



Tzipcanu

Bird Festival



E.R. Zaugg



“Gorrinyu llibertat ghanyva tlenva llemakhal zentzu.

The sparrow's freedom and perseverance reminds us to seek a life of simplicity.”

-Sister Aranya “Mother” Jimaiyo

Aranya smiled, closing her eyes and holding the teacup up to inhale its aroma.

The tea was papaya, one of her favorites and native to Sceotan, though considered quite rare elsewhere on Innatraea. She had watched the fruit grow on this very rooftop, had plucked it herself days ago and left it to dry in the morning sun. Now the fragrance rose to meet her—sweet and bright, like sunlight made liquid.

She took a very slow sip, savoring its flavor while listening to the birds singing around her.

She was sitting in the garden atop her home, as she did most mornings. Centuries ago she had changed the entire roof into a flourishing garden of flowers, fruit trees, and other plants. It had taken her decades, because she had also decided to use Weaving to make the garden self-sustaining. She no longer had to water a single plant, trim any leaves or branches, or in fact do anything at all.

Except sit there and enjoy her small personal paradise.



She opened her eyes. The morning air was soft and warm, carrying the scent of frangipani and ripening citrus. Dew still clung to the broad leaves of the banana trees in the corner, catching the early light like scattered jewels. A hummingbird—iridescent green and no larger than her thumb—hovered near a cluster of hibiscus flowers, its wings a blur of impossible speed.

Aranya took another sip of tea, smiling.

The many colorful birds that inhabited her home flitted about everywhere, singing as they did every morning, both greeting the sunrise and her. Parrots in brilliant blues and yellows. Finches in orange and red. Tiny wrens that darted between the fruit trees like living leaves caught in a playful wind. The air was thick with their chorus—not chaotic, but layered, like voices in a temple choir each finding their own harmony.

She watched them, enjoying the colorful display of flapping wings and sound, while still sipping her tea occasionally.

It was almost time for Tzipcanu, their island's bird festival, that occurred every Spring when the flocks returned to Sceotan. The migratory birds would come in great waves, darkening the sky for hours as they arrived from their winter homes across the sea. The whole island would turn out to welcome them—with song, with dance, with offerings of seed and fruit left on every windowsill and rooftop.

The birds in her garden, of course, no longer migrated. The garden was kept warm year-round by Weaves she had layered into the very stones of the roof, and they had long since figured out life was easier living around her home.



Aranya's smile widened as a Gorrinyu—referred to by most Innatraeans as the common sparrow—landed on her small table by the bowl of seeds she always kept there.

She'd named this one Kolotzi, a name amongst her people that meant "Brave," because the little bird seemed to never give a whit whether she was nearby or not. He would land on her table, her shoulder, even her head if she sat still enough, and regard her with bright black eyes that held no fear whatsoever. He was her favorite, for now anyway.

Unfortunately, the tiny birds did not live long lives.

She had learned centuries ago not to let that sadness consume her. Instead, she held each small life as the gift it was—brief and bright, like a candle flame. Kolotzi would die someday, as all sparrows did, and she would grieve him. But his children would remain. And their children. And on and on, an unbroken chain of small brave lives, all of them somehow carrying a piece of him forward.

He finally flew away, taking more food than usual with him.

He and his mate Yenu—whose name meant "Pretty" for her unusual coloring, a soft grey with a stripe of gold across her wing—had another host of babies to take care of. Aranya had watched them build their nest in the crook of her oldest fig tree, had seen Yenu sitting patient and still while Kolotzi brought her food, had heard the first tiny cheeps when the eggs hatched three weeks ago.

Keeping track of her birds, naming them, and watching their families over time was a joy. It gave her something to do with her mind that made her happy, and more importantly had nothing to do with the complexities of Weaver responsibilities or politics.



Those could drown you if you let them. The endless debates about jurisdiction and resources, the subtle power plays between islands, the younger Weavers always jockeying for position and influence. She had watched it consume so many of her Sisters and Brothers over the centuries—watched them forget why they had been given these gifts in the first place.

Not her.

She had her birds. Her garden. Her people. That was enough. That had always been enough.

Aranya finished her last sip of tea and set the cup down, sighing happily.

Then she got up and walked over to another nearby table, taking a seat again, and looking at the little potted tree there.

Its name was Pilutzi Ghani, which meant "Little Giant," and it was the one thing she still tended to herself in the garden. The tree was nearly her same age—she had grown it from a cutting taken during a trip to Imperial Shinoda in her younger years, back when she had still been curious enough to travel, still eager to see what the wider world held.

They called the art form Bonsai, and it was an exercise in diligent patience that she truly loved.

The tree stood no taller than her forearm, but its trunk was thick and gnarled, speaking of centuries of slow growth. Its branches spread in graceful curves that she had shaped over generations—a little pressure here, a careful cut there, always working with the tree's own nature rather than against it. The leaves were small and delicate, a deep green that turned to gold at the edges in autumn.



She touched the little tree gently with her fingers, admiring its flowing contours.

Pilutzi Ghani had seen so much. It had been with her through loves and losses, through wars and peace, through the births and deaths of everyone she had ever known. Sometimes she talked to it, late at night when the garden was quiet and the stars wheeled overhead. She told it things she could tell no one else—her fears, her doubts, the loneliness that came from outliving everyone.

The tree never answered, of course.

But it listened. She was certain of that.

Aranya laid her other hand on the small pair of shears next to her, thinking.

There was no hurry. There had been many days over her long life where she and Pilutzi Ghani had spent hours together without her performing a single cut. Patience, and the appreciation of the tree's beauty, were an integral part of why she loved the art of Bonsai so much. The shears were not for correction—they were for conversation. Each cut a question asked of the tree. Each response a new branch, a new direction, a new possibility.

Then she smiled, closing her eyes, as the delicate music of Ollin's clavichord gently drifted over the morning air to her ears.

The melody was something old, something Sceotian, a tune about fishermen returning home after a long voyage. She recognized it from her childhood—though her childhood was so long ago now that it felt like a story she had read rather than a life she had lived.



The man was an excellent musician and lived in one of her apartments as a pensioner. There were many that lived throughout her large home, mostly those who were older or had nowhere else to go. Tlalli ran her home's kitchens with cheerful efficiency, always humming while she worked. Izel kept things organized, her sharp mind tracking every detail of the household with quiet competence. Ximena tended the lower gardens. Old Tenoch repaired whatever needed fixing, his weathered hands still steady despite his age.

Her people had long ago taken to calling her home Nochalu, which really just meant "Home" in their language, but held a more significant meaning. It was a place of love and safety, where people could always go and be a part of a family.

She smiled listening to the music, and laughed a little to herself remembering Ollin as a young boy.

He had been a handful—all energy and mischief, forever getting into places he shouldn't, asking questions that had no easy answers. She'd ended up paddling his backside on more than one occasion, though even then she had seen the music in him. The way his fingers moved, always tapping, always keeping rhythm with some song only he could hear.

He was an old man now, though still very young compared to herself. He had been living under her roof since his wife Zaniya had passed, three winters ago. They had been married for forty-seven years, and losing her had hollowed something out of him that she wasn't sure would ever be filled again.

His beautiful music, that he played every morning, was the man's way of thanking her.



But it was more than that, she knew. It was his way of remembering. His way of staying connected to the world. His way of saying *I am still here, I am still alive, I still have something to offer.*

She understood. She had played that same song herself, in different ways, across more years than Ollin could imagine.

Then she heard quickly approaching footsteps and opened her eyes, looking over just in time to catch Chima with a few Weaves of air before the young girl fell flat on her face and spilled Aranya's breakfast all over the floor.

The Weaves caught her gently, cradling her like invisible hands, and set her upright again with the tray still somehow balanced—if barely—in her grip.

The child had only been a part of the household for a few years, having moved in after losing both of her parents to a horrific storm. Aranya still remembered the night they had brought her—soaked and shivering, eyes too large in a face too thin, unable or unwilling to speak. She had simply held the child for hours, rocking her, humming old lullabies, until finally Chima had fallen asleep.

It had taken months for her to smile again. Longer for her to laugh. But now—now she was all energy and enthusiasm, eager to help, desperate to please, still learning that she didn't have to earn her place here.

Aranya smiled, amused. "Child, how many times must I tell you? Walk carefully and get your tasks done in a patient manner. No one expects you to run, or get things done more quickly than even a Weaver could."



Chima nodded, looking chastised. Her dark hair was escaping from its braids already, as it always did, and there was a smudge of something—flour? honey?—on her cheek.

"Yes, Mother Jimaiyo."

Aranya's heart warmed at the title. She had never borne children of her own—had chosen not to, knowing what it would mean to outlive them—but she had mothered hundreds over the centuries. Thousands, perhaps. Every orphan who had found their way to Nochalu. Every lost soul who needed shelter. Every frightened child who needed to know that someone, somewhere, would catch them when they fell.

"Alright child, come sit. What did you bring for us?"

Chima smiled joyously, the chastisement already forgotten.

The best way to encourage a young girl's confidence and self-worth was to make any chastisements a gentle learning experience while focusing on the positive things that truly mattered. Aranya's use of the word "us" meant that they would, as usual, be sharing breakfast together while watching the birds.

Which also meant that Chima was forgiven.

"Your favorite—Chilatlukhu!"

The girl very carefully walked the rest of the way and set the tray down on the table between them. The scent rose immediately—crispy fried tortilla pieces softened in rich red pepper sauce, topped with crumbled white cheese and a generous dollop of cream. Tlalli's recipe, perfected over decades, the kind of humble breakfast that street vendors sold to workers at dawn and mothers made for children on cold mornings. Nothing fancy. Nothing rare. Just warmth and comfort on a plate.



Aranya moved Pilutzi Ghani and her shears out of the way to make room.

"Kolotzi took more food again this morning," she said, watching the girl settle into her chair. "The babies must be doing very well."

Chima sat down, practically vibrating with excitement, while patiently waiting for Aranya to take her food first. "Really?! When do you think we will get to see them?"

Aranya selected one of the smaller pieces—her appetite had diminished over the centuries, though her appreciation for good food had not—and took a bite, savoring the warmth.

"Soon, I think. Another week, perhaps two. Kolotzi is bringing them more food each day, which means they're growing quickly." She smiled at the girl. "We'll need to be very quiet when we visit the nest. Baby birds frighten easily."

"I can be quiet!" Chima said, far too loudly, then caught herself and lowered her voice to a whisper. "I can be quiet."

Aranya laughed—a genuine laugh, the kind that came from deep in her belly and surprised her every time.

"I know you can, child. I know you can."

They ate together in comfortable silence, watching the birds move through the garden, listening to Ollin's music drift up from below. The sun climbed higher, warming the stones of the roof, making the dew sparkle like diamonds before it burned away.

Somewhere in the fig tree, Kolotzi was feeding his children.



Somewhere below, the streets of Sceotan were beginning to fill with people preparing for Tzipcanu.

And here, in her garden, surrounded by life she had nurtured and people she had saved, Aranya felt what she always felt on mornings like this.

Peace.

Simple and complete.

This was why she had been given centuries. Not for power. Not for politics. For this.

For breakfast with a child who needed to be loved.

For a tree that needed patience.

For birds that needed someone to remember their names.



Just over a century later...

Taia took another sip of her kahve, a hot and bitter drink from Tursim, which she far preferred over tea—especially when it was strong and thick like the Tursi themselves drank it.

Others might add milk, herbs, sugar, or even fruits to soften its taste, which she found a bit ridiculous. Why drink kahve at all if you were going to utterly ruin the flavor? The whole point was the bitterness, the way it hit the back of your tongue like a slap, the way it made your heart beat faster and your mind sharpen to a fine edge.

Then her cup was empty.

It always seemed like every inn on Sceotan served kahve in cups that were too small. Tiny ceramic things, barely enough for three swallows, as if the Sceotians were rationing it out drop by precious drop. In Tursim the cups were larger. In Tursim they understood that kahve was not a treat to be savored in thimbles but a necessity to be consumed in quantity.

Sighing, Taia placed the empty cup on its saucer and looked off of the balcony at the street below.

The morning was already warm, the sun blazing down on cobblestones that would be hot enough to fry an egg by midday. Vendors were setting up their stalls, hanging streamers of bright fabric and paper birds from every available surface. Children ran through the streets in costumes of feathers and paint, shrieking with delight, getting underfoot and causing no end of chaos.

At least from here she would have a good view of the parade.



She enjoyed the annual display of brightly colored bird costumery, dances, and singing—just not being amongst the people performing them. Crowds made her skin crawl. All those bodies pressing together, all that noise, all that *emotion*. It was exhausting just thinking about it.

Better to watch from above. Detached. Safe.

It would still be a few hours until the festivities started. Taia always arrived early to avoid the crowds and find herself a good spot on a nice inn's balcony. This inn—The Singing Parrot, a ridiculous name—had decent kahve and an excellent view of the main processional route.

The serving girls, however, left a lot to be desired.

She looked at her empty cup and sighed again. The girl had filled it once, nearly an hour ago, and then vanished into the depths of the inn. Perhaps if she ordered more food they would fill up her cup a little faster?

Then again, she could probably just give them a few more coins and accomplish the same thing without stuffing her face like Brother Frederick. The man ate like every meal was his last, which given his age might actually be true. She'd seen him put away an entire roasted pig at last year's Summer Solstice celebration and then go back for seconds.

A commotion started below, distracting Taia from her kahve frustrations and making her look down towards the street again.

She smiled, because it was Mother Jimaiyo and her little army of Sceotians.

The procession moved slowly through the crowded street, parting the morning crowd like a ship through water. At its head walked a small woman—tiny, really, barely five feet tall—with silver hair braided and coiled atop her head like a crown. She wore simple clothes, undyed linen in the Sceotian style, with a single bright feather tucked behind her ear.

There was nothing impressive about her appearance.

And yet.

Everyone they passed stopped what they were doing. Vendors paused mid-transaction. Children ceased their running. Conversations died mid-sentence. All of them turning to watch, to bow their heads slightly, to smile with a warmth that spoke of genuine love rather than mere respect.

Chima was with them too—a Goddess Bound who was just over a century old now, and though bonded to someone else, always came to help with events like these. Taia had heard the stories, of course. The orphan girl Mother Jimaiyo had raised, who had grown into a formidable warrior, and became Goddess Bound. The loyalty between them was admirable, even from Taia's detached perspective.

They were walking through the street waving and singing, while throwing out handfuls of candy for the children. The sweets arced through the air in colorful trajectories, and children scrambled to catch them, laughing and shouting.



Meanwhile, their matriarch herself was specifically going to each of the most destitute-appearing people—the beggars in their rags, the crippled veterans missing limbs, the hollow-eyed women who had likely sold everything they had just to survive—and personally embracing them, before giving them coins and food.

Taia watched with a mixture of respect and discomfort.

She appreciated the woman's effort, but couldn't quite fathom how she was able to hug such dirty Innatraeans. Just thinking about doing that made her shudder. The smell alone would be unbearable. The grime that would transfer to her clothes. The potential for disease.

And yet Mother Jimaiyo showed no hesitation whatsoever. She held each person as if they were precious. Looked into their eyes as if they mattered. Spoke to them—actually spoke, asked questions, listened to answers—as if she had all the time in the world.

That's how she does it, Taia realized. She actually believes they matter. Every single one of them.

It was remarkable. It was naive. It was perhaps the most powerful thing Taia had ever witnessed.

Then again, the woman did have an inherently greater level of respect amongst their island's people than any other Weaver. Everywhere she went, people automatically greeted her, gave her food or gifts, asked for advice, offered a helping hand, or moved out of her way.

She never demanded it. Never expected it. It simply... happened.



The woman was a force, and in such an unusual way. She rarely ever left Sceotan, and never volunteered for any position of power amongst the Weavers, yet Innatraea seemed to bend itself to her will. Not through manipulation or political maneuvering, but through something far more dangerous.

Love.

She loved them. All of them. The whole island. And they loved her back with a ferocity that defied explanation.

Taia still remembered an incident, nearly two centuries ago now, where the Greater Consensus, including herself, had stood in consensus for raising the local taxes. It had been a reasonable increase, well-justified by the costs of maintaining the harbor and improving the roads.

Everyone had agreed. The vote had been unanimous.

Then, out of nowhere, Mother Jimaiyo had entered the Great Loom.

She had ignored all decorum that said she couldn't be there—she held no official position, had no right to speak—and simply walked to the center of the chamber. The guards hadn't stopped her. The other Weavers hadn't objected. They had all just... watched.

She had looked at each one of them in the eyes. Slowly. Deliberately. Taking her time.

And then she had simply said: "No."

Not a speech. Not an argument. Not a threat or a bargain. Just that single word, spoken with absolute certainty.

Though strange, they had all laughed it off. What could one old woman do, even a Weaver, against the unanimous decision of the Greater Consensus?



They found out the next morning.

The entire island, down to every last Sceotian, had decided to stop working. Every shop, inn, guard post, dockmaster's station, and more just didn't open. The streets were empty. The harbor was silent. Sceotan seemed like a ghost town, its people simply... absent.

Nothing changed their minds. They didn't answer their doors. They ignored any commands given to them. When Weavers came to demand explanations, they simply looked through them as if they weren't there.

It lasted three days.

Three days of nothing moving, nothing working, nothing happening on an island that was one of the most important trade hubs on Innatraea. Three days of ships sitting idle in the harbor, their cargo rotting in their holds. Three days of Weaver panic as they realized, perhaps for the first time, just how much their power depended on the cooperation of ordinary people.

The tax was repealed.

Mother Jimaiyo never spoke of it again. Never gloated. Never demanded credit. She simply went back to her garden, her birds, her household of strays and orphans, as if nothing had happened.

But everyone remembered.

The woman never cared about Weaver politics or power. She sat out of meetings, ignored invitations to prestigious events, refused every honor and title that was offered to her. But as soon as anything affected her people, Mother Jimaiyo became an immovable mountain.



Maybe that level of confidence, wisdom, and command is what came from being one of the three oldest Weavers living, Taia thought. Or maybe it was simply who she had always been, and the centuries had only refined it.

It was remarkable, really. The woman's influence was even present in Taia's thoughts, because she didn't think of her as Sister Aranya, the title she was technically owed. She was simply Mother Jimaiyo, and always would be.

A serving girl finally appeared at her elbow, filling her cup with more kahve. The liquid was dark and fragrant, steam rising in delicate curls.

Taia smiled at the girl—a genuine smile, surprising herself.

"Thank you."

The girl nodded and hurried away, and Taia turned back to the balcony, watching the procession continue down the street.

Mother Jimaiyo had stopped again, this time crouching down to speak with a small boy who was crying—lost, perhaps, or frightened by the crowds. Taia watched her wipe his tears with her sleeve, watched her speak to him gently, watched her somehow produce a piece of candy from her pocket and press it into his small hand.

The boy stopped crying.

A moment later, his mother appeared—frantic, terrified—and Mother Jimaiyo simply handed him over with a smile, accepting the woman's tearful thanks with the same grace she accepted everything else.

Then she continued on, moving through her people like water through stone, leaving calm in her wake.



Taia took a sip of her kahve.

It was still too bitter for most people. Still too strong. Still served in cups that were too small.

But somehow, this morning, it tasted exactly right.

Below her, the parade was beginning in earnest, and the streets of Sceotan were filling with music and color and life. Somewhere in that crowd, a tiny silver-haired woman was still hugging strangers and giving away coins, still loving her people with a ferocity that had outlasted centuries.

And above them, in the garden atop Nochalu, a little tree named Pilutzi Ghani was growing toward the sun, patient and eternal, waiting for its mother to come home. Taia often wondered what secrets that little tree knew.