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Daughters of the Sun: "The Birth" (An Excerpt)

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ONE

I

YOU HAVE NEVER HEARD OF ME BEFORE. You have never heard of me, but my name has come out of your mouth thousands of times. You have never heard of me because they did not tell you.

He created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Yes, that is true. But fast forward from the Old to the New and the Half-Truths begin. Sure the stories are semi-accurate—they couldn't have gotten *everything* wrong. They just omitted one crucial piece of the puzzle: Me. I am not the Chosen One, but the Forgotten One, the One Pushed Aside. Typical: the woman standing in the shadow of the man's light. And I do mean literal light. He glowed. But don't get me wrong. I loved him—love him. He is my brother after all. Yes, I love him, but I don't like him all that much. He left me here with the humans. These stupid mortals! *That* is the second coming: coming to get me.

Oh don't worry. I've been waiting over two thousand years. I have time to tell you one story.

II

I AM A WOMAN LIKE ANY OTHER you would pass on the street. I have two eyes, a nose, a mouth, two arms and two legs, like you. I most certainly do not glow. And yes (because I know you are wondering) I even have bad hair days. See, what'd I tell you? The main difference between you

and me is that I *know*. I know everything. Well, everything in the past that is. Unfortunately, I can't see into the future. I know because I was there: empires during their rise and after their falls; kings and queens standing adored before their people and in their final moments, vilified by those who once held them exalted; tyrants hated by history; wars fought in the name of God, the king and man; ideas that question humanity's intelligence; and (some) progress.

You want to know the one thing I have seen over and over and over? Struggle. You mortals are all divinely destined to struggle. Yes, life is a mixture of science and faith. I know, a heated debate, but it's true, because one other thing I have seen consistently is that the world is not black and white, but a mottled shade of gray. It's not dark or light, but filled with shadows, the unseens: you can smell it but not see it; taste it while it makes no sound. Darwin and Mohammad are correct; the Good Book of Mostly Made Up Stories is no more wrong than a heavy, expensive chemistry textbook. You exist because of a commingling: egg and sperm, Mother Nature and God the Father. Miracles do happen; your eyes just can't see them. That's the sixth sense (and another difference between you and me).

It wasn't easy to build the trains across the continent, planes that land safely on the ground or sea, automobiles modeled after tanks, and telescopes to see into space or microscopes to view a section of an organism less than the diameter of a pin head. It's not every day that an apple conks you on the head and you puzzle out a theory. We can get people up among the clouds and under water, but what would those feats mean without a little hair-pulling? Significantly less, my friend.

Birth. Life. Death. You can't get away from them. Me? I've got the first two. But death is the one thing I can't have. It is the reward. Death is easy. Death is over, the finish line, the final

song. The only time you will ever find peace on earth is when you are six feet under the soil after the shovel drops the last clod. You mortals all die. I don't understand why you get so freaking sad about it.

And what about love? Love is complicated in its simplicity and simple in its complexity (puzzle that one out). Love makes you do stupid things. You become twisted in the other person such that you lose yourself. Love does not save and it does not protect. It exposes weakness, cuts to the bone. At the end of the day, you're in bed with your tablet, scrolling through pages of media with no worth whatsoever. Alone.

I hear the bells tolling through the open window. It will be Sunday in a handful of hours. I get a weekly reminder about what a disappointment I am, about how not only have I screwed up my life, but the life of every human who has lived, is living and will ever live. What am I talking about? Well, to answer that, we must go back, all the way, to the beginning.

The clock chimes above my head. I must get this out. Tonight is the night, I can feel it in my very old bones. "Why?" you ask. It has been floating around in my brain for many years (many, *many* years). And when the sun pushes itself above the horizon tomorrow—Well I won't give away the ending. I'm not psychic. These words, my words, are all that matter now, so please be patient. It will be clear in time.

III

WHERE DOES OUR STORY BEGIN? My story begins in a barn. Yes, *the* barn. The two weary travelers, mostly sure of what the night will bring yet still scared, take the only shelter available. Ten fingers, ten toes, they hope. Two horses stand in the stalls, their onyx eyes watchful and their velvet bodies perfuming the air with their earthy scent. One has a star on her forehead. She will

bring luck. The other has a line of white from her ears to the broad tip of her nose. She will bring courage. Two cats mew for attention. One winds his body around the man's legs. The man kicks at him and the woman scolds, "Joseph!" Then the pains grab her underneath her breasts and she doubles over. Nothing exists for a minute except what is inside her and trying to get out. She is exhausted but finds strength in breath. As the pains die, she lets the man settle her on a bed of straw. Her lower back aches. The weight in her womb shifted suddenly the other day when they were traveling and she thought she was going to give birth in the middle of the road. All is not right. She has known this for a while. It is a feeling in her gut, oily and dark. Tonight, she knows, will reveal the truth.

"Water," she asks and the man goes to the mule standing in the middle of the unfamiliar barn. The mule is tired. He had to carry the woman on his back the whole way and she was not light. His back aches too.

Joseph takes the spoon and looks around. She nods at the water trough in the corner. It is not good enough, but it is all she has. The water slides into her stomach, cool but stale, and washes away the feeling. She knows it will return.

She looks up and, through the slats on the roof, can see two stars. Not one, but two. The pains return and hold her belly in their unforgiving fists. *Why?* The thought occurs in a moment of weakness. *Why must it hurt so much?* She is not asking Him, but Her, the first, the original. The one from whom all pain began. Then the pains pass. She is sweating and panting. One of the barn cats purrs in her ear while the other hides in the shadows. She closes her eyes. Sleep is so close, but the pains are closer.

“Oh my Lord,” she mumbles before cringing. She should not be saying His name like that, but He is not the one in this pain. “Joseph. I feel something.” She licks her cracked lips. It is too much. She wants to bury herself under the hay. *Why*, she asks again, *why does it have to be like this?* “Low, beneath my stomach.” Her cheeks flame. *He is my husband. He is a man. He is all I have.*

“Let me see,” Joseph says. He has never looked down there. The Virgin Mother is left with no choice but to part her legs. He pauses, his eyes widening in—horror?

“What?” she demands. “Is something wrong?” *Please, do not let anything be wrong with him. I will do anything. Let him be okay.*

Joseph shakes his head. “No, I—” He pauses and she clenches a handful of hay. “I can see his head.”

Releasing the hay, she exhales and with that breath, her body tells her to push. It is an instinct, a guiding from the mothers who have gone before her, her own mother whispering in her ear: Do not forget to breathe, my daughter. This time there is no man, angel or otherwise, guiding her, coaching her, promising her things that are not and will never be. One horse shakes her mane while the other whinnies. With courage and luck, she pushes.

“Yes, yes, that is it.” Joseph’s eyes are sparkling. She thinks she can see the baby’s head reflected in their brown depths. She closes her eyes and tells him, *You will be well.* When the pains stop, she rests. One of the cats bats a piece of hay with his paw. She reaches for the feline.

“One more,” Joseph says, as if he knows anything about what is happening. “One more, Mary. Two breaths and you shall be done.”

She bears down, breathes, sends every ounce of energy to the horse’s star and pushes.

“Almost there,” Joseph’s words fill her ears and she pushes them out too. She does not need them. Does she need him? Well, if nothing else, he is nice to have. She does not favor being alone. Bad memories. A scream flies from her mouth, raw and unforgiving. It is not the pains, but the face, her face, the Dark One.

Then, a release, wet and slippery and unexpected. Joseph is shouting and smiling. It is over. And it has just begun.

“Jesus,” she exhales, her body falling limp into the hay. She expected to feel empty, deflated, but there is not time for that because there is more. “Joseph.” He does not hear her. Her voice is weak. She pulls everything she has left inside and shouts, “Joseph!”

He looks down at her as the baby starts crying.

“I think,” she begins as the pains start. She inhales and says with the breath, “There is another one. Another baby.”

Joseph is stunned. She knows she has about half a minute before the pains set in, for she can feel them building.

“Find something,” she pants as sweat slides down the crescent of her face and drops into her already soaked tunic, “to put him in.”

“One,” Joseph says, confusion smeared on his face. “You said there was to be one.”

He is not the one in pain. He plays no part in this. It is that voice, the one that comes to her in the darkest moments of the night, the moments when demon hands wrap around her throat, when their claws puncture her skin and she bleeds for her sins. It is the voice that haunts her, finds her in the dark, hidden amongst the shadows, lures her into the light. It is the voice that guides her to do the bad things her soul craves. It is the voice she wishes she could listen to

more. It is the one that gives her more courage than any god could. It is the voice of another. It is her voice.

Now, though, she has no time. She is being demanded of by something—someone—else. “Please Joseph,” she pleads as the pains begin to take over. Her body tenses and concentrates itself, pulls itself into her core. She squeezes her eyes shut but hears him rustling around. There is nothing but the pains. She forgot their unforgiving ferocity the moment the boy slid out of her body, but they have come back, harder than before. They slide out from her stomach, tendrils coil around her muscles and joints, and squeeze. Her head pounds, her arms and legs ache, and her womb has endured so much pain, it is numb.

She feels heat and opens one eye to find Joseph kneeling between her knees. He looks perplexed, but murmurs encouraging words. “You are doing well, Mary. Yes, I can see his head.” His eyes light up as if this were the first time and not the second in as many minutes.

“Oh my Lord!” she screams, bearing down into the hay, grunting, panting, sweating and straining. “Get it out of me!”

Joseph nods like he knows exactly how to do this. She leans back as the pains subside. “Almost there. Next one and you shall be done.” He smiles and reaches for her hand. They have traveled so far together, all to reach this one place for this one event. Well, two events. But what about what happens next? That angel never said anything about after. How will they care for two babies? She looks over and sees the panic on Joseph’s face. He is thinking the same thing, perhaps even worse.

She inhales and squints as the pains rise from deep in her belly, the dark place of all pain, male and female. She feels numb between her legs and does not realize it is over until Joseph

cradles the baby. She falls back, her entire body releasing. A warm, wet, sticky lump on her chest. She fumbles around until her breast is exposed. The child latches on as Joseph looks down at the slimy mess in the hay under her feet and begins sucking. She hurts, but it is nothing compared to the pains before.

He looks with a quick glance to see that her breast is almost fully covered and says, "It is a girl."

Mary whispers, "Alleluia." Two: horses, cats, stars and babies. Twins: boy and girl. History repeating itself.

Joseph stands dumbfounded. "You said one. The Son of God."

"This is my fault?" Mary asks as the girl ate first. "He said one baby."

"Then why are there two?"

Mary exhales. She has no energy to deal with his panic. The babies are more important. She may be only sixteen, but she is a mother. She brought these babies into the world, not him. That is something he will never be able to do. "I do not know, Joseph. Maybe something got mixed up from Heaven down. Maybe the angels are having a laugh at our expenses. Whatever the reason, here they are. The children of God. Our children. Bring me the boy. He needs to drink." She shifts the girl to make room for the boy and within moments both are suckling. Mary strokes the girl's head with her index finger. The skin is soft and has a delicate perfume. She inhales.

"She needs a name," Joseph says.

"She has one." Mary leans down and whispers into the girl's ear, "Alleluia."