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The Gift
an elegy excerpted from
Songs of the Metamythos
by C.F. Cooper

ONCE THERE WAS A GODDESS who lived among the stars, whose voice whispered like an ocean breeze:

“Timeless emptiness, hear my plea
“Tell what only you can see.”

Maia’s call drifted past her stellar brothers and sister worlds, roaming the galaxies in search of something rumored once to have been found at the edges of existence: the void...a nothingness beyond dimension and comprehension. It was said that to look into it was to encounter the deepest of mysteries; that at the beginning of things it had shown the three faces of Unu their true self. Or that nameless terror might lurk within it, waiting. Waiting. Waiting...

And still there was no sign from the void.

Maia—the riot of earth’s life about to burst from her belly—had sought out the void to face her own reflection and beseech it for some hint of her true nature. But now she feared that this strange enigma might no longer exist. Or could it be that it had ignored her call? After all, she was but one of a trillion trillion celestial gods. Or worse, might it not have heard her at all? The stellar winds faltered as her plea left the outermost galaxies far behind, like so much dust in the distance. She heard its final echoes fade past the hem of the Cloak of Space that envelopes the heavens, the last syllables falling into whatever lay beyond.

Only then did the void answer.

It came as a reflection of Maia’s simple sapphire-and-emerald beauty; her sibling stars and worlds, no matter how brightly they shone or magnificently they arrayed

themselves, paled beside it. Even now, as Maia grew round with a million children soon to be born, every slope of her form was fascination; her mane of tangled green, like the tropics in wet season, grew still more vivid and lush; and her ethereal eyes danced with anticipation of the joys of motherhood.

Anticipation... and doubt, doubt that had driven Maia to probe the void in the first place. Dissatisfied with the reply she received, she asked again:

“Lonely emptiness, speak to me
“What kind of mother will I be?”

She saw her own arms and legs, breasts and back and lovely face with questioning lips, and nothing more.

“Come away,” Luna insisted. Ever by Maia’s side, Luna coaxed her twin sister’s attention back from the empty reflection to the familiar folds of the cloak. “From the look of you,” she said, touching her lover’s swollen belly, “we will learn what sort of mother you are all too soon.”

True to Luna’s words, new life flowed from Maia’s womb soon after, in a trickle and then a flood. It was the dawn of an age of contentment, with barren Luna finding joy in her sister’s children as if they were her own, and their father, Cosmos, Lord of the Stars, keeping delighted watch from afar through the flaming right eye he’d plucked from his own head and set in the heavens nearby. Through Sol, by proxy he could linger on Maia’s abundant flesh, soft as tilled soil yet strong as iron. He could marvel as her skin changed from the whites and yellows of sand to the reds of clay to the browns and blacks of richest earth, as the

light from his luminous eye shifted across her face. Maia soaked in Sol's radiance, the light emanating from this one eye—the merest fraction of Cosmos' vitality—nearly overpowering her senses. His glance could sear flesh and incinerate bone, and if she was anything less than the goddess she was, even Maia could not have withstood his presence for long. As their children multiplied and grew stronger, so did the light from Sol, a certain sign that Cosmos was pleased with what he saw and that he would soon be coming in all his majesty to her and Luna. Maia's pulse quickened at the thought of his return, of being taken by those immensely strong arms once again, perhaps to bear more children.

And yet, in this age of contentment, one little thing was amiss. In a universe reverberating with Unu's ethereal song, Maia could hear one of her children was crying.

"Poor thing," she cooed as she picked up the newborn to comfort it, noting with concern that it seemed ill. "To be beset by woes in this age of contentment! What could ail you, with a mother who loves you, and Luna who loves you, and the light of Sol in which to bask..."

Her voice trailed off. The light of Sol. A glance that could sear flesh and incinerate bone. And the Lord of the Stars was fast approaching in all his blazing glory.

Her children, she realized, were in grave danger.

None of them had reckoned for this. Cosmos had set the eye to watch over them, not to wreak havoc; and her mortal children reveled in the light as she did, unaware that their fragile shells would sicken and die from the searing energies before long. For the sake of the children, Maia pleaded with Sol to look away. But Cosmos was still far from them, his attention divided among the other celestials as he made his inexorable way back to Maia and Luna. In the sight of

the eye he had left behind, all seemed well, and so Sol blazed on, oblivious to the harm it caused.

The rush of the stellar wind, which had once carried Maia's voice, now blew cold horror through her, for its every eddy brought a reminder that Cosmos was coming closer. That thought had always quickened her pulse, but instead her heart pounded with desperation. She had to find shelter for her young, but she lived in the heavens among the stars, where there was none to be found. There was only the Cloak of Space, which offered no protection, since it was the very thing that Cosmos used to gather his children to him. He would embrace them in its folds and even dim his presence before them, but by then it would be too late; his love would unwittingly leave nothing of their mortal kin but smoldering embers.

And there was nothing Maia could do about it. She could only watch as her children died, one by one. "Is this the kind of mother I am?" she wailed, her search for refuge fruitless. She turned to her children, playing in the sun, blissfully ignorant of the danger and too young to grasp their mother's fears. "I have nothing to give you, no way to help you," Maia cried, despondent, and buried her face in her hands. And seeing those hands, she suddenly knew that wasn't true.

At last she understood the answer from the void.

Luna caught the flicker of realization across Maia's face and from it grasped her intention. "You are no shapeshifter like Cosmos," Luna warned, her voice quavering with fear for her beloved.

"No. Nothing so easy—nor so transient," Maia replied, resolute, and began her work.

What happened next is legend, for few saw it who can tell the tale. Maia waited until Sol was asleep, as were nearly all the children; and the few who roamed at night didn't understand the scope of what they

saw. Maia's siblings couldn't bear to watch, so all but one of the celestials looked away; only Luna, compelled by her vow and her love to witness her companion's ordeal, saw it all, even through the tears she shed in silence. First, Maia plunged her hands into her back, seized her own spine, and tore it loose, laying the steaming vertebrae down to make a sturdy foundation; then she ripped out the rest of her bones one by one to frame the rest of a great structure. Then she scooped out her womb, dividing it into great basins that she filled with her own blood, every last drop, so that her children would never go thirsty, and spooled out her arteries and veins as waterworks to carry her blood to the farthest reaches. She peeled her flesh off bit by bit—the skin that would bead with sweat when she danced, and the muscles beneath that would never dance again—building walls and floors from the jigsaw pieces. She unfurled the clear substance of her eyes to form a vault above, which would shield her children from the worst of Cosmos' fires yet still let them revel in Sol's light by day and gaze at their celestial kin by night; and she took her hot, beating heart and plunged it into the depths below to form a hearth at the center of it all. Slowly a living palace took shape: Terra, wrought by Maia from her own flesh to be our home among the stars. Within its walls a thousand wonders lie waiting, from the glittering treasures buried in its deepest keep to the curtaining wisps drifting past its highest towers; wonders in halls of sand and heat, halls of blizzard white, halls of sunken mystery.

And when Maia had nothing left to give from her flesh, she reached deep into her soul and parceled out her essence as unique gifts for each of her children: to the insects,

her fecundity became the gift of great numbers; to the plants, the luxuriance of the hair she had pulled out by the roots was deeded as their own lush growth habits; and from among the plants, a touch of her immortality became the gift of long life for a chosen few, and they grew into trees; those plants that she blessed with her beauty and allure burst into flower; to the birds, her lost freedom became the mastery of flight; and so it went, gifts to each so that they could find their own special place in their new home and thrive there. To humankind, she bequeathed her thinking faculties as the gift of reason, so that now our cultures are her personality, our history her memory.

When next Sol awoke, just as Cosmos arrived to revisit the two most favored of his celestials, Maia as she had been was gone. In her place the palace Terra stood, brimming with all manner of life. "What's this?" Cosmos roared in shock and dismay.

"The mother of our children," Luna replied. "Is she not more beautiful now than ever before?"

And as he watched the first dawn break over the towers of Terra, the bright lord felt himself falling in love all over again.

Once there was a goddess who lived among the stars. All that she was is gone, but not lost; her wild spirit soars with every stroke of a feathered wing, the breadth of her vision known to any who have seen the open sky, her devotion as certain as the ground beneath our feet, and her loveliness plain to see, in shades of sand and clay and richest earth in the face of every woman and man, her wisdom dancing in our eyes. She's speaking to us now; listen...

But the only sound is an ocean breeze.