling but was drawn lightly upward, shrinking as he did so to the size of a baby. He wailed bitterly at the strangeness of it all, but she held him in her arms and he hushed. The swans' wingbeat became steadier. We passed over the violent seas to the peaceful waters, and then somehow we were diving, diving into a deep tunnel, and yet there was brightness all around us. The infant who had been Prince Bhonei lay sleeping on Nilhima's breast.

For me that dream ended without a clear border and I drifted from it into common visions. I awoke the next day feeling unusually energetic and cheerful. I did not think about the dream, but it affected my behavior, just as the removal of a cataract affects someone's sight whether or not he recalls the healer's ministrations. All Satrian wisdom-training teaches perception, so that dreams such as mine become more vivid and solid in the memory as we age, instead of fading away as they do for most people. Of course, at that time my training was hardly begun, and besides it happened to be a rest-day, so my tutor did not ask me to recount my dreams, as he

would have ordinarily. Still, a true-dream of the Goddess Nilhima makes itself felt anyway. Now and again while I played, delicious and staggering new thoughts would come to me. Scents seemed fresher and more delicate, colors deeper and brighter, and the faces of my sister and nurse more touching and lovable than before. Just as I was sniffing at a jasmine arbor or chasing our long-eared Satrian spaniel among the trees, I would suddenly stop in my tracks, turn away from what I was doing, look behind me and laugh with delight. I also sensed some great danger hanging over us, but for the moment it excited me instead of frightening me.

In the middle of the afternoon I found a baby squirrel nested in one of the almond trees. At the sight of its small body curled among the dried shrubs, its eyes closed, its half-formed nose hidden behind its tiny paws, I was overwhelmed with such tenderness that I almost felt I could not go on living. Shutting my eyes, I threw myself on the grass, put my hands over my head and burst into laughter which verged on tears.

This time my nurse swooped upon me, lifted me from the ground and supported me against her ample hip. "Why are you acting so strangely, little master? What are you laughing about?"

Just feeling the emotion had tired me; I could not express it too. I became solemn. "Don't you like me to laugh, Mistress Zusani?" I asked.

"I love to hear you laugh, little master, but you do not seem yourself today. You always were a merry child, and a gentle one, but I've never seen you let a baby animal escape before, not unless I stopped you. By now you should have it in your hands and be calling for Lomi to help you find a box. Why are you content just to look?"

I tried clumsily to explain it to both of us. "I saw the Healer, Zusani. She took me in her shell chariot with the swans. A salmon jumped in her lap and she let it go."

A long pause told me that Zusani was startled. At last she spoke cautiously, bending over to fix her eyes on mine. "The Healer? You mean the Goddess Nilhima? You are saying the Goddess Nilhima took you in her chariot?"

"Zekasse, my mistress!" I answered, using the emphatic "yes indeed!" in my excitement. "How," she asked, "did you know it was Nilhima?"

I was indignant at her condescension. "What other goddess has a swan chariot?" I returned. "Besides, she had the Crown of Tears and the Blood-Ruby sandals. She took Prince Bhonei in her chariot when the evil Satrian Muroru pushed him off the cliff toward the shadow-monsters."

Zusani set me down. I felt alarm surging in her, but she tried not to show it. "Sit by me on the garden bench and tell me about this dream, little master," she said.

I did my best, aided by much coaxing and prodding from her. When I had finished, she looked grave.

"Some parts of the dream were very beautiful, Jamun," she said.

Jamun was the name by which I was known to the waking world. Among Archiac Satrians, true names, both family and individual, are only spoken in private during solemn ceremonies. It is considered extremely unfortunate if anyone but an intimate friend should learn one's true name, for experience shows that gifts of wisdom on the fifth level and higher tend to run in families. Were the shadow-sorcerers to connect our worldly identities with the dream-shapes in which we exercise our powers, few of us would live past our youths. Zusani, of course, knew my true name, for Archaic Satrians chose nurses carefully and children are not old enough to conceal such things. But she, like my parents, habitually called me Jamun in private to make public slips less likely.

"I think, perhaps, that you had best not talk about it," she said slowly. "What you dreamed about Prince Bhonei, do you know what that could mean?"

"That he is safe with the Healer in her chariot. That's good, isn't it, Mistress Zusani?" I asked.

Her eyes held doubt a moment before she looked away. "There are many ways of being safe. Princes do not desire them all equally." She sang softly, words from a familiar nursery rhyme. I recognized it after the first line and joined her:

Crowned with tears, ruby-shod
Lady of emerald seas,
Her footsteps bridge the Underworld,
Weaver of Destinies!

"Now," Zusani said, "when you see someone taken into the destiny-weaver's chariot, what do you suppose it means, little Jamun?"

"Doesn't it mean that the Goddess loves him, Zusani? She also took *me* in her chariot, my mistress. What does *that* mean?"

At this question, Zusani's brows furrowed. "It was only a mind-weave, of course," she said at last. "Your mind made the Goddess Nilhima up from the stories you were told. It wasn't a true-dream. You didn't really see her."

I was too young to understand the technical distinction our wise-people make between *alvanome* (mind-weave; dream-thoughts originating in the dreamer's mind from things he has been told) and *koshinome* (true-weave; dreams in which the gods actually appear and reveal hidden knowledge). If the stories I had been told were true, would not my mind present the goddess correctly also? Of course, I could not have explained this incorrect view clearly then, but Zusani read my confusion in my face. She spoke aloud to herself. "And yet, the vision did change your behavior. *Alvanome* does not change behavior, at least not usually . . . Go and play with your sister," she concluded, at last.

Happily I romped with Lomi for the rest of the afternoon and forgot all about Zusani's peculiar reaction to the dream. As we were walking toward the mansion for

supper, though, I felt a shock suddenly, like a cold draft striking my chest. Only I knew it was not the air. I froze, and I felt Lomi freeze beside me. Then from the other side of the arched doorway came a harsh sound: a woman's wail: *Eu! Eu! Eyo!* Zusani knelt on the floor and drew us up against her. I turned and searched her anxious face. "Prince Bhonei is dead," I whispered.

Her grip tightened. "Hush! hush!" she whispered.

The wooden door swung open and Tolomu, my tutor, suddenly appeared. His was face taunt. He gazed down at the kneeling Zusani, trying without success to read the meaning of her position. "Have you heard? Or not?" he asked grimly. She shook her head, almost imperceptibly. He went on. "Word has just come that Prince Bhonei, the Emperor's heir, died this morning. It was kept secret for some hours for political reasons. They have just proclaimed it."

Zusani wailed. *"Eu! eu! eyo!"* He's the only good man they had in that family!"

Tolomu looked away. "That's as the gods shall rule. There's talk of shadow-sorcery. Muroru."

Zusani gasped. The name was not strange to her.

"However, the maidservant who was beside him to the end, testifies that his last word was the name of the goddess Nilhima. We know that Nathri is a trustworthy one."

"I suppose," said Zusani bitterly, "that his *devoted* bride, the Princess Wadinah, was not there."

"No."

"Shadow-slut!" cried Zusani, as if forgetting our presence. But we could not be forgotten long.

"Why wasn't she with him? Didn't she *care*?" asked Lomi, her eyes round and liquid.

"Hush, hush!" cried Zusani, hugging us again. "Prince Bhonei is dead, and Princess Wadinah is alive."

Tolomu bid us a subdued farewell, and Zusani brought us to our nursery to dress us in the white garments of mourning. Our parents gave us a subdued greeting, and then we went to the children's room to eat. Lomi cried and hardly touched anything on her plate. I remembered how peaceful Prince Bhonei had looked in Nilhima's arms and could not understand why everyone was so sad, but out of consideration for their feelings I tried not to be too greedy.

The next morning, when Tolomu came to the gallery to instruct me, I noticed he had red eyes and a drawn face. All the same, he opened with the usual morning greeting. "Good morning, little master. Tell me, did you dream anything memorable last night?"

"Ze-ek, Master Tolomu," I answered, using the drawled indefinite Satrian "yes" which the northern Gauth usually translate as *probably*; more or less true). "I saw the Goddess again."

"Again?" He spoke with more than usual reserve.

"Ze-ek, master. I think Zusani told you about the first time."

"Did she tell you that she would, little master?"

"No, my master. But you look as though you know." "So I do." He turned away to gaze at one of the citron trees through the pillars of the open courtyard. "And what did you dream this time, little master?"

"She took me in her chariot again, my master. We travelled a long way. We crossed from the emerald sea to other seas, dark and slaty where the waves were wild and high. First they were as high as I am, then the wind grew stormy and blew them as high as Prince Marhemet's charger. I pressed close to her. Then it grew even darker and the waves blew as high the palace, my master. I could see many eyes staring out of the water and big creatures longer than the orchards were crawling among the waves. They had teeth like dogs and bodies like snakes except that they were furry. One of them was Yortnovacheu, the Otter-god, but a lot of the others looked like him. They wanted to eat me, but they couldn't come near the Lady. Then behind them the sea ended and there was the opening of a huge cavern. It was the underworld. I saw it in the other dream too, but didn't remember it clearly."

"Were you afraid then, little Jamun?"

"How could I have been afraid, my master? She was holding me in her arms."

"What of Prince Bhonei? Did you see him again?"

"No indeed, my master. She must have taken him safely through yesterday. Don't you think so? That's when we were diving through that tunnel. She came to him herself, because he was such a good man and she didn't want him to wander for even a moment in the dungeons."

"Did you get that from the dream, or is it your own idea?" He questioned me rather sharply.

I stared. Tolomu himself had told me that Nilhima sometimes went in person, even now, to guide the spirits of the dead safely through Chadudama. For since the time when Yortnovachu and his shadow-minions distorted the Web of Destiny, there has been no straight path for humans to the land of the Shining-gods. Everyone must go through the underworld first, following the bloody footprints of Nilhima if they ever wish to get out. Some are not steady travelers and get lost there for years. People who have learned wisdom and gained the friendship of the Shining-gods have a much better chance for a safe journey. The knowledge to search for Nilhima's footprints, and sometimes the added gift of a wise guide who has gained a diamond tear through extraordinary wisdom, is all that most people hope for. But the Goddess still graciously attends to some in person. I could not imagine any other interpretation for my dream of Bhonei. Sensing my bewilderment, Tolomu turned away in chagrin. "If you *will* have such extraordinary dreams, Jamun, other people besides me will forget that you are a only child. So, you enjoyed the dream, my pupil?"

"Oh, zekasse, my master!"

Seeming perplexed, Tolomu dismissed me to the seashore far earlier than usual that day. This puzzled me,

but Lomi and I had a pleasant time, at least during those stretches when my sister forgot her duty to weep for the murdered prince. (She remembered it about five minutes out of every hour and reproached me for forgetting.) We built an enormous sand castle, bigger than I was, and stocked the wide moat richly with crabs and clams and minnows, only releasing them at the end of the day. In the evening when we were summoned home for supper, I had completely forgotten the perplexity my dreams had caused my elders. The sun by then was sinking slowly in the west, painting the clouds many shades of pastel, pink and rose and amber. The arched doorway of the steward's house gleamed with reflected gold as Zusani brought us through it to our suite and instructed us to change from our sandy clothes to our white mourning garments.

Soon we were proceeding again though the courtyard on our way to pay our respects to our parents in their formal dining hall before having our own meal in the nursery. Just outside the door to the anteroom, however, we found my ten-year old brother, Agun, dressed in his own mourning white and staring glumly at the sky. Agun was old enough to dine with our parents, so Zusani stopped and stared at him. "Master Agun, why are you not yet with your parents?" she inquired.

He tapped his foot restlessly. "Master Tolomu told me to wait for him here."

"Well, then." Zusani shrugged, unable to make sense of this, and led the two of us through the arch and into the anteroom. I toddled obediently after her, hardly noticing what went on around me, my thoughts fixed on dinner. Suddenly I felt Zusani's hand tighten on mine. She had stopped dead some five feet from the door, aghast because she heard angry voices coming from within. With the thrill of alarm, Lomi and I also froze and pricked up our ears.

"I wish this hadn't happened!" My father's voice hissed with unusual distinctness. "It can bring nothing but trouble!"

Tolomu answered in a lower register, but still more loudly than normal. "Master, it must be faced. A gift like that is more dangerous when ignored."

"How *can* anyone be sure?" The tone challenged hollowly but did not contradict.

"Perhaps you should talk to the High Priest--"

"Ferdreju is barely competent to handle his own affairs, and as for trusting him with my life--"

"Master, you are unjust if you imagine Ferdreju would allow his political views to distort--"

Zusani, who had stood paralyzed, suddenly regained self-possession and laid a hand on a shoulder of each of us. "Come," she said, drawing us away from the door. "They aren't ready for us yet."

My mother's voice came from within. "Is that Zusani I hear? Are the children out there?"

The nurse froze again, uncertain what to do. "Ze-ek, my mistress," she said.

The door was thrown open, and my father stood

over the threshold, his face tense. "Where are you going, Zusani? Come in at once." He withdrew.

Hesitantly Zusani led us in. Everything had returned to apparent calm when we arrived. Father was seated at the center of the table with Mother on his right. Tolomu had moved, embarrassed, back toward the door, preparing to fetch Agun. Mother had her eyes raised to the ceiling.

Father was doing his best to look composed. He was a man of no more than medium height (even for a Satrian), not quite five feet tall, with dark hair and a small pointed beard which he kept trimmed to a sharp point and slightly curled. Being extremely busy and having little time for frivolity, he usually wore the same gown every day, a medium gray color with a single white diamond fastened in a brooch below his collar. But today he wore only the stark white of mourning. His pale face matched the clothes.

"So," he said, managing a faint smile, "you are ready for your dinner, my children? Have you had a pleasant day?" He looked hard at us, as if demanding a reply, but since he had not designated a spokesman, neither of us answered. Lomi shrank back against Zusani, frightened at the overheard quarrel, and I was too shy. Dinner was the only time we usually saw him, and neither of us wanted to ruin our chance to impress him favorably.

My mother prodded gently, "Did you play by the seashore today, Lomiethi?" she said, using the affectionate diminutive.

"Ze-ek, Mother," replied my sister, and gathering some confidence she added mournfully, "Ze-ek Mother, but we couldn't forget about poor Prince Bhonei and we kept crying." Then she brightened without noticing the incongruity. "I caught six crabs though, and Jamunethu caught two! We put them in the castle moat."

Mother nodded. Father said, "Yes, children, it is better to go on with your play; it is we who should be pitied for the loss of our Prince Bhonei. He, no doubt, is better where he is. Come, children, kiss your father and mother, and then go and get your dinner."

Lomi went to him first, and then I, for our kiss. When my turn came, he suddenly lifted me into the air and held me at the level with his face. I gazed back at him, wondering whether I could comfort him. "What was it like to ride in the Healer's chariot, Jamun?" he asked suddenly.

"Splendid, Father!" I said.

"Truly?"

"Splendid!"

"Well, I'm glad to hear about it. For his sake," he said. He kissed me again and put me down.

I was sent to supper without knowing what the argument had been about. But I did not worry. I thought I felt a breath of fragrant air on my cheek, as if the goddess were beside me, and she told me that I would learn tomorrow.