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XIRAN JAY ZHAO



IRON  
WIDOW

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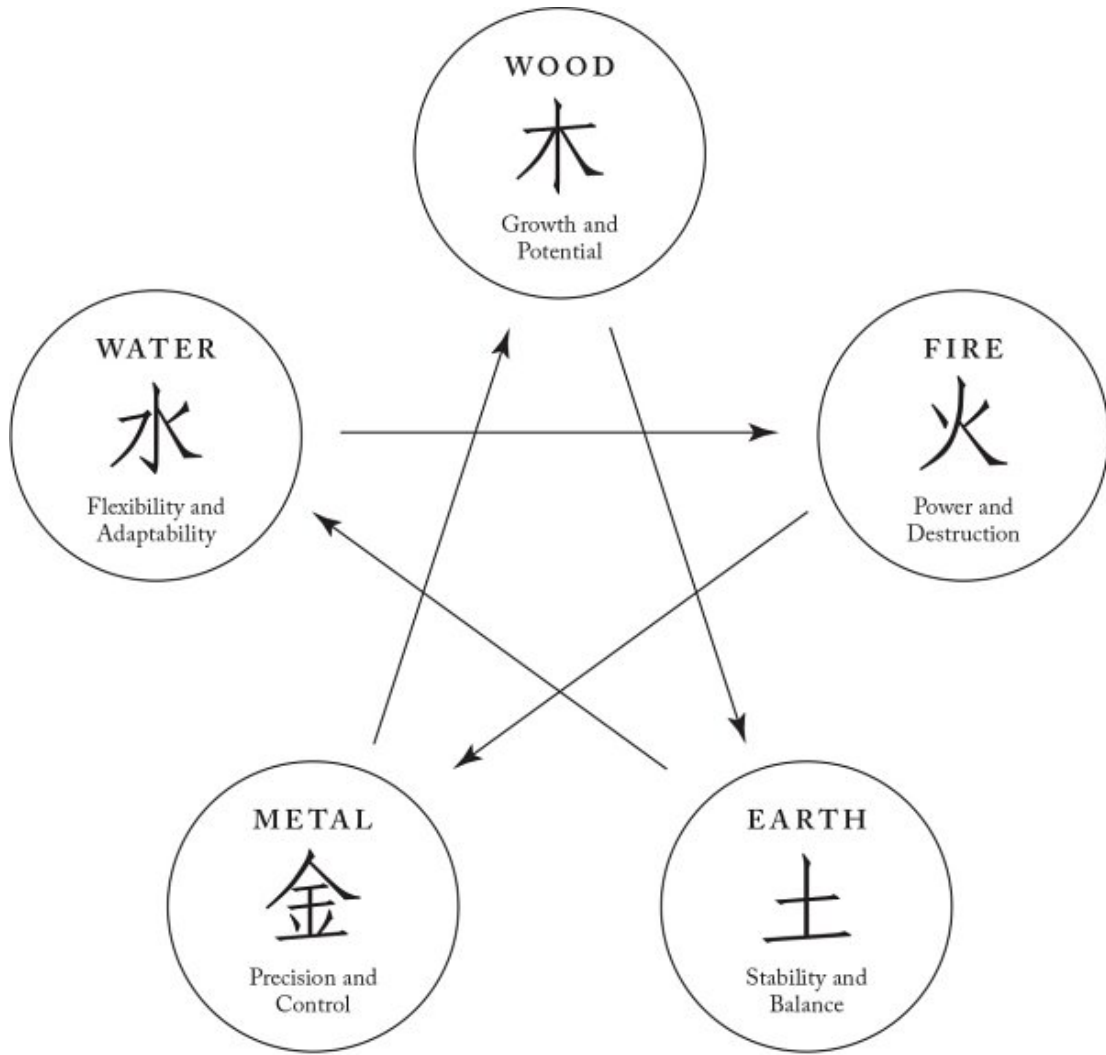
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*Epilogue*

*Acknowledgements*

To Rebecca Schaeffer, who was there for me the whole way  
as I transformed from statistic to survivor strong enough to  
write this story



—————→ TYPE ADVANTAGE



Please be aware that this book contains scenes of violence and abuse, suicide ideation, discussion and references to sexual assault (though no on-page depictions), alcohol addiction, and torture.

This book is not historical fantasy or alternate history, but a futuristic story set in an entirely different world inspired by cultural elements from across Chinese history and featuring historical figures reimaged in vastly different life circumstances. Considerable creative liberties were taken during the reimaging of these historical figures, such as changing their family upbringing or relative age to each other, because accuracy to a particular era was not the goal. To get an authentic view of history, please consult non-fiction sources.

## PROLOGUE

The Hunduns were coming. A whole herd of them, rumbling across the wilds, stirring up a dark storm of dust through the night. Their rotund, faceless bodies, made of spirit metal, glinted under the silver half-moon and sky full of glittering stars.

A lesser pilot would have had to fight off nerves to go meet them in battle, but Yang Guang wasn't fazed. At the foot of his watchtower just outside the Great Wall, he compelled his Chrysalis, the Nine-Tailed Fox, to launch into action. It was as tall as a seven- or eight-story building and bristly green. Its metallic claws pounded across the earth, shaking it.

A Chrysalis was no ordinary war machine. Yang Guang didn't maneuver it with steering wheels or levers, like he would an electric carriage or a hovercraft. No, he *became* it. While his mortal body sat dormant in the cockpit, its arms around the concubine-pilot he'd taken to battle tonight, his mind psychically commanded every part of the Nine-Tailed Fox, making it pounce toward the incoming herd on the horizon. Far out on either side of him, the silhouettes of other active-duty Chrysalises raced forth as well.

Through hair-thin acupuncture needles along his pilot seat that bit into his spine, Yang Guang channeled his qi, his life force, to power the Fox. Qi was the vital essence that sustained everything in the world, from the sprouting of leaves to the blazing of flames to the turning of the planet. Not only did he draw on his own, he reached across the Chrysalis's psychic link and sapped up his concubine-pilot's as well. Her mind wasn't strong enough to put up any resistance as he did so; it was lost deep inside his. Pieces of her memories flurried through him, but he did his best to ignore them. It was best not to know too much about his concubines. The only thing he

needed was the interaction of her qi with his own, which multiplied his spirit pressure, making it possible for him to command a Chrysalis so large.

Trickles of common-class Hunduns reached Yang Guang first, like oversized metal bugs eager to burrow into the Fox and kill him. Their various colors were dull under the starlight. But some lit up, shooting weaponized qi out of their bodies in luminous blasts or crackling bolts. If Yang Guang had faced them as a human, they'd have loomed as big as houses and vaporized him instantly, but when he piloted the Fox, they were too small to hurt him. As he smashed them with the Fox's claws, bursts of foreign emotion shot through him—grief and terror and rage, as riotous as static. He didn't know how exactly Chrysalises were made from Hundun husks—only the highest-level engineers were allowed to know—but even centuries of improving their craft hadn't vanquished the kink that made pilots feel whatever the Hunduns felt when they pierced a Hundun's hull.

Pilots didn't talk much about this in public, but resisting these distracting emotions was a surprisingly rigorous part of battle. Yang Guang was one of the most powerful pilots alive precisely because he could detach from them so well. Powering through the mental onslaught, he kept pummeling the Hunduns. The Fox's nine tails swished and creaked behind him like nine new limbs, slapping larger Hunduns away with resonant clangs.

Yang Guang had no pity for them. The Hunduns were invaders from the cosmos who'd pulverized the height of human civilization some two thousand years ago and shattered humanity into scattered tribes. If it hadn't been for the Yellow Sovereign, a legendary tribal leader who'd invented Chrysalis crafting with help from the gods, civilization would never have recovered, and the planet would have belonged to the Hunduns by now.

Camera drones whizzed around the Fox like red-eyed flies. Some of them belonged to the Human Liberation Army; others were from private media companies, broadcasting the battle to all of Huaxia. Yang Guang stayed hyper-vigilant, not letting himself make a mistake, lest he disappoint his fans.

*“Nine-Tailed Fox, there’s a Prince class in the herd!”* an army strategist shouted through the speakers in the Fox’s cockpit.

Yang Guang jerked alert. A Prince-class Hundun was a rare opponent, the same weight class as the Fox. If he took it out with minimal damage, it could be made into a new Prince-class Chrysalis, or be offered to the gods in exchange for some major gifts, such as manuals for ground-breaking technology or medicine. And the win would give a massive boost to his battle rank. Maybe he’d finally shoot past Li Shimin, that convicted murderer who did not deserve to be Huaxia’s top pilot.

For a clean shot, Yang Guang would have to shift the Fox into a more complex form.

“Xing Tian, cover me!” he called to his closest comrade through the Fox’s mouth, his qi broadcasting his voice across the battlefield. “I’m going to transform!”

“Got it, Colonel!” Xing Tian yelled from the Headless Warrior, a Chrysalis with shining yellow eyes where its nipples should’ve been and a mouth glowing on its gut. It stomped in front of the Fox, battering the swarming Hunduns with a giant spirit-metal ax. They died in splatters of light.

Assured, Yang Guang propelled his qi through the Fox with the most forceful spirit pressure he could generate. Radiant cracks fissured across the Fox’s bristly green surface.

Chrysalises might have been constructed from Hundun husks, but they were superior in every way. The Hunduns were so mindless, they couldn’t unlock the potential of the very spirit metal they were made of to become anything other than rotund blobs.

But humans could.

Yang Guang imagined the Fox’s Ascended Form, and it morphed into being. The Fox’s limbs thinned and lengthened, its waist drew in, and its shoulders rolled back, making it slightly more humanoid. Its nine tails became as sharp as lances, and they fanned out from the base of its back like sun rays, the way real nine-tailed foxes perked their tails up to intimidate enemies. He raised the Fox upright; with his qi conducting at a

higher spirit pressure, he had enough control and finesse to balance it on two legs. That set the Fox's front claws free to fight with a weapon.

With an over-the-shoulder reach, Yang Guang fused a claw around one of the Fox's tail lances and snapped it from its back. He barreled through the roiling herd of differently sized Hunduns until he spotted the Prince class, then he sank low and leapt from the ground. The lance arced through the night, hurling a gleam of moonlight, before piercing the Hundun's round body, featureless except for its six tiny bug-like legs. Spirit metal shattered with a spectacular sound, like a whole warehouse of porcelain exploding. Yang Guang braced against the flood of the Hundun's rage and dread as the light of its qi-filled core sputtered and dimmed.

The other Chrysalises fending off the sea of glinting Hunduns hooted in delight. Camera drones closed in on the Prince-class husk, and Yang Guang could imagine commoners cheering across Huaxia behind their screens. Exhilaration thrilling him, he bounced backward in the Fox, scraping the lance out of the Hundun. However, even after he removed contact, a foreign fear lingered in his mind.

It came from his concubine now, cresting through him like a wave.

This was the point where he always knew a concubine's mind would not make it back to her own body. He was now subconsciously controlling everything about her, down to her heartbeat. The moment he disconnected, there'd be nothing left to keep her heart pumping, and she'd pass into the beyond. There was no way around it.

The important thing was that her family would receive a nice compensation. Her soul would rest well in the Yellow Springs, knowing that.

He didn't remember her name. He'd tried not to. He went through so many concubine-pilots that it would be a paralyzing distraction to keep track of them. And he couldn't afford to be distracted. He had a world to protect.

She had known what she'd be getting into. She had made the decision to enlist for him.

Yang Guang focused on crushing and spearing the rest of the herd, reassuring his fans that their homeland would continue to be safe.

The concubine's noble sacrifice would not be in vain.

PART I

# WAY OF THE FOX

There is a kind of creature in the mountain, with the look of a fox with nine tails, whose sound is like an infant's cry. It feasts on human flesh.

—*Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海经)

## CHAPTER ONE

# A BUTTERFLY THAT BETTER NOT BE MY DEAD SISTER

**F**or eighteen years, my unibrow has saved me from being sold into a painful, terrifying death.

Today is the day I'm releasing it from its gracious service.

Well, *I'm* not doing it. Yizhi is the one manning the tweezers my sister left behind. Kneeling on the bamboo mat spread beneath us over the damp forest soil, he lifts my chin while ripping out bristle after bristle. My skin burns as if it's slowly incinerating. The ink-black rivulets of his half-up hair swish over his pale silk robes as he plucks. My own hair, way more matted and parched than his, sits in a messy bun under a tattered rag. Though the rag smells like grease, it keeps the stray strands out of my face.

I've been trying to act nonchalant. But I make the mistake of gazing at Yizhi's gentle, focused features for too long, wanting to inscribe them in my mind so I'll have something to hold on to in the last days of my life. My stomach twists, and hot pressure surges into my eyes. Attempting to squint the tears back only breaks them free down the sides of my nose—seriously, that never works.

Of course, Yizhi notices. Stops everything to check what's wrong, even though he has no reason to believe it's anything more than a reaction to the assault on my pores.

Even though he has no idea this is the last time we'll see each other.

"You all right, Zetian?" he whispers, tweezing hand suspended in a gossamer swirl of humidity from the waterfall not far from our hiding place.



The rushing creek beside the low-growing trees we're huddling under drowns his voice from anyone who might discover us.

"I sure won't be if you keep taking breaks." I roll my swollen eyes. "Come on. Just let me power through."

"Right. Okay." His frown twitches into a smile that almost breaks me. He dries my eyes with his fancy silk robe sleeves, then gathers them back near his elbows. They're rich-people sleeves, too long and floppy to be practical. I make fun of them every time he visits. Though, to be fair, it's not his fault his father doesn't let him and his twenty-seven siblings leave their estate in anything not luxury-branded.

Lucid sunlight, freshly broken after days of rain, streams down in shafts through our secret world of damp heat and swaying leaves. A patchwork of light and shadow dapples his pale forearms. The bursting green scent of springtime presses against us, rich enough to taste. His knees—he even sits in a prim and proper kneel—keep a tiny yet insurmountable distance from my carelessly folded legs. His designer silk robes contrast absurdly with the weathered roughness of my homespun tunic and trousers. Until I met him, I had no idea fabric could be that white or smooth.

He plucks faster. It really does hurt, like my brow is a living creature being frayed bit by bit into two, so if I tear up again, it shouldn't be suspicious.

I wish I didn't have to involve him in this, but I know that, past a certain point, it would be too painful to face my reflection and do it myself. All I would see is my big sister, Ruyi. Without the overgrown hairs that have kept my market value low, I'll look so much like she did.

Plus, I don't trust myself to landscape two matching brows out of the entity I've got. And how am I supposed to sign up for my death if my eyebrows are uneven?

I distract myself from the scalding ache by scrolling on the luminous tablet in Yizhi's lap, reading the notes he's taken in school since he visited me last month. Each tap feels more scandalous than being alone with him on a frontier mountain, shrouded by greenery and spring heat, breathing the same thick eddies of earthy, intoxicating air. My village elders say girls

shouldn't touch these heavenly devices, because we would desecrate them with, I don't know, our wicked femaleness or something. Only thanks to the gods in the sky was technology like these tablets reconstructed after humanity's lost age of cowering from the Hunduns. But I don't care how indebted I am to the elders or the gods. If they don't respect me just because I'm from the "wrong" half of the population, I'm not respecting them back.

The screen glows like the moon against Yizhi's leaf-shadowed robes, enticing me with knowledge I'm not supposed to have, knowledge from beyond my measly mountain village. Arts. Sciences. Hunduns. Chrysalises. My fingers itch to bring the tablet closer, though neither it nor I can move—a cone of neon light is spilling from an indent on the device, projecting the mathematically ideal brows for me onto my face. Yizhi and his dazzling city gadgets never disappoint. He whipped this up mere minutes after I lied about my family giving me a "final warning" regarding the unibrow.

I wonder how much he'll hate me after he finds out what he's really helping me do.

A droplet shivers out of the branches over our heads. It skims his cheek. He's so engrossed he doesn't notice. With a curled knuckle, I brush away the wet dash on his face.

His eyes startle wide. Color blooms into his pampered, almost translucent skin.

I can't help but grin. Turning my hand to touch him with the pads of my fingers instead, I wink. "Oh, my. Are my new eyebrows already irresistible?"

Yizhi breaks into a louder than usual laugh, then smacks his fingers over his mouth and glances around, even though we're decently hidden.

"Stop it," he says, quieter, laughter turning feather-light. He ducks away from my gaze. "Let me work."

The rising, undeniable heat in his cheeks singes me with a flash of guilt.

*Tell him*, my mind pleads.

But I just drop my hand as casually as possible and flick to a new section in his school notes, a social studies topic about the statistical dynamics of Hundun attacks.

Why should I endanger my mission by telling him? However Yizhi sees this relationship we have, I've never made the mistake of taking it too seriously. He's the son of literally the richest man in Huaxia, and I'm a random frontier girl he met by chance while getting some peace and quiet in the farthest place he could go on his hovercycle. If someone caught us together, he's not the one who'd get stuffed into a pig cage and drowned in the name of his family's honor. No matter that we've never crossed any lines we shouldn't.

My attention drifts to his lips, straying over their delicate curves, and I'm brought back to the time I marveled out loud about how soft they look. He admitted it's thanks to a four-step exfoliation and moisturizing routine, and I laughed so hard there were tears in my eyes as I touched his lips, and then I wasn't laughing anymore, just staring into his eyes, too close to him.

Then I immediately drew back and changed the topic.

A raw, tender part of me aches at what I will never have with him, but I have not and cannot rule out the possibility that this is nothing but a game to him. That I'm not the only peasant girl he visits on his break days. That the moment after I give in, he'd fasten the silk sash of his impeccable robes and laugh in my face, laugh about how something could mean so little to him but be life or death to me, yet I could still be hypnotized into it by his soft smiles and whispered words.

Maybe my caution is what's made this all the more thrilling, what's made him show up at the end of every month for the last three years.

I can never know his true motives. Which is fine. As long as I do not give in to my emotions, I cannot lose any game that might be being played.

Though, realistically, even if my entire village stumbled upon us this very second, my family wouldn't drown me now. I'm finally doing what they want: prettying myself so they can sell me to the army as a concubine-pilot. Just like they did my sister.

Obviously, they don't know about my bigger, deadlier plans.

As Yizhi moves on to the undersides of my brows, my finger lingers over a picture of a Hundun-Chrysalis battle in his class notes. The Chrysalis, the White Tiger, is so shapely and vivid in color that you'd never

guess it was once a round, featureless Hundun husk. Pictured in its Heroic Form, its highest transformation, it looks like a humanoid tiger warrior made of smooth, milky glass. Its armor-like pieces are edged with radiant green and black lines, the colors blurring with motion as it raises a dagger-ax taller than a tree. It's a favorite of the army to use in promos, and I actually feel comfortable looking at it. The boy-girl pair mentally connected to it are a Balanced Match. There's little risk of the boy's mind consuming the girl's and killing her once the battle ends.

Unlike the female pilot in most other cases.

That's the way I feared Big Sister would die when our family forced her to enlist under a Prince-class pilot, the second most powerful rank. But she never made it to the battlefield. The pilot killed her the traditional, physical way. For what, I don't know. Our family only got her ashes back. They've been devastated for eighty-one days now...because they didn't get the big war death compensation they were banking on.

It's funny. Big Sister spent her whole life being *cared* about.

*When is Ruyi getting married?*

*Is Ruyi going to enlist instead?*

*My, has Ruyi been sitting in the sun too much? She's getting a little dark.*

But the moment news of her death spread, no one brought her up again. No one even asked what I did with her ashes. Only Yizhi and I know she's been carried off by the creek beside us. A little secret between him, me, and her.

I lift my eyes to an actual butterfly chrysalis dangling on a branch behind Yizhi. The Chrysalises were named after those, so the saying goes that dead pilots reincarnate into butterflies. If that's true, I sure hope this one isn't my sister. I hope she's gone far, far away from here, somewhere that can't be reached by condemning village elders or nosy gossipers or greedy relatives or scumbag pilots.

A nascent butterfly has been squirming in the chrysalis for a while now, detaching from the surface layer. Now, finally, it's ruptured the membrane.

Its head emerges upside-down. Antennae pop out, wiggling. In a grand finale, it wholly unravels from the chrysalis like a blossoming flower.

Butterflies are common in these woods, so this isn't that special a sight.

Except, when this butterfly shakes out its wings, the patterns don't match.

"Whoa." I sit up straighter.

"What is it?" Yizhi looks over his shoulder.

"That butterfly has two different wings!"

Yizhi also makes a noise of surprise, which means this isn't some typical phenomenon I didn't know about because I'm a frontier peasant. He tells me my brows are pretty much done, then raises his tablet to take a magnified video of the butterfly.

Our eyes didn't trick us. One wing is black with a white dot, and the other is white with a black dot—like the yin-yang symbol. These butterflies were named after exactly that, but I've never seen one with both yin and yang wings.

"How did this happen?" I gawk.

Yizhi's smile widens. "You know what to do when you've got questions."

" 'Search it up.' Got it." I open the search engine on Yizhi's tablet like he taught me. It's not hard to use—I just have to enter the keywords of my question—but it's surreal and daunting, using just a few taps to access all the knowledge the scholars in the cities have reconstructed from the cryptic manuals the gods drop down whenever we offer enough tribute.

I squint in concentration at the academic writing in the search results. It's way harder to read than Yizhi's class notes, but I'm determined to sort them out on my own. "Apparently having different wings means a butterfly is...both male and female." My frown springs loose. I gape at the sentence. "That can happen?"

"Oh, yeah, biological sex has all sorts of variations in nature." Yizhi crawls beside me on the bamboo mat, gathering his robes away from the gray dirt beneath. "There are even creatures that can switch sex depending on their needs."

“But I thought...” I blink fast. “I thought females are female because their primordial qi is yin-based, and males are male because their primordial qi is yang-based.”

Yin and yang represent the opposing forces that churn the universe into life. Yin is everything cold, dark, slow, passive, and feminine. Yang is everything hot, bright, fast, active, and masculine.

Or so my mother told me.

Yizhi shrugs. “Nothing’s ever that rigid, I guess. There’s always some yin in yang, and some yang in yin. It’s right on the symbol. Now that I think about it, I’m pretty sure there are even cases where humans are born like this butterfly, where you can’t really pin down which sex they are.”

My eyes widen further. “Which seat would those people take if they became pilots?”

Every Chrysalis has the same seating arrangement. Girls go in the lower yin seat, while boys go in the slightly higher yang seat behind them, wrapping their arms around the girls.

Yizhi taps the bamboo mat. His fine brows knit in thought. “Whichever gender they’re closer to?”

“What does that even mean? At what point would a seat stop working for them?” I balk. “What is it about gender that matters so much to the system, anyway? Isn’t piloting entirely a mental thing? So why is it always the girls that have to be sacrificed for power?”

“I...I don’t know.”

I try to search for a legitimate answer to this, but I’m met with a red warning box.

WARNING: INSUFFICIENT PERMISSION  
RESULTS RESTRICTED

“Oh, you can’t search anything related to Chrysalis crafting. They can’t have people building rogue units.” Yizhi takes over the tablet.

I let him slide it out of my hands. I stare hard at the butterfly with both yin and yang wings.

*Female.* That label has never done anything for me except dictate what I can or cannot do. No going anywhere without permission. No showing too much skin. No speaking too loudly or unkindly, or at all, if the men are talking. No living my life without being constantly aware of how pleasing I am to the eye. No future except pushing out son after son for a husband, or dying in a Chrysalis to give some boy the power to reach for glory.

It's as if I've got a cocoon shriveled too tightly around my whole being. If I had my way, I'd exist like that butterfly, giving onlookers no easy way to bind me with a simple label.

"Yizhi, do you believe girls are naturally predisposed to sacrificing themselves?" I mutter.

"Well, that can't possibly be true, because you're a girl, and there's no way you would ever do that."

"Hey!" A laugh ruptures out of my gloom.

"What? Where's the lie?" He stamps his hands on his hips, sleeves flopping.

"Okay, fine! There's no lie." I strain back a grin.

Then the curl of my mouth fades.

I wouldn't live and suffer for anyone else, but I would die to avenge my sister.

Yizhi smiles, oblivious. "Honestly, though, there's nothing wrong with cherishing your life. With fighting for what you want. I find it admirable."

"Wow." I snort half-heartedly. "Are my eyebrows really that bewitching now?"

Yizhi laughs. "I'm not brave enough to lie to you, so I'll have to admit—you do look much prettier in the conventional way." His smile softens. His eyes brighten in the patchy shade like night ponds reflecting the stars. "You're still the Zetian I know, though. I think you're the most stunning girl in the world, no matter what you look like."

My heart clenches, cracking.

I can't do this. I can't leave without telling him the truth.

"Yizhi," I say in a voice as dark as smoke.

“Sorry, was I—? Oh, no. Was that too weird?” A chuckle shakes out of him. “On a scale of ‘one’ to ‘middle-aged man asking you to put on a smile for him,’ how uncomfortable did that make you?”

“*Yizhi*.” I grab his hands, as if that could brace him for what’s coming.

He falls silent, peering in confusion at our clasped hands.

I say it. “I’m enlisting as a concubine-pilot.”

His jaw slackens. “For which pilot?”

I open my mouth, but I can’t spit out that bastard’s name. “For *him*.”

He searches my eyes. “For *Yang Guang*?”

I nod, all warmth gone from my face.

“Zetian, he killed your sister!”

“That’s why I’m going.” I fling Yizhi’s hands away and slide a long wooden hairpin out of my rag-wrapped hair bun. “I’m going to be his beautiful, sultry concubine. And then—” I yank the hairpin apart, revealing the sharp point within, “I’m going to rip his throat open in his sleep.”