

Song of Sidhedark

An Opera in Three Acts

Based upon *The Infinity Concerto*, Book One of “Songs of Earth and Power” by Greg Bear

Synopsis

Prologue

Michael Perrin, a budding young poet living a sheltered life in suburban L.A., has come into possession of an old brass key and cryptic instructions that are said will take him on a journey to see “what lies above and below the things we see”. These items, along with a book of poems, were given to Michael by his mentor, a now-deceased film music composer, Arno Waltiri, who told Michael of a mysterious but gifted arranger, David Clarkham, the owner of a house close to Michael's. Clarkham, it was said, disappeared many years ago leaving only the key with instructions to follow, something Waltiri was never able to do. Michael has decided he will do what his mentor could not.

Act 1

Midnight in Michael's bedroom in L.A.: As he sleeps, ethereal figures converge to discuss his worthiness for the task that lies ahead, then vanish at the sound of his alarm clock. He leaves his parents' house quietly and makes his way to the abandoned home of the mysterious David Clarkham and enters. He hurries through to the back yard as instructed, but a wraith-like female figure starts to give chase. He barely escapes through a garden gate using the key provided by Waltiri.

The Isomage's Mansion and nearby Euterpe: The garden gate having disappeared behind him, Michael finds himself transported to a lone mansion set in a treeless landscape within a place known as *Sidhedark*, the Realm of the immortal Faer who call themselves “*Sidhe*”. The mansion's sole occupant is Lamia, a reclusive woman living under a *Sidhe* curse. After hearing Michael's story, Lamia sends him to a human settlement called Euterpe for lodging. There he meets Savarin, a scholar, and he learns that all of the humans living in *Sidhedark* were transported at one time or another when caught up in a moment of musical ecstasy. All are confined to this region known as the Pact Lands, an area poor in resources where life is difficult, the fortunes of a war that ended in stalemate between the exiled Clarkham and the *Sidhe* who control the Realm. Reaching Clarkham – the one called Isomage – may be Michael's only hope for return to Earth, so Lamia orders that he be trained for survival in *Sidhedark* by the revered Crane Women. The three sisters named Spart, Nare and Coom are referred to as “Breeds” (daughters of a *Sidhe* mother and human father). Michael is forced to relocate to the Cranes' mound situated on the outskirts of Halftown, a Breed settlement where no humans choose to live.

Cranes' mound and nearby Halftown: Soon after his arrival Michael encounters Alyons the Wickmaster, the cruel and intimidating mounted *Sidhe* warrior given control over the Pact Lands, who takes an immediate dislike to the Cranes' new charge. Michael also meets Eleuth, a young Breed woman who is drawn to Michael. Michael, though attracted to Eleuth, is also put off by her *Sidhe* heritage, having learned how Breeds age rapidly and in peculiar ways despite their immortality. The Cranes bring Michael along for a Breed celebration known as Kaeli, the heroic telling of their combined *Sidhe* and human heritage. Held in the open wilderness at night despite the dangers, everything turns to chaos as Riverines and Umbrals (*Sidhe* water and shadow spirits) stage a raid, taking several Breeds, Eleuth's father Lirg among them. Michael gets separated from the Cranes during the ensuing storm, and after barely escaping the clutches of Riverines, he is tossed aside by an angry Umbral, knocking him unconscious, thus concluding Act 1.

Act 2

Euterpe; Halftown: Michael has survived, but he receives no accolades from the Cranes. An element of his rigorous physical training is running everywhere, and preferring human company he runs to Euterpe. Savarin introduces Michael to Helena, a vivacious young pianist living in Euterpe. Suddenly finding a reason for hope in his desolate internment, Michael is smitten (“She likes you, my boy,” Savarin confides with a chuckle). Michael later visits a grieving Eleuth at the Breed market in Halftown. Knowing she will never see her father again, Eleuth is compelled to seek solace in Michael who, for his part, remains uncertain how he feels about her. Eleuth tells him, “When we are alone we are most vulnerable”.

The Realm Proper: The Cranes take Michael on a journey to the unspoiled lands that lie beyond the perilous Blasted Plain. Their goal: to exchange a *Sidhe* horse called an *epon* for a young *Sidhe* male, Biri, who will be trained by the Cranes in preparation for his initiation into the *Sidhe* priesthood known as the *Maln*. All are dusted with *sani* powder to protect them during the crossing, with Michael riding the *epon* for added protection. They emerge unmolested from the Blasted Plain, and amid the rich splendor Spart demonstrates for Michael how the insubstantial foundations that underlie *Sidhedark* make it possible to alter another's perceptions using illusion. She deceives Michael again and again by

changing the color of a flower at will. The exchange for Biri fulfilled (topped off by an unexpected encounter with Alyons) they return across the Blasted Plain under the protection of Biri's full-blood *Sidhe* magic. When deliberately left unaided by his fellow travelers, however, Michael narrowly escapes succumbing to one of the spirits of the Blasted Plain, saved only by his growing discipline and self-reliance.

Wilderness near the Cranes' mound; Euterpe and Halftown: Michael is immediately put to the test again by being left alone in the wilderness as Meteorals (*Sidhe* air spirits) viciously attack him. He manages to save himself by employing Spart's illusion training, but the Meteorals are the last straw in his do-or-die training program, provoking him to rebel in defiance of Lamia's orders. He leaves, intent on going to live with his friends in Euterpe, but both Helena and Savarin refuse to accommodate him saying that they fear consequences of his disobedience. Rejected by his friends, Michael turns to Eleuth for help. She gladly takes him in, and they share a meal together. As they are about to retire, Eleuth asks if Michael fears or hates Breeds as many humans do, and he assures her that he does not. Eleuth tells Michael, "I'm mostly human", and she invites him into her bed: ["Sona, dosa sona."] The next day Helena notices a change in Michael, but he deflects her questioning. She asks Michael to swear that he is not a plant sent by the *Sidhe* to root out resistance and he swears, but just as she begins revealing plans for a human rebellion and efforts to build a piano out of stolen *Sidhe* metal, Alyons and his Coursers arrive outside her apartment demanding Michael accompany them to the Isomage's mansion to explain his defiance of Lamia's orders. Failing to escape the Coursers by throwing a shadow, Michael is tied and taken.

The Isomage's Mansion: Lamia cautions Michael not to defy the Isomage's plan, explaining that Alyons cannot harm Michael as long as he obeys her. Lamia warns Michael, "May you never know how cruel life is, or what can be lost, and yet still remain alive." His business with Lamia concluded, Michael boldly demands to ride Alyons' magnificent golden *epon* back to the Cranes' mound, and the Wickmaster grudgingly complies. They leave as the curtain falls, ending Act 2.

Act 3

Cranes' Mound; Halftown: Despairing over his silent muse, Michael is answered with a poem fragment. He visits Eleuth at the Breed market, but she has been relieved of her responsibilities due to her inability to manage it alone. They lie together, commiserating. Eleuth admits she loves Michael, and he expresses his confusion and guilt over not loving her. Undeterred, she explains how *Sidhe* females are passionate and desiring but seldom fulfilled because *Sidhe* males do not love. Later she demonstrates the magic she is learning by summoning a crawling beetle from the lawn outside Michael's home on Earth. It promptly dies, and Eleuth realizes in sadness that her magic is weak and that she has much to learn.

Euterpe; Halftown: Training continues, and as Michael practices drawing heat from his center to generate warmth, he accidentally sets fire to his clothes, leaving him naked outside Helena's apartment. He ducks inside and quickly puts on some of her clothes moments before she arrives home to see this amusing spectacle. Now convinced that Michael is not a spy, she finds him proper clothes and then takes him to visit The Yard, a shunned place where human children born in the Realm are imprisoned. There Michael meets Ishmael, one of the children possessed by a spirit from the Blasted Plain, and Ishmael predicts that rebellion will break the Pact and Alyons will lose everything. Upon their return to her apartment Helena invites Michael in. She admits having feelings for Michael, but insists that she cannot love him the way she would want to because the union of woman and man in the Realm brings forth abominations like Ishmael. "Don't you see? They've taken love away from us." She asks instead for Michael's friendship, and asks that he help their rebellion by stealing *sani* powder from the Cranes. Later when Michael rejoins Eleuth, she senses his growing frustration over the way things are going. Explaining that she cannot know jealousy, she offers "I could love you while you loved her."

Cranes' mound: Michael arrives to find the place deserted and he decides not to put off stealing the *sani* any longer. Searching the Cranes' hut, he finds a bag of *sani* and grabs it. As he makes his retreat he comes face to face with the frightful sight of Biri, a spectre of grief, shock and blood. The Cranes also appear, and Spart explains that Biri has passed his test, the hunting and killing of his *epon*, raised with him since early childhood. Referring to Michael's pilfered bag of *sani*, Spart asks "What you have, what you know...you will use it wisely?" Michael tearfully replies that he will. Feeling guilt over betraying the Crane Women but glad to be helping his friends in Euterpe, he decides to deliver the *sani* to Helena straight away and prove himself worthy.

Euterpe: He climbs the stairs to Helena's apartment and finds the door draped with a cloth, voices coming from within. Realizing she has a visitor, his heart sickens. He enters quietly, the voices continuing from behind the curtain surrounding the bedroom. He hesitates, then quietly pulls the curtain aside, finding Helena and Savarin lying naked together under a blanket. A startled Helena sees Michael, and he lets the curtain fall back. Reeling from shock and despair, Michael places the *sani* on the table. Helena emerges wearing a robe and tries to explain how it's not what any of them want – that Savarin cannot have children, making him "safe" whereas Michael is not. Michael cannot bear to hear any more, feeling betrayed by his most trusted human allies. He leaves with Helena calling after him to no avail.

Halftown: Michael appears at Eleuth's door, downcast and dispirited. Sensing his anguish, she leads him inside. He declares there is nothing left for him and that he must return to Earth. Eleuth reluctantly agrees to try. As Michael sleeps, she contemplates the self-sacrifice that lies ahead: ["Halftown has donned its mask of white, and I mine."] Having relocated to an isolated clearing nearby, Eleuth makes the necessary preparations and informs Michael that there is great risk, and he accepts this. She asks that he acknowledge her gift of love and he does so, still unable to understand why she feels so deeply for him. Lastly, Eleuth asks if Michael knows what his friends in Euterpe are doing, because all of the Breeds are sensing that something is about to happen and are staying in. Michael simply replies "No." Eleuth begins the magical proceedings, and amid the pyrotechnics Michael starts to rise above the scene. He hears her say she will guard him as long as she can.

L.A.: Eleuth's magic brings Michael home momentarily, but another force pulls him away again, and he finds himself in the backyard of Clarkham's house in L.A, the same wraith-like female figure guarding the passage as before, only now he has no gate key. Utilizing his training he throws a shadow to deceive the guardian, buying him a moment to try other gates. The guardian quickly resumes pursuit, though, and Michael suddenly sees an apparition of Eleuth interposing herself between him and the guardian. A struggle ensues, allowing Michael to escape through another gate. Glancing back he sees the motionless figure of Eleuth lying on the ground.

Isomage's Mansion: Once more Michael finds himself outside the mansion. He rushes in to find Lamia, but instead he finds her enormous shed flesh seated in a chair. As he confronts this horror, her voice comes from the dark corner behind him. Lamia shames Michael with the fact of his failure to reach home despite the risks to Eleuth, and reveals that in his absence the human rebellion is being crushed by Alyons and his Coursers. Lamia laments their poor choice of timing – that in her curse she is unable to help the rebellion. Lamia promises she will strengthen again as she always does, saying, "Then Alyons will pay, if he hasn't already". Michael flees from the mansion, heading for Euterpe.

Outskirts of Euterpe: Michael sees the town in ruins. A piano sounds in the distance, and Coursers chase after the insurgency. Too late to avoid being seen himself, Michael sees Alyons standing with his *epon* tied nearby. Michael takes refuge in a ring of large stones and Alyons follows, bent on ridding himself of a troublesome human. Spart's voice is heard from behind, instructing Michael to draw Alyons fully into the circle and to hide himself well to the back of the ring. Michael taunts Alyons who advances towards Michael's hiding place. Suddenly a giant steel snake springs upward from where it has lain, hidden below ground just inside the ring of stones, rising with the roar of a dozen freight trains. Alyons is caught in its steel teeth, its jaws crushing him as it hauls him upward. He is powerless to free himself, clutching at his throat as it tightens, mercilessly. Alyons calls to the Arborals (tree spirits in which fallen *Sidhe* may dwell), but it is too late and he dies. Michael asks Spart who made this lethal trap and she replies, "Clarkham, who calls himself Isomage". They find their way to an intact building where they find Savarin sitting in the middle of the floor, despondent, with Helena huddled against a smashed piano. Glittering *sani* powder is strewn everywhere. Savarin accuses Michael of being a traitor, but Helena supports Michael saying she knows he did not reveal their plan. Spart is disgusted by the waste of the *sani*, and tells Michael they are not worth his time. She drags Michael from the building and takes him back to the mound.

Cranes' mound: They find Michael's hut destroyed and Biri's hut gone, no sign of him. Michael pulls his poetry book and staff from beneath the rubble of his hut. He pleads to go look for Eleuth, but Spart assures Michael that Eleuth is dead, giving her credit for doing so well with what little magic she possessed. Michael is devastated, forced to accept she is truly gone. He is told that he must now cross the Blasted Plain, no *epon* or *sani* to protect him, and he is told to follow the river until he reaches the exiled Clarkham. The Cranes give Michael one final training: a means to take one of his inner selves that he despises and sacrifice it in a time of peril. The Cranes then disappear, leaving Michael truly on his own.

The Blasted Plain: Michael makes his way along a ridge above the river he follows, armed only with his staff. He soon encounters an impassable chasm. In order to reach the far side, he scrambles down to the lowland along the river but is confronted there by Ishmael, along with several other "children" from The Yard, all seeming to arise from the mud. Ishmael offers to be his guide and Michael declines, but Ishmael is unwilling to take no for an answer. He adds, "Where is your powder, traveler? Only a fool would cross the Blasted Plain without powder or a horse", and this stirs up the others. Michael yells for quiet, and the children all settle, eager to hear a story as Michael recounts his tribulations (surreptitiously seeking that hated part of himself to sacrifice in order to escape). He realizes that his most hated self is that part of him that took advantage of Eleuth. Letting himself fill with self-loathing, he summons all of his will to expel it, and a second Michael appears directly in front of him. Sensing a change, the children take their true form as frightening demons, and as they attack his doppelganger, Michael makes his escape to the far side of the chasm. Having regained the relative safety of the ridge but feeling utterly alone, Michael pulls out his poetry book, saying "You are my sanity. You are words from home..." He pockets this cherished companion, watching as the sunset deepens over the Blasted Plain. He reflects on the loss of his most hated self: ["Atonement. Survival...I have lost, but I have also gained."] As he repeats these self-affirming words, a distant bird is heard singing, symbolizing that Waltiri, the teller of our tale, will return to share more of Michael's adventure. Emboldened with renewed purpose, Michael upholds his staff as the Cranes taught him to do, and then sets off on his quest to find Clarkham, the final curtain falling as he fades from view.