

ONE



An empire is like a cherry tree; if it is blooming, its petals must one day fall. If it is barren, its petals must one day bloom. Thus it has always been.

—BOOK OF ODES, 856

WAR IS COMING . . .”

The rumors took wing and flew through the capital, leaving behind a trail of astonishment, fear, and, in some cases, a stirring hunger for glory. Only in my father’s house were they met with apathy.

“I will not go,” my father said, his face obscured by a cloud of smoke. The unaired room smelled of sweat and opium, but Father refused to let us open so much as a window. He claimed the sunlight would hurt his eyes. But I think he simply did not want to see the state of what he’d become.

His wife stood beside me, trembling. Xiuying was my stepmother, though we were only seven years apart. The servants had expected me to hate her upon her arrival, but against Father’s increasing rage and lunacy, we bonded over a common enemy. As the years passed, we became more than allies; we became laotong. Old sames.

Now, Xiuying clenched her hands into fists, trying to conceal her emotions. “The draft is the heavens’ mandate. To lie to the Imperial Commander is punishable by death—”

“For skies’ sake, just tell them I’m unwell! Make something up. You’re awfully creative when it comes to finding ways to spend money. Use some of that creativity to lie.”

The injustice of this remark stole my breath away. How dare he accuse *her* of losing all our money? “It’s your gambling habit that’s brought us—”

Xiuying covered my mouth with her hands. “No, Meilin,” she whispered.

Father blew out a delicate ring of smoke from his pipe; he hadn’t even heard me. Lost in his thoughts, he murmured, “I won’t go to war. I refuse. It doesn’t befit me, a man of my stature.” His hand trembled as he emptied his pipe against the old ashtray. The porcelain had once belonged to my mother’s dowry. It was now chipped and stained, ruined like everything else in this household.

“Why don’t you send the old footman in my place?” said Father, chuckling at his own idea. He set his pipe down at last, the full weight of his attention falling upon us. “He can pass for me.”

“Father,” I said loudly, unable to curb my tongue. “Zhou is not long for this world.”

“Did I ask you to speak?” he snapped, his eyes lighting on me. Xiuying shot me a frightened glance, but I shook my head at her while Father laughed.

“Even better,” he decided. “Two birds with one stone, as the scholars say. Better he die out there than waste our household resources any longer. These days even the dogs contribute more than he—”

“Uncle Zhou has done more for this household than you ever have.”

The words were out of my mouth before I could think twice. Xiuying gasped; Father narrowed his eyes, then lurched to his feet, grabbing hold of the table to steady himself. He was advanced in

years, but he was still a large man, several heads taller than me. They used to say he could command a room with his presence, before the opium commanded him.

He lumbered toward me now, his long hair loose on his shoulders, his gait sloping and precarious. With a snarl, he grabbed me by my chin, forcing me to meet his watery glare.

Our faces were inches from each other. I hadn't been this close to him in years.

Xiuying once confessed she'd thought him a handsome man when they first met, with his dark, luminous eyes, his straight nose and high cheekbones. "*You're blessed with beauty, like him,*" she'd said, trying to compliment me. I hadn't told her it felt like the worst kind of insult.

"That Zhou raised you to insolence," Father muttered. "After your mother died, I shouldn't have let him interfere." He turned my face from side to side, like a butcher inspecting a pig for slaughter. When I tried to pull away, his grip only tightened.

"How old is she?" he asked, glancing at Xiuying. His voice took on a mocking lilt. "How old is my dear, lovely daughter?"

Xiuying's voice quavered as she answered. "Only just past eighteen," she said. "I still have much to teach her in the ways of women's—"

"Silence." Father released me, his eyes roving down my body now. "Eighteen is far too old to be uncommitted. Have Zhou call for the matchmaker tomorrow. I expect a dowry by new moon."

The new moon was in a fortnight. "No," I bit out. "I refuse to marry."

I didn't see his hand until it smashed into my cheek, the force of the slap snapping my head to one side. I blinked, forcing back tears.

“You will do as you’re told, Hai Meilin,” he said, a lethal undertone to his voice. “And if you fail to fetch a handsome dowry as a first wife, I will sell you as a concubine.”

“My lord, please . . .” I hated the pleading look in Xiuying’s eyes.

“You will not intervene!” He raised his hand to strike her, but I grabbed her first, pulling her behind me. Xiuying was shaking so hard I could feel her tremors in my bones.

“My orders are final,” he said. “Meilin has lived under my roof for eighteen years, using my name, partaking at my table. It is time to pay back her debts.” His hand twitched, seeking his pipe. “Now get out of my sight.”

Xiuying opened the door to flee before he could change his mind.

“And don’t let any of the warlord’s messengers into this house!”

The door slammed shut behind us. We didn’t dare stop until we were down the hall, ensconced in the women’s chambers at the other end of the courtyard. Only then did I allow myself to come apart.

“Mei Mei,” Xiuying whispered. She tucked my face into her chest and rocked me back and forth as we both wept—quietly, for even in our own chambers the walls had ears.

“It won’t be so bad,” she murmured. “The matchmaker will find you a kind and decent man. He will treasure and protect you.”

“I wager that’s what the matchmaker said about Father too, when she paired you with him. They lie, all of them!” My voice was scraped raw. “I hate him.”

Xiuying shushed me. “Don’t blame your father. He’s under much stress,” she said. “The debt collectors come every day now.”

I raised my head. “I thought you dismissed most of the servants.”

She sighed. “Still, the way things are, the household cannot go

on for much longer. Perhaps it is a good thing war is on our doorsteps." She paused, biting her lip. "Skies forgive me for saying such a thing."

I tried to wipe away my tears, the realization dawning on me. "You need my dowry, don't you?"

Xiuying opened her mouth, then closed it. "Well," she said, "with war approaching, I believe the debt collectors will be otherwise occupied."

"Jie!"

My little sister ran into the chamber, clutching her beloved rag doll. She was only five years old, but already she had an intuitive sense for knowing when conflict was brewing. Living in this volatile household necessitated it.

"Rouha," I said, drying my eyes and standing. Xiuying patted her on the head and smoothed her braids.

"I told Plum to hide in the nursery," Rouha said. "I can tell Father's in a foul mood."

"Clever child," said Xiuying. "Play with your brother and stay out of the way tomorrow, all right? Jie Jie and I will be occupied."

"What are you doing?" She clung to my legs, peering at me with dread and apprehension. So she had overheard.

"The matchmaker will be paying us a visit," I said, opting for honesty. "I'm going to bring home a big dowry for all of you. Then you'll have new silks for dresses!"

"I don't want silks," Rouha said. "I hate dresses!"

Xiuying forced a laugh. "You fear dresses like the phoenix fears iron."

"And I hate the matchmaker!" Rouha's cheeks were flushed crimson—the telltale sign of an emerging tantrum.

"Shhh." Xiuying pinched her cheeks. "They're nice people. They read the stars and bring good fortune to families across Anlai."

“Good fortune,” I scoffed, though I tried not to sound overly critical in front of Rouha. She too would one day speak with the matchmaker, and the same fate would fall upon her. The thought sent despair coiling in my gut. No wonder Anlai mothers tried so hard not to love their daughters. It was like exiling a piece of your own heart.

“I’m thankful to my matchmaker,” Xiuying said softly, meeting my eyes over Rouha’s small head, “for she brought me to you, sister.”