

“The Days of the War, as Red as Blood, as Dark as Bile”

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The Days of the War, as Red as Blood, as Dark as Bile

In the old days, the phoenix, the vermillion bird, was a sign of peace and prosperity to come; a sign of a virtuous ruler under whom the land would thrive.

But those are the days of the war; of a weak child-Empress, successor to a weak Emperor; the days of burning planets and last-ditch defences; of moons as red as blood and stars as dark as bile.

WHEN THIEN BAO WAS TWELVE YEARS OLD, SECOND AUNT CAME to live with them.

She was a small, spry woman with little tolerance for children; and even less for Thien Bao, whom she grudgingly watched over while Mother worked in the factories, churning out the designs for new kinds of sharp-kites and advance needle ships.

“You are over pampered,” she’d say, as she busied herself at the stove preparing the midday meal. “An only child, indeed.” She didn’t approve of Thien Bao’s name, either—it was a boy’s name that meant “Treasure from Heaven”, and she thought Mother shouldn’t have used it for a girl, no matter how much trouble she and Father might have had having children at all.

Thien Bao asked Mother why Second Aunt was so angry; Mother looked away for a while, her eyes focused on something Thien Bao couldn’t see. “Your aunt had to leave everything behind when she came here.”

“Everything?” Thien Bao asked.

“Her compartment and her things; and her husband.” Mother’s face twisted, in that familiar way when she was holding back tears. “You remember your Second Uncle, don’t you?”

Thien Bao didn’t: or perhaps she did—a deep voice, a smile, a smell of machine oil from the ships, which would never quite go away. “He’s dead,” she said, at last. Like Third Aunt, like Cousin Anh, like Cousin Thu. Like Father; gone to serve at the edge of Empire-controlled space, fallen in the rebel attack that had overwhelmed the moons of the Eighth Planet. “Isn’t he?”

Those were the days of the dead; when every other morning seemed to see Grandmother adding new holos to the ancestral altar; every visitor spoke in hushed voices, as if Thien Bao weren’t old enough to understand the war, or the devastation it brought.

Mother had the look again, debating whether to tell Thien Bao grown-up things. “He was a very brave man. He could have left, but he waited until everyone had finished evacuating.” Mother sighed. “He never left. The rebel ships bombed the city until everything was ashes; your aunt was on the coms with him when—” she swallowed, looked away again. “She saw him die. That’s why she’s angry.”

Thien Bao mulled on this for a while. “They had no children,” she said, at last, thinking of Second Aunt sitting before the altar, grumbling that it was wrong to see him there, that he had died childless and had no place among the ancestors. But of course, the rules had changed in the days of the dead.

“No,” Mother said.

It was a sad thought, bringing a queer feeling in Thien Bao’s belly. “She can remarry, can’t she?”

“Perhaps,” Mother said, and Thien Bao knew it was a lie. She resolved to be nicer to Second Aunt from now on; and to pray to her ancestors so that Second Aunt would find another husband, and have children to comfort her in her old age.

That night, she dreamt of Second Uncle.

He stood in some shadowy corridor, one hand feverishly sending instructions to the structure's command nodes—speaking fast and in disjointed words, in a tone that he no doubt wanted to be reassuring. Thien Bao couldn't make out his face—it was a dark blur against the shaking of the walls; but she felt the impact that collapsed everything, like a spike-punch through reality, strong enough to shatter her bones—and heard the brief burst of static, the silence falling on the coms, as he died.

The dream changed, after that. She was soaring above a green planet, watching two huge attack ships confronting one another. There was no telling who was the rebels and who was the Empire. With the clarity of dreams she knew that one ship was scanning the other for antimatter weapons; and that the other ship, who had none, was preparing pinhead bombs, in the hopes of breaching the hull at its one weak point. Below, on the planet—again, with that strange clarity—people as tiny as ants were evacuating, struggling to fit onto a few aged shuttles that would carry them no further than the minuscule moon above.

They didn't matter—or, rather, they couldn't be allowed to matter, not if the mission were to be accomplished. Somehow, in the dream, she knew this; that, even if she had been ordered to save them, she wouldn't have been capable of it, wouldn't have made the slightest difference.

She floated closer, unfurling iridescent wings as wide as the trail of a comet; and prepared to unleash her own weapons, to put an end to the fight.

The scene seemed to freeze and blur, disintegrating like a hundred water droplets on a pane of glass—each droplet was a character, one of the old fashioned ones from Old Earth that no one save elite scholars knew how to read—column upon column of incomprehensible words in a red as bright as the vermillion of imperial decrees, scrolling downwards until they filled her entire field of vision—and they, too, faded, until only a few words remained—and though they were still in the old script, she *knew* in her heart of hearts what they meant, from beginning to end.

Little sister, you are fated to be mine.

Mine.

And then the words were gone, and she woke up, shaking, in the embrace of her own cradle-bed.



THERE WERE four mindships, built in the finest workshops of the Empire, in a time when the numbered planets were scattered across dozens of solar systems—when court memorials reached the outer stations, and magistrates were posted in far-flung arms of the galaxy.

Four mindships; one for each cardinal direction, raised by the best scholars to be the pride of the Empire; their claimers of tribute from barbaric, inferior dominions; the showcase of their technological apex, beings of grace and beauty, as terrible to behold as any of the Eight Immortals.



AFTER THAT, the dreams never stopped. They came irregularly—once a week, once a month—but they always came. In every one of them she was in a different place—above a planet, orbiting a moon, approaching a space station—and every time the war was in her dreams. In every dream she watched ships attack one another; soldiers fighting hand to hand in a desperate defence of a city's street, their faces featureless, their uniforms in bloody tatters without insignia, impossible to differentiate. She scoured clean the surface of planets, rained war-kites on devastated temple complexes, disabled space domes' weapons—and woke up, shivering, staring at the imprint of words she shouldn't have been able to understand.

Mine.

Come to me, little sister. Come to me and put an end to all of this.

And yet; and yet, the war still went on.

By daylight, Mother and Second Aunt spoke in hushed tones of the fall of planets; of the collapse of orbitals; of the progress of rebel forces across the Empire—ever closer to the First Planet and the Purple Forbidden City.

"The Lily Empress will protect us," Thien Bao said. "Won't she?"

Mother shook her head, and said nothing. But later, when Thien Bao was playing *The Battle for Indigo Mountain*, her implants synched with the house's entertainment centre, she heard them—Grandmother, Mother and Second Aunt, talking quietly among themselves in the kitchen around pork buns and tea. She froze the game into a thin, transparent layer over her field of vision, and crept closer to listen in.

"You should have said something," Grandmother said.

"What do you want me to say?" Mother sounded tired; angry, but the scary kind of anger, the bone-deep one that lasted for days or months. "Everything would be a lie."

"Then learn to lie," Second Aunt said, drily. There was the sound of chewing: betel leaf and areca, the only luxury she'd allow herself. "For her sake."

"You think I haven't tried? She's a bright child. She'll figure it out the moment I open my mouth. Her wealthier schoolmates have all left, and she's got to realise what a desert the city is becoming. Everyone is leaving."

"I know," Second Aunt said. "If we had the money..."

Mother sighed, and got up to pour more tea into her fist-sized cup. There was no money, Thien Bao knew; all of Grandmother's savings had gone into paying for the watered down food in the markets; for the rice mixed with blackened grit and ashes; for the fish sauce cut with brown colouring, which never tasted right no matter how much lime or sugar Thien Bao added to it.

Mother said, finally, "Money might not matter anymore soon. There's word at the factories—that Magistrate Viec wants to evacuate."

Silence; and then Grandmother, in a hushed voice, "They can't—the rebel fleet is still not in the solar system, is it?"

"No," Second Aunt said. "But it's getting closer; and they have mind-ships. If they wanted to hit us, they could send those as advance scouts. Wouldn't be enough to take the planet, but it would cost us much."

"The magistrate said the Lily Empress will send her armies next month, after the end of the rainy season." Mother's voice was still uncertain.

“Ha,” Second Aunt said. “Maybe she will , maybe she won’t. But even if she did; do you truly believe that will be enough to save us, little sister? The armies are badly run, and overwhelmed as it is.”

Mother said, at last, “All we need is one victory. One message to tell the rebels that their advance stops here, at the Sixth Planet; that to go further into the Empire will cost them dearly. They’re overstretched, too, it wouldn’t take much to make them stop...” Her voice was pleading.

“They might be overstretched,” Second Aunt said, and there was pity in her voice. “And you’re right. Maybe all it would take is a crushing victory; but we don’t have that within our grasp, and you know it.”

There was silence, then, as heavy as the air before the monsoon. Thien Bao turned back to her game; but it all seemed fake now, the units aligned on the artificial landscape, the battles where no one bled, which you could start, again and again, until you succeeded in the assigned mission—where no one ever felt fear like a fist of ice tightening in their guts; or the emptiness of loss, drawing closer with every passing hour.



IN THE first days of the war, the mindships were lost; their crews scattered by court decrees, recalled in haste to defend planets that had already fallen; their cradle pods neglected by the alchemists and programmers; their missions assigned irregularly, and then not at all.

One by one, they fell.

Golden Tortoise trying to evade pursuit by a vast rebel fleet, dove into deep spaces with an aged pilot as his only crew; and never re-emerged.

Azure Dragon went silent after the Battle of Huong He, plummeting downwards through the atmosphere in a shower of molten metal, her fragments peppering the burnt earth of the prefecture like so many seeds of grief.

White Unicorn completed the emergency evacuation of the Twelfth Planet, sustaining his trembling star-drives well past the point of bursting. He landed, shaking, bleeding his guts in machine-oil and torn rivets; and never flew again.

And as for Vermillion Phoenix—the strongest, most capable of all four ships...she, too, stopped speaking on the Empire's coms-channels; but her missions had been too well defined. She had been given leave to wage war on the Empire's enemies; and in those days when the Empire tore itself apart and brother denounced brother, father slew son and daughter abandoned mother, who could have told who the enemies of the Empire were, anymore?

Vermillion Phoenix *went rogue.*



IT TOOK two months, in the end, for Magistrate Viec to give the evacuation order. By then, the rebel fleet had entered the solar system; and the first and second moons of the Sixth Planet had fallen. The army of the Empress retreated, its ships slowly growing larger in the sky, trailing the sickly green light of ruptured drives. The few soldiers the magistrate could spare oversaw the evacuation, their faces bored—most of their comrades were up above, fighting the last-ditch battle in the heavens.

Thien Bao stood in the huddle at the spaceport with her family; holding Grandmother's hand while the old woman engaged in a spirited talk with Second Aunt and Mother, complaining about everything from the wait to the noise of their neighbours.

She watched the army ships through the windows—and the growing shadows of the rebel mindships, creeping closer and closer—and wondered when their own evacuation ships would be ready. Around her, people's faces were tight, and they kept looking at the screens; at the queue that hadn't moved; at the impassive faces of the militia.

Ahead was a floating palanquin: an odd sight, since such a thing could only belong to a high official; but those officials would have been able to jump to the front of the queue. Thien Bao tugged at Grandmother's sleeve. "Grandmother?"

"Yes, child?" Grandmother didn't even turn.

"Who's in the palanquin?"

“Oh.” Grandmother’s gaze raked the palanquin from base to top, taking in the black lacquered exterior, embossed with golden birds; and the crane with spread wings atop the arched roof. “Probably Lady Oanh—you wouldn’t remember her, but she and your mother were members of the same poetry club, in the days before she withdrew from public life. Always an eccentric, that woman.” She frowned. “I thought she had a mindship of her own, though—funny seeing her here.”

“Lady Oanh?”

But Grandmother had already turned back to her conversation with Mother and Second Aunt.

Above, the army ships hadn’t moved; but Thien Bao could see the shapes of the rebel mindships more clearly, emerging from the deep spaces just long enough to power weapons. They were going to...

She knew it a fraction of a second before it happened—saw the corona of light filling the sky like an aurora above the poles—saw it spread in deathly silence, engulf the largest of the army ships—saw the ship shudder, and crack like an egg shell—the horrible thing was that it still held together, leaking a cloud of darkened fluids that spread across the surface of the sky—that it shuddered, again and again, but did not fall apart, though surely the life support systems had to be gone, with that kind of impact; though everyone onboard had to be dead, or dying, or worse...

In the silence that followed, a man screamed, his voice deep and resonant; and the crowd went mad.

Without warning, people pressed themselves closer to the docks; elbowing each other out of the way, sending others sprawling to the floor. Thien Bao found herself crushed against Grandmother, struggling to remain upright against the press—arms pushed against her, separating her from her family, and she was lost amidst unfamiliar faces, pushed and pulled until it was all she could do to stand upright; until it was all she could do to breathe—

The darkness at the edge of her field of vision descended; and the red characters of her dreams scrolled by, resolving themselves into the same, sharp, lapidary message.

Little sister. Call me. Call me, and put an end to this.

She hung in the darkness of space, the ion exhaust of her drives trailing behind her, opening like a vast fan; every part of her sharp, honed to a killing edge—a living weapon, carrying enough firepower to end it all, to make the rebel fleet cinders, to crack them open as they'd cracked open the army ship. All she had to do was call, reach out to the vast, dark part of herself that moved between the stars...

Someone grabbed her. Cold hands tightened on her shoulders, and pulled her upwards before she could stifle a scream; and it all went away, the sense of vastness; the red characters and the presence of something other than her in her own mind.

She sat in the darkness; it took her a moment to realise she was inside the palanquin, and that the slightly clearer form in front of her was an old woman.

Lady Oanh.

"Child," the old woman said. Life-support wires trailed from every end of the palanquin, as though she sat on the centre of a spider's web. The skin of her face, in the dim light, had the pallor and thinness of wet rice paper; and her eyes were two pits of deeper darkness. "Anh's and Nhu's daughter, is it not? I was a friend of your mother; in a different lifetime."

Everything was eerily silent: no noise from outside, no hint of the riot that had started on the docks—of course the palanquin would have the best ambiance systems, but the overall effect—that of hanging in the same bubble of artificially stilled time—made Thien Bao's skin crawl. "Lady Oanh. Why—?"

Mother and Second Aunt would be freaking out; they'd always told her not to trust strangers; and here she was in the middle of a riot, stuck with someone who might or might not be a friend—but then why would Lady Oanh bother to kidnap her? She was a scholar, a public figure; or had been, once. Nevertheless... Thien Bao reached into her feed, and activated the location loop—she'd sworn to Mother she was a grown up and didn't need it any longer, and now she was glad Mother hadn't listened to her.

The old woman smiled, an expression that did not reach into her eyes. “You would prefer to be outside? Trust me, it is much safer here.” A feed blinked in the lower left-hand corner of Thien Bao’s vision, asking for her permission to be displayed. She granted it; and saw outside.

The palanquin floated on its repulsive field, cutting a swathe through the press of people. Thien Bao knew she wouldn’t have lasted a moment out there, that she’d have been mown down as others sought to reach the shuttles before her. But still...

Lady Oanh’s voice was quiet, but firm. “You looked set to be trampled by the mob.”

“You didn’t have to—”

“No,” Lady Oanh said. “You’re right. I didn’t.”

How old was she? Thien Bao wondered. How long did it take for skin to become this pale; for eyes to withdraw this deep into the face, as if she stood on the other side of death already? And did all of it, this aging, this putting death at bay, confer any of the wisdom of Thien Bao’s ancestors?

“A riot is no place for freezing,” Lady Oanh said. “Though in someone your age, it can possibly be excused.”

She hadn’t noticed the trance then; or that anything was wrong. Then again, why should she? She was certainly wise with her years, but wisdom was not omniscience. “I’m sorry,” Thien Bao said. But she remembered the sense of vastness; the coiled power within her. If it was real; if it wasn’t dreams; if she could somehow answer...

Call me, little sister. Let us put an end to all this.

Thien Bao said, “Grandmother said—you had a mindship—”

Lady Oanh laughed; genuinely amused it seemed. “*The Carp that Leapt Over the Stream?* It seemed senseless to hoard her services. She’s part of the fleet that will evacuate her. That’s where we’re going, in fact.”

Lady Oanh’s eyes focused on something beyond Thien Bao, and she nodded. “I’ll send a message to notify your kin that I’m helping you onboard a ship. That should alleviate their worries.”

If they didn’t all die first from rebel fire; if the remaining army ship held—if if if...

A gentle rocking, indicating the palanquin was moving forward again—to the waiting ships, to safety—except that there was no safety, not anywhere. Outside, the remaining army ship was trying to contain the rebel mindships; shuddering, its hull pitted and cracked. From time to time, a stray shot would hit the spacesport's shields, and the entire structure around them would shudder, but it held, it still held.

But for how long?

"I hate them," Thien Bao said.

"Who? The rebels?" Lady Oanh's gaze was sharp. "It's as much the fault of the Court as theirs, child. If the Great Virtue Emperor and the Lily Empress hadn't been weak, more concerned with poetry than with their armies; if their officials hadn't encouraged them, repeating that nonsense about adherence to virtue being the only safeguard the Empire needed..."

To hear her, so casually criticising the Empress—but then Second Aunt and Mother had done the same. "I wish..." Thien Bao sounded childish, she knew; like a toddler denied a threat. "I wish someone were strong enough to stop the rebel armies. To kill them once and for all."

Lady Oanh's face did not move, but she shook her head. "Be careful, child."

How could wanting peace be a bad thing? She understood nothing, that old, pampered woman who didn't have to fight through the crowd, who didn't live with fear in her belly, with the litany of the family dead in her mind—

"Killing is easy," Lady Oanh said. "But that has never stopped the devastation of war."

"It would be a start," Thien Bao said, defiantly.

"Perhaps," Lady Oanh said. She shook her head. "It would take a great show of strength from the Empire to stop them, and this is something we're incapable of, at the present time. The seeds of our defeat were in place long before the war, I fear; and—"

She never finished her sentence. Thien Bao saw nothing; but *something* struck the shields, wringing them dry like wet laundry; and going past

them, a network of cracks and fissures spreading throughout the pillars of the spaceport and the huge glass windows.

Look out, Thien Bao wanted to say; but the wall nearest to them shuddered and fell apart, dragging down chunks of the ceiling in its wake. Something struck her in the back of the head; and everything disappeared in an excruciating, sickening crunch.



WHEN SHE went silent, Vermillion Phoenix had had an officer of the Embroidered Guard as her only crew—not a blood relative, but a sworn oath-sister, who had been with the ship for decades and would never hear of abandoning her post.

There is no record of what happened to the officer. Being human, without any kind of augmentation, she likely died of old age, while the mindship—as ships did—went on, unburdened.

Unburdened does not mean free from grief, or solitude. In the centuries that followed, several people claimed to have had visions of the ship; to have heard her voice calling to them; or dreamt of battles—past and present—to which she put a brutal end. There were no connections between them; no common ancestry or closeness in space or time; but perhaps the mindship recognised something else: a soul, torn from its fragile flesh envelope and reincarnated, time and time again, until everything was made right.



THIEN BAO woke up, and all was dust and grit—choking her, bending her to the ground to convulsively cough until her lungs felt wrung dry. When she rose at last, shaking, she saw the ruins of the palanquin, half-buried under rubble; and a few cut wires, feebly waving in the dim light—and the mob, further into the background, still struggling to reach the ships. She'd thought the wall would collapse, but it stood in spite of the massive

fissures crossing it from end to end; and for some incongruous reason it reminded her of the fragile celadon cups Father had so treasured, their green surface shot with such a network of cracks it seemed a wonder they still held together.

Around her, chunks of the ceiling dotted the area—and the other thing, the one she avoided focusing on—people lying still or twitching or moaning, lying half under rubble—with limbs bent at impossible angles, and the stained white of bones laid bare at the heart of bleeding wounds; and spilled guts; and the laboured breathing of those in agony...

Those were the days of the dead, and she had to be strong.

At the edge of her field of vision—as faint as her paused game of *Battle for Indigo Mountain*, in another lifetime—the red characters of her dream hovered, and a faint sense of a vast presence, watching over her from afar.

“Lady Oanh? Mother? Second Aunt?” Her location loop was still running; but it didn’t seem to have picked up anything from them—or perhaps it was the spaceport network that was the problem, flickering in and out of existence like a dying heartbeat. It was nonsense anyway; who expected the network to hold, through that kind of attack.

The sky overhead was dark with the shadow of a ship—not the army ship, it had to be one of the mindships. Its hatches were open, spewing dozens of little shuttles, a ballet slowly descending towards them: rebels, come to finish the work they had started.

She had to move.

When she pulled herself upright, pain shot through her neck and arms like a knife-stab; but she forced herself to move on, half-crawling, half-walking, until she found Lady Oanh.

The old woman lay in the rubble, staring at the torn dome of the spaceport. For a moment, an impossibly long moment, Thien Bao thought she was alive; but no one could be alive with the lower half of their body crushed; and so much fluid and blood leaking from broken tubes. “I’m sorry,” she said, but it wasn’t her fault; it had never been her fault. Overhead, the shuttles were still descending, as slowly as the executioner’s blade. There was no time. There was

no safety; not anywhere; there was no justice; no fairness; no end to the war and the fear and the sick feeling in her head and in her belly.

A deafening sound in her ears, loud enough to cover the distant sounds of panic—she realised that it was her location loop, displaying an arrow and an itinerary to join whatever was left of her family; if they, like Lady Oanh, hadn't died, if there was still hope...

She managed to pull herself upwards—staggered, following the directions—left right left going around the palanquin around the dead bodies around the wounded who grasped at her with clawed hands—days of the dead, she had to be strong had to be strong...

She found Grandmother, Mother and Second Aunt standing by the barriers that had kept the queue orderly, once—which were now covered in dust, like everything else around them. There was no greeting, or sign of relief. Mother merely nodded as if nothing were wrong, and said, "We need to move."

"It's past time for that," Second Aunt said, her gaze turned towards the sky.

Thien Bao tried to speak; to say something about Lady Oanh, but no words would come out of her mouth.

Mother's eyes rolled upwards for a brief moment as she accessed the network. "*The Carp that Leapt Over the Stream*," she said. "Its shuttles were parked at the other end of the terminal, and there'll be fewer people there. Come on."

Move move move—Thien Bao felt as though everything had turned to tar; she merely followed as Second Aunt and Mother elbowed their way through the crowd; and onto a corridor that was almost deserted compared to the press of people. "This way," Mother said.

Thien Bao turned, briefly, before they limped into the corridor, and saw that the first of the rebel shuttles had landed some way from them, disgorging a flood of yellow-clad troops with featureless helmets.

It was as if she were back in her dreams, save that her dreams had never been this pressing—and that the red words on the edge of her field of vision kept blinking, no matter how she tried to dismiss them.

Mother was right; they needed to keep moving—past the corridor, into another, wider concourse that was mostly scattered ruin, following the thin thread of people and hoping that the shuttles would still be there, that the mindship would answer to them with Lady Oanh dead. By then, they had been joined by other people, among whom a wounded woman carried on the shoulder of a soldier—no introductions, no greetings, but a simple acknowledgement that they were all in this together. It wasn't hope that kept them going; it was sheer stubbornness, one foot in front of the other, one breath and the next and the next; the fear of falling behind the others, of slowing everyone down and ruining everything.

Ahead, the mass of a shuttle, seen behind glass windows; getting agonisingly, tantalisingly closer. "This way," Second Aunt said; and then they saw the yellow-clad troops in front of them, deployed to bar the passage across the concourse—and the other troops, too, blocking the passageways, herding people off the shuttle in the eerie silence.

Mother visibly sagged. "It will be fine," she said, and her voice was a lie. "They'll just want to check our identity and process us—"

But it was the soldier with them who panicked—who turned away, lightning-fast, still carrying his wounded charge—and in the dull silence that followed, Thien Bao heard the click of weapons being armed.

"No!" Mother said, sharply. As if in a dream Thien Bao saw her move in front of the yellow-clad soldiers, with no more apparent thought than if she'd been strolling through the marketplace—and she wanted to scream but couldn't, as the weapons found their mark and Mother crumpled, bloodless and wrung dry, her corpse so small it seemed impossible that she had once been alive.

Second Aunt moved at last, her face creased with anger—not towards Mother or the soldier, but straight at the rebel troops. "How dare you—"

There was the sound again; of weapons being armed.

No.

No. No.

Everything went red: the characters from her dreams, solidifying once more in front of her; the voice speaking into her mind.

Little sister.

And, weeping, Thien Bao reached out, into the void between stars, and called to the ship.



WHEN THE child named Thien Bao was born on the Sixth Planet, there were signs—a room filled with the smell of machine-oil, and iridescent reflections on the walls, tantalising characters from a long lost language. Had the birth-master not been desperately busy trying to staunch the mother's unexpected bleeding, and calm down the distraught father, she would have noticed them.

Had she looked, too, into the newborn's eyes as she took her first, trembling breath, the birth-master would have seen the other sign: the hint of a deep, metallic light in the huge pupils; a light that spread from end to end of the eye like a wash of molten steel, a presage of things to come.



SHE WAS vast, and old, and terrible; her wings stretched around entire planets, as iridescent as pearls fished from the depths; the trail of her engines the colour of jade, of delicate celadon—and where she passed, she killed.

She disintegrated the fleet that waited on the edge of the killing field; scoured clean the surface of the small moon, heedless of the screams of those trapped upon it; descended to the upper limit of the planet's atmosphere, and incinerated the two mindships in orbit, and the fragile ship that still struggled to defend against them; and the tribunal where the militia still fought the recently landed invasion force; and the magistrate in his chambers, staring at the tactical map of the planet and wondering how to save what he could from the rebels. In the spaceport, where the largest number of people congregated, she dropped ion bombs until no sign of life remained; until every shuttle had exploded or stopped moving.

Then there was silence; and lack of strife; and then there was peace.

And then she was merely Thien Bao again, standing in the ruins of the spaceport, in the shadow of the great ship she had called on.

There was nothing left. Merely dust, and bodies—so many bodies, a sea of them, yellow-clad, black-clad, civilians and soldiers and rebels all mingled together, their blood pooling on the cracked floor; and a circle around her, where Mother lay dead; and the soldier, and the wounded woman; and the rebels who had shot her—and by her side, Second Aunt and Grandmother, bloodless and pale and unmoving. It was unclear whether it was the mindship's weapons they had died of, or the rebels', or both; but Thien Bao stood in a circle of the dead, the only one alive as far as she could see.

The only one—it couldn't—couldn't—

Little sister. The voice of the mindship was as deep as the sea. *I have come, and ended it, as you requested.*

That wasn't what she'd wanted—that—all of it, any of it—

And then she remembered Lady Oanh's voice, her wry comment. Be careful, child. Be careful.

I bring peace, and an end to strife. Is that not what the Empire should desire?

No. No.

Come with me, little sister. Let us put an end to this war.

A great victory, Thien Bao thought, hugging herself; feeling hot and cold at the same time, her bones chilled within their sheaths of flesh, a churning in her gut like the beginning of grief. Everyone had wanted a great victory over the rebels, something that would stop them, once and for all, that would tell them that the Empire still stood, still could make them pay for every planet they took.

And she'd given them that; she and the ship. Exactly that.

Come. We only have each other, the ship said, and it was the bitter truth. There was nothing left on the planet—not a living soul—and of the rebel army that had entered the solar system, nothing and no one left either, just the husks of destroyed ships drifting in the emptiness of space.

Come, little sister.

And she did—for where else could she go; what else could she do, that would have made any sense?



IN THE old days, the phoenix, the vermillion bird, was a sign of peace and prosperity to come; a sign of a virtuous ruler under whom the land would thrive.

In the days of the war, it is still the case; if one does not enquire how peace is bought, how prosperity is paid for—how a mindship and a child scour the numbered planets, dealing death to rebels and Empire alike, halting battles by bloody massacres; and making anyone who raises arms pay dearly for the privilege of killing.

Meanwhile, on the inner planets begins the painful work of reconstruction—raising pagodas and tribunals and shops from the ashes of war, and hanging New Year's Eve garlands along avenues that are still dust and ruins, praying to the ancestors for a better future; for a long life; and good fortune; and descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

There is no virtuous ruler; but perhaps—perhaps just, there is a manner of peace and prosperity, bought in seas of blood spilled by a child.

And perhaps—perhaps just—it is all worth it. Perhaps it is all one can hope for, in the days of the war.