

The song of the dark and cold

author: Tiki Swain; date: May 2007;

completion status: final draft complete;

publication status: not for submission (free distribution OK)

Darkness.

Cold around him.

Pirin put the cold and the darkness to the side of his mind, and concentrated on singing. The song had to continue, had to tell the story. The small knot of warmth under his belly stayed constant.

His voice, alone in the darkness. Sustaining the note until he felt he'd faint from lack of air.

Then others, weaving in and reweaving, as he ran out of breath and fell still for a moment.

Several others, voices in the darkness, all very close. Pirin felt the support of their voices inside his mind, the richness, as they took over the song. He gasped for air once, twice, then plunged back into the melodies and harmonies. The song could not be stopped. Not for all his strength as a father.

Around him, the other men huddled close. It was cold, dark. They could not ignore this, so they made it part of their song. The coldness, that ran through every part of their waking and sleeping lives. The freedom it gave them from fear, the community they built as they stood together for warmth. The song was the most important thing of their lives. With the song of their minds, they stood together as a community and built a great thing, in the dark. Sometimes one voice, like Pirin's, rose above for a while, held a single keystone reaching out on its own, but before the arch could fall the others would bring their voices in and build up the far side of the arch to meet it.

They had been singing for three weeks. The foundations were built. Pirin shuffled in a little closer to the centre of the group, brushing up against the other fathers without apologies. They were all doing it, coming in close to share body heat. To be alone was to die of the great cold. And they took this, and they sang it. Sang of the joy of being a father, of sharing this great work in the long night. Of the life they knew. They told their stories, of the places they lived, the great migrations. The song of the wind and the beauty of the sky. They sang from their bellies.

It would take another six weeks to sing it all. To build the whole of the great thing they built.

Another nearby, Kenaw, lifted his voice for a brief moment to his wife, gone with the other hunters on a long trip. Pirin was reminded how young Kenaw still was. He truly missed her, and sang his love into the story. One by one the other fathers picked up the theme, and sang of their wives and mothers, their daughters. Their beauty, their skills, their strength and fearlessness. They sang of the women who were far away, while the men created the Great Work.

They sang of their sons, and their fathers. Of each other, and their great deeds and embarrassing mistakes. Of what it meant to laugh at yourself as well as to celebrate with friends. Then they sang of their ancestors, all those who'd come before. Of all the generations who'd lived the same song, and slowly added their pieces to it.

Pirin felt for the knot of warmth under his belly – still constant. He huddled over further, as he shuffled through the group and out the far side. To stand still was to risk the great cold seeping into you, which brought death. Or to risk being named as selfish, one who would not share his heat. And that too was death. Around him, all the dads shuffled in their patterns, sticking close to each

other. And the song never stopped.

Over the whole of nine weeks, they sang their entire culture in the darkness. They sang of their beliefs and their history. Of what it meant to be part of their community. They sang one song as many individuals, and came to terms with the discrepancies. And the song in their minds built upon itself, and focused on each of the little knots of warmth they all carried safe at their feet, hidden from the cold. They shaped and called, suggested and loved. They built images of strong women and fearless men, beautiful hunters and loving sharers. They called each of the precious things they guarded into their place in the song, into the images built for them – bravery, dedication, loyalty, thoughtfulness, respect. Care. Joy. Delight.

Together, the fathers built the minds of their children, enfolded them into their community. The Great Work, the new generation soon to be born. Shaped to know their history and identity before birth, to know instinctively the community they could never be separate from again.

And as the light returned and the first day broke, in joy Pirin and the other fathers heard the sound of running feet. The first groups of hunters were returning with food, Pirin and Kenaw's wives amongst them. And at his feet there was a tiny shuddering in that knot of warmth. Around him, he felt the song of the other fathers rise in anticipation and eagerness, and he added his harmonies of welcome. Of calling forth.

A tiny noise, the tiniest snick of a sound, echoed from beneath the bellies of several fathers.

And the first of the penguin chicks hatched.