

When the Sea and the Sky Turn to Blood

By Amy Lane

Listen my children? Do you hear me? Do you hear the roar of the ocean? Does it sound like sobbing?

Of course you hear it, but you don't know why.

Do you see the sun, how it is muted so often, here where the water meets the sky? Did you not wonder at the reason? We cannot afford to live in ignorance, my children. These stories must be handed down, or the oceans will forever run with blood.

You do not believe me? Do you not see? Wait for it. Gaze out on the horizon with the longing of a beloved for a long absent mate. Watch in anticipation as the sun dips down to kiss the water and do you see?

Yes. There it is. Scarlet and salty, precious and uncontainable.

The blood of the fire and the ice, mingling in the brine.

That is a lesson my children, as irrefutable as day and night, as ocean and land and sun and love and death and fate. Sit still, listen to me with big eyes, as I tell the tale.

You've seen—of course you've seen!—the giant stones that litter our hills. Bigger than people, bigger than cattle, and yet smaller than barns. Yes. Those are the fragments from the hearts of the sky giants, those that fought in our skies long before man could build houses, when he still squat, wordless and grunting, before a river while he gnawed bones and dipped his head to drink. The moon was once a giant, before another giant smashed into it, ripped out its heart, and hurled it to the ground, and there it sits, in the cleft of those two hills that are but a half-day's walk to the sea. You have seen it—it has been ripped asunder by two mighty and opposing forces.

Those were the things that lived within.

You see, within the heart of stone that landed on this very shore, there dwelled the giant of ice and the giant of fire, yes, within the very same heart of the moon! The heart came hurling to the ground, denting the crust of the earth with its force, but not breaking. It sat there, smoldering, brooding, for many years, while the things within it fought!

“Let me out!” screamed the fire. “I am mighty and wicked, and I shall rage upon the land and ravage the world!”

“Let me out!” hissed the ice. “I am subtle and cunning. I shall spread across the crust of the waters, the earth, and I shall chill the heart of the world!”

“Shut your mouth!” roared the fire. “The world is mine to destroy! I am trapped here, my arms against my chest, my vision, craving light, is cocooned in darkness. The world is mine... I am so angry, so hurt, to be ripped from the heart of the moon!”

“I never said I wished to destroy it,” the ice replied, all wounded dignity. “I said I wished to chill it, make it ache, make it shiver, make it cry.”

“Why not destroy it?” the fire asked (after they had been trapped for many, many years.) “You are strong, my brother. You could freeze the world with one mighty breath. One stomp from your foot, and it would crackle. We are battered and bruised, we are bleeding and trapped, why would you not wish to kill, to devour, to eat all the creatures of this world like molten berries, feeling their skin break about your teeth and their juices run down your throat!”

The ice sighed then, as they strained against their granite bonds. “Because it would be over too quickly. My anger is strong, and growing older and stronger. I wish for the world to freeze and mourn the passing of the heat, and to never see the spring.”

The fire grumbled. “I like it,” he said, his voice echoing against the stones of the chamber in which he was trapped. “I like it, but I fear I have no patience for that. I admire you, brother, for you can think long and think deep. Perhaps if you think enough, we can find our way out of this prison, and set about shaking the world with our rage!”

The ice cackled to himself, and put his long blue hands on the rough walls of his prison. The walls themselves chilled, grew blue, but that alone did not break them.

“Throw your might on the wall nearest me, brother, and I shall do the same!” the ice called. “Between us, we can burst the heart of our birth, and be leashed upon the world!”

Oh, and they *did*, my children! The ice froze the chamber wall of the granite heart and the fire burned it, and the stone split asunder, scattering giant stones about our hills like a child’s marbles. The fire and the ice both let out a terrible roars, and the fire stomped off in giant strides, and every footprint he left bubbled and exploded and poured molten rock into the air, fetid, boiling steam released from the screaming earth as he howled his anger and his pain onto his new and tiny planet.

The ice did as he promised as well. He wrapped his arms around his chest, thought grim, icy thoughts, and seeped frost into the earth, down to the soul of it, and froze skin of the planet until it was covered in white.

For *years* the world shuddered under their wrath. The snows covered the hills, the plains, the mountains and the deserts. Molten fury spewed from the footprints of the fire giant as he raged his way across the wasteland. People shuddered in fear day by day, for the havoc wreaked upon them by the merciless passions of the children from the heart of the moon.

But even children cannot tantrum forever. The ice fell into a state of melancholy dreaming. He missed his home on the heart of the moon, and he missed his brother, loud and full of life, in the chamber next to his. He sat, huddled, on the icy, briny shore where the land met the sea, and yearned for those moments, when they were close, and he could hear his brother's impassioned howling—and his hidden, heartbroken sobs.

For his part, the fire stopped stomping about, raging and wreaking destruction with gouts of fiery rock and flame. His footsteps became softer, flickery, and he shrank, became thin like the wind, tiptoeing lambent across treetops, drawn by the lightning, another lonely giant, cast down from the heart of the moon.

But the lightning was fickle and distant, not constant and patient like the ice. The fire yearned for the cool and soothing voice echoing in the cavernous chambers of the heart. He found his footsteps flickering lightly across the many lands, drawn to that one place where to look any more west was to see the east, where the sea embraced the sand like an unlikely lover.

He came up behind the ice, as his brother sat, holding his knees to his chest and gazed out to the place on the horizon where the day ended and the night began.

“Hello, brother,” he said, tempering the roar of his voice. “Have you seen any wonders since we parted?”

The ice whirled and danced toward him, spider webs of frost crackling across the sand under his feet. “I have seen *so* many things, brother! Would you care to hear?” His voice tinkled and drifted, and the fire was enchanted.

“I very much would. Let us sit, you on the side of the day, where I may see the light dance from your skin, and me on the side of the night, where I will seem bright and beautiful in your eyes. We can tell stories of our time apart, for...” he paused, and looked at his brother, his mouth open and the place in his chest where humans kept their hearts suddenly aching and void. “Your voice became dear to me, when we were imprisoned, and I have yearned for it since.”

The ice turned pale pink under the dancing flames of the fire. “I have yearned for you as well.”

For a moment, the fire did not flicker and the ice did not freeze, they simply were, elements in the world, regarding each other across a small void of space.

They sat then, and shared the things they had learned.

“Have you seen the peoples?” Fire asked, with wonder. “They are small, and fragile. They are like the other creatures of this world.” He grew pensive, regretful. “There is no fun in raging at them. They are too easy to kill.”

“Have you seen their vessels?” Ice asked, equally awestruck. “They are marvelous things, so small and weak, and the humans, just as small and weak, trust their very lives to them. I’ve rimed many a face and prow, giddy with the travels of such small, delicate things across a mighty swell.”

Fire glanced shyly at Ice, their lights dancing and commingling across the dark and empty space. “Have you seen them embrace?” he asked.

Ice nodded soberly. “I have indeed. It’s a frightening, animal heaving. I feel sorry for them, in the sweat and pain of that fleshy grappling.”

Fire cocked his head. “I think they like it.”

“Really?”

“They do it an awful lot.”

“I wonder. Perhaps we would need to be more human.”

They regarded each other across the expanse. They were both so great, it was several hills across. Fire scowled, the orange-red of him flickering as he thought.

“Perhaps if I went out into the world some more, and watched them, I could grow small and less fearsome. I would not want to hurt you, Ice, should we choose to embrace as humans.”

Ice looked surprised. “Us? Is that who you had in mind?”

Fire turned the deep red of blushing coals. “I remembered your voice, your peace, as we lay entombed in the heart of the moon. I longed for it. It became a thing I wished to touch.”

Fire's heat danced off of the blue-white of Ice, turning it a faint pink. "I missed your rages. I missed your life."

"So then...?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps if I gaze long enough at the horizon, perhaps help some humans home through the crusted skin of a frozen sea, perhaps I too would grow smaller, and less able to quench you and render you cold." Ice shuddered. He loved the heat of Fire—he would not like to see him still and cold, as the humans became before they were cast into the depthless heave of the swells, or lowered into the moist clench of the earth. "I would not wish to see you cold."

Fire smiled then, so bright he was as shiny white as Ice. "We shall try then? We shall try to fit on this smaller bodied planet, not as things from the sky, but as things from its bosom? We shall try?"

Now Ice's smile turned shy. "Indeed," he said mildly. "We shall try."

"What shall we be then? We will not be brothers, if we embrace like humans."

Ice sat stilly for quite some time, thinking of their long entombment in the heart of the moon. "We shall be heart-mates," he said with some decision. "We shall be two chambers of the same heart. Together, we shall drive a body that is bigger than our own, because that is how I feel, when I think of an embrace with you."

Fire whooped, and cast himself into the sky so as not to cause boiling eruptions on the skin of the earth. He glittered and burned and twisted, beautiful and awesome, but not frightening, not dangerous to those who watched, and Ice laughed, the sound booming across the hills in Fire's wake.

They spoke long into the night, and Ice felt his eyes closing in rest as the light rose to dawn. When he opened them again, Fire was gone.

Ice was lonely after that, but it was a bearable loneliness. He had faith; the same patient, ferocity that had sustained him to freeze the heart of the earth and cover the crust with snow now sustained him to gaze into the horizon and study the peoples of the world, in his effort to become more human.

Fire now ran across the surface of the planet, touching too lightly to leave even a charred imprint of his footstep upon the brown meadows of a thawing winter. He managed to dance brightly when he had a chance to stop and see humans, the better to coax them nearer that he might try to become their kind.

And the humans, for their part, were conquering more things and becoming less a slave to their fears of the elements, and more inclined to enslave those things to their bidding. They took their hands to stone and sticks and made tools. They took their tools to stone and sticks and made houses. They gathered in their houses and made families. They gathered families together and made towns. Fire was entranced. He would dance, poised, near a town gathering as they celebrated the coming together of two humans, the coming into the world of the small ones, or the departure of the old, or ill, or injured. The humans stopped fearing him and started capturing his little spurts of forgotten flame, bearing torches to weddings and to funerals, and with every bit of him that the humans bore aloft in triumph, with every part of him that sat at the hearth and gave comfort and warmth, drawing the humans from their black ignorance, the fire grew smaller, less fearsome, with delicate red-gold skin and eyes dark and bright, like wood before the flame.

In time, he came back to the ice, running forward as he had before. He halted, nearly half-a-league from his heart-mate, disappointment dripping from his voice like burning wax.

“You’re not human,” he said, distraught. “You’re not close to human at all!”

The ice turned to him, drops of marble-smooth frozen brine dribbling from white-blue cheeks. “I’m so sorry, heart-mate,” Ice wept. “The humans were so frightened of me. They will not live where I live, they will not take me to their hearths. They make their homes where I am not, and when winter comes to their doors, they hide inside with you and lock me out. I tried! I tried. I do not know how to beg, or I would have fallen to my knees and begged to be a part of them, so that I might be a part of you!”

Fire’s head drooped on his newly slender neck, and he was crestfallen. “Oh no,” he whispered, suddenly shivering in his heart-mate’s chill. “How will we be together? You must become more human, Ice, or I shall perish at your feet!”

Before Ice could answer, or even plan for such a thing, Fire looked up, brightening, dancing as was his wont. “Of course! Of course!” he cried. “I know just the thing! The humans abandon them all the time, just leave them wandering! I shall find you a human to live at your hearth! I shall!”

And with that, Fire flickered off, leaving only his joy and his optimism, and his sublime faith that there must be a way.

Ice waited. It’s what he did. Sometimes he waited with his face toward the sky, soaking in the heat and the light from above, and if he thawed but little, then every small bit was that much closer to being a mate for Fire. He spread his arms wide and welcomed the ships, pulling the rime from the deck and the uncomfortable droplets in their sweaters of

twined wool. The ships for their part came closer to a less treacherous shore, and that, more than the sun even, helped Ice thaw just a little more for his Fire.

But it was not enough, even Ice knew that, which is why he turned his head more and more often to the place where Fire had stood, looking at it longingly, as though some of that faith could still be seen in rippling orange and gold warps of the air.

One day, he was staring in that exact spot, shivering in the power of his own cold, when he saw Fire, even smaller than before, and holding his hand was a tiny girl-child, a human.

“Oh, Fire,” Ice breathed, terrified. “What have you done? She is precious and fragile, and she will wither and die here, on my sharp-edged shore.”

“She is stronger than she looks,” Fire said, his smile banked and smoldering. “She was lost and alone, and took my hand of her own free will. She comes from a place where the snows are deep, and the people there have many names for the many shades of you. She taught them all to me as we walked. Here. I shall sit here, and give her fire to warm her hands, and you shall talk with her. She will warm your heart.”

Ice looked upon the girl, her face piquant and flushing from the warmth of Fire’s hand in hers. The girl did warm him, he had to admit it was true, but that is not what caused the thaw of the next few years. The thing that wrapped around his icy heart and slowly bled his terrible giant’s form of frosty spikes and blocks of ice into that of a delicate, fragile human, was the earnest, hopeful smile on Fire’s face as he touched his hand to tinder and made fire for them by which to sit.

Some of it happened overnight.

Ice started out sitting far away, and listening to Fire’s conversation with the little human child.

“Will her family not be frightened?” Ice asked, concerned. He had seen humans looking for their lost ones—he did not want that worry and that pain and that wrath turned upon Fire. Fire was not an invincible giant anymore, raging murder across the land. Fire could be harmed.

“They’re dead,” said the child, surprising him. “They were killed in a landslide.”

Ice frowned, trying to decide if this was his doing or not.

“They happen,” Fire was telling the girl gently. “The world is a dangerous place.”

“I know. But you’ve been nice. Is your friend nice too?”

“Oh yes,” Fire told her, and he spoke so sincerely that Ice felt himself grow smaller and less fearsome right then and there.

Fire left the girl with Ice then for an hour while he ran off to get her food. He came back with a satchel of grains and a dead rabbit. Ice watched in curiosity as Fire pulled a pot from a pack on his back and cooked the grains in water from a nearby stream.

Fire and the girl talked quietly—Fire took pains to explain that the rabbit felt no pain, the girl took pains to explain that cooked grains were better with honey. Ice listened to their conversation and felt that curious softening and warming around his heart again. He leaned his cheek against his knees and contented himself in becoming smaller.

The girl eventually curled up under furs by the merry little blaze Fire had started for her, and Fire walked close enough to Ice that Ice saw him shiver.

“She is for you,” Fire said earnestly, smiling. Now that he was more human, his skin was the color of a tanned peach, and his hair was bright ginger. When he smiled, his face was wreathed with deep grooves around his mouth, and Ice yearned to touch soft fingers to them, and to feel that peach colored skin against his palms.

“She is a lovely gift,” Ice said, his mouth quirking with the irony of a person being a gift. “What am I to do with her?”

Fire’s skin flushed, and he looked away, embarrassed. Ice felt remorse, and grew smaller still.

“We can raise her,” Fire said, his voice uncertain and unsubstantial. “We can raise her, and watch her grow. I have seen the humans do so, and it makes them very happy to pass their lives this way.”

Ice sighed, and the wind around them grew chill enough for Fire to shiver. “You are very good with her. So warm, and very kind.”

“I have lost my temper,” Fire confessed. “She walks so very slow. I have yelled and made her cry. Perhaps you could keep me from doing so again.”

Ice brightened, closing his eyes and feeling warmer than the dark that surrounded them. “I *am* very good at that.” Perhaps they could. It was cheering to feel as though he had something to offer.

Fire's voice in the darkness suddenly stripped the cheer away, and the world became colorless again. "I would like to try something, if I may. I would like to touch you."

Ice shook and rattled against himself with fear. "I would hurt you," he whispered. "Humans can not touch me. Your hand would burn and then freeze, and then turn black. Your beautiful skin would crack and bleed..." Ice realized that there was water in his eyes, but did not realize that the frozen round tears no longer rolled down glass cheeks.

"No, no, no," Fire hushed, his voice the caesura of the licking flame. "Just a simple touch. Go ahead. Hold out your hand to me. My form is human, yes, but I still have the heart of the terrible fire giant that terrorized a world, Ice. I will not be broken so easily."

It was hard. Ice felt brittle and fractured as he held his palm up, bright and shiny crystal white against the rimed dark. He closed his eyes, so that he may not see the destruction of Fire's lovely new flesh, and simply stood there, palm out against his fears.

And that is when he felt it. Soft as a feather, a simple touch against his skin. His soft, blood-pumping skin. He started to shiver, and the soft touch became harder, and warm and pliant flesh grasped his hand. He kept his eyes closed, his entire form shuddering, and harder and harder, until he raised his face to the darkened sky, which had always been his friend. The hard and sharp edged lights within it had always seemed fellow ice giants, comforting him in his loneliness while he waited for Fire's return. The moon, while indifferent to the children of her heart, had at least been familiar, a place he had once dwelled, as he had sat his solitary vigil on the place where sea and sand did meet. But none of these things offered solace now as the terrible transformation swept Ice, the painful melting of his frigid greatness as his entire form rendered itself to a mate for the simple touch of Fire's now-human hand.

His roar almost cracked the heavens, but when the echoes of it died down, he was a man, shivering cold and naked on the shores of his beloved ocean, and Fire's arm was around his shoulders as he wept his fear and weakness into the sand.

There were clothes in Fire's knapsack—Fire had worn them as he'd approached, but Ice had not noticed, he'd been so happy to see his heart-mate. Fire dressed him in breeches and a shirt and a warm sweater. While Ice balanced his weight on Fire's shoulders, Fire slid warm, soft socks up his newly minted—and very cold!—feet. Eventually Fire took Ice's hand and led him to the happy orange light of the little blaze by which the girl still slept, oblivious to the falling of ice giants around her.

"We are helpless!" Ice protested, feeling fatigue in all his limbs, and the vastness of the world now that he was smaller. "How shall we care for a child when we can barely care for ourselves!"

Fire sat next to him on a fallen log and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Ice enjoyed that. He found his head fit nicely in the hollow of Fire's shoulder and head, and there was enough comfort there to block out the dark of the sky, and the laughing light-crystals that he'd once thought of as friends.

"We shall build shelter," Fire said, as much warmth in his voice as in his skin. "We shall build shelter, and places to sit that do not hurt our bones. We shall ask the child to plant grains for us, and harvest them. I shall hunt game. This place here, where the heart of the moon lies in pieces—this is a good place. Cattle may graze here and give us milk. We can make lives here that are gentle and kind. We no longer need to howl in vengeance or stand vigil, waiting for friends to come, afraid they will never bring us solace for our hearts."

Ice gave half a sob into that sacred hollow. "I thought you'd never come," he confessed. Fire wrapped himself more tightly around Ice's shoulders and the sobs became whole ones, ones that wracked his human body, transported him to the fears even his giant's body could not contain. He was not sure which part of darkness and light allowed his sobs to fade, and him to fall asleep.

When he awoke, the child was cooking him grains for his starving body, and Fire was off in the woods. The blows of his stone axe could be heard throughout the rolling hills, and Ice thought in bemusement that Fire was going to do it. They would have a home.

"He said I could have my own room," the child said, unsolicited, as she was dishing cooked grain into a wooden bowl. "And he said that you would make me toys."

Ice regarded her curiously. He'd never been this close to a human child. "I do not know what toys little girls play with," he said with truth.

"Dolls," she said promptly. "And marbles. And jacks."

Ice did not know these things, so he asked her many questions about them, which she was only too glad to answer. It wasn't until their meal was done, and Fire approached with a giant tree pulled by a team of two oxen, that he thought to ask the girl her name.

"Fire calls me Rain," she said simply, and that was her name for all the rest of her days.

They made Fire's vision come true. They labored, the little girl as well, to build a home, with smooth, straight boards, and stones to build a fireplace, with a chimney to take up the smoke. Ice labored beside his heart-mate, their bodies sweating and growing sore in the sun and the heat of the day, and at night, they whittled toys for the child. She had a room of her own, and she was very happy.

But even before that, before the room was built, when it was the three of them against the dark, they would wait until she was asleep in her pile of furs, and walk until the darkness covered them, and their bodies glistened in the moonlight, and not the night from the fire. They started with a simple kiss, a thing Fire had seen humans do, and Ice marveled at what lips and tongue could make him feel, marveled at the things his flesh could do. Their bodies twined in the dark, and heaved, and sweat, but when Ice was lost in the act and the touch, it was not fearsome, it was only sublime.

When they were finished, and they lay panting in each other's arms, Ice would look at Fire's flushed face, the curve of his oft-smiling lips, and think that never had he seen a more beautiful giant. Fire would bend reverently to touch lips to the curve of Ice's neck, his chin, his chest, his stomach, and Ice would feel greater than human, greater than giant—he would, indeed, know what it was to be a god.

“Is it worth it?” Fire would anxiously, as Ice pillowed his head with its flowing white hair on the solidity of Fire's shoulder. “We no longer span leagues in a single step. I no longer make the earth spew and boil in anger. Snow no longer covers the face of the planet. Is it worth it?”

Ice touched Fire's strong and narrow jaw with delicate, pale fingers. “Inside your chest,” he whispered, “beats the heart of a god. I never feel that more than when our bodies merge, and I am vulnerable to all the pleasure flesh has to give. Should our flesh wither tomorrow, our hearts would continue, and yes, even if they did not, I would give up all that I was before for this one moment skin to skin.”

Fire's smile was blinding, and his lips met Ice's in another kiss that warmed Ice's soul from the inside out, until his flesh was no longer pale and white, but flushed and rosy, just like Fire's.

So their days were spent in labor and their nights in each other's arms, and their hearts soared higher than the footsteps of gods.

But time—the god that all gods fear—was as merciless to them as she was to all mortals, and their girl child grew up.

“I must go,” she said to them, as they sat with faces carved from granite. “I love you, my fathers, but I have a place to make in the world. I am too old for dolls, now. I want children of my own. I want a home with a mate, as you have here. Can you forgive me for growing up? Will you allow me to leave with your blessing in my ears, and the labor and the love that you've given for me forever in my heart?”

Has any parent, in any time, ever had a choice when asked that question?

She was beautiful and strong now, and did not need them. Her hair had taken on the burnished red of Fire, and her skin was pale and fair, like Ice, and although her parents had been human, she had the fearsome temper of a giant, and the quick reasoning of a god. The world would need such a fine, strong daughter. They had no choice but to let her go.

For many days, there was unnatural quiet in the tiny home.

Fire walked outside one day to see Ice, sitting on their old log and gazing sightlessly into the fire pit they had built for fine, warm days, when the sky was a nicer ceiling than the one they had carved of living wood.

“Am I not enough for you now?” Fire asked anxiously, and Ice turned to him in surprise.

“Why would you say that?”

“I brought her for you to love, and love her you did. We both did. Am I not enough for you now? Do you need another child in our home, before your heart grows cold and grim?”

Ice smiled, and it was like the slight sheen of the sun behind high clouds. “You will always be enough, my Fire. You will always be my heart. I miss her, that is all. Humans grieve for these things brought about by time’s passing, and so we shall grieve for her absence. But it will pass. Come sit by me now that we are alone in the day, and tell me of other things we may learn to do, now that our child has gone to make wonder in the world.”

And so Fire did. They sat together and talked of things they would love to do. They would love to sing, to learn music, to paint and to learn art. They would love to spin and card and weave, and to sew. They would love to carve wood, to grow magical things, to mine tastes and spices from the earth. They would love to explore the oceans, the forests, the plains, to gentle animals, to live with them as friends. They could find herbs and become doctors of this fragile human flesh, or shape the earth to their touch and bake it in bright fires. So many things they could do, now that their daughter was roaming the earth, and they set about to do those things, as many as they could, to find all the joy to be had in their smaller human lives.

For a short time—a year or two—they lived that way, and it was glorious and good. They started with baking earth in a kiln, since fire was at their command, and their pots were beautiful and strong. Fire said, “Here, I will take these to the nearby town, and I will sell them.”

“We do not need the gold!” Ice protested, and it was true—they had all they wanted in their little cottage.

“We do not need the pots, either!” Fire said ruefully, and this was true as well. As much time as they spent painting and glazing, baking and spinning, they still made far too many beautiful clay vessels to ever keep to themselves.

So Fire ventured into town, a wagon full of lovely things in his wake, and the townspeople loved this wares very much—but they did not care so much for Fire.

“You are so jovial!” said one woman sharply, as though this were a bad thing. “Leaving your woman home so you can come to town. Do not dally with the young lasses here, for they are sober girls, and not fit for the likes of you.” She was fondling one of Fire’s favorite clay pots, one with a glaze sharp and blue-white, like Ice’s eyes.

“I won’t dally with anyone,” Fire said, not wanting trouble—and especially not wanting this unpleasant woman to injure his favorite pot. “I have my Ice at home, and as long as he waits for me, there is no reason to dally. Did you want that pot, my lady, or would you like another.”

The woman looked shocked, as though he had said something rude, and she put the pot down so sharply he inspected it anxiously for cracks.

“You live with a man?” she asked, and Fire was flaring, and too intemperate to read her voice or her expression.

“As do you, poor bastard he may be.”

The woman stalked off then, grumbling, and telling her associates to beware the too-hearty stranger and his pots, as they were made with perversion and a glib tongue. Fire ignored her—he had flickered in windows, travelling around the earth, and he knew what people did in the dark and what they said they did in the dark, and as far as he could see, the only difference was the shame.

And the woman’s bitter words did not seem to hurt his business any, for the pots were made with love and shaped as flames or as ice, and were beautiful, too beautiful for people to pass up, just listening to venomous words from a festering bosom.

As Fire was selling the last of the clay pots, he saw a child, furtive, crouching in the shadows, and he used some of his gold to buy a loaf of bread.

“Come here, child,” he said gently, “and I will give you some food.”

“What will I have to do for it?” the child replied with deep suspicion.

“Why, nothing. Simply take the food from my hands, and eat.”

The child did, setting upon the food and devouring it.

“Have you no parents to feed you?” Fire asked, and it could not be denied, he was hoping the answer would be no. He and Ice would love another child to watch grow.

“I do have parents,” the child muttered, taking another loaf from Fire’s hands. “But they do not feed me. They are drunk, or asleep in the tavern, and cannot be bothered.”

Oh, thought Fire. This was much the same as having no parents at all, was it not?

“Come with me,” Fire said gently. “I will feed you every day. My lover and I have a home, and you will have a room of your own. You will wake up every day to the hush of the ocean, and sleep every night with food in your belly. We will give you clean clothes, and read books to you, and you will grow to be a fine, strong young man and go off into the world someday.”

The child began to weep copiously, suddenly too overwrought to even finish his bread. “I want to,” he sobbed, “but you do not understand. You need to go, before the people hear of your lover and your home and your happiness. They will scream for your blood in ways you have never heard.”

Fire—ah, Fire. Even in destruction, is there anything as pure of heart as true flame?

“No!” he protested. “Why would they? Nobody here is feeding you, or making sure you are bathed or cared for. Come with me, and all will be well.”

The child took his hand then, because sometimes children are foolish, and sometimes they are wise. Sometimes they are selfish, and sometimes they will give. This child wanted food, and clothing, and although he knew the danger, he had food in his belly, and little enough of hope.

But he knew—oh yes he knew—as the village was merely a speck on the horizon, he heard the hue and cry, as someone noticed he was missing, and screamed in pursuit. He recognized the unreasoning sound of hatred, as the villagers took to their heels to claim the child they had not wanted until the thing they did not understand wanted him instead.

“Go!” he screamed at Fire. “You have been kind to me, now run!”

Fire was frightened, so frightened, and although he still had the power of the fire giant in his heart, he did not think to use it against these villagers. They had bought his wares and smiled and laughed, and he had thought of them as friends.

He had one thought, the thought that sustained him those years he'd walked the earth, in search of something, anything, to make Ice see his own humanity. He would go to Ice, his heart-mate, who could fix all problems, and make his world better.

Fire ran with all his might to Ice.

Ice was outside, watching the ocean, which is what he did when Fire was away to stave off the part where his heart felt hollow. He heard the cry of the villagers and turned, and there was his beloved Fire, running as though his heart would burst, and a crowd of angry people behind him.

Ice began to run toward them, toward Fire, before he even knew his legs would take him, but he was still far enough to see the hurled object, sharp and deadly, glittering dully as it flew. He saw it hit and penetrate, embed itself in Fire's precious flesh, saw Fire fall to his knees. Ice was there to catch him before he fell any further.

"Enough!" Ice shouted, and the agony in his heart was too terrible to be contained. A frozen wind swept the villagers, and they stopped in their tracks, moaning in pain and clutching frostbitten fingers to their chests in sudden fear.

"I'm sorry," Fire said, his dark, dancing eyes lost and confused. "I only meant to bring you a son." His eyes closed then, and his chest struggled for breath, and Ice felt a surge of heat well up in his breast.

"You will not die!" he cried, clutching Fire to him. "You will not! You have the heart of a giant in you, damn the world! Make it beat, my beloved! Make it beat! Find the rage to kill your killers! Find your rage to destroy the world!"

Fire opened his eyes then, and smiled, a pale, chill imitation of his customary warm and dancing one. "The only fury I can find in my heart is the fury of love for you," he said softly, and Ice held his face to the heavens and howled.

"Then do it! Find that! Make your heart beat, my beloved, oh gods, oh mother Moon, please make it beat for me!"

And Fire tried, oh how he tried. His body began to warm, to glow, and his chest became hot as an iron forge. But his body was growing pale, and his lifeblood was staining the coarse fabric of Ice's human clothes, and Ice's own heart began to grow, to glow too, cold as the heart of the stars, the ice giants in the sky, and twice as sharp.

But they had changed, they had grown, and Fire was not deadly and Ice could not draw blood. Their spirits grew and grew, burst beyond the bonds of flesh and went spilling across the water, taking the vast space between sun and sea, turning it to fire and ice as the two great bodies touched.

But they had known flesh and they had known blood, and it was not just fire and ice that spilled out across the water and into the sky, it was their heart's blood, spreading, encompassing, blood and spirit becoming one, meeting in that one place, where the sun meets the sea, every evening at day's end.

The villagers watched as the sea and sun turned to blood, and they were horrified and humbled, but it was too late. The souls of Fire and of Ice were gone, twined in a giants' embrace, and not even their bodies remained to grieve. But every night the humans were reminded, every night they saw what fear and hatred wrought, every night the souls of the two lovers turned the sun and sea to hard wrought human blood.

Did you listen, my children? Did you hear? Do you believe me, my children, that what is different, what is kind, is nothing to fear?

How do I know, you ask me, I can see it in your eyes. Can you not see me, my children? Can you not see that my hair is burnished brightly red, like the fire, and my skin is pale fair, like the ice. Can you see my wooden poppet, burnished smooth by hot hands, with a dress sewn in tiny, crystalline stitches? Can you see my tears, as I watch my fathers nightly turn the sky to blood? Can you listen my children, to the story of love and pain? Can you believe that you, and you alone, can take their lesson to your hearts?

Be kind, my children. Raise your children into the world and watch them grow, and know that they are the villagers, and they are the child. They can welcome strangers with open arms or drive them from their midst with knives and hatred. Know your part in all of this, my children, and watch, every night, as the sea and sun turn to blood, and mourn for the lives of two human giants who were born in the heart of the moon.

Amy Lane has four children, two cats, and a Mate she wouldn't trade for all of explored space. She writes because the people in her head refuse to shut up. Ever. She can be found at www.writerslane.blogspot.com or at www.greenshill.com, and would love to hear from you at amylane@greenshill.com--but be warned: her chronic disorganization has been known to spread via the internet. Do not blame her if you suddenly find your child's toys in the refrigerator or knitting on the ceiling after contact.