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Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust: A Creation Story

In the beginning, there were two, and that was all. They were carved from the same tree trunk and dipped into the same stream for purification, then lovingly air-dried in the same gentle southern breeze. Purification by fire was not an option, for obvious reasons, but their ablu-tion was thorough, and En-lin-la was pleased. She was a loving mother, infatuated with her creations and dreaming of a future with grandchildren and family holidays.

The sisters, though carved from the same wood, were very differ-ent. Ali-ash was bold and daring, dark and long, and Ish-nana was quiet, cautious and pale. En-lin-la had carved Ali-ash nearer the bark, while Ish-nana, carved from a thicker part of the trunk, had to be made from the in-nermost heart of the wood, a discrepancy that accounted for most of their differences. In other ways, however, they were very similar: they both had brilliant copper hair fashioned from falling leaves, and their voices sounded smooth as the flowing stream of their baptism. Their strongest commonality, by far, was their deep love for their mother, who hovered around them day and night, tending to their every wish, whim or need.

Now it was said that upon first drying her newly made girls, En-lin-la had found herself in a bit of trouble with the gods over her act of creation. Wood nymphs, it was understood, were not permitted, under any circum-stances, and no matter how lonely they might be, to go and simply create their own families without the permission of the higher deities. What if, for instance, without a god around to sand down the rough edges and approve the finishing touches, the twins ended up splintering or (the hor-ror) even cracking? What if, considering that there was only one parent, something should happen to En-lin-la which left the children as orphans? Clearly, En-lin-la did not think of these things at the time her desperate loneliness drove her to form companions for herself.

Many of the gods, and even some of the nymphs, went so far as to say that En-lin-la was a selfish mother who created her children for her own amusement and not for the good of their world or of themselves. En-lin-la knew differently though, for she had made two instead of one spe-cifically so that they would never be lonely, as she had been. They would always have each other, right from the very beginning, and all the way to the end, whatever that may be. If creating two wasn't looking out for the best interest of her children, then what was, she reasoned. It would have been so much easier to just make one girl, and if she had only made one, then she could have been even closer with her instead of having to share her with a sibling.

Now one thing En-lin-la did not account for in her creation of the twins was that the twins, though made from the same wood, might not care for each other very much, or that in fact, over time, they might even grow to despise each other, particularly as they competed for their moth-er's attention.

And so it wasn't long before the girls' bickering voices could be heard throughout the woods and over the hills and even carrying up into

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the sky, where Baba-bu, the god of gods, was trying to nap off a nasty hangover he'd acquired by overindulging wine offerings at the altar.

"I'm prettier," Ali-ash stated, twirling her copper hair around her beautiful brown finger.

"Well I'm funnier," said Ish-nana, who could indeed keep her mother laughing for hours on end.

"That doesn't mean anything," said Ali-ash. "I'm smarter, and we all know that's the most important thing of all."

"No, sister, kindness is the most important thing of all," said Ish-nana, who believed herself to be the kinder of the two.

"You're both annoying, and that is certain," boomed Baba-bu. "Somebody remind me why I granted your mother permission to create you. Oh that's right, I didn't. She just did it on her own, without a mate, without the balance of input and male reasoning. Somebody tell me why I even make rules. Sheesh."

Then Baba-bu sat up, surprisingly no longer angry. He had, dancing around in his head, perhaps the most brilliant idea so far in his career as god of gods. "Bless that merry wine I drank, and bless the lesser deities who left it for me," he exclaimed, upon which the two nymphs who'd made the previous day's wine offerings found themselves suddenly a little wider of wingspan. Yes, siree, old Baba-bu had himself an idea. He was going to make mates for Ali-ash and Ish-nana and shut them up once and for all. He was going to balance all the imbalances caused by En-lin-la's rash decision to make her own children.

Now, because Baba-bu was the god of gods, and not just a mere wood nymph, he had a far greater selection of raw materials at his disposal to work with than had En-lin-la. He built wind and river and earth and sky into those boys. He added clouds and ocean and raindrops and sunshine. He put in sand and stone and the jagged edges of cliffs. He even threw in a little bit of wine from the offering table, just to get things to stick together properly. He used everything he could think of but wood, because an overabundance of wood, he figured, was what he was trying to correct in the first place.

When Baba-bu completed the ritual purification of his grand masterpieces, he stood back to admire his work. "Now there are four," he said proudly to himself. "Two female, and two male, and they can love each other and live in harmony so that we gods can sleep when we have hangovers, and we can relax and read and bathe and do whatever else we want in peace."

Just then Baba-bu's wife, Iti-bel, queen of all deities, returned (looking quite refreshed) from her trip to the mud baths, where she'd spent a relaxing weekend with friends.

"Baba-bu, my lord, what have you done?" she asked, a sudden look of horror crossing her face.

Baba-bu turned to her, beaming. "Love, I would like for you to meet A-son and B-son, my new sons."

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"Your new sons," Iti-bel screeched. "How can you have sons without me? We're married. We do things together. We make children together. It's called a partnership, Baba-bu."

"Well En-lin-la did it. She made Ali-ash and Ish-nana, and if she did it, so can I."

"Yes, but look what happened. Look how imbalanced they are. You always said she was wrong to do that."

"Well now I'm fixing it. My two sons will be mates for Ali-ash and Ish-nana, and finally they will be balanced and content, and we will get rest, and everyone will be happy."

Baba-bu's wife, Iti-bel, the queen of all deities, then looked at Baba-bu and said, with indisputable certainty, "Fine, you can rear the little monsters yourself. I'll be at the spa." And to the spa she went, for an extended stay.

Baba-bu, in the meantime, took his twin sons A-son and B-son to meet Ali-Ash and Ish-nana. Because Ali-ash was undeniably the more beautiful, and A-son was undeniably the more powerful, he made the introduction between them first.

"Ali-ash, I would like for you to meet my new son, A-son, fashioned from the sea and the air and the clouds and the mountains and every other good thing of the earth to make a companionable mate for you. He is perfect in every way — charming, agreeable, intelligent, and strong enough to do any work you might require around the home."

Then he turned to Ish-nana.

"Ish-nana," he said. "May I present to you my new son, B-son? I have fashioned him out of the sea and the air and the clouds and the mountains and every other good thing of the earth to make a companionable mate for you. He is perfect in every way — charming, agreeable, intelligent, and strong enough to do any work you might require around the home. Take him and be married, and make you no more noise from now until the end of time."

Ish-nana, who could be fairly gracious, despite having been so spoiled by her devoted, doting mother, looked at Baba-bu, and said simply, "Thank you, your grace, but I think I prefer A-son."

"Oh, no problem," Baba-bu said, sensing the opportunity for peace slipping away.

He gave A-son a little shove between the shoulder blades and said, "Here you are, Ish-nana. My first-born son. Take him and be happy, and live in peace, quiet peace."

Now, A-son and B-son were fairly new to being alive, and they hadn't yet tested out their vocal skills, so it was in a somewhat faltering and even partially hesitant voice that A-son spoke up and said, "Wait, you said I was going with the pretty one. I want the pretty one."

To which Ali-ash responded, "Don't make me go with him. He talks funny. He's not strong like you said. He is weak and uncertain. The only thing he has going for him is his good taste, but even that is not so extraor-

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dinary being that anyone can see I am prettier than Ish-nana.”

Baba-bu, feeling defeated, plopped down on a tree stump, which just happened to be the stump from the tree that En-lin-la had used to make Ali-ash and Ish-nana, and he sat on this stump, and he put his head in his hands and said to himself, “What in the world have I done? Now there are four, and there is twice as much disagreement as there was before, and I have a headache, and I’m feeling a little dehydrated, and I need to rest.”

So Baba-bu did what any god would have done in the same situation: he made himself some earplugs, and he put them in his ears, and he went back home to take a nap and forget the whole darned mess he had created. The kids would have to sort it out themselves. He had made them mates, and that was good enough as far as he was concerned. After all, he had given them everything they could want. The rest was up to them, right?

And like all semi-good solutions, this solution had a life span, and that life span was approximately the length of one-half of a god’s hungover nap. For, soon the racket had reached a level that even divinely created ear-plugs could not filter, and Baba-bu found himself in the same position he had found himself in earlier that same day – sitting on the side of his bed, with his feet on the ground and his ear cocked downward for a better listen.

“En-lin-la,” he hollered into the wooded valley. “Look at the disaster you have created. Your harpy daughters are down there nag, nag, nagging at my perfect sons. I have tried to provide for them, but nothing is good enough. If my sons won’t do, then nothing will do.”

En-lin-la, who was frustrated about being interrupted right in the middle of stirring up a mix for the girls’ favorite cookies, stopped and shook her batter covered spoon at the sky and hollered back, “Baba-bu, I don’t care if you are the god of all gods; don’t you talk that way about my daughters. They are the perfect ones, gracious and beautiful, brilliant and kind. Your sons are simply lacking. That is why my daughters aren’t satisfied with them. Take it from a baker – you simply cannot leave out a key ingredient and expect good results. The problem Baba-bu, is that you built your sons without wood.”

Meanwhile, down by the riverbed, A-son attempted to hand Ali-ash a bouquet of flowers he had picked for her earlier that morning.

“You idiot,” Ali-ash responded. “Those are not flowers. They’re weeds. Are you trying to infect me with poison ivy? Do you want me to get a rash on my beautiful skin?”

B-son, at the same time, followed Ish-nana around like a lost fool, staring at her, stammering and wondering how to make her his.

“I’ll take the weeds,” Ish-nana said to A-son. “They’re the prettiest weeds I’ve ever seen; in fact I think you should petition to your father to have them declared flowers.

A-son, who was still smarting from Ali-ash’s rejection, looked sadly at Ali-ash, hoping she might change her mind and accept the flowerweeds at the last minute, but when it became apparent that no such thing would

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happen, he sheepishly held his flowers out to Ish-nana. Ish-nana was not able to accept the flowers though, because before she could get a grasp on them, B-son knocked them out of A-son's hand and then punched A-son in the face.

"What a wimp," Ali-ash declared. "Look how easy it was for B-son to hit him. He didn't even block it or hit back."

A-son, hearing this from where he lay on the ground, lifted his head up a bit, turned it sideways and bit B-son right on the calf. "That will show her," he thought, but show her it did not. Instead, it only further confirmed what she considered to be his cowardice.

"Stand up and fight like a man," she jeered.

En-lin-la, witnessing all of this from the tree house where she still baked and looked out the window, called up to Baba-bu, and said, "What do you think of your perfect sons now, Baba-bu? They don't get along with each other any better than they get along with my daughters."

And, of course, Baba-bu responded, "They would have gotten along fine if your daughters hadn't corrupted them as soon as I made them. Their disagreements are through no faults of their own, but only due to the influence of your daughters. My sons are perfect; do you hear me? Perfect!"

Over time, the fighting and bickering got worse and worse. Even though there were only four of them, they just couldn't seem to pair up, and the boys beat each other up more and more frequently and went to ever more outrageous and ridiculous extremes to try to win the wooden hearts of the girls. They jumped out of trees and broke their legs, they swam the oceans until they sank and drowned and had to be revived by their father, they wrestled wild immortal boars (and lost), and on and on and on. Baba-bu kept so busy saving, reviving, and bailing out his two sons that he had time for little else; and all the other gods and goddesses, nymphs, fairies, elves and immortal beings of every sort finally realized, with some heaviness of heart that a council was in order and that they would probably have to solve the problem themselves, even, possibly, against the wishes of their ruler. Everyone was invited except En-lin-la, who they viewed as part of the problem, and, of course, Baba-bu.

"Now Baba-bu may be god of all gods and ruler of the universe, but anyone can see that when it comes to own his sons he is perfectly irrational and no kind of ruler at all," said Ur-su, who, as god of social order, had appointed himself leader of the council.

"I couldn't agree more," said Iti-bel, who had returned from the spa only upon guarantee by the council that a solution would be reached before the next day commenced.

The gods thought and they thought. They turned ideas over, and took them apart and put them back together again. They discussed, debated and analyzed. And through it all, they could only come up with one solution: yes - you guessed it - they would make more. If they made more, there would be a greater variety of mates to choose from, and everyone could be happy. But since, in the eyes of the council, Baba-bu and En-lin-la

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had so thoroughly messed up the first two batches, someone else would have to be in charge of making them.

It was Iti-bel, by far the most logical member of the council, who came up with the only objection: "What if things don't work out as planned? What if they don't match up easily, and there is even more chaos than before?"

"Excellent point," said Ur-su, god of social order. And they thought, and thought, and thought some more until one of them finally said, "Why don't we give them life spans?"

"Life spans? What does it mean?" Ur-su asked.

It means they will only live a set number of years, and if they haven't worked out their issues by then, too bad. It's over. They had their chance for happiness. And we won't have to listen to them forever."

"Brilliant," said Ur-su.

"Brilliant," concurred Iti-bel. "We shall call them mortals."

And it was done.

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