

## Prologue

Wu Shimen marched around the corner, brows creasing as he met the room with a scowl. He hated the Hall of Union at this hour.

The light spilling through the stained-glass windows made everything look more beautiful than it deserved. The Inner Court's hall stood in silence with incense curls that scattered across the floor like creatures fast asleep—creatures that he kicked as he strode through the smoke. The whole building was designed to impress. To distort.

Much like his own place beside the throne.

Chancellor Wu climbed the lacquered steps, stopping before the two guards flanking the towering chestnut doors.

“Grand Chancellor of Balance, Wu Shimen.” A palace escort approached him, bowing as he spoke. “The Emperor is ready for you.”

He brushed the guards aside with a flourish of his arm and proceeded through the open door, the familiar glint of the glass cases lining either side of the throne room.

Taking measured steps along the crimson carpet, the Chancellor advanced toward the Emperor. Like a practiced dance. *Never approach eagerness nor stoop to hesitance in front of me*, the Emperor once said to him.

All but two of the Empire's twenty-four jade dragon seals stood arrayed between the pillars he walked past. Each one stood alone, the embodiment of Xishan's great noble houses—including his own.

Elevated on a dais of seven steps, the Imperial Throne was framed with murals depicting the vibrant valleys of Huoshan Mountain, creating a backdrop shaped like a flaming lotus.

Emperor Rong loomed over him, his ash hair bound in a topknot secured with a gold dragon hairpin, its parchment-thin wings casting shadows across his angular face like curved blades. His black robes brushed against the floor, accentuated by hues of crimson and gold, the embroidery of dancing dragons on his sleeves creating layered rivers of fire.

“Thank you for granting an audience with me at such short notice, Imperial Son of Heavenly Flame. My family and I fervently pray for your continued good health and prosperity.” The Chancellor bowed deeply, folding his hands within the long sleeves of his ceremonial robe until the fabric nearly brushed the floor. When his back felt a familiar ache and his face was low enough to be sheltered from the Emperor’s watchful eye, he creased his brow in a grimace.

“You may rise, Chancellor Wu.”

As he rose, smoothing the jagged edges of his expression as he would his favourite silk handkerchief, he searched the Emperor’s face for the mood that ruled him today. Emperor Rong was pale, his carved cheekbones adding no warmth to his face as he spoke with detachment. He leaned forward slightly, as if testing whether Wu would be worth the effort of listening to today. One finger tapped idly against the arm of the throne, in the aggravating way he always did—slow yet arrhythmic. *Tap... Tap. Tap.* “What matter have you deemed worthy of my attention?”

“Your Imperial Majesty, a special envoy from Dongshan will be arriving within the season to commence diplomatic talks. Officially, their stated aim is to decrease the tensions between our two nations,” Wu announced. *Tap, tap...*

“I’m aware of this already, Chancellor,” Emperor Rong stated shortly, leaning back on his throne. *Are you aware that I’d like to break your fingers too?*

“I have heard whispers that it is being led by the First Prince of Dongshan,” Wu said in a lowered voice.

The tapping stopped. Good, now he had his attention.

“How certain are you of his identity?”

“It is but an unconfirmed rumour passed along to me by the Minister of Echoes and Edicts,” the Chancellor replied smoothly. “But for an enemy nation to send an envoy to arrive right before the New Year... that is no coincidence, Your Imperial Majesty. Especially when it is to be the first Year of the Dragon this century. Dongshan likely plans to interfere with the Trial of Ascension.”

“Where is the envoy currently?”

Wu hesitated, offering a thoughtful frown. “Dongshan has set up encampments along Shulin’s outer reaches. The envoy is likely to pass through them before arriving in Xishan. However, many routes lead to Xishan.”

“In plainer language, you haven’t the faintest idea.” The Emperor’s voice was dry and hollow as he levelled a flat, disapproving stare at the Chancellor. “Don’t you realize that the envoy could be anywhere from Dongshan to the very outskirts of our borders by now?”

*In plainer language, you’re not fit to wipe the sweat from my brow.* Wu winced at the rebuke before recovering with a gracious nod. “That is correct, Your Imperial Majesty. Our ability to send spies into Shulin is limited—as you know, if any are discovered, it will be viewed as a sign of aggression within neutral territory.

If I may speak freely—”

Emperor Rong gestured for him to continue.

“No foreign court would elect to send a guest during the most sacred time in our calendar without purpose. If I were Empress Hu, I would use the chaos of the New Year to plant seeds of rebellion under the guise of celebration. We must not underestimate Dongshan’s appetite for

influence—nor their desire to stamp out Xishan’s flame once and for all.” He met the Emperor’s gaze, pressing hand to heart. “Use me, Your Imperial Majesty, to ensure Xishan’s fire burns bright for many years to come.”

The Emperor considered for a moment. “Send our best spies to locate the envoy group and confirm the identity of its leader. Use whatever means necessary to monitor them carefully once they arrive—and report back as soon as you have evidence of interference.”

“And if I get confirmation, Your Imperial Majesty?” he asked, his tone timid.

The Emperor’s voice turned cold. “Send the prince’s head back to his mother.”

“Understood, Your Majesty.” The Chancellor bowed low towards the ground, the corner of his mouth curling into a subtle smile. “May the light of dragon-fire shine forever upon your rule.”

## Chapter —

*Of the eight nations in Zhonghua, the Empire of Xishan boasts the greatest number of soldiers in any standing army. Three hundred thousand strong, it is said that as disciples of the great dragon Long Shen, creator of fire and one of the twelve Zodiac gods, his omnipotent power emboldens the fighters of Xishan to become the most fearsome in the world.*

Kailin flipped the page.

"...Top exports to other nations include grains, liquor, and tea leaves," she read aloud. "How thrilling." *Grand flames, this was dull.* She carefully rolled up the scroll and fastened it with a soft exhale, shoving the aged study material to the side as she prepared to unfurl the next one. As one of Emperor Rong’s elite soldiers, albeit still in formal training, Kailin was set to

graduate from the Imperial Institute of Heavenly Flame the following month. That is, *if* she could manage to get a passing grade in Diplomacy IV. Or, as she liked to call it: ‘the Coward’s Art’.

It was a course (and degree) she felt was utterly useless, for she would rather be thrown into a pit of blazing fire set by Long Shen himself than work as an imperial aide, doomed to waste her life licking the feet of corrupt noblemen.

She didn’t lack the skillset for it. In fact, she had a natural talent for reading people. It was the tiptoeing, the false pleasantries, and the slow coiling around your neck by serpents masquerading in silk that left a sour taste in her mouth. She preferred to face her opponents head-on, their blades pointed directly at her heart.

Her eyes drifted lazily past the unmoving dragon etched seamlessly into the red wooden frame above the cramped desk to look out the carved window of her student quarters. She scowled with disdain, the sweeping darkness broken only by the soft, diffused glow of waning moonlight peering through misty clouds. The sun would come up soon.

*Another all-nighter, and still no progress.*

A glimmer caught her attention, the light refracting too much to be a star.

“How long do you plan on watching me for?” she declared into the empty room, eyes fixed on the star as it began to move, revealing the all-too-familiar silhouette of Wu Sunming.

“Until you swallow your pride and ask for help,” Sunming replied, arms crossed as she stepped into the room with trained poise. In the corner of her eye, she noticed another pest slip into her room, this one in the form of a small grey moth now fluttering around the lantern-light.

Sunming moved with the calculated grace her tutors had drilled into her since childhood, each step measured, each gesture deliberate. Her jet-black waves were pinned into a bun, wrapped in delicate ribbons and ornaments that framed her soft features. Today, she wore a

flowing azure qipao woven with golden birds gliding up her petite frame. The fabric looked almost wet under the rich lantern light: a clear indication of the finest raw mulberry silk from the southern coastal nation of Nanyang. *Apparently, knowledge of foreign trade has some use after all.*

“It’s the middle of the night. Why are you dressed like you’re expecting a visit from the Emperor?”

Sunming cast her eyes downward, her hands fidgeting. “I couldn’t sleep.”

Kailin knew something had been going on with her lately, but Sunming had been tight-lipped about it. Most likely, her father had refused to indulge her latest jewellery obsession or something—and Kailin had no desire to pry.

“Well, you look like a peacock during mating season.” Kailin glared a moment longer before Sunming began to laugh, prompting her to relax her shoulders as she let her composure slip.

“My craftsmen would think you use both your eyes for breathing if they heard that,” Sunming tutted. “Even you must appreciate the stunning lustre of Nanyang silk.”

“A dragon does not concern itself with the differences between a sparrow and a swan,” Kailin replied, raising a finger and furrowing her brow to imitate one of the Institute’s temple elders. “Besides, the only thing that really matters to me with clothing is how easy they are to fight in. The more extravagant they are, the more likely I’ll end up staining them red with *my own* blood.”

“How macabre. You are aware that clothes can still look nice *and* be easy to move around in, right? I’ll see to it that my tailors make something suited for you.” Sunming held up a hand as Kailin opened her mouth to protest. “No objections. You’d be doing *my* eyes a favour.”

She sat on Kailin's bed, elbows on her knees and chin in her hands. "Master Han reported that I've been doing much better in Espionage, but it seems I'm still no match for you."

Kailin rolled her eyes. Master Han picked favourites, and Sunming's noble birth meant she'd be coddled by any master wishing to keep their job. And their head. "Master Han is a joke. From what I understand, he only got his position by promising lonely Minister Zao that his sister would crawl under the palace sheets with him. She's rumoured to be a courtesan, after all."

Sunming's eyes widened a fraction before she swiftly smoothed her expression away. "So, anyway, what gave me away earlier?"

"Your hairpin. I saw the reflection of gold in the window."

She touched her hand to her head, smiling softly. "A gift from my father."

Kailin remembered the hushed whispers of servants working on the school grounds as they discussed rumours of Sunming's upbringing. They spoke of how a young Sunming had once been gifted a new jade bracelet by her father, an effective means to draw her attention away from the sound of her nursemaid being caned over a trivial infraction in the gardens. The screams, they said, were frequent enough to become part of the household's rhythm.

"If I hadn't already known it was you, your *dreadfully* expensive silk would be confetti by now." Kailin lifted her sleeve, flashing a sly grin as she revealed the throwing knives hidden in the sleeves of her crimson robe. "The hairpin is exquisite, but I wouldn't wear it out so casually. I'm sure even a common thief would find it worth the risk to kill you—*just* to tear it off your head. And it wouldn't be all that difficult. Allow me to demonstrate."

Sunming blinked as a knife zipped across her eyeline and impaled the thorax of the grey moth to the wooden shutters of the far window. Her lip curved into a tight smile, satisfaction replacing her annoyance now that the pest had been reduced to a twitching museum specimen.

“Cold as always,” Sunming muttered. “If I hadn’t known you since we both joined the Institute, I’d be fully convinced you were a Dongshan spy.”

Kailin scoffed, pointing toward the door.

“*If* I were a spy, the thought would never even cross your mind. Now get off my bed and leave. As hopeless as it may be, I’m trying to study.”

Sunming pouted as she stood, and Kailin ignored the pang of guilt when the voice in her head whispered to play nice.

But she reminded herself that soon, she’d graduate into the Emperor’s service. Sunming would thrive in the cushioned life of a wealthy noblewoman. Kailin would live wherever the Emperor or the Minister of War deemed her most useful. As a soldier. A spy. An executioner. Whatever she was asked.

Only one thing was certain: playing nice would get her nowhere.