

"A PRIMAL SCREAM OF A BOOK."

—E.K. JOHNSTON, #1 NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF AETHERBOUND

XIRAN JAY ZHAO



IRON
WIDOW

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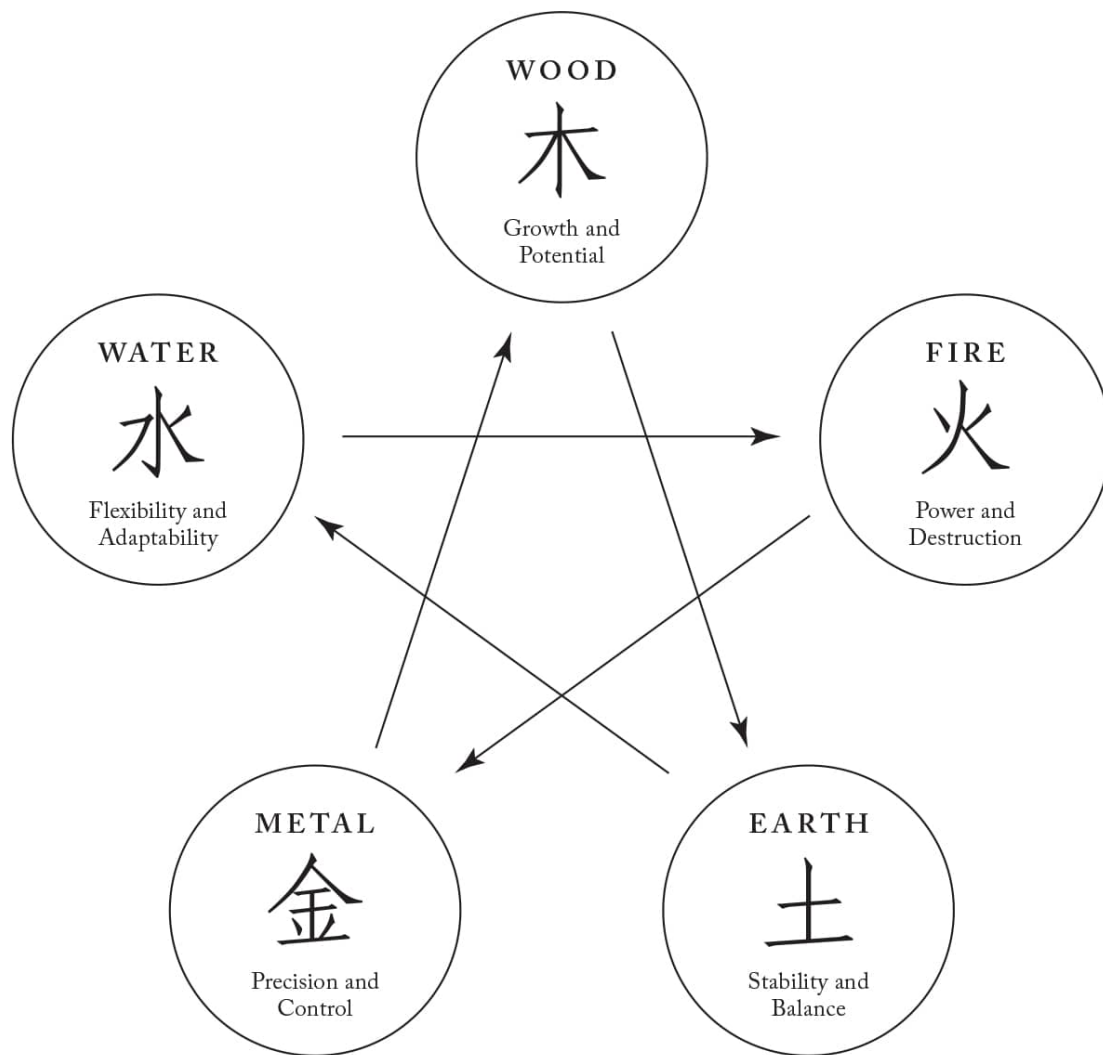
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Acknowledgements

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 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 qì, his life force, to power the Fox. Qì 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 qì 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 qì 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 qì 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 qì 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 qì 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 qì-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

For 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