

# STRIKE THE ZITHER

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ROARING BROOK PRESS  
NEW YORK

Published by Roaring Brook Press  
Roaring Brook Press is a division of Holtzbrinck Publishing Holdings  
Limited Partnership  
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271 • [fiercereads.com](http://fiercereads.com)

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

First edition, 2022  
Book design by Aurora Parlagreco  
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-250-25858-8 (hardcover)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

To Heather, my 孔明

## MAJOR FIGURES

### **North / Capital of the Xin Empire / Kingdom of Miracles**

Empress: Xin Bao\*

Prime Ministress: Miasma

Strategist: Crow

Advisor: Plum

Notable Generals: Viper, Talon, Leopard

### **Southlands / Kingdom of Knowledge**

Lordess: Cicada

Strategist: November

### **Westlands**

Governor: Xin Gong\*

Advisor: Sikou Hai

Notable Generals: Sikou Dun, Aster, Bracken

### **Without Land**

Lordess: Xin Ren\*

Swornsisters: Cloud, Lotus

Strategist: Zephyr

Notable Generals: Tourmaline

\*Surname precedes given name. For example, Xin Bao and Xin Ren both share the surname “Xin.”

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Xin Ren, Xin clan member and first of the three swornsisters



高云

Cloud (Gao Yun), second sworn sister

黄莲子



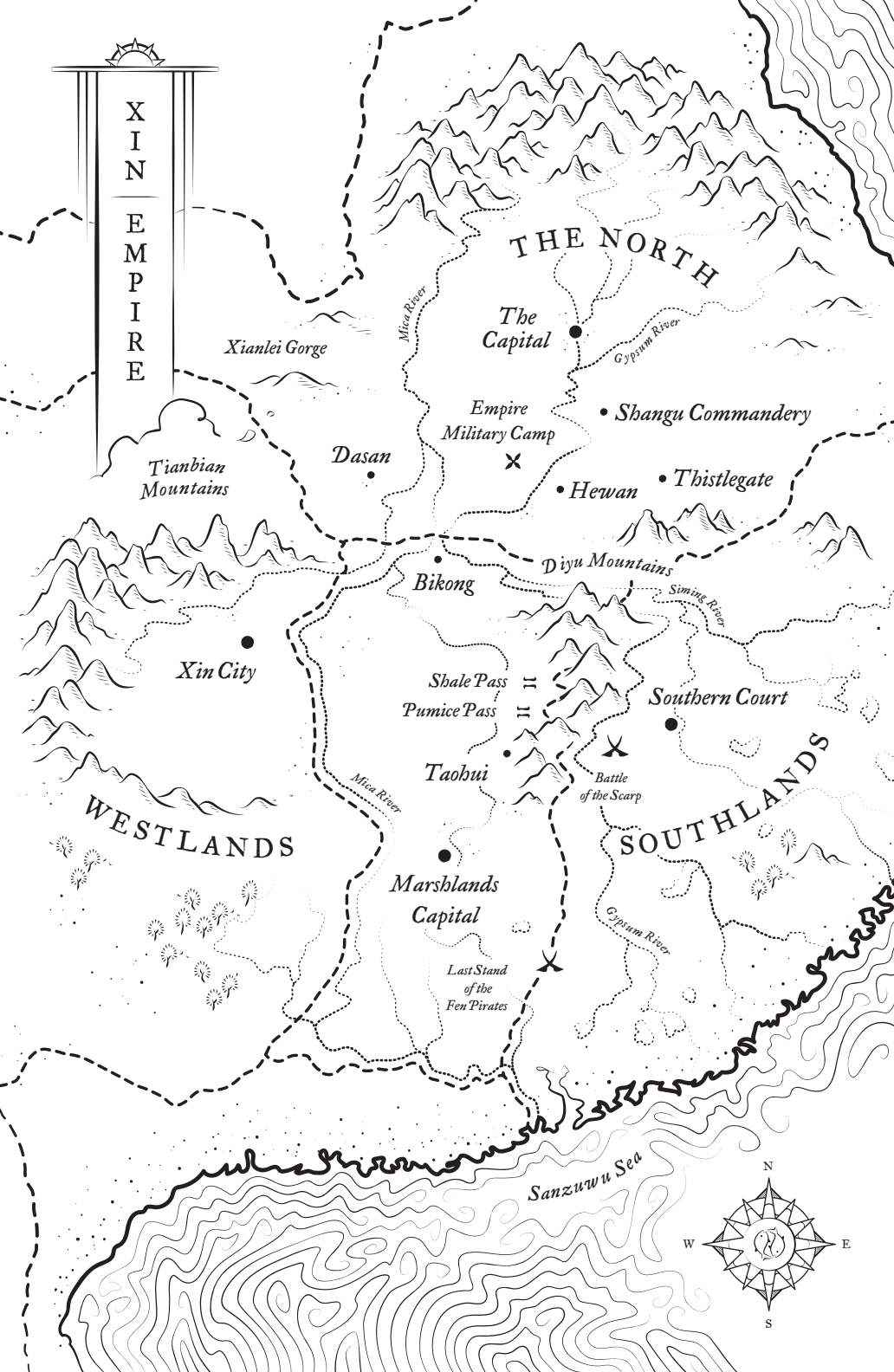
Lotus (Huang Lianzi), third swornsister





潘奇林

Zephyr (Pan Qilin), strategist to Xin Ren



XIN  
EMPIRE

Xianlei Gorge

Mia River

THE NORTH

The  
Capital

Gypsum River

Empire  
Military Camp

• Shangu Commandery

• Hewan

• Thistlegate

Tianbian  
Mountains

Dasan

Bikong

Diyu Mountains

Siming River

Xin City

Shale Pass  
Pumice Pass

Southern Court

Taohui

Battle  
of the Scarp

WESTLANDS

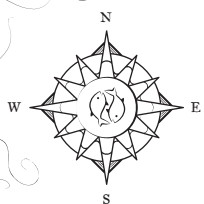
Marshlands  
Capital

SOUTHLANDS

Last Stand  
of the  
Fen Pirates

Gypsum River

Sanzuwu Sea



*Please note that this is a work of fantasy. The Xin Dynasty does not exist in history, and the story is neither set in China nor a true-to-times portrayal of social orders and demographics. Furthermore, Strike the Zither should not be used as an educational reference for Chinese philosophy and spirituality; the metaphysics of qì; the mythology of gods; or the playing techniques of the gǔqín, to name just a few areas in which artistic liberties have been taken.*

## STANZA ONE

*To the north, a miasma  
descended over the capital,  
trapping the young empress in its thrall.*

*To the south, a cicada  
sang a song of vengeance  
as the people mourned their late queen.*

*Between lands, a lordess  
with nothing  
sought to change her fate.*

*And in the skies above,  
the heavens were one god short.*



## SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

Some say the heavens dictate the rise and fall of empires.  
Clearly, those peasants have never met me.

My abilities as a strategist have earned me many sobriquets, from the Dragon's Shadow to the Tactician of Thistlegate. Rising Zephyr is my personal favorite. "Zephyr" will do, if you please.  
"Peacock!"

Unless you're Lotus. Then it's too much to ask for.

I struggle to steer my mare around; horses don't appreciate genius.

Neither does Lotus. "Hey, Peacock!" she hollers over the creaking wagons, crying babies, and cracking whips. She urges her stallion up along the other side until we're somewhat eye to eye, the heads of people and oxen coursing between us. "They're catching up!"

Consider me unsurprised. Miasma, prime mistress of the Xin Empire in name, acting empress in reality, was bound to close in on our soldiers and peasants, who now—thanks to Lotus—realize they're about to die. A child bursts into tears, an

auntie trips, a young couple spurs their mule faster. No luck. The steep forest path is doughy from last night's rainfall, kneaded to mush by the hundreds we've evacuated.

Still hundreds more to go.

"Do something!" Lotus shouts at me. "Use your brain!" Her hair has frizzed into an impressive mane around her face, and she waves her ax as if she's itching to use it.

Wouldn't help us. It's not just Miasma we're up against: Our own numbers are bogging us down. *We must evacuate everyone*, Ren said sternly when I suggested it was time we flee our current town for the next. *Miasma will slaughter the commonfolk just for harboring us.*

Miasma may still yet, at this rate, but there's no arguing with our warlordess Xin Ren's benevolence. Most strategists wouldn't be able to cope with it.

*I can.*

"Think of a plan!" Lotus bellows.

Thanks for the confidence, Lotus. I already have—three, in fact. Plan one (ditch the commoners) might be off the table, but there's plan two (cut down trees and pray for rain), and plan three (send a trustworthy general to the bridge at the mountain's base to hold off Miasma).

Plan two is in motion, if the humidity is any indication. I've set General Tourmaline and her forces on felling trees behind us. The trunks will wash down in the coming storm, and the resulting dam should delay Miasma's cavalry by a couple of hours.

As for sending a trustworthy general to the bridge . . .

My gaze cuts from Lotus to Cloud, Ren's other swornsister.

She's helping evacuees farther up the muddy slope, her ultramarine cloak rich against the muted greens of the firs.

Cloud thinks better than Lotus under pressure. A shame, because I don't know if I can harness her. Last month, she released Miasma from one of my traps because *Sage Master Shencius forbids killing by way of snare*. That's all very nice, Cloud, but was Sage Master Shencius ever on the run from the empire? I don't think so.

"You." I point my fan at Lotus. "Ride down to the bridge with a hundred of your best and employ Beget Something from Nothing."

Lotus gives me a blank look.

"Just . . . make it look like we have more forces across the river than we actually do. Stir up dust. Roar. Intimidate them." Shouldn't be too hard for Lotus, whose sobriquet only suits her if you visualize the root, not the flower. Her war cry can shake birds out of trees within the radius of a li. She forged her own ax and wears the pelt of a tiger she killed as a skirt. She's as warrior as warriors come, the opposite of everything I stand for. At least Cloud knows her classical poems.

But Lotus has something Cloud doesn't: the ability to take an order.

"Intimidate," she repeats under her breath. "Got it." Then she's galloping down the mountain on her beastly stallion and referring to herself by name in that gauche way some warriors do before riding into battle. "Lotus won't disappoint!"

Thunder swallows the rumble of her departure. Clouds brew in the sky, and leaves drift around me in a breeze more stench

than air. Pressure builds in my chest; I breathe through it and focus on my hair, still clasped back in its high ponytail. My fan, still in my hand.

This won't be the first time I've delivered the impossible for Ren.

And deliver it I will. Miasma isn't reckless; the impending rains combined with Lotus's intimidation will make her think twice before pursuing us up the mountain. I *can* slow her down.

But I'll also need to speed us up.

I jerk on the reins; my mare balks. The insubordination! "Turnips and figs later!" I hiss.

Jerking harder, I trot us down the slope.

"Forget the pack animals!" I bark to the sluggish stream of people. "Leave the wagons! This is a command from Xin Ren's military strategist!"

They do as they're told, scowling all the while. They love Ren for her honor, Cloud for her righteousness, Lotus for her spirit. My job is not to be lovable but to get every peasant off the mountain and into the town over, where Ren should already be waiting with the first wave of evacuees, the other half of our troops, and—hopefully—a boat passage south so that I can secure us some much-needed allies.

"Hurry!" I snap. People plod a little faster. I order someone to help a man with a broken leg, but then there's a pregnant woman who looks seconds away from labor, children without shoes, toddlers without parents. The humid air thickens to soup, and the pressure in my chest climbs to my throat. Harbinger of a breathing attack, if there ever was one.



*Don't you dare*, I think to my body as I ride farther down the line, shouting until I'm hoarse. I pass a girl shrieking for her sister.

Ten people later, I cross a younger girl in a matching vest, bawling for hers.

"Follow me," I wheeze. I barely see the sisters reunited before lightning strips the forest bare. The animals whine in chorus—my horse among them.

"Turnips—"

Thunder claps and my horse rears, and the reins—

They slip through my fingers.



Death and I have met before. In this regard, I'm no different from hundreds if not thousands of orphans. Our parents died to famine or plague or some rampaging warlord, rising up in droves under the empire's waning power. Death may have spared me then, but I know it's there, a lingering shadow. Some people have the physical abilities to outrun it. I don't bother. My mind is my light, my candle. The shadow flees *me*, not the other way around.

So I'm not scared, when I dream of heaven. It's familiar. A white wicker gazebo. Nested limestone terraces. Magnolia-bloom skies. Wind chimes and birdsong and always, always this melody.

This melody of a zither.

I follow the familiar music, over lakes of pink clouds. But the pink fades, and the dream becomes a nightmare of a memory.

*Clash of steel. Steeds thundering down the street. A spearhead erupts through a torso, red. I grab your hand and we run. I don't*

*know if these warriors are friend or foe, which warlord has seceded from the empire now and named themselves king, if they're empire forces come to relieve us or kill us. We're just orphans. Less than people, to these warriors. All we can do is run from them. Run. Your hand tears from mine; I scream your name.*

Ku!

*The fleeing tide is too thick. I can't find you. Finally, the dust settles. The warriors leave.*

*You've left me too.*

I bolt upright, panting.

"Steady." Hands, closed around my upper arms. A face: hawk-beak brows, nose bridge scarred. It's Tourmaline, Xin Ren's third general—the *only* general of Ren's with a fitting sobriquet, seeing as Tourmaline's disposition is as solid as the gemstone. We tolerate each other, as far as warriors and strategists go. But right now, Tourmaline isn't the person I want to see.

She's not the sister from my dream.

"Steady, Zephyr," she coaches as I lunge against her grip.

Gasp by gasp, I release my disappointment. Tourmaline, in turn, releases me. She hands me a waterskin. I clutch it, hesitating. Water will wash the name from my tongue, the name I haven't spoken in six years.

*Ku.*

But the dream wasn't real, and when Tourmaline says, "Drink," I do.

Tourmaline sits back. Dried mud cakes her silver armor. "You, Zephyr, are god-blessed," she says, and I cough on a mouthful of water. "That, or you did something good in a previous life."

Reincarnation and gods are both the stuff of peasant myths.

"I reached you seconds before the wheels of a wagon did," Tourmaline continues, stoic. I could have done without the image, but if anyone had to find me on the ground, better it be Tourmaline than Lotus or Cloud. Those two would have squawked about it to everyone and their mothers. On the subject of everyone—

My gaze darts to my surroundings. We're in a tent; it's night; something gamey is roasting outside. All good signs we weren't decimated by Miasma.

Still, I need to hear it to be sure. "We made it to Hewan?"

Tourmaline nods. "Exactly ten li, a mountain, and a river away from Miasma's forces. The rain came just as you said it would. It'll take them at least a day to clear a path, four to go around."

"Lotus?"

"Will be the talk of the empire. Think lots of drums and bellowing. Miasma's generals ran so fast, you'd think we had a hidden force of ten thousand."

I choke down some more water. Good. Miasma is the paranoid type. She'll hear the war sounds, see the difficult terrain, and think *ambush*. A maneuver like that requires more forces than we actually have, but as long as Miasma believes in Lotus's illusion, we've bought ourselves however long it'll take for her to gather reinforcements—a day, by my estimates.

Then I remember the limping man, the groaning woman, the crying sisters. If they're alive—"They are," Tourmaline confirms—they owe it to the ideals of one person. "And Ren?"

“She was meeting with the Hewan governor, last I checked,” says Tourmaline.

She steadies me as I rise. Hands braced against my lower back, I eye the scant pile of belongings that survived the journey with me. My white robes are muddied beyond salvaging, and I wrinkle my nose at the replacement set. Beige. Blech.

Tourmaline breaks the quiet. “You shouldn’t ride off on your own like that.”

“I can *ride* fine. It’s the horse. Your turnip-and-fig trick didn’t work.” Or I was the fool, for taking a warrior’s advice.

Tourmaline blinks, once and slow. “I found no turnips or figs on your person.”

“I promised them as rewards.” Obviously, the horse did not earn them.

Another drawn-out blink.

“I’ll let you dress,” Tourmaline finally says.

She leaves the tent. Alone, I groan and put on the beige robes. I fasten my broadbelt, reach down—hand hovering over the wrapped bundle that is my zither—and pick up my fan. I beat the crane feathers clean and smooth out the kinks, fingers slowing to trace over the single kingfisher feather. A gift from my last mentor, who’d lived longer than the rest. *One star cannot light a galaxy*, he’d said as he’d sewn on the feather.

*I’m not a star*, I’d countered. *I am the universe itself*.

But even the universe is subject to unseen forces. The next night, a meteorite punched my mentor and his outhouse clean into the ground.

I can predict meteors now. Trace the paths of all stars, foretell

weather patterns nine times out of ten. The environment, as it stands, is our only ally. Using it to our advantage has earned me the sobriquet of Fate Changer. But the work I do isn't magic. It's memorization and analysis and application. It's limiting the factors I can't control, and reducing our reliance on miracles.

Today, without a doubt, was a miracle. It pains me to admit it, but unless a meteorite kills Miasma next time, even *I* can't save us, not if we keep on traveling with so many commoners.

It's time I had a talk with Ren.

I slip my fan's bamboo handle between the broadbelt and my waist, clasp my hair back into its ponytail, and head out of the tent, into the night.

Braziers raised on cross staves line the road to Hewan's town square. Suckling pigs roast over fire pits. Under a pavilion canopied with drying laundry and hemp quilts, the townspeople and our troops raise wine dishes in Ren's name. Our popularity has never been an issue. Towns welcome us. Governors who detest Miasma give us refuge. Commoners practically line up to follow us over rivers and mountains.

That needs to stop here.

I spy Ren at a table under the pavilion, sitting with the Hewan governor and townsfolk. With her threadbare gray robes, patched broadbelt, and modest topknot, she's almost indistinguishable from the rabble. Almost. Her voice carries a weight to it. A sadness, I sometimes think, that doesn't match her easy grin. She's grinning now at something a soldier says to her.

I make my way over.

"Hey, Peacock!"

Heavens spare me. Not this again.

*“Peacock!”*

*Ignore her.* But then I hear the voice of my third mentor, the chess master. *You can’t push people around like chess pieces. You have to inspire trust.*

To inspiring trust, then.

“What are you calling her here for?” Cloud asks Lotus as I face their table. Her blue cloak spills over her broad, armored shoulders; her hair hangs in a thick braid down her back. “Haven’t you had enough of being ordered around for a day?”

“I want to see her up close!” Lotus explains, face lighting up when I am *up close*. “You *did* change colors.”

*Peacock or chameleon, Lotus. Make up your mind.*

“Huh,” says Cloud, glancing over me. “What happened to the white? Let me guess: You tired of the dung stains.”

The soldiers around her snicker. I sniff. *They* wouldn’t understand the significance. White is the color of sages, of purity and wisdom and—

“Rumor is that you had a little spill today.” Cloud’s not done. “Ren asked me to search for a carpenter in this town. It’s just too bad there’s no one skilled enough to fix your carriage.”

*Chariot.* The contraption I rode before it too fell victim to the mud. I level my gaze at Cloud and she stares back, arch. No doubt she dislikes me because I have Ren’s ear, despite not being one of her two swornsisters. Pity for her. I have little interest in fraternizing with either Lotus or Cloud, a nineteen-year-old and twentysomething who act like they’re ten. I start to leave—and yelp as Lotus grabs my arm.

“Wait! A toast to the peacock!” Wine spills from the dish she raises. “She saved everyone today!”

I extricate myself. “Carry on without me.”

Lotus’s expression falls.

“Oh, don’t look so down,” says Cloud. Her proud voice carries over the din as I make my escape. “You know what they say about strategists.”

*Walk away.*

“They can’t hold their liquor.”

*Walk away.*

“One drink, and they’re barfing—”

I march back, snatch the dish from Lotus, and down it.

Lotus slaps the table. “Another round!”

Suddenly I’m boxed in by warriors, everyone crowding for their fill. Dishes go bottom-up. Lotus pours more from the jug.

“Who here thinks Skull-face is a god?” Skull-face must be Lotus’s nickname for Miasma. Hands rise and Lotus roars, “Cowards! *Ren* is the god!”

“Quit yapping,” says Cloud. “Ren doesn’t want you spreading that.” Then she pounds her chest with a fist and declares to the table, “I’m the god!”

“No, *I’m* the god!”

“I’m the god!”

*“I’m the god!”*

*Peasants, all of you*, I think darkly as more wine is sloshed onto me instead of into mouths. Someone belches. Lotus farts. I wiggle free the second I see an opening, squeezing out of the crush.

I barely make it to a bush before throwing up.

*That was* three, *Cloud*. I frown at the mess I've deposited in the bush—yew bush, to be precise. Scaly brown bark. Needles spiraling around the stem. Berries round and red. Toxic to humans, who I'd hope are smart enough not to graze on wild bushes, and horses, who probably aren't. I should warn the cavalry—

I retch again.

"Aiya, my swornsisters got you, didn't they?"

*Ren*.

I wipe my mouth and hurry to face her, bowing low from the waist.

"At ease, at ease." Ren waits for me to straighten. "I'll have a word with them."

And make them even more recalcitrant? "It wasn't—"

"Who said they were the god this time?"

"Cloud." *Ugh*. "But all of them, eventually."

"Heavens forgive their sedition," Ren says, but she's smiling. "Shall we escape them for a while? Survey the town?" She turns, then glances back to me, concern softening her smile. "If you're up for it."

As if I'd let some warriors get the better of me.

I wipe my mouth again, and accompany Ren through our temporary camp. She checks in with our troops, helps a soldier fix a pair of boots, asks the mother-to-be when she's due. I stand off to the side—this isn't quite the "surveying" I had in mind—and at last, our path brings us to Hewan's western watchtower. Ren goes up the bamboo stairs first. I climb behind her, lungs



smarting. We reach the top and gaze at the town. The night is clear, the sky dashed with stars.

"Tell me, Qilin." Only Ren still calls me by my birth name. It's too late to tell her that I loathe it. "On a scale of one to ten, how close are you to quitting?"

I rush to bow again. "If I've done anything to disappoint—"

"You saved us today," Ren interrupts, firm. "But this can't be what you signed up for."

*She can't know.* Of all the times I've washed my robes, trying to rid them of grime and filth, or the nights I've lain awake, sleepless, feeling more like a shepherd of peasants than a strategist.

But in the end, those are all small inconveniences. Even the peasants. Our most pressing problem is my lack of a boat passage south. *Bring it up—*

"I won't fail you," I blurt.

"I know," says Ren. "I just worry that I'll fail you. And maybe . . ." She looks up at the sky. "I'll fail her."

There are hundreds of stars in the night, but I know exactly which one she's looking at. It's small and dull, our Empress Xin Bao's star.

Ren beholds it as if it's the sun.

To my knowledge, Ren has only met our prepubescent sovereign once—which is one more occasion than most. Empresses since antiquity have lived cloistered within the palace, their power vested not in who they are, but in the ancient tradition they symbolize and their courts. Xin Bao's court has belonged to a long line of regents.

Miasma is simply the latest.

When Xin Bao asked Ren to liberate her from Miasma's clutches, Ren heard a child's cry for help. She abandoned her post in the empire army, took up arms against her old colleagues. Miasma has been hell-bent on exterminating Ren ever since, for the same reason so many peasants follow her: of all the warlords who've challenged the empire in the last decade, Ren has the most legitimate cause. The most legitimate *claim*, should she covet the throne one day. As members of the Xin clan, she and Xin Bao share blood. And while Miasma is professing to be heavens-sent, I know some think it's Ren. Because next to Empress Xin Bao's star is another star. It appeared in the sky eight years ago. Miasma may have all the imperial cosmologists wrapped around her finger, but even she can't kill rumors. New stars are said to represent gods.

That rogue star could belong to anyone.

I know my stars, but I don't believe in gods. Even if I did, I don't believe they care one bit about us. As we stare at the sky, Ren's hand drifts to the pendant at her throat, engraved with the Xin surname. I wonder which is more burdensome: chaining your fate to a higher power or to your family.

I'm lucky to have neither.

Eventually, Ren snaps out of her spell. "Get some sleep, Qilin." Her hand starts for my back, then rests on my head instead. My bruises still ache in response, for some reason. "We'll depart early tomorrow. We'll keep the commoners here—"

My heart lifts.

"—and supply the town with some of our forces."

No loss, I tell myself. "Forces" don't mean much when you're constantly on the retreat.

“Lordess—” I call out before she descends the tower. “My boat passage south?”

Ren grimaces. “I’m sorry, Qilin. Every river within a hundred li from here is empire-controlled.”

“I’ll find a way.” I always do.

I watch Ren from above as she goes, people bowing in her path. I close my eyes, weary suddenly. But I haven’t lost what’s most important: my role in this world.

I am a strategist. Ren’s only one. Three times she came to my Thistlegate hut, beseeching me to serve her. I’d heard of warlords like her. Toss them a bone of wisdom, and they’d be on their way. So I told her the Rising Zephyr Objective: *Ally with the South. Establish a stronghold in the West. March on the North too soon, and you’ll be crushed. But claim the South and West first, and the empire is as good as yours.*

Ren had held firm. *The empire belongs to Empress Xin Bao. I am but her protector.*

And though Prime Ministress Miasma also called herself a protector, something about Ren’s words rang through me. They compelled me to leave with her that day. At the time, I didn’t know why. Now, after a year in her service, I do. Surnames and god rumors be damned—it was her sincerity. Her charisma. Traits I’ve never personally valued, but if Ren could get *me* to leave my hut, then what power might she hold over the common people? I saw the thousands of Xin loyalists who would rally around her cause. I saw my future. Help Ren restore power to Xin Bao, and I’d be the greatest strategist of the land. I’d erase the girl I was, a girl I see as I nod off.

A lone figure in dirty beige robes on the roadside.

My sister, lost to the fleeing tide.

Blood and dust. That's all the warriors have left behind. Their war cries, distant. The smell of fire is closer . . .

*Fire.*

My eyes fly open.

Smoke. It plumes from the helm of the mountain, feathering gray into the night. Scarlet webs through the forest we just cleared, bleeding from tree to tree. There's no beat of the drum, no rallying cry for war, but the smog of burning wood—much too damp to kindle naturally—tells me all I need to know:

Miasma is coming.

## A KNIFED SMILE

*Miasma is coming.*

She shouldn't be. We should have had hours before she returned with reinforcements at dawn. Now I have minutes at most before the town guards sound the alarm and send everyone into a brainless frenzy.

I stumble down the watchtower steps and run to the pavilion, where Lotus is snoring, sprawled flat on the bench, an empty wine jug in one hand. I nudge her with a foot; she throws an arm over her face. I kick the arm aside and she's up on her feet, swinging her ax.

I step in as soon as the danger of evisceration passes. "What did you *do*?"

"Do what?" mumbles Lotus, pawing at her face.

"At the bridge." I white-knuckle my fan; it's all I can do not to shout. "Report everything. Spare no detail."

"I scared off Skull-face and broke down the bridge, just like you ordered."

"You *what*?"

"I scared them off and broke down the bridge—"

"You. Touched. The. Bridge."

Lotus nods.

No. No, no, *no*. The whole *point* of Beget Something from Nothing is to create an *illusion* of strength, and Lotus broke the illusion when she broke the bridge. A lordess with ten thousand strong would never do such a thing. A lordess with ten thousand strong would leave the bridge be, to *beckon* the enemy into an ambush.

Like the cunning vulture she is, Miasma must have circled back, seen the torn-down bridge, and called the bluff. We could have bought ourselves days by appearing formidable enough to warrant reinforcements. Instead, we bought ourselves however many hours it took for the empire's best engineers to construct a temporary crossing.

"Was I not supposed to?" Lotus is asking, but my mind has already raced on to the burning trees. Another smart move. The fire smokes out any concealed troops, clears the path of felled logs, and announces Miasma's intentions. She *wants* us to panic and run. It's all downhill from Hewan. We'll be easy targets for enemy archers. Like deer in a royal hunt, we can't flee. Can't fight. We're at the disadvantage—and dead if we pretend otherwise.

As I pace back and forth, Lotus lifts her head and snorts the air. "Is that . . . fire?"

"Brava! Right on the first guess. And who do you think set it?"

"Who?"

"Give it another guess."

Lotus works her jaw. It shouldn't be that hard—there's only

one person in this entire empire who wants our heads badly enough to torch a forest—and slowly, her eyes grow round as cymbals.

She lopes for the stables.

*Brilliant. Just what I needed.* “Lotus! Stop!” I trip into a run after her. “Stop right there! I order you!”

I reach the stables just as she bursts out, already mounted. Her stallion rears, and I scramble backward.

“Get Ren to safety!” she shouts, as if *she’s* the strategist. Then she gallops off with a rallying cry. Her underlings stream out from their tents and leap onto their mounts. I narrowly avoid death by horse again.

“*Lotus!*” *Rat-livers.* Futile as it is, I give chase. As I run past the granary huts, the guards on the watchtowers come to their senses. Bronze bells clang up and down the tamped-earth walls, and Ren’s troops pour out, grabbing polearms and Ren’s tattered banners. The evacuees and people of Hewan follow some sleepy minutes later, grabbing plows and meat mallets.

I shove past them all. Civilian or soldier, everyone’s a peasant, so hasty to die.

Lotus is no exception. I reach the town gate too late; I’m not built to race warriors. Doubled over and wheezing, I glower at her stallion’s massive hoofprints while her underlings tear past right and left of me. Then I straighten. Tighten my ponytail.

I’m still in control. I still have my stratagems.

When I find Ren by the stables, she’s already saddled, double swords—fittingly named Virtue and Integrity—strapped across her back. My face falls in disapproval, and Ren’s hardens.

"It's me she wants," she says, as if that's an acceptable reason to ride into Miasma's five thousand strong.

"So you'll just hand yourself over."

"Lotus is out there."

"Without your orders." And against mine.

"Qilin—"

"Allow me." I fist one hand, slant the other over my knuckles, and bow over both in deference. "Allow me to ride out after them with twenty troops."

"To do what?" Cloud trots up beside Ren on her massive mare and gives me a cold once-over. "Die?"

That may be Lotus's plan, but it's not mine. "To stop Miasma," I say politely. We can't all be the lesser person.

"With twenty soldiers." Cloud's gaze sharpens on my knobby wrists. I know what she's thinking. I've encountered so many like her: stronger children in the orphanage. Soldiers in the cities. She thinks my strategies are for weaklings and cowards who can't face their enemies head-on. That I want to ride out with twenty soldiers is a trick or bluff, never mind that Lotus rode out with half that number. Defeat is unthinkable to a warrior. They die before they see it coming.

I've fought death all my life. "If I fail, I'll accept the martial punishment for lying to my lordess."

"If you fail, your head will be on an empire spike alongside ours." Cloud leans forward, looming over me from her mount. "Just what are you going to do? Kill her with your sweet tongue?"

"Cloud," says Ren, her voice a warning.

Truthfully? *Yes, Cloud, and that stratagem has a name: Hide*



*a Knife Behind a Smile.* But why enlighten a warrior? “Whatever I have planned, it’s our only option.” Then, before I can help myself: “I’d take you with me, Cloud, but I just can’t risk having Miasma set free a second time.”

“You—”

“*Enough.*” Ren holds out a hand; reluctantly, Cloud removes hers from the pole of her crescent-bladed glaive. To me, Ren says, “Twenty troops. Against Miasma.”

“Yes.”

A beat of silence. “I trust you, Qilin.”

*Then humor me.*

“You may have your twenty.”

“Thank you.” I bow again. When I raise my gaze to Ren’s, her eyes swim with worry. *For Lotus.* But when I vow to bring her swornsister back unharmed, Ren’s brow furrows, and the uncomfortable thought crosses my mind that maybe, just maybe, Ren is worried for *me*.

*Well, why wouldn’t she be?* I’m this camp’s lone strategist. Ren can’t afford to lose me. But she shouldn’t worry. I haven’t failed us yet, and I don’t plan on starting now.

Quickly, I gather my twenty. They’re neither the strongest nor the smartest. They blanch when I tell them our objective. But they don’t dawdle, and in minutes we’re ready to ride.

I seek out Tourmaline before we leave. “By the pavilion,” I say under my breath, “you’ll find yew shrubs. First chance you get, feed the leaves to the horses. Make sure no one catches you, and make sure the blame goes to me.”

Tourmaline doesn’t respond at once. Perhaps she also knows

what yew leaves can do to a grown horse. If so, she doesn't call me out for sabotage either. Her eyes flick to the stallion beside me. "Where are you going?"

First? To Miasma. Then? To wherever Miasma takes me. But ultimately?

"South." I say it with conviction. I pray she won't ask me *how*. That's for me to work out.

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know." Too truthful. It's the wine—has to be the wine, I think, as I grab Tourmaline by the arm. "No matter what happens, I'm on your side. Do you understand?"

Tourmaline stares at my hand like it's sprouted from her wrist-guard. My grip tightens. "Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"When the time is right, I'll return. Until then, forget we ever had this conversation. If Ren probes, say nothing. Keep her here. She's safest in Hewan." Once I divert Miasma, that is.

"I understand," repeats Tourmaline. "But one thing."

She leaves—and returns with her horse, a mare of pure white. She holds out the reins.

"Pearl behaves, with or without turnips or figs."

It takes me a moment to understand her intentions. Suspicion sets in. *Rumor is that you had a little spill*, Cloud said earlier. Was it Tourmaline who told her? What if this kindness is an insult? My mind spins—and recoils when Tourmaline offers me her arm. "I can do it myself."

Three attempts later, I successfully mount. Huffing, I stare down at Tourmaline.

If I could replicate myself, I would. I would carry out my own final instructions. But as it is, I have to trust that Tourmaline will execute my plans better than Cloud or Lotus. She passes me the reins and steps back.

“Ride safe.”

I nod stiffly, and cast a final glance to Ren.

Orphaned at thirteen. Unsupported by her clan. Fighting for Xin Bao’s empire, but against empire troops commandeered by Miasma. Others might see a lost cause, but I see a saga that will live on for generations.

I won’t return empty-handed. Next time I see everyone, it’ll be with a Southlands alliance.

I dig in my heels. The gate thunders up for me and my twenty; the watchtower bells ring loud, then soft as we plunge into the open night. Our mounts eat up the muddy, rutted path, bringing us back the way we came, the mountain rising like a dark-haired head on the horizon. Moonlight pours into the hoofprints left by Lotus and her underlings, minting the trail with silver coins. Then the trees close in—ten li passes by incredibly quickly when you’re riding in the wrong direction—and the trail is no more. The darkness closes us in its fist. I can’t even see the firs, only feel their needled fingers on my cheeks as we slow from gallop to trot.

The smoke strengthens. My eyes tear as I fight the urge to cough. The first torches appear, small like fireflies. Pearl whickers; I coax her forward. A whimper comes from behind me. To my right, a bowstring hums as someone nocks an arrow.

“Put that away,” I snap. To the rest: “You are to do *nothing* without my orders.”

No one makes a sound after that. It's just the rustle of undergrowth beneath our hooves and the drumming of my heart. The reins in my hand slicken, and I'm thankful my soldiers can't see me flinch at the percussion of steel against steel in the distance.

*Any moment now.* Anticipation is a wolf, hunting my thoughts. *Any moment—*

"Halt!"

Miasma's soldiers emerge from the trees. Their faces and bodies are smeared with soot, but behind all the black, their laminar glows. Only the best for the empire's minions.

One rides up to me. Her leopard-skin cloak elevates her above a rank-and-file soldier. She's a general.

A warrior.

My heart pounds faster.

I dismount, sending thanks to the heavens when my foot doesn't catch in the stirrup and Pearl doesn't spook and I don't otherwise make a fool of myself. My soldiers try to close around me but are stopped by Miasma's. A spear is shoved under my chin, forcing it up. A torch is thrust before my face.

Leopard Cloak motions for another minion. Together they consider my ragtag group of twenty.

"Ren's," says the minion.

Leopard nods, then raises a hand. Bowstrings moan from the surrounding trees in which Miasma's archers are perched.

I bite my cheek, triggering saliva flow. My voice is full and round when I say, "I'm here to speak with your lordess."

Bated breaths. Quivering strings.

“She’s expecting me. And”—I lower my voice—“you know how she is when she doesn’t get what she wants.”

Leopard is silent.

“Kill the rest,” she finally says.

“They come with me,” I say over the whine of bowstrings. Then I command my soldiers to dismount and discard their weapons.

The extent of our helplessness is glaring once our weapons lie in the undergrowth. Twenty versus at least two hundred. Unarmed versus swords and bows, fitted with arrows, in the trees. We’re not just weak. We’re pathetic. Crushing us would be like using a hammer on an ant. Overkill.

Leopard lowers her signaling hand, and empire soldiers stream in. Rope goes around my wrists while what feels suspiciously like the tip of a polearm prods my spine, goading me into a forward walk.

My calves strain as the ground slopes upward. What feels like hours later, we’re led into a mist-laden clearing at the mountain’s base. My eyes struggle to adjust to the ruddy torchlight and moonbeams shafting through, but once they do, I immediately make out Lotus and her underlings.

They’re trussed up like ducks for the plucking, their faces bruised, mouths bleeding, eyes swollen shut. Unlike them, I know better than to act rashly. Because standing before them, with a head half-shaved and a single, red lacquer bell hanging from her earlobe like a blood droplet, is the one and only Miasma.

She doesn't see us, not with her back turned, but she must hear our approach. She definitely does when Lotus croaks, "Peacock?"

It's a good thing my anonymity isn't a requisite for my stratagem.

Leopard slips up to Miasma and whispers into her pierced ear. In reply, the prime ministress of the Xin Empire reaches for her sword. The twisted blade grows out of its sheath, mirror bright. "I'll be with my guest in a moment."

Then she swings.

Bells should tinkle. Heads should thud. But my senses are all mixed up, and the head tinkles as it falls into the ferns and Miasma's bell thuds and thuds, swinging violently from her ear as she uncoils and returns to her center while the underling keels over in a headless bow.

Roosting birds roost no more at Lotus's howl.

"There. Now you have my undivided attention." Miasma runs a thumb along the soaked blade and licks the pad, then holds the sword out to me in offering. "Care for a taste?"

The tang of iron taints the air. My own neck throbs.

"I'm afraid my stomach isn't as strong as yours." Or anything of me, for that matter. Miasma may be less than five *chǐ* tall, but her arms are corded, shown off by her sleeveless laminar vest. Her face is chiseled like an arrowhead, the bare minimum of skin stretched thin over bone and vein. At twenty-five, she's only two years Ren's senior, but she appears ten years older and has inspired a thousand rumors. Miasma can kill assassins in her sleep. Miasma pickles the livers of her enemies. Miasma is like a worm: cut her in half, and she'll grow back.

The latest rumor is that Miasma is a god, sent by the heavens to save the crumbling empire. I prefer fact to rumor, but fact isn't much better. When a group of radical peasants called the Red Phoenixes marched against the empire capital seven years ago, Miasma put down the rebellion and rose to the rank of cavalry general. When the Ten Eunuch Cabal plotted to assassinate Empress Xin Bao six years ago, Miasma exterminated them and all their living ancestors, "rescuing" Xin Bao while consolidating power in the military and court. So naturally, when humble Xin Ren, a fellow veteran of the Red Phoenix Rebellion hailing from some no-name town, decried her as a usurper, Miasma was not pleased, to say the least.

Now I stand face-to-face with the enemy. Many call her evil. I'd call her opportunistic—which is far more dangerous, in my opinion.

Miasma shrugs at my refusal, wipes down the blade, and sheathes it. Lotus sobs. I gird my nerves and take a step forward.

"I wouldn't," says Miasma. The torchlight flares, allowing me a fleeting glimpse of the hundreds of mounted troops encircling the clearing. "Unless you want more of your friends' heads to roll."

I force myself to take another step. "They're not my friends." Another. "I've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time." Kneeling is a challenge with bound hands, but I manage, bowing over a patch of white toadstools. "My lordess."

Silence.

Miasma's laugh is more of a caw, starting and ending in her throat. "Not bad—for your first speech of defection. Practice will do you good."

"I speak with actions, not words. Let me show you my loyalty."

"Loyalty coming from one who betrays her own lordess."

"I never swore an oath of fealty to Xin Ren. I took up her cause only because she came to my hut and *begged*."

Lotus stops sobbing. "Y-y-you . . . *traitor*!"

Miasma gives a lazy wave of her hand, and Lotus is gagged. "Begged," she says, savoring it.

"Yes, begged," I say. "On her knees. Three times."

"She would, wouldn't she?" Miasma muses. "Always desperate, Charity Ren. And you." Her voice suddenly booms. "You, *Rising Zephyr*, always crafty." The sobriquet sends a shiver of delight through me; Miasma has to be thinking of every occasion we've eluded her. "You speak with actions?" She nods at Lotus. "Well, go on. Prove your loyalty by killing this one."

"And cause you to lose this war? I think not."

"Oh?" Miasma raises a brow. "Elaborate."

I should be too terrified for words. My head might end up severed from my neck before this night is over. And I *am* terrified—until I touch my fan. This is what I do best: reading my opponent's attacks, playing the information I've already accrued as counterattack.

*I am in control of the board.*

"You know Ren as well as I do," I start. "Better, perhaps, considering your shared history." Miasma chuckles at the reminder of a bygone time, when two nobodies—Miasma, the foster child of a eunuch, and Ren, the powerless offspring of a powerful clan—served the dynasty side by side. "Xin Ren is a lordess



without a territorial stronghold to train or supply her troops. Leave her be, and the elements will take care of her. But kill any of her swornsisters, and you'll end up with a rabid dog on your hands."

"Then what are we waiting for?" cries Miasma. "We'll crush her right here, right now. I'll even save you the honors of claiming her head."

"Why bother? Just before coming here, I poisoned two thirds of their steeds with yew." Lotus screams against her gag. I ignore her and continue, "Xin Ren and her troops won't be leaving Hewan anytime soon."

That gives Miasma pause. Clearly, she didn't think I had it in me to cull a cavalry. She'll probably send a scout to check. It's in her nature to be suspicious. "You didn't come alone," she notes.

"*Me*, riding to meet you on my own? Even a fool like Ren would have suspected something. These soldiers are but a cover for my defection. And now they're sacrifices for a deserving lordess. Kill them. Interrogate them. Twenty may not be much use against your five thousand, but twenty talking mouths? That's information."

An acrid scent stings my nose—the scent of urine, coming from my own ranks. To them, I must sound utilitarian, heartless, cruel. If only I could tell them that there's a three in four chance Miasma will spare their lives; she has a weakness for talent, regardless of its source.

"A camp full of traitors." Miasma rubs her hands together. "Oh, Ren. It'd break her heart if she knew. So the horses—"

“Dead by dawn,” I assure her.

“Excellent.” But I still haven’t won her over. Not quite. When it comes down to it, dead horses and sacrificial troops could just be strategy, tightly wielded in my hand. I need to show Miasma that I have something real to lose. Show her that I’ve made an enemy out of my previous camp.

The ground finally starts to tremble.

About time.

*Come on.* My fingers curl around my fan’s handle. I set the bait, I planted the distrust, but what happens next is out of my control. *Come on.*

*I know you can go faster.*

Two of Miasma’s elite generals, Talon and Viper, immediately appear at their lordess’s side, reaching for their swords. The rest of Miasma’s troops take formation around us. In the dark, a shout is cut short. Mist ghosts over the ferns, reaching for our feet. Miasma looks pale. Some say the prime ministress believes in ghosts. I suppose it’s only natural; ghosts and gods are one and the same.

But no ghost could barrel through both bracken and soldiers the way Cloud does.

She’s a riot of blue cloak and bronze armor atop that monstrous mare, her glaive raised high above her head before it comes down. The bladed end sinks into the chest of one of Miasma’s minions while the poled end smashes into a helmed head. Bronze and bone cave, and it’s my turn to pale, as I’m reminded of the warriors from my nightmare. But this is all a part of my plan.

Cloud is too, even if she doesn’t know it.

Her tawny gaze sweeps the clearing, taking in my soldiers, Miasma's soldiers, Miasma herself, before finally landing on me.

I see the exact moment she pieces together my defection.

By the time Lotus works through her gag and screams traitor, Cloud's already cut through a whole line of Miasma's infantry. Her crescent blade is oiled with their blood as she whirls down to one knee. Arrows release at her signal, flying over her head. One hits Leopard in the eye. Another nicks my shoulder. I hiss, grip the bleeding wound as Miasma's troops return fire.

Cloud's archers drop from their mounts like plums from a tree.

But Cloud—she spins her glaive until it's a blur, a maw of blade that devours everything in its path—a path leading to me. Me, the trickster. The traitor. The one who taunted Cloud about letting Miasma go right before riding out to swear myself to her.

She never reaches me, of course. One Cloud could feasibly kill thirty minions, but not hundreds. Foot soldiers surround her, their pikes pointed like a ring of teeth. A lesser warrior would panic.

Cloud's eyes remain pinned on me.

"Want us to take care of her?" asks Viper.

Miasma doesn't answer. She eyes Cloud with a glassy sort of rapture. "What a marvel to behold." She says it so softly that I wonder if Viper even hears.

"My lordess?"

With a running start, she mounts a stallion twice her height. "Let her go alive."

"But Prime Minis—"

“Hand over the horse.”

Cloud’s voice, not Miasma’s. “The horse,” she repeats as we stare at her. “Pearl.”

Pearl whinnies at her name. I come to my senses and look to Miasma.

The prime ministress waves a hand. “Granted. Viper.”

Viper walks Pearl over to Cloud. Cloud takes the reins.

I breathe out. *Thank you, Tourmaline, for getting me this far. You too, Cloud. Thank you for trying to kill me so . . . convincingly, and for leading Pearl home.*

*Take care of Ren while I’m gone.*

“We’re really just letting her go?” asks Talon as Cloud remounts her own mare.

“For now, Talon. Just for now. One of these days, she’ll realize her talents are wasted on Charity Ren, just like this one did.” Miasma smiles down at me. I cling tighter to my arrow wound. It convinced Miasma of my desertion, and now it justifies my wince as she says, “Welcome to the empire, Rising Zephyr.” Her smile widens to a toothy, skull-like grin. “Or, as I like to say, welcome to the Kingdom of Miracles.”