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HEAVENLY
TYRANT



PROLOGUE

In a world teeming with those who wanted him dead, Qin Zheng never thought it'd be a plague that would take him down.

He had crushed Hunduns that dwarfed the greatest of man-made monuments. He had bested legions of Chrysalises commanded by fools who'd refused to surrender to him. He had roused the workers of seven bickering nations into rising against the industrialists, bankers, and landlords who subjugated them. And he was still young. He should have had so many more years to further his revolution. It was absurd that he was now at the mercy of something more minuscule than the eye could see. A virus, ravaging through his every organ, rending him from the inside, making pustules bloom like cursed flowers over his skin. He felt more powerless than when he'd been a gutter child spat on and laughed at for being the son of a whore. It was one thing to gaze up and dream of infinity; it was another to reach the peak, only to plummet with so little warning.

After burrowing the Yellow Dragon under Mount Zhurong, deep enough to access the living energy of the planet itself, he disconnected from the pilot link.

"*Shifu* . . . This is not how I . . ." he began to say to the woman coming to consciousness in the yīn seat in front of him, someone he'd never thought he'd pilot a Chrysalis with, for she had always

fought at his side in her own unit. Queen-General Mi Xuan, pilot of the Three-Legged Crow, leader of the Iron Widows. His mentor.

“Quit wasting your energy on talking,” she grunted over her shoulder, her words muffled by her protective leather mask, its glass lenses fogging up. She was the only one left in his nascent empire of Huaxia who dared speak to him this way. She shed her temporary Yellow Dragon armor on the yin seat like a golden husk and stood up in her black conduction suit. She’d brought her usual Three-Legged Crow armor into the cockpit, but she wouldn’t need it for what would come next.

Qin Zheng sprouted thin needles out of his gauntlet palms to let her manipulate the qì flow between him and the Dragon. His Council of Sages had vehemently opposed this experiment, but they had not come up with any alternative solutions. He was showing symptoms of the most aggressive form of flowerpox. He had mere days before his organs began liquefying right in his body. A cure would not be produced within days.

Silently, he cursed the gods. Even after he had resumed tribute to them, they would not respond to his requests for dialogue. His sole remaining option was this audacious attempt to freeze himself in time.

“*Shifu*,” Qin Zheng said in a smaller voice than he had used in years. It pained him to leave Huaxia in the hands of others, but he could scarcely hold on to his existence, much less his empire. “Do not let them wake me until a cure is made. No matter how long it takes.”

General Mi’s steely eyes glistened behind the glass lenses of her mask. “That, I can promise you.”

She pressed her bare palms into the needles on his gauntlets. Her jaw clenched. Blood trickled out between their hands. The meridians carrying her qì through her body darkened across the few swaths of visible skin on her neck and the backs of her hands. Water was the qì type she had the least affinity for, yet she wielded

it like a roaring tide. Its coldness pervaded like slush into Qin Zheng's blood. His instinct was to control it, the way he controlled everything, but for once he let it happen to him. If a passive stream of qi could be established through the Dragon like a river flowing downhill, while its primal particles were fine-tuned to filter only Water type into Qin Zheng, this coldness could theoretically persist indefinitely.

"Xuan-jièjiè . . ." he breathed out as his consciousness frosted over. An improper way for a student to refer to their mentor. As improper as the way she, in turn, never used his imperial title.

A slight tremor went through her. Qin Zheng wanted to say more, but could no longer conjure the words to encapsulate everything he was feeling.

"Get some rest, Zheng'er," she murmured. "I will come back to you."

Please, he pleaded in the safety of his mind, because he would never do so out loud.

The cold closed over him like ice over a lake.

He swore it was less than a minute later when heat coursed through his body again. His eyes stuttered open to a winged blur in the dim cockpit. Had General Mi put on her Three-Legged Crow armor? The pressure of her hand on his gauntlet now pumped Fire qi into him. He momentarily feared the experiment hadn't worked, but there was someone else with her now, hand on his other gauntlet. Some time must have passed. She had indeed returned to him.

"Where's the cure?" Qin Zheng croaked out.

She and the other person stood in silence.

"Where's the cure?" he repeated, stale air wedging in and out of his thawing lungs.

Shouts rose in the shadows further ahead in the cockpit. Had they brought more people into the cockpit?

General Mi snapped into motion, fumbling with something in her free hand. "Open up!"

Her voice was wrong, higher-pitched and less raspy. Her qi felt off as well. And her armor was red and coarse, not black and form-fitting.

Before he could tell if this impression was the fault of his reviving senses, he felt a numbness in the right side of his body and a sagging in half his face. He and General Mi both cried out in surprise. He shook one gauntlet free to morph a mask of spirit metal over that half of his face, because, though he knew she would not care past the initial shock, he did not want her to see him like this.

As expected, she was dazed for but an instant before she stabbed a syringe into his neck. A cold liquid he assumed was the cure to flowerpox seeped into him. Slowly, his vision came to focus.

The sight was not what he wanted to see.

She was not General Mi. They looked remarkably similar, with the same eyes that promised vengeance and bloodshed, but it was impossible that General Mi had gotten younger and shorter.

What was going on? How long had it been? Where was the general?

"Can you pilot?" The girl's question pierced his spiraling thoughts. She spoke with a strange dialect, one he could not pinpoint. She detached the syringe from his neck and pressed down on the bleeding puncture. "I need your power, your Chrysalis. Now."

Qin Zheng kept his expression neutral. He could not show vulnerability in an unknown situation.

After feeling for her spirit pressure, he let out a dry laugh. Who did this little girl think she was? Had no one told her who *he* was? Piloting with him would be her death sentence. He channeled all five types of qi with the full force he could muster, showing her exactly what she'd be getting herself into.

Yet, after a few stunned seconds, she did not relent. She demanded he shift to the yin seat—the *woman's* seat—and threatened

to withhold further medicine if he did not. It was preposterous. He told her so.

“Do you want to live or die?” the girl shouted at him. “It’s a simple question!”

“You wouldn’t let me—”

“Qin Zheng, I know two hundred and twenty-one more years of what’s going on than you do, and I have no time to explain!”

Her tirade continued, but his mind snagged on the number she’d spouted. *Two hundred and twenty-one years.*

Over two centuries.

The world seemed to turn on its axis, tipping Qin Zheng around and around and around. Two hundred and twenty-one times around the sun. Constellations cycling, trees rising and falling, lives beginning and ending.

His General Mi was dead, along with everyone and everything else he knew.

PART I

HEAVENLY EMPEROR

天皇 *Tiānhuáng*

How could you say you have no clothes to wear?

I will share my robe with you.

His Majesty has called his army;

I will prepare my ax and spear,
and share an enemy with you.

How could you say you have no clothes to wear?

I will share my shirt with you.

His Majesty has called his army;

I will prepare my lance and halberd,
and march together with you.

How could you say you have no clothes to wear?

I will share my skirts with you.

His Majesty has called his army;

I will prepare my armor and weapons,
and advance together with you.

—Qin folk song, from *The Classic of Songs* 诗经

THE LEGEND, THE TRUTH

I am ready to slaughter the gods.
If I can find them.

I soar in the Yellow Dragon, straining against the pull of gravity in search of the Heavenly Court's sailing twinkle in the ocean of stars above. The gods' unexpected message burns in my mind, fueling me onward even as exhaustion eats at my consciousness.

"If you do our bidding as the Sages did, we have ways to bring back what you've lost. But if you defy us or reveal the truth, you will lose everything."

Soon, the stars look less like stars and more like the static that pops behind my eyes whenever someone hits me hard on the head. Truthfully, I have no idea where I'm going. I flew the Yellow Dragon beyond the Kunlun Mountains right after the gods' message, but there's really nothing indicating I might find them in this direction. I guess I just instinctively headed for the unknown. The sands of what must be the Xihuang Desert drift far below, known to me as only a label on the very west of maps until now.

"You still possess no concrete understanding of what the gods are," Qin Zheng remarks with an air of incredulity, his spirit form sitting opposite mine in the yīn-yáng realm, that incorporeal space our minds share via the Yellow Dragon's pilot link.

"No, what are they?" I demand.

"You of the future should be enlightening *me*." He shakes his head, gaze distant and haunted. "Two hundred and twenty-one

years, yet nothing has changed. They continue to lord over you, making you think of them as divine. Their power has not been broken.”

The Yellow Dragon slows in its flight as more of my focus strays to Qin Zheng. “Why do you say that like things are supposed to be different?”

His spirit form looks at mine as if I’m telling him an absurd story. “You know not of the ultimatum I attempted, do you?”

“No, I don’t! What are you talking about?”

“Three months ago . . . three months ago from *my* perspective, I halted all tribute to the gods, refusing to obey them blindly any longer. I had always doubted they were as mighty as they claimed, so I demanded to see their true faces. I told them that if Huaxia were to continue offering tribute, we must receive more in return. The gods responded only with warnings. Then, two weeks ago, I came down with this blasted pox.” He touches his face. Flower-shaped pustules bloom over his skin, the way his body looks in real life.

I waver on the farthest stretches of my capacity to process what’s happening. Two weeks ago from his perspective. Two hundred and twenty-one years from mine.

“They infected you?”

“Perhaps. At the very least, they left me to perish, even after I resumed the tributes.” Hatred erupts from him, hitting me like ice water through our mind link. “*Me*, the strongest pilot to ever live, who crafted a plan to end the war. This confirms my suspicion that they have no interest in letting that occur. I would guess the Hundun husks we offer are much too valuable to them. If we annihilated the Hunduns, they would receive no more.”

My mind spins at the reminder of the Hunduns.

“*This isn’t our planet!*” Yizhi’s words scour through my memories like a phantom wail.

“Did you know the truth about the Hunduns?” I choke out. “What they really are to this world? Of what we are to it?”

"Yes," Qin Zheng says, chillingly nonchalant. "The story of them as aggressive invaders and us as embattled defenders is useful fiction that maintains the resolve of the masses against the Hunduns. Those of us who reach the upper echelons of power know better. We need to, in order to know which studies and discoveries to nip in the bud. It is not difficult for an observant scholar to stumble upon findings that contradict our recorded history."

I wrench the Yellow Dragon around in midair. "We need to tell everyone."

"Absolutely not!" Qin Zheng seizes control of the Dragon, forcing it down from our considerable altitude. "This is the one matter I begrudgingly agree with the gods on. The fiction is effective. Exposing it would do more harm than good."

"What do you mean? How could telling the truth be—"

"You wish to rule? This is the cost!" He slaps the yīn-yáng realm's invisible ground. "Do you sincerely believe we can control and defend the entirety of Huaxia without maintaining certain illusions? Good pilots have always been in short supply, and I doubt that has changed, given how the war has gone nowhere. Revealing the truth would do nothing but dampen fighting spirits."

"So we lie to our entire world about why we're fighting? That's ridiculous!"

"Is it? Look how distraught you are, yet what can you do about our circumstances? The Hunduns will not cease their attacks, and we cannot cease to defend ourselves against them. Aside from creating turmoil in your heart, what practical difference has learning the truth made to you?"

I press my knuckles to my forehead, putting my everything into keeping myself from unraveling. "The truth means the Hunduns aren't mindless invaders. It means there's hope for peace."

"Peace?" Qin Zheng lets out a bitter laugh. "How shall we make peace with metallic bugs who cannot understand us?"

"Who says they can't? Didn't you hear the Water Emperor speaking in our heads?"

“Spare us . . . Please . . .” I remember it pleading as we drained it of qi with the Yellow Dragon near the end of our counterattack on the Zhou province.

“I heard no such thing,” Qin Zheng says, though a trace of uncertainty slows his words. I think he genuinely never experienced anything like it in his era. But two hundred years is a long time, and we humans might not be the only ones who’ve grown and evolved.

“Your brain was still thawing!” I point out. “Before I woke you up, my army fought a Metal-type Emperor, too. Fly back and ask any pilot who was there. They’ll tell you they heard it speak in their head.”

There’s no way any of them could forget that eerie voice stabbing into our minds, accompanied by a shrill melody, sending us all into unnatural panic. “Get out!” it said. “Leave us alone!”

I couldn’t comprehend what was happening then, but now it makes sense. So much of my world is making more sense.

Qin Zheng’s eyes flit side to side like he’s reading something. “Even if these extraordinarily rare Emperor-class Hunduns somehow developed this ability, did you manage any proper dialogue with it? Have any other Hunduns demonstrated the same capacity?”

“We didn’t know it was possible to try! But now we do, and surely we can figure out a way to communicate with—”

“The Hunduns will not indulge your delusions of peace! From their perspective, *we* are the invaders. The only way we can battle them with equal vigor is if we believe the same of them. This war has raged for centuries. How it started no longer matters. Many Rongdi tribes have folktales that tell of being ‘cast from the heavens as divine punishment.’ This suggests our ancestors were criminals exiled to this planet. We would not be accepted back to wherever they originated.”

A sickness crawls over me. *Ancestors. Criminals.* How deep and ugly does the truth go?

I can barely think. I am so tired of these lies upon lies upon lies from those in power. The last thing I want to do is become the one maintaining them.

“Besides,” Qin Zheng adds, “so long as the gods rule over us, they will not allow any prospect of peace. However,” he leans close and drops his voice, “if you attempt to publicize the truth, I will not wait for the gods to end you. I will do it myself. Then I shall ensure your words are remembered as hysterical nonsense.”

I flinch from his piercing gaze, though the threat isn’t shocking when I remember who I’m dealing with. These eyes have set sight on countless enemies before watching them surrender or perish. It’s honestly laughable that I brought up the word “peace” around him. This is Qin Zheng. Qin Fucking Zheng. I still can’t quite believe he’s alive before me, resurrected out of stories and legends, transcending time and death.

But this is no longer the world he ruled.

“I’d like to see how you’d pull that off when you have no idea how the modern world works,” I say, refusing to cower.

“I have perused enough of your memories to be certain the masses would believe my word over yours, Iron Widow.”

The Yellow Dragon hits the ground in a hefty, shuddering landing, having been descending by his will this whole time. Horror trembles at my core at the reminder that memories can spill across a mind link. How much has he learned of my life?

“You’re really willing to bet on that?” I hold his stare in the yīn-yáng realm despite the icy nausea creeping through me.

After a lengthy silence, he cocks his head, gaze softening. “Do you not wish for your partner back?”

I wince as an image flashes in a deeper layer of my consciousness, that of a partial body suspended in a fluid-filled glass tank. I can’t admit it’s . . . it’s . . .

“The gods are bluffing.” Words tumble out of me. “There’s no way, just no way, that someone can come back from that.”

“The gods are capable of more than we can comprehend. The technological information they throw to us in exchange for our tribute is no doubt a mere fraction of their knowledge.”

“Then how did you think you could bargain with them?”

“Because I would rather die fighting than languish in servitude. Is that not why *your* first impulse upon receiving their message was to hunt for them?”

Through the Dragon’s eyes, I glance around the desolate landscape we’ve landed in, utterly different from the forests on the other side of the Kunlun Mountains. Wind sweeps up curls of sand like glimmering stardust under the full moon. An unknown territory I entered out of a sheer, seething desire to confront the gods, despite knowing logically I cannot win.

“I won’t find the gods by wandering like this, though, will I?” I remark, more to myself than to Qin Zheng. I feel like I aged a decade in this one day. How was it just this morning that I was charging out from the Sui-Tang frontier with the cautious hope of retaking the Zhou province and leveraging it against the government? Now neither the Sui-Tang command center nor the central government exist anymore. I crushed them both to rubble.

Skies, did I really do that? How am I supposed to clean up this mess?

“This is folly indeed.” Qin Zheng’s eyes fall shut. “The wiser move would be to return to Chang’an and abide by the gods’ commands for now. If we are to challenge them, we ought to formulate a more concrete plan.”

We. The word catches at my mind like a thorn.

There is no “we,” I want to insist.

Yet . . . isn’t there?

I study Qin Zheng’s spirit form, sitting like he’s deep in meditation, shockingly composed for someone who woke up to find he overslept for two centuries. He is undeniably the most powerful co-pilot I could have. While we disagree on revealing the truth of

the Hunduns, we have the same goal of challenging the gods. I'm not sure I can physically activate the Yellow Dragon again without him. He's also not wrong about going back to Chang'an. We won't find the Heavenly Court by blindly flying. We have to track its movements, plan a proper trajectory, something more.

When Qin Zheng's eyes stay shut and the Yellow Dragon remains on the ground, I realize he's leaving the decision to take off to me. Why? He cannot be someone used to yielding power.

Or is he? Maybe he's still too dazed from his thawing to pilot properly. What do I really know about him? His name. His power. His accomplishments. But who is he beyond the legend of a prostitute's son who united seven warring nations into Huaxia? I have no clue besides what I experienced in his mind realm: countless *egui*, hungry ghosts, clawing through a frozen sea. Why is it like that? What did he go through that the stories don't speak of? How did he get those streaking scars over one side of his face? Who did he leave behind in his century?

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't know.

No matter how hard I reach, I can't access any of his memories. Whatever.

I propel the Dragon into flight again. It's better than sitting around doing nothing.

He makes no effort to influence the Dragon's movements. As I fly over endless stretches of sand, I almost wish he would help. Now that I've lost my momentum and adrenaline, just pushing the Dragon forward is a strenuous endeavor. I doubt I can keep moving for much longer. I can't wait to settle down and rest.

When we finally approach the Kunlun Mountains again, a string of pings inside the Dragon's cockpit startles me.

Crap. We must've flown out of range of the radio wave transmitters in the trucks I placed around the mountains. I'd destroyed