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WHAT DOESN'T KILL YOU

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**WHAT DOESN'T
KILL YOU**

CHAPTER

1

Sai Tam Island, China

“WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY?” Venable, deputy director of the CIA, had his binoculars focused on the small cottage in the valley below. “Special Ops were supposed to go in from the rear fifteen minutes ago and take Hu Chang out of there.”

“It’s a difficult job,” Agent Gregory said. “The place is surrounded by mercenaries. You told Special Ops they had to get Hu Chang out alive.”

“You’re damn right. We have to know how much he told them and what he gave them.” Besides the fact that Catherine Ling, who was one of his best agents, would kill Venable if he allowed it to be bungled. She and Hu Chang had some kind of history. Even Venable wasn’t sure exactly what it was. But, dammit, it wasn’t Venable’s fault that Hu Chang had gotten into this mess, and the CIA was having to pull him out.

Not that he wouldn’t have had to go after him anyway if the story Venable’s informant had told him was true. A potion that complex and dangerous had never been invented. It probably wasn’t true, but why else was Hu Chang down there being tortured to make him talk? Venable couldn’t take the chance.

“There they are,” Gregory said as he went to the back of the helicopter and threw open the door. “We should be out of here in ten minutes.”

Shots.

The door of the cottage flew open and four men in Special Ops gear ran out. And in the middle of the group was a slim, dark-haired man in a torn tunic. Hu Chang.

“Yes.” Venable watched as the Special Ops men fired back over their shoulders while they headed for the woods. Men were streaming out of the cottage.

More shots.

Then Hu Chang and the special team had disappeared into the trees.

“They should reach the helicopter in three minutes,” Gregory said. “I’ll go tell the pilot to be ready to lift off.”

Three minutes passed.

Shots.

No Special Ops. No Hu Chang.

Another four minutes.

Venable began to curse.

Justin, the Special Ops commander, burst out of the trees and was climbing the rocks toward the helicopter. “Is he here?” he called. “I told him where you were in case we got separated. I can’t find him.”

“What?”

“I can’t find Hu Chang. When we reached the trees, he slipped away from us. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. He’s not here?”

“No, he’s not here.”

“Then I’ll go back for him.”

Shots.

More men running from the cottage to the woods.

"No, get your men back to the helicopter. You're outnumbered. Just lay down protective fire to keep anyone away from the helicopter."

"What about Hu Chang? He was my mission, dammit."

"Evidently he didn't want to be your mission," Venable said. "And I'm not going to lose any of your men because he endangered you by this stupidity. We'll give him ten minutes, then we're out of here."

"They'll surround the area around the helicopter. He won't be able to get through."

"That's his problem. Go get your men."

PAIN.

The bullet had entered Hu Chang's side, piercing flesh and muscle. The pain was blunt and brutal.

He fell to his knees as the second bullet tore past his ear. Then he was behind the rocks, crawling toward the helicopter balanced on the side of the cliff.

"Get the hell over here. Stay low. I can't risk anyone else coming out in this sniper cross fire," Venable shouted above the rotors from the doorway of the helicopter. "Special Ops got you out of that shack fifteen minutes ago. You were supposed to stay with them. Where have you been?"

"I had something to do," he called to the CIA agent. "It was important."

"We had a chance of making a clean getaway." Venable was cursing a steady stream. "You led them back to us. You're a complete idiot."

"Not the thing to say to a dying man," Hu Chang gasped

as he started to crawl toward the helicopter. Another spate of bullets ricocheted off the rocks ahead of him, but they were high. "You have no sense of suitability, Venable."

"I came after you, didn't I? I waited." He was silent, watching Hu Chang crawl toward him. "Are you dying, Hu Chang?"

"I would not die from a bullet wound. It is ugly and without subtlety. There are so many better ways to kill a man. This kind of weapon is barbaric." He was almost to the helicopter. "But I'm bleeding. Bloodletting has a certain lethal glamour that even has historical significance. I could bear dying of loss of blood."

"I couldn't bear your dying at all. I'd catch hell, so you'd better shape up," Venable said roughly. "Just a few more feet, and we'll be able to pull you into the helicopter. Keep on coming."

"I find it interesting to know how you're going to get the helicopter off this cliff without a bullet through the gas tank once you're in the air?"

"I have an F-16 in the neighborhood. It will assist with ground fire as soon as I call it."

"An F-16 for me? I am honored."

"Honored? You're going to be dead if you don't hurry."

"I don't wish to cause the blood to flow with more alacrity in case I decide I don't want to pass this way. Be patient."

Silence. "I'll be patient. Take your time."

"I'm almost there."

"You *are* here." Venable jumped out of the helicopter and shouted to the CIA agent next to him. "Gregory, grab his other arm. Let's get him in the helicopter."

A spate of bullets sprayed around Venable and the other agent as they bent double and ran the few feet toward Hu Chang.

"Very foolish," Hu Chang said as he was dragged toward the helicopter. "All you would have had to do was wait."

"Shut up," Venable said. "You've caused me enough trouble."

"You're just angry because of the F-16. I explored the cost of using one of those fighter jets once, and it was far beyond what I expected. I'm certain you'll have problems with your budget department over this extraction. After all, it's not as if I'm a president or a prime minister."

"You're certainly not." A bullet shattered the rock next to Venable, and he muttered a curse. "In!" They threw Hu Chang onto the floor of the helicopter and dove in after him.

"Though I'm far more valuable in my field than a mere politician. It's all a case of perception."

"Let's get out of here, Hank," Venable shouted to the pilot. "They'll be swarming anytime. When you hear the F-16, get out quick." He made the connection to the Air Force captain on the F-16. "We're lifting off. Give us cover for at least four minutes." He turned back to Hu Chang. "Don't you dare die. Do you hear me? Just give me a couple minutes, and I'll be free to take care of you."

"Not necessary." Hu Chang started to unbutton his shirt. "Attend to business."

The helicopter skittered sideways as it lifted, then veered off the cliff. It dropped over a hundred feet before the pilot was able to right it.

Then Hu Chang heard the F-16 above them, spraying the entire cliff with bullets as it swooped down, made a pass, then turned and made another run.

"I wish I could see it," he whispered. "It's most upsetting to be the center of such a major operation and not be able to witness it."

"Well, unless we get out of here before that F-16 leaves us to our own resources, you may do more than witness it." The

helicopter veered to the left, then turned north. A moment later, Venable turned to Hu Chang. "I think we're clear."

"That is good." He was fighting dizziness, and Venable's face was no longer sharp, but hazy. "Then I believe I'll accept your help with this small inconvenience. I can't seem to stop the blood, and I've decided that I'm not ready to die. There are still too many goals to reach for a man of my talent."

"I'm glad that I can be of service," Venable said sarcastically as he fell to his knees beside Hu Chang. "I realize that you're condescending to permit—" He broke off as he opened Hu Chang's shirt. "Shit."

"My thought exactly. It's done considerable damage. I do hate bullets. Did I tell you that?"

"You told me." Venable was reaching for the first-aid kit. "Uncivilized."

"Exactly. I won't allow it to kill me, you know. But I do require assistance."

"You'll get it," Venable said grimly. "Now hang on, dammit. I can't let you die. You're not going to get me in hot water with her."

Hu Chang tried to laugh, but it ended in a cough. "I understand your intimidation. I'll do everything I can to prevent that from happening."

"Do that." He got out a gauze pad and began to use pressure. "How did you get yourself into this mess? You should have called me sooner."

"You're CIA. Doesn't CIA know everything?"

"Sure. We're all mind readers." He looked up at Hu Chang. "This is bad. I'll try to pull you through, but I don't know if I can."

"Just get me somewhere that they can stop the bleeding. I'll take care of the rest."

"Another miracle potion, Hu Chang?"

"Of course." He closed his eyes. "Leave me alone. Don't talk to me. I have to concentrate. Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Don't . . . tell her about this. Don't tell Catherine Ling."

Hong Kong

"HOW IS HE?" AGENT BILL GREGORY ASKED Venable as he came into the apothecary shop. "And why the hell is he here instead of in the hospital? I thought he was a dead man when we got him off that helicopter."

"So did I." Venable lifted his cup of tea to his lips. "But Hu Chang wasn't having it. After we stopped the bleeding, he insisted on being brought home." His gaze wandered around the pristine shop, with its gleaming vials and bottles containing liquids of a hundred different hues and consistencies. "He brought in a neighborhood surgeon he trusted to do the surgery, and he's been swallowing his own concoctions instead of antibiotics." He made a face. "But considering his reputation, he's probably better off with them. Catherine swears he's a genius."

"But definitely illegal," Gregory said dryly. "He has no compunctions about creating exotic poisons as well as lifesaving medicines. I'm surprised the local government hasn't thrown him in jail, or at least closed him down."

"I'm not. In Hong Kong, when you're the best, you occupy a special place in the hierarchy. There's no telling when you

might need his services. He's discreet and smart enough to walk a fine line."

Gregory tilted his head. "And have you used his services, Venable?"

He gave him a cool glance. "Do you think I'd answer that question? I walk a fine line, too, and I'm just as discreet as Hu Chang."

"Just curious," Gregory said quickly. "I thought it might help if you had a history with him. Have you started to question him yet?"

"No. He's been sleeping in his bedroom in the back." His smile was twisted. "He said sleep was necessary for healing. He ordered me to stay out here in the shop and guard him. He assured me it would only be for 9.5 hours—that is exactly how he phrased it—and then we would talk." He checked his watch. "Which is up now." He finished his tea, put the cup back in the saucer, and set both on the elegant carved table beside the chair. "And I'll make my appearance and see what I can find out."

"Good luck." Gregory made a face. "I did everything from threatening him, to offering him a bribe and I wasn't able to find out zilch. That was why the director called you in to take over. You had this territory years ago. Right?"

"Right."

"And you know Hu Chang?"

"I can't claim that distinction. We've had . . . encounters. There's only one person who has a relationship with him."

"Catherine Ling."

He nodded. "Catherine."

"I've never worked with her." His eyes were bright with curi-

osity. "But I saw her recently when she was in town. She's drop-dead gorgeous. I could—"

"Good description," Venable interrupted. If he had to use Catherine, Gregory should be warned. "She's one of the most beautiful women I've ever met. And definitely the most lethal. Don't make the mistake of annoying her, Gregory."

"I won't." He grimaced. "She's something of a legend in this town. I hadn't been here more than a week, and I began to hear stories. She was born here?"

"No, in Seoul, Korea. Her mother was a half-Korean, half-Russian prostitute and her father an American soldier. Her mother brought Catherine to Hong Kong when she was four and died shortly after. Catherine had to survive on her own from that time on."

"In her mother's profession?"

"No, she was too smart. She found out that information was the most valuable commodity to sell in Hong Kong and made herself an expert. She became the person to go to when you needed to find out anything. We used her whenever we needed info from the time she was fourteen. When she was seventeen, I recruited her for the Company."

"And taught her everything she knows?"

"I helped." He glanced at the bedroom. "But she knows a hell of a lot more than I do about a lot things. She and Hu Chang are very, very close." He turned toward the door. "Wait here, Gregory. Keep watch."

He smiled. "I'm supposed to guard your back?"

"You're damn right. Just because we managed to get Hu Chang away from those bastards is no guarantee they won't try to snatch him again."

“Or kill him.”

“But they’d rather have him alive. I don’t think he’d have made it to the helicopter without being blown to bits if they’d wanted to kill him.”

“They came close.” Gregory held up his hand as Venable was about to speak. “I’m not arguing. Remember, I was the one who sent you the report on that leak I’d had from my informant. I know how important Hu Chang could be.”

No, he didn’t, Venable thought. Gregory hadn’t the slightest idea how devastating this info he’d uncovered could be. He was only aware of the top layer. Venable had gone deep, and it was scaring the hell out of him.

Don’t let Hu Chang see it. He was clever, and he would take advantage of any weakness. Venable couldn’t afford to show that he had any doubts or fears. He turned and strode into Hu Chang’s room.

“You are late.” Hu Chang was sitting up in bed, and he stared blandly at Venable. “Punctuality is important.”

“I’ll try to remember,” Venable said sarcastically. Damn, Hu Chang looked amazingly well considering the fact that he had wondered if the man was on his deathbed only the day before. There was color in his cheeks, and his dark eyes were bright and alert in his triangular face. He had no idea how old Hu Chang was because he appeared ageless. He was above average height, slim, but muscular with close-cut black hair and an expression that was totally enigmatic. He had heard Catherine tease him about it once. She had told Hu Chang he had seen too many kung fu movies. “Should you be sitting up? Won’t you tear your stitches?”

“No. I will not. Another three days, and I will be well.”

“I doubt that.”

Hu Chang did not smile. "I do not. And I know my body better than you, Venable."

"I'm sure you do, but there are laws of nature."

"Which can be circumvented also by nature." He inclined his head. "And no one knows how to do that better than I do. I will require you to assign someone to guard me while I sleep for the next two nights. I could just disappear, but I have work to do here in my lab."

"And I'm just supposed to furnish you with your body-guard?" He shook his head. "Not likely. Not without adequate compensation. We need to make a deal."

"Oh, you didn't rescue me because you thought that I was too brilliant to leave this Earth?" He sighed. "I suspected that when I saw the F-16. I guess you've heard rumors. I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you they weren't true? Not that I'd lie to you when I'm so grateful for your timely rescue."

"Bullshit."

"No, truly." He tilted his head. "Perhaps I'd be more grateful if I knew you'd done it to save me with no hint of ulterior motive. But I can't fault you. A person who acts selflessly without thinking of a return is rare indeed."

Venable's eyes narrowed on his face. "Like Catherine?"

Hu Chang nodded. "Like Catherine. Though she would deny it. She regards herself as a warrior."

"So do I."

He shrugged. "Yet she is what she is." He met Venable's gaze. "You have not told her?"

"No."

"That is good."

"But I will if you don't tell me who the target is, dammit."

"No, you won't. Because you're still hopeful of getting

information out of me.” He leaned back on the pallet and closed his eyes. “And that will not happen if you bring Catherine into it. I will just disappear. I’m very good at that.”

“You may do it anyway.”

“I promise I will not for the next three days. That will allow you to interrogate me and permit me to rest and recover.”

“It will take you longer than three days to get well. That’s total bullshit.”

“We disagree. You may go now. It’s time for me to get back to sleep.”

Venable was so exasperated he wanted to yank him out of bed and shake him. Great. He’d probably kill him. Hu Chang might think he was on the way to recovery, but he had to be fragile. “Three days.” He turned to go. “And we’ll talk every day.”

“Conversation can be so frustrating. Do you play chess?”

“No, I don’t have the patience for it. Checkers.”

“Chess. You’re a man who uses your mind. You will conquer impatience.”

“Let’s go back to conversation.” He paused. “This is no game to me, Hu Chang. It could cause too many deaths.”

“That is why you’re CIA. You take such things with great gravity. That’s why I trust you to guard me well during the next days.” His eyes remained closed. “But do not assign Agent Gregory to do that task. He is too young to realize what a treasure I am. He might be careless . . .”

He was already asleep, Venable thought, as he turned and left the room. He’d gone off in the blink of an eye.

But not without issuing that last order about not using Gregory. He hadn’t been planning on it. Like Hu Chang, Venable was bothered by Gregory’s brash self-confidence. He might

be smart, and Venable knew he was brave, but he preferred wariness. He'd do most of the duty himself while he tried to persuade Hu Chang to tell him what he needed to know.

Three days . . .