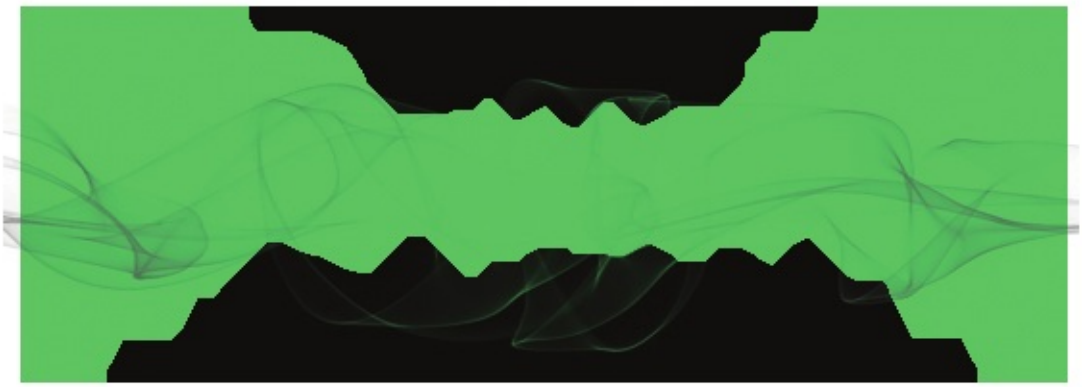

THE POPPY WAR
They trained her for a war. She intends to end it.
R.F. KUANG
THE DRAGON REPUBLIC
R.F. KUANG
THE BURNING GOD
R.F. KUANG
NEBULA, LOCUS, AND WORLD FANTASY AWARD-NOMINATED AUTHOR
HARPER
Voyager







The Drowning Faith

“Who is the true god?” asks Sistra Petra Ignatius.

Nezha knows what she wants him to say. He knows how this game is played; that it's not about the truth or debate but about the submission, and if he just utters the right words then she'll stop. But this is where he draws the line. He has conceded everything else–his body, his pride, his dignity. The soul of his country. But he can't concede the truth.

He's seen the gods. He's touched them.

He's fought them.

"Who is the true god?"

Pain. Pain so bad he doesn't know how much more he can endure. Nezha stopped associating pain with death long ago, since pain can't kill or maim him because he'll always come back. He wishes he wouldn't; that his body wouldn't always stitch itself back together no matter how viciously it was rendered apart. He wishes pain bad enough would mean things were coming to an end. But he's known for a while now that he would always live through it; that he would always heal, survive, and return to suffer more.

That's infinitely worse.

"Who is the true god?"

The Maker. The Watchmaker, the Divine Architect, the one who pieced together this universe like a well-crafted machine. A singular, rational, entity; the endpoint of the cosmos; all that is and ever will be. Say it.

"Who is the true god?"

The true god is their god. Say it, and this stops.

It makes no sense that they waste so much time every day on this same, nonsensical conversation. There's no utilitarian reason for this. This doesn't advance Petra's research, it hinders it. It distracts from it.

But he knows why she does it. Petra is a scientist, but she's also a disciple. A zealot. For all her talk of rationalism, of the scientific process, she is a believer at heart. All the Hesperians are.

What lies at the heart of her faith is not reason but dogma. And fear, dogma's ever-present companion. She *needs* her Maker to be real. She *needs* to be right. She can't imagine a world where she's not.

But Nezha won't lie.

"Who is the true god."

"Chaos," he says.

That's the closest the Hesperians will ever come to understanding the Pantheon. They'll never grasp the depths of it; the terrifying swirl of forces that constitute all that is. Their minds can't handle its incoherence; the fact that the sixty-four gods do not will and do not care. They can't fathom a world without intention. The only word they might accept is chaos.

But Nezha knows divinity. It's fathomless. It is not something that can be measured or studied; can't be described through meticulously constructed logic. The forces that dreamed up this world are the opposite of rational. Divinity isn't knowable. It's the Dragon in the grotto. It's the Dragon inside him. It's the three madmen who united a nation and tore themselves apart. It's pain, eternity, and terror. It's endless, all-consuming fire.

It's *her*.

He's lost.

He can't fucking believe he's lost. This match should have ended in thirty seconds with Rin on the ground, flat on her back and moaning, but somehow it's Nezha who is on the floor, face pressed against the dirt. He can't breathe. He can't move–every time he tries, she digs her elbow harder into his neck.

Dimly, he registers she's still hitting him, pummeling her fist into the back of his head over and over, even though he's clearly down for the count with no way of defending himself.

It's cruel--

No, that's not cruelty. It's prudence. She's making sure he won't get up.

Smart, he thinks. It's what he'd do.

She keeps going. Nezha's gone completely limp, but she doesn't care. She grasps a handful of his hair, yanks his head back, and slams his face again into the floor.

It hurts. He's stunned by how much it hurts. Nezha's cuts and scrapes usually heal themselves so quickly that he barely has time to register the pain, but it's going to take several minutes at least for his face to reconstruct itself. His feels his nose break. He feels his teeth split through his lip.

Shit, he thinks when the blows don't stop. *Holy shit*.

Whatever power the Dragon has here is gone. Startled away by something–her? No, it must be something else–but Nezha can't think straight. Right now he can't even see. The world is a haze of black, red flashes bursting in his vision every time she grinds his face into the dirt.

She's going to kill him. She might actually kill him.

Now he's scared.

All these years trying to find a way to kill himself, and here's someone who might actually finish the job. And somehow, paradoxically, this is the most he's ever wanted to be alive. This is the first time in an eternity that he doesn't feel like he's drowning.

"Break," someone says, and the pressure gives.

Heavy footsteps in the ring. They're stopping the match; they're pulling Rin off of him.

Nezha drops his head against the ground and moans.

"I'm sending you to Ankhiluun," says Vaisra.

Nezha's only been home for several days, just back from a stint in a Federation war camp that felt like a living hell, yet these are the first words his father utters upon their reunion.

But what did he expect?

A hug?

“Why Ankhiluun?” Nezha winces. It still hurts to speak. His muscles pull at barely-healed wounds, a web of bright red scars that should have disappeared by now. But some wounds, it appears, are beyond even the Dragon’s reach. Some wounds are too vicious, too unnatural.

“I need you to pick up an old classmate. It’s delicate.”

Nezha frowns. “Did they find Kitay?”

“Better,” says Vaisra. “Moag found the Speerly.”

You’re shitting me, Nezha almost says, but doesn’t, because his father doesn’t appreciate swearing.

“You’ll have to be careful. Moag can’t know how badly we need her. Will she come back with you?”

“Of course she will,” says Nezha. “We’re friends.”

He’s suddenly ridiculously excited. Rin is in Ankhiluun. Rin is *alive*. He’d never feared for a day that she was dead, because creatures like Rin are impossible to kill. And the rumors from the coast had been getting too loud to ignore. They’d made their way as far north as the Federation camp by Ankhiluun, where the soldiers were just starting to figure out that they’d lost the war, and that perhaps there was no home to return to.

No, he’s always known Rin would make it out intact. *She,* however, thinks he’s dead.

He imagines the look on her face when she sees him, hale and hearty and alive. Suddenly he can’t wait to set sail.

Yes, it’s worth it. Risky, maybe, to trick a Speerly into thinking she’s been kidnapped. In retrospect, he probably shouldn’t have fired on her ship. Probably that was coming on a bit strong. But it’s so worth it.

“You’re dead.” She looks like she’s about to faint. “I saw you die.”

He'd rehearsed something about being glad to see her, but right now he just wants to get a jab in. "And you were always supposed to be the clever one."

"*What the fuck*?" she screams, and it's all Nezha can do not to throw his head back and laugh.

"Democracy." She spits the word like she's tried it out for the first time and has decided she doesn't like the taste. She shakes her head. "You really believe all this shit?"

"Of course I do," he says, confused.

"That's cute."

"Come on, Rin. We're trying to build something new here."

"'We're trying to build something new here,'" she mimics, then goes back to sharpening her trident.

He gives up. She doesn't want a good-faith debate, she wants to provoke him. He wonders sometimes if Rin even cares what she's fighting for, so long as she gets to fight.

She likes to joke about his republic; his and his fathers. She likes to call it his presumed inheritance. She thinks this is a war about ambition; for personal gain. She doesn't understand that he doesn't want to rule. He doesn't want power. He doesn't want a kingdom.

But it's never mattered what he wanted. *Your life is not your own*. This lesson has been drilled into him from childhood. His life belongs to the people. His role in the future of the nation was determined before his birth.

"Our structure of government is the worst thing about this empire," he insists. "It's what's held us back for centuries. Democracy is the only way forward."

"It certainly seems like what's best for the House of Yin," she said. "What do you do when they vote for someone else?"

"Then there's a peaceful transition of power."

“Oh, *that’s* likely.”

He can’t refute her cynicism. Rin thinks everyone’s out for themselves. Duty is not a concept she understands, because she is beholden to no one. She’s tied to nothing. There’s no weight sinking her down. She has her secrets, her painful memories, but she doesn’t drown in them. She ignores them, shoves them aside, sets them on fire.

Nezha wonders what it’s like to be that reckless, that free.

“Come on,” she says. “Be honest. It makes no difference to me if you’re just swapping one emperor for another.”

“But that’s precisely it,” he says. “The imperial system has to change. One person can’t rule the entire nation. Government must be decentralized.”

“See, that’s why I don’t believe you.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re about to be the ones in power,” she says. “And because you never decentralize power once you’ve got it. I wouldn’t.”

“Well, we all know *you* wouldn’t.”

She gives him a look. “That’s not my cynicism, Nezha. That’s human nature.”

Yin Jinzha is dead, and the House of Yin mourns.

Vaisra is alone in the great hall when Nezha’s permitted in. The Lady Saikhara is not present.

Confined to her rooms, they say. They say she’s gone mad, catatonic, unable to say anything but the name of her favorite son.

She hasn’t asked for Nezha. When Mingzha died, she did not so much as look in his direction for up to a year. Nezha’s mother loves him, but it’s a strained, wretched love, one stained by the ever-lingering suspicion that the person who came back from the grotto was not really her son.

Vaisra sits stooped atop his throne, hunched over, shoulders still bent from the injuries he sustained at Lusan. He looks aged twenty years by grief.

Nezha wants to rush to his father, to throw his hands around his shoulder. But habit, and propriety, keep them apart.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I know it should have been me.”

Vaisra doesn’t hesitate. “It should have bee you.”

A great silence stretches between them.

“How is Mother?” Nezha asks.

“She’s with Sister Petra,” Vaisra says. “She finds more comfort from her… priests.”

Nezha dares to ask. “Is that prudent?”

“It doesn’t matter. Let her seek solace where she can find it, the poor woman. Three sons she gave me.” Vaisra sighs. “Three.”

What goes unsaid: that only one remains.

What also goes unsaid: the wrong one.

“I’ll kill her,” Nezha vows. He doesn’t have to feign his vehemence. He hates Su Daji, hates her for what she’s done to this country, to his family. Never has he been so convinced of the righteousness of their cause. “I’ll destroy the Empress for what she did to us. I’ll deliver you her head, Father, I promise–”

“Don’t.” Vaisra only shakes his head. “You don’t have the strength.”

Rin or the Hesperians. Rin or military aid. Rin or victory. Only now has Nezha come to accept this. There is no future where Rin and the Republic coexist, because everything about her is antithetical to what they are trying to accomplish. There’s no space for Rin in the world they’re trying to build, and the unavoidable truth of this kills him.

He loves her.

Of this he’s certain.

He loves her laugh; that sharp, sudden sound; the cynical laugh that always comes too quick, like it’s ripped out of her. He loves her quick, confident grin. He loves her resilience, her bravery, even her impulsiveness.

She’s everything he’s not: unbound, reckless, free. He’s never known anyone like her.

She terrifies him, and he loves her so much it hurts.

In all of his worst nightmares, she’s dying. She’s fading away in his arms, helpless and whimpering, while hot, dark blood spills over his fingers.

This, he tells her.

He doesn’t tell her that his hand holds the blade.

“You can’t beat that thing,” Nezha says. “You have no idea what you’re up against.”

She scoffs. “I think I have some idea.”

“Not about this.” It scares him that she sounds so cavalier. It scares him that they’re even having this conversation. Rin is so brave, but she’s stupid--so stupid--and he doesn’t know how to make her understand. There’s so much she won’t understand. “You will never ask me about this again.”

She shrugs. “Fine.”

They lapse into silence.

Rin leans back, trailing her fingers through the water. Flames dance up and down her wrists, skim capriciously over the gentle waves. She’s showing off, he knows. She loves this.

She’s never been able to do this before, never been able to exert this much control, but ever since she got her fire back she’s wielded it as comfortably as a limb--a force inextricable from her very being. She can’t stop calling it. She’s besotted with what she can do.

He can’t take his eyes off of her. She’s the most magnificent thing he’s ever seen.

“Can I ask another question now?” he says.

“Go ahead.”

“Did you mean it when you said we should raise an army of shamans?”

He’s encouraged by the fact that she seems startled by the suggestion. “When did I say that?”

“New Year’s,” he says cautiously. “Back on the campaign, when we were sitting in the snow.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Why not? It’d be marvelous. We’d never lose.”

He tries to keep his voice calm. He tries not to give anything away. “You understand that’s precisely what the Hesperians are terrified of.”

“For good reason. It’d fuck them up, wouldn’t it?”

Nezha swallows. This is a test, and Rin is failing, and his heart is breaking. But he needs to continue the show.

“Did you know Tarcquet is seeking a moratorium on all shamanic activity?”

She frowns. “What does that mean?”

“It means you promise never to call on your powers again, and you’ll be punished if you do. We report every living shaman in the Empire. And we destroy all written knowledge of shamanism so it can’t be passed down.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m not joking,” he insists. “You’d have to cooperate. If you never call the fire again, you’ll be safe.”

He wants to tell her everything. He wants to lay out the stakes for her–either she cooperates with the Hesperians, or she dies. They’re building a glorious new world here, a world where she and her gods have no place.

If Rin knows the stakes, then she'll say whatever she needs to. That, or she'll strike first.

And if she strikes first, then he's dead.

Her next answer is her only chance. Nezha needs to know where her heart lies.

But that was never a question, was it?"

"Fat chance," she sneers. "I've just gotten the fire back. I don't intend to give it up."

Please, Rin. Please, for once, don't be brave. Be smart.

"And if they tried to force you?" he whispers. He can barely get the words out.

"Then good fucking luck," she says blithely–so cruel, so disdainful–and trails her flames through the water.

And he feels like he's choking then, sinking below waves where nothing can reach.

He wants to feel like he has a choice. That if he does this, at least this is *his* doing . But he knows that's not true. They are, both of them, bound by forces far behind their making: vicious paths that put them in this spot, across each other, never on the same side. Their visions of the future don't include each other. There is no compromise or neutrality. Only her way.

Or his.

It doesn't matter that he loves her. It doesn't matter. It's never mattered.

What matters is what she is, and what she'll do.

Oh, he thinks. *But history moves in such cruel circles*.

He moves to sit down beside her. He reaches for her back. He needs to find the wound that's already open; the place where his blade will sink effortlessly into flesh.

She flinches, alarmed. "What are you doing?"

“Where’s your injury? Here?”

“That hurts.” But she’s not moving. Either she’s too drunk, or she trusts him, or both.

“Good.”

She gasps.

“Don’t try to speak,” Nezha murmurs, because it’ll kill him if she does.

Because his resolve is only so strong, and if she utters another word then he’ll be lost.

“Sir.”

Nezha glances up. “Yes?”

The aide steps in. From the look on his face, Nezha can tell he’s been standing there for a while. This isn’t the first time he’s spoken.

He’s finding it harder to concentrate these days. His thoughts are slow, his body exhausted. He thought he could do it all–lead an army, unite his base, please his father, please the Hesperians. But he’s whittled down to the bone. If this has been a test of his mettle, then he’s failed.

He finds his attention slipping in the council room. He tires easily in training. Every time he leaves the laboratory, it takes his body longer and longer to recover.

He needs this war to end quickly, because he’s not sure how long he can last.

“There’s news.” The aide looks uncertain. It’s important then. Bad news–or very good news?

Nezha rallies his focus. “Did they–”

“She’s in Rooster Province, sir,” the aide blurts out. They can’t say her name in his presence. He’s never made this a rule. But for some reason, none of them dare.

“Then tell them,” Nezha says softly, “to mobilize.”

At last. The moment he’s been waiting for, the confrontation that will finally put an end to this long, bloody war.

He shudders at the thought. Her face across the battlefield. Her flames, scorching the air.

Her fist against his face. That lovely, familiar pain.

They’ve been going back and forth, he and Rin, for what feels like a lifetime. But it’s got to come to an end. All the rest–all the scheming, the minor skirmishes, all the political infighting–means nothing. The future of the Republic hinges on one outcome only: her death.

Nezha knows what he’s meant to do, what Vaisra expects. It’s the role he was born for.

There’s no time to waste. They must move now, before Rin again disappears off the map.

It takes the dirigible sixteen hours to traverse the country, but just six to get from Arlong to Tikany. In six hours he’ll be face to face from Rin. In six hours they’ll see, at last, which of them has the will to finish things off.

She’s the only divine thing he’s ever believed in. The only creature in this vast, cruel land who could kill him. And sometimes, in his loveliest dreams, he imagines she does.