

KITEMASTER

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a vibrant green dress and dark boots, stands on a grassy hillside. She is looking towards a large, multi-masted sailing ship that is flying through the sky. The ship has white sails and a wooden hull. The background features a lush, green valley with a small village of houses with red roofs, a winding road, and a blue bay. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds and other smaller flying ships in the distance. The overall scene is fantastical and serene.

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A small, delicate purple flower with yellow center is located in the bottom right corner of the image, near the author's name.

Kitemaster - Preview

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Kitemaster Chapter 1

They say the wind is the breath and life of the world.

The irony burned like acid in my chest. As one of three wisps in the village of Allon-Li, I'd always been considered lucky, blessed by my connection to the wind.

My gift had done nothing to help my husband during the long months of his sickness. My so-called blessing had done nothing to save his life.

Tonight, the wind was angry, matching my mood. For six days it had raged, ever since the quake that had damaged eight homes on the western edge of the village and cracked one of our two silos.

I sat with my back to a driftwood log, facing the bay. I'd hoarded every free moment today to work on Jika's spirit kite, cutting and sewing silk panels from the shirt he'd worn for our wedding. Resin glue and red thread secured the blue panels to spars of laminated serpent reed. White ribbons trailed from the bottom of the kite, each a different length.

I picked up the embroidered shoulder bag sitting by my feet and took out a bracelet of dry, braided grapevine. I'd given this to Jika when we were children. He'd kept it for all those years, tucked away in the bottom of a carved bonewood box.

I clutched the bracelet and wiped my eyes. Gapa said grief was like the wind. When it blew the hardest, you could bend with it, or you could break. I wasn't sure yet which way I would go.

I should have finished the kite days ago. Today was one year since Jika's death. His kite had to fly before tomorrow's sun rose, to lift his spirit to the stars and beyond.

Overhead, a handful of stars flowed up from the eastern horizon like a narrow, inverted waterfall, following their familiar path in pursuit of the sun. There was no urgency to their chase. Unlike the air battering its way through Allon-Li, the night river was slow and shallow tonight. Stars meandered like leaves floating along a stream.

I paused in my work, trying to quell a storm of emotions. I didn't have time to lose myself to grief. I'd put this off too long, unable to bear the thought of letting Jika go all over again.

I tied the bracelet to the end of a ribbon, then picked up needle and thread to secure the knot.

“The wind’s too strong to fly him tonight, Nial.”

I jumped so hard I pricked my finger. I stuck the tip in my mouth to keep from bleeding on the kite. “Rai!”

My younger brother grinned. “I can’t understand you with your mouth full.”

I started to lash out, but then his eyes turned briefly to the kite in my hands, and his smile faltered. Jika had been like an older brother to him, taking him out on the bay and teaching him to sail. He was hurting too.

When we were children, I would have scooped up a handful of the orange sand and flung it at Rai or chased him into the water for startling me. He would have shrieked and laughed and splashed me in return.

Those memories felt as distant and unreal as starlight tales, the impossible stories parents told their children to help them sleep.

Rai kicked off his sandals and trudged into the bay. He hadn’t changed out of the clothes he’d worn while working in the field—tight-fitting tan breeches and a worn purple vest. A wide belt with metal rings peeked from beneath the vest.

Rai was fourteen, seven years my junior, but there were times he acted much younger. He spent most of his days working the vineyard with our parents. The sun had darkened his skin a deeper shade of brown than mine and lightened his close-trimmed hair. He was tall and lean, despite the fact that he rarely stopped eating.

He walked until the water darkened the bottom hem of his vest, then dunked beneath the water. He emerged with a gasp a moment later and hurried back out, shivering. Once he was close enough, he shook like an animal, spraying water toward me and the kite.

I’d been expecting this. I whispered to the wind, which shifted to blow the water back into Rai’s face.

“No fair!” he protested.

“Go away, Rai. I’m trying to work.”

He plopped down next to me and picked wet sand from between his toes. “Ki-Sila says the wind’s anger is a warning. War is coming.”

“Has she foretold that the sun will rise at the end of the night, too?” I hadn’t spent much time with people this past year, but even I’d heard stories of marauder raids along our northern border and an increased military presence on both sides.

If war did come, Rai was of an age to be conscripted. The thought made my hands shake.

“Do you remember the year Ki-Sila predicted locust swarms?” Rai laughed to himself. “Aunt Lhata got sand lice that spring. That’s kind of like a swarm.”

“Rai, please.” Once the sun disappeared beyond the eastern edge of Allon Bay, the stars would flow in earnest, painting a ribbon of light through the blackness. A slow river meant a broader swath of starlight, but it wouldn’t be bright enough for me to finish the kite.

I checked that my finger had stopped bleeding, then resumed sewing. Once the grapevine bracelet was secure, I added a rolled-up drawing Jika’s sister had done of the two of us and a brittle rattle made from a dried hakao nut. His parents had given me the rattle for the spirit kite. Tiny tooth marks ringed the top where he’d gnawed it when he was little. Finally, I tied his silver marriage bracelet to the last ribbon, remembering when I’d slipped it onto his wrist.

A thousand trinkets wouldn’t capture everything Jika had been, but these would be enough to draw him to his kite and carry him to the next chapter of his tale. I touched my own bracelet and imagined his hand clasping mine.

“You missed dinner,” said Rai.

I ignored him.

“Jika will understand if his kite’s a day late. He was never on time for anything else. Why should he start now?”

Jika had been late for everything. It had annoyed me when he was alive. Now that he was gone, I realized how unimportant those annoyances were, how pointless most of our arguments had been. I missed grumbling about his inability to properly spice a meal, or hearing him complain that I’d stolen the blanket again during the night.

“Have you eaten *anything* today?” Rai pressed.

“I grabbed two rice balls and some raisins before I left the house.”

“No wonder you’re so stormy. You weigh less than I do these days. You know what Gama would say?” He scrunched his face and added a deep rasp to his voice. “Skinny people get blown into the sky and eaten by cloud serpents. Now have another piece of ruby grape pie.”

Our grandmother had died three years ago, but his imitation was perfect. I smiled despite my frustration.

“It’s too windy tonight,” Rai said again. “Come home and eat.”

He was right, but I wasn't ready to admit it. As a wisp, I'd worked with stormy weather before, but this was different. The day after the quake, I'd barely been able to shift the wind at all. Each day since was a little easier than the last, but the work left me exhausted. Even Baaj, the village's senior wisp, said he'd never seen anything like it.

Tonight was the same. I'd been using my gift to create an oasis of calm while I worked, but it was hard to maintain. The air rushed overhead and raised whitecaps on the bay. The wilder the wind, the greater the chance Jika's spirit kite would be damaged or dashed to the ground.

Rai tossed sand beyond my shell of stillness and watched it fly out over the water. "At least back home, you can blow the smell from the house when Pata breaks wind."

"I have my own home. And that's not what a wisp's gift is for."

"He made fish chili tonight." Rai waited for that to sink in. Our father's fish chili was the best in the village, but its aftereffects were infamous.

"Wisps are supposed to help people."

"Rai ..."

He toppled over, pretending to choke. "You'd be saving lives."

Laughter and tears fought to escape. I crushed them both.

"It'll be too dark for kite-flying soon. Unless you've suddenly gained a bat's senses?"

My fingers raced faster, threading a black silk line through the kite's bridle and tying off the end. The ribbons rustled at my touch, like they could taste the winds racing overhead and couldn't wait to join them.

I worked with the speed and confidence of a master kitemaker. My body felt light, like I could push off and soar alongside the kite.

The sky was blacker now, save for a stripe of purple and red sunlight to the west. The curve of the night river had brightened with stars. Those in the center moved fastest, while the stars at the edges slogged along like horses trudging through mud.

Clusters of stars spun away from both sides of the night river, drifting in slow, lazy spirals until they were drawn back into the currents. I watched two stars dance around one another, moving slower and slower until they appeared to be standing still: two burning white eyes staring down at us.

"Come and eat, bat-face," said Rai.

"I have food at home." It was technically true, though I couldn't remember when I'd last had the energy to eat more than rice, smoked fish,

and a bit of dried fruit. My stomach gurgled loudly, adding its voice to Rai's. I put a hand over my belly and muttered, "Traitor."

Rai was right, though it was like a knife to my gut to admit it. The spirit kite was ready, but I was too late. By the time everyone gathered, it would be darker still. And I was too weary to protect the kite in this wind.

I knew Jika would understand. That didn't stop me from feeling like I'd failed him. Again.

I placed my needles and thread back into a brocade case decorated with faded red and orange butterflies. The remnants of Jika's shirt I tied into a bundle with a leftover length of ribbon.

Finally, I picked up the spirit kite. I hadn't gotten the frame perfectly square, but everything felt tight. Much like Jika, the kite was a little off-kilter, but strong. It would fly ... just not tonight.

The wind buffeted my body as I stood, like a friend turned belligerent when I tried to leave. I held the kite edge-first to keep it from ripping free as Rai and I started up the grassy hill toward my parents' home.

My hair streamed behind me. The untied slit sleeves of my shirt fluttered from my shoulders like green banners, leaving my arms bare. The air held the scent of spices and cooked fish. I rarely had much of an appetite these days, but now my mouth watered, and my stomach repeated its complaints. Everyone would have finished eating. Hopefully my parents had saved a bowl for me.

Atop the hill, the wind struck with its full force. I instinctively diverted it around us.

Allon-Li nested in a shallow valley, sheltered from the worst of the world's endless wind. Starlight and covered lanterns illuminated the low stone buildings and their slanted rooftops. On the far side of the village, low stone walls sheltered the crops, including our family's vineyards.

My gaze was drawn to the small house to the north that I'd shared with Jika. We'd painted the outer walls together the week after we were married, turning the stones sky blue with whorls of orange, black, and white.

Since Jika's death, those cheerful colors felt like mockery. Our home was simultaneously too empty and too full, stuffed with memories. Even the joyful memories cut like thorns in my chest.

I wrenched my attention away. High above the center of town flew a single kite lamp. The eight-sided lantern swung and swayed beneath the broad triangular kite. Trapped inside the glass were all the wine beetles the

younger children had gathered during the day. The beetles glowed blue when they were content, but turned the color of fire when threatened.

Tonight, the lamp was bright orange, the same as it had been every night since the quake.

Jika's spirit kite twitched in my hands. I jumped.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing." I was exhausted and imagining things. I shifted my grip and kept walking, head bowed against the wind.

The kite tugged again, stronger this time. The ribbons fluttered and pulled away, rapping their tokens against my ribs.

"You almost dropped it!"

"That wasn't me." I quelled the air until Rai and I stood in alien stillness. The kite continued to flutter and pull.

Rai leaned closer and scowled like his glare could make the kite behave. The ribbon with the rattle on the end flicked out to tap the tip of his nose.

Rai yelled and scrambled back so fast he dropped onto his backside.

The rattle was sewn to the second ribbon. The hair on my arms rose. How many times had Jika teasingly flicked Rai's nose with his index finger?

My body felt like it was carved from stone. I watched the ribbons of Jika's kite settle.

"How did you do that?" demanded Rai.

"I didn't." I raised the kite to examine it more closely. The white ribbons stroked my forearm.

Memories stirred in my chest like bubbles rising through the water. Only these memories weren't my own.

Instead, I saw myself through Jika's eyes, standing in the front of his boat and staring out over the water. The sun outlined my body, and the wind tossed my braids like streamers. I'd known he was watching me that day. This was before we'd spoken of our feelings for each other. I remembered turning to give him a better view.

Another memory, this one more recent. I felt the pain squeezing his lower back and shared his fear the first time he realized this was no simple bruising or torn muscle. He tried to keep that fear from me, but forced smiles couldn't hide the stiffness of his movements or the red pinpricks that began to appear on his skin.

More memories followed, scenes from throughout Jika's life. Splashing with his brothers and sisters in the bay while their parents watched from shore. The first time he took a boat out alone. The love he felt on our wedding night as he watched me sleep and listened to me snore.

My skin warmed. I hadn't believed him when he told me how loud my snores had been that night.

Amusement—*Jika's* amusement—filled my chest.

"It's him." I'd crafted his spirit kite because it was custom, not because I'd truly believed. But this was real. These were Jika's thoughts and emotions.

I felt like I'd swallowed a whirlwind.

"Nial ... it's just a kite." Pity suffused Rai's words.

Before I could respond, one of the ribbons jabbed at Rai like a scolding finger. Rai yelped again.

"How?" he whispered. "Gama's spirit kite never did this."

"I don't know." Wisps spoke to the wind, not the spirits of the dead. And Jika had never shown any signs of magic during his life. He'd been annoyingly focused on the physical world and the mundane practicalities of life. It was one of countless things I loved and missed about him.

It didn't matter. Jika was with me again tonight. I couldn't hear his voice, but I felt his love and his eagerness. I relaxed my hands, and the spirit kite leapt free. "He wants to fly. He's ready."

I loosened my grip on the spool, letting it spin out line. The wind should have battered the kite about, but he climbed steadily higher.

"Nial, what about his family?"

He was right. This wasn't just about Jika. It was a chance for those who loved him to say goodbye. I pulled the line.

The kite strained against me. I felt his longing to be free. "Not yet, Jika. Please." My voice broke.

Slowly, the kite calmed.

"Go fetch everyone. Tell them Jika's ready." I pulled the kite lower and dug my feet into the grassy sand.

I felt off-balance, like I was being buffeted by the same wind that carried the kite. I felt the air catching my panels, the strength of my spars, the weight of the mementoes keeping me upright. I felt the line stretching back, the physical connection between Jika and me.

The kite tugged again, drawing me onto my toes. I imagined the slightest push would lift me into the sky. I tensed my legs, wanting so badly to launch myself after the kite, to join Jika on his journey. “Tell them to hurry.”

§

The line buzzed like a harp string ready to snap. High in the darkness, Jika’s spirit kite was a fleck of blue, straining like a fish desperate to escape the hook. He tugged me another step.

A cold wave splashed over my sandals. The kite had dragged me down the hill, all the way to the edge of the bay. I braced myself and pulled. “They’re coming, love.”

The kite’s struggles eased slightly. I lowered my head in thanks. The kite dipped, returning the gesture.

I raised the line overhead and spun on my toes. Jika’s kite traced a larger circle against the night river. I stepped sideways, and he flew left, following me.

I don’t know how long we danced together. I was sweating and out of breath, but I never wanted to stop. I waded into the bay. The water climbed past my knees. Waves soaked my waist, threatening to knock me down. The cold pimpled my skin.

“Nial Onalan Sarnin!”

My father’s shout transformed me into a child. My body tensed. My shoulders rose, bracing for a verbal lashing. Even the kite froze in place.

Slowly, I turned around.

Pata stood at the base of the hill, his dark eyes fixed on me. His scalp glinted in the starlight. He wore his old robe tied over loose cotton pants, which meant he must have been getting ready for bed when Rai told him what I had done.

Mata was one step behind. Farther back, Rai held our grandfather’s arm, guiding him down the hill. Jika’s family had come as well. His parents clutched each other’s hands. They stared at the kite, their faces stone. Jika’s younger brother stood beside them. His sisters and their husbands walked behind. Kolai, Jika’s two-year-old nephew, toddled along beside his mother.

I waded toward the shore, only now realizing how far I’d gone.

“It’s one thing to shut yourself away from the world, from your mother and your brother and me.” Pata stormed toward me. “But to do this alone?”

This is a ritual for *family*, Nial.”

Mata stepped forward, her round face tight. “We know you’re hurting, Nial. But you should have waited. This wouldn’t be the first time a spirit kite needed an extra day to begin its journey. My father waited three days for a blizzard to pass before we could send him to join my mother.”

I hadn’t just broken tradition. I’d shamed and embarrassed my family.

“I’m sorry.” I looked past her, to Jika’s parents. They’d waited all day for me to finish working on Jika’s kite, never interrupting me or nagging me for updates. I’d repaid their patience by launching Jika on his journey without them.

They said nothing. Both had tears on their cheeks. Their hands were clasped so tightly they appeared to be the same flesh.

Once launched, a spirit kite was supposed to be cut free. As angry as everyone was, they would never disrespect Jika by forcing his kite back to land.

Eventually, his father stepped toward me and put a hand on my shoulder. He was a slender man whose wrinkled, sun-dried skin and thin gray hair made him look older than his years. Jika’s illness and death had aged him further. “We know you loved our son. We watched you care for him. Whatever happened here tonight, we know you acted from love and grief.”

His kindness broke me. I sobbed and pulled away.

“Bring the kite lower,” Gapa said softly. “Let everyone say their farewells.”

I swallowed and began to wind the line.

Gapa stepped closer and leaned his weight against his thick, shoulder-high walking stick. He wore a blue cloak for warmth, a stained, weatherworn thing Gama had made for him before I was born. His gentle, deep-set blue eyes studied me, then the kite. “How are you doing that?”

“Doing what?” asked Mata.

“Even with her gift, I was amazed she could fly the kite in this wind, but she’s done more.” Gapa brushed his hair from his face and pointed to the line, which hung loose enough for me to wind it with ease. “She’s not pulling the kite down. It’s coming on its own.”

“It’s Jika. He’s sorry for upsetting everyone. We both are.” I turned away. “I’ve never flown a spirit kite before. I didn’t know I would feel him like this, that I would hear his voice. I wasn’t ready—”

“Nial ...” Gapa’s voice was as soft and gentle as a new-budded flower. “The spirit kite helps the dead on their journey. It doesn’t speak to the living.”

“But I feel him.” I whirled. “You think I’m imagining it?”

He looked at the line, then at the kite returning to me despite the wind. “No, I don’t.”

“I don’t understand,” said Pata. “Wisps command the wind. They can’t speak with the dead.”

“They can’t,” agreed Gapa. “But there are tales of kitemasters who could.”

Kitemaster. The word hung in the air like the aftermath of a storm.

Even the smallest village had at least one wisp to help manage and use the wind, but only one in a hundred wisps became a kitemaster.

I’d flown kites all my life, like every child, but I’d never felt any special connection or power over them.

“Isn’t Nial too old to receive the dragon’s gift?” asked Pata.

My grandfather pointed to the kite. “I would have thought so, but maybe the dragons had other ideas.”

A thousand questions swirled through me. The first to escape was a faint, “Why?”

Was this meant as a kindness to a young widow? Where had the dragons’ magic and power been when Jika was writhing in sweat-soaked blankets, arguing with the fevered delusions that tormented him near the end?

Or maybe there was no reason. Dragons lived among the stars. Who was to say they noticed us at all? Maybe the three wisps of Allon-Li—Baaj, Luska, and me—were no different from anyone else. Maybe none of it meant anything at all.

“You’re sure it’s him?” Jika’s mother was a small woman, and she trembled when she spoke.

A melody drifted through my confusion. The notes were muffled, like soft waves against the side of a boat. I tilted my head, trying to listen.

“What is it?” asked Gapa.

“A song. The Lost Skyfish.”

Sudden tears filled Jika’s mother’s eyes. “I must have sung that song a thousand times to lull him to sleep as a baby. He was so fussy.”

It was a song about a young skyfish whose fins were too small for flight. When a flood separated her from her family, she had to swim through rivers

and streams to find them, with the help of various sea creatures she met along the way. It was a lesson about hard work and determination and friendship.

“My son ...” Jika’s father squeezed his wife’s hand. “Tell him we love him and we miss him. Tell him we think of him every day.”

I carefully pressed the spool into his hand. “You can tell him. He’s listening.”

With that, tradition and formality took over. One by one, our families said their goodbyes. First his parents, then his brother and sisters and cousins, everyone save his oldest brother and one cousin who were serving with the border forces to the north.

My family went next.

Pata talked about a time when Jika and I were children and snuck away to stuff ourselves with grapes. We’d both denied it, despite the fact that our hands, faces, and clothes had been stained purple.

When it was my brother’s turn, he chose to speak silently. Whatever Rai said, he was crying by the time he returned the kite to me.

I stood frozen. How could it be my turn already? As Jika’s widow, I was last to speak. These would be the last words I said to him, the last time I’d feel him with me. When I finished, I would have to cut the line and send him away. I’d have to let him go again.

It had been hard enough when Gama died, when her spirit kite had just been a kite, and the words were just words, and it was all just ritual to help us grieve and comfort each other.

“Nial?” Mata touched my back.

I whispered the same words I’d spoken that morning a year before, when I sat beside him and listened to the lengthening silences between his breaths. *“Please don’t leave me.”*

Mata stood with her hand on my back, saying nothing. Nobody fidgeted or complained. I felt like they would wait all night if I needed. A part of me wanted that, to stand here forever and never let go.

The kite tugged once, breaking me from my trance.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I’m sorry we didn’t have more time. I’m sorry I didn’t make better use of the time we had. I’m sorry I couldn’t save you. I’m—”

My throat tightened. There was more I’d meant to say, but if I kept going, the words would break me.

I took an old grape knife from the sheath on my belt. The wood handle was worn smooth by three generations of use, and the sickle-shaped blade shone in the starlight. My hand shook as I pressed the edge to the line.

Gapa's voice brimmed with love and understanding. "Send him home, kitemaster."

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About the Author

[Jim C. Hines](#) has written books about kick-butt fairy tale princesses, magic-wielding librarians, and post-apocalyptic space janitors, and of course, goblins. He's also the author of the Fable Legends tie-in *Blood of Heroes*. His short fiction has appeared in [more than 50 magazines and anthologies](#).

When he has time, Jim blogs about topics ranging from sexism and harassment to zombie-themed Christmas carols. He won a Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer in 2012.



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