Cloud Dragon Skies

Long ago, our ancestors looked at the sky and saw gods. Their ancestors saw only stars. In the end, only the earth knew the truth.

They came at the end of harvest season. I was in the field, picking hard little pods of okra with dirty fingers, when I heard my father’s voice on the wind. I got to my feet and saw, above the bobbing leaves, strangers standing in front of our house. Four of them, all wearing baggy white garments which enclosed them from head to toe. I was not alarmed. Because the sky-people were weak against our diseases—the Earth is so much wilder than their land—they always wrapped themselves thus. Even so, we kept our guard up. Who knew what new diseases they might have developed, up in the sky and surrounded by strangeness? Infected blankets. Germs as spears and arrows. Accept no gifts from them, the griots had warned, but of course, people are greedy.

I walked through the fields to stand at my father’s side. He had no sons, my father, and no other daughters. His fields were productive, his sculptures and drawings prized by all, yet often he felt himself impoverished in the way that men do when they have too few copies of themselves underfoot. I saw the strangers look me over through the small windows which revealed their faces, and felt pleased to be assessed so seriously. I kept hold of my basket but stood tall, letting my posture speak for me. Harm him, trick him, and I shall know you are as evil as the stories say. Not for nothing was I still unmarried.

“My daughter, Nahautu,” my father said to the strangers. He kept his voice neutral, and by this I knew he disliked them. “She, too, must agree to
this.”

The stranger who stood at the front of the group inclined his head. “My greetings, Nahautu,” he said. He spoke our tongue with a thick accent, and tortured the pronunciation of my name. “I and my companions have come from the sky-land. Do you know of it?”

“The Humanicorp ring habitat beyond Mars,” I replied. I kept my voice as neutral as my father’s.

“Yes, exactly,” the stranger replied, clearly surprised. “We are scientists—seekers of knowledge—come to study the changes in the sky. We have asked your father for his hospitality.” He nodded toward the back field, where our fishing cottage sat near the shore of the river, among the twisting cypress roots. “Your village elders told us you use that building only during autumn and winter; may we use it until then?”

I set down my basket and folded my arms. “Autumn is three months away,” I said. “We are good hosts, but we cannot feed four extra mouths for so long and still eat ourselves.”

“They bring provisions of their own,” my father said. I heard the same kindly condescension from him as from the sky-man. “They will keep their space machines out of sight. The cottage will be sealed in a bubble while they are inside—only a few hours each day. They will be ghosts, barely there and rarely seen. Do you agree?”

And what would we get in return? I wanted to ask, but I knew the answer to that. It was against our law to accept their goods, even in trade, and we had all we wanted of their knowledge. Even so, Father would gain status from hosting the strangers. The young warriors would think him brave for flirting with danger; the elders would call him wise for aiding relations with the sky-folk. He had a need to be admired, my father. My fault. I had been slow to give him grandchildren, who could look up to him in awe as I once had.

For him, I gave the strangers my nod.

They bowed, stiffly and with no true humility, but that was all right because I expected no better of them. All my life I had heard tales of the sky-people and how their ways had nearly destroyed the world. I looked each of them in the eye as they straightened and sent my silent message again. You are fools, I said with my shoulders and my legs and my tight strong fists, but I know how much harm fools can do. I will watch you
closely.

Two of them were women. One squirmed under my gaze. The other smiled, plainly intending friendliness but seeming fatuous instead. Their leader narrowed his eyes at me, puzzled or irritated by my manner. The fourth was a younger man, who also squirmed and looked away at first, but then his eyes drifted back. There was a familiar weight and texture to his gaze.

I picked up my basket and returned to the field, making sure to sway my hips as I walked.

I was a child when the sky changed. I can still remember days when it was endlessly blue, the clouds passive and gentle. The change occurred without warning: One morning we awoke and the sky was a pale, blushing rose. We began to see intention in the slow, ceaseless movements of the clouds. Instead of floating, they swam spirals in the sky. They gathered in knots, trailing wisps like feet and tails. We felt them watching us.

We adapted. We had never taken more than we needed from the land, and we always kept our animals far from water. Now we moistened wild cotton and stretched this across our smoke holes as filters. Sometimes the clouds would gather over fires that were out in the open. A tendril would stretch down, weaving like a snake’s head, opening delicate mist jaws to nip the plume of smoke. Even the bravest warriors would quickly put such fires out.

“How do you like the sky?” asked the younger man of the sky-folk. He came out of the fishing cot to watch each evening as I bathed at the river. Usually he looked away, but every so often I felt his eyes on my breasts, my round hips, the forest of curls between my legs. It charmed him that I was “so natural, so unselfconscious,” even though every woman is conscious of such things.

I sat on the riverbank, twisting my hair into rows along my scalp. It would dry overnight and then I could let it loose to dangle in spirals like a cloud-dragon’s neck.

“I neither like it nor dislike it,” I said. “It just is.”

He sat near me, awkwardly perched on a fallen tree branch. I wondered if he worried about snagging his soft white garment on a spar of wood. I
wondered if he would wriggle his way out of it, like a snake, if that happened.

“We’ve determined that a chemical shift has occurred in the planetary atmosphere at the tropopausal layer,” he said. “We think the actual amount of change is very slight, on the order of parts per trillion.”

So sweet, his words of courtship. It pleased me that he made no assumptions. We live simply, down here on this earth that his kind have forsaken, but we are not stupid.

“And what of the dragons?” I asked. “How different are they?”

“Dragons?”

I gestured up at the clouds. One wove a lazy braid above us, brilliant gold in the setting sun.

“Ah, the clouds. Clouds are clouds, aren’t they? Just fog in the air instead of on the ground.”

I leaned back on my elbows and looked at him. Did his people never stop studying the sky to simply watch it?

He watched the blackeyes of my nipples rise and fall and said, “Well, the Ring’s distance sensors did detect some odd amino acids in the thermosphere. We’re planning to send up sampling probes soon. If we find anything I’ll let you know.”

I visualized them sending up one of their little metal balls to take a bite out of a dragon. Stupid, stupid. His kind have never seen the forest for the trees, or the dragons for the vapor particulates.

But then, I am the one who knew better and said nothing.

After the sky turned red, the sun still shone and the crops still grew. The sky-folk came down to check for changes in us, but there were none—none of the kind they cared about, anyhow. Our weavers chose new colors for traditional beadwork patterns. Our musicians made up new songs, though only some were laments for the lost blueness. The red skies were beautiful, too. At sunset, streaks of yellow boiled across the red like rivers of lava. Bits of blue returned then, and violet, and green as bright as new leaves. The clouds lined up to dance along these colors, ribboning the sky until nightfall, when they gathered into knots or relaxed in wisps to rest. Rain came only at night now.
My conversations with the young sky-man continued. Each day he sat a little closer, talked a little more. They were beaming light upward and testing the reflections to see what this revealed about the new sky. He had a brother and two sisters in his village—city—on the Ring. He asked very little about me, but I sensed that this was because he did not want to seem nosy. As sky-folk went, he was less foolish than most. I liked him.

“Why do you call them dragons?” he asked one day as we sat together beneath the sky, where the clouds had begun their evening dance. It was full summer, so hot and humid even at sunset that it took hours to dry after my bath. I lay on the riverbank on a swatch of deerskin, wearing a long-sleeved tunic to protect against insects. He wore the same ugly white bag.

“Because they are,” I replied.

“I didn’t think dragons were part of your, er, cultural tradition,” he said. “Your people have chosen to follow African and Native American ways, right?” He was as dark as I inside his baggy skin. It was clear we shared ancestors, yet he spoke as if we were different species.

Perhaps we were. There had been only two choices at the time of the great exodus: the Ring, where there could be cities and cars and all the conveniences of life as it once was, or Earth and nothing. Most chose the Ring, even though it meant traveling to the great belt of rocks beyond Mars, from which the Earth is merely a tiny pinpoint lost in a black, starry sky. For those who chose Earth, the lama manipa and the rebbe and the storytellers came forth and taught the people anew all the ways they had once scorned. And all the clans everywhere, no matter their chosen ways, swore the same oath: to live simply. Those who could not or would not were exiled to the Ring.

“Dragons are a human thing,” I said. “People have dreamt of dragons in every corner of the Earth.”

“What do you dream of, Nahautu?” he asked. He sat very near me, sharing the swatch of deerskin, and looked at me through his little face-window. His eyes were impossibly wistful. Even if he had grown up among my people, he could never have been a warrior. Perhaps because of that, I had begun to love him.

“Becoming a griot,” I said. “Traveling the world sharing tales.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Who would look after my father? I have no husband or children to
share the duty. I stand too tall and talk too loudly and have too little patience with foolishness. No man wants a wife so unwomanly.”

“On the Ring,” he said, very softly, “there are many women like you.”

Somehow I was not at all surprised.

The leader of the sky-scientists came to my father a few days later. He hunkered down in the center of our house and drew a diagram in the floor dust. They had determined the source of the sky’s change: a simple chemical shift, triggered by a critical mass of oxygen in our atmosphere and a certain kind of light from the sun. Old foolishness lay at the root of it. Before the exodus, for many years, all the world blew poisons into the sky. Forests died. The world grew warmer. Since the exodus, the forests had returned and the world began to cool, but the old poisons were still there, dormant. Now they had awakened, combined in some strange new way, and changed the sky.

“We can neutralize the chemicals,” the sky-man said. One of the women was with him, her face alight with the good news. “We fire a single missile into the air, with a wide dispersal pattern. The chain reaction would begin here and spread through the atmosphere. Earth would be her old self again by the next morning.”

My father tried to be polite. “We like the sky the way it is,” he said.

The woman’s excitement faltered and faded. The man frowned. “Others might not.”

“True,” my father said, “but they must accept the sky the way it is. That is the one law we all obey, no matter what traditions we follow, and no matter that it means our lives are shorter and harder than yours. We no longer change the world to suit ourselves. When the world changes, we change with it.”

“This red sky is nothing natural. The procedure would restore nature.”

My father folded his arms, his eyes growing thunderous. There were times when I admired his obstinacy. His fury could be a truly awesome thing.

“Leave,” he said. “Take your bubble off my fishing cottage and go back to the sky.”

“If I have given offense—”
“You live in the sky on a strip of rock. The same air your ancestors breathed sickens you now. You offend me with your existence! Get out!” And he reached for a nearby drinking gourd; he would have thrown it had I not grabbed his wrist.

The sky-people left quickly. I let my father go and he stomped about the room for some time, still raging. I sat back to wait for him to calm down. “And you will see nothing more of them either,” he said. I knew then that he was bothered by my evening chats with the young one.

I did not argue. His obstinacy was a thing to be admired except when it was not, and at such times reason and common sense were useless. Nor did I agree, however. He would notice this and be angry, for he was a warrior and warriors expect their every command to be obeyed. One day, perhaps, he would understand that he had raised a warrior in me as well. Did I not love him in spite of his disappointment with me? Had I not proven myself willing to die alone rather than surrender my spirit just to obtain a husband? And now I had resisted a fine suitor’s advances out of loyalty to my people. I could not speak for wisdom, but did these things not signify strength?

I laid out dinner and swept the floor and laid out our pallets for sleep, then went down to the river for my evening bath. The fishing cottage sat forlorn and empty beside the water. The clear shell that the sky-folk had built around it was gone, and so were they.

I washed, and then watched the clouds swim against the waves of the sunset until dark. My only true friends, I thought, but I felt more alone than ever.

Perhaps the sky-people sent messages back to the Ring and conferred with others of their folk. Perhaps they simply talked among themselves and decided to do what they felt was right. I am told they solicited the opinion of several villages’ elders, at least, though that was spurious. The elders had lived most of their lives under blue skies. Enough of them yearned for those days that the sky-folk found some agreement for their plan. They could be very smart when it suited them, and my people could be very stupid.

I was in the fields, harvesting ripe ears of corn, when the young one returned. I would have laughed had anyone told me a man could sneak onto our land wearing a big white bag, but perhaps it was a testament to his
desire that he did so successfully.

“Nahautu, come with me,” he said. I was glad to see him, though I knew my father would likely tear his white bag open when he caught us. We walked to the river and that was the moment when I intuited what would happen. The air felt heavy that day; I could see the shadows moving more than usual. High above, dragons touched tails and spun in a delicate lattice.

“I wanted you to see this,” he said. Greatly daring, he took my hand. Was it weak of me that I allowed it? Was I a traitor? The men of my village were confused by me, but I was not so very different from other women. I wanted to be touched with tenderness. I wanted to be special in another’s eyes. I wanted someone to talk to who would not think me strange; someone who would look at me and not think, How do I control such a woman? That did not seem so very much to ask, to me. Nor to this strange young man from the sky.

He pointed toward the hills in the near distance, humps of trees outlined against the horizon. “There.”

I squinted along the line of his arm. “What?” But then I saw it: a sudden flare of light amid the trees. Something flew into the sky, like an arrow fired straight up. A rope of smoke trailed behind it. The dragons would ignore it, I thought in sudden, irrational hope. The smoke was graceless, too straight and too white, to be of interest to them. They would ignore it and everything would be all right.

The thing reached the height of the clouds and vanished. In its place, a splatter of blue appeared in the bowl of the sky.

Above our heads, the wheeling dragons paused in their dance.

The blue splatter began to spread. A ripple in a lake weakens with distance; this did the opposite, moving faster as it grew, gaining strength as we watched. The red sky had no defense, consumed utterly in the blue’s wake.

I looked over at my suitor. His face was jubilant, adoring. This was his gift to me. I was touched by it, even as my soul wept in anguish. I knew what this meant. We had thought ourselves better than the sky-people. We had called ourselves guardians of the new Earth, yet we had failed in that duty. We were unworthy.

I heard him gasp as the clouds above our heads suddenly streaked toward the spreading blue circle. No longer wispy or slow, their intent was
now obvious. They met, melded, and spun a thread—a dozen threads—a
rope. Tawny white and water-swift, the rope raced to encircle the spreading
blue. I imagined translucent jaws clamping down on a scraggling misty tail.
They had formed themselves into a living, lashing breakwater.

When the edges of the blue crashed against this barrier, I expected the
cacophony of battle—roaring and shrieks and splashes of darker red against
the sky. But the reality was nothing so dramatic. Blue met white; the white
vanished. I thought perhaps I heard a cry of anguish, but that might only
have been my imagination. The dragons were gone.

But in death they achieved victory as the circle of blue stopped. Its crisp
edge held for a moment, then softened. Gradually, inexorably, it began to
shrink.

And all around it, thunderheads began to darken the sky.
His confusion was painful to witness. I felt pity where I should have felt
rage. “I don’t understand,” he said.

“Yes, you do.” Above us the thunderheads roiled, flickering with
lightning. Dragons arced in and out of the mass. I imagined their cries of
fury and grief in the thunder. “Touch me before we die.”

He stared at me for a moment longer, and then did perhaps the first
natural thing he’d ever done in his life. He caught my hand, turned, and
began to run.

*Where could we go?* I wanted to ask him. Where could we hide from the
wrath of the very sky? But he moved with purpose as he dragged me among
the cypresses, following a trail that was half mud. He could move swiftly in
his clumsy bag. There was a roar to the east, in the direction of the hills.
Through the trees we saw a spinning column wind down from the gathering
clouds. The tip of it whipped and twisted, a dozen dragon-heads charging
with jaws open, before it touched the place from which the sky-folk had
shot their great arrow. Trees and boulders flew into the air.

Against the boiling sky other knots had begun to spin. Hundreds of
them.

He reached a clearing and stumbled to a halt. A silvery box like a coffin
lay there, open and waiting. He pulled me toward it and I balked. “No.”
He looked at the sky in wordless argument: If we stayed, we would die.
“We deserve this,” I said. I wanted to weep. Oh, Father, my father. “We
have learned nothing.”

He clutched my hands. “Please, Nahautu. Please.”

What woman has ever been proof against such a plea from the man she loves? Even if it means betraying all she holds dear. Every daughter must leave her father’s house sometime. I never dreamt it would be like this.

Yet I climbed into his coffin with him, watched as he sealed the door shut, and clung tight as the coffin lifted into the air. Through the coffin’s window I saw us rise like a bird on a thermal; my stomach fell and my head spun as we soared above the trees. All around us, the sky drove gray tornado spears down into the earth, tearing apart forest and plain alike. I saw my village, and another in the near distance, obliterated beneath a column of angry, grinding dragons. We rose toward clouds like bruises, clouds angry enough to tear us apart, and I cried out. But though the coffin shook as we passed through the clouds, we emerged on the other side into sunlight, unharmed. A tendril of mist followed, looping once and opening silvery jaws to swallow us whole, but the coffin was too swift. We left the furious Earth behind and kept going and going into the sky.

Life on the Ring has not been what I expected. The people here are not so very different. They crave nature, too, in their own limited, tame way, and they have sculpted the Ring in ways that honor the Earth they’ve left behind. There have built rivers and hills. There are some trees here, brought up from Earth during the exodus. They grow well beneath the transparent shield that protects us from open space and the unfiltered rays of the sun. My husband has shown me the tiny patches of carefully tended forest here and there.

Sometimes, as I travel the Ring to tell my tales, I forget that the earth on which I walk is nothing more than a narrow strip of crushed asteroids, a quarter of a mile thick and millions of miles long. Sometimes I forget that I have ever lived anywhere else.

And then I look up.