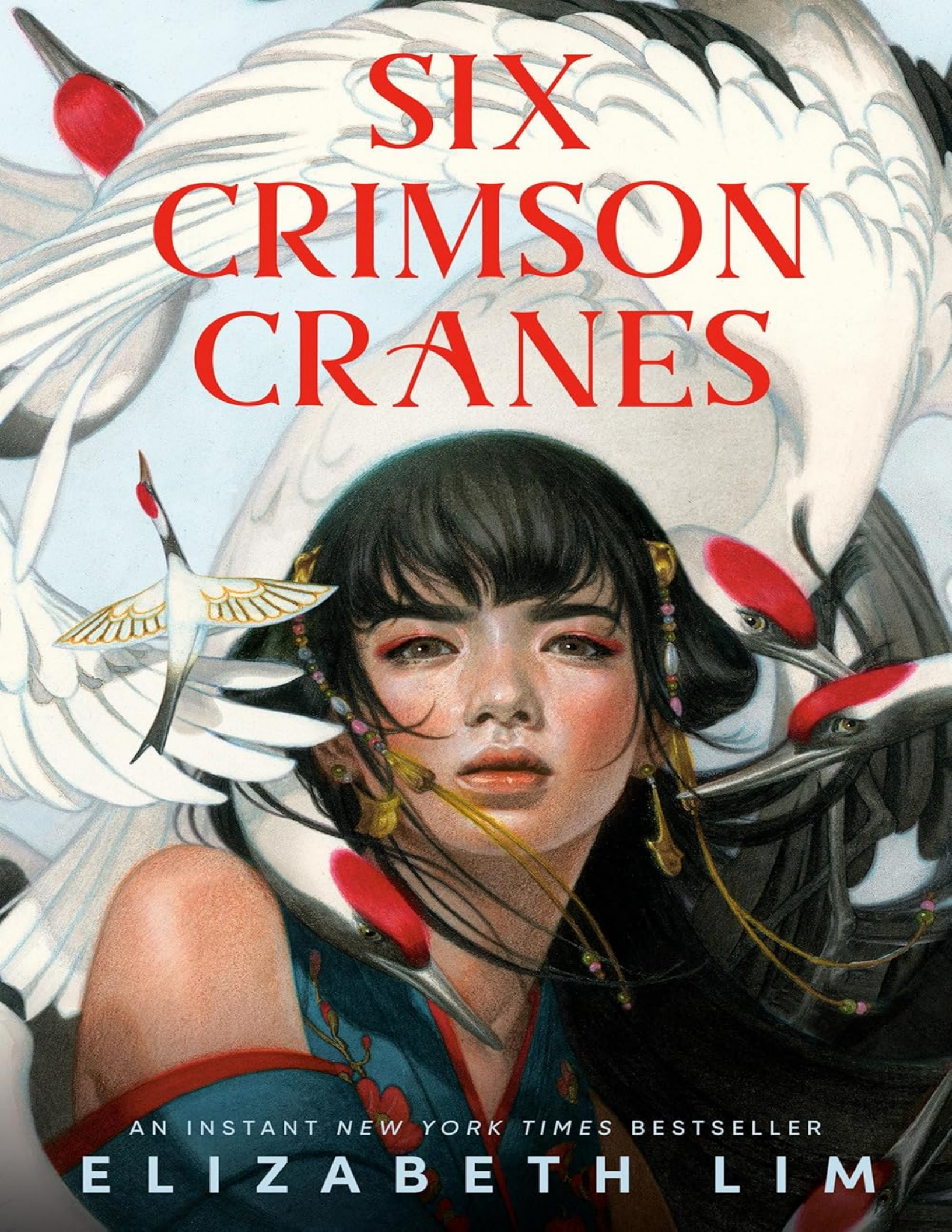




SIX CRIMSON CRANES

AN INSTANT NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

ELIZABETH LIM

ALSO BY ELIZABETH LIM

THE BLOOD OF STARS DUOLOGY

Spin the Dawn

Unravel the Dusk

SIX CRIMSON CRANES

ELIZABETH LIM



Alfred A. Knopf
New York

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Acknowledgments

About the Author

*To Charlotte and Olivia, for being my greatest adventure. You are my joys,
my wonders, and my loves.*





CHAPTER ONE

The bottom of the lake tasted like mud, salt, and regret. The water was so thick it was agony keeping my eyes open, but thank the great gods I did. Otherwise, I would have missed the dragon.

He was smaller than I'd imagined one to be. About the size of a rowboat, with glittering ruby eyes and scales green as the purest jade. Not at all like the village-sized beasts the legends claimed dragons to be, large enough to swallow entire warships.

He swam nearer until his round red eyes were so close they reflected my own.

He was watching me drown.

Help, I pleaded. I was out of air, and I had barely a second of life left before my world folded into itself.

The dragon regarded me, lifting a feathery eyebrow. For an instant, I dared hope he might help. But his tail wrapped around my neck, squeezing out the last of my breath.

And all went dark.



In hindsight, I probably shouldn't have told my maids I was going to jump into the Sacred Lake. I only said it because the heat this morning was insufferable. Even the chrysanthemum bushes outside had wilted, and the kitebirds soaring above the citrus trees were too parched to sing. Not to mention, diving into the lake seemed like a perfectly sensible alternative to attending my betrothal ceremony—or as I liked to call it, the dismal end of my future.

Unfortunately, my maids believed me, and word traveled faster than demonfire to Father. Within minutes, he sent one of my brothers—along with a retinue of stern-faced guards—to fetch me.

So here I was, being shepherded through the palace's catacomb of corridors, on the hottest day of the year. To the dismal end of my future.

As I followed my brother down yet another sun-soaked hall, I fidgeted with my sleeve, pretending to cover a yawn as I peeked inside.

"Stop yawning," Hasho chided.

I dropped my arm and yawned again. "If I let them all out now, I won't have to do it in front of Father."

"Shiori..."

"You try being woken up at dawn to have your hair brushed a thousand times," I countered. "You try walking in a god's ransom of silk." I lifted my arms, but my sleeves were so heavy I could barely keep them raised. "Look at all these layers. I could outfit a ship with enough sails to cross the sea!"

The trace of a smile touched Hasho's mouth. "The gods are listening, dear sister. You keep complaining like that, and your betrothed will have a pockmark for each time you dishonor them."

My betrothed. Any mention of him went in one ear and out the other, as my mind drifted to more pleasant thoughts, like cajoling the palace chef for his red bean paste recipe—or better yet, stowing away on a ship and voyaging across the Taijin Sea.

Being the emperor's only daughter, I'd never been allowed to go anywhere, let alone journey outside of Gindara, the capital. In a year, I'd be too old for such an escapade. And too married.

The indignity of it all made me sigh aloud. "Then I'm doomed. He'll be hideous."

My brother chuckled and nudged me forward. "Come on, no more complaining. We're nearly there."

I rolled my eyes. Hasho was starting to sound like he was seventy, not seventeen. Of my six brothers, I liked him most—he was the only one with wits as quick as mine. But ever since he started taking being a prince so

seriously and wasting those wits on chess games instead of mischief, there were certain things I couldn't tell him anymore.

Like what I was keeping inside my sleeve.

A tickle crawled up my arm, and I scratched my elbow.

Just to be safe, I pinched the wide opening of my sleeve shut. If Hasho knew what I was hiding under its folds, I'd never hear the end of it.

From him, or from Father.

"Shiori," Hasho whispered. "What's the matter with your dress?"

"I thought I smudged the silk," I lied, pretending to rub at a spot on my sleeve. "It's so hot today." I made a show of looking out at the mountains and the lake. "Don't you wish we were outside swimming instead of going to some boring ceremony?"

Hasho eyed me suspiciously. "Shiori, don't change the topic."

I bowed my head, doing my best to look remorseful—and covertly adjusted my sleeve. "You're right, Brother. It's time I grew up. Thank you for...for..."

Another tickle brushed my arm, and I clapped my elbow to muffle the sound. My secret was growing restless, making the fabric of my robes ripple.

"For escorting me to meet my betrothed," I finished quickly.

I hastened toward the audience chamber, but Hasho caught my sleeve, raised it high, and gave it a good shake.

Out darted a paper bird as small as a dragonfly, and just as fast. From afar, she looked like a little sparrow, with an inky red dot on her head, and she flitted from my arm to my brother's head, wildly beating her slender wings as she hovered in front of his face.

Hasho's jaw dropped, his eyes widening with shock.

"Kiki!" I whispered urgently, opening my sleeve. "Come back inside!"

Kiki didn't obey. She perched on Hasho's nose and stroked it with a wing to show affection. My shoulders relaxed; animals always liked Hasho, and I was certain she would charm him the way she'd charmed me.

Then my brother swooped his hands over his face to catch her.

"Don't hurt her!" I cried.

Up Kiki flew, narrowly avoiding his clutches. She bounced against the wooden shutters on the windows, seeking one that was open as she darted farther and farther down the hall.

I started after her, but Hasho grabbed me, holding fast until my slippers skidded against the whispery wood.

“Let it go,” he said into my ear. “We’ll talk about this later.”

The guards flung open the doors, and one of Father’s ministers announced me: “Princess Shiori’anma, the youngest child, the only daughter of Emperor Hanriyu and the late empress—”

Inside, my father and his consort, my stepmother, sat at the head of the cavernous chamber. The air hummed with impatience, courtiers folding and refolding their damp handkerchiefs to wipe their perspiring temples. I saw the backs of Lord Bushian and his son—my betrothed—kneeling before the emperor. Only my stepmother noticed me, frozen at the threshold. She tilted her head, her pale eyes locking onto mine.

A chill shivered down my spine. I had a sudden fear that if I went through with the ceremony, I’d become like her: cold and sad and lonely. Worse, if I didn’t find Kiki, someone else might, and my secret would get back to Father...

My secret: that I’d conjured a paper bird to life with magic.

Forbidden magic.

I spun away from the doors and pushed past Hasho, who was too startled to stop me.

“Princess Shiori!” the guards yelled. “Princess!”

I shed my ceremonial jacket as I ran after Kiki. The embroidery alone weighed as much as a sentinel’s armor, and freeing my shoulders and arms of its heft was like growing wings. I left the pool of silk in the middle of the hall and jumped out a window into the garden.

The sun’s glare was strong, and I squinted to keep my eyes on Kiki. She wove through the orchard of cherry trees, then past the citrus ones, where her frenzied flight caused the kitebirds to explode from the branches.

I'd intended to leave Kiki in my room, tucked away in a jewelry box, but she had flapped her wings and knocked against her prison so vigorously I was afraid a servant might find her while I was at the ceremony.

Best to keep her with me, I thought.

"Promise to be good?" I'd said.

Kiki bobbed her head, which I'd taken as a yes.

Wrong.

Demons take me, I had to be the biggest idiot in Kiata! But I wouldn't blame myself for having a heart, even for a paper bird.

Kiki was *my* paper bird. With my brothers growing older and always occupied with princely duties, I had been lonely. But Kiki listened to me and kept my secrets, and she made me laugh. Every day, she became more alive. She was my friend.

I had to get her back.

My paper bird landed in the middle of the Sacred Lake, floating on its still waters with unflappable calm—as if she hadn't just upended my entire morning.

I was panting by the time I reached her. Even without the outer layer, my dress was so heavy I could hardly catch my breath.

"Kiki!" I tossed a pebble into the water to get her attention, but she merely floated farther away. "This isn't the time to play."

What was I going to do? If it was discovered I had a talent for magic, no matter how small, I'd be sent away from Kiata forever—a fate far worse than having to marry some faceless lord of the third rank.

Hurrying, I kicked off my slippers, not even bothering to shed my robes.

I jumped into the lake.

For a girl forced to stay indoors practicing calligraphy and playing the zither, I was a strong swimmer. I had my brothers to thank for that; before they all grew up, we used to sneak to this very lake for summer-evening dips. I knew these waters.

I kicked toward Kiki, the sun's heat prickling against my back, but she was sinking deeper into the water. The folds of my dress wrapped around me

tight, and my skirts clung to my legs every time I kicked. I began to tire, and the sky vanished as the lake pulled me down.

Choking, I flailed for the surface. The more I struggled, the faster I sank. Whorls of my long black hair floated around me like a storm. Terror rioted in my gut, and my throat burned, my pulse thudding madly in my ears.

I undid the gold sash over my robes and yanked at my skirts, but their weight brought me down and down, until the sun was but a faint pearl of light glimmering far above me.

Finally I ripped my skirts free and propelled myself up, but I was too deep. There was no way I would make it back to the surface before I ran out of breath.

I was going to die.

Kicking furiously, I fought for air, but it was no use. I tried not to panic. Panicking would only make me sink faster.

Lord Sharima'en, the god of death, was coming for me. He'd numb the burning soreness in my muscles, and the pain swelling in my throat. My blood began to chill, my eyelids began to close—

That was when I saw the dragon.

I thought him a snake at first. No one had seen a dragon in centuries, and from afar, he looked like one of my stepmother's pets. At least until I saw the claws.

He glided toward me, coming so close that I could have touched his whiskers, long and thin like strokes of silver.

His hand was extended, and above his palm, pinched between two talons, was Kiki.

For an instant, I bubbled to life. I kicked, trying to reach out. But I had no strength left. No breath. My world was shrinking, all color washed away.

With a mischievous glint in his eye, the dragon closed his hand. His tail swept over me from behind and encircled my neck.

And my heart gave one final thud.



CHAPTER TWO

“A...a snake,” I heard Hasho stammer. He wasn’t a very good liar. “She saw a snake.”

“So she ran all the way to the lake? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Well—” Hasho faltered. “You know how much she hates snakes. She thought it might bite her.”

My head hurt like a thunderstorm, but I blinked an eye half-open, spying my two eldest brothers, Andahai and Benkai, at my bedside. Hasho hung in the back, chewing on his lip.

I closed my eye. Maybe if they thought I was still asleep, they’d all go away.

But, curse him, Hasho noticed. “Look, she’s stirring.”

“Shiori,” Andahai said sternly, his long face looming over me. He shook my shoulders. “We know you’re awake. Shiori!”

I coughed, my body scrunching up with pain.

“Enough, Andahai,” said Benkai. “Enough!”

My lungs still burned, greedy for air, and my mouth tasted of dirt and salt. I gulped the water Hasho offered, then forced a smile at my brothers.

None smiled back.

“You missed your betrothal ceremony,” Andahai chided. “We found you on the banks, half-drowned.”

Only my oldest brother would scold me for almost dying.

Almost dying, I repeated to myself, my fingers flying to my neck. The dragon had wrapped his tail around it, as if to choke me. But I felt no bruises, no bandages, either. Had he saved me? The last thing I remembered was seeing two ruby eyes and a crooked grin. I didn’t remember coming up to the surface, and I couldn’t have floated up on my own....

Wings fluttered against my thumb, and I became suddenly aware of my other hand, hidden under my blankets.