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IRON  
WIDOW



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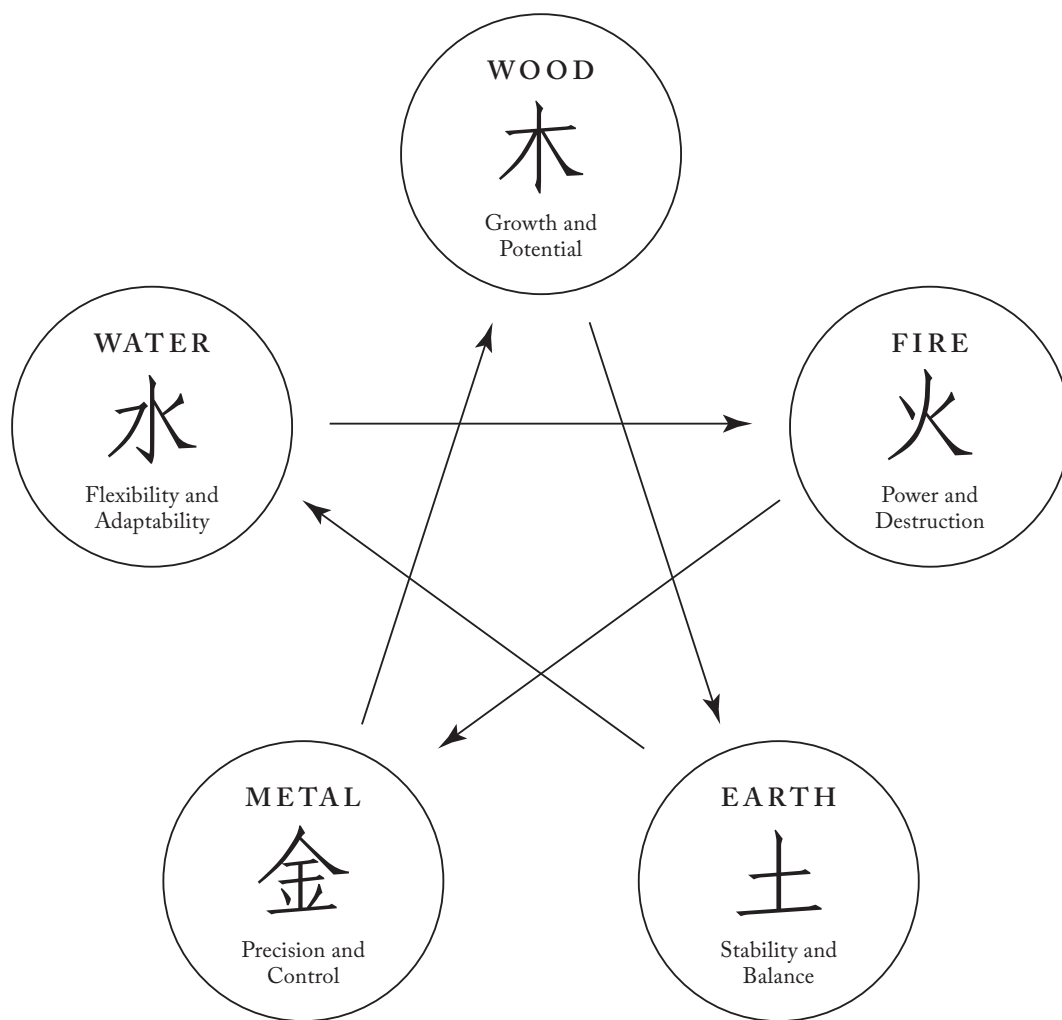
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To Rebecca Schaeffer,  
who was there for me the whole way  
as I transformed from statistic to survivor  
strong enough to write this story



—————→ 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 reimagined in vastly different life circumstances. Considerable creative liberties were taken during the reimagining 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.”



## CHAPTER TWO

# LIKE WATER HURLED OUT THE DOOR

I stagger through the mountain paths with my bamboo cane, alone. A lattice of forest shadows crawls over me, sliced up by blades of scarlet twilight. If I don't get home before the sun drops beyond the western peaks, my family will think this is my latest escape attempt. The whole village will start combing the mountains with flashlights and barking dogs. They can't have their own daughters thinking it's possible to run away.

Soggy leaves turn to mush under my tiny, battered shoes, which Yizhi has offered to replace countless times. But I could never accept his gifts, for fear of my family finding out about him. A lump swells in my throat at the memory of his horrified expression after learning of my self-imposed mission, and the broken way he called my name after I vanished into the woods to abandon the conversation. I shouldn't have told him. There was no way he wouldn't try to stop me.

Now that awful moment is the last we'll have of each other.

I'm not sure if I heard the whir of his hovercycle over the treetops, but I hope he's left the mountains. He can't change anything. He doesn't own me. Nobody does. They may think they do, but no matter how they scold or threaten or beat me, they can't really control what goes on in my head, and I think that frustrates them to no end.

A bloody haze of sunset gapes at the end of the forest path. When the shadows release me, my view opens to the rice terraces I grew up in, whole mountainsides carved like stairways soaring for the skies. Trenches of collected rainwater gleam on each tier, nourishing rice seedlings and mirroring the scorching sky. Fevered clouds drift across every wedge of water as I make my way between them. My cane squelches over platforms of gray mud. Smoke from roasting dinners rises from the clusters of houses nestled in the terraces. The plumes weave into the orange, dusk-tinged mist swirling around the highest summits.

In the skin-cracking winter when I was five, when the cold pressed in so ruthlessly that the rice terraces froze solid, my grandmother forced me to walk over the ice with no shoes. After the cold crystallized deep into my flesh, turning it purple, she shooed all the men out of our house, sat me down on the frosted concrete ground, and soaked my feet in a wooden basin of boiled pig's blood and numbing medicine. Then two of my aunts held me down against the floor as my grandmother broke every bone along the arches of my feet to crush them in half.

The force of the scream that tore out of me still flashes through my memories when I least expect it, always stunning me in the middle of whatever I'm doing.

That's not the case for the pain, though. The pain can't surprise me because it has never left. A lightning strike of it shoots up my legs with every step I take.

Every. Single. Step.

I don't walk. That burning tread over the frozen rice terrace was the last time I walked. Ever since then, my feet have been bound into bulging, misshapen mounds that can only *totter*. Three toes have fallen off from infections that nearly took my life, ruining my balance for good. The other toes wrap around the bottoms of my feet, clutching the other side near the heels, as if trying to squeeze the mess of bones and flesh back up my legs. My soles are smaller than my palms. A pair of perfect lotus feet.

It really boosts my market value.

My family has scolded me endlessly for letting my facial hair grow rampant and having too much fat around my waist, but I face the worst lashings and screamed insults when I rebel against the tightness of my foot bindings. Hairy brows can be plucked, weight can be starved off, but lotus feet stop being lotus feet once they're allowed to grow. And no man from a respectable family would marry a girl without bound feet.

"Without them, we'd be no different from the Rongdi!" my grandmother once yelled while I shrieked and sobbed about going through with the ritual. She was referring to the tribes that largely roam the untamed wilds with a pack-everything-on-horseback-and-run strategy of evading the Hunduns. Some were incorporated into Huaxia when we pushed the Hunduns out of whole chunks of territory; others from further out have been sneaking through the Great Wall in small, persistent trickles. Living on the frontier, we have plenty as neighbors. My family has always cautioned me against being like their women, who "run all over the place with no morals, shame, or decency."

When I was little, I used to buy into this fear of becoming *those women*. But the older I got, the more confused I became about what's so bad about them.

When I pass under a cluster of houses higher on the terraced mountainside, a few men knee-deep in the terraces lurch up from their work and ogle as I waddle by. They wouldn't dare come after me—everyone knows everyone around here—but they never fail to make their desires clear.

See, when every frontier daughter who's remotely decent-looking either enlists as a concubine-pilot or gets sold to richer men in the cities, the frontier men start having serious issues finding wives to bear their sons. The bride prices have soared up to tens of thousands of yuan, impossible for families here to afford . . . unless they enlist their own daughters or sell them to rich city men.

It's a mess of a cycle, and not ending any time soon. No one stays on the frontier unless they have to. Most of us are here only because our original ancestral home, the Zhou province, fell to the Hunduns two hundred and twenty-one years ago.

I throw the men my most hateful glower. The terrace pools blaze like molten copper under the sunset, and I fantasize about real heat building up in them, boiling the men alive.

Then my cane snaps, and I tumble.

Gravity. One of the first scientific concepts I learned from Yizhi. It snatches me toward the mud path and almost into a rice paddy. The heel of my hand scrapes a harsh dent in the mud. Cold density smacks into my nose and cheek.

I push onto both arms. Gray filth plops from my heating face and latches to my tunic. I brace myself for howling laughter.

It doesn't come.

The men are splashing through the terraces instead, hollering excitedly, crowding around someone holding a tablet.

A quiver ripples through my confusion.

A quiver in the terrace waters, specifically.

My breath hitches. Unmistakable vibrations are traveling through the ground, stirring the water.

A Hundun-Chrysalis battle is starting beyond the frontier.

I press my ear to the earth, not caring that it's dirtying me further and dampening the rag tied around my hair. The Great Wall is only a few mountains away. On clear days, we can see the dusty, lifeless peaks that have been sucked dry of qi by the Chrysalises stationed along it.

The men must be watching a livestream and betting on the number of battle points each pilot will achieve. But it's so much more raw and visceral and stunning, sensing the physical force of the Chrysalises through the planet.

What power.

My throat goes dry, yet my mouth waters. I close my eyes, picturing myself taking command of a Chrysalis, towering over buildings and smashing the earth with my colossal limbs or luminous qi blasts. I could crush anyone who's ever tried to crush me. I could free all the girls who'd love to run away.

A whooping cheer from the men fractures my daydream.

I rattle my head. Flecks of dirt fly onto my sleeves. I crawl onto my knees, covered in filth, staring at my broken cane.

I should really stop with the delusions.



I don't know if my father will count me as having reached the house before my curfew. Some last dregs of sun line our fortress of mountains with a ghostly blue halo, silhouetting them into colossal shadows that look eerily like Hunduns.

"Where were you?" My mother breathes through the barred window of the kitchen shack on the side of our house. Her voice

is as frail as the steam sighing from the large wok of porridge she's stirring. My grandmother sits on a stool behind her, descaling a *luoyu*, a winged fish, from the terrace waters. Firelight from the hearth flares across their weathered faces, as if they're trapped inside a blazing dungeon.

"Was in the woods." I pass my mother a pouch of herbs and starch roots through the window. Gathering these are why I spend so much time in the forest, and how I first met Yizhi.

"What happened?" My mother puts the pouch on a wooden shelf without looking away from my grimy state. Gray hairs stray out of the faded rag tied over her head, fluttering in the visible ripples of heat.

"Took a tumble. Broke my cane." I resume teetering over the stone walkway that lines the row of houses. I land my feet gingerly, trying not to plummet onto the clay-tiled roof of our neighbors one tier down.

"You're lucky a battle started." My mother darts a look at the main entrance to the house, up ahead. Her eyes glisten orange from the crackling hearth flames. "Go quickly. Don't let your father see you like this."

"Right."

"And scrub those clothes clean tomorrow. You can't look like that when the army comes."

A stab goes through my chest at the casual way she mentions that. She might have no idea about my true intentions, but she must be aware that my enlistment will end in my death, no matter what.

She must remember how it ended for Big Sister.

Or does she? Sometimes, my mother's so good at pretending nothing's wrong that it scares me into suspecting *I'm* the one with the head full of false memories.

“I’m sure they’ll give me better clothes.” I stare at the bars of light dithering out of the kitchen window.

“But you still have to look presentable.”

I stop waddling and turn at the waist to face her dead-on.

There’s one big consequence to my assassination plans that I’ve done my best to ignore: killing an Iron Noble, a pilot with a maximum spirit pressure of over 2000—when the human average is 84—would implicate three generations of my family. My mother, my father, my seventeen-year-old brother Dalang, my grandparents, my aunts, my uncles. They would all be executed along with me. Because pilots like Yang Guang are just too important to the war effort.

*Give me one reason to protect you.* I gawk at my mother. *Stop me.*

All I need is one sign that they’re worth my mercy. One sign that they value my life as much as I’m expected to value theirs.

Since there’s no point holding back now, I spew my most burning thought out loud. “Are you honestly more worried about me looking presentable than me going off to war?”

The fire cracks and pops beside my mother. She squints at me through the woodsmoke and fragrant steam. Then a smile blooms across her face like a wildflower in a burning wasteland. “Your brows—you listened. You look beautiful.”

I whip my head away and trudge on, no matter that every step is like stomping on a live wire.

It’s like she didn’t even hear what I said.

Electric lanterns blink on across the village, lighting up windows like the glowing eyes that Chrysalises have but Hunduns don’t. A breeze sweeps through the rice terraces, swirling a reedy musk into the roasting scent of humble dinners.

Wheat-colored light spills out of the open main doors of my house. A battle commentator’s tinny shouts punch into the falling



night, blasting from the tablet granted to our family by the Huaxia government (though, of course, only the males can use it freely). My grandfather, father, and brother have propped it on our grease-blackened dining table. Their eyes bulge at the screen, reflecting the flashing colors of Hunduns and Chrysalises clashing.

I take the chance to step over the house threshold. I hurry toward the room I've been forced to share with my grandparents since my second attempt at sneaking away during the night, years ago.

“—and here comes the *Vermilion Bird*!”

I halt, almost toppling over. My blood runs cold.

Oh, not *that* unit.

Even my Chrysalis-obsessed family, which usually cheers at every big-name unit, remains uncomfortably silent. Nobody wants to acknowledge that the Vermilion Bird is the strongest Chrysalis in Huaxia right now. At over fifty meters tall in its Standard Form, it's the only King class we have. But it's piloted by Li Shimin, the Iron Demon, a half-Rongdi death-row inmate who murdered his own father and both brothers at just sixteen. He's nineteen now. His execution has been indefinitely delayed only because of his freakishly high spirit pressure, the highest in two centuries.

While concubine-pilots are always in danger of dying in battle, only when it comes to him is death so certain.

No one has ever survived a ride with him.

A girl will die soon.

“Hey!”

My father startles me out of my thoughts. I jump, clutching the wooden walls.

His chair screeches back on the concrete floor. He rises, shadows sliding over his frown lines. “Why do you look so dirty?”



Icy sweat beads under the edge of my hair rag. "I fell on the terraces."

Not a lie, for once.

The clashing of spirit metal and qi blasts ring on in the live-stream. My grandfather and brother keep watching, as if nothing is wrong. My father steps around them and stalks toward me. His topknot, tragically loose due to his thinning hair, flops against his head.

"You better not have been fooling around with a *boy*."

"Of course not." I back away, shoulder hitting the door of my grandparents' room.

Half a lie. I was breaking one's heart instead.

My father charges closer. His looming figure doubles in my view. "You better be able to pass the maidenhood test when—"

That one jolting word makes me forget how to fear him.

"For the last time, *nothing's ever been up inside me!*" I scream. "Stop being so obsessed!"

He blanks out in shock, but I can feel the utter fury that's coming.

I slip through the bedroom door and slam it in his face.

"What did you just say to me?" His shout shudders through the house, and his fists thunder against the door. The brass handle jangles so hard it sounds like something broke inside.

"Unwrapping my feet!" I jam my back against the door while acting on the threat. Unwrapped feet are more indecent than naked breasts. Not to mention the rotting flesh smell, which is possibly its own class of biological weapon. Girls are supposed to maintain the fantasy of their dainty prettiness by always wearing perfumed, embroidered shoes and never removing the bindings in front of anyone, not even their husbands.

My father's fists leave the door, but his lungs bellow on. *Disrespectful. Ungrateful. Whore.*

The typical.

My mother's mist-frail voice emerges, trying to calm him down. My brother is laughing. My grandfather has turned the livestream to peak volume. A girl is dying in a Chrysalis in the name of mankind.



I don't risk leaving the bedroom for dinner.

My stomach rumbles, bubbling like the porridge it wants, but I stay in the woven wicker chair my grandmother knits in, soaking my feet in the same wooden bucket that prepared them for being crushed.

*See, this is why it doesn't matter if you implicate them,* the rotten, putrid core of me drawls from deep inside my head.

I uncork the wooden plug on one of the tall thermoses my grandparents keep in the room.

*They don't care about you.*

I pour another steaming stream into the bucket. Medicinal leaves and roots scramble wildly in the flow, steeping the water maroon, like blood forgotten in a dark corner.

*You don't need to care about them.*

A lantern buzzes above me. Shadows shift in the room's grimy corners, seeming to creep closer. I set the thermos down and stare blankly at the straw I sleep on, right beside my grandparents' bed. There's a saying in Huaxia: a daughter married off is like water hurled out the door. Unlike my brother Dalang, who will pass on the Wu family name and stay in the house for life to take care of our parents, I was born to have a transient existence in my family's lives, something to set a price on and trade off. They never bothered to give me my own bed.

The clatter of chopsticks on bowls and the babble of Dalang

raving about the battle come muffled through the walls. The Chrysalises won. Of course. If they hadn't, breach sirens would've gone off from the village speakers, and we'd be scrambling east, just like our ancestors did from the Zhou province.

No one else says much. I hope they're thinking of me.

I hope they go to their graves regretting the way they treated me and Big Sister.

*People sentenced to familial extermination don't get to have graves.*

I wince, shoving away the image of our rotting corpses dangling off the Great Wall.

The door opens. I flinch against the chair, not knowing where to look, hoping my eyes aren't as red and swollen as they feel.

My mother totters to me on her own bound feet, offering me a bowl of porridge. I take the bowl with an awkward nod. My cold fingers wrap around the hot porcelain. A bitterness like tears floods my mouth. My mother sits down beside me, on the foot of my grandparents' bed. Tension coils tight in my belly.

*What does she want?* part of me snaps, while another part goes, *Stop me.*

"Tian-Tian." She starts with my baby name, picking at some old burns on her hands. "You shouldn't have talked to your father like that."

"He was being weird first." I glare at her, though a stifling shame heats my cheeks. I tip the bowl of porridge to my mouth to hide my face.

*Stop me*, thumps my heavy heartbeat. *Stop me. Stop me.*

My mother only gives a sad frown. "Must you always make things so difficult?"

I grip the bowl tighter. "Mama, do you honestly feel like your life has been *easy* because you always give in?"

"It's not about having it easy. It's about keeping peace in the family."

I laugh against the bowl, the sound hardening with a dark edge. "Tell him to not worry. I'm only here for two more days. Then he can have all the peace he wants."

My mother sighs. "Tian-Tian, your father just feels emotions very strongly. Deep down, he knows that you've matured after all. That you've understood what really matters. He's proud of you." She smiles. "*I'm* proud of you."

I raise my head stiffly. "You're proud of me for sending myself off to death?"

"You don't know if that'll happen." She evades my eyes. "You've always had a strong mind. Didn't the testing team say your spirit pressure might be over five hundred? Six times the average! And that was four years ago. It must be even higher now. You and Prince-Colonel Yang could turn out to be a Balanced Match. You could be his Iron Princess."

"There are only three Iron Princesses in all of Huaxia!" Tears tumble from my eyes, hazing my view of her. "And their spirit pressures are in the thousands! It's just a low-odds fantasy that gives girls delusions of surviving!"

"Tian-Tian, don't be so loud." My mother darts a panicked glance at the door.

"Is it a fantasy that comforts you, too?" I go on. "Does it help you sleep at night?"

Her eyes glisten. "Why can't you accept that you're doing a good thing? You're going to be a hero. And with the money, Dalang could pay the bride price for a—"

I smash the bowl to the ground. The porcelain shatters, and porridge escapes in a slimy, steaming burst.

"Tian-Tian!" My mother stumbles to her feet. "Your grandparents sleep here!"

"Yeah? And what are they going to do?" I yell pointedly at the door. "Beat me, so I can turn Yang Guang off with my fresh

wounds? Make me sleep in the pigsty, so I can turn him off with my smell? If you all want the money so bad, you can't do anything to me anymore!"

"Tian—"

"Get out!"

*You can't speak to her like this,* a voice in my head chides, sounding achingly like Big Sister. *She's your mother. The woman who gave you life.*

But a mother who has failed me so thoroughly is no mother of mine.

My chest heaves. I lean forward, hands clutching my knees. My voice squeezes out around a hard sob in my throat. "In the next life, I hope we have nothing to do with each other."

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE LIFE YOU WANT

The next time anyone in my family willingly utters a word to me, it's them shrieking my name the morning of my enlistment.

I lurch up from my straw bed, where I've been festering with a twisted stomach all night, turning my wooden hairpin over and over and over in my hand like a thick chopstick.

A hovercraft is supposed to take me to the Great Wall. Did they see it in the distance or something?

"Tian-Tian!" My grandmother's voice floats closer to the door. "There's a *boy* here!"

I falter while getting up. My hand brakes against my grandparents' bed frame.

A boy . . .

No. *No*, it can't be—

I totter to the door in a daze. A dangerous anticipation hovers alarm-red in my chest. My thumping heartbeat travels from my palm and into the door as I push it open.

Brightness stings my eyes. Then, when the spots wash away,

there he is. Yizhi. Standing in the blazing sunlight beyond the front entrance, pleading with my family, who cower like cave creatures in the shadows of our house. His white silk robes, embroidered with golden patterns of bamboo shoots and leaves, practically glow like an otherworldly material.

I have never seen him outside the mottled shadows of forest cover. For an instant, I'm disoriented—is it really him? But the gentle tenor of his voice is unmistakable.

“Aunties, uncles, believe me, I can match any price.” He shows my family the metal piece of his ID. “So, please. Let me marry your daughter.”

My heart chokes like I've missed a step going down the stairs along the rice terraces.

Shock ripples through my family. Jaws drop. Hands fly to their lips. My grandmother, standing closest to me, swings a bewildered look between me and Yizhi. Transaction chimes must be going off like firecrackers in their heads at the sight of his family name and his address in the Huaxia capital, Chang'an.

They might actually forbid me from getting on the hovercraft.

I move without speaking or thinking. I shove through them, snatch Yizhi by the wrist, then tug him into the dimness of the house. His mouth parts in surprise. He almost trips over the threshold. But then his eyes meet mine and light up with an intensity that shoots a pang through my chest.

I drag him into my grandparents' room. Even his shoes don't sound the same when they scuff our dingy concrete floors.

“Don't come in,” I warn my family before slamming the door, stirring a flurry of dust.

I turn to Yizhi. The slant of light from the window cuts over him like an ethereal blade, turning his robes lunar-white and his skin translucent.

"This is my house. My home." My voice shakes the silence. The image of him against the greasy wooden walls is so wrong that I'm not sure if I'm dreaming. "You were never, ever supposed to show up here—*how did you even find it?*"

"The official registries." He gulps, thick-lashed eyes wilting. "Zetian, I can take you to Chang'an."

"No, you can't!" I blurt, because my family is definitely eaves-dropping. "That's just something you're saying. Your father would never let you marry me!"

"He's got fourteen more sons. He'll get over it."

"Really? Would he? Wouldn't he rather pair you up with the granddaughter of some high-up official? I doubt he became the richest man in Huaxia by missing opportunities!"

"Then we'll make our own opportunities. We can figure it out together. As long as there's life, there's hope." Yizhi lifts my fingers into the spill of window light. His words tremble like winter and fall like snow. "But any life I make will be meaningless without you."

Light shivers in my eyes. His face blurs over.

I know how to be hurt. I know how to take a beating, how to be insulted, how to be ground up and crumpled and thrown around like a piece of trash. But this?

This, I don't know how to handle.

It doesn't feel real.

It can't be real.

I'm not falling for it.

"Give me a break." I snatch my hand away. Hot tears scald from the corners of my eyes. A dry laugh cracks my voice. "Frontier peasant girl marries into the richest family in Huaxia? Can you be even a bit realistic? I'm not some four-year-old child you can swindle."

Yizhi's eyes gloss over. "Zetian . . ."



“Stop pretending like your family would let me be anything but a concubine.” I back away with wobbling steps. “And that will never work. There’ll be problems when I refuse to kowtow to your disgusting pig of a father. When I refuse to serve the proper wife you’ll inevitably get arranged with. When I refuse to bear your son—because I am *never* letting anyone’s spawn swell up my body and bind me forever, not even yours. And you will not be able to prevent any of this, because you are barely eighteen years old, and any semblance of money and power you have are based on your father’s mercy. Now, you could bravely elope with me, and we could spend our lives as humble migrant workers in some small city, but because I never got to do what I wanted, I will be *miserable*. I’ll be constantly thinking about how much more satisfying it would’ve been if I had *volunteered for my death* instead of going with you. Is that what you want? Is that the life you want, Gao Yizhi?”

My words snap off into an asphyxiating silence.

Yizhi looks at me like a beautiful immortal who’s floated down from the Heavenly Court, only to stumble upon the concept of cannibalism.

Then it’s not silent anymore.

A rumbling clatter picks up beyond the window. Great winds churn through the mountains, rustling the trees. Our pigs and chickens freak out in our backyard, oinking and clucking in their pens.

Now *that* must be the hovercraft.

I’ve heard this noise once before, when my sister was taken. I didn’t realize it was meant for her until the hovercraft hovered directly over our house, its steel hull gleaming like white fire, and a soldier with a neat topknot and olive-green uniform dropped a rope ladder into our backyard. Everyone had kept it a secret from me. Including her. They’d known they wouldn’t be able to

predict what I'd do to prevent it if I had found out beforehand.

I couldn't stop anybody then.

Nobody can stop me now.

"Zetian." Yizhi leans closer, whispering, eyes widening. "There has to be a different way to kill Yang Guang. My family has connections in—"

"If there was anything you could do, you would've done it already," I growl under my breath. "You can't touch a pilot that powerful and popular, Yizhi. You just can't!"

"What about his family?" Yizhi's voice sinks lower, deeper. His eyes darken with a menacing fervor I've only glimpsed in him a few times. "*They're* not untouchable. Would it be enough for them to be . . . ?"

"No!" I say on a gasping breath. Yizhi really must be beyond desperate. "They weren't the ones who did what he did! What would be the point?"

"Then just let him die in battle. Even male pilots hardly live past twenty-five."

"You don't get it. It needs to be me. I need to do it. I need to avenge Big Sister by my own hand."

"Why?" His fine brows squeeze up at the middle. "Karma will get him."

"There's no such thing as karma," I say, enunciating every syllable like I want to crush them with my teeth. "Or, if it does exist, it sure doesn't give a shit about people like me. Some of us were born to be used and discarded. We can't afford to simply go along with the flow of life, because nothing in this world has been created, built, or set up in our favor. If we want something, we have to push back against everything around us and take it by force."

Yizhi has nothing to say to that. He just looks at me, weary lines etched around his eyes. Strands of his half-up hair stray

across the front of his pristine robes, curling to the side as choppy winds intensify through the window.

“We’re all going to die anyway,” I say, softer. “Don’t you wish you could at least go out doing something you’ve dreamed of doing?”

“The . . .” Yizhi’s mouth opens and closes. His lips have gone pale. I can’t stop staring at them. “The thing I dream about most is being with you. No more hiding. No more shame.”

My heartstrings pull into knots. “Then you seriously need to dream bigger, Yizhi.”

The hovercraft rumbles louder. A buzz goes through the house, vibrating the walls.

“No regrets?” Yizhi leans even closer. “You really won’t come with me?”

“It’ll be the same fight, just in a city instead of a village,” I murmur, focus flicking to his lips over and over. A new kind of tension builds in me. “I’m tired. Just tired.”

“But we could—”

I grasp his face and close the gap between us. His plea hushes away between our lips.

Warmth like I’ve never felt blooms through me. Heat seeps into my blood, and I swear it could’ve turned luminous. Yizhi’s lips are tense with surprise at first, then meld to the shape of mine. His hand lifts up, trembling, grazing my neck like he’s afraid to touch me, like he’s afraid this isn’t real.

When I break the kiss, I thread my fingers through the pulled-back portion of his hair and touch my forehead to his. Warm breaths gust and swirl between our faces.

Maybe, if things were different, I could get used to this. Being cradled in his warmth and light. Being cherished. Being loved.

But I have no faith in love. Love cannot save me.

I choose vengeance.

Gathering my senses, I rip myself away and push him back.

“That’s what you were trying to get, right?” I say with no emotion, ignoring his disheveled look, his pained eyes. “You got it. Now let me go. If you somehow retrieve my body, burn it and scatter the ashes in the creek. So I can follow after Big Sister, wherever she is.”

Wet lines break from his eyes, glittering in the sunlight.

I can’t look anymore. I turn and head for the door.

But before I reach it, I pause.

“One last thing,” I say over my shoulder, too quiet for my family to hear over the hovercraft churning. “Don’t think I’ve overlooked that you came to my house and almost foiled my plan, despite knowing how important it is to me. If you tip off the army in even the slightest way, I will kill myself when they lock me up, and then I will haunt you.”

I wrench the door open and leave him forever.