

Chapter One: Jade Rabbit

The bustle inside the Chrysanthemum Teahouse perished the moment Rabbit entered.

Waiters carrying trays of pork dumplings and sweet mung bean soup halted. Onstage, a trio of instrumentalists froze, fingers stiff over zither and pipa strings. Diners dropped their chopsticks and mahjong tiles. All gaped at Rabbit and her retinue of hanfu-clad bodyguards.

Rabbit rolled her jade prayer beads with her left thumb, fighting the buried memories that had burst from their coffins. Ravenous flames licking her flesh. Her brother's wheezes mingling with their parents' cries. Death's smoky fingers knifing her throat. Feng Ziyang's shrill laughter ringing off the Chrysanthemum Teahouse's walls. It was audacious of Ziyang to select the locale of her nightmares for a peace conference. Alas, no matter where he chose, Rabbit would exact her vengeance.

She found Ziyang eating alone at a round table near the stage, his scrutinizing gaze latched onto her. As he chewed, a dagger smile blossomed on his thin lips. He set down his utensil and rested his chin on his steepled fingers. Several diners turned toward him and gasped, murmuring about the impossibility of the Yenese Prime Minister feasting among them.

"Your Highness," Ziyang said, "it's unlike you to disgrace punctuality. I was starting to worry."

Rabbit sneered, reining in the urge to embed her willow-leaf saber into his throat. "Oh? Do you not wish to see me in the throes of misfortune?"

That same uproarious laughter pierced Rabbit's ears. Ziyang regarded her as though she were a feral beast and he was a zookeeper. "I wouldn't have arranged this peace conference if I wished death upon you and your disciples."

“You are a master of gambits, Mr. Feng,” Rabbit said. “More lies tumble off your tongue than any other.”

A corner of his mouth twitched. Ziyang glanced at the petrified wait staff and instrumentalists, the sea of vermillion lanterns overhead washing his chiseled face in a golden hue. His gaze sharpened when they latched onto Rabbit’s bodyguards. She held up a hand, deeming it acceptable for her disciples to hang back, and crossed the room. She settled into the rosewood chair opposite Ziyang.

The music returned. Two performers in vividly colored armors strutted onstage, vibrant opera masks concealing their features. They flicked open their hand fans. At the table, Ziyang leaned in, his cloying cologne failing to mask the putrid stench clinging to his pinstriped suit. He filled their cups with honeysuckle tea.

“I am honored by your presence, Princess,” Ziyang said. “I rejoice in how the High Priest is finally receptive to our attempts at communication.”

“Oh?” Rabbit cocked a brow. “My brother is not an unreasonable man. He savors all opportunities to end our disputes, but I do not blame him for being intolerant of your recent offenses.”

Ziyang bit into an egg tart. Salivating aromas of minced pork dumplings, sticky rice chicken, and steaming soup teased Rabbit’s nostrils. She stopped herself from picking up the chopsticks lest her appetite spelled a venomous downfall. The waitress Rabbit bribed should be arriving soon.

Ziyang cleared his throat. “Shang District is a neutral territory. Huan Ying Cult doesn’t own Sui Han Park. You shouldn’t spill blood on grounds that don’t belong to either of us.”

Rabbit fisted the lacquered wooden table, rattling the porcelain plates. “Is that so? Then how come your men slaughtered four of my sisters on ‘neutral territory?’ Huan Ying can be likened to bees; we do not sting unprovoked.”

He studied her. “We do not tolerate trespassers in the government complex, Your Highness.”

Rabbit scoffed. “And I do not tolerate a hypocrite who professes benevolence with one breath and seeks bloodshed with the next.”

Ziyang offered a stiff smile, the expression hurtling Rabbit back to that tempestuous evening when he stormed the teahouse and ordered his men to set it ablaze. Had it not been for her parents’ sacrifice, Rabbit and her brother would have been swallowed by the flames.

Her heartbeat quickened. She attempted to banish the flashbacks, but the rumbling conversations around them sharpened until they became a thousand mocking voices stabbing her ears. Despite the cool blasts of air from the vent above, sweat licked Rabbit’s brow and heat flared in her chest. She exhaled, gripping her jade prayer beads beneath the table.

“Did you recall something unpleasant, Princess?” Ziyang sounded faraway.

His teeth flashed. Rabbit dug her silver nail guard into her palm, anchoring herself to the pain, the present, the pulsating anticipation of an inevitable triumph.

She steeled herself and wiped on a smirk. “Not at all, Mr. Feng. I was pondering over the rumors of you hiring a foreign assassin.”

“Ah, yes.”

Ziyang downed his honeysuckle tea in one gulp, allowing the silence between them to grow fangs. Behind her, someone shouted victory in a game of mahjong. Ziyang raised a brow as though Rabbit ought to know who the killer was.

“My hired gun should be joining us today,” he said.

“And when will they—”

The instruments and declarations of triumph died. A hush descended upon the teahouse like a pall, drowning out all noises and activities. Ziyang gazed behind Rabbit, his mouth pulling into a sinister grin. She began to turn but tensed at the sound of a familiar gruff voice, one that had been haunting her feverish dreams for the past two years. Rabbit whirled, the rosewood chair groaning from the sudden movement.