



## CHAPTER 27

HARRY LOOKED UP when I stepped into the room.

“Mr. Hon has a little job he wants us to do,” Chin said.

I turned to Harry. “What is this about?”

“More responsibility,” Chin answered.

After dinner, we walked into the evening, past the parade of dragon lamps and curved pagoda rooftops. I tucked my hands in my pockets to guard them against the chill. The main street was emptying, so only a few people frowned as we passed. We stopped in front of the door to a laundry.

“Someone needs to tell me what we are doing here,” I said.

Harry stared at the sidewalk and shuffled from one foot to the other. Chin said, “Harry is going to offer this man an opportunity, and you and I are here to make sure he takes it.” He pushed through the door. I frowned at hearing myself paired with Chin.

Inside, packages of clothes wrapped in brown paper waited in woven baskets to be delivered. Planks of wood leaned in the corner next to a shelf with shakers of water, ready for the next day’s ironing. Washing troughs lined the back wall. A man stood behind the

counter, moving coins from one pile to another with one hand and writing in a large ledger with the other. When he saw Chin, he lifted his shoulders and tightened his lips. It looked like the beginning of a fight.

But based on what Neil had just taught me, it was a terrible place to fight — crowded with baskets and bottles, and shelves of folded sheets and towels. It was a place where strength or luck would win over skill. Someone like Neil, who could knock a person out with one punch, might do well, but I wouldn't, and I suspected Chin wouldn't either.

"It is nice to see you," the man said to Harry. But the forced sound of his words betrayed him.

Chin pushed Harry forward. "I hope your business is doing well," Harry said.

The man muttered a response.

"You have been a loyal member of the tong for many years, and it has always protected you," Harry said, his voice tense.

The man looked up. "Say what you came to say."

Harry shifted from one foot to the other. "We require your store for our lottery business. People buy their tickets here, and a runner picks up the tickets and —"

The man slammed the ledger shut and coins rattled down the table. "I know how the lottery works."

Harry swallowed and continued. "Chin will send one of his boys to run the lottery in your back room. If the police come, all you will have to do is warn them, and they will disappear."

"That is just what I need. Hatchet men in my business." He looked at Chin, then his eyes shifted to include me. The accusation stung. I wasn't a hatchet man, one of the brutal men Mrs. Ying said

terrorized Chinatown. Hatchet men like Chin did not carry bad luck in their skin; they mined it from the tragedy around them and directed it to their own ends. I had never wanted to admit that this was what Mr. Hon was training me for. Every time that thought slipped into my conscience, I slammed it back. But now someone had said it out loud. It was in the air around me. Chin moved forward, but Harry shook his head.

“First I allow the lottery, then you hide slave girls in my back room, then you start to run games at night. Before long, the police come and arrest me. I lose my business. The tong, they just find a new laundry.”

“Nothing will happen —” Harry began.

“Where did you run the lottery before?” the man demanded.

“What?” Harry said.

“What happened to the last place?” he repeated.

I looked from Harry to Chin to the laundryman. Everyone’s shoulders were tight. Chin took a step forward. The laundryman moved quickly, pulling a revolver from below the counter and holding it with two trembling hands. Chin yanked his own revolver from under his jacket. The laundry owner was behind the one piece of furniture that could block bullets. I looked for an escape, but Chin blocked my path to the door. This was going horribly wrong.

Harry raised his hands. “We don’t want any trouble.”

Chin held his gun steady, and a dark smile flickered across his lips. He wanted trouble.

My heart started to beat faster. I had not come all the way from China to become the hatchet man Mr. Hon wanted me to be. “This is a bad idea,” I said to Chin. He flexed the muscles in his arms. I turned to Harry. “Convince him,” I hissed.

“How?”

Chin and the laundry owner stared at each other. I grabbed Harry's arm to pull him out of the way, but when I did, the laundry man's arm stiffened and the gun moved to point at Harry. “I can't lose my laundry. I have a family in China,” he said. I could barely hear the words for the desperation screaming from them.

Harry nodded. That seemed to be all he could manage.

“Chin, put your gun down,” I said, struggling to keep my voice steady.

He did not look at me. “You'll run the lottery from here,” he said. “You owe it to the tong.”

“What about my duty to my family?” the laundryman yelled at him. “Go ahead and shoot me. It will only prove what bullies the tongs have become. You don't protect anyone but yourselves.”

“No one needs to shoot anyone,” I said.

“We have talked enough,” Chin said, taking two steps toward the counter, keeping the gun leveled at the owner. Chin was someone who fought. He was not a fighter. It was up to me.

“Wait,” I shouted, my mind working quickly. “There is a way this can work for everyone.”

“I didn't bring you to make peace,” Chin growled.

I ignored him and looked at Harry. “This man needs to make money. Your father needs to hide the lottery. What if the tickets came in the laundry? Players tuck them inside the pockets of clothes going to be cleaned.” I turned to the laundryman. “You can't be responsible for the things people leave in their pockets.” I was trying to get everything out before the dizziness I was feeling overwhelmed me. Shifting my stance slightly, I mimicked the man's lifted chin and shoulders. “After you collect the laundry for washing, you can put

the tickets in the trash by the back door. A runner can pick them up from there. Everything still works like a laundry. If the police come, they would find nothing more than a pile of old lottery tickets left in people's pockets. You might even get some extra business. The winnings get packaged with the laundry and picked up the next day."

"It's a good idea," Harry said.

"You don't have to fight everyone," I said to Chin, my heart stumbling a little at the familiar sound of the words. He didn't move. "He has a gun pointed at Harry," I hissed.

Chin growled but lowered his gun. The laundryman let his gun drop too.

My head felt light. Harry's shoulders relaxed.

"I'll consider it," the laundryman said. "Now, get out."

Harry and I moved willingly toward the door. Chin hesitated. "I'll have to discuss this with Mr. Hon," he said before he stormed into the night.

Harry and I walked back home in silence. When we got there, Mr. Hon was in the front hall talking with Chin in a low voice. "I'll take care of it," he said. "Harry, come with me."

"Mr. Hon, if there was a problem, it is my fault," I offered.

"Then we'll have to talk about it in the morning. Right now, I would like to speak to my son."

Harry followed him into his office. I spent a sleepless night going over the evening in my head — the laundryman's desperation, Harry's fear, Chin's anger. And me — hatchet man. Is that what I had turned into? Perhaps. But I was in America, and at the very least, I did not have to be what others told me I was.

When I went down to breakfast the next morning, Harry sat alone at the table. "Is your father angry?" I asked.

"I can't tell."

I sat down and started to eat. After we chewed for a few moments in silence, he said, "Why didn't you want to fight last night?"

"He had a gun. I'm trying to learn not to fight when I know I will lose."

Harry stared at the table. I took another bite.

"It was smart, what you did," he said. "I know it probably saved me."

"Don't thank me. Thank Neil. He taught me," I said.

"Neil taught you to persuade people?"

I laughed at the thought of Neil trying to explain how to manipulate people without hitting them. "No, that was Sterling Promise," I said. His name flew off my tongue like it had been waiting there for months.

"Who is he?"

My smile faded. "We traveled together. He was skilled at talking people into things."

"It is strange hearing you talk about people from your past. You never mention people from China."

"Would you clear away your past if you could?" I asked.

"Maybe some of it. The parts when I brought shame to my father."

"When we ran the lottery tickets, I always liked watching them clear the winning numbers from the drawing the day before," I said. "Everything is possible again. Everyone is a potential winner. That is what coming to America is for me."

Harry opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a servant entered and announced that Mr. Hon wanted to see me in his

office. I looked at Harry, who just shrugged. I rose and followed the servant into a room that reminded me of a more elaborate version of my father's study — carpets lining the floor, leather books in tidy rows behind glass doors. Chin was already there, glaring at me. Mr. Hon regarded me coolly. He opened his hand, inviting me to sit in a chair across from him.

"Chin was just telling me about your meeting last night," he said. I nodded.

Chin turned his dark eyes on me. "You should have kept your mouth shut, Fire Horse. The soldiers of the tong are there to enforce what the tong decides, not make decisions on their own."

"He was going to shoot you. And he was going to shoot through Harry to do it," I said.

Mr. Hon looked at Chin, who shifted in his seat. "That man was a coward. He would not have shot anyone," Chin insisted.

"Can you be sure?" Mr. Hon asked. "You can risk your own life, but you're never to risk the life of my son."

"I can't do my job if I have to negotiate with everyone who pulls out a gun."

"True," Mr. Hon said. "And I agree that Fire Horse did not make much of a soldier."

Chin grunted his enthusiastic agreement.

"How did Harry do?" Mr. Hon asked.

"He —" Chin started.

"He didn't lose his temper and pull out a gun," I interrupted.

Mr. Hon looked a few times from me to Chin. "Would you like to be a soldier for the tong, Fire Horse?"

I was pretending to be many things, but my whole body rebelled against this one. "I would not."

Mr. Hon's face was still and hard. "It is a great honor to be asked."

"There is no honor in what Chin does," I said.

Chin's face reddened. "He would be worthless as a soldier. Worse than worthless, dangerous. You can't trust him to follow orders."

Mr. Hon nodded. "Last night did not go the way I expected."

Chin leaned back in his chair and folded his hands, a satisfied smile flickering on his lips.

"I understand if you want me to leave," I said, starting to rise.

"That doesn't mean it went badly, though." Mr. Hon signaled me to sit back down. "I have another plan." He paused. "Harry must take over leadership of the tong when I am gone. I will not have it fall into other hands after all my work. It is his duty. But he lacks the fight and the fire that he must have to protect our family against its many enemies. Fire Horse, you seem to have just the elements he needs." He looked at me like I was supposed to understand more than what he was saying. "Perhaps you would be willing to help him."

Chin stiffened.

"You would be his friend, his defender, his protector. You would be like a brother to him — a younger brother," he said, making sure I knew my place.

I hesitated. "A younger brother who fights his fights."

"There would perhaps be fights to fight, but you would have more discretion in fighting them. You will gain from this too. Family members are loyal to one another. They don't allow anyone or anything to interfere with that loyalty. Someone that loyal to my son would enjoy my utmost protection."



I did not think I wanted his unique style of protection. "What if I refuse?"

His face hardened again. "I do not recommend that. You will be back on the streets with no friends, no family, and no papers. Do you think the Yings will take you in after you have lived under my roof?"

The shock of his knowledge of the Yings must have registered on my face.

"Of course I know about your friends. I keep a close eye on everything that goes on in Chinatown, especially when it involves my son." He folded his hands. "In fact, I probably know more than you do. They are still in Chinatown."

Neil told me that a fighter is most vulnerable when he is off balance. If Mr. Hon was trying to catch me off balance, he succeeded. "The Yings are here in Chinatown?" I stammered.

"I had Harry take you to their old address," Chin said, grinning.

A chill swept through me. I thought I had chosen my place here at the Hon house. It was my only option, but I chose it. Now, I found out it was chosen for me too.

"Do you think you can go to them now?" Mr. Hon said. "Even if they were foolish enough to want a troublemaker like you, they couldn't take you in. It would offend me. It would open them up to attacks from Rat Face and his tong. Then there are the police, who would happily put them on the first boat back to China with you. I don't think you *can* refuse my offer, Fire Horse."

I shook my head slowly. "I don't think I can either," I said.

Was the world full of traps and cages, or was I particularly good at falling into them?