

The Shipmaker

Aliette de Bodard

Ships were living, breathing beings. Dac Kien had known this even before she'd reached the engineering habitat, even before she'd seen the great mass in orbit outside, being slowly assembled by the bots.

Her ancestors had once carved jade, in the bygone days of the Lê Dynasty on Old Earth: not hacking the green blocks into the shape they wanted, but rather whittling down the stone until its true nature was revealed. And as with jade, so with ships. The sections outside couldn't be forced together. They had to flow into a seamless whole – to be, in the end, inhabited by a Mind who was as much a part of the ship as every rivet and every seal.

The Easterners or the Mexica didn't understand. They spoke of recycling, of design efficiency: they saw only the parts taken from previous ships, and assumed it was done to save money and time. They didn't understand why Dac Kien's work as Grand Master of Design Harmony was the most important on the habitat: the ship, once made, would be one entity, and not a patchwork of ten thousand others. To Dac Kien – and to the one who would come after her, the Mind-bearer – fell the honour of helping the ship into being, of transforming metal and cables and solar cells into an entity that would sail the void between the stars.

The door slid open. Dac Kien barely looked up. The light tread of the feet told her this was one of the lead designers, either Miahua or Feng. Neither would have disturbed her without cause. With a sigh, she disconnected from the system with a flick of her hands, and waited for the design's overlay on her vision to disappear.

“Your Excellency.” Miahua’s voice was quiet. The Xuyan held herself upright, her skin as pale as yellowed wax. “The shuttle has come back. There’s someone on board you should see.”

Dac Kien had expected many things: a classmate from the examinations on a courtesy visit; an Imperial Censor from Dongjing, calling her to some other posting, even further away from the capital; or perhaps even someone from her family, mother or sister or uncle’s wife, here to remind her of the unsuitability of her life choices.

She hadn’t expected a stranger: a woman with brown skin, almost dark enough to be Viet herself, her lips thin and white, her eyes as round as the moon.

A Mexica. A foreigner... Dac Kien stopped the thought before it could go far. For the woman wore no cotton, no feathers, but the silk robes of a Xuyan housewife, and the five wedding gifts (all pure gold, from necklace to bracelets) shone like stars on the darkness of her skin.

Dac Kien's gaze travelled down to the curve of the woman's belly, a protruding bulge so voluminous that it threw her whole silhouette out of balance. "I greet you, younger sister. I am Dac Kien, Grand Master of Design Harmony for this habitat." She used the formal tone, suitable for addressing a stranger.

"Elder sister." The Mexica's eyes were bloodshot, set deep within the heavy face. "I am..." She grimaced, one hand going to her belly as if to tear it out. "Zoquitl," she whispered at last, the accents of her voice slipping back to the harsh patterns of her native tongue. "My name is Zoquitl." Her eyes started to roll upwards, and she went on, taking on the cadences of something learnt by rote. "I am the womb and the resting place, the quickener and the Mind-bearer."

Dac Kien's stomach roiled, as if an icy fist were squeezing it. "You're early. The ship – "

"The ship has to be ready."

The interjection surprised her. All her attention had been focused on the Mexica – Zoquitl – and what her coming here meant. Now she forced herself to look at the other passenger off the shuttle, a Xuyan man in his mid-thirties. His accent was that of Anjiu province, on the Fifth Planet. His robes, with the partridge badge and the button of gold, were those of a minor official of the seventh rank, but they were marked with the yin-yang symbol, showing stark black and white against the silk.

"You're the birth-master," she said.

He bowed. "I have that honour." His face was harsh, all angles and planes on which the light caught, highlighting the thin lips, the high cheekbones. "Forgive me my abruptness, but there is no time to lose."

"I don't understand." Dac Kien looked again at the woman, whose eyes bore a glazed look of pain. "She's early," she said, flatly, and she wasn't speaking of their arrival time.

The birth-master nodded.

"How long?"

"A week, at most." The birth-master grimaced. "The ship has to be ready."

Dac Kien tasted bile in her mouth. The ship was all but made – and, like a jade statue, it would brook no corrections nor oversights. Dac Kien and her team had designed it specifically for the Mind within Zoquitl's womb, starting out from the specifications the imperial alchemists had given them, the delicate balance of humours, optics and flesh that made up the being Zoquitl carried. The ship would answer to nothing else; only Zoquitl's Mind would be able to seize the heartroom, to quicken the ship, and take it into deep planes, where fast star-travel was possible.

"I can't –" Dac Kien started, but the birth-master shook his head, and she didn't need to hear his answer to know what he would say.

She had to. This had been the posting she'd argued for, after she came in second at the state examinations. This, not a magistrate's tribunal and district, not a high-placed situation in the palace's administration, not the prestigious Courtyard

of Writing Brushes, as would have been her right. This was what the imperial court would judge her on.

She wouldn't get another chance.

“A week.” Hanh shook her head. “What do they think you are, a Mexica factory overseer?”

“Hanh.” It had been a long day, and Dac Kien had come back to their quarters looking for comfort. In hindsight, she should have known how Hanh would take the news: her partner was an artist, a poet, always seeking the right word and the right allusion – ideally suited to understanding the delicacy that went into the design of a ship, less than ideal to acknowledge any need for urgency.

“I have to do this,” Dac Kien said.

Hanh grimaced. “Because they're pressuring you into it? You know what it will look like.” She gestured towards the low mahogany table in the centre of the room. The ship's design hung inside a translucent cube, gently rotating, the glimpses of its interior interspersed with views of other ships, the ones from which it had taken its inspiration: all the great from *The Red Carp* to *The Golden Mountain* and *The Snow-White Blossom*. Their hulls gleamed in the darkness, slowly and subtly bending out

of shape to become the final structure of the ship hanging outside the habitat. “It’s a whole, lil’ sis. You can’t butcher it and hope to keep your reputation intact.”

“She could die of it,” Dac Kien said, at last. “Of the birth, and it would be worse if she did it for nothing.”

“The girl? She’s *gui*. Foreign.”

Meaning she shouldn’t matter. “So were we, once upon a time,” Dac Kien said. “You have a short memory.”

Hanh opened her mouth, closed it. She could have pointed out that they weren’t quite *gui*, that China, Xuya’s motherland, had once held Dai Viet for centuries, but Hanh was proud of being Viet, and certainly not about to mention such shameful details. “It’s the girl that’s bothering you, then?”

“She does what she wants,” Dac Kien said.

“For the prize.” Hanh’s voice was faintly contemptuous. Most of the girls who bore Minds were young and desperate, willing to face the dangers of the pregnancy in exchange for a marriage to a respected official. For a status of their own, a family that would welcome them in, and a chance to bear children of good birth.

Both Hanh and Dac Kien had made the opposite choice, long ago. For them, as for every Xuyan who engaged in same-gender relationships, there would be no children, no one to light incense at the ancestral altars, no voices to chant and honour their names after they were gone. Through life, they would be second-class

citizens, consistently failing to accomplish their duties to their ancestors. In death, they would be spurned, forgotten, gone as if they had never been.

“I don’t know,” Dac Kien said. “She’s Mexica. They see things differently where she comes from.”

“From what you’re telling me, she’s doing this for Xuyan reasons.”

For fame, and for children, all that Hanh despised – what she called their shackles, their overwhelming need to produce children, generation after generation.

Dac Kien bit her lip, wishing she could have Hanh’s unwavering certainties. “It’s not as if I have much choice in the matter.”

Hanh was silent for a while. At length, she moved, came to rest behind Dac Kien, her hair falling down over Dac Kien’s shoulders, her hands trailing at Dac Kien’s nape. “You’re the one who keeps telling me we always have a choice, lil’ sis.”

Dac Kien shook her head. She said that when weary of her family’s repeated reminders that she should marry and have children, when they lay in the darkness side by side after making love and she saw the future stretching in front of her, childless and ringed by old prejudices.

Hanh, much as she tried, didn’t understand. She’d always wanted to be a scholar, had always known that she’d grow up to love another woman. She’d always got what she wanted, and she was convinced she only had to wish for something hard enough for it to happen.

And Hanh had never wished, would never wish, for children.

“It’s not the same,” Dac Kien said at last, cautiously submitting to Hanh’s caresses. It was something else entirely, and even Hanh had to see that. “I chose to come here. I chose to make my name that way. And we always have to see our choices through.”

Hanh’s hands on her shoulders tightened. “You’re one to talk. I can see you wasting yourself in regrets, wondering if there’s still time to turn back to respectability. But you chose me. This life, these consequences. We both chose.”

“Hanh...” It’s not that, Dac Kien wanted to say. She loved Hanh, she truly did, but... She was a stone thrown in the darkness; a ship adrift without nav, lost, without family or husband to approve of her actions, and without the comfort of a child destined to survive her.

“Grow up, lil’ sis.” Hanh’s voice was harsh, her face turned away, towards the paintings of landscapes on the wall. “You’re no one’s toy or slave – and especially not your family’s.”

Because they had all but disowned her. But words, as usual, failed Dac Kien, and they went to bed with the shadow of the old argument still between them, like the blade of a sword.

The next day, Dac Kien pored over the design of the ship with Feng and Miahua, wondering how she could modify it. The parts were complete, and assembling them would take a few days at most, but the resulting structure would never be a ship. That much was clear to all of them. Even excepting the tests, there was at least a month's work ahead of them – slow and subtle touches laid by the bots over the overall system to align it with its destined Mind.

Dac Kien had taken the cube from her quarters and brought it into her office under Hanh's glowering gaze. Now, they all crowded around it voicing ideas, the cups of tea forgotten in the intensity of the moment.

Feng's wrinkled face was creased in thought as he tapped one side of the cube. "We could modify the shape of this corridor, here. Wood would run through the whole ship, and –"

Miahua shook her head. She was their Master of Wind and Water, the one who could best read the lines of influence, the one Dac Kien turned to when she herself had a doubt over the layout. Feng was Commissioner of Supplies, managing the systems and safety – in many ways Miahua's opposite, given to small adjustments rather than large ones, pragmatic where she verged on the mystical.

"The humours of water and wood would stagnate here, in the control room." Miahua pursed her lips, pointed to the slender aft of the ship. "The shape of this section should be modified."

Feng sucked in a breath. “That’s not trivial. For my team to rewrite the electronics...”

Dac Kien listened to them arguing, distantly, intervening with a question from time to time to keep the conversation from dying down. In her mind she held the shape of the ship, felt it breathe through the glass of the cube, through the layers of fibres and metal that separated her from the structure outside. She held the shape of the Mind – the essences and emotions that made it, the layout of its sockets and cables, of its muscles and flesh – and slid them together gently, softly, until they seemed made for one another.

She looked up. Both Feng and Miahua had fallen silent, waiting for her to speak.

“This way,” she said. “Remove this section altogether, and shift the rest of the layout.” As she spoke, she reached into the glass matrix, and carefully excised the offending section, rerouting corridors and lengths of cables, burning new decorative calligraphy onto the curved walls.

“I don’t think – ” Feng said, and stopped. “Miahua?”

Miahua was watching the new design carefully. “I need to think about it, Your Excellency. Let me discuss it with my subordinates.”

Dac Kien made a gesture of approval. “Remember that we don’t have much time.”

They both took a copy of the design with them, snug in their long sleeves. Left alone, Dac Kien stared at the ship again. It was squat, its proportions out of kilter, not even close to what she had imagined, not even true to the spirit of her work, a mockery of the original design, like a flower without petals, or a poem that didn't quite gel, hovering on the edge of poignant allusions but never expressing them properly.

"We don't always have a choice," she whispered. She'd have prayed to her ancestors, had she thought they were still listening. Perhaps they were. Perhaps the shame of having a daughter who would have no descendants was erased by the exalted heights of her position. Or perhaps not. Her mother and grandmother were unforgiving. What made her think that those more removed ancestors would understand her decision?

"Elder sister?"

Zoquitl stood at the door, hovering uncertainly. Dac Kien's face must have revealed more than she thought. She forced herself to breathe, relaxing all her muscles until it was once more the blank mask required by protocol. "Younger sister," she said. "You honour me by your presence."

Zoquitl shook her head. She slid carefully into the room, careful not to lose her balance. "I wanted to see the ship."

The birth-master was nowhere to be seen. Dac Kien hoped that he had been right about the birth – that it wasn't about to happen now, in her office, with no

destination and no assistance. “It’s here.” She shifted positions on her chair, invited Zoquitl to sit.

Zoquitl wedged herself into one of the seats, her movements fragile, measured, as if any wrong gesture would shatter her. Behind her loomed one of Dac Kien’s favourite paintings, an image from the Third Planet: a delicate, peaceful landscape of waterfalls and ochre cliffs, with the distant light of stars reflected in the water.

Zoquitl didn’t move as Dac Kien showed her the design. Her eyes were the only thing which seemed alive in the whole of her face.

When Dac Kien was finished, the burning gaze was transferred to her – looking straight into her eyes, a clear breach of protocol. “You’re just like the others. You don’t approve,” Zoquitl said.

It took Dac Kien a moment to process the words, but they still meant nothing to her. “I don’t understand.”

Zoquitl’s lips pursed. “Where I come from, it’s an honour. To bear Minds for the glory of the Mexica Dominion.”

“But you’re here,” Dac Kien said. In Xuya, among Xuyans, where to bear Minds was a sacrifice – necessary and paid for, but ill-considered. For who would want to endure a pregnancy, yet produce no human child? Only the desperate or the greedy.

“You’re here as well.” Zoquitl’s voice was almost an accusation.

For an agonising moment, Dac Kien thought Zoquitl was referring to her life choices – how did she know about Hanh, about her family’s stance? Then she

understood that Zoquitl had been talking about her place onboard the habitat. “I like being in space,” Dac Kien said at last, and it wasn’t a lie. “Being here almost alone, away from everyone else.”

And this wasn’t paperwork, or the slow drain of catching and prosecuting lawbreakers, of keeping Heaven’s order on some remote planet. This was everything scholarship was meant to be: taking all that the past had given them, and reshaping it into greatness, every part throwing its neighbours into sharper relief, an eternal reminder of how history had brought them here and how it would carry them forward, again and again.

Zoquitl said, not looking at the ship anymore, “Xuya is a harsh place, for foreigners. The language isn’t so bad, but when you have no money, and no sponsor...” She breathed in, quick and sharp. “I do what needs doing.” Her hand went to the mound of her belly and stroked it. “And I give him life. How can you not value this?”

She used the animate pronoun, without a second thought.

Dac Kien shivered. “He’s...” She paused, groping for words. “He has no father. A mother, perhaps, but there isn’t much of you inside him. He won’t be counted among your descendants. He won’t burn incense on your altar, or chant your name among the stars.”

“But he won’t die.” Zoquitl’s voice was soft, and cutting. “Not for centuries.”

The ships made by the Mexica Dominion lived long, but their Minds slowly went insane from repeated journeys into deep planes. This Mind, with a proper anchor, a properly aligned ship... Zoquitl was right: he would remain as he was, long after she and Zoquitl were both dead. He – no, it – it was a machine, a sophisticated intelligence, an assembly of flesh and metal and Heaven knew what else. Born like a child, but still...

“I think I’m the one who doesn’t understand.” Zoquitl pulled herself to her feet, slowly. Dac Kien could hear her laboured breath, could smell the sour, sharp sweat rolling off her. “Thank you, elder sister.”

And then she was gone, but her words remained.

Dac Kien threw herself into her work, as she had done before, when preparing for the state examinations. Hanh pointedly ignored her when she came home, making only the barest attempts at courtesy. She was working again on her calligraphy, mingling Xuyan characters with the letters of the Viet alphabet to create a work that spoke both as a poem and as a painting. It wasn’t unusual: Dac Kien had come to be accepted for her talent, but her partner was another matter. Hanh wasn’t welcome in the banquet room, where the families of the other engineers would congregate in

the evenings. She preferred to remain alone in their quarters rather than endure the barely concealed snubs or the pitying looks of the others.

What gave the air its leaden weight, though, was her silence. Dac Kien tried at first, keeping up a chatter, as if nothing were wrong. Hanh raised bleary eyes from her manuscript, and said, simply, “You know what you’re doing, lil’ sis. Live with it, for once.”

So it was silence, in the end. It suited her better than she’d thought it would. It was her and the design, with no one to blame or interfere.

Miahua’s team and Feng’s team were rewiring the structure and rearranging the parts. Outside the window, the mass of the hull shifted and twisted, to align itself with the cube on her table, bi-hour after bi-hour, as the bots gently slid sections into place and sealed them.

The last section was being put into place when Miahua and the birth-master came to see her, both looking equally preoccupied.

Her heart sank. “Don’t tell me,” Dac Kien said. “She’s due now.”

“She’s lost the waters,” the birth-master said. He spat on the floor to ward off evil spirits, who always crowded around the mother in the hour of a birth. “You have a few bi-hours at most.”

“Miahua?” Dac Kien wasn’t looking at either of them, but rather at the ship outside, the huge bulk that dwarfed them all in its shadow.

Her Master of Wind and Water was silent for a while – usually a sign that she was arranging problems in the most suitable order. Not good. “The structure will be finished before this bi-hour is over.”

“But?” Dac Kien said.

“But it’s a mess. The lines of wood cross those of metal, and there are humours mingling with each other and stagnating everywhere. The qi won’t flow.”

The qi, the breath of the universe – of the dragon that lay at the heart of every planet, of every star. As Master of Wind and Water, it was Miahua’s role to tell Dac Kien what had gone wrong, but as Grand Master of Design Harmony, it fell to Dac Kien to correct this. Miahua could only point out the results she saw; only Dac Kien could send the bots in, to make the necessary adjustments to the structure. “I see,” Dac Kien said. “Prepare a shuttle for her. Have it wait outside, close to the ship’s docking bay.”

“Your Excellency – ” the birth-master started, but Dac Kien cut him off.

“I have told you before. The ship will be ready.”

Miahua’s stance as she left was tense, all pent-up fears. Dac Kien thought of Hanh, alone in their room, stubbornly bent over her poem, her face as harsh as that of the birth-master, its customary roundness sharpened by anger and resentment. She’d say, again, that you couldn’t hurry things, that there were always possibilities. She’d say that – but she’d never understood there was always a price, and that, if you didn’t pay it, others did.

The ship would be ready, and Dac Kien would pay its price in full.

Alone again, Dac Kien connected to the system, letting the familiar overlay of the design take over her surroundings. She adjusted the contrast until the design was all she could see, and then she set to work.

Miahua was right: the ship was a mess. They had envisioned having a few days to tidy things up, to soften the angles of the corridors, to spread the wall-lanterns so there were no dark corners or spots shining with blinding light. The heartroom alone – the pentacle-shaped centre of the ship, where the Mind would settle – had strands of four humours coming to an abrupt, painful stop within, and a sharp line just outside its entrance, marking the bots' hasty sealing.

The killing breath, it was called, and it was everywhere.

Ancestors, watch over me.

A living, breathing thing – jade, whittled down to its essence. Dac Kien slid into the trance, her consciousness expanding to encompass the bots around the structure, sending them, one by one, inside the metal hull, scuttling down the curved corridors and passageways; gently merging with the walls, starting the slow and painful work of coaxing the metal into its proper shape; going up into the knot of cables, straightening them out, regulating the current in the larger ones. In her

mind's view, the ship seemed to flicker and fold back upon itself. She hung suspended outside, watching the bots crawl over it like ants, injecting commands into the different sections, in order to modify their balance of humours and inner structure.

She cut to the shuttle, where Zoquitl lay on her back, her face distorted into a grimace. The birth-master's face was grim, turned upwards as if he could guess at Dac Kien's presence.

Hurry. You don't have time left. Hurry.

And still she worked. Walls turned into mirrors, flowers were carved into the passageways, softening those hard angles and lines she couldn't disguise. She opened up a fountain – all light projections, of course, there could be no real water aboard – and let the recreated sound of a stream fill the structure. Inside the heartroom, the four tangled humours became three, then one. Then she brought in other lines until the tangle twisted back upon itself, forming a complicated knot pattern that allowed strands of all five humours to flow around the room. Water, wood, fire, earth, metal, all circling the ship's core, a stabilising influence for the Mind, when it came to anchor itself there.

She flicked back the display to the shuttle, saw Zoquitl's face, and the unbearable lines of tension in the other's face.

Hurry.

It was not ready. But life didn't wait until you were ready. Dac Kien turned off the display, but not the connection to the bots, leaving them time to finish their last tasks.

"Now," she whispered into the com system.

The shuttle launched itself towards the docking bay. Dac Kien dimmed the overlay, letting the familiar sight of the room reassert itself: with the cube, and the design that should have been, the perfect one, the one that called to mind *The Red Carp* and *The Turtle Over the Waves* and *The Dragon's Twin Dreams*, all the days of Xuya from the Exodus to the Pearl Wars, and the fall of the Shan Dynasty; and older things, too: Le Loi's sword that had established a Viet dynasty; the dragon with spread wings flying over Hanoi, the Old Earth capital; the face of Huyen Tran, the Viet princess traded to foreigners in return for two provinces.

The bots were turning themselves off one by one, and a faint breeze ran through the ship, carrying the smell of sea-laden water and of incense.

It could have been, that ship, that masterpiece. If she'd had time. Hanh was right, she could have made it work: it would have been hers, perfect, praised, remembered in the centuries to come, used as inspiration by hundreds of other Grand Masters.

If...

She didn't know how long she'd been staring at the design, but an agonised cry tore her from her thoughts. Startled, she turned up the ship's feed again, and selected a view into the birthing room.

The lights had been dimmed, leaving shadows everywhere, like a prelude to mourning. Dac Kien could see the bowl of tea given at the beginning of labour. It had rolled into a corner of the room, a few drops scattering across the floor.

Zoquitl crouched against a high-backed chair, framed by holos of two goddesses who watched over childbirth: the Princess of the Blue and Purple Clouds, and the Bodhisattva of Mercy. In the shadows, her face seemed to be that of a demon, the alienness of her features distorted by pain.

"Push," the birth-master was saying, his hands on the quivering mound of her belly.

Push.

Blood ran down Zoquitl's thighs, staining the metal surfaces until they reflected everything in shades of red. But her eyes were proud – those of an old warrior race, who'd never bent or bowed to anybody else. Her child of flesh, when it came, would be delivered the same way.

Dac Kien thought of Hanh, and of sleepless nights, of the shadow stretched over their lives, distorting everything.

"Push," the birth-master said again, and more blood ran out. Push push push – and Zoquitl's eyes were open, looking straight at her, and Dac Kien knew – she

knew that the rhythm that racked Zoquitl, the pain that came in waves, it was all part of the same immutable law, the same thread that bound them more surely than the red one between lovers – what lay in the womb, under the skin, in their hearts and in their minds; a kinship of gender that wouldn't ever be altered or extinguished. Her hand slid to her own flat, empty belly, pressed hard. She knew what that pain was, she could hold every layer of it in her mind as she'd held the ship's design, and she knew that Zoquitl, like her, had been made to bear it.

Push.

With a final heart-wrenching scream, Zoquitl expelled the last of the Mind from her womb. It slid to the floor, a red, glistening mass of flesh and electronics: muscles and metal implants, veins and pins and cables.

It lay there, still and spent – and several heartbeats passed before Dac Kien realised it wouldn't ever move.

Dac Kien put off visiting Zoquitl for days, still reeling from the shock of the birth. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw blood: the great mass sliding out of the womb, flopping on the floor like a dead fish, the lights of the birthing room glinting on metal wafers and grey matter, and everything dead, gone as if it had never been.

It had no name, of course – neither it nor the ship, both gone too soon to be graced with one.

Push. Push, and everything will be fine. Push.

Hanh tried her best, showing her poems with exquisite calligraphy, speaking of the future and of her next posting, fiercely making love to her as if nothing had ever happened, as if Dac Kien could just forget the enormity of the loss. But it wasn't enough.

Just as the ship hadn't been enough.

In the end, remorse drove Dac Kien, as surely as a barbed whip, and she boarded the shuttle to cross to the ship.

Zoquitl was in the birthing room, sitting wedged against the wall, with a bowl of pungent tea in her veined hands. The two holos framed her, their white-painted faces stark in the dim light, unforgiving. The birth-master hovered nearby, but was persuaded to leave them both alone, though he made it clear Dac Kien was responsible for anything that happened to Zoquitl.

“Elder sister.” Zoquitl smiled, a little bitterly. “It was a good fight.”

“Yes.” One Zoquitl could have won, if she had been given better weapons.

“Don't look so sad,” Zoquitl said.

“I failed,” Dac Kien said, simply. She knew Zoquitl's future was still assured, that she'd make her good marriage, and bear children, and be worshipped in her

turn. But she also knew, now, that it wasn't the only reason Zoquitl had borne the Mind.

Zoquitl's lips twisted into what might have been a smile. "Help me."

"What?" Dac Kien looked at her, but Zoquitl was already pushing herself up, shaking, shivering, as carefully as she had done when pregnant. "The birth-master—"

"He's fussing like an old woman," Zoquitl said, and for a moment her voice was as sharp and as cutting as a blade. "Come. Let's walk."

She was smaller than Dac Kien had thought, her shoulders barely came up to her own. She wedged herself awkwardly, leaning on Dac Kien for support, a weight that grew increasingly hard to bear as they walked through the ship.

There was light, and the sound of water, and the familiar feel of qi flowing through the corridors in lazy circles, breathing life into everything. There were shadows barely seen in mirrors, and the glint of other ships, too – the soft, curving patterns of *The Golden Mountain*; the carved calligraphy incised in the doors that had been the hallmark of *The Tiger Who Leapt Over the Stream*; the slowly curving succession of ever-growing doors of *Baoyu's Red Fan* – bits and pieces salvaged from her design and put together into...into this, which unfolded its marvels all around her, from layout to electronics to decoration, until her head spun and her eyes blurred, taking it all in.

In the heartroom, Dac Kien stood unmoving, while the five humours washed over them, an endless cycle of destruction and renewal. The centre was pristine, untouched, with a peculiar sadness hanging around it, like an empty crib. And yet...

“It’s beautiful,” Zoquitl said, her voice catching and quivering in her throat.

Beautiful as a poem declaimed in drunken games, as a flower bud ringed by frost – beautiful and fragile as a newborn child struggling to breathe.

And, standing there at the centre of things, with Zoquitl’s frail body leaning against her, she thought of Hanh again, of shadows and darkness, and of life choices.

It’s beautiful.

It would be gone in a few days. Destroyed, recycled, forgotten and uncommemorated. But somehow Dac Kien couldn’t bring herself to voice the thought.

Instead she said, softly, into the silence, knowing it to be true of more than the ship, “It was worth it.”

All of it, now and in the years to come, and she wouldn’t look back, or regret.

Aliette de Bodard lives and works in Paris, where she has a job as a Computer Engineer. 'The Shipmaker' is set in her Xuya continuity (where China discovered America before Columbus), many centuries after the events of 'The Lost Xuyan Bride' and 'Butterfly, Falling at Dawn', both published in previous issues of *Interzone*.