



You cast a sidelong glance at the throne as you pass through the throne room. Never looking directly at it. Just like the Sun, its brilliance can be strong enough to be blinding. And yet it pulls at your consciousness. The tall, straight back, the sharp adornments, the soft seat. Above it sits four sigils. Old, but gilded anew every year, so they are never forgotten. Wisdom, honour, responsibility, qi. You carry them all as jewelry and as chains. You carry them alone.

You are Guang - a young prince who unexpectedly has become heir to the imperial throne.

You had never thought that you would one day rule the empire. You had never wanted it. You have *qi* in your blood and a noble lineage - you are suitable, but not destined for this task. Your place was supposed to be in the shadows. One step behind the throne from where you could support and guide your sister, Yu-Long. But Yu-Long is no longer around to rule, so the burden falls to you.

A ruler has to be fully educated: arithmetic, writing, art and martial art. But most importantly the art of *qi*. The power is innate, but can only be fully utilised if you understand how to control it. You know this, which is why you have always dedicated yourself to your training with your master Zhihao. Your sister was different. She was strong in the *qi*, far stronger than you, but her will to put herself second and serve her realm was weaker. She was never interested in her training. She would often say that if the *qi* was really what gave you the right to lead, she should follow its will - her instincts - instead of learning to rein it in. You often hoped that she was wrong. Because you can feel the *qi* inside you and you control it well, but its calling is just a whisper and not the roar which runs through both Zhihao and Yu-Long.

You had often sighed and thought that Yu-Long's lack of preparation meant that she would never be able to rule without you by her side. The thought had never crossed your mind that the reverse could be necessary. Now it is.

Worse still, your mother had almost forced you to lose your trusted master as well. In her sorrow she blamed Zhihao for Yu-Long's tragedy. She

maintained that if Zhihao had been a proper master, Yu-Long would have been able to defend herself. You bear no hate for Zhihao, because you know that if Yu-Long did not learn, it was because she did not want to learn. She always took her responsibilities too lightly and now your realm will have to make do with you.

This means that now more than ever you should stop putting yourself in danger. But this is the only sacrifice you have not been able to make for your country. You have not been able to resist from time to time going out to hunt the wild animals of your realm. It is your moment of freedom. Your one chance to go out and help the people where they are. To look them in the eyes and show them directly that you are willing to risk your life for them. You would risk dying for them, not only live your whole life for their sakes.

In a world in chaos, traditions are the solid foundations. An unrest has begun among the people. There are even some who whisper that the empire should be overthrown. You pity them that they cannot understand what they need. And yet you serve them. You will not bend for anyone, you live for your country.

Your weapon is the war fan. It is an elegant weapon, which in untrained hands is little more than an accessory. In spite of its sharp edge, a war fan is not a credible threat in the hands of a non-*qi*-user. Therefore it is a traditional weapon in the Imperial family. You had always wanted to be one of the great *qi*-masters, able to wield such a weapon, but you did not feel that you possessed the abilities necessary for it. Hence you will always be grateful to Yu-Long for giving you these fans when you came of age. The beautiful blades are more than just weapons, they are your assurance that your sister knows you and believes in your abilities. They are the part of her that you still have by your side.

Zhihao is the result of a nobleman's indiscretion, born with *qi* but without a title. In the past such children would have been gotten rid off immediately. But times have changed and some families choose to keep the ones with *qi*, not as part of their family, but as treasured servants. It is never mentioned where they come from, but accepted that they are a valuable resource.

Zhihao was your master. Zhihao is very strong in the *qi* and has spent her whole youth training her powers and gaining full control of them. Her abilities were noticed by your mother, the Empress, and Zhihao was invited to be your and Yu-Long's master. You were immediately impressed by her abilities. You wished to learn, you wished to be just as strong, so you did everything she asked. You approached your training with much more enthusiasm than any of your other lessons. Zhihao appreciated your dedication and you spent a great deal of time together. You have the deepest respect for her.

Zhihao fell in disgrace when Yu-Long disappeared, but now she serves as your bodyguard. When Yu-Long was taken by highwaymen your mother was devastated. When she could not apprehend the perpetrators, she turned against Zhihao to exercise her grief. Zhihao was disfigured by having one of her eyes burned out. She was disgraced and henceforth considered *qi*-less. She was also supposed to be banished, but you saved her by letting her share the post as captain of your personal guard with Chao-Fen. That way you have made sure that she can remain at the palace.

Zhihao is your closest advisor. She did not just teach you to use your *qi*, but also your reason. She has always listened to you when you needed to share your thoughts. She always had advice to give you. She believes in you and believes that you can serve the realm as its emperor. You could not bear to lose both her and your sister. You may be her ruler, but she is your master.

Zhihao is your rock, a foundation as solid as a mountain on which you can stand, but not unmovable, because if it ever starts to roll, you may all too easily lose your footing.

You love her because she made you who you are.

You hate that her now ruined face is an eternal reminder that even your power is not enough to keep those you love safe.

Chao-Fen is born *qi*-less, but now lives in the palace as your bodyguard. She was born in a small village, you have never heard of. She trained hard and joined the army. During one of your big game hunts you had to make due with *qi*-less guards. Chao-Fen was among them and you are grateful for that, because she saved your life. Afterwards you offered her the honour of serving at the palace as captain of your guard. That honour would normally never fall to someone like her.

Chao-Fen is the strongest *qi*-less warrior. You were not just grateful that she had saved your life. You were impressed by what she was capable of doing without special powers. You appreciate having her protection, but you are equally eager to train with her. Your *qi* is not as strong as you would like, so it gives you hope to see that you can come as far as Chao-Fen has completely without it. You do not like to admit it to others, but you would like to learn from her.

Chao-Fen is your friend, although it is not appropriate. She is a lively person who does not just have expectations of you, but also seems to simply enjoy your company. She does not judge you for your hunting or your long baths, but encourages you to take breaks. Above all she is honest with you, she shows you respect, but does not bow and scrape like other people. When Yu-Long was alive it was also Chao-Fen who could calm the storms between you. It pleases you to have her in your life, but you also know that people disapprove of you having gone so far as to make her captain of your guard. You make sure to hide your friendship when others are present - officially she is just your servant. Only when you are alone are you friends.

She and Zhihao now control the bodyguard together. There has always been a certain amount of rivaling between them, but you have occasionally encouraged this by letting them fight for the same thing. That was not the reason for your choice this time, but it might help them to perform their best. But you know that Chao-Fen does not appreciate sharing her post with Zhihao, so there may come a time when a decision must be made.

Chao-Fen is the laughter which makes the heavy burden a little easier, but perhaps it can become deafening.

You love her because it gives you strength to see that common people can also care for you.

You hate that she is *qi*-less, and yet bests you in a number of ways.

Jian-Min is of noble birth, born without *qi*. His mother chose to break with tradition and marry someone without *qi*. Jian-Min is a result so troublesome that it should not be permitted. Originally the problem was far smaller, because his younger brother had the *qi*. But unfortunately the heir died and now a *qi*-less stands to take over administration of one of the largest fortunes in the realm. If he was a decent person, he would renounce his position immediately.

Jian-Min introduced you to the joys of hunting. When you were young, before it became certain that Jian-Min would not develop *qi*, he would often visit the palace. It is a shame that you wasted energy on him. One good thing did come of it though. He took you hunting. He showed you the freedom of being in nature, pitted against a concrete threat. A target you could defeat.

Jian-Min is an advocate of giving influence to those without *qi*. You cannot fathom why the Empress has not already dealt harshly with that sort of talk. He believes that the people should elect their own leaders from among the whole population. That those without *qi* should manage their own lives. He has no idea the chaos and pain that would lead to. As a *qi*-less he cannot comprehend how ruling is a sacrifice you make for the realm and for its people.

Jian-Min and Chao-Fen used to be lovers. You respect him for coming directly to you to find out what consequences associating with him would have for Chao-Fen. That he understood that he might be a danger to his surroundings. You were not pleased with the idea, but you gave their relationship your blessing. Even though you care for Chao-Fen you have to accept that she is not a *qi*-user and therefore suitable for Jian-Min. Besides it would be advantageous if Jian-Min sired *qi*-less offspring before becoming the head of his family, since that would remove any doubt that his bloodline is no longer a noble one. Unfortunately they broke off their connection.

Jian-Min is a crack, small and unimportant, but it may grow bigger if it is ignored.

You hate him because he is the embodiment of society's greatest problem - the unwillingness to sacrifice oneself for the common good.

You are grateful to him for giving you a taste of the freedom you strive to give to others by introducing you to hunting.

You do not know that Yi is a cover for Yu-Lung. *This is information you have as a player, but Guang does not know it at the beginning of the scenario.*

Yu-Long was your sister, the heir to the throne. You grew up together. She is only a few years older than you and all your lessons, all your training and all your routines were planned so you would accompany each other. You loved her, but she also drove you crazy. You were always the diligent student. You did as you were told. You prepared yourself for the responsibility you would one day have as her advisor. Yu-Long always tried to shirk, to escape her responsibilities. You are devastated to have lost her, but in your darkest moments you catch yourself thinking that by dying she has once again abandoned her responsibility and left it to her little brother to clean up after her.

Yi is Jian-Min's manservant, who works as a spy for you. Yi contacted Chao-Fen and was later allowed to address you. He had discovered that Jian-Min was involved in undermining the throne. Chao-Fen confirmed that the information he brought were true, so you listened to Yi. His plea was simple, he would do what was right for the Lotus-realm. Therefore you asked him to remain in his position. He was to continue as Jian-Min's faithful servant, while reporting to you about his master's actions. Since it is not easy for the two of you to meet secretly, it is often Chao-Fen who receives the reports from Yi. You have also asked her to keep an eye on him to make sure that he is indeed loyal to you.

Yi is your trump, good to have in reserve, but dangerous if held too long. You love Yi's willingness to sacrifice himself, he puts aside his rank and reputation to serve the throne to the best of his ability. You hate that Yi is so secretive despite his servility.

Guang in keywords:

- Youngest child of the Empress, well educated, but with no expectation of ever having to rule. His older sister was taken by highwaymen and left the prospect of inheriting the throne to him.
- Proud and stoic man who enjoys his responsibility, but also sees it as a sacrifice he makes for the realm and the people.
- Values traditions and the use of *qi* above all else.
- Has always diligently dedicated himself to his training and education.
- He enjoys big game hunting to protect local rural areas, but he knows that he should not be risking himself, now that he is the last of the Imperial bloodline.

What Guang does not know about himself:

- Is he ready to be the Emperor?
- Is he unhappy that the throne will come to him, or does he believe that it is for the best that the reckless Yu-Long will not rule?
- How far can he take his promotion and association with the *qi*-less Chao-Fen?
- Can he tolerate that a *qi*-less can sometimes defeat him in combat?
- Can he continue to stain his reputation by protecting the disgraced Zhihao?
- Can he accept Jian-Min in a position of nobility if he ceases his rebellious tendencies and restores the *qi* to his bloodline?

Zhihao: Your treasured master, who has been disgraced because of your sister.

Chao-Fen: Your best friend, even though you should not call a *qi*-less person that - and never would where others might hear.

Jian-Min: A man without *qi*, who against your advice remains a part of the nobility despite his lack of powers and abilities. An advocate of democracy.

Yi: Jian-Min's manservant, who also serves as your spy on your enemy.

*As long as the lotus blooms...
... honour endures.*



Your brush caresses the canvas. Such a small action which leaves such an unmistakable trail. The scent of the paint stabs at your nose, but not as much as the reality you depict stabs at your soul. A flick of the wrist and the whole living city is covered by the shadow of the imperial palace.

You are Jian-Min - a young nobleman without *qi*-powers

You are an exception - a noble born without *qi*-powers. It was not unexpected, since your mother decided to marry a man without *qi*-blood. It has left you in a borderland. You have been raised in wealth and luxury in the most influential family after the Empress' own. But you yourself are nothing special. Your little brother was lucky enough to be born with the *qi*, so he was expected to inherit everything. No one had any expectations for you. For many years you simply enjoyed the life of luxury and gave yourself over to your painting and the other pleasures of life. In time a frustration grew inside you; you were looked down on because of something which was beyond your reach. You discovered that paintings had a tendency to hide reality by focusing only on the beauty. You began dreaming of bringing art and reality closer together - not just by depicting the dark sides on the canvas, but also by making them less omnipresent in the world around you. You started associating with people without powers and advocating that everyone should be heard. In public you limit yourself to a philosophical debate. In private you are working towards a revolution which would allow people to elect their own leaders. Someone who truly understands them and is like them.

Your brother died tragically far too young, before he could claim the position as head of the household or start a family of his own. That left you with an unexpected responsibility as heir. It means that many eyes are now on you and that you have to tread carefully. But it also means that your name carries greater weight and that you have more room to move.

You have let your mansion decorate to reflect your status and allow you to receive visitors in style. You make sure to always have exotic goods you can treat them to. It is your quiet defiance against those who do not feel that you belong in the halls of power. You do not attempt to hide who you are, but you dress in colourful silks and ride magnificent horses. Your family is rich. You have always made sure to put funds aside for yourself and it has only become easier now. You have savings which can help you in the fight against the supremacy of the establishment. You spend a little to live comfortably and otherwise keep it in reserve for when true need arises.

Out of the blue you were given another trump: the Empress' daughter, Yu-Long, thought lost, appeared on your doorstep in disguise. She offered to help your cause in secret. She has disguised herself as a man and acts as your manservant.

You carry many secrets these days. You have become betrothed with the former *qi*-master of the palace, Zhihao. She no longer has a title since she was disgraced when Yu-Long disappeared. But she remains one of the most powerful *qi*-users in the realm. You cannot speak openly about the engagement yet, since it would look bad that you take her in just as she has fallen out of favour with the Imperial family. But when that affair has gathered dust in the minds of the people and you can declare your relationship publicly, it will help to secure your position. The nobility will know that your family will still have *qi* in their blood, which for many equals noble legitimacy.

In a world in chaos the one who has the most allies stays afloat. Times are changing, because of people like you, who do not fit into the system. You know that it is not you who are wrong - it is the system that is broken. There are countless people in the realm, who have never has a chance to do anything but be herded. Now you can give them new possibilities by being a leader who understands that they are all equally valuable people.

Your weapon is the spear. It is a traditional and honourable weapon, used throughout time by many of the realm's greatest warriors. You are not one of the greatest warriors, but you can defend yourself in combat. You have painted enough portraits in your time to have learned to read people and anticipate their next move. With the spear as your brush, you can paint forth you adversary's weaknesses - even without the *qi*.

Chao-Fen is born without *qi*, but lives in the Empress' palace as bodyguard to the heir to the throne. She hails from small village of no importance. She has no title, her parents did not own the lands they farmed. Now she lives at the palace. In a way she is now everything she ever dreamed of being. Someone who was not born to wealth, but earned it. A name that is known to all. She is one of the realm's finest warriors in spite of not having the *qi*. Even prince Guang has recognised her worth and has taken her in as his bodyguard.

Chao-Fen was your lover. The first time you saw her, she took your breath away with a single look. She was proud and passionate and everything you had imagined from the stories you had heard of her. You sought her out to get to know her in person and it was not long before the two of you were in love. You were wild and tender at the same time. For a time you were happy.

You ended your relationship with Chao-Fen. You discovered that she was not everything you had dreamed of. She had advanced in the world not only by the warmth of her passion, but also by ice cold calculation. She was loyal to a select few, but always put herself first. She did not just have a talent for fighting, but also for lies and deceit. She left many people behind her in the muck to reach the clean corridors of the palace. You could not shake the fear that you were simply another step in the ladder she was climbing. That she was ready to stab you in the back as well. So you chose to end your time together.

Chao-Fen is Zhihao's sister, but none of them know it. When you looked into Zhihao's past recently, you discovered that the family she was taken from because of her *qi* was Chao-Fen's. They do not know it, however, and they have developed an intense rivalry. You do not know if Chao-Fen would want to know. You do not think that the lost sister is as much a person to her, as a symbol of the dominance of the *qi*-users.

Chao-Fen is flame behind a rock - the dancing lights are enchanting, but no matter how beautiful the shadows are, the fire will not keep you warm.
You love her for the strength to strive upwards, paying others no heed. You hate that the fire within her could burn down the entire world, but she never thinks of using it except to keep herself warm.

Zhihao is the result of a nobleman's indiscretion - born with *qi* but without a title. There was a time when such a child would have been killed before it could cause any damage, but now noble families accept them. Not as equals, but as noble servants. You both pity and envy her the circumstance.

Zhihao was the master to the Empress' children at the palace. She made a title for herself. Her *qi* is strong and she has dedicated herself to it, since it was her entire reason for existing in the eyes of the nobility. She was so skilled that she was invited to the palace as a master. She became close with the Empress' son Guang, but never reached her daughter Yu-Long.

Zhihao was disgraced when the Empress' daughter disappeared, but now serves as the son's bodyguard. When Yu-Long was taken by highwaymen a year ago, Zhihao was made the scapegoat. A good master would have taught her to defend herself. Zhihao was disfigured by having her eye burned out and given the status of *qi*-less. Guang refused to let her be banished. Instead he gave her a position in his personal guard. That is where she, against her will, serves alongside her rival Chao-Fen.

Zhihao is your fiancée, but is it not public yet. It began as a mutual partnership. An agreement that benefitted you both. She lost her title, but the *qi* is still in her blood, and strong enough to practically guarantee that your offspring would also have *qi*. You have not been able to make the engagement official yet, because you do not want to make a public spectacle of the fact that only a disgraced *qi*-user would choose you, even though it is true. Therefore you only meet in secret and otherwise send messages through your manservant Yi.

Zhihao is Chao-Fen's sister, but none of them know it. Before you got engaged to Zhihao, you looked into her past. You discovered who her family were. You know that she has wished she knew the *qi*-less side of her family and that she dreams it could be the place where she belongs. You have not shared your knowledge with her. You are afraid of disappointing her. She and Chao-Fen have never gotten along well. Perhaps you can be the family she seeks instead.

Zhihao is strong in the *qi*. You have started caring for her. She is good company and in spite of her situation, she shows impressive calm. Meanwhile you cannot shake the feeling that she in the back of her mind also sees you as inferior. You do not know if you can ever put that fear to rest. Or if you can love her, if it is true.

Zhihao is the Sun - pleasing and essential, but dangerous to stand unshielded against.

You love her for the calm and reflected company she gives you.

You hate her, because she is the picture of your weakness - the wish to fit in.

You know that Yi is the cover for Yu-Long, the heir to the throne. She has pretended to be taken by highwaymen and has travelled the country. Now she has returned to the capitol. She came to you because you both wish to see the regime changed.

Yu-Long was your friend in the palace, even after it became clear that you did not have *qi*. You grew up together, back when you were young enough that there was still hope that you would exhibit signs of *qi*. When it became clear that you would never develop those powers, most people turned their backs on you. Yu-Long was different. She did not care. She was your friend.

Yi works as your manservant. Yu-Long came to you with a desire to change the way of the world with you. But she wanted you to be the face of it. You agreed that she could disguise herself as a man and pass herself off as your manservant. You entrust him with everything from delivering messages to your fiancée to planning your next move against the established rule. Yi has shared his greatest secret with you, so you hold nothing back from him.

Yi acts as a doubleagent for Guang. It was Yi's suggestion that he use his knowledge of Chao-Fen's routines to get in touch with Guang. He pretended to be a loyal subject who had discovered that you were trying to undermine the throne. By pretending to be a spy, he can keep an eye on what goes on at the palace. Meanwhile you can mislead your opponents. To make them trust Yi, you gave them real information. You organised it so that the rumours could be confirmed, but too late to stop you. The plan worked. Sometimes you worry that the plan sprang from Yu-Long's need to see her brother again, and that being around him weakens her dedication to the rebellion.

Yu-Long has renounced her *qi*-powers. In a mistaken attempt to show solidarity with the wide population, Yu-Long refuses to use her *qi* until there is more justice in the world. It eats at you that she has everything you have ever desired, but refuses to use it. It is an insult to all of you who do not have that option and it is mostly about her own pride.

Yi refuses to let you reveal his true identity, although it could help the rebellion. Yu-Long is the perfect tool for launching the revolution. You can lead the wide population and she can give you a legitimate right to the throne even in the eyes of the nobility. You would be able to change things from within. But Yu-Long stubbornly insists on being Yi, ordinary and therefore an ally of little more importance than any of your other servants.

Yi is a sharp blade – an artwork of a weapon, which only truly shines in the hands of a master swordsman.

You love, that she has always been your friend, both before and after she became Yi.

You hate that she will not stand beside you now, honestly, as herself.

Guang is the Empress' youngest child, but stands to inherit the throne. He has been schooled in all the political duties of the palace, but he was never expected to take the throne. His destiny was advising his sister. When Yu-Lung disappeared, he suddenly became the heir to the throne.

Guang was once your friend. You grew up together in your youth before it became clear that you did not have *qi*. When you were small, you played together, when you were older, you learned together, when you were all but grown up, you went hunting together. Then he turned his back on you. He has never hidden the fact that he finds *qi*-less nobility distasteful.

Guang believes that *qi* gives you the right to rule. No one is the villain in their own story. You know that Guang does not believe that the difference is something his kind have created, but the natural order of things. He fears that the realm will crumble if someone without *qi* attempted to rule it. He is wrong.

At least once Guang has let love decide. When you fell in love with Chao-Fen, you immediately saw the danger that your relationship might rob her of everything she had built. So you went straight to Guang and asked him to either let you and your relationship be independent or to let you know at once. You would rather be without her than to hold her back. To your surprise and delight he showed enough magnanimity not to take advantage of the power you gave him over your happiness. You hope that he will act the same way when he learns of your engagement to his master Zhihao.

Guang does not know it himself, but he appreciates your art. His weapons - two beautifully painted war fans, which Yu-Long once gave him - you have made. You were going to give them to him yourself, but then things changed. Yu-Long needed something special to give him when he came of age, and she gladly accepted your suggestion to pass them on.

Guang is a statue of the heroes of old - a beautiful story, which can give hope but nothing else.

You respect that Guang defiantly stands up for what he believes in. You hate that he truly deep down believes that he is worth more as a person than all the rest of you, even if you take away his throne.

Jian-Min in keywords:

- Qi-less nobleman who does not fit into the system.
- Speaks openly for democracy. Secretly leading the nascent rebellion. *It is up to you to define how far along and how violent the rebellion is.*
- Not just a warrior - also a politician and an artist.
- Divided between the pride of being able to manage without *qi* and the envy of not having it.
- Wants to be seen and see himself as a champion of the people. They should be allowed to choose for themselves - and naturally they will choose him, since he fights for them.
- Talks about a more equal distribution of the wealth of the realm, but lives a life of luxury.
- Knows that a slow transformation of the order of the world would be safer for the population, but wants to be a part of something bigger and more memorable.

What Jian-Min does not know about himself:

- Can he marry Zhihao even though it is precisely what the system he hates wants of him?
- Can he love her, even though she has the *qi*?
- Does he even love Chao-Fen? Was it because she was more driven than him, that he could not handle the relationship? Was it because she cannot give him heirs with *qi*?
- What can push him to reveal Yi's secret?
- Does he really want what is best for the population or does he just want the power, which has always been just beyond his reach?

Chao-Fen: Your former lover. A mighty warrior without *qi* powers, but she is also a cold woman, who always puts herself first.

Zhihao: Former *qi*-master at the Imperial family. Now your fiancée - the agreement is made because she wants a title and you need *qi* in your family; but perhaps there is also more between you.

Guang: The future Emperor, who holds firmly to traditions and do not think that you can be nobility, when you do not have *qi*.

Yi: Your manservant who is actually the missing heir to the throne. She also wants a revolution, but your visions are not quite the same.

*As long as the lotus blooms...
... honour endures.*



Your muscles ache from exhaustion. The pain in your joints tells you, that your will is strong, but your body is weak. The deep resounding of the golden doors is heard behind you, while you unwrap the bindings on your hands. You take your time, while you let the sweat cool off your hot skin. Then you pick up your weapon. Reel in the chain meticulously. You leave the beautiful combat hall through the unimpressive wooden door in the side wall.

You are Chao-Fen – a young woman, the greatest qi-less warrior.

You were born as one among innumerable people with a prospect of a future identical to your parents'. You should have worked on the same small plot of land, that they had cultivated all of their lives. You once told your mother that you wished you were born with qi-powers so you could become something special. She said she was happy that you were not, otherwise you would be taken from her. Just like the big sister you've never met, who was taken away as soon as she showed signs of having the gift.

You did not want to make your mother unhappy, so you stopped dreaming about the qi. However, you did not stop dreaming about being something special. All you had to offer was yourself. So you trained to increase your worth; so you could become a warrior. Every free moment you had, you used to strengthen and honing your body and your abilities. As soon as the messengers arrived, with the offer to serve, you joined the army and left your home. At times you thought you also let yourself get taken away from your parents, not by the qi, but because you did not have it. You have not forgotten them, but when you think about them, it's often with sense of guilt.

In the army your raw strength was directed towards battle, and you were allowed to help maintain order and safety in the kingdom. You rendered the greatest effort of all. You broke the wings on those who could have been your competitors. You got up as the first and went to bed as the last. You always said yes, if asked if the credit was yours. There was only one way, and that was up.

You excelled quickly and rose in rank amongst the warriors. One day you were chosen to serve the heir to the throne as a bodyguard, as he ventured out to hunt a bear. You did your duty, which saved his life, and he was, against his own will, impressed by your effort. He invited you to train martial arts with him. It was a great honor, that he only made greater, when he named you his personal bodyguard and let you move into the imperial palace. You served him as a training partner, as a friend and quite often also as an intermediary between him and his feisty sister, Yu-Long.

You secretly added small things, which Guang never missed in all his abundance, to your salary. You delivered the trinkets to your own family so that your freedom and effort could also benefit them. For yourself, you have made a small garden of potted plants. You enjoy imagining that they are in a way, your own country.

You have achieved a position that nobody ever dreamed could be yours - nobody other than yourself. But you have reached the top. There are no finer titles given to those without the qi and no softer pillows you can stuff your bed with. Your life has been about climbing the mountain, now you have reached the top and fear that the only way onward may be down.

In a world of chaos one can only survive by his own strength. There is talk of change in the realm. Farmers who wants to decide for themselves, who to lead them. They want to be allowed to make something of themselves, even if they have no powers. You know it is possible; It does not require qi, but it does require courage and strength. If they had that, they could already do what they wanted. If they do not, they should not lead anyway.

Your weapon of choice is the kusarigama. You chose it the first time you saw it. An immensely difficult tool to use, and therefore what you had to master. In addition, you benefit from range as well as sharpness and strength, against any kind of enemy.

Guang is the youngest child of the empress, but stands to inherit the throne. Since birth, he has been trained in all the political chores of the palace. However, it was never expected that he should take the throne. His was destined to become his sister's counsellor. But Yu-Long disappeared, taken by highway robbers, and then he suddenly was first in line to the throne.

Guang has granted you a greater honor than any other qi-less has received. You have fought to show your worth and have come a long way, but without Guang's goodwill you would never have entered the palace. Initially, he was offended to have qi-less warriors on his big game hunt, which he enjoys so much, but also feels he should not care so much about. When you saved his life, you won his confidence and interest. You are deeply grateful that Guang went against the norm and appointed you as bodyguard and later as captain of his private guard. He thus showed the whole world that you had greater abilities than any other qi-less.

Guang is your best friend, but also your lord. In the beginning you were careful in your movement around the palace. However, you soon learned that where others wanted your submissiveness, Guang appreciated your honesty. He had countless subjects, but few friends. But he *is* the heir. You still need to obey his word, and there are expectations for his behaviour. When others are present, you're just his servant, and then he hides his appreciation for you.

Guang believes that the qi gives the right to rule, but has a weak qi himself. He is firmly convinced of the hierarchy of nature, also among humans. But he carries the knowledge that his sister was far stronger in the qi, with him. He does not believe that he, himself is the most suited.

Guang is a star - it has led you a long way, but just the thinnest layers of clouds can deprive it of all its shine.

You love him for making your name immortal by giving you an unprecedented honour.

Nevertheless, you hate him for not standing by you.

Zhihao is the result of an noblemans indiscretion, born with qi but without title. She has been raised by a noble family and has never wanted for anything. However, she was never part of the family and you have noticed a constant loneliness.

Zhihao was a teacher of the Empress children at the palace. Zhihao devoted herself to mastering her use of qi. She was so talented that even the emperess noticed it and asked her to come to the palace to train her children. Thus, Zhihao won her own title. She openly enjoyed the position. Guang accepted her wholeheartedly, but the heir Yu-Long, did not appreciate the young teacher.

You and Zhihao are the two closest to Guang. Like you, Guang turns to Zhihao for someone to talk to, who not only bows and scrapes. What frustrates you most is that he freely associates with Zhihao, and often directly asks for her advice - even when there are others nearby. Guang knows that the two of you fight for his favour, and it was not uncommon for him to let you compete for goods and rewards. It was frustrating to be played that way. However, you never say no to a challenge. In fact, you appreciated the rivalry that arose between the two of you; it pushed you to keep on doing your best.

Zhihao fell from grace when Yu-Long disappeared, but now serves as Guang's bodyguard. When Yu-Long disappeared, Zhihao was held responsible. Had she been a good enough teacher, Yu-Long would have been able to defend herself. As punishment, Zhihao was disfigured by having one eye burned out. She became dishonoured by being considered qi-less. Guang, however, would not allow her to be banished. Instead, he let her join his personal guard. She is now appointed co-captain. Her punishment was the same as your reward. Worse than that, it dimmed the honour that was shown you.

Zhihao is a hunting dog - focused on her goal, and you never run as fast as when you have it on your tail.

You hate her because she's like you, but can go further because of a coincidence in her blood.

You love your rivalry, pushing you forward and making you stronger.

Jian-Min is a noble born without qi-powers. His father was qi-less, yet married into the family. When Jian-Min did not show signs of having qi in his blood, most turned their back on him. Apart from the empress' family, his family is the richest so it's not possible to completely ignore him. Especially not now, when his little brother, who had the qi, is dead, and therefore can not lead the family, as was planned. However, many still find that the decent choice for a qi-less would be to renounce their inheritance - Guang is among those who think so.

Jian-Min was once your lover. He came to you after your first encounter at the palace. His eyes were warm and his words sweet. He was deeply taken by you. He praised your abilities; that you had come so far with neither money nor qi. You enjoyed being showered in compliments and luxury by him. As you got to know him better, it became more than that. You really came to care for him. He has the soul of an artist, fascinated with all aspects of the world. He sees both beauty and decay everywhere around him. For a while you were happy and you saw a new path ahead of you. Then Jian-Min ended your relationship. He claimed that you were not the one he thought you were. That it was not only through your abilities and resolve that you had risen through the world, but also by guile, and because you could steel your heart against all the pain in the world. You were furious that he could love you for what you had achieved, but not for the will to come so far. If that truthfully was the reason. You suspect that, in fact, he did not want to risk completely eliminating qi from his family bloodline by marrying a qi-less.

Jian-Min advocates the broad population, but lives luxuriously. In the time you were together, you shared many secrets and ideas. He often talked about his vision of a world where the qi-less were equal and could choose their own leader. You thought it was a strange vision, because if they wanted change, they could create it themselves, rather than relying on an activist like him to appear. No matter what, you felt it was distasteful how he spoke of the circumstances of the weak, but never shared the goods he set aside for himself. His home was always clean, his clothes always made of silk and his food was always made by people who had never tasted such food themselves.

Jian-Min is an adventure - exciting and beautiful, but nothing but a lie.
You love him because for a while he saw you, for who you are.
You hate him because the one you are, still wasn't good enough for him.

You do not know that Yi is just a cover for the heir, Yu-Long. *You, as the player, know that Yu-Long and Yi are the same person, but Chao-Fen, like everyone else in the kingdom, believes she was killed by highway robbers about a year ago.*

Yu-Long was feisty and not interested in the responsibility of governing, which often led to disputes between her and Guang. In those cases, it was often you who could understand both of them and undo the knots that they themselves had tied. You were fine with Yu-Long, she was fun and good company, but you were first and foremost Guang's friend and servant.

Yi is Jian-min's waiter. You had not seen him in Jian-Min's household before, but just a few months ago he appeared as a personal waiter. He seems to do a good job, but you're still perplexed as to why exactly he won his master's favour.

Yi acts as a spy for Guang. The contact was established through you. Yi said that he had heard rumours about Jian-Min being involved in actions undermining the throne. You examined his information, and although it was too late for you to stop the shady actions, you could confirm that it was true. When Yi got to talk to Guang, he asked for his advice on how to do the right thing. Guang commanded him to stay in Jian-min's service to keep an eye on his day-to-day actions. Often it is you Yi reports back to.

Yi is a woman disguised as a man. For a while you, on Guang's order, followed Yi to ensure his loyalty. It was difficult to reach a conclusion with the little information you could obtain simply by following her. To get to the bottom of who she was, you organized informal meetings at the local tea house. Yi turned out to be good company, but you probably would not have called upon her so often had you not discovered the wooden bead she wore in a string on the wrist. You knew the design already - your parents used to cut such pearls. However, as you spent more time in Yi's company, you noticed something in her movements and in her voice that convinced you Yi was born a woman. Yi told you that she was born in an insignificant village and was taken from her family by nobles, who came to the area. She now serves Jian-Min because his family has status, and it was a good connection to establish. You have not yet told Yi that you know her secret.

Yi is a slightly distorted mirror image - so close to the truth that it can make you believe the lie.

You love that Yi's secret shows that she is more than just a servant - just as you feel yourself.

You hate that Yi is an unloyal servant, who stabs her lord in the back, rather than telling what is on her mind or relinquishing her position.

Chao-Fen in keywords

- Born without qi and without a title.
- Has worked hard to get where she is. Has been training as a warrior throughout her life, but has also used both guile, deceit and manipulation to reach the top.
- Saved the life of the heir and thus won his respect. Is now his bodyguard - and friend, even though it is not proper conduct.
- Competitive - always had the need to prove her worth.
- Is happy about her life in the palace, but she steals to ensure her happiness also benefits her family.
- Has earned the good things in her life and believes that others could do the same through hard work.

What Chao-Fen does not know about herself:

- Is she actually proud to do without qi powers, or mostly just envious of people who have them?
- Does she feel guilty for stealing from Guang, or is it revenge for how he treats her?
- Does she still love Jian-Min?
- Why does she keep her knowledge of Yi secret to Guang?
- Is it a gift or a mockery to have Zhihao as her co-captain when she is still in high regard with Guang?

Guang: The heir, whom you work as a bodyguard for. Unintentionally or at least against his better judgement he has become your friend.

Zhihao: Former teacher to the children of the empress, became your rival in the pursuit of Guang's favor. When she fell from grace, she got a position as your co-captain.

Jian-Min: Your former lover and a noble without qi powers. He advocates democracy and was often frustrated by your lack of effort.

Yi: Jian-min's servant who spies on him for Guang. It is your job to keep an eye on Yi. She turns out to be a woman disguised as a man.

As long as the lotus blooms...

... honour endures.



You hear the rush of the wind above you. Somewhere a leaf falls. There is a soft scent of soil. A clear high note of running water. You reach out and let your mind graze every last one of the bamboo canes in the grove around you. You breathe the air, feel the wind. You draw the qi back into you. Gather it up. Shrink your consciousness until it is only yourself. Then you draw it further and further in. Until you are not even yourself. Only a tiny spot somewhere deep in your core. Your body stands as statue in the clearing of the bamboo grove. One leg lifted in a triangle, hands together in front of you. But that is not who you are. It is only what carries you. Your instrument.

You are Zhihao – a middle-aged woman, qi-master, but without a title.

You are one of the empire's strongest qi-users. The qi has shaped your life and in return you have learned to shape it. You have a great natural talent, but you also know that it is only through training that true strength can be achieved.

You remember very little from the first years of your life. You know that you were born in a small village near the Imperial city. But you remember nothing from that place, because you were brought to the capital by a noble family as soon as you showed signs of having the qi. You know that it means you were the result of someone's indiscretion with a qi-less. You were therefore never a part of the family - you were a part of the household. An especially valued servant. A tool. You often thought about the family you had been robbed of. How your life would have been, if you had been allowed to grow up there with qi-less parents, who would have loved you for who you were, and not for what you could do. You have often played with the idea of seeking out your lost past, but you do not know where you would begin.

But it was the qi that was valued about you. Therefore you dedicated yourself to your training. You saw it as your art and enjoyed challenging yourself and improving. Your talents were discovered and though you were young, you moved to the Empress' palace to help train her children. This led to both the greatest joy and the greatest sorrow of your life. The young prince Guang heartily embraced you as his master. But his older sister and heir to the throne, Yu-Long, had no interest in your training. Her raw qi-potential was far greater than his, but the discipline to control it was lacking. You continuously tried to reach her, but she would rather have had you leave her alone. This led to many disputes between you.

About a year ago Yu-Long was killed by highwaymen. When the culprits were not found, the Empress' blamed you. As Yu-Long's master it was your responsibility to make sure she could take care of herself. You know that Yu-Long had the abilities to defend herself, that she could have escaped if she

wanted to. Or if she had just listened, when you tried to teach her. She was the one who disgraced your name.

Guang tried in vain to talk the Empress out of punishing you. You were disfigured to make sure that your guilt would never be forgotten - one of your eyes was burned out. You were disgraced, every title you had made for yourself, any association you had had with the noble family you descended from was taken from you. You were lower than a *qi*-less. You should have left the palace, left the Imperial city. But Guang would not let it happen. After your punishment was complete he declared that he could choose whomever he wanted for his personal guard. Therefore he chose to take you in. Your title was not real, it was a shared captaincy of his personal guard. You do not belong there, but you are trapped between two worlds. On the one side the palace, which despises you and on the other the heir to the throne, who still sees you as a trusted advisor.

You still had your *qi*, but you were once again nothing special. Not a part of the noble ruling class. The middle seat is not a position you can fit into. So you sought out the nobleman Jian-Min who needed a wife who could bring *qi* to the family's blood.

In a world in chaos, the *qi* is a fix point. You understand better than anyone the potential of the *qi*. You understand how much better it makes a man. You understand why you need to be led by those who truly are the best. But you have also seen what it means to not be a part of the nobility. To be on the outside with no power and no importance. Meanwhile unshaped *qi* is no better than a sword, it all depends on the hand that wields it. You understand the wish for change, and you would also like to give the wide population more influence, but in truth they would never be able to lead as well as the *qi* can.

Your weapon is your *qi*. You use only your hands, your mind and your reason in battle. No weapon is stronger than self-control, and it is also harder to disarm you of than a blade. But it cannot protect you completely, so you have metal bracers around your forearms to enable you to parry safely.

Guang is the Empress' youngest child, but stands to inherit the throne. Side by side with his older sister he has been schooled in all the political duties of the palace. But there was never any expectation that he would take the throne. His destiny was to advise his sister, and he was satisfied with that position. When Yu-Long disappeared he suddenly became heir to the throne. He tries to hide it, but you can clearly sense his awe at the task. You try to support him, but you are not sure that your words can outweigh his doubt.

Guang is your eager student. Guang immediately accepted you when you came to the palace. You are only a few years older, but he has showed you only deep respect thanks to your mastery of the *qi*. He has always followed your instructions without question. He trusted that you wanted what was best for him. Even though he was a wonderful student, it has also been difficult, because his *qi* is not that strong, and no amount of training can change that.

Guang believes in the order of the world through the *qi*. He has never doubted his family's right to rule. That right is given them through tradition and strength in the *qi*. For those with the *qi* are the best. That is why he fears the throne. You know, better than anyone, how the *qi* can improve people. But *qi* cannot make evil into good, only good to better. Just as the lack of *qi* does not erase the good in people. But Guang has to hold on to his belief that the world is ordered by nature.

Guang tried to help you when you fell in disgrace. He was devastated when he could not convince the Empress' that you were innocent. Therefore he was overjoyed when he found the solution by making you a part of his bodyguard. You know that he meant well, but it burns you even more that he is blind to how his decision is causing you pain. Every day you walk in the palace where people once bowed to you, but now they look away or openly look down at you. Here where you thought that you had created a home for yourself, you are now unwanted. And yet you cannot leave, not now when Guang needs you more than ever.

Guang is your golden past and beautiful melancholia.

You love him because he sees you as you wish to be.

You hate him because he despises Jian-Min for being *qi*-less, yet honours the common Chao-Fen.

Jian-Min is a nobleman born without *qi*-powers. His father was *qi*-less, but married into the family anyway. When Jian-Min did not exhibit signs of having *qi* in his blood, most people turned their backs on him. But his family is the richest apart from the Empress' own, so he could never be completely ignored. Especially not now, when his brother, who had the *qi*, has passed away and cannot lead the family after all. Through most of your life you have had very little to do with Jian-Min, since Guang is among those who holds that the decent thing for a *qi*-less to do, would be to renounce his inheritance. You have therefore never sought him out before, but the few times you have interacted, he has seemed like a kind man.

Jian-Min is your fiancée, but it is kept secret. The agreement was made after you fell into disgrace at the palace. It was a partnership, which could benefit you both: You can once again have a title and get a new place to belong to, he needs *qi* in his bloodline and your *qi* is among the strongest. It was a sensible agreement and Jian-Min was a sensible man. For the same reason you still keep it a secret, because it would cast Jian-Min in a bad light to take you in right after your fall from grace - it would look like no one else wanted him. It has also given you time to try to get to know each other, even though it is hard to do in secret. It did not take you long, however, to realise that although his mundane skills will never be as good as yours, as a person he is every bit as good as you. He is kind and proud. Like you, life has given him a strange place, but he has chosen not to run from it. You are surprised to find that you may have feelings for a man without the *qi*, but also happy at the thought that you can get along well with the man you are going to share your future with. If that is really the person, he is. Because you sometimes doubt whether you even know him at all, or if the words are in reality those of his messenger, Yi.

Jian-Min is an advocate for the wide population. He has not hidden the fact that he wishes to change the way things are in the realm. He wants more power for the *qi*-less population. Wants for those people to be treated with respect as well. He wants everyone to have a part in the decisions concerning their country - independent of their powers or titles. It is a beautiful thought, but in reality it will probably not work in their favour.

Jian-Min is deep forest lake. Far from perfect, but both beautiful and dangerous.

You love him for his willpower and personality. He shows you that you can belong, even though you do not fit into the framework the world has made. You hate that he needs the *qi* so you can never know whether he really loves you for who you are - or if it is only for what you can give him.

You do not know that Yi is merely a cover for Yu-Long, the heir to the throne. *As a player you know that they are one and the same, but Zhihao is convinced, like the rest of the realm, that Yu-Long was killed by highwaymen.*

Yu-Long was your reluctant student. You trained Guang and Yu-Long together - or you tried to. Yu-Long was not willing to accept you as an authority. She was very strong in the *qi*, but not in the will to control it. She excused herself by saying that if the *qi* is a divine power, you should listen to it, not try to control it. She never understood - the *qi* and you are the same. To understand the *qi* is to understand yourself. But Yu-Long never understood herself either.

Yu-Long is the reason you are disgraced. For years you tried to reach her. You were patient and tried to explain and share your knowledge. But she would never listen. She was not weak, but if her *qi* failed her, and it cost her her life, it was her own fault - not yours. She was the one who never wanted to cross the bridge you had dedicated so much of your life to build.

Yi is Jian-Min's manservant, but is rumoured to be more than that. He is a competent servant. He follows his orders and, even better, he is adept at anticipating needs. He often fades into the background when nobles are present. And yet there are rumours that Yi is more than he lets on. That he is a hired blade. You do not like these rumours, since they put Jian-Min in a much more rebellious light than his actions have. You cannot help but fear that they are true.

Yi is often the link between you and your fiancée. You and Jian-Min can only rarely meet, but you make an effort to stay in touch. This is often achieved through Yi. Sometimes it is letters, sometimes it is presents, sometimes it is just words, which Yi delivers. He delivers them beautifully. Sometimes you keep talking when he has visited on behalf of his master. It can sometimes be difficult to tell when he is speaking for himself, and when he is simply delivering words. He is a good man, and you often feel like you know him better than you know Jian-Min.

Yi is the shadow that brings uncertainty. All your other problems are known, but if you were to shine a light on this dark corner, you do not know what you would find.

You love Yi for bringing you the words you want to hear.

You hate Yi because he gets so much of Jian-Min's attention. Your fiancée confides more in this servant than he does in you.

Chao-Fen is born qi-less, but lives in the Empress' palace as Guang's bodyguard. She comes from an insignificant village and is born without title. Now she lives in the palace. She has no *qi*, but has dedicated her life to training her body and wielding it as a weapon. She is a formidable warrior, you would not deny that. Guang invited her to his home after she had saved his life while he was hunting. Sometimes you are inclined to believe that Chao-Fen orchestrated the situation herself to move up in the world.

Chao-Fen is your rival in the eyes of Guang. It does not sit well with you at all that Guang pits you against each other. Often he has almost made a game of having you compete for little honours such as accompanying him on journeys or getting the best horse. Truthfully it has always been mostly about Guang's favour, though, which means a lot for both of you. It frustrates you that you allow yourself to be pulled into these personal battles. You *are* better than Chao-Fen, and you should be above such childish rivaling. Besides which Chao-Fen is a bad influence on Guang. She has never born the heavy duties of a future emperor. Has never had any respect for consequences.

Chao-Fen and Jian-Min used to be lovers. You know that you are better than Chao-Fen, but it is still impossible for you to escape the thought that if she had had *qi*, it would not be you engaged to Jian-Min.

You and Chao-Fen now share the position as captain of Guang's personal guard. Chao-Fen is outraged that you have taken her title from her. You have never wanted this position. You do not belong here. But this is where you are now, and once again you will prove that you are superior to Chao-Fen.

You have discovered that Chao-Fen steals from the palace, but you have kept it secret. Since you have moved into the guard's quarters, you have discovered that Chao-Fen smuggles expensive trinkets into her chamber. You have kept watch to confirm your suspicion and to have proof when you made Guang aware of her deceit. So you also discovered that she snuck away from the palace with the items and travelled to the village she came from. She gave them to her family, so her good fortune would also help them. To your own surprise you decided not to expose her. Had you known your *qi*-less family, you too would have wanted to help them in any way you could.

Chao-Fen is a drizzling rain, good for all growing things, but in time it seeps in and brings the cold with it.

You hate Chao-Fen for being worth less than you, and yet fitting in better than you do.

You love that she actually cares for her family, and not just for herself.

Zhihao in keywords

- Very strong *qi*-user. Both raw talent and well-trained control.
- Illegitimate child of a noble family - no inherited title. Has always felt out of place. Longs for the *qi*-less part of her family.
- Likes the *qi*, but feels like it is the thing that people want, never her.
- Has been master to the Imperial family - but has fallen in disgrace when Yu-Long disappeared.
- Now serves in the shared position as caption of the prince's personal guard. Does not enjoy the position, since it keeps her trapped in the palace where she is despised.
- Has since secretly engaged herself to Jian-Min, a *qi*-less nobleman who advocates democracy.
- She herself feels that *qi* is very important, but does see flaws in the system.

What Zhihao does not know about herself:

- Can she really love Jian-Min, when she cannot be with him?
- Can she differentiate between Jian-Min and his servant Yi?
- Can she turn her back on her student Guang to support her fiancée?
- Can she bear to marry Jian-Min if he does not love her?
- Can she really look down on the *qi*-less Chao-Fen, when she cares about Jian-Min and Yi?

Jian-Min: Your fiancé. *Qi*-less nobleman. Advocate of democratic changes.

Yi: Your fiancée's manservant, who is rumoured to also be a spy. Is often a messenger between you and Jian-Min, out of the two you almost know Yi better.

Guang: Your devoted student who unexpectedly stands to inherit the throne, now that his sister is gone. Believes in the power of traditions and the wisdom of the *qi*.

Chao-Fen: A *qi*-less warrior who has Guang's favour and your displeasure. You have often been rivals and now you have once again been pitted against each other, since you share the position as captain of the prince's personal guard.

*As long as the lotus blooms...
... honour endures.*

Yi

Yu-Long



In your chamber, you took off your servant uniform. Even if you set out on behalf of your lord, the night was yours. That freedom you had been seeking for so long. You pulled on the black suit and laced it tightly to your body. Your knives were hidden in the folds of the suit. The blades of your throwing stars were painted black, so even the moon would not bid them shine. You opened the window completely. The night was cool and embraced you with a caress from the flailing curtains. As light and easy as a carefree promise, you went out of the window. You were nothing more than a shadow. You were free.

You were Yu-Long - daughter of the empress and heir to the throne; now you are disguised as Yi a common, male servant.

You were born at the imperial palace. You were the firstborn of the empress and thus heir to the throne. You were schooled side by side with your little brother Guang. He took it all in and followed all the rules. However, you never really felt at home among servants and statues. You wanted to do something with your life, not just wait for the position someone else had decided for you. You learned what you wanted and skipped the remaining classes, you had the *qi* to draw upon when needed anyway, and Guang to do the rest for you. However, the two of you were never really close. You being sure that many people felt it would be better, if he was to be the next emperor did not exactly improve things. But you knew where he stood, obliging and ready to tell you exactly how things should be done.

The problem was, that you did not agree with the people surrounding you about how things should be. It became clear when your childhood friend Jian-Min did not get any *qi* powers. At first, you did not give it much thought, but Guang refused to spend time with him. He was not the only one. Slowly you began to notice how big the differences were. When the *qi*-less warrior Chao-Fen moved into the palace and became your friend, she told you a bit about how her life had been before. You did not believe her, so in secrecy you went out to see for yourself. You started to doubt the *qi*. Because if everyone who has it, is good - the best - how can everything be so wrong?

It was said that your mother was the only one in the empire more powerful than you. But you felt powerless. Even though you were to inherit the throne, you could not simply do what you pleased. The whole nobility had expectations for you, and did you not meet them, the memory of your mother would not be enough to restrain them for long. Still more frequently, you went on long trips to get away. Each time you just saw more injustice. When one day you were attacked by highway robbers, you took the chance to really get away. You let them take you away and faked your own death.

The first thing you did with your newly found freedom was to travel to the village Chao-Fen was from, to see for yourself. Nobody was in urgent distress. They did not starve, had roof over their heads. But they were not happy. You helped where you could: You patched a roof. You pulled a plow so they could have a rest. Taught them how to play music so they had something to look forward to. They appreciated it and for the first time in your life, you felt that you actually did something right. As you traveled on, a family from the village gave you a carved wooden bead. You wear it in a leather cord on your wrist, to you, it's more beautiful than anything you wore at the palace.

For some time you wandered and helped people wherever you could. But you only have two hands and there are always more problems to solve and more dreams to awaken. Even your *qi* can not solve it all. In addition, you soon realized that many people feared a lone wandering *qi* user who did not introduce herself by title. So you made a decision: You would not use your *qi* again before the world was a fair place. You disguised yourself as a man, so nobody would be reminded of Yu-Long by your presence, and returned to the imperial court. There you sought out Jian-Min, as you had heard rumors about him leading a democratic revolution. You offered him your help - not like Yu-Long, but as the *qi*-less Yi.

You suggested Jian-Min, that you as Yi could pretend to help Guang. You got information, as well as the opportunity to tell him what you wished for him to know. To Guang, you told that you in Jian-mins service, had heard rumors of his involvement in rebellion, but that you would serve the rightful regent. Initially, you gave true information, but too late for them to stop anything. Guang took the bait, and you now pretend to be his spy.

In a world of chaos you cannot make plans, only do your best. You can see that it's wrong, the way things are now. But the truth is that you do not know what's right. You only know that there is a need for change. Every time you see something wrong, you try to right it. Plans are for other people and you follow them only as long as they seem sensible.

Your weapon is small knives and throwing stars, that can easily be hidden and always are available. Back when you had the *qi*, they were a perfect accessory that gave you an edge by being unseen. It's only been beneficial that you understand how to handle them, now that you really need to keep your weapons hidden. But they are harder to control without your *qi*.

Guang is your little brother. Of course you love him, but he has not made your life easier. You grew up together and shared almost everything. Or you should have - but you did not share your worldview. You almost always fought. Guang tried to tell you what to do. He always saw himself as your advisor, not like your friend. Not like your brother.

Guang was a saint and hard to live up to. Your education, your training and all of your routines were set up so that you followed the same pace. Or at least you should have. Guang was the perfect student. It was the most important thing for him, and he always did his best to meet the expectations. You could not keep your focus. You did not want to live in this prison of gold and silk. Often, you skipped your classes, knowing that Guang would remember the lessons if you ever needed them. Sometimes you thought that Guang was far better suited to inherit the throne than you are.

Guang is the youngest child of the empress, but stands to inherit the throne. He had never expected it. You are sure the thought never occurred to him, that he would take your seat. Nevertheless, you gave it to him. When you ran away from the palace and your responsibility, you knew that Guang could take your place. You left because you did not want to stay. Knowing there was someone to take your place, made it easier.

Guang believes that the *qi* gives the right to rule, but has weak *qi* himself. Guang has *qi* in his blood, but far weaker than you have. You know it pains him. You are sure that's why he always tried to compensate, by studying and training endlessly. It does not matter to you. It doesn't make him worth any less. But to Guang, the *qi* is everything. You believe, that the only time he was sincerely thankful to you, was when you gave him the set of Tai Chi fans he uses for fighting. As the traditional weapon of strong *qi* warriors, he saw it as a recognition of his worth. You never had the heart to tell him that it was a gift Jian-Min had made for him, but that you gave him because they were no longer friends. Without the *qi*, Guang would never have accepted the throne. He believes that the world is divided, by nature, into those with and those without the *qi*. He believes that those who have the *qi* have a duty to lead, even those who will not be ruled. You agree that leadership is a burden, but do not agree that others need you to take up that burden.

Guang is a bird – fragile, but if frightened, he'll puff up to face any threat. You hate him because he has never had an independent thought in his life. You cannot help loving him, he is your brother and he means well.

Jian-Min is a noble born without *qi*. Jian-Min's mother cared more for love than tradition and married a *qi*-less. From that came Jian-Min. You think that that development is good, but that the life it has given Jian-Min is not. At least Jian-Min got a little brother who had *qi* and therefore could take over the family's business. But the brother died tragically way too young, and now Jian-Min is back in the spot-light.

Jian-Min has been your friend since you were children. Before it became apparent that he would not develop *qi*-powers, Jian-Min often came to the palace. You played and studied together. You were good friends. When it became undeniable that he is *qi*-less, he was rarely invited anymore. Many turned their back on him, and his company was no longer wanted, tolerated only. However, you did not care. He was still the boy you had painted and sung with. Perhaps you wanted even more to be his friend now that you should not.

Jian-Min advocates the general public. He has not concealed the fact that he believes things should be changed. He has not spoken openly about revolution or democracy, but often he questions how the country is run. It was not given much attention when he was not going to inherit, but now, it stirred some murmur in many of the nobles' halls.

You work as Jian-Min's servant so that you can work together to change the world order. When you decided to return to the imperial court, you visited Jian-Min. You wanted to help him in his fight. You want him to be the front figure instead of taking the lead yourself. With you in front, you don't believe that things can really change. You need a leader like him, standing on the edge between two worlds. He wholeheartedly accepted you and your support. You pretend to be his personal servant, so that it is natural for you to spend time together. You enjoy that it allows you to move in all layers of society, and you are fond of the simple tasks that that the role has given you.

Jian-Min is a broken bone healed up stronger, where it cracked before.
You love him because he sees the world as it is - a place spiced up by the *qi*, not composed of it.
You hate that he prefers you as Yu-Long not Yi.

Zhihao is the result of an noblemans indiscretion, born with *qi* but without title. Previously, they had killed such mistakes before they could create problems. Fortunately, it is not a practice that is exercised anymore. Now the noble families abduct the children as soon as they prove to have the abilities. Zhihao was never really part of the family she was brought into. She was just a valued servant.

Zhihao was yours and Guangs teacher in the use of *qi*. Because of power of Zhihao's *qi*, she was invited to the palace as your teacher. Guang took her in straight away, but she rubbed you the wrong way. She thought that her way was the only one. She always spoke about responsibility, patience and control. You never under-stood why you should seek control of the *qi*. If it really was the divine essence, you should let it run freely. Use it when it wants to be used. But that was never the purpose for Zhihao, to her it was about the *qi* itself - not about using it for good. The irony, in the fact that the *qi* is now most beneficial to you by not using it, is not lost on you.

Zhihao fell from grace when you left the palace. When you faked your own death, it had not occurred to you that your mother would punish Zhihao. You did not think she was a good teacher, but her losing her position, had in your eyes been a harsh enough consequence. To disfigure her by taking half of her sight and dishonor her, was never something you wanted. At least, Guang still protects her and has made sure she can stay in the palace as co-captain of his guard.

Zhihao is secretly engaged to Jian-Min. It happened after you disappeared. Since Jian-Min is not ready to reveal the relationship, it is often your job to deliver messages to her. You had no desire to have anything more to do with Zhihao, but did not want to stand in the way of their feelings. To meet with her in a position other than as your unwanted teacher, has shown you that she too is just a person. Lonely and with a need to be a part of something. Often you end up talking together, even after you have passed on the messages you were to deliver.

Zhihao is a tree - can cast shade if you approach it, warmth if you cut it down, but is rooted and unable to make itself useful.

You hate her because she felt, the *qi* had earned her your friendship. You love, that you get to see that she is more than just her use of the *qi*.

Chao-Fen is born *qi*-less, but lives in the empress' palace as Guangs bodyguard. She was first and foremost Guangs friend. The first time they met, he was disap-pointed to get a regiment of *qi*-less assigned for his hunt. When he got home, he spoke highly of Chao-Fen and how she saved his life. Since then, he invited her to train with him and bestowed upon her the honor of being the captain of his guard. It surprised you that Guang took in a *qi*-less that way. Sometimes you suspected that he wanted to prove to himself that it was possible to be a great warrior without having a strong *qi*.

Chao-Fen was a friend who understood Yu-Longs desire for freedom to be herself. Over time, Chao-Fen became your friend too. You were deeply impressed by her abilities. If you used your *qi*, you could easily defeat her, but to be able to handle a weapon the way she does without the *qi*, was beyond your compre-hension. Now that you have sworn off your *qi*, you are even more impressed. Chao-Fen was indomitable and relentless, she spoke unfiltered and plainly, but did not judge you for wanting to choose your own way. At times she could even get Guang to see things from your point of view.

Chao-Fen and Jian-Min were once lovers. You thought they were a strange couple. Him, a silent artistic soul and her an indomitable warrior. But you would have liked them to find happiness together. However, it did not last forever. You do not know the details but know that they did not end the relationship on good terms.

Chao-Fen can also be a friend of Yi. After you started 'spying' for Guang, you have been seeing Chao-Fen again. You often report back to her. Sometimes you meet up socially afterwards. As you get to know each other, the more you have to make up about Yi. You feel guilty about lying, but you have also come to like being Yi: Born by common parents and at a young age taken away by a noble family, with whom you never really felt you belonged. You were sent to the capital to serve Jian-min's influential family and hope to accomplish something here. You enjoy talking to Chao-Fen on more equal terms than you previously did - even if you had never discovered the unevenness between you.

Chao-Fen is a salmon, she swims up stream until she succeeds.
You love her because she, more than anyone else, shows you that you can be what you want, not just what is expected of you.
You hate that she is closer to your brother, than she is to you.

Yi in keywords:

- Born as the empress' oldest child and heir to the throne. Desired freedom to choose her destiny for himself.
- Has seen how the *qi* is the source of the injustice in society, and has therefore sworn off the use of it.
- Now works as Jian-min 's servant and does her utmost to succeed.
- Is a double agent, as Yi also works as a false spy for Guang.
- Yi would like to assume the responsibilities he used to ignore. Struggles to figure out what is right - and then to do it.
- Yi would like to be the hero. He has a hard time figuring out what he is supposed do to be the hero.

What Yi does not know about himself:

- Can he be Yi forever and put everything else behind him or would he like to return one day?
- What does it take for Yi to use his *qi*?
- Do Yi believe that Jian-Min has the answer, or could there be another way to improve the situation of the people?
- Does Yi have any love for his brother, or just contempt?
- Can Yu-Long forgive Zhihao for ruining her youth? Can Yi even learn to love Zhihao? And if he can, can Yu-Long forgive herself for the punishment she has brought upon Zhihao?

Guang: Your brother, who you practically made heir to the throne. You act as a fake spy for him. He is arrogant and certain that his leadership is his congenital right.

Jian-Min: Your childhood friend and now master - a *qi*-less nobleman. He leads the democratic rebellion and you came to him to further that cause.

Zhihao: Former *qi* teacher to the imperial family, now in disgrace, but on her way to a new title, now that she is engaged to Jian-Min.

Chao-Fen: A skilled warrior, though she is *qi*-less. She is Guang's bodyguard. You have always admired her and it seems that Yi can become the key to a stronger friendship for you two.

As long as the lotus blooms...

... honour endure.