

Chapter 246 Painting

We batted him back and forth like a tennis ball. Getting hit from both sides, Lin Kang's face became as swollen as a pufferfish.

"Chao, don't do this. I didn't have a choice. If I didn't tell him, he would kill me." He sat on the floor and cried for mercy.

"If I didn't save you, you would be dead. Lin Kang, next time, it won't be as simple as two fists. These are international waters. I can save you, and I can push you off. If it was anyone else, you would already be dead. Get out of here!"

Lin Kang crawled away.

"I thought you would kill him," Yue Mangong said.

"You can be lawless, but I can't. Us military types don't kill our prisoners of war. Murder is illegal. Your disputes are just because common law isn't common enough."

My joke fell flat, and Yue Mangong did not look amused.

I found a cigarette in my pocket, but it was wet and I tossed it into the sea. The calm sea was as still as a mirror. The stars shining in the sky and the glow of the plankton in the sea made the surface of the water sparkle like a dream.

"I never imagined that Ji Yanran and Zhang Jun's son could be so soft-hearted."

"You talk like you knew my parents. They died when I was seven. You probably weren't born then."

"Everyone knows each other here." Yue Mangong looked at me uncertainly. "No one told you anything about your parents?"

My aunt never talked about my parents. If she could, she would have erased the names Zhang Jun and Ji Yanran from her existence entirely. She tore up all my parents' photos and there were no backups in the days before the Internet. I could barely remember what my mother looked like.

"No one did. What can you tell me?" I asked.

"Your mother was the oldest daughter of the Ji family. Do you know of the nine big families? Yin, Ji, Yue, Guan, Qian, Liu, Jiang, Zhao, Gan. After the decline of the Yins, the Ji family became the most prestigious. Your mother was the talk of the town. She was the most beautiful woman around, and she had countless suitors, all after her beauty and her wealth. I don't know how she ended up with your father. I heard from my family that it was a huge sensation at the time because your father was just an unknown person from a small fishing village."

I was full of admiration. "I didn't know that. My father must have been amazing."

Yue Mangong actually cracked a smile. "Uncle Zhang was a genius."

"Uncle?"

"Yes. Uncle Zhang was my master's sworn brother."

Yue Mangong was giving me too much new information at the same time. I was stunned. I knew my parents were great, but I had not known how great they really were.

"How did my parents really die?" I asked the most important question.

Yue Mangong took a deep breath. "It has to do with the Mount Wuxiang painting you're hiding."

That painting? I had not had time to look at it after taking it. What was so special about it that my parents lost their lives?

I might not understand art, but Jiang Ming's willingness to pay so much for the painting could not have to do with the art itself and was probably for my mother's sake. Then why had he hurt my mother?

I came back to the present. "Stop that. Mount Wuxiang isn't with me."

Yue Mangong leaned on the railing and looked out at the sea. "Do you remember what I said? We all want Mount Wuxiang but would never hide it. You're the only one who would hide it because you don't know its true worth. Ever since the decline of the Yins forty years ago, the eight families fought bloody battles with each other. About twenty years ago, a respectable elder stepped up to mediate and made the families sign a treaty. We were not allowed to fight among ourselves, and anyone who killed an ally would be punished. This finally ended almost twenty years of chaos. If there is someone to be punished, the leader must give the order."

I nodded. "A wise old man. Otherwise, you would probably still be fighting among yourselves. What was Liu Rushi referring to when he mentioned Old Ge and the last words? It sounds like the leader hasn't been chosen. It's been twenty years."

"That's right," said Yue Mangong. "Old Ge chose the leader from the eight families, but he was very ill. He only left his last words, and the only person who knew what they were was your mother. You've probably already guessed it. Old Ge's last words are on Mount Wuxiang's canvas. Back then, Ho Zhitian owed a large amount of money to loan sharks and was being hunted. Your mother turned Old Ge's last words into Mount Wuxiang and gave it to him. He then used the last of his money to send it to a bank vault in New York. The vault could only be opened with a combination of his iris, fingerprints, key, and signature. If he died, the last words would be lost forever. The families worked together to protect Ho Zhitian. When he said that your mother saved his life, he was not wrong."

This was not a story that I could imagine. "Then?"

"Ho Zhitian could not die or even be touched. The only person who knew what Old Ge's last words were was your mother. She was his best disciple. Jiang Ming then came up with a stupid plan. If your mother said that the Jiang family were the leaders, and he had Ho Zhitian killed off, no one would dispute it."

"Ugh, that's a plan only he would come up with."

"After the death of the Yins, the Ji family had begun to slowly relocate into the mountains. At this time, both the Jiangs and the Yues were getting stronger. Guan and Qian were Yue family allies, while Liu and Gan were Jiang family allies. The Zhao family remained neutral. I heard from my master that Jiang Ming had pursued your mother, but he was just one of many in the queue. He knew that your mother would not give in so easily, and decided to use a car accident to threaten your parents. Unfortunately, the situation spiraled out of control. It seemed as though the driver was drunk and failed to avoid an oncoming truck... The idea was Jiang Ming's and he was the mastermind, but he was not the only party involved."

As I listened to Yue Mangong tell me about the truth of that night, my heart felt empty. It took a long while before I came back to myself.

Yue Mangong pat my shoulder in sympathy. "It's been so long. Don't be too upset. Jiang Ming will pay for it."

I grimaced and shook my head. "I thought it was a great tale of hatred and animosity, but it's just this. You lot don't lack for anything, yet you're fighting over some leadership. It's ridiculous."