

Chapter 1: Not So Chance Meetings

If marriage were a woman's grave, as the proverb claimed, sixteen-year-old Kaiya suspected the emperor was arranging her funeral. Entourage in tow, she shuffled through the castle halls toward the garden where General Lu waited. Given his notorious dislike of the arts, the self-proclaimed *Guardian Dragon of Hua* had undoubtedly envisioned a different kind of audition when he requested to hear her sing.

After all, she was dressed like a potential bride.

She buried a snort. The Guardian Dragon—such a pretentious nickname. The only real dragon, Avarax, who lorded over some faraway land, might make for a more appealing audience. A quick trip down his gullet would spare her a slow death in a marriage with neither love nor music.

And it wouldn't matter what she wore. The gaudy dress compensated for her numerous physical imperfections, but stifled the only thing that made her special. How was she supposed to sing with the inner robe and gold sash squeezing her chest, in a futile attempt to misrepresent her woefully underdeveloped curves? The tight fold of the skirts concealed her lanky legs, but forced a deliberate pace. At least the short stride delayed the inevitable, while preventing her unsightly feet from tripping on the hanging sleeves of the vermilion outer gown.