

Chapter One

*Sai Kung, Hong Kong, China
Early Spring 2020*

The noon sun spread light on the nearby worn tombstones. Debra Gong stood amid a small group and listened to Pastor Fung's words. "All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return..."

Cliché!

Debra's heart constricted with agitation. She knitted her eyebrows. The small turnout at the cemetery reflected her father's solitary nature, or maybe the looming specter of the new coronavirus that threatened Asia. Most attendees wore face masks, conscious of the past bird flu's inevitable cycle.

The pastor droned on about her father's achievements. "Phil Gong's books, mainly written in Chinese and published under different pen names, have been translated into over twenty languages."

So what? She gritted her teeth against tumultuous emotions—anger, sadness, and betrayal. Yes. Betrayal. The man had been absent for most of her life. Choosing to prioritize his personal pursuits over his only daughter, he'd missed her birthdays, school events, and important milestones.

Pastor Fung's eulogy shifted to forgiveness and compassion.

Debra stared at the ground. How could she forgive a father who had failed her time and time again?

After Pastor Fung finished, she stepped forward and threw a handful of dirt onto the coffin below, a final, somber goodbye to the man who had kept his distance. The mourners followed and offered silent respects.

Auntie Lindsay, her dad's distant cousin and publisher, came over. She was one of the few who didn't wear a face cover. Wasn't she worried about the new virus?

She touched Debra's arm. "Phil kept his mysteries tight. It's our duty to decide how to relay his passing to the world."

While Debra's eyes misted up, Auntie Lindsay leaned in closer. "I can't believe Maggie Cheung refused to come. No matter how strained their relationship might have been, the divorce occurred some twenty years ago. She should've put her abhorrence aside for today."

Why must Auntie Lindsay always address Mom with her full name? Debra blinked back her tears and mustered a small smile. "Mom has her burdens to bear. At least she arranged this." She brushed the dirt off her hands. "Getting a proper burial for my dad means a lot to me."

"Your father wasn't a Christian. I doubt he'd agree with this arrangement." Auntie Lindsay pursed her lips.

Yeah. Folks in Hong Kong expected a Buddhist funeral with monks to guide the soul on its journey to the afterlife. A lump formed in Debra's throat. Would it make any difference what her father had believed? "I think this is what he wanted."

"Having a Christian funeral is unconventional, to say the least." Auntie Lindsay huffed. "Anyway, take care. I'll call you later."

She waited for Auntie Lindsay to leave, then cast one last glance at the grave, the vibrant flowers a poignant contrast to the atmosphere. "Goodbye, Dad."

Despite the insignificant memories they'd shared, Dad gave her life. Besides, he'd financed her high school and college education in the US, a first-class ticket to forge her future.

Had it only been two weeks since she left Chicago? She'd rushed home after Mom called her about Dad's pancreatic cancer. Following one week of self-quarantine, she visited Dad in the hospital. The next day, he passed away.

As she approached the entrance and slipped off her face mask, a figure emerged from behind a wisteria tree. She gasped. "Mom? I thought you didn't want to come."

The purple flowers swayed in the breeze, spreading shadows on her mother's still-youthful profile. At forty-four, with an oval face, luminous eyes, and a slim figure, Mom turned heads wherever she walked. No wonder strangers often mistook them for sisters.

"I worry about you." A faint smile tugged at her mother's mouth. "Are you all right?"

Debra swallowed hard against the lump lodged in her throat. "I'm fine."

Mom nodded. "Your dad was a complicated man, but he loved you in his own way."

They walked in silence to the bus stop, the crunch of gravel beneath their feet the only sound. Debra's steps slowed at the lack of people in line. "Odd that no one's around."

"Folks hesitate to take the bus because of the new coronavirus." Mom frowned.

Debra skimmed her fingertips over her purse. "Why did you come?"

Mom looked up at the sky. "Phil discarded our relationship like trash. Yet he gave me the most precious gift of all—my beautiful daughter. And you carry his last name."

Tears pricked at the corner of Debra's eyes. "I'm glad you came."

"I couldn't stay away." Mom touched Debra's shoulder. "About your wedding, you shouldn't change it. Although it's customary for couples to postpone their wedding date to at least a year after a family member's death, as Christians, we don't feel obligated to follow the practice."

Debra blinked at the sudden conversational pivot. Mom might as well say outright that she wanted to become a grandma. But her fiancé, Colin, had parents who hailed from Chicago's Chinatown and practiced the Chinese folk religion. She kept quiet. No point to reason with Mom now. She and Colin had already talked about postponing their wedding from early June to next April multiple times since she informed him about her dad's passing.

The bus arrived. She followed her mom and ascended to the upper deck.

Mom smoothed out her blouse and sighed. "Sai Kung has changed a lot. It's no longer that peaceful little town."

Debra quirked an eyebrow. "Didn't you and Dad meet here?"

Mom's nostalgic grin gave away the fond memories. "Your aunt Lindsay invited both of us to a party in her mansion. He asked me for my phone number, but I declined."

She hooked her mom's arm with hers. "What happened next?"

"Well, your father was persistent." Mom shook her head hard. "Let's not talk about him. I'm more concerned about you and Colin. You two met at a Chinese New Year's party, didn't you?"

Debra shrugged. "Yes, two years ago. And when he asked to add me on social media, I didn't hesitate."

“You liked him from the start?” Mom tilted her chin. “Though I only met him once in Chicago, he impressed me.”

Debra fanned a smirk. “Attractive, charismatic, a stockbroker with ambition... Hard not to notice. He whisked me away for dinners and movies every weekend—a fixture in my thoughts.”

As the bus wound its way along the waters, sunlight glistened off the waves. She shut her eyes and envisioned the salty sea air, the sound of seagulls high above her, and the wet sand between her toes... Colin, Chicago, and their wedding plan faded into the background.

Mom’s slight cough shattered her untethered solace. “You mentioned Colin has been attending church with you. Has he accepted Christ as his personal Savior?”

Debra repressed the trace of a groan. “Not yet. He’s trying to understand more about Christianity on his own time.”

“I understand, sweetie.” Mom patted her arm. “Genuine faith can’t be rushed. After my divorce, I attended church but didn’t become a Christian until years later. Pray for him. God will work in his heart when the time is right.”

What an overused phrase. How many times had she heard it from others in her church? They meant well. Yet, it came across as empty comfort.

Her cell phone rang. The contact name for her father’s attorney, Mr. Guan, flashed on the screen. “Hello?”

“Debra,” he said in a gentle voice. “I understand today is your father’s funeral, and I offer my deepest condolences. Since you’ll be leaving Hong Kong soon, could you please come to my office this afternoon? Phil left his entire estate to you. We need to go over his will.”

The elderly gentleman didn’t attend Dad’s funeral. He must be worried about the new coronavirus that seemed to most affect seniors. Debra agreed to meet and disconnected.

Mom shifted. “Who called?”

“Simon Guan, Dad’s attorney.” Debra furrowed her eyebrows. “He wants to see me.”

“Isn’t his office in Central?” Mom pulled up Google Maps. “You can get off at the Che Kung Temple stop, then take the MTR to Hong Kong Island.”

So inconvenient. “Mom, why don’t you own a car?”

Her mom snorted. “And buy a parking space that’s almost as expensive as my apartment? No, thank you. With that money, I can take taxis wherever I desire for years to come.”

Mom’s phone pinged, and her face paled after she read the message. “The US government has implemented travel restrictions on Asia. Only American citizens and legal permanent residents are allowed entry through one of thirteen specified airports.”

A chime from Debra’s phone indicated a new notification—the same news on her social media feed. “What about people with student visas?”

Mom didn’t reply.

“Does this mean I can’t return to Chicago next week?” Tears welled up in Debra’s eyes.

Her mother leaned in, and her hair tickled Debra’s cheek. “Maybe the travel restriction will end soon.”

But when?

“My whole life is in Chicago.” Her voice trembled. “I can’t get stuck here.”

When she left Chicago, she’d never imagined being away for more than three weeks. Would she see Colin in person again soon? Could they handle a long-distance relationship? And what would her PhD advisor say? She’d passed her qualifying exam and started her lab work two months ago.

Mom patted her back. “One step at a time. Go meet with Mr. Guan first.”

Her heart heavy, Debra bid Mom goodbye at the Che Kung Temple stop, put on her face mask, and transferred to the MTR. The train rattled along, the rhythmic sound providing comfort in the uncertainty.

The train jolted to a stop. After the door opened, she tightened her grip on her purse and stepped off. Free of the hustle and bustle of a crowd, she meandered through Central with ease.

Years earlier, in an outing with her father, she'd met Mr. Guan, a gentleman more like a family friend than a lawyer.

His office reflected a dignified charm, rich with traditional Chinese decor. As Debra crossed the threshold, the grandfatherly attorney welcomed her and pointed toward a young man seated by the desk. "My grandson, Jason."

Unlike Colin, Jason didn't possess the perfect fusion of ruggedness and chiseled features. Yet, his eyes, veiled by dark, luxurious lashes, shimmered in an irresistible allure. He stood and extended his hand. "It's a pleasure meeting you."

A few simple words. Still, the huskiness in his resonant baritone drew her in.

She shook his hand. "Same here."

His touch sent a surge through her.

Wow. What happened?

He dropped his grip and waved to Mr. Guan. "Grandpa, see you tonight at dinner."

A strange loss overtook her after he left. Would they ever cross paths again? Ugh. Not a prudent question to ask. Her fiancé awaited her in Chicago.

"Please sit down." Mr. Guan's voice roused her. "Care for a cup of tea?"

"No. I'm fine." She took the seat in front of him.

He flattened a palm on the desk. "I'm sorry for your loss, Debra. Your father's intentions for you were clear."

While Debra absorbed his words, her internal arguments flared. Didn't Dad know money could never replace his presence?

Dad's estate shocked her as Mr. Guan explained its breadth. "There are tangible assets—a Kowloon apartment, a Cheung Chau home, a diversified stock portfolio. The greatest asset, the royalty of Phil Gong's literary works, passes to you too."

He explained in detail, then guided her through the legal process. Despite their distant relationship, perhaps Dad had loved her. "Thank you for your assistance."

"No need to thank me." Mr. Guan flipped through a pile of paper. "Take your time to consider everything before you make any decisions."

She scratched her forehead. "What decisions?"

"For example, is it better to sell the stocks or keep them? Would it make sense to rent out the properties?" He laced his fingers in his lap. "Talk to your mother about them."

"I planned to leave Hong Kong once the travel ban is lifted." She twisted her fingers together. "Could I give my mom the power of attorney to handle my dad's estate?"

He tapped the desk. "A power of attorney could be wise. I can draft the legal documents." His chair squeaked as he shifted. "I hope you enjoy the financial rewards of your father's literary legacy and also finish his work for him."

What did Mr. Guan mean?

"Did I confuse you?" He retrieved a USB storage stick and gave it to her. "Your father's final manuscript is stored on this drive. Perhaps ninety percent complete. He had big plans for it and wanted you to finish it."

What on earth? She'd never have the time or ability for such a thing. "As a scientist, I know nothing about creative writing." She swallowed the unspoken words. *I've never taken an interest in my dad's books.*

"I believe in you, Debra." His smile crinkled up his eyes. "Your father always spoke highly of your intelligence. You possess his gift."

Suffocating.

His words snatched the breath out of her lungs. She flipped the USB drive on her palm. What secrets lay within those digital pages?

"I'll call you once I have the power-of-attorney document drafted." Mr. Guan stood to end their meeting.

She shuffled from the plush office. Should she ignore the USB and go on as before? No, she couldn't continue her usual routine, at least not until her return to Chicago.

The subtropical sun beat down on her. She strolled through the empty streets toward her mother's apartment. Once inside, she collapsed onto the couch. A tranquil silence settled in. Where was Mom?

She called out to her mother.

No response.

A faint sound reached her ears from the master bedroom.

She rushed toward the noise. Mom sat on the bed and stared out the window. Tears streamed down her face.

"Mom?" Debra's heart pounded in her rib cage. "What's wrong?"

Mom turned sideways, her eyes puffy. "After so many years, I still loved him."

Didn't Mom and Dad divorce almost twenty years ago? "What do you mean?"

Her mother's index finger traced the bedspread. "I thought I'd moved on, but being at Sai Kung today brought back so many memories."

"You never stopped loving him?" She wrapped an arm around Mom's shoulder. "That's why you didn't remarry."

Her mother slumped against her and threaded an arm around Debra's back. "All along, I thought I hated him. Now that he's gone, I realize hate and love are two sides of the same coin. I loved him. And deep down, you loved him too."

Did she love her father? Did she love Colin? Why was love so complicated?

Mom blew her nose, then stood. "It's almost six. Let me go prepare dinner. We'll have your favorite shrimp scampi tonight."

Debra squinted at the change in her mother's mood and did a quick mental calculation. Five in the morning Chicago time. She'd give Colin a video call after dinner.

Alone in her bedroom, she looked out the window. As a mountain-shaped cloud drifted into view, her phone rang.

Colin's face lit up the screen, his perfect features set in a concerned expression that softened his proud visage. "Deb, are you well? I wish I could be there with you."

His tone sounded warm, a stark contrast to his usual confident demeanor.

She hunched over the edge of her bed. "You're up super early today."

"Yeah. The travel-ban news worried me." His features twisted. "I feel useless so far away."

The creased lines on his forehead mirrored her helplessness. She recounted Dad's funeral. Should she tell him Mom still loved Dad, even after years of separation? Maybe not. "Mom said we shouldn't postpone our wedding. What do you think?"

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“We have to. I already promised my mother.” Colin knitted his thick eyebrows. “Plus, who knows when the government will remove the ban? You can’t come back until then, right?”

She clutched the phone and steadied her voice. “True. What’d happen if I’m stuck here? I have to call my PhD advisor on Monday to discuss how the school will handle this situation.” The words *please pray for me* almost rolled off her tongue. No, Colin didn’t pray.

“Dinner is ready.” Mom called from the kitchen.

“Coming!” Debra yelled back, then returned her attention to Colin. “I need to go. Let’s catch up later.”

After the phone clicked off, she stifled a sigh and strolled to the kitchen. Although Mom prepared her favorite dishes, she didn’t enjoy the meal. Her mom’s mind also seemed elsewhere. They picked at their food in silence.

After dinner, Debra retreated into her room and plugged the USB drive into her laptop. A single document appeared. She clicked on it. The Chinese words *Pirates of the China Sea* appeared on the screen.

Chapter Two

*South China Sea
Early Summer 1800*

The *Blue Dragon* navigated the choppy South China Sea, its blue sails billowing in the wind. A group of seagulls circled high in the clear sky.

As a wind gust swept in the salty ocean scent, Yi-Lan paused from lacing her leather boots over her pants. Motion rocked the sailing junk. Its old timbers creaked.

Long shadows stretched across the wooden planks. She tucked loose hair into her braid and squinted against the water's shimmering reflection.

Just then, a swift punch hurled toward her face. Her teacher's voice echoed in her ears. "Unloading technique!"

Yi-Lan dodged, executed a smooth spin, and with a push of her right hand, utilized her opponent's force to redirect Sifu Hua's body to the side.

"Splendid work." Sifu Hua steadied herself. The jade hairpin in the topknot of her still-black hair swayed. "You have mastered the unloading element in tai chi and use your enemy's force to leverage your strength severalfold. Your reaction time is impressive."

"Thank you, Sifu." Yi-Lan leaned forward. "I shan't cease until I've mastered every technique you've imparted."

"You have the potential to become a great warrior." A smile brightened Sifu Hua's countenance. "Remember, true mastery in martial arts goes beyond physical techniques. You must cultivate your mind, stay focused, and maintain discipline in all aspects of your life. The path to greatness requires not only skill but also mental fortitude."

A tremor ran through her bosom. Yi-Lan stepped up to hug Sifu.

Crew members busied themselves. Some climbed the rigging to adjust the sails, their silhouettes stark against the blue sky. Others coiled ropes or swabbed the deck.

Yi-Lan chuckled at the peaceful activity, then knitted her eyebrows. "Will it matter? All Baba wants is for me to get married."

Did the sea not call out to her with tales of freedom? Why did her father's traditional mindset loom over her like a dark cloud?

"Your father may hold different expectations for you. Do not allow them to shape your identity or limit your aspirations. Your journey is your own." Sifu Hua's almond-shaped eyes glowed. She gripped Yi-Lan's shoulder. "Embrace the challenges, learn from them, and continue to grow. That is the path to true greatness."

Yi-Lan clenched her fists. "I will not permit anyone—"

"Sail ho!" A howl from the crow's nest boomed. "A target off the starboard bow!"

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The crew sprang into action. While she laced up her boots, her father, Captain Shih, shouted. "Prepare the cannons! Ready the grapeshot! This merchant ship carries gold."

She adjusted her blue silk tunic and knotted her braid with a gold pin. "Baba, do we need to call the *Yellow Dragon* for help?"

He shook his head. His tousled hair swayed from side to side. "Unnecessary. We can tackle this together with the *Green Dragon*."

The *Blue Dragon* sped up. Its flag emblazoned with one skull and crossbones flapped.

"Faster." He gripped his hips and rocked forward on his toes as if to propel the ship along. "We are nearly upon them!"

Waves surged around three vessels locked in a desperate race. The merchant ship plunged forward. Yet, the narrow gap between them shrunk with every heartbeat.

"Brace for combat!"

The cannons fired a volley. The deafening impact echoed as the crew let out a triumphant cheer. The chaos on the merchant ship increased.

Baba waved his men onward. "Board them. Take what we want, especially the gold!"

Uncertain any ears would hearken to her plea, she cried out, "Refrain from needless harm!"

Screams soon ricocheted. Steel clashed against steel. Yi-Lan lunged ahead. Her skillful bladework sliced through any defenses. A metallic tang of blood swirled around her. With each opponent defeated, guilt cut into her heart. Would it be like this every time, or was there another way?

A man in a blue uniform from the merchant ship aimed his pistol at Ah-Ya, a mute crew member. Yi-Lan's shuriken spun through the air and knocked the pistol out of his hand before he could pull the trigger.

She sprinted over, picked up the pistol, and spoke in Cantonese. "Are you the captain?"

Their gazes intertwined. The man clutched his bloody wrist without answering.

The clashes subsided.

How effortlessly her efficient comrades subdued the crew. The fellow in front of her scanned the surroundings. His face fell.

An abrupt revelation—they belonged to a shared humanity endeavoring to persevere in a world laden with tribulation—arrested her. She repeated her question in accented Mandarin. "Are you the captain?"

This time, he dipped a nod.

"Surrender. We can settle this with no more bloodshed." She sheathed her sword. "Show me where you store the gold."

The captain blinked, perhaps taken aback. Then he spoke in a low voice. "Can you assure me you won't take any of us as hostages?"

After she committed the promise, he led the way into the bowels of the ship.

When she and her fellow pirates returned to the *Blue Dragon*, Baba gathered his men for a head count. A lad named Little Liao didn't return.

"A pistol bullet struck him." Tiger Chang recounted his witness of the events.

Baba's eyes darkened. "Such a loyal member of our team shall be deeply missed. We must bid him a proper farewell by firing off a cannon. Moreover, I will ensure his portion of the spoils is conveyed to his father in the village."

Phoenix Liao raised his hand. "Little Liao and I both came from Humen. Upon my return to our homeland next month, I shall visit his father."

Amidst the grief, she pondered the question. In their perilous existence as sea marauders, loss remained an ever-present shadow. Yet, was there another way?

After they divided the loot, Ah-Ya, the mute crewmate, placed his bag before Yi-Lan and threw his tall, muscular frame onto the ground at her feet. He pointed at himself, then gestured for her to accept his portion of the booty.

“No, Ah-Ya. You keep it.” She wagged a finger. “I did what any one of us would have done for you.”

He rose and clasped her hand.

Moisture gathered behind her eyelids. In that moment, they forged a connection transcending mere speech. They were allies, bound in companionship for the odysseys before them.

The salty sea air clung to the sails as she strolled forth to inspect the cannons. A slight bounce entered her step. Her whole life spent on this ship instilled a profound sense of home.

“Ah, Yi-Lan, you look radiant as ever. If you let your hair down, you will look even better.” Tiger Chang swaggered up and pointed at her braid, still secured in a tidy knot. A suave grin slanted his mouth. “Care for a stroll along the starboard side with the most handsome pirate in these waters?”

She snorted out both mirth and caution. “My gratitude, Tiger. Perhaps I shall unbind my hair when you are prepared to conduct yourself as a true gentleman.”

“A beautiful damsel such as yourself deserves some time away from the dreariness of ship duties.” Tiger clutched his chest and let out a theatrical sigh. “Let me show you a world of excitement beyond your craziest dreams.”

“I appreciate the offer.” She cocked an eyebrow. “I have had my fill of excitement for this day.”

Tiger Chang chortled, the tiger tattoo on his forearm lifelike in the sun. “You know not what you are missing. I’ll teach you the way between a man and a woman. The pleasure surpasses the bounds of your wildest fancies.”

She swallowed the bile rising within her bosom. Who required instruction from Tiger, a frequent patron of the brothel during his ventures ashore? “Come now, Tiger. We—”

“Tiger still hasn’t given up, eh?” Captain Thunder Kao emerged from below deck. His tall profile juxtaposed the youth she once knew.

“We are well aware of his tenacity.” She let out an embarrassed laugh.

Thunder Kao stalked closer to Tiger. “Do you recall the time we extricated you from that interminable card game on the *Yellow Dragon*?”

Tiger shook strands of hair away from his eyes. “How could I not? I lost all my earnings. You wound me, my friends. Those were minor misfortunes. I have acquired much wisdom since then.” He rocked back on his heels. “I could instruct you in the ways of real pleasure now.”

Not keeping the bile down, she gagged. “Tiger, we grew up together since our youth. You be akin a brother to me.”

Tiger’s grin faltered. “Very well. My offer stands. Should you change your mind, you need only call for Tiger Chang. I shall be at your disposal.” He flourished salute, then sauntered off.

Thunder Kao tsked. “He’ll never change, will he?”

“No.” The bile returned to where it belonged. She braved a cautious exhalation. “Speaking of change, permit me to commend how well you are steering the *Green Dragon*. Baba is most proud of you.”

A rare blush colored Thunder Kao’s cheeks. “Thank you, Yi-Lan. Your words bear great weight.”

“Though we have both matured, genuine friendship remains unaltered.” She squeezed his arm. “Are you staying for the celebration?”

“I must return to my ship.” After a bow, Thunder made his departure.

A warm amber glow spread over the horizon. Yi-Lan followed Phoenix Liao and two other crewmen to the main deck. They set roasted chicken, fresh fruits, and a barrel of Shaoxing rice wine on a makeshift table. The pleasant scents mixed in the breeze, and the gloomy mood from Little Liao’s demise began to dissipate, replaced by laughter.

Baba hoisted a mug high. His weathered face beamed. “Yi-Lan, excellent job today. Without you, we might not have found the gold chest so fast.”

She clinked her father’s mug with hers. “It was a team effort. We all played our part well.”

The crew cheered on their successful day.

“To Yi-Lan, the beautiful pirate princess.” Tiger Chang stood up. “To us all, the most fearless pirates to sail the China seas.”

Her baba laughed aloud. “My daughter possesses both beauty and wit.” His smile faded to a frown at Sifu Hua. “When might she enter into the bonds of matrimony?”

Before Sifu Hua responded, Yi-Lan gestured toward her feet and wrinkled her nose to tease her father. “Baba, do observe my enormous feet. No gentleman from a reputable family will seek my hand in matrimony, for they prize tiny, bound feet in their brides.”

“Nay. Plenty of suitors wait in line for your hand in marriage.” Baba dropped his mug. “In earnest, when will you take a husband? You are near twenty-one. Most young ladies of your age have already become mothers.”

She rolled her eyes. “You know my simple requirement. Whoever proposes to me must beat me in two out of three competitions. Then I shall consent to be his wife.”

“Eight people have already tried archery, martial arts, swordplay, and pistol shooting. No one has beaten you yet.” Sifu Hua let out a small cough. “Perhaps you ought to change your rules.”

“My rules are just.” Yi-Lan squared her shoulders. “My opponent and I decide the subjects of our contests through a game of rock paper scissors. The winner can choose any options.”

Baba rubbed his temples. “Sifu Hua, you may have taught Yi-Lan too well.”

Yi-Lan leaned in to hug her. “Sifu is the best.” She jeered at her father. “Why do I need a man to define me or my worth? I want to sail the seas, conquer new lands, and make a name for myself.”

Baba stood up, sat back down, then squinted his fiercest look. “Sooner or later, you must take a husband. The sooner the better. If you wed a prominent rival pirate, we will solidify a crucial alliance.”

Yi-Lan tightened her lips into a thin line. “Baba, do you try to sell me for your gain?”

“For the good of our fleet.” He raised his voice. “We need an alliance to strengthen our position.”

She crossed her arms. “Do not treat me as a mere token to be traded at your whim. Let the man you have in mind best me in fair contests. I shall wed him.”

Her father’s beard swung in the wind. He shot up to his feet, his boots thudding on the wooden deck. “You do not understand our dangers. We received a tip. Ever since the government banned the import of opium last December, the East India Company has resorted to smuggling it from India to our region in exchange for gold. Much more gold than we have obtained today. Several rivals plan to ambush them for the treasure. We have to devise a strategic plan to outmaneuver our competitors. Failure is not an option as our very future hinges on this. An alliance with another confederation is crucial.”

She also stood. As they faced each other, the waves lapping against the hull provided the only noise. At last, her father gave a resigned nod and strode away.

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Sifu Hua tugged at Yi-Lan's sleeve. "You bear a remarkable resemblance to your mother."

Yi-Lan slumped into her chair. The mention of her mother always stirred up her emotions. Aye. Baba and Mama grew up in the same village, Zhuhai. Like them, the majority of their crew members hailed from the small towns around Pearl River harbor. Familial ties, through either blood or marriage, connected most of them.

Sifu often said, "Yi-Lan, your mother was a fierce warrior, known for her bravery on the high seas."

Alas, a grievous misfortune that Mama died young during childbirth. The absence of memories with her mother left a void most profound within Yi-Lan's soul. How fortunate Sifu Hua assumed the mantle of a maternal figure and not only taught her martial arts but also offered a shoulder to lean on.

"I am my mother's daughter," she murmured, her voice carried away by the wind. "And I will make her proud."

"Flag signals from a ship!" the call from high above rang clear. "They want to parley."

She rushed to the ship's bow.

Who was that?