

The Unstrung Zither

by Yoon Ha Lee

Yoon Ha Lee published her first story ten years ago, when she was still an undergraduate at Cornell University. She subsequently went on to Stanford University's teacher education program in math and a stint in teaching. These days she lives in Pasadena, California, with her husband and their daughter. Her Web site (egasus.cityofveils.co) lists Anne McCaffrey and Orson Scott Card as two of her influences; perhaps you'll see their imprint on this story, but we think you'll find it pretty distinctive on its own.

"They don't look very dangerous," Xiao Ling Yun said to the aide. Ling Yun wished she understood what Phoenix Command wanted from her. Not that she minded the excuse to take a break from the composition for two flutes and hammered dulcimer that had been stymieing her for the past two weeks.

Through a one-way window in the observation chamber, Xiao Ling Yun saw five adolescents sitting cross-legged on the floor in a semicircle. Before them was a tablet and two brushes. No ink; these were not calligraphy brushes. One of the adolescents, a girl with short, dark hair, leaned over and drew two characters with quick strokes. All five studied the map that appeared on the tablet.

"Nevertheless," the aide said. "They attempted to assassinate the Phoenix General. We are fortunate to have captured them."

The aide wrote something on her own tablet, and a map appeared. She circled a region of the map. The tablet enlarged it until it filled the screen. "Circles represent gliders," the aide said. "Triangles represent dragons."

Ling Yun peered at the formations. "Who's winning?"

At the aide's instigation, the tablet replayed the last move. A squadron of dragons engaged a squadron of gliders. One dragon turned white—white for death—and vanished from the map. The aide smiled. "The assassins are starting to slip."

Ling Yun had thought that the Phoenix General desired the services of a musician to restore order to the fractious ashworlds. She was not the best person for such a purpose, nor the worst: a master musician, yes, but without a sage's philosophical bent of mind. Perhaps they had chosen her on account of her uncle's position as a logistician. She was pragmatic enough not to be offended by the possibility.

“I had not expected prisoners to be offered entertainment,” Ling Yun said, a little dubious. She was surprised that they hadn’t been executed, in fact.

“It is not entertainment,” the aide said reprovingly. “Every citizen has a right to education.”

Of course. The government’s stance was that the ashworlds already belonged to the empire, whatever the physical reality might be. “Including the classical arts, I presume,” she said. “But I am a musician, not a painter.” Did they want her to tutor the assassins? And if so, why?

“Music is the queen of the arts, is it not?” the aide said.

She had not expected to be discussing the philosophy of music with a soldier. “According to tradition, yes,” Ling Yun said carefully. Her career had been spent writing music that never strayed too much from the boundaries of tradition.

The most important music lesson she had had came not from her tutor, but from a servant in her parents’ house. The servant, whose name Ling Yun had deliberately forgotten, liked to sing as he stirred the soup or pounded the day’s bread. He didn’t have a particularly notable voice. It wavered in the upper register and his vowels drifted when he wasn’t paying attention. (She didn’t tell him any of this. She didn’t talk to him at all. Her parents would have disapproved.) But the servant had two small children who helped him with his tasks, and they chanted the songs, boisterously out of tune.

From watching that servant and his children, Ling Yun learned that the importance of music came not from its ability to move the five elements, but from its ability to affect the heart. She wanted to write music that anyone could hum, music that anyone could enjoy. It was the opposite of the haughty ideal that her tutor taught her to strive toward. Naturally, Ling Yun kept this thought to herself.

The aide scribbled some more on the tablet. In response, an image of a mechanical dragon drew itself across the tablet. It had been painted white, with jagged red markings on its jointed wings.

“Is this a captured dragon?” Ling Yun asked.

“Unfortunately, no,” the aide said. “We caught glimpses of two of the assassins as they came down on dragons, but the dragons disappeared as though they’d been erased. We want to know where they’re hiding, and how they’re

being hidden.”

Ling Yun stared at the dragon. Whoever had drawn it did not have an artist’s fluency of line. But everything was precise and carefully proportioned. She could see where the wings connected to the body and the articulations that made motion possible, even, if she squinted, some of the controls by the pilot’s seat.

“Who produced this?”

The aide turned her head toward the window. “The dark-haired girl did. Her name is Wu Wen Zhi.”

It was a masculine name, but they probably did things differently in the ashworlds. Ling Yun felt a rebellious twinge of approval.

Ling Yun said, “Wen Zhi draws you a picture, and you expect it to yield the ashworlders’ secrets. Surely she’s not as incompetent an assassin as all that. Or did you torture this out of her?”

“No, it’s part of the game they’re playing with the general,” the aide said.

“I don’t see the connection,” she said. And why was the general playing a game with them in the first place? *Wei qi* involved no such thing, nor had the tablet games she had played as a student.

The aide smiled as though she had heard the thought. “It personalizes the experience. When the game calculates the results of combat, it refers to the pilot’s emblem to determine her strengths and weaknesses. Take Wen Zhi’s dragon, for instance. First of all, the dragon’s design indicates that it specializes in close combat, as opposed to Mesketalioth’s—” she switched briefly to another dragon painting “—which has repeating crossbows mounted on its shoulders.” She returned to Wen Zhi’s white dragon. “However, notice the stiffness of the lines. The pilot is always alert, but in a way that makes her tense. This can be exploited.”

“The general has an emblem in the game, too, I presume,” Ling Yun said.

“Of course,” the aide said, but she didn’t volunteer to show it to Ling Yun. “Let me tell you about our five assassins.

“Wu Wen Zhi comes from Colony One.” The empire’s two original colonies had been given numbers rather than names. “Wen Zhi has tried to kill herself three times already. She doesn’t sleep well at night, but she refuses to meditate,

and she won't take medications."

I wouldn't either, Ling Yun thought.

"The young man with the long braid is Ko. He's lived on several of the ashworlds and speaks multiple languages, but his accent suggests that he comes from Arani. Interestingly enough, Ko alerted us to the third of Wen Zhi's suicide attempts. Wen Zhi didn't take this well.

"The scarred one sitting next to Ko is Mesketalioth. He's from Straken Okh. We suspect that he worked for Straken's intelligence division before he was recruited by the Dragon Corps.

"The girl with the light hair is Periet, although the others call her Perias. We haven't figured out why, and they look at us as though we're crazy when we ask them about it, although she'll answer to either name. Our linguists tell us that Perias is the masculine form of her name; our doctors confirm that she is indeed a girl. She comes from Kiris. Don't be fooled by her sweet manners. She's the one who destroyed Shang Yuan."

Ling Yun opened her mouth, then found her voice. "*Her?*" Shang Yuan had been a city of several million people. It had been obliterated during the Festival of Lanterns, for which it had been famous. "I thought that the concussive storm was a natural disaster."

The aide gave Ling Yun a singularly cynical look. "Natural disasters don't flatten every building in the city and cause all the lanterns to explode. It was an elemental attack."

"I suppose this is classified information."

"It is, technically, not that many people haven't guessed."

"How much help did she have?"

The aide's mouth twisted. "Ashworld Kiris didn't authorize the attack. As near as we can determine, Periet did it all by herself."

"All right," Ling Yun said. She paced to the one-way window and watched Periet-Perias, trying to map the massacre onto the girl's open, cheerful expression. "Who's the fifth one now skulking in a corner?"

“That’s Li Cheng Guo, from Colony Two,” the aide said. “He killed two of our guards on the first day. Actually, they all did their share of killing on the way in, although Periet takes the prize.”

“That’s terrible,” Ling Yun said. But what she was thinking was, *The ashworlds must be terribly desperate, to send children*. The Phoenix General had had the ashworlds’ leader assassinated two years ago; this must be their counterstroke. “So,” she said, “one assassin from each ashworld.” Colony One and Colony Two; Arani, Straken Okh, and Kiris. The latter three had been founded by nations that had since been conquered by the empire.

“Correct.” The aide rolled the brush around in her hand. “The Phoenix General wants you to discover the assassins’ secret.”

Oh no, Ling Yun thought. For all the honors that the empress had lavished on the Phoenix General, he was still known as the Mad General. He had started out as a glider pilot, and everyone knew that glider pilots were crazy. Their extreme affinity for fire and wood unbalanced their minds.

On the other hand, Ling Yun had a lifetime’s practice of bowing before those of greater standing, however much it chafed, and the man had produced undeniable results. She could respect that.

“I’m no soldier,” Ling Yun said, “and no interrogator. What would you like me to do?”

The aide smiled. “Each assassin has an emblem in the game.”

Ling Yun had a sudden memory of a self-portrait she had drawn when she was a child. It was still in the hallway of her parents’ house, to her embarrassment: lopsided face with tiny eyes and a dot for a nose, scribbly hair, arms spread wide. “Why did they agree to this game?” she asked.

“They are playing because it was that or die. But they have some hidden purpose of their own, and time may be running out. You must study the game—we’ll provide analyses for you, as we hardly expect you to become a tactician—and study the dragons. Compose a suite of five pieces, one for each dragon—for each pilot.”

“Pilot?”

“They’re pilots in their minds, although we’re only certain that Periet and

Mesketalioth have the training. Maybe the secret is just that they found blockade runners to drop them off.” The aide didn’t sound convinced.

“One piece for each dragon. You think that by translating their self-representations into music, the supreme art, you will learn their secret, and how to defeat them.”

“Precisely.”

“I will do what I can,” Xiao Ling Yun said.

“I’m sure you will,” the aide said.

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Xiao Ling Yun’s ancestors had worshipped dragons. At the harvest festival, they poured libations of rice wine to the twin dragons of the greatmoon and the smallmoon. When the empire’s skies were afire with the summer’s meteor showers, people would burn incense for the souls of the falling stars.

You could still see fire in the sky, most nights, festive and beautiful, but no one brought out incense. The light came from battles high in the atmosphere, battles between the ashworlders’ metal dragons and the empire’s Phoenix Corps.

When she was a child, Ling Yun’s uncle had made her a toy glider, a flimsy-looking thing of bamboo and paper, with tiny slivers to represent the wing-mounted flamethrowers. He had painted the red-and-gold emblem of the Phoenix Corps on each wing. “Uncle,” she asked, “why do we fight with fire when the gliders are made of wood? Isn’t it dangerous?”

Her uncle patted her hand and smiled. “Remember the cycle of elements, little one.”

She thought about it: metal cut wood, wood split earth, earth drank water, water doused fire, and—“Fire melts metal,” she said.

“Indeed,” he said. “The ashworlds abound in metal, mined from the asteroid belts. Therefore their dragons are built of metal. We must use fire to defeat metal.”

“But wood *burns*,” Ling Yun said, wondering, despite all her lessons and the habits of obedience, if her uncle were right in the head. She turned the glider

around in her hands, testing the paper wings. They flexed under her touch.

“So does the phoenix,” her uncle said.

Ling Yun squinted, trying to reconcile fire-defeats-metal with fire-burns-wood and fire-goes-down-in-flames.

Taking pity on her, her uncle added, “The phoenix is a symbol that came to us by conquest, from the southern spicelands.” He laughed at her wide eyes. “Oh, yes—do you think that for thousands and thousands of years, the empire has never been conquered? You’ll find all the old, ugly stories in the history books, of the Boar Banner and the Tiger Banner, the woman who brought down the wall, the Outsider Dynasty with its great fleets....”

Ling Yun took note of the things that he had mentioned so she could look them up later.

“Come, Ling Yun,” her uncle said. “Why don’t we go outside and test the glider?”

She sensed that he was preventing her from asking further questions. But if he didn’t want her to know, why had he told her about the phoenix in the first place?

Still, she loved the way the glider felt in her hand, and her uncle didn’t visit very often. “All right,” she said.

They went into the courtyard with its broad flagstones and pond, and spoke no more of the elements.

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Ling Yun started composing the suite on the *wuxian qin*, the five-stringed zither. She had brought her favorite one with her. The military was accustomed to transporting fragile instruments, thanks to the Phoenix Corps, whose gliders had to be attuned to the elements.

For suicidal, dark-haired Wu Wen Zhi, Ling Yun wrote a disjunct melody with tense articulations, reflecting the mixed power and turmoil she saw in the girl’s white dragon. White and red, bone and blood, death and fortune. The aide said Wen Zhi had killed six people since landing in the empire. The dragon had nine markings. Ling Yun trusted the dragon. Wen Zhi did not strike her as the subtle

type. The aide's response to this observation was a pained laugh.

Ko's drawing was more of a sketch, in a relaxed, spontaneous style that Ling Yun's calligraphy tutor would have approved of. The colors worried her, however: black and gray, no sign of color, a sense of aching incompleteness. Yet the reports that came every morning noted Ko's unshakable good cheer and cooperativeness. Ling Yun felt a strange affinity to what she knew of the boy. She had no illusions that she understood what it was like to be a killer, but she knew something about hiding part of yourself from the outside world. She gave Ko's piece a roving melody with ever-shifting rhythms and playful sliding tones.

Mesketalioth's blue dragon was the most militant-looking of the five, at least to Ling Yun's untrained eye. Ko's dragon, if you looked at it from a distance, might pass as a picture of a god out of legend, not a war automaton. Mesketalioth's diagram included not only the dragon, but cross-sections and insets showing the mechanisms of the repeating crossbows and the way the joints were put together. The aide assured her that it was a known type of ashworlder dragon, and provided Ling Yun with explanations from the engineers. Ling Yun thought that the aide was trying to be reassuring for her benefit, and failing. For Mesketalioth, she wrote a military air in theme and variations, shadows falling in upon themselves, the last note an infinitely subtle vibrato informed by the pulse in the finger holding down the string.

Periet was the best painter of the five. She had drawn her dragon out of scale so it looked no larger than a large cat, its head tilted to watch two butterflies, one sky-blue and the other star-spotted black. It was surrounded by flowers and gears and neatly organized mechanics' tools. Ling Yun thought of Shang Yuan, with its shattered lanterns and ashes, wind blowing through streets inhabited only by grasshoppers and mice. No one had attempted to rebuild the City of Lanterns. The song she wrote for Periet had an utterly conventional pentatonic melody. The countermelody, on the other hand, was sweet, logical, and in a foreign mode.

As for the last of them, Li Cheng Guo had drawn a flamboyant red dragon with golden eyes. Ling Yun wondered if he meant some mockery of the Phoenix General by this. On the other hand, red did indicate good fortune. The gliders were always painted in fire-colors, while the dragons came in every color imaginable. Obliging, Ling Yun wrote a rapid, skirling piece for Cheng Guo, martial in its motifs, but hostile where Mesketalioth's was subtle.

Ling Yun slept surrounded by the five assassins' pictures. She was disturbed to realize that, no matter where she rearranged them on the walls, she always woke up facing Periet's butterfly dragon.

Careful inquiry revealed the assassins' sleeping arrangements: in separate cells, although they were permitted in a room together for the purposes of lessons—probably a euphemism for interrogation sessions—and the general's game. Ling Yun asked how they kept the assassins from killing their guards or tutors.

"After the first few incidents, they swore to the Phoenix General that they would abide by the terms of the game," the aide said.

"And you trust them?" Ling Yun said.

"They've sworn," the aide said emphatically. "And if they break oath, he'll have them executed."

Sooner or later, she was going to have to speak with the Phoenix General, if he didn't demand a report from her first. She presumed that Phoenix Command had other precautions in place.

Two weeks into the assignment, Ling Yun said to the aide, "I'd like to speak with the assassins."

"If you draw up a list of questions," she said, "our interrogators can obtain the answers you want."

"In person," Ling Yun said.

"That's unwise for a whole list of reasons I'm sure you've already thought of."

"Surely one musician more or less is expendable in the general's game," Ling Yun said, keeping all traces of irony from her voice. She doubted the aide was fooled.

Sure enough, the aide said, with exasperation, "Do you know why we requested you, Musician Xiao? When we could have asked for the empress's personal troupe and had them do the general's bidding?"

"I had wondered, yes."

"Most musicians at your level of mastery have, shall we say, a philosophical bent of mind."

Ling Yun could think of a number of less flattering expressions. "I've heard that criticism," she said noncommittally.

The aide snorted. "Of course you have. We wanted you because you have a reputation for pragmatism. Or did you think it would go unnoticed? The psychological profiles for the empire's musicians aren't completely worthless."

"Will you trust that I have a pragmatic reason for wanting to talk to the assassins, then?" Ling Yun said. "Tell them it's part of the game. Surely that isn't far from the truth. It's one thing for me to study your game transcripts, but I want to know what the assassins are like as people. I'm no interrogator, but I am accustomed to listening to the hidden timbres of the human voice. I might hear something useful."

"We will consider it," the aide said.

"Thank you," Ling Yun said, certain she had won.

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The first time Ling Yun tuned a glider to the elements with her music, she was shaking so badly that her fingers jerked on her zither's peg and she broke a string.

Ling Yun's tutor looked down at her with imperturbable eyes. "Perhaps the flute—" he suggested. Many of the Phoenix Corps' musicians preferred the bamboo flute for its association with birdsong, and therefore the heavens.

Ling Yun had come prepared with an extra set of strings. "I will try again," she said. Instead of trying to block the presence of the pilot and engineers from her mind, she raised her head and studied them. The pilot was a woman scarcely older than Ling Yun herself, who met Ling Yun's gaze with a quirk to her mouth, as if in challenge. The engineers had an expression of studied politeness; they had been through this before.

Carefully, mindful of the others' time but also mindful of the necessity of precision, Ling Yun replaced the broken string. The new one was going to be temperamental. She would have to play to compensate.

After tuning the zither to her satisfaction, she breathed in and breathed out several times. Then she began "The Crane Flies Home," the traditional

blessing-piece. At first, the simple task of getting her fingers through the piece occupied her.

Then, Ling Yun became aware of the glider responding. It was a small, scarred creature, with gouges in the wood from past battles, and it thrummed almost imperceptibly whenever she played the strings that corresponded to wood and fire. Remembering her tutor's advice not to neglect the other strings, she coaxed the glider with delicate harmonics, reminding it that it would have to face water, fight metal, return to earth.

Only when she had finished did she realize that her fingers were bleeding, despite her calluses. That hadn't happened in years. She blotted the blood against the hem of her jacket. *Water feeds wood*, she thought.

The engineers, who had their own training in music, checked the glider over. They consulted with her tutor, using terminology she didn't understand. The tutor turned to her and nodded once, smiling.

"You haven't even flown it," Ling Yun said, bewildered. The winch was all the way down the airfield. "How do you know I tuned it properly?"

"I listened," he said simply. "It must fly in spirit before it can fly in truth. You have achieved this."

All her dreams that night were of gliders arcing into the air, launched by winch and changing into birds at the moment of release: herons and cranes and sparrows, hawks and geese and swallows, but not a single red-and-gold phoenix.

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The five pilots—Ling Yun wasn't sure when she had started thinking of them as dragon pilots rather than assassins, a shift she hoped to keep from Phoenix Command—wore clothes that fit them indifferently. Dark-haired Wu Wen Zhi stood stiffly, her arms crossed. Ko, the boy with the braid, was smiling. Mesketalioth, whose face was calmly expressionless, had his hands clasped behind his back. The scars at his temple were startlingly white. Periet's blue eyes were downcast, although Ling Yun knew better than to mistake the girl's demeanor for submissiveness. Li Cheng Guo, the tallest, stood farthest from the others and scowled openly.

"I'm—"

“Another interrogator,” Wen Zhi said. The girl’s voice was high, precise, and rapid. It put Ling Yun in mind of stone chimes.

“Yes and no,” Ling Yun said. “I have questions, but I’m not a soldier; do you see me wearing a uniform?” She had worn a respectable gray dress, the kind she would have worn to speak with a client.

Wen Zhi grabbed Ling Yun’s wrist and twisted. Ling Yun bit back a cry. “It’s all right!” she said quickly, knowing that the guards were monitoring the situation.

The girl ran her hand over Ling Yun’s fingertips, lingering over the calluses. “You’re an engineer.”

“Also yes and no,” Ling Yun said. “I’m a musician.” Wen Zhi must not play the zither, or she would have noticed immediately that Ling Yun’s fingernails were slightly long to facilitate plucking the strings. Ling Yun could practically hear the aide’s reproof, but what was she supposed to do? Deny the obvious?

Ko tossed his head. “The correct response, Wen Zhi,” he said, “is to say, ‘Hello, I am honored to meet you.’ Then to give your name, although I’m sure you already know ours, madam.” His Imperial was startlingly good, despite the broadened vowels. “I’m Ko.”

“I’m Xiao Ling Yun,” she said gravely. Did they not use surnames on Arani? Or Straken Okh or Kiris, for that matter?

The others gave their names. Mesketalioth had a quiet, clipped voice, distantly polite. Periet called herself by that name. She had a pleasant alto and spoke with a heavier accent than the others. Li Cheng Guo’s Imperial was completely idiomatic; he addressed Ling Yun with a directness that was just short of insulting.

Ling Yun wondered if any of them had vocal training, then felt silly. Of course they did. Not in the populist styles of their homes, surely, but in the way that all glider pilots did, the ability to hold a tune and the more important ability to listen for a glider’s minute reverberations. What would it be like to write for their voices?

The question was moot, as she doubted the aide would stand for any such endeavor.

On a whim, Ling Yun had brought her uncle’s toy glider with her. Keeping

her motions slow, she drew it from her jacket.

“Pretty,” Periet said. “Does it fly?” She was smiling.

Mesketalioth opened his hands toward Ling Yun. She gave the toy glider to him. He studied its proportions, and she was suddenly chilled. Could he draw diagrams of gliders, too?

“Yes, it flies,” Mesketalioth said. “It’s never been tuned, has it?”

“No,” Ling Yun said. “It’s just a toy.” Surely the adolescents had had toys in childhood. What kinds of lives had they led in the ashworlds, constantly under assault from glider bombing runs?

“Even a toy can be a weapon,” Cheng Guo said with a sneer. “I would have had it tuned. Especially if you’re already a musician.”

“Oh, for pity’s sake, Cheng Guo,” Ko said, “what’s it going to do? Drop little origami bombs?” He made flicking motions with his fingers. Cheng Guo glowered at him, and Ko only grinned back.

They sounded like the students she had attended classes with as an adolescent herself, fractious and earnest. However, unlike those fellow students, they carried themselves alertly. She noticed that, despite standing around her, they deliberately left her path to the exit unblocked.

“I have permission to ask you some questions,” Ling Yun said. She wanted them to be clear on her place in the hierarchy, which was to say, low.

“Are you part of the game?” Wen Zhi asked.

Ling Yun wondered if the girl ever smiled, and was struck by a sudden urge to ruffle that short hair. The thought of the nine red marks on Wen Zhi’s dragon made the urge entirely resistible. “No,” she said, afraid that they would refuse to talk to her further.

“Good,” Cheng Guo said shortly. “You’re not prepared.” He trained his glower on Ling Yun, as though it would cause her to go away. It seemed to her that ignoring her would be much more effective.

“What does it feel like to kill?” Ling Yun said.

Ko had sauntered over to the wall across from Cheng Guo and was leaning against it, worrying at the fraying end of his braid. They hadn't given him a clip for his hair, and the aide had said that he refused to get it cut. Ko gave Ling Yun a shrewd look and said, "You could ask that of your own soldiers, couldn't you?"

"I'd know how they felt, but I'm interested in you," she said.

"Ask what you mean," Periet said. Her tone had shifted, just below the surface. Ling Yun wondered if the others could hear that undercurrent of ferocity. "You're interested in how we're different."

"All right," Ling Yun said. "Yes." It cost her nothing to be agreeable, a lesson she had applied all her life.

"Don't listen to her," Wen Zhi said to the others. "She's trying to get inside our heads."

"Well, yes," Ling Yun said mildly. "But the longer you talk to me, the longer you draw out the game, the longer you live."

Mesketalioth raised his chin. His scars went livid. "Living isn't the point."

"Then what is?" she asked.

With no warning—at least, not to Ling Yun's slow senses—Mesketalioth snapped the glider between his hands.

Ling Yun stared at him, fists pressed to her sides. Her eyes stung. She had known, theoretically, that she might lose the glider. What had she been thinking, bringing it into a room full of assassins? Assassins who knew the importance of symbols and would think of a glider as a hostile one, at that. She just hadn't expected them to break this reminder of her childhood.

It's a toy, she reminded herself. She could make another herself if she had to.

How much had these children lost, before coming here?

Periet's blue eyes met Ling Yun's gaze. The girl made a tiny nod.

"Even a toy can be a weapon," Mesketalioth said, without inflection. "There are many kinds of weapons."

“Hey,” Ko said to Ling Yun. He sounded genuinely concerned. “We can fix it. They’ll let us have some glue, won’t they? Besides, your general likes you. He’d have our heads if we didn’t.”

I’ve never even met the Phoenix General, Ling Yun thought, chewing her lip before she caught herself. “How many people did *you* take down?” she asked, trying to remind herself that these children were assassins and killers.

Ko rebraided the ends of his hair. “I keep a tally in my head,” he said.

“He’s killed sixteen gliders in the game,” Wen Zhi said contemptuously. “That’s information that you should have gotten from studying the game.”

“You’re still losing territory,” Ling Yun said, remembering the latest report. “How do you expect to win?”

Cheng Guo laughed from his corner. “As if we’d tell you? Please.”

General, Ling Yun thought, *how in the empress’s name is this a good idea?* She hoped she wasn’t the only musician they had working on the problem. The whole conversation was giving her a jittery sense of urgency.

“Indeed,” she said. “Thank you.”

“Leave the glider,” Ko said. “We’ll fix it. You’ll see.”

“If you like,” Ling Yun said, wondering what her uncle would say if he knew. Well, she didn’t have to tell him. “Perhaps I’ll see you another time, if they permit it.”

Periet touched Ling Yun’s hand lightly. Ling Yun half-turned. “Yes?”

Periet said, “There should be six, not five. But you’ve always known that, haven’t you?”

The hairs on the back of Ling Yun’s neck prickled.

Periet smiled again.

Ling Yun thought of the two butterflies in Periet’s dragon-portrait, and wondered if dragons ate butterflies. Or musicians, for that matter. “It was

pleasant meeting you all,” she said, because her parents had raised her to be polite.

Wu Wen Zhi and Li Cheng Guo ignored her, but the others murmured their good-byes.

Shaking her head, Ling Yun made the signal that the guards had taught her, and the door opened. None of the assassins made an attempt to escape. It scared her.

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Ling Yun was in the midst of revising Mesketalioth’s piece in tablature when the summons came. She knew it had to be the Phoenix General because the soldiers would not disrupt her concentration for anything else. But Ling Yun used to practice composing in adverse circumstances: sitting in a clattering train; at a street puppet theater while children shouted out their favorite characters’ names; during tedious parties when she had had too much rice wine. She didn’t compose courtly lays or ballads, but cheerful ditties that she could hum in the bath where no one else had to know. But the aides had certain ideas about how musicians worked, and it was hardly for her to overturn those ideas.

The aide asked, “Will you need your zither?”

“That depends,” Ling Yun said. “Will he want me to play what I have so far?”

“No,” the aide said, a little hesitantly. “He’ll make arrangements when he wants to hear a performance, I’m sure.”

Surreptitiously, Ling Yun curled and uncurled her fingers to limber them up, just in case.

The aide escorted her to a briefing room painted with Phoenix Command’s flame-and-spear on the door. She slid the door open with a surprising lack of ceremony. “General,” she called out, “Musician Xiao is here.” She patted Ling Yun’s shoulder. “Go on. You’ll be fine.”

Ling Yun stepped through the minimum distance possible and knelt in full obeisance, catching a glimpse of the Phoenix General on the way down. He had gray-streaked hair and a strong-jawed profile.

“Enough,” the general said. “Let’s not waste time on ceremony.”

Slowly, she rose, trying to interpret his expression. *He hasn't heard your work yet, she reminded herself, so he can't hate it already.*

"Sir," she said, dipping in a bow despite herself.

"You've been too well trained, I see," the general said wryly. "I swear, it's true of every musician I meet. Sit down."

Ling Yun had no idea what to say to this, so she sat cross-legged at the table and settled for looking helpful.

"What dreams do you dream?" the general asked. His fingers tapped the wall. Indeed, he seemed unable to stop them.

"My last dream was about the fish I had for dinner," Ling Yun said, taken aback. "It swam up out of my mouth and chastised me for using too much salt. When I woke up, I was facing the butterfly dragon."

"Ah, yes," the general said. "Periet, destroyer of Shang Yuan. I lost an entire glider squadron when she flew in. Dragon pilots are unstable too, as you might guess, so we thought she was a rogue. We'd seen her take down a couple of her own comrades on the way in. Then her dragon roared, and the concussive storm shattered everything in its path, and the City of Lanterns exploded in fire."

"You were there, General?"

He didn't answer her. "How is the dragon suite progressing?"

"I have revisions to make based on this morning's results in the game, sir," Ling Yun said.

"Do you play *wei qi*, Musician?" he asked.

"Only poorly," Ling Yun said. "My mother taught me the rules, but it's been years. It concerns territory and influence and patterns, doesn't it? It's strange—musical patterns are so easy for me to perceive, but the visual ones are more difficult."

The general sat across from her. "If musicians were automatically as skilled at *wei qi* as they were at music," he said, "they would be unbeatable."

A tablet rested on the table. He picked up the larger of two brushes and wrote *game*, then several other characters. There were no triangles—no dragons—to be seen anywhere. “I didn’t know they could do that,” the general mused. “This is what happens when you allow the game to modify its own rules.” He met Ling Yun’s inquisitive gaze. “Somehow I don’t think they’ve conceded.”

“So the dragons haven’t been captured,” she said, slipping back into the terminology of *wei qi*. “What else mediates this game, General?”

“It’s tuned the way a glider might be tuned by a musician, the way a tablet is calibrated by a calligrapher. It’s tuned by developments in the living war.”

“I had understood,” Ling Yun said, “that the suite was to reflect the pilots, not to influence them. I must confess that so far I haven’t seen anything that would explain the vanishing dragons.”

The general said, “In music, the ideal is a silent song upon an unstrung zither. Is this not so?”

Ling Yun drew the characters in her mind: *wuxian* meant “five,” *qin* meant “zither.” But the *wu* of “five,” in the third tone, brought to mind the *wu* of “nothing” or “emptiness,” which was in the first tone. The unstrung zither, favored instrument of the sages. The ancients had preferred subtlety and restraint in all things; the unstrung zither took this to the natural conclusion. Ling Yun had applied herself to her lessons with the same patient dedication that she did all things musical, but the unstrung zither had vexed her. “That was the view of the traditional theorists,” she said neutrally, “although modern musicians don’t necessarily agree.”

The Phoenix General’s smile only widened, as though he saw right through her temporizing. “Music is the highest expression of the world’s patterns. The sages have told us so, time and again. The music in the empress’s court provides order to her subjects. We must apply the same principles in war.”

She already knew what he was going to say.

“Thus, in war, the ideal must be a bloodless engagement upon an empty battlefield.”

“Are you sure it is wise to keep the ashworlder children alive, then?” Ling Yun said. It made her uneasy to ask, for she didn’t want to change the general’s mind. Perhaps the thought was traitorous.

“They’ll die when they’re no longer useful,” the general said frankly.

Traitorous or not, there was something wrong with a war that involved killing children. Even deadly children. Even Periet, with her eyes that hid such lethality.

Wei qi was a game of territory, of colonialism. Ling Yun thought of all the things she owed to her parents, who had made sure she had the best tutors; to her uncle, who had brought her the glider and other treats over the years. But she no longer lived in her parents’ house. And three of the colonies, Arani and Straken Okh and Kiris, had not been founded by the empire at all. What did they owe the Phoenix Banner?

In her history lessons, she had learned that the phoenix and dragon were wedding symbols, and that this was a sign that the ashworlds, with their dragons, needed to be joined to the empire. But surely there were ways to cooperate—in trade, say—without conquering the ashworlds outright.

The general closed his eyes for a second and sighed. “If we could win the war without expending lives, it would be a marvel indeed. Imagine gliders that fly themselves, set against the ashworlds’ dragons.”

“The ashworlders are hardly stupid, sir,” Ling Yun said. “They’ll send pilotless dragons of their own.” *Or*, she thought suddenly, *dragonless pilots*.

Maybe the ashworlds were ahead of the Phoenix General. From Ling Yun’s vantage point, it was impossible to tell.

“Then there’s no point sending army against army, is there?” the general said, amused. “But people are people. I doubt anyone would be so foolish as to disarm entirely, and commit a war solely on paper, as a game.”

Ling Yun bowed, even knowing it would annoy him, to give herself time to think.

“Enough,” the general said. “It is through music we will win the game, and through the game we will win the war. I commend your work, Musician. Take the time you need, but no longer.”

“As you will, sir,” Ling Yun said.

* * * *

The population of the empire on the planet proper, at the last census, was 110 million people.

The population of the five ashworlds was estimated at 70 million people, although this number was much less certain, due to the transients who lived in the asteroid belts.

The number of gliders in the Phoenix Corps was classified. The number of dragons in the Dragon Corps was likewise classified.

Ling Yun stayed up late into the night reviewing the game's statistics. Visual patterns were not her forte, but she remembered the general's words. She had heard the eagerness in his voice, the way she heard echoes of the massacre of Shang Yuan in Periet's. Even now, there had to be pilotless gliders speeding toward the colonies.

Many of the reports compared the pilots' strategy in the game to actual engagements. Ling Yun had skimmed these earlier, because of all the unfamiliar names and places—the Serpent's Corridor, the Siege of Uln Okh, the Greater Vortex—but now she added up the ashworlders' estimated casualties and felt ill. They had lost their own Shang Yuans. She doubted that the general would stop until they lost many more.

Ling Yun had been right. The ashworlders were desperate, to send children.

Something else that interested her was the rate of replenishment. In the game, you could build new units to replace the ones you had lost. The five pilots kept losing dragons. Over the course of the game, the rate at which the game permitted them to build new dragons dropped slowly but significantly. Based on the general's remarks, Ling Yun was willing to bet that this was based on actual intelligence about the Dragon Corps' attrition rate.

It was too bad she couldn't ask her uncle, who had probably helped plan the general's grand attack. Her uncle once told her that, so far, the ashworlds had held their own because they had a relatively large number of dragon pilots. Metal was not nearly as unstable an element as fire; people who worked almost exclusively with metal did not self-destruct quite as regularly.

It was no coincidence that each colony sent an assassin, and also no coincidence that the Phoenix General had kept all of them captive. Five was an

important number, one that Ling Yun had taken for granted until Periet told her that the key was *six*.

The empire, with its emphasis on tradition, had accepted the sages' cycle of five elements since antiquity, even after it founded Colony One and Colony Two in the vast reaches of space. But what of space itself?

Numbers were Ling Yun's domain as much as they were any musician's. Now she knew what to do.

* * * *

Ling Yun's head hurt, and even the tea wasn't going to keep her awake much longer. Still, she felt a quiet glow of triumph. She had finished the suite, including the sixth piece. The sixth piece wasn't for the *wuxian qin* at all. It was meant to be hummed, or whistled, like a folk melody or a child's song, like the music she had wanted to write all her life.

There was no place in the empire for such music, but she didn't have to accept that anymore.

If the toy glider had a song, it would be this one, even if the glider was broken. It was whole in her mind. That was what mattered.

Five strings braided together were coiled in her jacket sleeve, an uncomfortable reminder of what she was about to do.

Ling Yun wrote a letter on the tablet and marked it urgent, for the general's eyes only: *I must speak to you concerning the five assassins*. Her hand shook and her calligraphy looked unsteady. Let the general interpret that however he pleased.

A handful of moments passed. The character for *message* drew itself in the upper right corner. Ling Yun touched the tip of her brush to it.

The general's response was, simply: *Come*.

Shaking slightly, Ling Yun waited until her escort arrived. Under her breath, she hummed one of the variations from Mesketalioth's piece. In composing the suite, she had attuned herself to the pilots and their cause, but she did this by choice.

Be awake, she urged him, urged all the young pilots. *Be prepared*. Would the music pluck at the inner movements of their souls, the way it happened in the stories of old?

The escort arrived. "You are dedicated to work so long into the night," the taller of the two soldiers said, with every appearance of sincerity.

"We do what we can," Ling Yun said, thinking, *You have no idea*. People thought musicians were crazy, too. Perhaps everybody looked crazy to someone.

After tonight, she was going to look crazy to everyone, assuming Phoenix Command allowed the story to escape.

The Phoenix General met her in a different room this time. It had silk scrolls on the walls. "They're pretty, aren't they?" he said. Ling Yun was eerily reminded of Periet looking at her glider. "Some of them are generations old."

One of the scrolls had crisp, dark lines. Ling Yun's eyes were drawn to it: a phoenix hatching from a *wei qi* stone. "You painted that," she said.

"I was younger," the general said, "and never subtle. Please, there's tea. Your profile said you preferred citron, so I had them brew some for us."

The citron smelled sweet and sharp. Ling Yun knew that if she tasted it, she would lose her nerve. But courtesy was courtesy. "Thank you, sir," she said.

She held the first five movements of the dragon suite in her head, to give her Wu Wen Zhi's fixity of purpose and Ko's relaxed mien, Mesketalioth's reflexes and Periet's hidden ferocity, and Li Cheng Guo's quick wits.

The braided silk strings slipped down into Ling Yun's palm. She whipped them around the Phoenix General's neck. He was a large man, but she was fighting with the strength of six, not one. And she was fighting for five ashworlds rather than one empire.

As the Phoenix General struggled, Ling Yun tightened the strings. She fixed her gaze upon the painting of the hatching stone.

Ling Yun had been the Phoenix General's creature. The phoenix destroyed itself; it was only fitting that she destroy him.

It would not occur to her until later that it had begun with the general

assassinating the ashworlders' leader, that justice was circular.

Now I know what it is like to kill.

There was—not happiness, precisely, but a peculiar singing relief that the other was dead, and not she. She let go of the strings and listened to the thump as the general's body hit the floor.

The door crashed open. Wen Zhi and Periet held pistols. Wen Zhi's was pointed straight at Ling Yun.

Ling Yun looked up, heart thudding in her chest. She pulled her shoulders back and straightened. It turned out that she cared to die with some dignity, after all. "Make it quick," she said. "You have to get out of here."

Ko showed up behind the other two; he had apparently found a cord to tie his braid. "Come *on*, madam," he said. "We haven't any time to waste."

"So you were right," Wen Zhi said to him, sounding irritable. "The musician took care of the general, but that doesn't guarantee that she's an ally."

"Is this really the best time to be arguing?" Periet asked, with an air of, *Have you ever known me to be wrong?*

The other girl lowered her pistol. "All right, Perias. Are you coming with us, Musician?"

It was unlikely that Ling Yun's family would ever forgive her, even if she evaded capture by the imperial magistrates. She hurried after the pilots, who seemed to know exactly where they were going. "Perias?" she asked Periet, hoping that she might get an answer where Phoenix Command had not.

"Was the sixth one," Mesketalioth said without slowing down.

"What exactly is your plan for getting out of here?" Ling Yun said diffidently, between breaths. "We'll be hunted—"

"You of all people have no excuse to be so slow-witted," Cheng Guo called back. He was at the head of the group. "How do you think we got here?"

"All we need is a piece of sky," Periet said yearningly. She struck the wall with the heel of her hand.

I was right, Ling Yun thought. The edges of her vision went black; the reverberations sounded like a great gong.

Mesketalioth caught her. His arm was steady and warm. "Next time, a warning would be appreciated," he said, deadpan as ever.

The wall split outwards. *Metal cuts wood.*

"Let's fly," Periet said. A great wind was blowing through the hallway. They stepped through the hole in the wall, avoiding the jagged, broken planks. Above them, stars glittered in the dark sky.

"The void is the sixth element," Ling Yun said, looking up.

Five dragons manifested in a half circle, summoned through the void, white black blue yellow red. In the center, tethered to the red dragon by shimmering cables, was an unpainted glider. The sleek curves of its fuselage reminded Ling Yun of her zither.

"See?" Ko said. "I told you we'd fix it."

"Thank you," Ling Yun said, overwhelmed. They had written her into the game after all.

"It only works if there's six of us," Cheng Guo said. "You're the sixth pilot."

Mesketalioth helped Ling Yun into the glider's cockpit. "When we release the cables," he said, "follow Cheng Guo. He understands glider theory best, and he'll safely keep you on the void's thermal paths." Despite the scars, his expression was almost kind.

"It's time!" Wen Zhi shouted from her white dragon. There were now ten red marks on it. "We have to warn the seedworlds."

Soldiers shouted from the courtyard. A bolt glanced from one dragon in a shower of sparks. Mesketalioth's dragon reared up and laid down covering fire while Wen Zhi's dragon raked the ground with its claws. The soldiers, overmatched, scattered.

Then they were aloft, all six of them, dragons returning to the sky where they had been born.

Ling Yun spared not a glance backwards, but sang a quiet little melody to herself as they headed for the stars.