

# FREEDOM SWIMMER

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# CHAPTER 1

## MING

The morning was already sticky and wet. Steam rose from the puddles that had collected along the roads during the last rains. I was running, my back sweaty, my hair hanging in my face. I huffed at it, and the strands flew upward, then settled in my eyeline again.

“Ming, Ming, wait up!” a voice called from behind me. I wasn’t the only one late this morning.

Tian caught up, his unbuttoned work shirt flapping around him, an unlit cigarette dangling from his mouth.

“Little brother, what’s the rush? We all receive the same bag of manure no matter what time we arrive.” He pinched the cigarette from his lips and tucked it behind his ear.

“Easy for you to say,” I replied with a smile. “We all know you’re the Cadre’s favorite.” Tian laughed and shoved me playfully.

“Come on, slowpoke,” he chided as he took off for the work hall.

As we ran through the village, the shirts clinging to our backs were drenched in moments. Typhoon season was just around the corner, which would bring welcome relief after the hot summer months in Dingzai village and the rest of Dapeng.

The work hall was in the center of the village. It was where we checked in with our team leader every morning and was also where we reported at the end of the day and received our daily work points. We all worked in the fields from early in the morning until it was too dark to see. Digging, planting, picking—every day was the same, with rare breaks on the few public holidays.

As we neared the hall, I saw that we weren’t quite the last ones to check in for the morning.

“There’s trouble,” Tian murmured, taking the cigarette from behind his ear and tucking it safely into the carton he kept in his shirt pocket. A group of boys lingered by the entrance to the hall. Caocao, the tallest, turned and spotted us.

“You stink-breaths are late.” Caocao ambled over to me. The tips of my ears were on fire, and I dropped my head as the gang around him sniggered. “That’s a deduction of at least one work point each.” My heart stopped; one full work point was about a week’s worth of field work.

Caocao wouldn’t have picked on us this way if our fathers were around. He seemed to have it in for the orphans while his

own dad was the most powerful man in the village—Caocao was the Cadre's son, and he made sure we never forgot it.

“Mind your own business, Caocao,” Tian said. “No one made you brigade leader.”

Caocao smacked his lips, his eyes narrowing like a hawk homing in on its prey. “Brigade Leader's a busy man. He needs some help to keep bastards like you in line. He'll know about your tardiness before long.” He squeezed his fist until his knuckles cracked.

“What do you want?” I asked, wishing he'd just leave us alone.

“It's been a lean month; the boys and I could use a little extra.” The boys around us grinned eagerly. “One grain coupon each ought to cover it.”

My hands automatically went to my pockets. It was only when I held a coupon in my fist, worth a precious half kilo of grain, that I realized Tian hadn't moved a muscle.

“Tian,” I whispered, elbowing him in the side. “Come on.” But Tian shook his head and squared his jaw, pulling himself up so he was looking the other boy in the eye.

Caocao leaned forward so his broad, flat nose almost bumped Tian's. “You know, I don't like your attitude, but I'm willing to overlook it. How about a couple of those American-import cigarettes?”

And then Tian smiled. “Sik si laa,” he spat.

I felt the blood drain from my face as Caocao went purple. Tian didn't even blink, the corners of his mouth curling up ever so slightly. I felt the press of bodies as the boys surged forward, ready to teach us a lesson.

"Good morning, comrades." The loudspeakers crackled to life above our heads.

We all froze. Instead of the usual propaganda slogans, the Cadre himself was addressing the village.

"My fellow comrades, this is a message from your esteemed Party. Field work is delayed this morning for an important announcement. Report to the assembly area in ten minutes, no exceptions. That is all."

Tian and I exchanged a look of alarm, and even Caocao's boys were distracted. An official announcement was hardly ever good news.

Caocao jerked his head, and the group dispersed, but my sigh of relief was cut short. "This is not done."

Tian smirked, and I had half a mind to scold him for giving Caocao a new reason to hassle us. Before I could say anything, he clapped me on the shoulder and took off. "Come on, we don't want to be late twice in one morning."

I went after him, and we joined the rest of the villagers for the ominous assembly.