

# THE KITE WARRIORS

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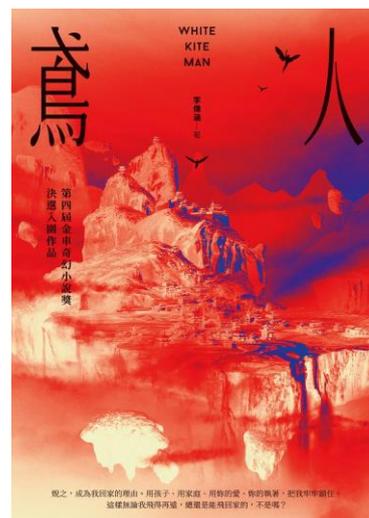
\* Winner, King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize

*As an interstellar war drags on, a young wife moves to an island community near the front lines to be closer to her husband, a mutant whose abilities curse him to a career in the army. The inaugural winner of the King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize blends fantasy and romance in an energetic, moving story.*

As an interplanetary war between two civilizations wears on, a young woman named Ni-Chih moves to an island community near the front lines to be closer to her husband. Sweethearts since childhood, the pair have held onto love despite a beautiful yet hopeless condition: her husband, Yu, is a “kite warrior”, a mutant who can transform into an enormous bird of prey. Looked down upon by mainstream society, kite warriors are immensely important to the war effort, because the enemy’s population centers hang suspended in midair.

While the island community is unfamiliar, Ni-Chih delights in being close to her husband again. The two resolve to start a family, and they have a son not long after. Yet, as Ni-Chih familiarizes herself with the island and its society, she finds dangerous secrets hiding in every dark corner; and when the interminable war takes a sudden turn for the worse, she and Yu discover that the decision to move families to the front lines was not made with the soldiers’ well-being in mind.

Lee Wei-han’s breakout novel, winner of the inaugural King Car Fantasy Fiction Prize, blends elements of complicated, tragic romance into a high-energy narrative of interplanetary conflict, simultaneously speaking to the emotional, social, and imaginative aspects of the human psyche.



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## Lee Wei-han 李偉涵

Lee Wei-han is an author and editor who published his first novel, *The Hope Stone*, with Chiu-Ko Publishing House when he was only sixteen years old.

# THE KITE WARRIORS

By Lee Wei-han

Translated by Roddy Flagg

## 1. The Hanging Isles

The carriage juddered, as if it were being dragged by a mule up a rocky mountain track. I could imagine the beast straining in harness.

There was no mule, of course. Nor was there a mountain track.

I gathered the blanket the army provided around my shoulders, cocooning myself against the cold. I was finding it difficult to breathe for some reason, my chest painfully tight.

The icy air, perhaps? Or the altitude?

I took a little of the redleaf, remembering as I chewed what the Herders said: that the redleaf tree stores the warmth of the summer sun and the breath of the summer breezes in its leaves. So the tree survives even in the worst of years, and even a frozen and breathless woman can chew on its leaves and feel warmth and breath flow through her.

I ran my fingers over the blanket as I chewed: kite feathers, lighter and warmer than any other material. Also inexpensive, made as it was from feathers sloughed off at the change of plumage.

Inexpensive, perhaps. But still of *them*. These feathers had once grown from *their* bodies, had once borne *them* into the sky.

Had these feathers once belonged to my Yu?

The blanket's feathery embrace only brought him closer to mind. My husband, away at the war.

The carriage rocked again, buffeted by a gust of wind.

One of the other women spoke as if from experience: "That means we're getting closer. It's the islands that cause the gusts."

"We'll land soon!" another woman told her child with a smile. "You'll see Father!"

This was my first trip to this place. I turned to one of the other wives, a mother of three who sat to my side: "The Hanging Isles...what are they like?"

"Just think of them as islands in the sea – a chain of them, scattered here and there – and all will be well," she told me. "It frightened me the first time too."

Another woman, also more experienced, added: "Yes, like islands, but floating in clouds rather than the sea."

"Is it your first time?" someone inquired of me. "I don't recall seeing you before."

"It is," I answered.

"And is your husband an enlisted soldier, or..." She paused, awaiting my response.

I spoke shyly: "My husband has the honor of being Vice Kite-Master."

A murmur of surprise ran through the carriage.

The wives of enlisted men fell silent. But those who were married to men of similar rank to my Yu warmed to me. "Your husband must have seen action at the front," one said, "to have been promoted so young."

I smiled through my unease. The truth was, Yu rarely spoke of his work, either in our correspondence or during his visits. He preferred to listen attentively while I talked of my life, savoring each word. All I knew of his soldiering was his pay, which came to me in full every month.

"It can't be easy for you," the woman continued when I failed to reply.

"It's bearable. And we have no children as yet."

"Forgive me for asking, but are you also...?"

I knew what she meant. "No. I'm ordinary."

The woman sighed. "That only makes it harder," she commiserated. "To be earthbound, watching the skies, knowing you can never join him there. It must be so lonely."

I pursed my lips. I had no response.

Because she was right. It was lonely, and no paycheck could change that. Yu and I had been inseparable since childhood. Yet now we were separated, him in the sky, myself on land. My life would never feel complete, riches or none.

And, I told myself, Yu surely felt the same way.

"And only one trip home a year," the woman continued. "My children barely remember what their father looks like!"

Another joined in: "Mine are the same. Then my husband gets upset and can't help but change, and then the children think he's some kind of monster.... And who is it who has to calm them down? Me."

A young boy interjected: "My father's not a monster. His wings are the beautifullest thing ever."

The women laughed. I found myself agreeing with the boy. It was reassuring to not be alone in this.

My Yu was no monster. And his wings were beautiful. I had always told him so.

"Don't fret, they'll all come home to us soon."

I looked to the woman who was now speaking. "Haven't you heard? New orders, they're preparing to—"

The carriage lurched. The driver twisted to call to us: "Hold tight, ladies, we'll be landing shortly."

My heart raced in excitement. I wanted so much to see where Yu worked and how he lived. Most urgently, I wanted to see him.

It had been a year. Was he well? Letters were no longer adequate. I needed to see with my own eyes.

The carriage shook violently before steadying and coming to a gentle halt. The three soldiers escorting us took turns helping the women and children disembark.

I had expected a colder wind, thinner air, harsher sunlight. But on leaving the carriage I found I was now in a huge cavern, lit by some kind of glowing rock. It was a gloomy and disorienting place.

The ground, still some way below us, was to be reached by a staircase.

I made my way cautiously down the steps, glancing back as I did so. The pigeon which had carried us here, a huge beast the size of a house, was obediently lowering its head into a hood held out by the ground staff. It would fall still once its eyes were covered. I saw how the breadth of its back allowed the carriage to be fastened there for the conveyance of goods or passengers, how the bird was easily strong enough to fly stably with the added weight. Transportation between the Hanging Isles and the lands below relied on these birds, I knew.

We had traveled within a squadron of twenty of them, bringing food as well as visiting family members. I could smell the foodstuffs, especially the powerful fragrance of sun-dried buckwheat. Soldiers of the transportation corps swarmed like ants across the cavern, hauling bulky hessian sacks away to be stored.

I had heard the women say that no food was grown in the Hanging Isles, so they relied on the eastern region of Chuandao for supplies.

To the rear of the squadron stretched a wide tunnel, so long that only a tiny dot of sky and cloud was visible at its end. This must have been how we had arrived.

Valise in hand, I searched the waiting crowd for Yu. Men clustered around the new arrivals, anxious to find their wives and children. They were still clad in their working uniforms, and I figured they must have hurried from their posts on hearing the squadron was due to land. Cries of joy and excited waves were followed by loving embraces. I could not help but watch.

"Excuse me," a voice asked. "Mrs. Ni-Chih?"

I turned to see a man looking at me.

"Yes, that's me."

He smiled and took my bag. "I'm Sung Min, the master's aide. He sent me to meet you, ma'am."

"The master?" Who was he?

"Forgive me, the Vice Kite-Master – your husband, Yu. He's on duty in the mountains, I am to escort you to his residence."

Still on duty? I couldn't see him now?

Sung Min was quick to notice my disappointment: "But he has been talking of your arrival for days, ma'am, don't think for a moment he forgot you. Why, he was so excited this morning he couldn't eat breakfast! And you must know how unruly his wings get when he's excited, made quite the mess in the mess hall, you might say."

I giggled. Yu had been mature beyond his years as a child, as steady a presence as my own father or brothers. But while he would never display excitement on his face, the wings on his back always showed his true feelings, unfurling and spreading of their own accord like a child's smile. I learned to watch them after an argument: if the feathers started to rustle I knew he was happy again and I had been forgiven.

I laughed. "I am grateful, Sung, and sorry to have troubled you."

“Not at all, and please, call me Min.” He seemed a straight-forward type. “The master’s apartments are on the East Wing, if you would step this way. And do take care, ma’am, the ground has mostly been chiseled smooth, but the light is poor.”

Sung led me towards what he called the East Road. It took us through a succession of intersections with roads and lanes that were no different than those of any small city.

“Yes, ma’am, the towns of the Hanging Isles are all built underground. Everything you can think of is here – shops, homes, hospitals, offices. We call them ‘undercities’. Just think of it as night time, all the time! I’m afraid there’s no time to show you the city properly now, it’s too big. We’re in North Wing here, we shall have to hurry to reach East Wing in time for you to be there when your husband returns.”

It certainly was bigger than I had imagined – so big that we couldn’t walk to our destination. Sung led me to the side of a canal filled with clear water and constructed of glistening stone that added its own light to the sparkle of the water. An animal was resting there – a hornless water dragon, I saw, with a cabin attached to its back. Sung told me these ‘dragonboats’ were used for transport here, where horses could not go.

The network of canals was as extensive as the roads, he said. They could take us anywhere we wished to go.

We entered the dragonboat. It too carried goods as well as passengers, and I again found myself sitting amongst sacks of grain.

“Do you like buckwheat, ma’am?” Sung asked, brushing buckwheat dust from his uniform.

“I do, Yu and I are from Chuandao. We grew up eating it.”

“That’s good. Because up here, the only alternative to buckwheat is more buckwheat. The southerners and westerners soon get sick of it.”

Chuandao, the easternmost part of mainland Nomad, was a high plateau and bitterly cold. Buckwheat was the only crop that could survive. The Hanging Isles, still further east than Chuandao and much higher, could not grow even buckwheat and relied on supplies from the already struggling plateau below. Life up here was a constant battle.

I looked out onto the dim streets. “What are the Hanging Isles like?” I asked him.

“They are...just islands in the sky. Forty of them in total.”

“And is there a garrison on each?”

“Yes.”

“And Aire...is it close?”

Aire, a nation Mu had sought to conquer for some years now, lay in the eastern sky. It too consisted of floating islands. But it had no territory on land proper.

Sung thought for a moment. “Yes, I would say it is close.”

“How close?”

Sung looked uncertain. “That...varies, ma’am.”

I did not understand. How could it vary? Were Mu and Aire not fixed in their respective positions? Surely distances could be calculated, as between Mu and the nations of Jin and Tang.

But before I could enquire further, our dragonboat arrived at the East Wing.

And that prompted another question. Why East Wing, West Wing and so on? The wings of what? Was the island some winged beast, to have its parts named like this.

Sung laughed. "You've got me there, ma'am, you'd have to ask the master. We should disembark, ma'am."

Yu's quarters were in a building seven floors high which had been carved from a towering rock face. The windows of each floor glowed a homely yellow, and it was easy to imagine domestic scenes playing out inside. The men I saw might all be in uniform, but there was no tension or fear. This was no battlefield, and the front felt very distant.

"The frontline has barely moved these two years, ma'am. The Hanging Isles and parts of Aire are almost peaceful enough for settlers now."

He spoke as he led me up the stairs to Yu's quarters on the sixth floor.

"Does Yu use the stairs like this?" I asked.

"No, ma'am, the master prefers to fly."

"I thought he might."

And then yet another question: "Sung, are you also a kite?"

He winced as he glanced back at me. "I was, ma'am."

"Then..."

"I no longer have wings, so can be no kite."

I had clearly touched a nerve, and I apologized for my intrusion.

Yet Sung seemed to enjoy a natural cheeriness: "Don't apologize, ma'am. It has been a hard-fought war and many have died. If my wings are the price I pay to survive, so be it."

"Does it make life harder?"

"I struggle with my balance. You may have noticed, ma'am, I can't walk straight."

"I hadn't noticed," I told him, and I hadn't.

"My reactions are slower and my eyesight less acute. These are the skills any kite relies upon in this war, kite-master or ordinary soldier. And so it is only natural I should be called back from the front."

It appeared Sung too had experienced his own great trials.

"I hope it is not presumptuous of me to say," I told him, "but I suppose you are like me now, an ordinary person. And we ordinary folk still have our uses."

Sung looked at me.

"For example," I continued, "I'm very glad of your company up these stairs."

Sung grinned. "Exactly as the master said."

"I beg your pardon?"

"He told me you are a compassionate and supportive woman."

"I meant what I said."

"The master has told me the same," Sung said as he walked up. "There is work here, he said, even for those without wings."

"I am sure there is."

“I did very nearly have to leave. There is little use on the front for a guy who wobbles as he walks and works half a beat slower than his fellows. Which is why I was so grateful when the master asked me as to serve as his aide and manage his quarters. But more than that, ma’am, he stopped them mocking my injuries. I couldn’t have stayed otherwise. Even without my wings, I’m still a kite, and I must be in the sky if I am to truly live.”

I cannot deny how gladdened I was to hear Yu was loved by his men.

We reached the sixth floor at last and Sung unlocked the door for me. Despite knowing Yu would not be home, he made a point of calling out: “Sorry to bother you, sir!”

He ushered me to a seat and fetched tea before consulting a burning coil of incense used to keep time. “Ah, it’s nearly three, the master will soon be off duty. I must meet him at the landing ground.” He then explained the landing ground: a square set aside for kites to land in, or at least those of senior rank. It seemed there was a separate landing ground for the lower ranks.

“Forgive me, ma’am, I shall have to take my leave. Please help yourself to anything you require.”

“Of course, attend to your duties. I need nothing more.” In truth I would have preferred to go to meet Yu with him, but I assumed a civilian would not be welcome and so did not ask.

Once Sung had left, I investigated Yu’s quarters.

The rooms were so clean and orderly I felt no sense of a home. No unnecessary items, no signs of a life being lived, no entertainments the resident might enjoy when off-duty. Accommodations designed for passing guests and apparently occupied by a traveler of limited means and even less luggage.

I recalled Yu’s words when he told me he would volunteer: “It will mean a better life for us!”

The promise was kept only in part. His pay reached me in full every month, and I did live better for it. Yet I saw no sign of a better life for him.

But he always was this way. Thinking of what he could do for others, never for himself.

And so what could I do for him? I thought this over as I waited.

As I relaxed I noticed a faint scent on the air, familiar and sweet, and I realized that perhaps these rooms were not as bare as I had thought. I sat down and breathed deeply through my nose to make certain.

Yes. Sweetmilk flowers. Yu’s quarters were filled with their scent.

His favorites.

I had never been able to understand how a grown man like Yu could love the sickly-sweet perfume of those blooms. But it was a scent I had come to associate with him, and I sometimes thought I wouldn’t recognize him without it.

It was barely discernable, but it was there. And now I knew this was his home, the place he had lain his head these six long years.

The embrace of the scent quickened my pulse. Couldn’t I see him now? Couldn’t he embrace me?

I moved to the side of his bed and gazed at where he had slept, the bedding folded with knife-cut edges. I swept the pillow into my arms and pressed it to my face, imagining Yu’s hair,

Yu's skin, Yu's sturdy limbs. Yu holding me until I could barely breathe, and nothing filled my lungs but the scent of sweetmilk on his skin....

I yearned for him. A yearning I had suppressed on my journey which now blossomed like a meadow in spring.

A disturbance outside: cries of alarm, laughter. I recognized Sung's voice among them: efficient, solicitous, and begging: "Master! Master! Your wings! Gather your wings! Be careful of the—sorry, ma'am, sorry, sir. Oh, Vice-Master Chi, I hope he didn't...I'll apologize later, forgive me, I must...Master! Wait!"

The commotion rose as the men approached. A tumultuous crash as the door in front of me flew open.

I looked on in surprise.

"Ni-Chih!" In that deep voice I had missed for so long, the man at the door called my name.

I gazed at him wide-eyed. A man, yet not merely a man: the body and face of a man, but covered in white feathers, with limbs ending in sharp talons. From his back spread wings as broad as three men are tall. A man, a beloved husband, a kite – and to those who did not know the kites as I did, a monster.