



CHAPTER 26

MORE DAYS PASSED, more weeks, more months. I got used to standing in Neil's enormous shadow and the rhythms of his speech. I stopped flinching at the low murmurs that came from deep in his throat when he was unhappy. The fighting connected us. It forced us to share space and air, to develop a rhythm and trust as we hurled punches at each other.

Harry was kept in his father's office from breakfast to dinner, no longer allowed to waste his time running numbers through Chinatown's alleys.

One night at dinner, Mr. Hon asked, "How are your lessons with Neil going?"

"Well," I said.

"Good. I have plans that I want to start before the New Year."

The New Year was a week away. I shouldn't have been surprised. There was a burst of sweeping and cleaning throughout the house. From the window in my room, I could see women carrying blossoming lilies and quince home in the evenings. Salted and candied plums, bean cakes, and melon seeds appeared in dishes scattered

around rooms and at dinner. The day before, Chin walked in eating lychee nuts from a roll of brown paper. But I didn't want to see all of this.

It had been a year since I sat outside our home in China with Nushi, listening to her tell the Cowherd and Weaver Girl story. A year since Father and Grandfather had tried to marry me to Fourth Brother Gou. A year had passed since Sterling Promise arrived in my life.

Harry had been in his father's office all afternoon, which left me training with Neil until he grew tired of me. My arms ached, and there were bruises along the side of my body where I had carelessly let my guard down for a split second. Neil was showing me how to wrestle a man to the ground, when suddenly he reached down and patted the wrappings along my side. I froze.

"Ah now, what's that?" he asked.

I could feel panic squeezing my heart. I had to close my eyes to steady myself.

"Is it one of those shirts you people wear in fights? The padding?"

I knew what he was talking about — the padded shirts that some tong members wore to slow the progress of bullets and knives. Some were simply a thick quilting. Others had a layer of woven steel links inside. I nodded.

"Did Chin give it to you? The one with the mean puss?" He pointed to his face. I nodded again.

Neil reared back and slammed his fist into my stomach. I buckled over, nausea sweeping over me. "Pure useless," he said.

As I crawled to my feet, my head dizzy, I stumbled a little. Neil's hand reached down. I grabbed it and let him pull me up. Then I took my stance again and readied myself.

He shook his head. "You don't stop when you're hit. You don't stop when you're knocked down. You fight long past the time any sane man would. You know nothing about fighting, but you are definitely a fighter."

"Is . . . that . . . good?" I asked in English, pushing the words out with each exhale.

He thought for a moment. "People who fight like that are usually fighting more than what's in front of them, so I guess that depends."

"On what?"

"On if what you are fighting is worth it."

Neil went into the house and came back with a second chair. He sat it down across from his and gestured for me to sit.

"It is time for you to learn some strategy."

"Strategy?" I said, shaking my head.

"Using your head more than your fists."

"Why?"

"You can't just punch everyone," Neil said. "Did you think that was all fighting was?"

"Nooo . . .," I said. "There's blocking and holds . . ."

"And thinking," he said, tapping his head. "People who don't think, get themselves killed. When you walk into a fight, you have to calculate."

"Calculate?"

"Look around," he said, pointing to his eye. It was funny when Neil mimed his words. I shook my head, pretending not to

understand. "Look. Look," he said. Now he put his hand on his brow and scanned the room.

I held back a smile. "Oh, 'look.'"

"How many people there are. Where you are. Are you blocked by four walls or out in the open?"

"It matters?"

"It depends on whether you want to run away," he said.

"Why would I run away?"

"So that you can fight another day. Sometimes, Fire Horse, it makes sense to run. There's no shame in it."

"But —"

"Let's say I wanted to kill you." He put his hands on his knees and leaned toward me.

I nodded. That wasn't hard to imagine.

"Would you come find me?"

I shook my head.

"When I found *you*, would you rather fight me on the streets or in a room?"

"The street."

"Why?"

"I'm faster. You're strong, but if I . . . I . . . move faster you can't hit me."

"That's right. A real fight isn't about knocking someone out. It is about surviving. You might survive by hitting your opponent, but you might survive by just wearing him down. Draining his resources. Or you might survive by running. Fighting is only useful when it gets you what you want."

I thought of Sterling Promise. He had told me something like that once, ages ago. "How did you learn to fight?"

Neil hesitated. "My father taught me. I was a bit of a trouble-maker, with a nasty temper."

"But didn't the fighting get you in more trouble?"

"Fighting doesn't get you in trouble. Getting angry does. Not having control does. Fighting teaches you that control."

"In China, I was told not to fight," I said.

"You can't ask someone with fight in them not to fight. You might as well ask them to rip out their own heart. Besides, I had to fight. It was tough for Irish families in America. We fought for everything."

"Yes," I said. "I can understand that."

He looked at me, his brows folding into creases that buried the scars between his eyes. "Boxing has always been the sport of the underdog." He picked up the paper and pointed to the pictures of men starting at me from its pages. "Irish, Jewish, German, black, you name it. They come here and they fight for every inch of freedom."

We sat in silence. His words burrowed into me, into places I had forgotten, where my dreams of America and its freedoms had cowered.

Neil leaned back and continued the strategy lesson. He taught me how to evaluate a room. He taught me how to add up the strengths and weaknesses of an opponent and match them with my own. While he was explaining the use of barriers, Mr. Hon came into the room.

"Why aren't you fighting?" he asked Neil in English.

Neil stood but did not answer. "Neil is teaching me strategy," I said, also in English.

"Why would you need to know that?" he mumbled, pulling out his watch. He switched back to Chinese. "Chin and Harry are expecting you in the main room." He walked through the room and up the stairs.

When I started to walk away, Neil grabbed my arm. "That man just wants you to fight. He doesn't care if you get killed. I'm teaching you to survive."

I nodded. He dropped my arm, sat back in his chair, and lifted the paper to his face.

"Wait," I said, grinning. "Does that mean you care if I get killed?"

Neil kept his paper up. "Get out of here. I can't listen to your blathering all day."