

# THE INCOMPLETE PAOLO BACIGALUPI

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## The Calorie Man

"NO MAMMY, NO PAPPY, poor little bastard. Money? You give money?" The urchin turned a cartwheel and then a somersault in the street, stirring yellow dust around his nakedness.

Lalji paused to stare at the dirty blond child who had come to a halt at his feet. The attention seemed to encourage the urchin; the boy did another somersault. He smiled up at Lalji from his squat, calculating and eager, rivulets of sweat and mud streaking his face. "Money? You give money?"

Around them, the town was nearly silent in the afternoon heat. A few dungareed farmers led mulies toward the fields. Buildings, pressed from WeatherAll chips, slumped against their fellows like drunkards, rain-stained and sun-cracked, but, as their trade name implied, still sturdy. At the far end of the narrow street, the lush sprawl of SoyPRO and HiGro began, a waving rustling growth that rolled into the blue-sky distance. It was much as all the villages Lalji had seen as he traveled upriver, just another farming enclave paying its intellectual property dues and shipping calories down to New Orleans.

The boy crawled closer, smiling ingratiatingly, nodding his head like a snake hoping to strike. "Money? Money?"

Lalji put his hands in his pockets in case the beggar child had friends and turned his full attention on the boy. "And why should I give money to you?"

The boy stared up at him, stalled. His mouth opened, then closed. Finally he looped back to an earlier, more familiar part of his script, "No mammy? No pappy?" but it was a query now, lacking conviction.

Lalji made a face of disgust and aimed a kick at the boy. The child scrambled aside, falling on his back in his desperation to dodge, and this pleased Lalji briefly. At least the boy was quick. He turned and started back up the street. Behind him, the urchin's wailing despair echoed. "Noooo maaaammy! Nooo paaaapy!" Lalji shook his head, irritated. The child might cry for money, but he failed to follow. No true beggar at all. An opportunist only — most likely the accidental creation of strangers who had visited the village and were open-fisted when it came to blond beggar children. AgriGen and Midwest Grower scientists and land factotums would be pleased to show ostentatious kindness to the villagers at the core of their empire.

Through a gap in the slumped hovels, Lalji caught another glimpse of the lush waves of SoyPRO and HiGro. The sheer sprawl of calories stimulated tingling fantasies of loading a barge and slipping it down through the locks to St. Louis or New Orleans and into the mouths of waiting megadonts. It was impossible, but the sight of those emerald fields was more than enough assurance that no child could beg with conviction here. Not surrounded by SoyPRO. Lalji shook his head again, disgusted, and squeezed down a footpath between two of the houses.

The acrid reek of WeatherAll's excreted oils clogged the dim alley. A pair of cheshires sheltering in the unused space scattered and molted ahead of him, disappearing into bright sunlight. Just beyond, a kinetic shop leaned against its beaten neighbors, adding the scents of dung and animal sweat to the stink of WeatherAll. Lalji leaned against the shop's plank door and shoved inside.

Shafts of sunlight pierced the sweet manure gloom with lazy gold beams. A pair of hand-painted posters scabbed to one wall, partly torn but still legible. One said: "Unstamped calories mean starving families. We check royalty receipts and IP stamps." A farmer and his brood stared hollow-eyed from beneath the scolding words. PurCal was the sponsor. The other poster was AgriGen's trademarked collage of kink-springs, green rows of SoyPRO under sunlight and smiling children along with the words "We Provide Energy for the World." Lalji studied the posters sourly.

"Back already?" The owner came in from the winding room, wiping his hands on his pants and kicking straw and mud off his boots. He eyed Lalji. "My springs didn't have enough stored. I had to feed the mulies extra, to make your joules."

Lalji shrugged, having expected the last-minute bargaining, so much like Shriram's that he couldn't muster the interest to look offended. "Yes? How much?"

The man squinted up at Lalji, then ducked his head, his body defensive. "F-Five hundred." His voice caught on the amount, as though gagging on the surprising greed scampering up his throat.

Lalji frowned and pulled his mustache. It was outrageous. The calories hadn't even been transported. The village was awash with energy. And despite the man's virtuous poster, it was doubtful that the calories feeding his kinetic shop were equally upstanding. Not with tempting green fields waving within meters of the shop. Shriram often said that using stamped calories was like dumping money into a methane composter.

Lalji tugged his mustache again, wondering how much to pay for the joules without calling excessive attention to himself. Rich men must have been all over the village to make the kinetic man so greedy. Calorie executives, almost certainly. It would fit. The town was close to the center. Perhaps even this village was engaged in growing the crown jewels of AgriGen's energy monopolies. Still, not everyone who passed through would be as rich as that. "Two hundred."

The kinetic man showed a relieved smile along with knotted yellow teeth, his guilt apparently assuaged by Lalji's bargaining. "Four."

"Two. I can moor on the river and let my own winders do the same work."

The man snorted. "It would take weeks."

Lalji shrugged. "I have time. Dump the joules back into your own springs. I'll do the job myself."

"I've got family to feed. Three?"

"You live next to more calories than some rich families in St. Louis. Two."

The man shook his head sourly but he led Lalji into the winding room. The manure haze thickened. Big kinetic storage drums, twice as tall as a man, sat in a darkened corner, mud and manure lapping around their high-capacity precision kink-springs. Sunbeams poured between open gaps in the roof where shingles had blown away. Dung motes stirred lazily.

A half-dozen hyper-developed mulies crouched on their treadmills, their rib cages billowing slowly, their flanks streaked with salt lines of sweat residue from the labor of winding Lalji's boat springs. They blew air through their nostrils, nervous at Lalji's sudden scent, and gathered their squat legs under them. Muscles like boulders rippled under their bony hides as they stood. They eyed Lalji with resentful near-intelligence. One of them showed stubborn yellow teeth that matched its owner's.

Lalji made a face of disgust. "Feed them."

"I already did."

"I can see their bones. If you want my money, feed them again."

The man scowled. "They aren't supposed to get fat, they're supposed to wind your damn springs." But he dipped double handfuls of SoyPRO into their feed canisters.

The mulies shoved their heads into the buckets, slobbering and grunting with need. In its eagerness, one of them started briefly forward on its treadmill, sending energy into the winding shop's depleted storage springs before seeming to realize that its work was not demanded and that it could eat without molestation.

"They aren't even designed to get fat," the kinetic man muttered.

Lalji smiled slightly as he counted through his wadded bluebills and handed over the money. The kinetic man unjacked Lalji's kink-springs from the winding treadmills and stacked them beside the slavering mulies. Lalji lifted a spring, grunting at its heft. Its mass was no different than when he had brought it to the winding shop, but now it fairly seemed to quiver with the mulies' stored labor.

"You want help with those?" The man didn't move. His eyes flicked toward the mulies' feed buckets, still calculating his chances of interrupting their meal.

Lalji took his time answering, watching as the mulies rooted for the last of their calories. "No." He hefted the spring again, getting a better grip. "My helpboy will come for the rest."

As he turned for the door, he heard the man dragging the feedbuckets away from the mulies and their grunts as they fought for their sustenance. Once again, Lalji regretted agreeing to the trip at all.

SHRIRAM HAD BEEN the one to broach the idea. They had been sitting under the awning of Lalji's porch in New Orleans, spitting betel nut juice into the alley gutters and watching the rain come down as they played chess. At the end of the alley, cycle rickshaws and bicycles slipped through the mid-morning gray, pulses of green and red and blue as they passed the alley's mouth draped under rain-glossed corn polymer ponchos.

The chess game was a tradition of many years, a ritual when Lalji was in town and Shriram had time away from his small kinetic company where he rewound people's home and boat springs. Theirs was a good friendship, and a fruitful one, when Lalji had unstamped calories that needed to disappear into the mouth of a hungry megadont.

Neither of them played chess well, and so their games often devolved into a series of trades made in dizzying succession; a cascade of destruction that left a board previously well-arrayed in a tantrum wreck, with both opponents blinking surprise, trying to calculate if the mangle had been worth the combat. It was after one of these tit-for-tat cleansings that Shriram had asked Lalji if he might go upriver. Beyond the southern states.

Lalji had shaken his head and spit bloody betel juice into the overflowing gutter. "No. Nothing is profitable so far up. Too many joules to get there. Better to let the calories float to me." He was surprised to discover that he still had his queen. He used it to take a pawn.

"And if the energy costs could be defrayed?"

Lalji laughed, waiting for Shriram to make his own move. "By who? AgriGen? The IP men? Only their boats go up and down so far." He frowned as he realized that his queen was now vulnerable to Shriram's remaining knight.

Shriram was silent. He didn't touch his pieces. Lalji looked up from the board and was surprised by Shriram's serious expression. Shriram said, "I would pay. Myself and others. There is a man who some of us would like to see come south. A very special man."

"Then why not bring him south on a paddle wheel? It is expensive to go up the river. How many gigajoules? I would have to change the boat's springs, and then what would the IP patrols ask? 'Where are you going, strange Indian man with your small boat and your so many springs? Going far? To what purpose?' " Lalji shook his head. "Let this man take a ferry, or ride a barge. Isn't this cheaper?" He waved at the game board. "It's your move. You should take my queen."

Shriram wagged his head thoughtfully from side to side but didn't make any move toward the chess game. "Cheaper, yes...."

"But?"

Shriram shrugged. "A swift, inconsequential boat would attract less attention."

"What sort of man is this?"

Shriram glanced around, suddenly furtive. Methane lamps burned like blue fairies behind the closed glass of the neighbors' droplet-spattered windows. Rain sheeted off their roofs, drumming wet into the empty alley. A cheshire was yowling for a mate somewhere in the wet, barely audible under the thrum of falling water.

"Is Creo inside?"

Lalji raised his eyebrows in surprise. "He has gone to his gymnasium. Why? Should it matter?"

Shriram shrugged and gave an embarrassed smile. "Some things are better kept between old friends. People with strong ties."

"Creo has been with me for years."

Shriram grunted noncommittally, glanced around again and leaned close, pitching his voice low, forcing Lalji to lean forward as well. "There is a man who the calorie companies would like very much to find." He tapped his balding head. "A very intelligent man. We want to help him."

Lalji sucked in his breath. "A generipper?"

Shriram avoided Lalji's eyes. "In a sense. A calorie man."

Lalji made a face of disgust. "Even better reason not to be involved. I don't traffic with those killers."

"No, no. Of course not. But still...you brought that huge sign down once, did you not? A few greased palms, so smooth, and you float into town and suddenly Lakshmi smiles on you, such a calorie bandit, and now with a name instead as a dealer of antiques. Such a wonderful misdirection."

Lalji shrugged. "I was lucky. I knew the man to help move it through the locks."

"So? Do it again."

"If the calorie companies are looking for him, it would be dangerous."

"But not impossible. The locks would be easy. Much easier than carrying unlicensed grains. Or even something as big as that sign. This would be a man. No sniffer dog would find him of interest. Place him in a barrel. It would be easy. And I would pay. All your joules, plus more."

Lalji sucked at his narcotic betel nut, spit red, spit red again, considering. "And what does a second-rate kinetic man like you think this calorie man will do? Generippers work for big fish, and you are such a small one."

Shriram grinned haplessly and gave a self-deprecating shrug. "You do not think Ganesha Kinetic could not some day be great? The next AgriGen, maybe?" and they had both laughed at the absurdity and Shriram dropped the subject.

An IP man was on duty with his dog, blocking Lalji's way as he returned to his boat lugging the kink-spring. The brute's hairs bristled as Lalji approached and it lunged against its leash, its blunt nose quivering to reach him. With effort, the IP man held the creature back. "I need to sniff you." His helmet lay on the grass, already discarded, but still he was sweating under the swaddling heat of his gray slash-resistant uniform and the heavy webbing of his spring gun and bandoliers.

Lalji held still. The dog growled, deep from its throat, and inched forward. It snuffled his clothing, bared hungry teeth, snuffled again, then its black ruff iridesced blue and it relaxed and wagged its stubby tail. It sat. A pink tongue lolled from between smiling teeth. Lalji smiled sourly back at the animal, glad that he wasn't smuggling calories and wouldn't have to go through the pantomimes of obeisance as the IP man demanded stamps and then tried to verify that the grain shipment had paid its royalties and licensing fees.

At the dog's change in color, the IP man relaxed somewhat, but still he studied Lalji's features carefully, hunting for recognition against memorized photographs. Lalji waited patiently, accustomed to the scrutiny. Many men tried to steal the honest profits of AgriGen and its peers, but to Lalji's knowledge, he was unknown to the protectors of intellectual property. He was an antiques dealer, handling the junk of the previous century, not a calorie bandit staring out from corporate photo books.

Finally, the IP man waved him past. Lalji nodded politely and made his way down the stairs to the river's low stage where his needleboat was moored. Out on the river, cumbrous grain barges wallowed past, riding low under their burdens.

Though there was a great deal of river traffic, it didn't compare with harvest time. Then the whole of the Mississippi would fill with calories pouring downstream, pulled from hundreds of towns like this one. Barges would clot the arterial flow of the river system from high on the Missouri, the Illinois, and the Ohio and the thousand smaller tributaries. Some of those calories would float only as far as St. Louis where they would be chewed by megadonts and churned into joules, but the rest, the vast majority, would float to New Orleans where the great calorie companies' clippers and dirigibles would be loaded with the precious grains. Then they would cross the Earth on tradewinds and sea, in time for the next season's planting, so that the world could go on eating.

Lalji watched the barges moving slowly past, wallowing and bloated with their wealth, then hefted his kink-spring and jumped aboard his needleboat.

Creo was lying on deck as Lalji had left him, his muscled body oiled and shining in the sun, a blond Arjuna waiting for glorious battle. His cornrows spread around his head in a halo, their tipped bits of bone lying like foretelling stones on the hot deck. He didn't open his eyes as Lalji jumped aboard. Lalji went and stood in Creo's sun, eclipsing his tan. Slowly, the young man opened his blue eyes.

"Get up." Lalji dropped the spring on Creo's rippled stomach.

Creo let out a whuff and wrapped his arms around the spring. He sat up easily and set it on the deck. "Rest of the springs wound?"

Lalji nodded. Creo took the spring and went down the boat's narrow stairs to the mechanical room. When he returned from fitting the spring into the gearings of the boat's power system, he said, "Your springs are shit, all of them. I don't know why you didn't bring bigger ones. We have to rewind, what, every twenty hours? You could have gotten all the way here on a couple of the big ones."

Lalji scowled at Creo and jerked his head toward the guard still standing at the top of the riverbank and looking down on them. He lowered his voice. "And then what would the Midwest Authority be saying as we are going upriver? All their IP men all over our boat, wondering where we are going so far? Boarding us and then wondering what we are doing with such big springs. Where have we gotten so many joules? Wondering what business we have so far upriver." He shook his head. "No, no. This is better. Small boat, small distance, who worries about Lalji and his stupid blond helpboy then? No one. No, this is better."

"You always were a cheap bastard."

Lalji glanced at Creo. "You are lucky it is not forty years ago. Then you would be paddling up this river by hand, instead of lying on your lazy back letting these fancy kink-springs do the work. Then we would be seeing you use those muscles of yours."

"If I was lucky, I would have been born during the Expansion and we'd still be using gasoline."

Lalji was about to retort but an IP boat slashed past them, ripping a deep wake. Creo lunged for their cache of spring guns. Lalji dove after him and slammed the cache shut. "They're not after us!"

Creo stared at Lalji, uncomprehending for a moment, then relaxed. He stepped away from the stored weapons. The IP boat continued upriver, half its displacement dedicated to massive precision kink-springs and the stored joules that gushed from their unlocking molecules. Its curling wake rocked the needleboat. Lalji steadied himself against the rail as the IP boat dwindled to a speck and disappeared between obstructing barge chains.

Creo scowled after the boat. "I could have taken them."

Lalji took a deep breath. "You would have gotten us killed." He glanced at the top of the riverbank to see if the IP man had noticed their panic. He wasn't even visible. Lalji silently gave thanks to Ganesha.

"I don't like all of them around," Creo complained. "They're like ants. Fourteen at the last lock. That one, up on the hill. Now these boats."

"It is the heart of calorie country. It is to be expected."

"You making a lot of money on this trip?"

"Why should you care?"

"Because you never used to take risks like this." Creo swept his arm, indicating the village, the cultivated fields, the muddy width of river gurgling past, and the massive barges clogging it. "No one comes this far upriver."

"I'm making enough money to pay you. That's all you should concern yourself with. Now go get the rest of the springs. When you think too much, your brain makes mush."

Creo shook his head doubtfully but jumped for the dock and headed up the steps to the kinetic shop. Lalji turned to face the river. He took a deep breath.

The IP boat had been a close call. Creo was too eager to fight. It was only with luck that they hadn't ended up as shredded meat from the IP men's spring guns. He shook his head tiredly, wondering if he had ever had as much reckless confidence as Creo. He didn't think so. Not even when he was a boy. Perhaps Shriram was right. Even if Creo was trustworthy, he was still dangerous.

A barge chain, loaded with TotalNutrient Wheat, slid past. The happy sheaves of its logo smiled across the river's muddy flow, promising "A Healthful Tomorrow" along with folates, B vitamins, and pork protein. Another IP boat slashed upriver, weaving amongst the barge traffic. Its complement of IP men studied him coldly as they went by. Lalji's skin crawled. Was it worth it? If he thought too much, his businessman's instinct — bred into him through thousands of years of caste practice — told him no. But still, there was Gita. When he balanced his debts each year on Diwali, how did he account for all he owed her? How did one pay off something that weighed heavier than all his profits, in all his lifetimes?

The NutriWheat wallowed past, witlessly inviting, and without answers.

"You wanted to know if there was something that would be worth your trip upriver."

Lalji and Shriram had been standing in the winding room of Ganesha Kinetic, watching a misplaced ton of SuperFlavor burn into joules. Shriram's paired megadonts labored against the winding spindles, ponderous and steady as they turned just-consumed calories into kinetic energy and wound the shop's main storage springs.

Priti and Bidi. The massive creatures barely resembled the elephants that had once provided their template DNA. Generippers had honed them to a perfect balance of musculature and hunger for a single purpose: to inhale calories and do terrible labors without complaint. The smell of them was overwhelming. Their trunks dragged the ground.

The animals were getting old, Lalji thought, and on the heels of that thought came another: he, too, was getting old. Every morning he found gray in his mustache. He plucked it, of course, but more gray hairs always sprouted. And now his joints ached in the mornings as well. Shriram's own head shone like polished teak. At some point, he'd turned bald. Fat and bald. Lalji wondered when they had turned into such old men.

Shriram repeated himself, and Lalji shook away his thoughts. "No, I am not interested in anything upriver. That is the calorie companies' province. I have accepted that when you scatter my ashes it will be on the Mississippi, and not the holy Ganges, but I am not so eager to find my next life that I wish my corpse to float down from Iowa."

Shriram twisted his hands nervously and glanced around. He lowered his voice, even though the steady groan of the spindles was more than enough to drown their sounds. "Please, friend, there are people... who want... to kill this man."

"And I should care?"

Shriram made placating motions with his hands. "He knows how to make calories. AgriGen wants him, badly. PurCal as well. He has rejected them and their kind. His mind is valuable. He needs someone trustworthy to bring him downriver. No friend of the IP men."

"And just because he is an enemy of AgriGen I should help him? Some former associate of the Des Moines clique? Some ex-calorie man with blood on his hands and you think he will help you make money?"

Shriram shook his head. "You make it sound as if this man is unclean."

"We are talking of generippers, yes? How much morality can he have?"

"A geneticist. Not a generipper. Geneticists gave us megadonts." He waved at Priti and Bidi. "Me, a livelihood."

Lalji turned on Shriram. "You take refuge in these semantics, now? You, who starved in Chennai when the Nippon genehack weevil came? When the soil turned to alcohol? Before U-Tex and HiGro and the rest all showed up so conveniently? You, who waited on the docks when the seeds came in, saw them come and then saw them sit behind their fences and guards, waiting for people with the money to buy? What traffic would I have with this sort of people? I would sooner spit on him, this calorie man. Let the PurCal devils have him, I say."

THE TOWN WAS as Shriram had described it. Cottonwoods and willows tangled the edges of the river and over them, the remains of the bridge, some of it still spanning the river in a hazy network of broken trusses and crumbling supports. Lalji and Creo stared up at the rusting construction, a web of steel and cable and concrete, slowly collapsing into the river.

"How much do you think the steel would bring?" Creo asked.

Lalji filled his cheek with a handful of PestResis sunflower seeds and started cracking them between his teeth. He spit the hulls into the river one by one. "Not much. Too much energy to tear it out, then to melt it." He shook his head and spat another hull. "A waste to make something like that with steel. Better to use Fast-Gen hardwoods, or WeatherAll."

"Not to cover that distance. It couldn't be done now. Not unless you were in Des Moines, maybe. I heard they burn coal there."

"And they have electric lights that go all night and computers as large as a house." Lalji waved his hand dismissively and turned to finish securing the needleboat. "Who needs such a bridge now? A waste. A ferry and a mulie would serve just as well." He jumped ashore and started climbing the crumbling steps that led up from the river. Creo followed.

At the top of the steep climb, a ruined suburb waited. Built to serve the cities on the far side of the river when commuting was common and petroleum cheap, it now sprawled in an advanced state of decay. A junk city built with junk materials, as transient as water, willingly abandoned when the expense of commuting grew too great.

"What the hell is this place?" Creo muttered.

Lalji smiled cynically. He jerked his head toward the green fields across the river, where SoyPRO and HiGro undulated to the horizon. "The very cradle of civilization, yes? AgriGen, Midwest Growers Group, PurCal, all of them have fields here."

"Yeah? That excite you?"

Lalji turned and studied a barge chain as it wallowed down the river below them, its mammoth size rendered small by the height. "If we could turn all their calories into traceless joules, we'd be wealthy men."

"Keep dreaming." Creo breathed deeply and stretched. His back cracked and he winced at the sound. "I get out of shape when I ride your boat this long. I should have stayed in New Orleans."

Lalji raised his eyebrows. "You're not happy to be making this touristic journey?" He pointed across the river. "Somewhere over there, perhaps in those very acres, AgriGen created SoyPRO. And everyone thought they were such wonderful people." He frowned. "And then the weevil came, and suddenly there was nothing else to eat."

Creo made a face. "I don't go for those conspiracy theories."

"You weren't even born when it happened." Lalji turned to lead Creo into the wrecked suburb. "But I remember. No such accident had ever happened before."

"Monocultures. They were vulnerable."

"Basmati was no monoculture!" Lalji waved his hand back toward the green fields. "SoyPRO is monoculture. PurCal is monoculture. Generippers make monoculture."

"Whatever you say, Lalji."

Lalji glanced at Creo, trying to tell if the young man was still arguing with him, but Creo was carefully studying the street wreckage and Lalji let the argument die. He began counting streets, following memorized directions.

The avenues were all ridiculously broad and identical, large enough to run a herd of megadonts. Twenty cycle-rickshaws could ride abreast easily, and yet the town had only been a support suburb. It boggled Lalji's mind to consider the scale of life before.

A gang of children watched them from the doorway of a collapsed house. Half its timbers had been removed, and the other half were splintered, rising from the foundation like carcass bones where siding flesh had been stripped away.

Creo showed the children his spring gun and they ran away. He scowled at their departing forms. "So what the hell are we picking up here? You got a lead on another antique?"

Lalji shrugged.

"Come on. I'm going to be hauling it in a couple minutes anyway. What's with the secrecy?"

Lalji glanced at Creo. "There's nothing for you to haul. 'It' is a man. We're looking for a man."

Creo made a sound of disbelief. Lalji didn't bother responding.

Eventually, they came to an intersection. At its center, an old signal light lay smashed. Around it, the pavement was broken through by grasses gone to seed. Dandelions stuck up their yellow heads. On the far side of the intersection, a tall brick building squatted, a ruin of a civil center, yet still standing, built with better materials than the housing it had served.

A cheshire bled across the weedy expanse. Creo tried to shoot it. Missed.

Lalji studied the brick building. "This is the place."

Creo grunted and shot at another cheshire shimmer.

Lalji went over and inspected the smashed signal light, idly curious to see if it might have value. It was rusted. He turned in a slow circle, studying the surroundings for anything at all that might be worth taking downriver. Some of the old Expansion's wreckage still had worthy artifacts. He'd found the Conoco sign in such a place, in a suburb soon to be swallowed by SoyPRO, perfectly intact, seemingly never mounted in the open air, never subjected to the angry mobs of the energy Contraction. He'd sold it to an AgriGen executive for more than an entire smuggled cargo of HiGro.

The AgriGen woman had laughed at the sign. She'd mounted it on her wall, surrounded by the lesser artifacts of the Expansion: plastic cups, computer monitors, photos of racing automobiles, brightly colored children's toys. She'd hung the sign on her wall and then stood back and murmured that at one point, it had been a powerful company...global, even.

Global.

She'd said the word with an almost sexual yearning as she stared up at the sign's ruddy polymers.

Global.

For a moment, Lalji had been smitten by her vision: a company that pulled energy from the remotest parts of the planet and sold it far away within weeks of extraction; a company with customers and investors on every continent, with executives who crossed time zones as casually as Lalji crossed the alley to visit Shriram.

The AgriGen woman had hung the sign on her wall like the head of a trophy megadont and in that moment, next to a representative of the most powerful energy company in world, Lalji had felt a sudden sadness at how very diminished humanity had become.

Lalji shook away the memory and again turned slowly in the intersection, seeking signs of his passenger. More cheshires flitted amongst the ruins, their smoky shimmer shapes pulsing across the sunlight and passing into shadows. Creo pumped his spring gun and sprayed disks. A shimmer tumbled to stillness and became a matted pile of calico and blood.

Creo repumped his spring gun. "So where is this guy?"

"I think he will come. If not today, then tomorrow or the next." Lalji headed up the steps of the civil center and slipped between its shattered doors. Inside, it was nothing but dust and gloom and bird droppings. He found stairs and made his way upward until he found a broken window with a view. A gust of wind rattled the window pane and tugged his mustache. A pair of crows circled in the blue sky. Below, Creo pumped his spring gun and shot more cheshire shimmers. When he hit, angry yowls filtered up. Blood swatches spattered the weedy pavement as more animals fled.

In the distance, the suburb's periphery was already falling to agriculture. Its time was short. Soon the houses would be plowed under and a perfect blanket of SoyPRO would cover it. The suburb's history, as silly and transient as it had been, would be lost, churned under by the march of energy development. No loss, from the standpoint of value, but still, some part of Lalji cringed at the thought of time erased. He spent too much time trying to recall the India of his boyhood to take pleasure in the disappearance. He headed back down the dusty stairs to Creo.

"See anyone?"



Lalji shook his head. Creo grunted and shot at another cheshire, narrowly missing. He was good, but the nearly invisible animals were hard targets. Creo pumped his spring gun and fired again. "Can't believe how many cheshires there are."

"There is no one to exterminate them."

"I should collect the skins and take them back to New Orleans."

"Not on my boat."

Many of the shimmers were fleeing, finally understanding the quality of their enemy. Creo pumped again and aimed at a twist of light further down the street.

Lalji watched complacently. "You will never hit it."

"Watch." Creo aimed carefully.

A shadow fell across them. "Don't shoot."

Creo whipped his spring gun around.

Lalji waved a hand at Creo. "Wait! It's him!"

The new arrival was a skinny old man, bald except for a greasy fringe of gray and brown hair, his heavy jaw thick with gray stubble. Hemp sacking covered his body, dirty and torn, and his eyes had a sunken, knowing quality that unearthed in Lalji the memory of a long-ago sadhu, covered with ash and little else: the tangled hair, the disinterest in his clothing, the distance in the eyes that came from enlightenment. Lalji shook away the memory. This man was no holy man. Just a man, and a generipper, at that.

Creo resighted his spring gun on the distant cheshire. "Down south, I get a bluebill for every one I kill."

The old man said, "There are no bluebills for you to collect here."

"Yeah, but they're pests."

"It's not their fault we made them too perfectly." The man smiled hesitantly, as though testing a facial expression. "Please." He squatted down in front of Creo. "Don't shoot."

Lalji placed a hand on Creo's spring gun. "Let the cheshires be."

Creo scowled, but he let his gun's mechanism unwind with a sigh of releasing energy.

The calorie man said, "I am Charles Bowman." He looked at them expectantly, as though anticipating recognition. "I am ready. I can leave."

Gita was dead, of that Lalji was now sure.

At times, he had pretended that it might not be so. Pretended that she might have found a life, even after he had gone.

But she was dead, and he was sure of it.

It was one of his secret shames. One of the accretions to his life that clung to him like dog shit on his shoes and reduced himself in his own eyes: as when he had thrown a rock and hit a boy's head, unprovoked, to see if it was possible; or when he had dug seeds out of the dirt and eaten them one by one, too starved to share. And then there was Gita. Always Gita. That he had left her and gone instead to live close to the calories. That she had stood on the docks and waved as he set sail, when it was she who had paid his passage price.

He remembered chasing her when he was small, following the rustle of her salwar kameez as she dashed ahead of him, her black hair and black eyes and white, white teeth. He wondered if she had been as beautiful as he recalled. If her oiled black braid had truly gleamed the way he remembered when she sat with him in the dark and told him stories of Arjuna and Krishna and Ram and Hanuman. So much was lost. He wondered sometimes if he even remembered her face correctly, or if he had replaced it with an ancient poster of a Bollywood girl, one of the old ones that Shriram kept in the safe of his winding shop and guarded jealously from the influences of light and air.

For a long time he thought he would go back and find her. That he might feed her. That he would send money and food back to his blighted land that now existed only in his mind, in his dreams, and in half-awake hallucinations of deserts, red and black saris, of women in dust, and their black hands and silver bangles, and their hunger, so many of the last memories of hunger.

He had fantasized that he would smuggle Gita back across the shining sea, and bring her close to the accountants who calculated calorie burn quotas for the world. Close to the calories, as she had said, once so long ago. Close to the men who balanced price stability against margins of error and protectively managed energy markets against a flood of food. Close to those small gods with more power than Kali to destroy the world.

But she was dead by now, whether through starvation or disease, and he was sure of it.

And wasn't that why Shriram had come to him? Shriram who knew more of his history than any other. Shriram who had found him after he arrived in New Orleans, and known him for a fellow countryman: not

just another Indian long settled in America, but one who still spoke the dialects of desert villages and who still remembered their country as it had existed before genehack weevil, leafcurl, and root rust. Shriram, who had shared a place on the floor while they both worked the winding sheds for calories and nothing else, and were grateful for it, as though they were nothing but genehacks themselves.

Of course Shriram had known what to say to send him upriver. Shriram had known how much he wished to balance the unbalanceable.

THEY FOLLOWED Bowman down empty streets and up remnant alleys, winding through the pathetic collapse of termite-ridden wood, crumbling concrete foundations, and rusted rebar too useless to scavenge and too stubborn to erode. Finally, the old man squeezed them between the stripped hulks of a pair of rusted automobiles. On the far side, Lalji and Creo gasped.

Sunflowers waved over their heads. A jungle of broad squash leaves hugged their knees. Dry corn stalks rattled in the wind. Bowman looked back at their surprise, and his smile, so hesitant and testing at first, broadened with unrestrained pleasure. He laughed and waved them onward, floundering through a garden of flowers and weeds and produce, catching his torn hemp cloth on the dried stems of cabbage gone to seed and the cling of cantaloupe vines. Creo and Lalji picked their way through the tangle, wending around purple lengths of eggplants, red orb tomatoes, and dangling orange ornament chiles. Bees buzzed heavily between the sunflowers, burdened with saddlebags of pollen.

Lalji paused in the overgrowth and called after Bowman. "These plants. They are not engineered?"

Bowman paused and came thrashing back, wiping sweat and vegetal debris off his face, grinning. "Well, engineered, that is a matter of definition, but no, these are not owned by calorie companies. Some of them are even heirloom." He grinned again. "Or close enough."

"How do they survive?"

"Oh, that." He reached down and yanked up a tomato. "Nippon genehack weevils, or curl.111.b, or perhaps cibiscosis bacterium, something like that?" He bit into the tomato and let the juice run down his gray bristled chin. "There isn't another heirloom planting within hundreds of miles. This is an island in an ocean of SoyPRO and HiGro. It makes a formidable barrier." He studied the garden thoughtfully, took another bite of tomato. "Now that you have come, of course, only a few of these plants will survive." He nodded at Lalji and Creo. "You will be carrying some infection or another and many of these rarities can only survive in isolation." He plucked another tomato and handed it to Lalji. "Try it."

Lalji studied its gleaming red skin. He bit into it and tasted sweetness and acid. Grinning, he offered it to Creo, who took a bite and made a face of disgust. "I'll stick with SoyPRO." He handed it back to Lalji, who finished it greedily.

Bowman smiled at Lalji's hunger. "You're old enough to remember, I think, what food used to be. You can take as much of this as you like, before we go. It will all die anyway." He turned and thrashed again through the garden overgrowth, shoving aside dry corn stalks with crackling authoritative sweeps of his arms.

Beyond the garden a house lay collapsed, leaning as though it had been toppled by a megadont, its walls rammed and buckled. The collapsed roof had an ungainly slant, and at one end, a pool of water lay cool and deep, rippled with water skippers. Scavenged gutter had been laid to sluice rainwater from the roof into the pond.

Bowman slipped around the pool's edge and disappeared down a series of crumbled cellar steps. By the time Lalji and Creo followed him down, he had wound a handlight and its dim bulb was spattering the cellar with illumination as its spring ran its course. He cranked the light again while he searched around, then struck a match and lit a lantern. The wick burned high on vegetable oil.

Lalji studied the cellar. It was sparse and damp. A pair of pallets lay on the broken concrete floor. A computer was tucked against a corner, its mahogany case and tiny screen gleaming, its treadle worn with use. An unruly kitchen was shoved against a wall with jars of grains arrayed on pantry shelves and bags of produce hanging from the ceiling to defend against rodents.

The man pointed to a sack on the ground. "There, my luggage."

"What about the computer?" Lalji asked.

Bowman frowned at the machine. "No. I don't need it."

"But it's valuable."

"What I need, I carry in my head. Everything in that machine came from me. My fat burned into knowledge. My calories pedaled into data analysis." He scowled. "Sometimes, I look at that computer and all I see is myself whittled away. I was a fat man once." He shook his head emphatically. "I won't miss it."

Lalji began to protest but Creo startled and whipped out his spring gun. "Someone else is here."

Lalji saw her even as Creo spoke: a girl squatting in the corner, hidden by shadow, a skinny, staring, freckled creature with stringy brown hair. Creo lowered his spring gun with a sigh.

Bowman beckoned. "Come out, Tazi. These are the men I told you about."

Lalji wondered how long she had been sitting in the cellar darkness, waiting. She had the look of a creature who had almost molded with the basement: her hair lank, her dark eyes nearly swallowed by their pupils. He turned on Bowman. "I thought there was only you."

Bowman's pleased smile faded. "Will you go back because of it?"

Lalji eyed the girl. Was she a lover? His child? A feral adoptee? He couldn't guess. The girl slipped her hand into the old man's. Bowman patted it reassuringly. Lalji shook his head. "She is too many. You, I have agreed to take. I prepared a way to carry you, to hide you from boarders and inspections. Her," he waved at the girl, "I did not agree to. It is risky to take someone like yourself, and now you wish to compound the danger with this girl? No." He shook his head emphatically. "It cannot be done."

"What difference does it make?" Bowman asked. "It costs you nothing. The current will carry us all. I have food enough for both of us." He went over to the pantry and started to pull down glass jars of beans, lentils, corn, and rice. "Look, here."

Lalji said, "We have more than enough food."

Bowman made a face. "SoyPRO, I suppose?"

"Nothing wrong with SoyPRO," Creo said.

The old man grinned and held up a jar of green beans floating in brine. "No. Of course not. But a man likes variety." He began filling his bag with more jars, letting them clink carefully. He caught Creo's snort of disgust and smiled, ingratiating suddenly. "For lean times, if nothing else." He dumped more jars of grains into the sack.

Lalji chopped the air with his hand. "Your food is not the issue. Your girl is the issue, and she is a risk!"

Bowman shook his head. "No risk. No one is looking for her. She can travel in the open, even."

"No. You must leave her. I will not take her."

The old man looked down at the girl, uncertain. She gazed back, extricated her hand from his. "I'm not afraid. I can live here still. Like before."

Bowman frowned, thinking. Finally, he shook his head. "No." He faced Lalji. "If she cannot go, then I cannot. She fed me when I worked. I deprived her of calories for my research when they should have gone to her. I owe her too much. I will not leave her to the wolves of this place." He placed his hands on her shoulders and placed her ahead of him, between himself and Lalji.

Creo made a face of disgust. "What difference does it make? Just bring her. We've got plenty of space."

Lalji shook his head. He and Bowman stared at one another across the cellar. Creo said, "What if he gives us the computer? We could call it payment."

Lalji shook his head stubbornly. "No. I do not care about the money. It is too dangerous to bring her."

Bowman laughed. "Then why come all this way if you are afraid? Half the calorie companies want to kill me and you talk about risk?"

Creo frowned. "What's he talking about?"

Bowman's eyebrows went up in surprise. "You haven't told your partner about me?"

Creo looked from Lalji to Bowman and back. "Lalji?"

Lalji took a deep breath, his eyes still locked on Bowman. "They say he can break the calorie monopolies. That he can pirate SoyPRO."

Creo boggled for a moment. "That's impossible!"

Bowman shrugged. "For you, perhaps. But for a knowledgeable man? Willing to dedicate his life to DNA helixes? More than possible. If one is willing to burn the calories for such a project, to waste energy on statistics and genome analysis, to pedal a computer through millions upon millions of cycles. More than possible." He wrapped his arms around his skinny girl and held her to him. He smiled at Lalji. "So. Do we have any agreement?"

Creo shook his head, puzzling. "I thought you had a money plan, Lalji, but this...." He shook his head again. "I don't get it. How the hell do we make money off this?"

Lalji gave Creo a dirty look. Bowman smiled, patiently waiting. Lalji stifled an urge to seize the lantern and throw it in his face, such a confident man, so sure of himself, so loyal....

He turned abruptly and headed for the stairs. "Bring the computer, Creo. If his girl makes any trouble, we dump them both in the river, and still keep his knowledge."

Lalji remembered his father pushing back his thali, pretending he was full when dal had barely stained the steel plate. He remembered his mother pressing an extra bite onto his own. He remembered Gita, watching, silent, and then all of them unfolding their legs and climbing off the family bed, bustling around the hovel, ostentatiously ignoring him as he consumed the extra portion. He remembered roti in his mouth, dry like ashes, and forcing himself to swallow anyway.

He remembered planting. Squatting with his father in desert heat, yellow dust all around them, burying seeds they had stored away, saved when they might have been eaten, kept when they might have made Gita fat and marriageable, his father smiling, saying, "These seeds will make hundreds of new seeds and then we will all eat well."

"How many seeds will they make?" Lalji had asked.

And his father had laughed and spread his arms fully wide, and seemed so large and great with his big white teeth and red and gold earrings and crinkling eyes as he cried, "Hundreds! Thousands if you pray!" And Lalji had prayed, to Ganesha and Lakshmi and Krishna and Rani Sati and Ram and Vishnu, to every god he could think of, joining the many villagers who did the same as he poured water from the well over tiny seeds and sat guard in the darkness against the possibility that the precious grains might be uprooted in the night and transported to some other farmer's field.

He sat every night while cold stars turned overhead, watching the seed rows, waiting, watering, praying, waiting through the days until his father finally shook his head and said it was no use. And yet still he had hoped, until at last he went out into the field and dug up the seeds one by one, and found them already decomposed, tiny corpses in his hand, rotted. As dead in his palm as the day he and his father had planted them.

He had crouched in the darkness and eaten the cold dead seeds, knowing he should share, and yet unable to master his hunger and carry them home. He wolfed them down alone, half-decayed and caked with dirt: his first true taste of PurCal.

In the light of early morning, Lalji bathed in the most sacred river of his adopted land. He immersed himself in the Mississippi's silty flow, cleansing the weight of sleep, making himself clean before his gods. He pulled himself back aboard, slick with water, his underwear dripping off his sagging bottom, his brown skin glistening, and towed himself dry on the deck as he looked across the water to where the rising sun cast gold flecks on the river's rippled surface.

He finished drying himself and dressed in new clean clothes before going to his shrine. He lit incense in front of the gods, placed U-TeX and SoyPRO before the tiny carved idols of Krishna and his lute, benevolent Lakshmi, and elephant-headed Ganesha. He knelt in front of the idols, prostrated himself, and prayed.

They had floated south on the river's current, winding easily through bright fall days and watching as leaves changed and cool weather came on. Tranquil skies had arched overhead and mirrored on the river, turning the mud of the Mississippi's flow into shining blue, and they had followed that blue road south, riding the great arterial flow of the river as creeks and tributaries and the linked chains of barges all crowded in with them and gravity did the work of carrying them south.

He was grateful for their smooth movement downriver. The first of the locks were behind them, and having watched the sniffer dogs ignore Bowman's hiding place under the decking, Lalji was beginning to hope that the trip would be as easy as Shriram had claimed. Nonetheless, he prayed longer and harder each day as IP patrols shot past in their fast boats, and he placed extra SoyPRO before Ganesha's idol, desperately hoping that the Remover of Obstacles would continue to do so.

By the time he finished his morning devotions, the rest of the boat was stirring. Creo came below and wandered into the cramped galley. Bowman followed, complaining of SoyPRO, offering heirloom ingredients that Creo shook off with suspicion. On deck, Tazi sat at the edge of the boat with a fishing line

tossed into the water, hoping to snare one of the massive lethargic LiveSalmon that occasionally bumped against the boat's keel in the warm murk of the river.

Lalji unmoored and took his place at the tiller. He unlocked the kink-springs and the boat whirred into the deeper current, stored joules dripping from its precision springs in a steady flow as molecules unlocked, one after another, reliable from the first kink to the last. He positioned the needleboat amongst the wallowing grain barges and locked the springs again, allowing the boat to drift.

Bowman and Creo came back up on deck as Creo was asking, "...you know how to grow SoyPRO?"

Bowman laughed and sat down beside Tazi. "What good would that do? The IP men would find the fields, ask for the licenses, and if none were provided, the fields would burn and burn and burn."

"So what good are you?"

Bowman smiled and posed a question instead. "SoyPRO — what is its most precious quality?"

"It's high calorie."

Bowman's braying laughter carried across the water. He tousled Tazi's hair and the pair of them exchanged amused glances. "You've seen too many billboards from AgriGen. 'Energy for the world' indeed, indeed. Oh, AgriGen and their ilk must love you very much. So malleable, so...tractable." He laughed again and shook his head. "No. Anyone can make high calorie plants. What else?"

Nettled, Creo said, "It resists the weevil."

Bowman's expression became sly. "Closer, yes. Difficult to make a plant that fights off the weevil, the leafcurl rust, the soil bacterium which chew through their roots... so many blights plague us now, so many beasts assail our plantings, but come now, what, best of all, do we like about SoyPRO? We of AgriGen who 'provide energy to the world'?" He waved at a chain of grain barges slathered with logos for SuperFlavor. "What makes SuperFlavor so perfect from a CEO's perspective?" He turned toward Lalji. "You know, Indian, don't you? Isn't it why you've come all this distance?"

Lalji stared back at him. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. "It's sterile."

Bowman's eyes held Lalji's for a moment. His smile slipped. He ducked his head. "Yes. Indeed, indeed. A genetic dead-end. A one-way street. We now pay for a privilege that nature once provided willingly, for just a little labor." He looked up at Lalji. "I'm sorry. I should have thought. You would have felt our accountants' optimum demand estimates more than most."

Lalji shook his head. "You cannot apologize." He nodded at Creo. "Tell him the rest. Tell him what you can do. What I was told you can do."

"Some things are perhaps better left unsaid."

Lalji was undaunted. "Tell him. Tell me. Again."

Bowman shrugged. "If you trust him, then I must trust him as well, yes?" He turned to Creo. "Do you know cheshires?"

Creo made a noise of disgust. "They're pests."

"Ah, yes. A bluebill for every dead one. I forgot. But what makes our cheshires such pests?"

"They molt. They kill birds."

"And?" Bowman prodded.

Creo shrugged.

Bowman shook his head. "And to think it was for people like you that I wasted my life on research and my calories on computer cycles.

"You call cheshires a plague, and truly, they are. A few wealthy patrons, obsessed with Lewis Carroll, and suddenly they are everywhere, breeding with heirloom cats, killing birds, wailing in the night, but most importantly, their offspring, an astonishing ninety-two percent of the time, are cheshires themselves, pure, absolute. We create a new species in a heartbeat of evolutionary time, and our songbird populations disappear almost as quickly. A more perfect predator, but most importantly, one that spreads.

"With SoyPRO, or U-TEX, the calorie companies may patent the plants and use intellectual property police and sensitized dogs to sniff out their property, but even IP men can only inspect so many acres. Most importantly, the seeds are sterile, a locked box. Some may steal a little here and there, as you and Lalji do, but in the end, you are nothing but a small expense on a balance sheet fat with profit because no one except the calorie companies can grow the plants.

"But what would happen if we passed SoyPRO a different trait, stealthily, like a man climbing atop his best friend's wife?" He waved his arm to indicate the green fields that lapped at the edges of the river. "What if someone were to drop bastardizing pollens amongst these crown jewels that surround us? Before the calorie companies harvested and shipped the resulting seeds across the world in their mighty clipper fleets, before the licensed dealers delivered the patented crop seed to their customers. What sorts of seeds might they be delivering then?"

Bowman began ticking traits off with his fingers. "Resistant to weevil and leafcurl, yes. High calorie, yes, of course. Genetically distinct and therefore unpatentable?" He smiled briefly. "Perhaps. But best of all, fecund. Unbelievably fecund. Ripe, fat with breeding potential." He leaned forward. "Imagine it. Seeds distributed across the world by the very cuckolds who have always clutched them so tight, all of those seeds lusting to breed, lusting to produce their own fine offspring full of the same pollens that polluted the crown jewels in the first place." He clapped his hands. "Oh, what an infection that would be! And how it would spread!"

Creo stared, his expression contorting between horror and fascination. "You can do this?"

Bowman laughed and clapped his hands again. "I'm going to be the next Johnny Appleseed."

LALJI WOKE suddenly. Around him, the darkness of the river was nearly complete. A few windup LED beacons glowed on grain barges, powered by the flow of the current's drag against their ungainly bodies. Water lapped against the sides of the needleboat and the bank where they had tied up. Beside him on the deck the others lay bundled in blankets.

Why had he wakened? In the distance, a pair of village roosters were challenging one another across the darkness. A dog was barking, incensed by whatever hidden smells or sounds caused dogs to startle and defend their territory. Lalji closed his eyes and listened to the gentle undulation of the river, the sounds of the distant village. If he pressed his imagination, he could almost be lying in the early dawn of another village, far away, long ago dissolved.

Why was he awake? He opened his eyes again and sat up. He strained his eyes against the darkness. A shadow appeared on the river blackness, a subtle blot of movement.

Lalji shook Bowman awake, his hand over Bowman's mouth. "Hide!" he whispered.

Lights swept over them. Bowman's eyes widened. He fought off his blankets and scrambled for the hold. Lalji gathered Bowman's blankets with his own, trying to obscure the number of sleepers as more lights flashed brightly, sliding across the deck, pasting them like insects on a collection board.

Abandoning its pretense of stealth, the IP boat opened its springs and rushed in. It slammed against the needleboat, pinning it to the shoreline as men swarmed aboard. Three of them, and two dogs.

"Everyone stay calm! Keep your hands in sight!"

Handlight beams swept across the deck, dazzlingly bright. Creo and Tazi clawed out of their blankets and stood, surprised. The sniffer dogs growled and lunged against their leashes. Creo backed away from them, his hands held before him, defensive.

One of the IP men swept his handlight across them. "Who owns this boat?"

Lalji took a breath. "It's mine. This is my boat." The beam swung back and speared his eyes. He squinted into the light. "Have we done something wrong?"

The leader didn't answer. The other IP men fanned out, swinging their lights across the boat, marking the people on deck. Lalji realized that except for the leader, they were just boys, barely old enough to have mustaches and beards at all. Just peachfuzzed boys carrying spring guns and covered in armor that helped them swagger.

Two of them headed for the stairs with the dogs as a fourth jumped aboard from the secured IP boat. Handlight beams disappeared into the bowels of the needleboat, casting looming shadows from inside the stairway. Creo had somehow managed to end up backed against the needleboat's cache of spring guns. His hand rested casually beside the catches. Lalji stepped toward the captain, hoping to head off Creo's impulsiveness.

The captain swung his light on him. "What are you doing here?"

Lalji stopped and spread his hands helplessly. "Nothing."

"No?"

Lalji wondered if Bowman had managed to secure himself. "What I mean is that we only moored here to sleep."

"Why didn't you tie up at Willow Bend?"

"I'm not familiar with this part of the river. It was getting dark. I didn't want to be crushed by the barges." He wrung his hands. "I deal with antiques. We were looking in the old suburbs to the north. It's not illeg — " A shout from below interrupted him. Lalji closed his eyes regretfully. The Mississippi would be his burial river. He would never find his way to the Ganges.

The IP men came up dragging Bowman. "Look what we found! Trying to hide under the decking!"

Bowman tried to shake them off. "I don't know what you're talking about — "

"Shut up!" One of the boys shoved a club into Bowman's stomach. The old man doubled over. Tazi lunged toward them, but the captain corralled her and held her tightly as he flashed his light over Bowman's features. He gasped.

"Cuff him. We want him. Cover them!" Spring guns came up all around. The captain scowled at Lalji. "An antiques dealer. I almost believed you." To his men he said, "He's a generipper. From a long time ago. See if there's anything else on board. Any disks, any computers, any papers."

One of them said, "There's a treadle computer below."

"Get it."

In moments the computer was on deck. The captain surveyed his captives. "Cuff them all." One of the IP boys made Lalji kneel and started patting him down while a sniffer dog growled over them.

Bowman was saying, "I'm really very sorry. Perhaps you've made a mistake. Perhaps...."

Suddenly the captain shouted. The IP men's handlights swung toward the sound. Tazi was latched onto the captain's hand, biting him. He was shaking at her as though she were a dog, struggling with his other hand to get his spring gun free. For a brief moment everyone watched the scuffle between the girl and the much larger man. Someone — Lalji thought it was an IP man — laughed. Then Tazi was flung free and the captain had his gun out and there was a sharp hiss of disks. Handlights thudded on the deck and rolled, casting dizzy beams of light.

More disks hissed through the darkness. A rolling light beam showed the captain falling, crashing against Bowman's computer, silver disks embedded in his armor. He and the computer slid backwards. Darkness again. A splash. The dogs howled, either released and attacking or else wounded. Lalji dove and lay prone on the decking as metal whirred past his head.

"Lalji!" It was Creo's voice. A gun skittered across the planking. Lalji scrambled toward the sound.

One of the handlight beams had stabilized. The captain was sitting up, black blood lines trailing from his jaw as he leveled his pistol at Tazi. Bowman lunged into the light, shielding the girl with his body. He curled as disks hit him.

Lalji's fingers bumped the spring gun. He clutched after it blindly. His hand closed on it. He jacked the pump, aimed toward bootfalls, and let the spring gun whir. The shadow of one of the IP men, the boys, was above him, falling, bleeding, already dead as he hit the decking.

Everything went silent.

Lalji waited. Nothing moved. He waited still, forcing himself to breathe quietly, straining his eyes against the shadows where the handlights didn't illuminate. Was he the only one alive?

One by one, the three remaining handlights ran out of juice. Darkness closed in. The IP boat bumped gently against the needleboat. A breeze rustled the willow banks, carrying the muddy reek of fish and grasses. Crickets chirped.

Lalji stood. Nothing. No movement. Slowly he limped across the deck. He'd twisted his leg somehow. He felt for one of the handlights, found it by its faint metallic gleam, and wound it. He played its flickering beam across the deck.

Creo. The big blond boy was dead, a disk caught in his throat. Blood pooled from where it had hit his artery. Not far away, Bowman was ribboned with disks. His blood ran everywhere. The computer was missing. Gone overboard. Lalji squatted beside the bodies, sighing. He pulled Creo's bloodied braids off his face. He had been fast. As fast as he had believed he was. Three armored IP men and the dogs as well. He sighed again.

Something whimpered. Lalji flicked his light toward the source, afraid of what he would find, but it was only the girl, seemingly unhurt, crawling to Bowman's body. She looked up into the glare of Lalji's light, then ignored him and crouched over Bowman. She sobbed, then stifled herself. Lalji locked the handlight's spring and let darkness fall over them.



He listened to the night sounds again, praying to Ganesha that there were no others out on the river. His eyes adjusted. The shadow of the grieving girl kneeling amongst lumped bodies resolved from the blackness. He shook his head. So many dead for such an idea. That such a man as Bowman might be of use. And now such a waste. He listened for signs others had been alerted but heard nothing. A single patrol, it seemed, uncoordinated with any others. Bad luck. That was all. One piece of bad luck breaking a string of good. Gods were fickle.

He limped to the needleboat's moorings and began untying. Unbidden, Tazi joined him, her small hands fumbling with the knots. He went to the tiller and unlocked the kink-springs. The boat jerked as the screws bit and they swept into the river darkness. He let the springs fly for an hour, wasting joules but anxious to make distance from the killing place, then searched the banks for an inlet and anchored. The darkness was nearly total.

After securing the boat, he searched for weights and tied them around the ankles of the IP men. He did the same with the dogs, then began shoving the bodies off the deck. The water swallowed them easily. It felt unclean to dump them so unceremoniously, but he had no intention of taking time to bury them. With luck, the men would bump along under water, picked at by fish until they disintegrated.

When the IP men were gone, he paused over Creo. So wonderfully quick. He pushed Creo overboard, wishing he could build a pyre for him.

Lalji began mopping the decks, sluicing away the remaining blood. The moon rose, bathing them in pale light. The girl sat beside the body of her chaperone. Eventually, Lalji could avoid her with his mopping no more. He knelt beside her. "You understand he must go into the river?"

The girl didn't respond. Lalji took it as assent. "If there is anything you wish to have of his, you should take it now." The girl shook her head. Lalji hesitantly let his hand rest on her shoulder. "It is no shame to be given to a river. An honor, even, to go to a river such as this."

He waited. Finally, she nodded. He stood and dragged the body to the edge of the boat. He tied it with weights and levered the legs over the lip. The old man slid out of his hands. The girl was silent, staring at where Bowman had disappeared into the water.

Lalji finished his mopping. In the morning he would have to mop again, and sand the stains, but for the time it would do. He began pulling in the anchors. A moment later, the girl was with him again, helping. Lalji settled himself at the tiller. Such a waste, he thought. Such a great waste.

Slowly, the current drew their needleboat into the deeper flows of the river. The girl came and knelt beside him. "Will they chase us?"

Lalji shrugged. "With luck? No. They will look for something larger than us to make so many of their men disappear. With just the two of us now, we will look like very small inconsequential fish to them. With luck."

She nodded, seeming to digest this information. "He saved me, you know. I should be dead now."

"I saw."

"Will you plant his seeds?"

"Without him to make them, there will be no one to plant them."

Tazi frowned. "But we've got so many." She stood and slipped down into the hold. When she returned, she lugged the sack of Bowman's food stores. She began pulling jars from the sack: rice and corn, soybeans and kernels of wheat.

"That's just food," Lalji protested.

Tazi shook her head stubbornly. "They're his Johnny Appleseeds. I wasn't supposed to tell you. He didn't trust you to take us all the way. To take me. But you could plant them, too, right?"

Lalji frowned and picked up a jar of corn. The kernels nestled tightly together, hundreds of them, each one unpatented, each one a genetic infection. He closed his eyes and in his mind he saw a field: row upon row of green rustling plants, and his father, laughing, with his arms spread wide as he shouted, "Hundreds! Thousands if you pray!"

Lalji hugged the jar to his chest, and slowly, he began to smile.

The needleboat continued downstream, a bit of flotsam in the Mississippi's current. Around it, the crowding shadow hulks of the grain barges loomed, all of them flowing south through the fertile heartland toward the gateway of New Orleans; all of them flowing steadily toward the vast wide world.

## The Fluted Girl

The fluted girl huddled in the darkness clutching Stephen's final gift in her small pale hands. Madame Belari would be looking for her. The servants would be sniffing through the castle like feral dogs, looking under beds, in closets, behind the wine racks, all their senses hungry for a whiff of her. Belari never knew the fluted girl's hiding places. It was the servants who always found her. Belari simply wandered the halls and let the servants search her out. The servants thought they knew all her hiding places.

The fluted girl shifted her body. Her awkward position already strained her fragile skeleton. She stretched as much as the cramped space allowed, then folded herself back into compactness, imagining herself as a rabbit, like the ones Belari kept in cages in the kitchen: small and soft with wet warm eyes, they could sit and wait for hours. The fluted girl summoned patience and ignored the sore protest of her folded body.

Soon she had to show herself, or Madame Belari would get impatient and send for Burson, her head of security. Then Burson would bring his jackals and they would hunt again, crisscrossing every room, spraying pheromone additives across the floors and following her neon tracks to her hidey-hole. She had to leave before Burson came. Madame Belari punished her if the staff wasted time scrubbing out pheromones.

The fluted girl shifted her position again. Her legs were beginning to ache. She wondered if they could snap from the strain. Sometimes she was surprised at what broke her. A gentle bump against a table and she was shattered again, with Belari angry at the careless treatment of her investment.

The fluted girl sighed. In truth, it was already time to leave her hidey-hole, but still she craved the silence, the moment alone. Her sister Nia never understood. Stephen though...he had understood. When the fluted girl told him of her hidey-hole, she thought he forgave because he was kind. Now she knew better. Stephen had bigger secrets than the silly fluted girl. He had secrets bigger than anyone had guessed. The fluted girl turned his tiny vial in her hands, feeling its smooth glass shape, knowing the amber drops it held within. Already, she missed him.

Beyond her hidey-hole, footsteps echoed. Metal scraped heavily across stone. The fluted girl peered out through a crack in her makeshift fortress. Below her, the castle's pantry lay jumbled with dry goods. Mirriam was looking for her again, poking behind the refrigerated crates of champagne for Belari's party tonight. They hissed and leaked mist as Mirriam struggled to shove them aside and look deeper into the dark recesses behind. The fluted girl had known Mirriam when they were both children in the town. Now, they were as different as life and death.

Mirriam had grown, her breasts burgeoning, her hips widening, her rosy face smiling and laughing at her fortune. When they both came to Belari, the fluted girl and Mirriam had been the same height. Now, Mirriam was a grown woman, a full two feet taller than the fluted girl, and filled out to please a man. And she was loyal. She was a good servant for Belari. Smiling, happy to serve. They'd all been that way when they came up from the town to the castle: Mirriam, the fluted girl, and her sister Nia. Then Belari decided to make them into fluted girls. Mirriam got to grow, but the fluted girls were going to be stars.

Mirriam spied a stack of cheeses and hams piled carelessly in one corner. She stalked it while the fluted girl watched and smiled at the plump girl's suspicions. Mirriam hefted a great wheel of Danish cheese and peered into the gap behind. "Lidia? Are you there?"

The fluted girl shook her head. No, she thought. But you guessed well. A year ago, I would have been. I could have moved the cheeses, with effort. The champagne would have been too much, though. I would never have been behind the champagne.

Mirriam stood up. Sweat sheened her face from the effort of moving the bulky goods that fed Belari's household. Her face looked like a bright shiny apple. She wiped her brow with a sleeve. "Lidia, Madame Belari is getting angry. You're being a selfish girl. Nia is already waiting for you in the practice room."

Lidia nodded silently. Yes, Nia would be in the practice room. She was the good sister. Lidia was the bad one. The one they had to search for. Lidia was the reason both fluted girls were punished. Belari had given up on discipline for Lidia directly. She contented herself with punishing both sisters and letting guilt enforce compliance. Sometimes it worked. But not now. Not with Stephen gone. Lidia needed quiet now. A place where no one watched her. A place alone. Her secret place which she showed to Stephen and which he had examined with such surprised sad eyes. Stephen's eyes had been brown. When he looked at her, she thought that his eyes were almost as soft as Belari's rabbits. They were safe eyes. You could fall into those safe brown eyes and never worry about breaking a bone.

Mirriam sat heavily on a sack of potatoes and scowled around her, acting for her potential audience. "You're being a selfish girl. A vicious selfish girl to make us all search this way."

The fluted girl nodded. Yes, I am a selfish girl, she thought. I am a selfish girl, and you are a woman, and yet we are the same age, and I am smarter than you. You are clever but you don't know that hidey-holes are best when they are in places no one looks. You look for me under and behind and between, but you don't look up. I am above you, and I am watching you, just as Stephen watched us all.

Mirriam grimaced and got up. "No matter. Burson will find you." She brushed the dust from her skirts. "You hear me? Burson will find you." She left the pantry.

Lidia waited for Mirriam to go away. It galled her that Mirriam was right. Burson would find her. He found her every time, if she waited too long. Silent time could only be stolen for so many minutes. It lasted as long as it took Belari to lose patience and call the jackals. Then another hidey-hole was lost.

Lidia turned Stephen's tiny blown-glass bottle in her delicate fingers a final time. A parting gift, she understood, now that he was gone, now that he would no longer comfort her when Belari's depredations became too much. She forced back tears. No more time to cry. Burson would be looking for her.

She pressed the vial into a secure crack, tight against the stone and roughhewn wood of the shelving where she hid, then worked a vacuum jar of red lentils back until she had an opening. She squeezed out from behind the legume wall that lined the pantry's top shelves.

It had taken weeks for her to clear out the back jars and make a place for herself, but the jars made a good hidey-hole. A place others neglected to search. She had a fortress of jars, full of flat innocent beans, and behind that barrier, if she was patient and bore the strain, she could crouch for hours. She climbed down.

Carefully, carefully, she thought. We don't want to break a bone. We have to be careful of the bones. She hung from the shelves as she gently worked the fat jar of red lentils back into place then slipped down the last shelves to the pantry floor.

Barefoot on cold stone flagging, Lidia studied her hidey-hole. Yes, it looked good still. Stephen's final gift was safe up there. No one looked able to fit in that few feet of space, not even a delicate fluted girl. No one would suspect she folded herself so perfectly into such a place. She was slight as a mouse, and sometimes fit into surprising places. For that, she could thank Belari. She turned and hurried from the pantry, determined to let the servants catch her far away from her last surviving hidey-hole.

\* \* \*

By the time Lidia reached the dining hall, she believed she might gain the practice rooms without discovery. There might be no punishments. Belari was kind to those she loved, but uncompromising when they disappointed her. Though Lidia was too delicate to strike, there were other punishments. Lidia thought of Stephen. A small part of her was happy that he was beyond Belari's tortures.

Lidia slipped along the dining hall's edge, shielded by ferns and blooming orchids. Between the lush leaves and flowers, she caught glimpses of the dining table's long ebony expanse, polished mirror-bright each day by the servants and perpetually set with gleaming silver. She studied the room for observers. It was empty.

The rich warm smell of greenery reminded her of summer, despite the winter season that slashed the mountains around the castle. When she and Nia had been younger, before their surgeries, they had run in the mountains, amongst the pines. Lidia slipped through the orchids: one from Singapore; another from Chennai; another, striped like a tiger, engineered by Belari. She touched the delicate tiger blossom, admiring its lurid color.

We are beautiful prisoners, she thought. Just like you.

The ferns shuddered. A man exploded from the greenery, springing on her like a wolf. His hands wrenched her shoulders. His fingers plunged into her pale flesh and Lidia gasped as they stabbed her nerves into paralysis. She collapsed to the slate flagstones, a butterfly folding as Burson pressed her down.

She whimpered against the stone, her heart hammering inside her chest at the shock of Burson's ambush. She moaned, trembling under his weight, her face hard against the castle's smooth gray slate. On the stone beside her, a pink and white orchid lay beheaded by Burson's attack.

Slowly, when he was sure of her compliance, Burson allowed her to move. His great weight lessened, lifting away from her like a tank rolling off a crushed hovel. Lidia forced herself to sit up. Finally she stood, an unsteady pale fairy dwarfed by the looming monster that was Belari's head of security.

Burson's mountainous body was a cragged landscape of muscle and scars, all juts of strength and angry puckered furrows of combat. Mirriam gossiped that he had previously been a gladiator, but she was romantic and Lidia suspected his scars came from training handlers, much as her own punishments came from Belari.

Burson held her wrist, penning it in a rock-like grasp. For all its unyielding strength, his grip was gentle. After an initial disastrous breakage, he had learned what strain her skeleton could bear before it shattered.

Lidia struggled, testing his hold on her wrist, then accepted her capture. Burson knelt, bringing his height to match hers. Red-rimmed eyes studied her. Augmented irises bloodshot with enhancements scanned her skin's infrared pulse.

Burson's slashed face slowly lost the green blush of camouflage, abandoning stone and foliage colors now that he stood in open air. Where his hand touched her though, his skin paled, as though powdered by flour, matching the white of her own flesh.

"Where have you been hiding?" he rumbled.

"Nowhere."

Burson's red eyes narrowed, his brows furrowing over deep pits of interrogation. He sniffed at her clothing, hunting for clues. He brought his nose close to her face, her hair, snuffled at her hands. "The kitchens," he murmured.

Lidia flinched. His red eyes studied her closely, hunting for more details, watching the unintentional reactions of her skin, the blush of discovery she could not hide from his prying eyes. Burson smiled. He hunted with the wild fierce joy of his bloodhound genetics. It was difficult to tell where the jackal, dog, and human blended in the man. His joys were hunting, capture, and slaughter.

Burson straightened, smiling. He took a steel bracelet from a pouch. "I have something for you, Lidia." He slapped the jewelry onto Lidia's wrist. It writhed around her thin arm, snakelike, chiming as it locked. "No more hiding for you."

A current charged up Lidia's arm and she cried out, shivering as electricity rooted through her body. Burson supported her as the current cut off. He said, "I'm tired of searching for Belari's property."

He smiled, tight-lipped, and pushed her toward the practice rooms. Lidia allowed herself to be herded.

\* \* \*

Belari was in the performance hall when Burson brought Lidia before her. Servants bustled around her, arranging tables, setting up the round stage, installing the lighting. The walls were hung in pale muslin shot through with electric charges, a billowing sheath of charged air that crackled and sparked whenever a servant walked near.

Belari seemed unaware of the fanciful world building around her as she tossed orders at her events coordinator. Her black body armor was open at the collar, in deference to the warmth of human activity. She spared Burson and Lidia a quick glance, then turned her attention back to her servant, still furiously scribbling on a digital pad. "I want everything to be perfect tonight, Tania. Nothing out of place. Nothing amiss. Perfect."

"Yes, Madame."

Belari smiled. Her face was mathematically sculpted into beauty, structured by focus-groups and cosmetic traditions that stretched back generations. Cocktails of disease prophylaxis, cell-scouring cancer inhibitors, and Revitia kept Belari's physical appearance at twenty-eight, much as Lidia's own Revitia treatments kept her frozen in the first throes of adolescence. "And I want Vernon taken care of."

"Will he want a companion?"

Belari shook her head. "No. He'll confine himself to harassing me, I'm sure." She shivered. "Disgusting man."

Tania giggled. Belari's chill gaze quieted her. Belari surveyed the performance hall. "I want everything in here. The food, the champagne, everything. I want them packed together so that they feel each other when the girls perform. I want it very tight. Very intimate."

Tania nodded and scribbled more notes on her pad. She tapped the screen authoritatively, sending orders to the staff. Already, servants would be receiving messages in their earbuds, reacting to their mistress's demands.

Belari said, "I want Tingle available. With the champagne. It will whet their appetites."

"You'll have an orgy if you do."

Belari laughed. "That's fine. I want them to remember tonight. I want them to remember our fluted girls. Vernon particularly." Her laughter quieted, replaced by a hard-edged smile, brittle with emotion. "He'll be angry when he finds out about them. But he'll want them, anyway. And he'll bid like the rest."

Lidia watched Belari's face. She wondered if the woman knew how clearly she broadcast her feelings about the Pendant Entertainment executive. Lidia had seen him once, from behind a curtain. She and Stephen had watched Vernon Weir touch Belari, and watched Belari first shy from his touch and then give in, summoning the reserves of her acting skill to play the part of a seduced woman.

Vernon Weir had made Belari famous. He'd paid the expense of her body sculpting and made her a star, much as Belari now invested in Lidia and her sister. But Master Weir extracted a price for his aid, Faustian devil that he was. Stephen and Lidia had watched as Weir took his pleasure from Belari, and Stephen had whispered to her that when Weir was gone, Belari would summon Stephen and reenact the scene, but with Stephen as the victim, and then he would pretend, as she did, that he was happy to submit.

Lidia's thoughts broke off. Belari had turned to her. The angry welt from Stephen's attack was still visible on her throat, despite the cell-knitters she popped like candy. Lidia thought it must gall her to have a scar out of place. She was careful of her image. Belari seemed to catch the focus of Lidia's gaze. Her lips pursed and she pulled the collar of her body armor close, hiding the damage. Her green eyes narrowed. "We've been looking for you."

Lidia ducked her head. "I'm sorry, Mistress."

Belari ran a finger under the fluted girl's jaw, lifting her downcast face until they were eye to eye. "I should punish you for wasting my time."

"Yes, Mistress. I'm sorry." The fluted girl lowered her eyes. Belari wouldn't hit her. She was too expensive to fix. She wondered if Belari would use electricity, or isolation, or some other humiliation cleverly devised.

Instead, Belari pointed to the steel bracelet. "What's this?"

Burson didn't flinch at her question. He had no fear. He was the only servant who had no fear. Lidia admired him for that, if nothing else. "To track her. And shock her." He smiled, pleased with himself. "It causes no physical destruction."

Belari shook her head. "I need her without jewelry tonight. Take it off."

"She will hide."

"No. She wants to be star. She'll be good now, won't you, Lidia?"

Lidia nodded.

Burson shrugged and removed the bracelet, unperturbed. He leaned his great scarred face close to Lidia's ear. "Don't hide in the kitchens the next time. I will find you." He stood away, smiling his satisfaction. Lidia narrowed her eyes at Burson and told herself she had won a victory that Burson didn't know her hidey-hole yet. But then Burson smiled at her and she wondered if he did know already, if he was playing with her the way a cat played with a maimed mouse.

Belari said, "Thank you, Burson," then paused, eyeing the great creature who looked so man-like yet moved with the feral quickness of the wilds. "Have you tightened our security?"

Burson nodded. "Your fief is safe. We are checking the rest of the staff, for background irregularities."

"Have you found anything?"

Burson shook his head. "Your staff love you."

Belari's voice sharpened. "That's what we thought about Stephen. And now I wear body armor in my own fief. I can't afford the appearance of lost popularity. It affects my share price too much."

"I've been thorough."

"If my stock falls, Vernon will have me wired for TouchSense. I won't have it."

"I understand. There will be no more failures."

Belari frowned at the monster looming over her. "Good. Well, come on then." She motioned for Lidia to join her. "Your sister has been waiting for you." She took the fluted girl by the hand and led her out of the performance hall.

Lidia spared a glance back. Burson was gone. The servants bustled, placing orchid cuttings on tables, but Burson had disappeared, either blended into the walls or sped away on his errands of security.

Belari tugged Lidia's hand. "You led us on a merry search. I thought we would have to spray the pheromones again."

"I'm sorry."

"No harm. This time." Belari smiled down at her. "Are you nervous about tonight?"

Lidia shook her head. "No."

"No?"

Lidia shrugged. "Will Master Weir purchase our stock?"

"If he pays enough."

"Will he?"

Belari smiled. "I think he will, yes. You are unique. Like me. Vernon likes to collect rare beauty."

"What is he like?"

Belari's smile stiffened. She looked up, concentrating on their path through the castle. "When I was a girl, very young, much younger than you, long before I became famous, I used to go to a playground. A man came to watch me on the swings. He wanted to be my friend. I didn't like him, but being near him made me dizzy. Whatever he said made perfect sense. He smelled bad, but I couldn't pull away from him." Belari shook her head. "Someone's mother chased him away." She looked down at Lidia. "He had a chemical cologne, you understand?"

"Contraband?"

"Yes. From Asia. Not legal here. Vernon is like that. Your skin crawls but he draws you to him."

"He touches you."

Belari looked down at Lidia sadly. "He likes my old crone experience in my young girl body. But he hardly discriminates. He touches everyone." She smiled slightly. "But not you, perhaps. You are too valuable to touch."

"Too delicate."

"Don't sound so bitter. You're unique. We're going to make you a star." Belari looked down at her protégé hungrily. "Your stock will rise, and you will be a star."

\* \* \*

Lidia watched from her windows as Belari's guests began to arrive. Aircars snaked in under security escort, sliding low over the pines, green and red running lights blinking in the darkness.

Nia came to stand behind Lidia. "They're here."

"Yes."



Snow clotted thickly on the trees, like heavy cream. The occasional blue sweeps of search beams highlighted the snow and the dark silhouettes of the forest; Burson's ski patrols, hoping to spy out the telltale red exhalations of intruders crouched amongst pine shadows. Their beams swept over the ancient hulk of a ski lift that climbed up from the town. It was rusting, silent except when the wind caught its chairs and sent its cables swaying. The empty seats swung lethargically in the freezing air, another victim of Belari's influence. Belari hated competition. Now, she was the only patron of the town that sparkled in the deep of the valley far below.

"You should get dressed," Nia said.

Lidia turned to study her twin. Black eyes like pits watched her from between elfin lids. Her skin was pale, stripped of pigment, and she was thin, accenting the delicacy of her bone structure. That was one true thing about her, about both of them: their bones were theirs. It was what had attracted Belari to them in the first place, when they were just eleven. Just old enough for Belari to strip them from their parents.

Lidia's gaze returned to the view. Deep in the tight crease of the mountain valley, the town shimmered with amber lights.

"Do you miss it?" she asked.

Nia slipped closer. "Miss what?"

Lidia nodded down at the shimmering jewel. "The town."

Their parents had been glassblowers, practicing the old arts abandoned in the face of efficient manufacturing, breathing delicate works into existence, sand running liquid under their supervision. They had moved to Belari's fief for patronage, like all the town's artisans: the potters, the blacksmiths, the painters. Sometimes Belari's peers noticed an artist and his influence grew. Niels Kinkaid had made his fortune from Belari's favor, turning iron to her will, outfitting her fortress with its great hand-wrought gates and her gardens with crouching sculptural surprises: foxes and children peering from amongst lupine and monkshood in the summers and deep drifted snow in the winters. Now he was almost famous enough to float his own stock.

Lidia's parents had come for patronage, but Belari's evaluating eye had not fallen on their artistry. Instead, she selected the biological accident of their twin daughters: delicate and blond with cornflower eyes that watched the world blinkless as they absorbed the fief's mountain wonders. Their trade flourished now thanks to the donation of their children.

Nia jostled Lidia gently, her ghostly face serious. "Hurry and dress. You mustn't be late."

Lidia turned away from her black-eyed sister. Of their original features, little remained. Belari had watched them grow in the castle for two years and then the pills began. Revitia treatments at thirteen froze their features in the matrix of youth. Then had come the eyes, drawn from twins in some far foreign land. Lidia sometimes wondered if in India, two dusky girl children looked out at the world from cornflower eyes, or if they walked the mud streets of their village guided only by the sound of echoes on cow-dung walls and the scrape of their canes on the dirt before them.

Lidia studied the night beyond the windows with her stolen black eyes. More aircars dropped guests on the landing pads then spread gossamer wings and let the mountain winds bear them away.

More treatments had followed: pigment drugs drained color from their skins, leaving them Kabuki pale, ethereal shadows of their former mountain sun-blushed selves, and then the surgeries began. She remembered waking after each successive surgery, crippled, unable to move for weeks despite the wide-bore needles full of cell-knitters and nutrient fluids the doctor flushed through her slight body. The doctor would hold her hand after the surgeries, wipe the sweat from her pale brow and whisper, "Poor girl. Poor

poor girl.” Then Belari would come and smile at the progress and say that Lidia and Nia would soon be stars.

Gusts of wind tore snow from the pines and sent it swirling in great tornado clouds around the arriving aristocracy. The guests hurried through the driving snow while the blue search beams of Burson’s ski patrols carved across the forests. Lidia sighed and turned from the windows, obedient finally to Nia’s anxious hope that she would dress.

\* \* \*

Stephen and Lidia went on picnics together when Belari was away from the fief. They would leave the great gray construct of Belari’s castle and walk carefully across the mountain meadows, Stephen always helping her, guiding her fragile steps through fields of daisies, columbine, and lupine until they peered down over sheer granite cliffs to the town far below. All about them glacier-sculpted peaks ringed the valley like giants squatting in council, their faces adorned with snow even in summer, like beards of wisdom. At the edge of the precipice, they ate a picnic lunch and Stephen told stories of the world before the fiefs, before Revitia made stars immortal.

He said the country had been democratic. That people once voted for their lieges. That they had been free to travel between any fief they liked. Everyone, he said, not just stars. Lidia knew there were places on the coasts where this occurred. She had heard of them. But it seemed difficult to credit. She was a child of a fief.

“It’s true,” Stephen said. “On the coasts, the people choose their own leader. It’s only here, in the mountains, that it’s different.” He grinned at her. His soft brown eyes crinkled slightly, showing his humor, showing that he already saw the skepticism on her face.

Lidia laughed. “But who would pay for everything? Without Belari who would pay to fix the roads and make the schools?” She picked an aster and twirled it between her fingers, watching the purple spokes blur around the yellow center of the flower.

“The people do.”

Lidia laughed again. “They can’t afford to do that. They hardly have enough to feed themselves. And how would they know what to do? Without Belari, no one would even know what needs fixing, or improving.” She tossed the flower away, aiming to send it over the cliff. Instead, the wind caught it, and it fell near her.

Stephen picked up the flower and flicked it over the edge easily. “It’s true. They don’t have to be rich, they just work together. You think Belari knows everything? She hires advisors. People can do that as well as she.”

Lidia shook her head. “People like Mirriam? Ruling a fief? It sounds like madness. No one would respect her.”

Stephen scowled. “It’s true,” he said stubbornly, and because Lidia liked him and didn’t want him to be unhappy, she agreed that it might be true, but in her heart, she thought that Stephen was a dreamer. It made him sweet, even if he didn’t understand the true ways of the world.

“Do you like Belari?” Stephen asked suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“Do you like her?”

Lidia gave him a puzzled look. Stephen’s brown eyes studied her intensely. She shrugged. “She’s a good liege. Everyone is fed and cared for. It’s not like Master Weir’s fief.”

Stephen made a face of disgust. "Nothing is like Weir's fief. He's barbaric. He put one of his servants on a spit." He paused. "But still, look at what Belari has done to you."

Lidia frowned. "What about me?"

"You're not natural. Look at your eyes, your skin and..." he turned his eyes away, his voice lowering, "your bones. Look what she did to your bones."

"What's wrong with my bones?"

"You can barely walk!" he cried suddenly. "You should be able to walk!"

Lidia glanced around nervously. Stephen was talking critically. Someone might be listening. They seemed alone, but people were always around: security on the hillsides, others out for walks. Burson might be there, blended with the scenery, a stony man hidden amongst the rocks. Stephen had a hard time understanding about Burson. "I can walk," she whispered fiercely.

"How many times have you broken a leg or an arm or a rib?"

"Not in a year." She was proud of it. She had learned to be careful.

Stephen laughed incredulously. "Do you know how many bones I've broken in my life?" He didn't wait for an answer. "None. Not a single bone. Never. Do you even remember what it's like to walk without worrying that you'll trip, or bump into someone? You're like glass."

Lidia shook her head and looked away. "I'm going to be star. Belari will float us on the markets."

"But you can't walk," Stephen said. His eyes had a pitying quality that made Lidia angry.

"I can too. And it's enough."

"But —"

"No!" Lidia shook her head. "Who are you to say what I do? Look what Belari does to you, but still you are loyal! I may have had surgeries, but at least I'm not her toy."

It was the only time Stephen became angry. For a moment the rage in his face made Lidia think he would strike her and break her bones. A part of her hoped he would, that he would release the terrible frustration brewing between them, two servants each calling the other slave.

Instead, Stephen mastered himself and gave up the argument. He apologized and held her hand and they were quiet as the Sun set, but it was already too late and their quiet time was ruined. Lidia's mind had gone back to the days before the surgeries, when she ran without care, and though she would not admit it to Stephen, it felt as though he had ripped away a scab and revealed an aching bitter wound.

\* \* \*

The performance hall trembled with anticipation, a room full of people high on Tingle and champagne. The muslin on the walls flickered like lightning as Belari's guests, swathed in brilliant silks and sparkling gold, swirled through the room in colorful clouds of revelry, clumping together with conversation, then breaking apart with laughter as they made their social rounds.

Lidia slipped carefully amongst the guests, her pale skin and diaphanous shift a spot of simplicity amongst the gaudy colors and wealth. Some of the guests eyed her curiously, the strange girl threading through their pleasure. They quickly dismissed her. She was merely another creature of Belari's, intriguing to look at,

perhaps, but of no account. Their attention always returned to the more important patterns of gossip and association swirling around them. Lidia smiled. Soon, she thought, you will recognize me. She slipped up against a wall, near a table piled high with finger sandwiches, small cuts of meat and plates of plump strawberries.

Lidia scanned the crowds. Her sister was there, across the room, dressed in an identical diaphanous shift. Belari stood surrounded by mediascape names and fief lieges, her green gown matching her eyes, smiling, apparently at ease, even without her newfound habit of body armor.

Vernon Weir slipped up behind Belari, stroking her shoulder. Lidia saw Belari shiver and steel herself against Weir's touch. She wondered how he could not notice. Perhaps he was one of those who took pleasure in the repulsion he inflicted. Belari smiled at him, her emotions under control once again.

Lidia took a small plate of meats from the table. The meat was drizzled with raspberry reduction and was sweet. Belari liked sweet things, like the strawberries she was eating now with the Pendant Entertainment executive at the far end of the table. The sweet addiction was another side effect of the Tingle.

Belari caught sight of Lidia and led Vernon Weir toward her. "Do you like the meat?" she asked, smiling slightly.

Lidia nodded, finishing carefully.

Belari's smile sharpened. "I'm not surprised. You have a taste for good ingredients." Her face was flushed with Tingle. Lidia was glad they were in public. When Belari took too much Tingle she hungered and became erratic. Once, Belari had crushed strawberries against her skin, making her pale flesh blush with the juice, and then, high with the erotic charge of overdose, she had forced Lidia's tongue to Nia's juice-stained flesh and Nia's tongue to hers, while Belari watched, pleased with the decadent performance.

Belari selected a strawberry and offered it to Lidia. "Here. Have one, but don't stain yourself. I want you perfect." Her eyes glistened with excitement. Lidia steeled herself against memory and accepted the berry.

Vernon studied Lidia. "She's yours?"

Belari smiled fondly. "One of my fluted girls."

Vernon knelt and studied Lidia more closely. "What unusual eyes you have."

Lidia ducked her head shyly.

Belari said, "I had them replaced."

"Replaced?" Vernon glanced up at her. "Not altered?"

Belari smiled. "We both know nothing that beautiful comes artificially." She reached down and stroked Lidia's pale blond hair, smiling with satisfaction at her creation. "When I got her, she had the most beautiful blue eyes. The color of the flowers you find here in the mountains in the summer." She shook her head. "I had them replaced. They were beautiful, but not the look I wished for."

Vernon stood up again. "She is striking. But not as beautiful as you."

Belari smiled cynically at Vernon. "Is that why you want me wired for TouchSense?"

Vernon shrugged. "It's a new market, Belari. With your response, you could be a star."

"I'm already a star."

Vernon smiled. "But Revitia is expensive."

"We always come back to that, don't we, Vernon?"

Vernon gave her a hard look. "I don't want to be at odds with you, Belari. You've been wonderful for us. Worth every penny of your reconstruction. I've never seen a finer actress. But this is Pendant, after all. You could have bought your stock a long time ago if you weren't so attached to immortality." He eyed Belari coldly. "If you want to be immortal, you will wire TouchSense. Already we're seeing massive acceptance in the marketplace. It's the future of entertainment."

"I'm an actress, not a marionette. I don't crave people inside my skin."

Vernon shrugged. "We all pay a price for our celebrity. Where the markets move, we must follow. None of us is truly free." He looked at Belari meaningfully. "Certainly not if we want to live forever."

Belari smiled slyly. "Perhaps." She nodded at Lidia. "Run along. It's almost time." She turned back to Vernon. "There's something I'd like you to see."

\* \* \*

Stephen gave her the vial the day before he died. Lidia had asked what it was, a few amber drops in a vial no larger than her pinky. She had smiled at the gift, feeling playful, but Stephen had been serious.

"It's freedom," he said.

She shook her head, uncomprehending.

"If you ever choose, you control your life. You don't have to be Belari's pet."

"I'm not her pet."

He shook his head. "If you ever want escape," he held up the vial, "it's here." He handed it to her and closed her pale hand around the tiny bottle. It was handblown. Briefly, she wondered if it came from her parents' workshop. Stephen said, "We're small people here. Only people like Belari have control. In other places, other parts of the world, it's different. Little people still matter. But here," he smiled sadly, "all we have is our lives."

Comprehension dawned. She tried to pull away but Stephen held her firmly. "I'm not saying you want it now, but someday, perhaps you will. Perhaps you'll decide you don't want to cooperate with Belari anymore. No matter how many gifts she showers on you." He squeezed her hand gently. "It's quick. Almost painless." He looked into her eyes with the soft brown kindness that had always been there.

It was a gift of love, however misguided, and because she knew it would make him happy, she nodded and agreed to keep the vial and put it in her hidey-hole, just in case. She couldn't have known that he had already chosen his own death, that he would hunt Belari with a knife, and almost succeed.

\* \* \*

No one noticed when the fluted girls took their places on the center dais. They were merely oddities, pale angels, entwined. Lidia put her mouth to her sister's throat, feeling her pulse threading rapidly under her white, white skin. It throbbed against her tongue as she sought out the tiny bore hole in her sister's body. She felt the wet touch of Nia's tongue on her own throat, nestling into her flesh like a small mouse seeking comfort.

Lidia stilled herself, waiting for the attention of the people, patient and focused on her performance. She felt Nia breathe, her lungs expanding inside the frail cage of her chest. Lidia took her own breath. They

began to play, first her own notes, running out through unstopped keys in her flesh, and then Nia's notes beginning as well. The open sound, haunting moments of breath, pressed through their bodies.

The melancholy tones trailed off. Lidia moved her head, breathing in, mirroring Nia as she pressed her lips again to her sister's flesh. This time, Lidia kissed her sister's hand. Nia's mouth sought the delicate hollow of her clavicle. Music, mournful, as hollow as they were, breathed out from their bodies. Nia breathed into Lidia and the exhalation of her lungs slipped out through Lidia's bones, tinged with emotion, as though the warm air of her sister came to life within her body.

Around the girls, the guests fell quiet. The silence spread, like ripples from a stone thrown into a placid pool, speeding outward from their epicenter to lap at the farthest edges of the room. All eyes turned to the pale girls on stage. Lidia could feel their eyes, hungry, yearning, almost physical as their gazes pressed against her. She moved her hands beneath her sister's shift, clasping her close. Her sister's hands touched her hips, closing stops in her fluted body. At their new embrace a sigh of yearning came from the crowd, a whisper of their own hungers made musical.

Lidia's hands found the keys to her sister, her tongue touching Nia's throat once more. Her fingers ran along the knuckles of Nia's spine, finding the clarinet within her, stroking keys. She pressed the warm breath of herself into her sister and she felt Nia breathing into her. Nia's sound was dark and melancholy, her own tones, brighter, higher, ran in counterpoint, a slowly developing story of forbidden touch.

They stood embraced. Their body music built, notes intertwining seductively as their hands stroked one another's bodies, bringing forth a complex rising tide of sound. Suddenly, Nia wrenched at Lidia's shift and Lidia's fingers tore away Nia's own. They stood revealed, pale elfin creatures of music. The guests around them gasped as the notes poured out brighter now, unmuffled by clinging clothes. The girls' musical graftings shone: cobalt boreholes in their spines, glinting stops and keys made of brass and ivory that ran along their fluted frames and contained a hundred possible instruments within the structure of their bodies.

Nia's mouth crept up Lidia's arm. Notes spilled out of Lidia as bright as water jewels. Laments of desire and sin flowed from Nia's pores. Their embraces became more frenzied, a choreography of lust. The spectators pressed closer, incited by the spectacle of naked youth and music intertwined.

Around her, Lidia was vaguely aware of their watching eyes and flushed expressions. The Tingle and the performance were doing their work on the guests. She could feel the heat rising in the room. She and Nia sank slowly to the floor, their embraces becoming more erotic and elaborate, the sexual tension of their musical conflict increasing as they entwined. Years of training had come to this moment, this carefully constructed weave of harmonizing flesh.

We perform pornography, Lidia thought. Pornography for the profit of Belari. She caught a glimpse of her patron's gleaming pleasure, Vernon Weir dumbstruck beside her. Yes, she thought, look at us, Master Weir, look and see what pornography we perform, and then it was her turn to play upon her sister, and her tongue and hands stroked Nia's keys.

It was a dance of seduction and acquiescence. They had other dances, solos and duets, some chaste, others obscene, but for their debut, Belari had chosen this one. The energy of their music increased, violent, climactic, until at last she and Nia lay upon the floor, expended, sheathed in sweat, bare twins tangled in musical lasciviousness. Their body music fell silent.

Around them, no one moved. Lidia tasted salt on her sister's skin as they held their pose. The lights dimmed, signaling completion.

Applause exploded around them. The lights brightened. Nia drew herself upright. Her lips quirked in a smile of satisfaction as she helped Lidia to her feet. You see? Nia's eyes seemed to say. We will be stars. Lidia found herself smiling with her sister. Despite the loss of Stephen, despite Belari's depredations, she was smiling. The audience's adoration washed over her, a balm of pleasure.

They curtsied to Belari as they had been trained, making obeisance first to their patron, the mother goddess who had created them. Belari smiled at the gesture, however scripted it was, and joined the applause of her guests. The people's applause increased again at the girls' good grace, then Nia and Lidia were curtsying to the corners of the compass, gathering their shifts and leaving the stage, guided by Burson's hulking presence to their patron.

The applause continued as they crossed the distance to Belari. Finally, at Belari's wave, the clapping gave way to respectful silence. She smiled at her assembled guests, placing her arms around the slight shoulders of the girls and said, "My lords and ladies, our Fluted Girls," and applause burst over them again, one final explosion of adulation before the guests fell to talking, fanning themselves, and feeling the flush of their own skins which the girls had inspired.

Belari held the fluted girls closely and whispered in their ears, "You did well." She hugged them carefully.

Vernon Weir's eyes roved over Lidia and Nia's exposed bodies. "You outdo yourself, Belari," he said.

Belari inclined her head slightly at the compliment. Her grip on Lidia's shoulder became proprietary. Belari's voice didn't betray her tension. She kept it light, comfortably satisfied with her position, but her fingers dug into Lidia's skin. "They are my finest."

"Such an extraordinary crafting."

"It's expensive when they break a bone. They're terribly fragile." Belari smiled down at the girls affectionately. "They hardly remember what it's like to walk without care."

"All the most beautiful things are fragile." Vernon touched Lidia's cheek. She forced herself not to flinch. "It must have been complex to build them."

Belari nodded. "They are intricate." She traced a finger along the boreholes in Nia's arm. "Each note isn't simply affected by the placement of fingers on keys; but also by how they press against one another, or the floor; if an arm is bent or if it is straightened. We froze their hormone levels so that they wouldn't grow, and then we began designing their instruments. It takes an enormous amount of skill for them to play and to dance."

"How long have you been training them?"

"Five years. Seven if you count the surgeries that began the process."

Vernon shook his head. "And we never heard of them."

"You would have ruined them. I'm going to make them stars."

"We made you a star."

"And you'll unmake me as well, if I falter."

"So you'll float them on the markets?"

Belari smiled at him. "Of course. I'll retain a controlling interest, but the rest, I will sell."

"You'll be rich."

Belari smiled, "More than that, I'll be independent."

Vernon mimed elaborate disappointment. "I suppose this means we won't be wiring you for TouchSense."

“I suppose not.”

The tension between them was palpable. Vernon, calculating, looking for an opening while Belari gripped her property and faced him. Vernon’s eyes narrowed.

As though sensing his thoughts, Belari said, “I’ve insured them.”

Vernon shook his head ruefully. “Belari, you do me a disservice.” He sighed. “I suppose I should congratulate you. To have such loyal subjects, and such wealth, you’ve achieved more than I would have thought possible when we first met.”

“My servants are loyal because I treat them well. They are happy to serve.”

“Would your Stephen agree?” Vernon waved at the sweetmeats in the center of the refreshment table, drizzled with raspberry and garnished with bright green leaves of mint.

Belari smiled. “Oh yes, even him. Do you know that just as Michael and Renee were preparing to cook him, he looked at me and said ‘Thank you’?” She shrugged. “He tried to kill me, but he did have the most eager urge to please, even so. At the very end, he told me he was sorry, and that the best years of his life had been in service to me.” She wiped at a theatrical tear. “I don’t know how it is, that he could love me so, and still so desire to have me dead.” She looked away from Vernon, watching the other guests. “For that, though, I thought I would serve him, rather than simply stake him out as a warning. We loved each other, even if he was a traitor.”

Vernon shrugged sympathetically. “So many people dislike the fief structure. You try to tell them that you provide far more security than what existed before, and yet still they protest, and,” he glanced meaningfully at Belari, “sometimes more.”

Belari shrugged. “Well, my subjects don’t protest. At least not until Stephen. They love me.”

Vernon smiled. “As we all do. In any case, serving him chilled this way.” He lifted a plate from the table. “Your taste is impeccable.”

Lidia’s face stiffened as she followed the conversation. She looked at the array of finely sliced meats and then at Vernon as he forked a bite into his mouth. Her stomach turned. Only her training let her remain still. Vernon and Belari’s conversation continued, but all Lidia could think was that she had consumed her friend, the one who had been kind to her.

Anger trickled through her, filling her porous body with rebellion. She longed to attack her smug patron, but her rage was impotent. She was too weak to hurt Belari. Her bones were too fragile, her physique too delicate. Belari was strong in all things as she was weak. Lidia stood trembling with frustration, and then Stephen’s voice whispered comforting wisdom inside her head. She could defeat Belari. Her pale skin flushed with pleasure at the thought.

As though sensing her, Belari looked down. “Lidia, go put on clothes and come back. I’ll want to introduce you and your sister to everyone before we take you public.”

\* \* \*

Lidia crept toward her hidey-hole. The vial was still there, if Burson had not found it. Her heart hammered at the thought: that the vial might be missing, that Stephen’s final gift had been destroyed by the monster. She slipped through dimly lit servant’s tunnels to the kitchen, anxiety pulsing at every step.

The kitchen was busy, full of staff preparing new platters for the guests. Lidia’s stomach turned. She wondered if more trays bore Stephen’s remains. The stoves flared and the ovens roared as Lidia slipped through the confusion, a ghostly waif sliding along the walls. No one paid her attention. They were too



busy laboring for Belari, doing her bidding without thought or conscience: slaves, truly. Obedience was all Belari cared for.

Lidia smiled grimly to herself. If obedience was what Belari loved, she was happy to provide a true betrayal. She would collapse on the floor, amongst her mistress's guests, destroying Belari's perfect moment, shaming her and foiling her hopes of independence.

The pantry was silent when Lidia slipped through its archway. Everyone was busy serving, running like dogs to feed Belari's brood. Lidia wandered amongst the stores, past casks of oil and sacks of onions, past the great humming freezers that held whole sides of beef within their steel bowels. She reached the broad tall shelves at the pantry's end and climbed past preserved peaches, tomatoes, and olives to the high-stored legumes. She pushed aside a vacuum jar of lentils and felt within.

For a moment, as she slid her hand around the cramped hiding place, she thought the vial was missing, but then her grasp closed on the tiny blown-glass bulb.

She climbed down, careful not to break any bones, laughing at herself as she did, thinking that it hardly mattered now, and hurried back through the kitchen, past the busy, obedient servants, and then down the servants' tunnels, intent on self-destruction.

As she sped through the darkened tunnels, she smiled, glad that she would never again steal through dim halls hidden from the view of aristocracy. Freedom was in her hands. For the first time in years she controlled her own fate.

Burson lunged from the shadows, his skin shifting from black to flesh as he materialized. He seized her and jerked her to a halt. Lidia's body strained at the abrupt capture. She gasped, her joints creaking. Burson gathered her wrists into a single massive fist. With his other hand, he turned her chin upward, subjecting her black eyes to the interrogation of his red-rimmed orbs. "Where are you going?"

His size could make you mistake him for stupid, she thought. His slow rumbling voice. His great animal-like gaze. But he was observant where Belari was not. Lidia trembled and cursed herself for foolishness. Burson studied her, his nostrils flaring at the scent of fear. His eyes watched the blush of her skin. "Where are you going?" he asked again. Warning laced his tone.

"Back to the party," Lidia whispered.

"Where have you been?"

Lidia tried to shrug. "Nowhere. Changing."

"Nia is already there. You are late. Belari wondered about you."

Lidia said nothing. There was nothing she could say to make Burson lose his suspicions. She was terrified that he would pry open her clenched hands and discover the glass vial. The servants said it was impossible to lie to Burson. He discovered everything.

Burson eyed her silently, letting her betray herself. Finally he said, "You went to your hidey-hole." He sniffed at her. "Not in the kitchen, though. The pantry." He smiled, revealing hard sharp teeth. "High up."

Lidia held her breath. Burson couldn't let go of a problem until it was solved. It was bred into him. His eyes swept over her skin. "You're nervous." He sniffed. "Sweating. Fear."

Lidia shook her head stubbornly. The tiny vial in her hands was slick, she was afraid she would drop it, or move her hands and call attention to it. Burson's great strength pulled her until they were nose to nose. His fist squeezed her wrists until she thought they would shatter. He studied her eyes. "So afraid."

“No.” Lidia shook her head again.

Burson laughed, contempt and pity in the sound. “It must be terrifying to know you can be broken, at any time.” His stone grip relaxed. Blood rushed back into her wrists. “Have your hidey-hole, then. Your secret is safe with me.”

For a moment, Lidia wasn’t sure what he meant. She stood before the giant security officer, frozen still, but then Burson waved his hand irritably and slipped back into the shadows, his skin darkening as he disappeared. “Go.”

Lidia stumbled away, her legs wavering, threatening to give out. She forced herself to keep moving, imagining Burson’s eyes burning into her pale back. She wondered if he still watched her or if he had already lost interest in the harmless spindly fluted girl, Belari’s animal who hid in the closets and made the staff hunt high and low for the selfish mite.

Lidia shook her head in wonderment. Burson had not seen. Burson, for all his enhancements, was blind, so accustomed to inspiring terror that he could no longer distinguish fear from guilt.

\* \* \*

A new gaggle of admirers swarmed around Belari, people who knew she was soon to be independent. Once the fluted girls floated on the market, Belari would be nearly as powerful as Vernon Weir, valuable not only for her own performances, but also for her stable of talent. Lidia moved to join her, the vial of liberation hidden in her fist.

Nia stood near Belari, talking to Claire Paranovis from SK Net. Nia nodded graciously at whatever the woman was saying, acting as Belari had trained them: always polite, never ruffled, always happy to talk, nothing to hide, but stories to tell. That was how you handled the media. If you kept them full, they never looked deeper. Nia looked comfortable in her role.

For a moment, Lidia felt a pang of regret at what she was about to do, then she was beside Belari, and Belari was smiling and introducing her to the men and women who surrounded her with fanatic affection. Mgumi Story. Kim Song Lee. Maria Blyst. Takashi Ghandi. More and more names, the global fraternity of media elites.

Lidia smiled and bowed while Belari fended off their proffered hands of congratulation, protecting her delicate investment. Lidia performed as she had been trained, but in her hand the vial lay sweaty, a small jewel of power and destiny. Stephen had been right. The small only controlled their own termination, sometimes not even that. Lidia watched the guests take slices of Stephen, commenting on his sweetness. Sometimes, not even that.

She turned from the crowd of admirers and drew a strawberry from the pyramids of fruit on the refreshment table. She dipped it in cream and rolled it in sugar, tasting the mingled flavors. She selected another strawberry, red and tender between her spidery fingers, a sweet medium for a bitter freedom earned.

With her thumb, she popped the tiny cork out of the vial and sprinkled amber jewels on the lush berry. She wondered if it would hurt, or if it would be quick. It hardly mattered, soon she would be free. She would cry out and fall to the floor and the guests would step back, stunned at Belari’s loss. Belari would be humiliated, and more important, would lose the value of the fluted twins. Vernon Weir’s lecherous hands would hold her once again.

Lidia gazed at the tainted strawberry. Sweet, Lidia thought. Death should be sweet. She saw Belari watching her, smiling fondly, no doubt happy to see another as addicted to sweets as she. Lidia smiled inwardly, pleased that Belari would see the moment of her rebellion. She raised the strawberry to her lips.

Suddenly a new inspiration whispered in her ear.

An inch from death, Lidia paused, then turned and held out the strawberry to her patron.

She offered the berry as obeisance, with the humility of a creature utterly owned. She bowed her head and proffered the strawberry in the palm of her pale hand, bringing forth all her skill, playing the loyal servant desperately eager to please. She held her breath, no longer aware of the room around her. The guests and conversations all had disappeared. Everything had gone silent.

There was only Belari and the strawberry and the frozen moment of delicious possibility.

# The Gambler

My father was a gambler. He believed in the workings of karma and luck. He hunted for lucky numbers on license plates and bet on lotteries and fighting roosters. Looking back, I think perhaps he was not a large man, but when he took me to the muay thai fights, I thought him so. He would bet and he would win and laugh and drink laolao with his friends, and they all seemed so large. In the heat drip of Vientiane, he was a lucky ghost, walking the mirror-sheen streets in the darkness.

Everything for my father was a gamble: roulette and blackjack, new rice variants and the arrival of the monsoons. When the pretender monarch Khamsing announced his New Lao Kingdom, my father gambled on civil disobedience. He bet on the teachings of Mr. Henry David Thoreau and on whisper sheets posted on lampposts. He bet on saffron-robed monks marching in protest and on the hidden humanity of the soldiers with their well-oiled AK-47s and their mirrored helmets.

My father was a gambler, but my mother was not. While he wrote letters to the editor that brought the secret police to our door, she made plans for escape. The old Lao Democratic Republic collapsed, and the New Lao Kingdom blossomed with tanks on the avenues and tuk-tuks burning on the street corners. Pha That Luang's shining gold chedi collapsed under shelling, and I rode away on a UN evacuation helicopter under the care of kind Mrs. Yamaguchi.

From the open doors of the helicopter, we watched smoke columns rise over the city like nagas coiling. We crossed the brown ribbon of the Mekong with its jeweled belt of burning cars on the Friendship Bridge. I remember a Mercedes floating in the water like a paper boat on Loi Kratong, burning despite the water all around.

Afterward, there was silence from the land of a million elephants, a void into which light and Skype calls and e-mail disappeared. The roads were blocked. The telecoms died. A black hole opened where my country had once stood.

Sometimes, when I wake in the night to the swish and honk of Los Angeles traffic, the confusing polyglot of dozens of countries and cultures all pressed together in this American melting pot, I stand at my window and look down a boulevard full of red lights, where it is not safe to walk alone at night, and yet everyone obeys the traffic signals. I look down on the brash and noisy Americans in their many hues, and remember my parents: my father who cared too much to let me live under the self-declared monarchy, and my mother who would not let me die as a consequence. I lean against the window and cry with relief and loss.

Every week I go to temple and pray for them, light incense and make a triple bow to Buddha, Damma, and Sangha, and pray that they may have a good rebirth, and then I step into the light and noise and vibrancy of America.

\* \* \*

My colleagues' faces flicker gray and pale in the light of their computers and tablets. The tap of their keyboards fills the newsroom as they pass content down the workflow chain and then, with a final keystroke and an obeisance to the "publish" button, they hurl it onto the net.

In the maelstrom, their work flares, tagged with site location, content tags, and social poke data. Blooms of color, codes for media conglomerates: shades of blue and Mickey Mouse ears for Disney-Bertelsmann. A red-rimmed pair of rainbow O's for Google's AOL News. Fox News Corp. in pinstripes gray and white. Green for us: Milestone Media—a combination of NTT DoCoMo, the Korean gaming consortium Hyundai-Kubu, and the smoking remains of the New York Times Company. There are others, smaller stars, Crayola shades flaring and brightening, but we are the most important. The monarchs of this universe of light and color.

New content blossoms on the screen, bathing us all in the bloody glow of a Google News content flare, off their WhisperTech feed. They've scooped us. The posting says that new ear bud devices will be released by Frontal Lobe before Christmas: terabyte storage with Pin-Line connectivity for the Oakley microresponse glasses. The technology is next-gen, allowing personal data control via Pin-Line scans of a user's iris. Analysts predict that everything from cell phones to digital cameras will become obsolete as the full range of Oakley features becomes available. The news flare brightens and migrates toward the center of the maelstrom as visitors flock to Google and view stolen photos of the iris-scanning glasses.

Janice Mbutu, our managing editor, stands at the door to her office, watching with a frown. The maelstrom's red bath dominates the newsroom, a pressing reminder that Google is beating us, sucking away traffic. Behind glass walls, Bob and Casey, the heads of the Burning Wire, our own consumer technology feed, are screaming at their reporters, demanding they do better. Bob's face has turned almost as red as the maelstrom.

The maelstrom's true name is LiveTrack IV. If you were to go downstairs to the fifth floor and pry open the server racks, you would find a sniper sight logo and the words SCRY GLASS—KNOWLEDGE IS POWER stamped on their chips in metallic orange, which would tell you that even though Bloomberg rents us the machines, it is a Google-Nielsen partnership that provides the proprietary algorithms for analyzing the net flows—which means we pay a competitor to tell us what is happening with our own content.

LiveTrack IV tracks media user data—Web site, feed, VOD, audiostream, TV broadcast—with Google's own net statistics gathering programs, aided by Nielsen hardware in personal data devices ranging from TVs to tablets to ear buds to handsets to car radios. To say that the maelstrom keeps a finger on the pulse of media is an understatement. Like calling the monsoon a little wet. The maelstrom is the pulse, the pressure, the blood-oxygen mix; the count of red cells and white, of T-cells and BAC, the screening for AIDS and hepatitis G.???.?It is reality.

Our service version of the maelstrom displays the performance of our own content and compares it to the top one hundred user-traffic events in real-time. My own latest news story is up in the maelstrom, glittering near the edge of the screen, a tale of government incompetence: the harvested DNA of the checkerspot butterfly, already extinct, has been destroyed through mismanagement at the California Federal Biological Preserve Facility. The butterfly—along with sixty-two other species—was subjected to improper storage protocols, and now there is nothing except a little dust in vials. The samples literally blew away. My coverage of the story opens with federal workers down on their knees in a two-billion-dollar climate-controlled vault, with a dozen crime scene vacuums that they've borrowed from LAPD, trying to suck up a speck of butterfly that they might be able to reconstitute at some future time.

In the maelstrom, the story is a pinprick beside the suns and pulsing moons of traffic that represent other reporters' content. It doesn't compete well with news of Frontal Lobe devices, or reviews of Armored Total Combat, or live feeds of the Binge-Purge championships. It seems that the only people who are reading my story are the biologists I interviewed. This is not surprising. When I wrote about bribes for subdivision approvals, the only people who read the story were county planners. When I wrote about cronyism in the selection of city water recycling technologies, the only people who read were water engineers. Still, even though no one seems to care about these stories, I am drawn to them, as though poking at the tiger of the American government will somehow make up for not being able to poke at the little cub of New Divine Monarch Khamsing. It is a foolish thing, a sort of Don Quixote crusade. As a consequence, my salary is the smallest in the office.

“Whoooo!”

Heads swivel from terminals, look for the noise: Marty Mackley, grinning.

“You can thank me???.?” He leans down and taps a button on his keyboard. “Now.”

A new post appears in the maelstrom, a small green orb announcing itself on the Glamour Report, Scandal Monkey blog, and Marty's byline feeds. As we watch, the post absorbs pings from software clients around the world, notifying the millions of people who follow his byline that he has launched a new story.

I flick my tablet open, check the tags:

Double DP,

Redneck HipHop,

Music News,

Schadenfreude,

underage,

pedophilia???

According to Mackley's story, Double DP the Russian mafia cowboy rapper—who, in my opinion, is not as good as the Asian pop sensation Kulaap, but whom half the planet likes very much—is accused of impregnating the fourteen-year-old daughter of his face sculptor. Readers are starting to notice, and with their attention Marty's green-glowing news story begins to muscle for space in the maelstrom. The content star pulses, expands, and then, as though someone has thrown gasoline on it, it explodes. Double DP hits the social sites, starts getting recommended, sucks in more readers, more links, more clicks???.and more ad dollars.

Marty does a pelvic grind of victory, then waves at everyone for their attention. "And that's not all, folks." He hits his keyboard again, and another story posts: live feeds of Double's house, where???it looks as though the man who popularized Redneck Russians is heading out the door in a hurry. It is a surprise to see video of the house, streaming live. Most freelance paparazzi are not patient enough to sit and hope that maybe, perhaps, something interesting will happen. This looks as though Marty has stationed his own exclusive papcams at the house, to watch for something like this.

We all watch as Double DP locks the door behind himself. Marty says, "I thought DP deserved the courtesy of notification that the story was going live."

"Is he fleeing?" Mikela Plaa asks.

Marty shrugs. "We'll see."

And indeed, it does look as if Double is about to do what Americans have popularized as an "OJ." He is into his red Hummer. Pulling out.

Under the green glow of his growing story, Marty smiles. The story is getting bigger, and Marty has stationed himself perfectly for the development. Other news agencies and blogs are playing catch-up. Follow-on posts wink into existence in the maelstrom, gathering a momentum of their own as newsrooms scramble to hook our traffic.

"Do we have a helicopter?" Janice asks. She has come out of her glass office to watch the show.

Marty nods. "We're moving it into position. I just bought exclusive angel view with the cops, too, so everyone's going to have to license our footage."

"Did you let Long Arm of the Law know about the cross-content?"

"Yeah. They're kicking in from their budget for the helicopter."

Marty sits down again, begins tapping at his keyboard, a machine-gun of data entry. A low murmur comes from the tech pit, Cindy C. calling our telecom providers, locking down trunklines to handle an anticipated data surge. She knows something that we don't, something that Marty has prepared her for. She's bringing up mirrored server farms. Marty seems unaware of the audience around him. He stops typing. Stares up at the maelstrom, watching his glowing ball of content. He is the maestro of a symphony.

The cluster of competing stories are growing as Gawker and Newsweek and Throb all organize themselves and respond. Our readers are clicking away from us, trying to see if there's anything new in our competitor's coverage. Marty smiles, hits his "publish" key, and dumps a new bucket of meat into the shark tank of public interest: a video interview with the fourteen-year-old. On-screen, she looks very young, shockingly so. She has a teddy bear.

"I swear I didn't plant the bear," Marty comments. "She had it on her own."

The girl's accusations are being mixed over Double's run for the border, a kind of synth loop of accusations:

"And then he?..?..?"

"And I said?..?..?"

"He's the only one I've ever?..?..?"

It sounds as if Marty has licensed some of Double's own beats for the coverage of his fleeing Humvee. The video outtakes are already bouncing around YouTube and MotionSwallow like Ping-Pong balls. The maelstrom has moved Double DP to the center of the display as more and more feeds and sites point to the content. Not only is traffic up, but the post is gaining in social rank as the numbers of links and social pokes increase.

"How's the stock?" someone calls out.

Marty shakes his head. "They locked me out from showing the display."

This, because whenever he drops an important story, we all beg him to show us the big picture. We all turn to Janice. She rolls her eyes, but she gives the nod. When Cindy finishes buying bandwidth, she unlocks the view. The maelstrom slides aside as a second window opens, all bar graphs and financial landscape: our stock price as affected by the story's expanding traffic—and expanding ad revenue.

The stock bots have their own version of the maelstrom; they've picked up the reader traffic shift. Buy and sell decisions roll across the screen, responding to the popularity of Mackley's byline. As he feeds the story, the beast grows. More feeds pick us up, more people recommend the story to their friends, and every one of them is being subjected to our advertisers' messages, which means more revenue for us and less for everyone else. At this point, Mackley is bigger than the Super Bowl. Given that the story is tagged with Double DP, it will have a targetable demographic: thirteen- to twenty-four-year-olds who buy lifestyle gadgets, new music, edge clothes, first-run games, boxed hairstyles, tablet skins, and ringtones: not only a large demographic, a valuable one.

Our stock ticks up a point. Holds. Ticks up another. We've got four different screens running now. The papcam of Double DP, chase cycles with views of the cops streaking after him, the chopper lifting off, and the window with the fourteen-year-old interviewing. The girl is saying, "I really feel for him. We have a connection. We're going to get married," and there's his Hummer screaming down Santa Monica Boulevard with his song "Cowboy Banger" on the audio overlay.

A new wave of social pokes hits the story. Our stock price ticks up again. Daily bonus territory. The clicks are pouring in. It's got the right combination of content, what Mackley calls the "Three S's": sex, stupidity,

and schadenfreude. The stock ticks up again. Everyone cheers. Mackley takes a bow. We all love him. He is half the reason I can pay my rent. Even a small newsroom bonus from his work is enough for me to live. I'm not sure how much he makes for himself when he creates an event like this. Cindy tells me that it is "solid seven, baby." His byline feed is so big he could probably go independent, but then he would not have the resources to scramble a helicopter for a chase toward Mexico. It is a symbiotic relationship. He does what he does best, and Milestone pays him like a celebrity.

Janice claps her hands. "All right, everyone. You've got your bonus. Now back to work."

A general groan rises. Cindy cuts the big monitor away from stocks and bonuses and back to the work at hand: generating more content to light the maelstrom, to keep the newsroom glowing green with flares of Milestone coverage—everything from reviews of Mitsubishi's 100 mpg Road Cruiser to how to choose a perfect turkey for Thanksgiving. Mackley's story pulses over us as we work. He spins off smaller additional stories, updates, interactivity features, encouraging his vast audience to ping back just one more time.

Marty will spend the entire day in conversation with this elephant of a story that he has created. Encouraging his visitors to return for just one more click. He'll give them chances to poll each other, discuss how they'd like to see DP punished, ask whether you can actually fall in love with a fourteen-year-old. This one will have a long life, and he will raise it like a proud father, feeding and nurturing it, helping it make its way in the rough world of the maelstrom.

My own little green speck of content has disappeared. It seems that even government biologists feel for Double DP.

\* \* \*

When my father was not placing foolish bets on revolution, he taught agronomy at the National Lao University. Perhaps our lives would have been different if he had been a rice farmer in the paddies of the capital's suburbs, instead of surrounded by intellectuals and ideas. But his karma was to be a teacher and a researcher, and so while he was increasing Lao rice production by 30 percent, he was also filling himself with gambler's fancies: Thoreau, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Sakharov, Mandela, Aung Sung Kyi. True gamblers, all. He would say that if white South Africans could be made to feel shame, then the pretender monarch must right his ways. He claimed that Thoreau must have been Lao, the way he protested so politely.

In my father's description, Thoreau was a forest monk, gone into the jungle for enlightenment. To live amongst the banyan and the climbing vines of Massachusetts and to meditate on the nature of suffering. My father believed he was undoubtedly some arhat reborn. He often talked of Mr. Henry David, and in my imagination this falang, too, was a large man like my father.

When my father's friends visited in the dark—after the coup and the countercoup, and after the march of Khamsing's Chinese-supported insurgency—they would often speak of Mr. Henry David. My father would sit with his friends and students and drink black Lao coffee and smoke cigarettes, and then he would write carefully worded complaints against the government that his students would then copy and leave in public places, distribute into gutters, and stick onto walls in the dead of night.

His guerrilla complaints would ask where his friends had gone, and why their families were so alone. He would ask why monks were beaten on their heads by Chinese soldiers when they sat in hunger strike before the palace. Sometimes, when he was drunk and when these small gambles did not satisfy his risk-taking nature, he would send editorials to the newspapers.

None of these were ever printed, but he was possessed with some spirit that made him think that perhaps the papers would change. That his stature as a father of Lao agriculture might somehow sway the editors to commit suicide and print his complaints.



It ended with my mother serving coffee to a secret police captain while two more policemen waited outside our door. The captain was very polite: he offered my father a 555 cigarette—a brand that already had become rare and contraband—and lit it for him. Then he spread the whisper sheet onto the coffee table, gently pushing aside the coffee cups and their saucers to make room for it. It was rumpled and torn, stained with mud. Full of accusations against Khamsing. Unmistakable as one of my father's.

My father and the policeman both sat and smoked, studying the paper silently.

Finally, the captain asked, "Will you stop?"

My father drew on his cigarette and let the smoke out slowly as he studied the whisper sheet between them. The captain said, "We all respect what you have done for the Lao kingdom. I myself have family who would have starved if not for your work in the villages." He leaned forward. "If you promise to stop writing these whispers and complaints, everything can be forgotten. Everything."

Still, my father didn't say anything. He finished his cigarette. Stubbed it out. "It would be difficult to make that sort of promise," he said.

The captain was surprised. "You have friends who have spoken on your behalf. Perhaps you would reconsider. For their sake."

My father made a little shrug. The captain spread the rumpled whisper sheet, flattening it out more completely. Read it over. "These sheets do nothing," he said. "Khamsing's dynasty will not collapse because you print a few complaints. Most of these are torn down before anyone reads them. They do nothing. They are pointless." He was almost begging. He looked over and saw me watching at the door. "Give this up. For your family, if not your friends."

I would like to say that my father said something grand. Something honorable about speaking against tyranny. Perhaps invoked one of his idols. Aung Sung Kyi or Sakharov, or Mr. Henry David and his penchant for polite protest. But he didn't say anything. He just sat with his hands on his knees, looking down at the torn whisper sheet. I think now that he must have been very afraid. Words always came easily to him, before. Instead, all he did was repeat himself. "It would be difficult."

The captain waited. When it became apparent that my father had nothing else to say, he put down his coffee cup and motioned for his men to come inside. They were all very polite. I think the captain even apologized to my mother as they led him out the door.

\* \* \*

We are into day three of the Double DP bonanza, and the green sun glows brightly over all of us, bathing us in its soothing, profitable glow. I am working on my newest story with my Frontal Lobe ear buds in, shutting out everything except the work at hand. It is always a little difficult to write in one's third language, but I have my favorite singer and fellow countryperson Kulaap whispering in my ear that "Love is a Bird," and the work is going well. With Kulaap singing to me in our childhood language, I feel very much at home.

A tap on my shoulder interrupts me. I pull out my ear buds and look around. Janice, standing over me. "Ong, I need to talk to you." She motions me to follow.

In her office, she closes the door behind me and goes to her desk. "Sit down, Ong." She keys her tablet, scrolls through data. "How are things going for you?"

"Very well. Thank you." I'm not sure if there is more that she wants me to say, but it is likely that she will tell me. Americans do not leave much to guesswork.

"What are you working on for your next story?" she asks.

I smile. I like this story; it reminds me of my father. And with Kulaap's soothing voice in my ears I have finished almost all of my research. The bluet, a flower made famous in Mr. Henry David Thoreau's journals, is blooming too early to be pollinated. Bees do not seem to find it when it blooms in March. The scientists I interviewed blame global warming, and now the flower is in danger of extinction. I have interviewed biologists and local naturalists, and now I would like to go to Walden Pond on a pilgrimage for this bluet that may soon also be bottled in a federal reserve laboratory with its techs in clean suits and their crime scene vacuums.

When I finish describing the story, Janice looks at me as if I am crazy. I can tell that she thinks I am crazy, because I can see it on her face. And also because she tells me.

"You're fucking crazy!"

Americans are very direct. It's difficult to keep face when they yell at you. Sometimes, I think that I have adapted to America. I have been here for five years now, ever since I came from Thailand on a scholarship, but at times like this, all I can do is smile and try not to cringe as they lose their face and yell and rant. My father was once struck in the face with an official's shoe, and he did not show his anger. But Janice is American, and she is very angry.

"There's no way I'm going to authorize a junket like that!"

I try to smile past her anger, and then remember that the Americans don't see an apologetic smile in the same way that a Lao would. I stop smiling and make my face look???something. Earnest, I hope.

"The story is very important," I say. "The ecosystem isn't adapting correctly to the changing climate. Instead, it has lost???" I grope for the word. "Synchronicity. These scientists think that the flower can be saved, but only if they import a bee that is available in Turkey. They think it can replace the function of the native bee population, and they think that it will not be too disruptive."

"Flowers and Turkish bees."

"Yes. It is an important story. Do they let the flower go extinct? Or try to keep the famous flower, but alter the environment of Walden Pond? I think your readers will think it is very interesting."

"More interesting than that?" She points through her glass wall at the maelstrom, at the throbbing green sun of Double DP, who has now barricaded himself in a Mexican hotel and has taken a pair of fans hostage.

"You know how many clicks we're getting?" she asks. "We're exclusive. Marty's got Double's trust and is going in for an interview tomorrow, assuming the Mexicans don't just raid it with commandos. We've got people clicking back every couple minutes just to look at Marty's blog about his preparations to go in."

The glowing globe not only dominates the maelstrom's screen, it washes everything else out. If we look at the stock bots, everyone who doesn't have protection under our corporate umbrella has been hurt by the loss of eyeballs. Even the Frontal Lobe/Oakley story has been swallowed. Three days of completely dominating the maelstrom has been very profitable for us. Now Marty's showing his viewers how he will wear a flak jacket in case the Mexican commandos attack while he is discussing the nature of true love with DP. And he has another exclusive interview with the mother ready to post as well. Cindy has been editing the footage and telling us all how disgusted she is with the whole thing. The woman apparently drove her daughter to DP's mansion for a midnight pool party, alone.

"Perhaps some people are tired of DP and wish to see something else," I suggest.

"Don't shoot yourself in the foot with a flower story, Ong. Even Pradeep's cooking journey through Ladakh gets more viewers than this stuff you're writing."

She looks as though she will say more, but then she simply stops. It seems as if she is considering her words. It is uncharacteristic. She normally speaks before her thoughts are arranged.

“Ong, I like you,” she says. I make myself smile at this, but she continues. “I hired you because I had a good feeling about you. I didn’t have a problem with clearing the visas to let you stay in the country. You’re a good person. You write well. But you’re averaging less than a thousand pings on your byline feed.” She looks down at her tablet, then back up at me. “You need to up your average. You’ve got almost no readers selecting you for Page One. And even when they do subscribe to your feed, they’re putting it in the third tier.”

“Spinach reading,” I supply.

“What?”

“Mr. Mackley calls it spinach reading. When people feel like they should do something with virtue, like eat their spinach, they click to me. Or else read Shakespeare.”

I blush, suddenly embarrassed. I do not mean to imply that my work is of the same caliber as a great poet. I want to correct myself, but I’m too embarrassed. So instead I shut up, and sit in front of her, blushing.

She regards me. “Yes. Well, that’s a problem. Look, I respect what you do. You’re obviously very smart.” Her eyes scan her tablet. “The butterfly thing you wrote was actually pretty interesting.”

“Yes?” I make myself smile again.

“It’s just that no one wants to read these stories.”

I try to protest. “But you hired me to write the important stories. The stories about politics and the government, to continue the traditions of the old newspapers. I remember what you said when you hired me.”

“Yeah, well.” She looks away. “I was thinking more about a good scandal.”

“The checkerspot is a scandal. That butterfly is now gone.”

She sighs. “No, it’s not a scandal. It’s just a depressing story. No one reads a depressing story, at least, not more than once. And no one subscribes to a depressing byline feed.”

“A thousand people do.”

“A thousand people.” She laughs. “We aren’t some Laotian community weblog, we’re Milestone, and we’re competing for clicks with them.” She waves outside, indicating the maelstrom. “Your stories don’t last longer than half a day; they never get social-poked by anyone except a fringe.” She shakes her head. “Christ, I don’t even know who your demographic is. Centenarian hippies? Some federal bureaucrats? The numbers just don’t justify the amount of time you spend on stories.”

“What stories do you wish me to write?”

“I don’t know. Anything. Product reviews. News you can use. Just not any more of this ‘we regret to inform you of bad news’ stuff. If there isn’t something a reader can do about the damn butterfly, then there’s no point in telling them about it. It just depresses people, and it depresses your numbers.”

“We don’t have enough numbers from Marty?”

She laughs at that. “You remind me of my mother. Look, I don’t want to cut you, but if you can’t start pulling at least a fifty thousand daily average, I won’t have any choice. Our group median is way down in

comparison to other teams, and when evaluations come around, we look bad. I'm up against Nguyen in the Tech and Toys pool, and Penn in Yoga and Spirituality, and no one wants to read about how the world's going to shit. Go find me some stories that people want to read."

She says a few more things, words that I think are meant to make me feel inspired and eager, and then I am standing outside the door, once again facing the maelstrom.

The truth is that I have never written popular stories. I am not a popular story writer. I am earnest. I am slow. I do not move at the speed these Americans seem to love. Find a story that people want to read. I can write some follow-up to Mackley, to Double DP, perhaps assist with sidebars to his main piece, but somehow, I suspect that the readers will know that I am faking it.

Marty sees me standing outside of Janice's office. He comes over.

"She giving you a hard time about your numbers?"

"I do not write the correct sort of stories."

"Yeah. You're an idealist."

We both stand there for a moment, meditating on the nature of idealism. Even though he is very American, I like him because he is sensitive to people's hearts. People trust him. Even Double DP trusts him, though Marty blew his name over every news tablet's front page. Marty has a good heart. Jai dee. I like him. I think that he is genuine.

"Look, Ong," he says. "I like what you do." He puts his hand around my shoulder. For a moment, I think he's about to try to rub my head with affection and I have to force myself not to wince, but he's sensitive and instead takes his hand away. "Look, Ong. We both know you're terrible at this kind of work. We're in the news business, here. And you're just not cut out for it."

"My visa says I have to remain employed."

"Yeah. Janice is a bitch for that. Look." He pauses. "I've got this thing with Double DP going down in Mexico. But I've got another story brewing. An exclusive. I've already got my bonus, anyway. And it should push up your average."

"I do not think that I can write Double DP sidebars."

He grins. "It's not that. And it's not charity; you're actually a perfect match."

"It is about government mismanagement?"

He laughs, but I think he's not really laughing at me. "No." He pauses, smiles. "It's Kulaap. An interview."

I suck in my breath. My fellow countryperson, here in America. She came out during the purge as well. She was doing a movie in Singapore when the tanks moved, and so she was not trapped. She was already very popular all over Asia, and when Khamsing turned our country into a black hole, the world took note. Now she is popular here in America as well. Very beautiful. And she remembers our country before it went into darkness. My heart is pounding.

Marty goes on. "She's agreed to do an exclusive with me. But you even speak her language, so I think she'd agree to switch off." He pauses, looks serious. "I've got a good history with Kulaap. She doesn't give interviews to just anyone. I did a lot of exposure stories about her when Laos was going to hell. Got her a lot of good press. This is a special favor already, so don't fuck it up."

I shake my head. “No. I will not.” I press my palms together and touch them to my forehead in a nod of appreciation. “I will not fuck it up.” I make another nod.

He laughs. “Don’t bother with that polite stuff. Janice will cut off your balls to increase the stock price, but we’re the guys in the trenches. We stick together, right?”

\* \* \*

In the morning, I make a pot of strong coffee with condensed milk; I boil rice noodle soup and add bean sprouts and chiles and vinegar, and warm a loaf of French bread that I buy from a Vietnamese bakery a few blocks away. With a new mix of Kulaap’s music from DJ Dao streaming in over my stereo, I sit down at my little kitchen table, pour my coffee from its press pot, and open my tablet.

The tablet is a wondrous creation. In Laos, the paper was still a paper, physical, static, and empty of anything except the official news. Real news in our New Divine Kingdom did not come from newspapers, or from television, or from handsets or ear buds. It did not come from the net or feeds unless you trusted your neighbor not to look over your shoulder at an Internet cafe and if you knew that there were no secret police sitting beside you, or an owner who would be able to identify you when they came around asking about the person who used that workstation over there to communicate with the outside world.

Real news came from whispered rumor, rated according to the trust you accorded the whisperer. Were they family? Did they have long history with you? Did they have anything to gain by the sharing? My father and his old classmates trusted one another. He trusted some of his students, as well. I think this is why the security police came for him in the end. One of his trusted friends or students also whispered news to official friends. Perhaps Mr. Intha-chak, or Som Vang. Perhaps another. It is impossible to peer into the blackness of that history and guess at who told true stories and in which direction.

In any case, it was my father’s karma to be taken, so perhaps it does not matter who did the whispering. But before then—before the news of my father flowed up to official ears—none of the real news flowed toward Lao TV or the Vientiane Times. Which meant that when the protests happened and my father came through the door with blood on his face from baton blows, we could read as much as we wanted about the three thousand schoolchildren who had sung the national anthem to our new divine monarch. While my father lay in bed, delirious with pain, the papers told us that China had signed a rubber contract that would triple revenue for Luang Namtha province and that Nam Theun Dam was now earning BT 22.5 billion per year in electricity fees to Thailand. But there were no bloody batons, and there were no dead monks, and there was no Mercedes-Benz burning in the river as it floated toward Cambodia.

Real news came on the wings of rumor, stole into our house at midnight, sat with us and sipped coffee and fled before the call of roosters could break the stillness. It was in the dark, over a burning cigarette that you learned Vilaphon had disappeared or that Mr. Saeng’s wife had been beaten as a warning. Real news was too valuable to risk in public.

Here in America, my page glows with many news feeds, flickers at me in video windows, pours in at me over broadband. It is a waterfall of information. As my personal news page opens, my feeds arrange themselves, sorting according to the priorities and tag categories that I’ve set, a mix of Meung Lao news, Lao refugee blogs, and the chatting of a few close friends from Thailand and the American college where I attended on a human relief scholarship.

On my second page and my third, I keep the general news, the arrangements of Milestone, the Bangkok Post, the Phnom Penh Express—the news chosen by editors. But by the time I’ve finished with my own selections, I don’t often have time to click through the headlines that these earnest news editors select for the mythical general reader.

In any case, I know far better than they what I want to read, and with my keyword and tag scans, I can unearth stories and discussions that a news agency would never think to provide. Even if I cannot see into the black hole itself, I can slip along its edges, divine news from its fringe.

I search for tags like Vientiane, Laos, Lao, Khamsing, China-Lao friendship, Korat, Golden Triangle, Hmong independence, Lao PDR, my father's name.???.?Only those of us who are Lao exiles from the March Purge really read these blogs. It is much as when we lived in the capital. The blogs are the rumors that we used to whisper to one another. Now we publish our whispers over the net and join mailing lists instead of secret coffee groups, but it is the same. It is family, as much as any of us now have.

On the maelstrom, the tags for Laos don't even register. Our tags bloomed brightly for a little while, while there were still guerrilla students uploading content from their handsets, and the images were lurid and shocking. But then the phone lines went down and the country fell into its black hole and now it is just us, this small network that functions outside the country.

A headline from Jumbo Blog catches my eye. I open the site, and my tablet fills with the colorful image of the three-wheeled taxi of my childhood. I often come here. It is a node of comfort.

Laofriend posts that some people, maybe a whole family, have swum the Mekong and made it into Thailand. He isn't sure if they were accepted as refugees or if they were sent back.

It is not an official news piece. More, the idea of a news piece. SomPaBoy doesn't believe it, but Khamchanh contends that the rumor is true, heard from someone who has a sister married to an Isaan border guard in the Thai army. So we cling to it. Wonder about it. Guess where these people came from, wonder if, against all odds, it could be one of ours: a brother, a sister, a cousin, a father.???

After an hour, I close the tablet. It's foolish to read any more. It only brings up memories. Worrying about the past is foolish. Lao PDR is gone. To wish otherwise is suffering.

\* \* \*

The clerk at Novotel's front desk is expecting me. A hotel staffer with a key guides me to a private elevator bank that whisks us up into the smog and heights. The elevator doors open to a small entryway with a thick mahogany door. The staffer steps back into the elevator and disappears, leaving me standing in this strange airlock. Presumably, I am being examined by Kulaap's security.

The mahogany door opens, and a smiling black man who is forty centimeters taller than I and who has muscles that ripple like snakes smiles and motions me inside. He guides me through Kulaap's sanctuary. She keeps the heat high, almost tropical, and fountains rush everywhere around. The flat is musical with water. I unbutton my collar in the humidity. I was expecting air-conditioning, and instead I am sweltering. It's almost like home. And then she's in front of me, and I can hardly speak. She is beautiful, and more. It is intimidating to stand before someone who exists in film and in music but has never existed before you in the flesh. She's not as stunning as she is in the movies, but there's more life, more presence; the movies lose that quality about her. I make a nop of greeting, pressing my hands together, touching my forehead.

She laughs at this, takes my hand and shakes it American-style. "You're lucky Marty likes you so much," she says. "I don't like interviews."

I can barely find my voice. "Yes. I only have a few questions."

"Oh no. Don't be shy." She laughs again, and doesn't release my hand, pulls me toward her living room. "Marty told me about you. You need help with your ratings. He helped me once, too."

She's frightening. She is of my people, but she has adapted better to this place than I have. She seems comfortable here. She walks differently, smiles differently; she is an American, with perhaps some flavor of our country, but nothing of our roots. It's obvious. And strangely disappointing. In her movies, she holds herself so well, and now she sits down on her couch and sprawls with her feet kicked out in front of her. Not caring at all. I'm embarrassed for her, and I'm glad I don't have my camera set up yet. She kicks her feet up on the couch. I can't help but be shocked. She catches my expression and smiles.

“You’re worse than my parents. Fresh off the boat.”

“I am sorry.”

She shrugs. “Don’t worry about it. I spent half my life here, growing up; different country, different rules.”

I’m embarrassed. I try not to laugh with the tension I feel. “I just have some interview questions,” I say.

“Go ahead.” She sits up and arranges herself for the video stand that I set up.

I begin. “When the March Purge happened, you were in Singapore.”

She nods. “That’s right. We were finishing *The Tiger and the Ghost*.”

“What was your first thought when it happened? Did you want to go back? Were you surprised?”

She frowns. “Turn off the camera.”

When it’s off she looks at me with pity. “This isn’t the way to get clicks. No one cares about an old revolution. Not even my fans.” She stands abruptly and calls through the green jungle of her flat. “Terrell?”

The big black man appears. Smiling and lethal. Looming over me. He is very frightening. The movies I grew up with had falang like him. Terrifying large black men whom our heroes had to overcome. Later, when I arrived in America, it was different, and I found out that the falang and the black people don’t like the way we show them in our movies. Much like when I watch their Vietnam movies, and see the ugly way the Lao freedom fighters behave. Not real at all, portrayed like animals. But still, I cannot help but cringe when Terrell looks at me.

Kulaap says, “We’re going out, Terrell. Make sure you tip off some of the papcams. We’re going to give them a show.”

“I don’t understand,” I say.

“You want clicks, don’t you?”

“Yes, but—”

She smiles. “You don’t need an interview. You need an event.” She looks me over. “And better clothes.” She nods to her security man. “Terrell, dress him up.”

\* \* \*

A flashbulb frenzy greets us as we come out of the tower. Papcams everywhere. Chase cycles revving, and Terrell and three others of his people guiding us through the press to the limousine, shoving cameras aside with a violence and power that are utterly unlike the careful pity he showed when he selected a Gucci suit for me to wear.

Kulaap looks properly surprised at the crowd and the shouting reporters, but not nearly as surprised as I am, and then we’re in the limo, speeding out of the tower’s roundabout as papcams follow us.

Kulaap crouches before the car’s onboard tablet, keying in pass codes. She is very pretty, wearing a black dress that brushes her thighs and thin straps that caress her smooth bare shoulders. I feel as if I am in a movie. She taps more keys. A screen glows, showing the taillights of our car: the view from pursuing papcams.

“You know I haven’t dated anyone in three years?” she asks.

“Yes. I know from your Web site biography.”

She grins. “And now it looks like I’ve found one of my countrymen.”

“But we’re not on a date,” I protest.

“Of course we are.” She smiles again. “I’m going out on a supposedly secret date with a cute and mysterious Lao boy. And look at all those papcams chasing after us, wondering where we’re going and what we’re going to do.” She keys in another code, and now we can see live footage of the paparazzi, as viewed from the tail of her limo. She grins. “My fans like to see what life is like for me.”

I can almost imagine what the maelstrom looks like right now: there will still be Marty’s story, but now a dozen other sites will be lighting up, and in the center of that, Kulaap’s own view of the excitement, pulling in her fans, who will want to know, direct from her, what’s going on. She holds up a mirror, checks herself, and then she smiles into her smartphone’s camera.

“Hi everyone. It looks like my cover’s blown. Just thought I should let you know that I’m on a lovely date with a lovely man. I’ll let you all know how it goes. Promise.” She points the camera at me. I stare at it stupidly. She laughs. “Say hi and good-bye, Ong.”

“Hi and good-bye.”

She laughs again, waves into the camera. “Love you all. Hope you have as good a night as I’m going to have.” And then she cuts the clip and punches a code to launch the video to her Web site.

It is a bit of nothing. Not a news story, not a scoop even, and yet, when she opens another window on her tablet, showing her own miniversion of the maelstrom, I can see her site lighting up with traffic. Her version of the maelstrom isn’t as powerful as what we have at Milestone, but still, it is an impressive window into the data that is relevant to Kulaap’s tags.

“What’s your feed’s byline?” she asks. “Let’s see if we can get your traffic bumped up.”

“Are you serious?”

“Marty Mackley did more than this for me. I told him I’d help.” She laughs. “Besides, we wouldn’t want you to get sent back to the black hole, would we?”

“You know about the black hole?” I can’t help doing a double-take.

Her smile is almost sad. “You think just because I put my feet up on the furniture that I don’t care about my aunts and uncles back home? That I don’t worry about what’s happening?”

“I—”

She shakes her head. “You’re so fresh off the boat.”

“Do you use the Jumbo Cafe—” I break off. It seems too unlikely.

She leans close. “My handle is Laofriend. What’s yours?”

“Littlexang. I thought Laofriend was a boy—”

She just laughs.



I lean forward. "Is it true that the family made it out?"

She nods. "For certain. A general in the Thai army is a fan. He tells me everything. They have a listening post. And sometimes they send scouts across."

It's almost as if I am home.

\* \* \*

We go to a tiny Laotian restaurant where everyone recognizes her and falls over her and the owners simply lock out the paparazzi when they become too intrusive. We spend the evening unearthing memories of Vientiane. We discover that we both favored the same rice noodle cart on Kaem Khong. That she used to sit on the banks of the Mekong and wish that she were a fisherman. That we went to the same waterfalls outside the city on the weekends. That it is impossible to find good dum mak hoong anywhere outside of the country. She is a good companion, very alive. Strange in her American ways, but still, with a good heart. Periodically, we click photos of one another and post them to her site, feeding the voyeurs. And then we are in the limo again and the paparazzi are all around us. I have the strange feeling of fame. Flashbulbs everywhere. Shouted questions. I feel proud to be beside this beautiful intelligent woman who knows so much more than any of us about the situation inside our homeland.

Back in the car, she has me open a bottle of champagne and pour two glasses while she opens the maelstrom and studies the results of our date. She has reprogrammed it to watch my byline feed ranking as well.

"You've got twenty thousand more readers than you did yesterday," she says.

I beam. She keeps reading the results. "Someone already did a scan on your face." She toasts me with her glass. "You're famous."

We clink glasses. I am flushed with wine and happiness. I will have Janice's average clicks. It's as though a bodhisattva has come down from heaven to save my job. In my mind, I offer thanks to Marty for arranging this, for his generous nature. Kulaap leans close to her screen, watching the flaring content. She opens another window, starts to read. She frowns.

"What the fuck do you write about?"

I draw back, surprised. "Government stories, mostly." I shrug. "Sometimes environment stories."

"Like what?"

"I am working on a story right now about global warming and Henry David Thoreau."

"Aren't we done with that?"

I'm confused. "Done with what?"

The limo jostles us as it makes a turn, moves down Hollywood Boulevard, letting the cycles rev around us like schools of fish. They're snapping pictures at the side of the limo, snapping at us. Through the tinting, they're like fireflies, smaller flares than even my stories in the maelstrom.

"I mean, isn't that an old story?" She sips her champagne. "Even America is reducing emissions now. Everyone knows it's a problem." She taps her couch's armrest. "The carbon tax on my limo has tripled, even with the hybrid engine. Everyone agrees it's a problem. We're going to fix it. What's there to write about?"

She is an American. Everything that is good about them: their optimism, their willingness to charge ahead, to make their own future. And everything that is bad about them: their strange ignorance, their unwillingness to believe that they must behave as other than children.

“No. It’s not done,” I say. “It is worse. Worse every day. And the changes we make seem to have little effect. Maybe too little, or maybe too late. It is getting worse.”

She shrugs. “That’s not what I read.”

I try not to show my exasperation. “Of course it’s not what you read.” I wave at the screen. “Look at the clicks on my feed. People want happy stories. Want fun stories. Not stories like I write. So instead, we all write what you will read, which is nothing.”

“Still—”

“No.” I make a chopping motion with my hand. “We newspeople are very smart monkeys. If you will give us your so lovely eyeballs and your click-throughs we will do whatever you like. We will write good news, and news you can use, news you can shop to, news with the ‘Three S’s.’ We will tell you how to have better sex or eat better or look more beautiful or feel happier and or how to meditate—yes, so enlightened.” I make a face. “If you want a walking meditation and Double DP, we will give it to you.”

She starts to laugh.

“Why are you laughing at me?” I snap. “I am not joking!”

She waves a hand. “I know, I know, but what you just said ‘double’—” She shakes her head, still laughing. “Never mind.”

I lapse into silence. I want to go on, to tell her of my frustrations. But now I am embarrassed at my loss of composure. I have no face. I didn’t used to be like this. I used to control my emotions, but now I am an American, as childish and unruly as Janice. And Kulaap laughs at me.

I control my anger. “I think I want to go home,” I say. “I don’t wish to be on a date anymore.”

She smiles and reaches over to touch my shoulder. “Don’t be that way.”

A part of me is telling me that I am a fool. That I am reckless and foolish for walking away from this opportunity. But there is something else, something about this frenzied hunt for page views and click-throughs and ad revenue that suddenly feels unclean. As if my father is with us in the car, disapproving. Asking if he posted his complaints about his missing friends for the sake of clicks.

“I want to get out,” I hear myself say. “I do not wish to have your clicks.”

“But—”

I look up at her. “I want to get out. Now.”

“Here?” She makes a face of exasperation, then shrugs. “It’s your choice.”

“Yes. Thank you.”

She tells her driver to pull over. We sit in stiff silence.

“I will send your suit back to you,” I say.

She gives me a sad smile. “It’s all right. It’s a gift.”

This makes me feel worse, even more humiliated for refusing her generosity, but still, I get out of the limo. Cameras are clicking at me from all around. This is my fifteen minutes of fame, this moment when all of Kulaap's fans focus on me for a few seconds, their flashbulbs popping.

I begin to walk home as paparazzi shout questions.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later I am indeed alone. I consider calling a cab, but then decide I prefer the night. Prefer to walk by myself through this city that never walks anywhere. On a street corner, I buy a pupusa and gamble on the Mexican Lottery because I like the tickets' laser images of their Day of the Dead. It seems an echo of the Buddha's urging to remember that we all become corpses.

I buy three tickets, and one of them is a winner: one hundred dollars that I can redeem at any TelMex kiosk. I take this as a good sign. Even if my luck is obviously gone with my work, and even if the girl Kulaap was not the bodhisattva that I thought, still, I feel lucky. As though my father is walking with me down this cool Los Angeles street in the middle of the night, the two of us together again, me with a pupusa and a winning lottery ticket, him with an Ah Daeng cigarette and his quiet gambler's smile. In a strange way, I feel that he is blessing me.

And so instead of going home, I go back to the newsroom.

My hits are up when I arrive. Even now, in the middle of the night, a tiny slice of Kulaap's fan base is reading about checkerspot butterflies and American government incompetence. In my country, this story would not exist. A censor would kill it instantly. Here, it glows green; increasing and decreasing in size as people click. A lonely thing, flickering amongst the much larger content flares of Intel processor releases, guides to low-fat recipes, photos of lol-cats, and episodes of Survivor! Antarctica. The wash of light and color is very beautiful.

In the center of the maelstrom, the green sun of the Double DP story glows—surges larger. DP is doing something. Maybe he's surrendering, maybe he's murdering his hostages, maybe his fans have thrown up a human wall to protect him. My story snuffs out as reader attention shifts.

I watch the maelstrom a little longer, then go to my desk and make a phone call. A rumpled hairy man answers, rubbing at a sleep-puffy face. I apologize for the late hour, and then pepper him with questions while I record the interview.

He is silly looking and wild-eyed. He has spent his life living as if he were Thoreau, thinking deeply on the forest monk and following the man's careful paths through what woods remain, walking amongst birch and maple and bluets. He is a fool, but an earnest one.

"I can't find a single one," he tells me. "Thoreau could find thousands at this time of year; there were so many he didn't even have to look for them."

He says, "I'm so glad you called. I tried sending out press releases, but?..?" He shrugs. "I'm glad you'll cover it. Otherwise, it's just us hobbyists talking to each other."

I smile and nod and take notes of his sincerity, this strange wild creature, the sort that everyone will dismiss. His image is bad for video; his words are not good for text. He has no quotes that encapsulate what he sees. It is all couched in the jargon of naturalists and biology. With time, I could find another, someone who looks attractive or who can speak well, but all I have is this one hairy man, disheveled and foolish, senile with passion over a flower that no longer exists.

I work through the night, polishing the story. When my colleagues pour through the door at 8 a.m. it is almost done. Before I can even tell Janice about it, she comes to me. She fingers my clothing and grins.

“Nice suit.” She pulls up a chair and sits beside me. “We all saw you with Kulaap. Your hits went way up.” She nods at my screen. “Writing up what happened?”

“No. It was a private conversation.”

“But everyone wants to know why you got out of the car. I had someone from the Financial Times call me about splitting the hits for a tell-all, if you’ll be interviewed. You wouldn’t even need to write up the piece.”

It’s a tempting thought. Easy hits. Many click-throughs. Ad-revenue bonuses. Still, I shake my head. “We did not talk about things that are important for others to hear.”

Janice stares at me as if I am crazy. “You’re not in the position to bargain, Ong. Something happened between the two of you. Something people want to know about. And you need the clicks. Just tell us what happened on your date.”

“I was not on a date. It was an interview.”

“Well then publish the fucking interview and get your average up!”

“No. That is for Kulaap to post, if she wishes. I have something else.”

I show Janice my screen. She leans forward. Her mouth tightens as she reads. For once, her anger is cold. Not the explosion of noise and rage that I expect. “Bluets.” She looks at me. “You need hits and you give them flowers and Walden Pond.”

“I would like to publish this story.”

“No! Hell, no! This is just another story like your butterfly story, and your road contracts story, and your congressional budget story. You won’t get a damn click. It’s pointless. No one will even read it.”

“This is news.”

“Marty went out on a limb for you—” She presses her lips together, reining in her anger. “Fine. It’s up to you, Ong. If you want to destroy your life over Thoreau and flowers, it’s your funeral. We can’t help you if you won’t help yourself. Bottom line, you need fifty thousand readers or I’m sending you back to the third world.”

We look at each other. Two gamblers evaluating one another. Deciding who is betting, and who is bluffing.

I click the “publish” button.

The story launches itself onto the net, announcing itself to the feeds. A minute later a tiny new sun glows in the maelstrom.

Together, Janice and I watch the green spark as it flickers on the screen. Readers turn to the story. Start to ping it and share it amongst themselves, start to register hits on the page. The post grows slightly.

My father gambled on Thoreau. I am my father’s son.

# The People of Sand and Slag

“Hostile movement! Well inside the perimeter! Well inside!”

I stripped off my Immersive Response goggles as adrenaline surged through me. The virtual cityscape I’d been about to raze disappeared, replaced by our monitoring room’s many views of SesCo’s mining operations. On one screen, the red phosphorescent tracery of an intruder skated across a terrain map, a hot blip like blood spattering its way toward Pit 8.

Jaak was already out of the monitoring room. I ran for my gear.

I caught up with Jaak in the equipment room as he grabbed a TS-101 and slashbangs and dragged his impact exoskeleton over his tattooed body. He draped bandoleers of surgepacks over his massive shoulders and ran for the outer locks. I strapped on my own exoskeleton, pulled my 101 from its rack, checked its charge, and followed.

Lisa was already in the HEV, its turbofans screaming like banshees when the hatch dilated. Sentry centaurs leveled their 101’s at me, then relaxed as friend/foe data spilled into their heads-up displays. I bolted across the tarmac, my skin pricking under blasts of icy Montana wind and the jet wash of Hentasa Mark V engines. Overhead, the clouds glowed orange with light from SesCo’s mining bots.

“Come on, Chen! Move! Move! Move!”

I dove into the hunter. The ship leaped into the sky. It banked, throwing me against a bulkhead, then the Hentasas cycled wide and the hunter punched forward. The HEV’s hatch slid shut. The wind howl muted.

I struggled forward to the flight cocoon and peered over Jaak’s and Lisa’s shoulders to the landscape beyond.

“Have a good game?” Lisa asked.

I scowled. “I was about to win. I made it to Paris.”

We cut through the mists over the catchment lakes, skimming inches above the water, and then we hit the far shore. The hunter lurched as its anti-collision software jerked us away from the roughening terrain.

Lisa overrode the computers and forced the ship back down against the soil, driving us so low I could have reached out and dragged my hands through the broken scree as we screamed over it.

Alarms yowled. Jaak shut them off as Lisa pushed the hunter lower. Ahead, a tailings ridge loomed. We ripped up its face and dropped sickeningly into the next valley. The Hentasas shuddered as Lisa forced them to the edge of their design buffer. We hurtled up and over another ridge. Ahead, the ragged cutscape of mined mountains stretched to the horizon. We dipped again into mist and skimmed low over another catchment lake, leaving choppy wake in the thick golden waters.

Jaak studied the hunter’s scanners. “I’ve got it.” He grinned. “It’s moving, but slow.”

“Contact in one minute,” Lisa said. “He hasn’t launched any countermeasures.”

I watched the intruder on the tracking screens as they displayed real-time data fed to us from SesCo’s satellites. “It’s not even a masked target. We could have dropped a mini on it from base if we’d known he wasn’t going to play hide-and-seek.”

“Could have finished your game,” Lisa said.

“We could still nuke him.” Jaak suggested.

I shook my head. “No, let’s take a look. Vaporizing him won’t leave us anything and Bunbaum will want to know what we used the hunter for.”

“Thirty seconds.”

“He wouldn’t care if someone hadn’t taken the hunter on a joyride to Cancun.”

Lisa shrugged. “I wanted to swim. It was either that, or rip off your kneecaps.”

The hunter lunged over another series of ridges.

Jaak studied his monitor. “Target’s moving away. He’s still slow. We’ll get him.”

“Fifteen seconds to drop,” Lisa said. She unstrapped and switched the hunter to software. We all ran for the hatch as the HEV yanked itself skyward, its auto pilot desperate to tear away from the screaming hazard of the rocks beneath its belly.

We plunged out the hatch, one, two, three, falling like Icarus. We slammed into the ground at hundreds of kilometers per hour. Our exoskeletons shattered like glass, flinging leaves into the sky. The shards fluttered down around us, black metallic petals absorbing our enemy’s radar and heat detection while we rolled to jarred vulnerable stops in muddy scree.

The hunter blew over the ridge, Hentosas shrieking, a blazing target. I dragged myself upright and ran for the ridge, my feet churning through yellow tailings mud and rags of jaundiced snow. Behind me, Jaak was down with smashed arms. The leaves of his exoskeleton marked his roll path, a long trail of black shimmering metal. Lisa lay a hundred yards away, her femur rammed through her thigh like a bright white exclamation mark.

I reached the top of the ridge and stared down into the valley.

Nothing.

I dialed up the magnification of my helmet. The monotonous slopes of more tailings rubble spread out below me. Boulders, some as large as our HEV, some cracked and shattered by high explosives, shared the slopes with the unstable yellow shale and fine grit of waste materials from SesCo’s operations.

Jaak slipped up beside me, followed a moment later by Lisa, her flight suit’s leg torn and bloodied. She wiped yellow mud off her face and ate it as she studied the valley below. “Anything?”

I shook my head. “Nothing yet. You okay?”

“Clean break.”

Jaak pointed. “There!”

Down in the valley, something was running, flushed by the hunter. It slipped along a shallow creek, viscous with tailings acid. The ship herded it toward us. Nothing. No missile fire. No slag. Just the running creature. A mass of tangled hair. Quadrupedal. Splattered with mud.

“Some kind of bio-job?” I wondered.

“It doesn’t have any hands,” Lisa murmured.

“No equipment either.”

Jaak muttered. "What kind of sick bastard makes a bio-job without hands?"

I searched the nearby ridgelines. "Decoy, maybe?"

Jaak checked his scanner data, piped in from the hunter's more aggressive instruments. "I don't think so. Can we put the hunter up higher? I want to look around."

At Lisa's command, the hunter rose, allowing its sensors a fuller reach. The howl of its turbofans became muted as it gained altitude.

Jaak waited as more data spat into his heads-up display. "Nope, nothing. And no new alerts from any of the perimeter stations, either. We're alone."

Lisa shook her head. "We should have just dropped a mini on it from base."

Down in the valley, the bio-job's headlong run slowed to a trot. It seemed unaware of us. Closer now, we could make out its shape: A shaggy quadruped with a tail. Dreadlocked hair dangled from its shanks like ornaments, tagged with tailings mud clods.

It was stained around its legs from the acids of the catchment ponds, as though it had forded streams of urine.

"That's one ugly bio-job," I said.

Lisa shouldered her 101. "Bio-melt when I'm done with it."

"Wait!" Jaak said. "Don't slag it!"

Lisa glanced over at him, irritated. "What now?"

"That's not a bio-job at all." Jaak whispered. "That's a dog."

He stood suddenly and jumped over the hillside, running headlong down the scree toward the animal.

"Wait!" Lisa called, but Jaak was already fully exposed and blurring to his top speed.

The animal took one look at Jaak, whooping and hollering as he came roaring down the slope, then turned and ran. It was no match for Jaak. Half a minute later he overtook the animal.

Lisa and I exchanged glances. "Well," she said, "it's awfully slow if it's a bio-job. I've seen centaurs walk faster."

By the time we caught up with Jaak and the animal, Jaak had it cornered in a dull gully. The animal stood in the center of a trickling ditch of sludgy water, shaking and growling and baring its teeth at us as we surrounded it. It tried to break around us, but Jaak kept it corralled easily.

Up close, the animal seemed even more pathetic than from a distance, a good thirty kilos of snarling mange. Its paws were slashed and bloody and patches of fur were torn away, revealing festering chemical burns underneath.

"I'll be damned," I breathed, staring at the animal. "It really looks like a dog."

Jaak grinned. "It's like finding a goddamn dinosaur."

“How could it live out here?” Lisa’s arm swept the horizon. “There’s nothing to live on. It’s got to be modified.” She studied it closely, then glanced at Jaak. “Are you sure nothing’s coming in on the perimeter? This isn’t some kind of decoy?”

Jaak shook his head. “Nothing. Not even a peep.”

I leaned in toward the creature. It bared its teeth in a rictus of hatred. “It’s pretty beat up. Maybe it’s the real thing.”

Jaak said, “Oh yeah, it’s the real thing all right. I saw a dog in a zoo once. I’m telling you, this is a dog.”

Lisa shook her head. “It can’t be. It would be dead, if it were a real dog.”

Jaak just grinned and shook his head. “No way. Look at it.” He reached out to push the hair out of the animal’s face so that we could see its muzzle.

The animal lunged and its teeth sank into Jaak’s arm. It shook his arm violently, growling as Jaak stared down at the creature latched onto his flesh. It yanked its head back and forth, trying to tear Jaak’s arm off. Blood spurted around its muzzle as its teeth found Jaak’s arteries.

Jaak laughed. His bleeding stopped. “Damn. Check that out.” He lifted his arm until the animal dangled fully out of the stream, dripping. “I got me a pet.”

The dog swung from the thick bough of Jaak’s arm. It tried to shake his arm once again, but its movements were ineffectual now that it hung off the ground. Even Lisa smiled.

“Must be a bummer to wake up and find out you’re at the end of your evolutionary curve.”

The dog growled, determined to hang on.

Jaak laughed and drew his monomol knife. “Here you go, doggy.” He sliced his arm off, leaving it in the bewildered animal’s mouth.

Lisa cocked her head. “You think we could make some kind of money on it?”

Jaak watched as the dog devoured his severed arm. “I read somewhere that they used to eat dogs. I wonder what they taste like.”

I checked the time in my heads-up display. We’d already killed an hour on an exercise that wasn’t giving any bonuses. “Get your dog, Jaak, and get it on the hunter. We aren’t going to eat it before we call Bunbaum.”

“He’ll probably call it company property,” Jaak groused.

“Yeah, that’s the way it always goes. But we still have to report. Might as well keep the evidence, since we didn’t nuke it.”

We ate sand for dinner. Outside the security bunker, the mining robots rumbled back and forth, ripping deeper into the earth, turning it into a mush of tailings and rock acid that they left in exposed ponds when they hit the water table, or piled into thousand-foot mountainscapes of waste soil. It was comforting to hear those machines cruising back and forth all day. Just you and the bots and the profits, and if nothing got bombed while you were on duty, there was always a nice bonus.

After dinner we sat around and sharpened Lisa’s skin, implanting blades along her limbs so that she was like a razor from all directions. She’d considered monomol blades, but it was too easy to take a limb off



accidentally, and we lost enough body parts as it was without adding to the mayhem. That kind of garbage was for people who didn't have to work: aesthetes from New York City and California.

Lisa had a DermDecora kit for the sharpening. She'd bought it last time we'd gone on vacation and spent extra to get it, instead of getting one of the cheap knock-offs that were cropping up. We worked on cutting her skin down to the bone and setting the blades. A friend of ours in L.A said that he just held DermDecora parties so everyone could do their modifications and help out with the hard-to-reach places.

Lisa had done my glowspine, a sweet tracery of lime landing lights that ran from my tailbone to the base of my skull, so I didn't mind helping her out, but Jaak, who did all of his modification with an old-time scar and tattoo shop in Hawaii, wasn't so pleased. It was a little frustrating because her flesh kept trying to close before we had the blades set, but eventually we got the hang of it, and an hour later, she started looking good.

Once we finished with Lisa's front settings, we sat around and fed her. I had a bowl of tailings mud that I drizzled into her mouth to speed her integration process. When we were weren't feeding her, we watched the dog. Jaak had shoved it into a makeshift cage in one corner of our common room. It lay there like it was dead.

Lisa said, "I ran its DNA. It really is a dog."

"Bunbaum believe you?"

She gave me a dirty look. "What do you think?"

I laughed. At SesCo, tactical defense responders were expected to be fast, flexible, and deadly, but the reality was our SOP was always the same: drop nukes on intruders, slag the leftovers to melt so they couldn't regrow, hit the beaches for vacation. We were independent and trusted as far as tactical decisions went, but there was no way SesCo was going to believe its slag soldiers had found a dog in their tailings mountains.

Lisa nodded. "He wanted to know how the hell a dog could live out here. Then he wanted to know why we didn't catch it sooner. Wanted to know what he pays us for." She pushed her short blond hair off her face and eyed the animal. "I should have slagged it."

"What's he want us to do?"

"It's not in the manual. He's calling back."

I studied the limp animal. "I want to know how it was surviving. Dogs are meat eaters, right?"

"Maybe some of the engineers were giving it meat. Like Jaak did."

Jaak shook his head. "I don't think so. The sucker threw up my arm almost right after he ate it." He wiggled his new stump where it was rapidly regrowing. "I don't think we're compatible for it."

I asked, "But we could eat it, right?"

Lisa laughed and took a spoonful of tailings. "We can eat anything. We're the top of the food chain."

"Weird how it can't eat us."

"You've probably got more mercury and lead running through your blood than any pre-weeviltech animal ever could have had."

"That's bad?"

“Used to be poison.”

“Weird.”

Jaak said, “I think I might have broken it when I put it in the cage.” He studied it seriously. “It’s not moving like it was before. And I heard something snap when I stuffed it in.”

“So?”

Jaak shrugged. “I don’t think it’s healing.”

The dog did look kind of beat up. It just lay there, its sides going up and down like a bellows. Its eyes were half-open, but didn’t seem to be focused on any of us. When Jaak made a sudden movement, it twitched for a second, but it didn’t get up. It didn’t even growl.

Jaak said, “I never thought an animal could be so fragile.”

“You’re fragile, too. That’s not such a big surprise.”

“Yeah, but I only broke a couple bones on it, and now look at it. It just lies there and pants.”

Lisa frowned thoughtfully. “It doesn’t heal.” She climbed awkwardly to her feet and went to peer into the cage. Her voice was excited. “It really is a dog. Just like we used to be. It could take weeks for it to heal. One broken bone, and it’s done for.”

She reached a razored hand into the cage and sliced a thin wound into its shank. Blood oozed out, and kept oozing. It took minutes for it to begin clotting. The dog lay still and panted, clearly wasted.

She laughed. “It’s hard to believe we ever lived long enough to evolve out of that. If you chop off its legs, they won’t regrow.” She cocked her head, fascinated. “It’s as delicate as rock. You break it, and it never comes back together.” She reached out to stroke the matted fur of the animal. “It’s as easy to kill as the hunter.”

The comm buzzed. Jaak went to answer.

Lisa and I stared at the dog, our own little window into pre-history.

Jaak came back into the room. “Bunbaum’s flying out a biologist to take a look at it.”

“You mean a bio-engineer,” I corrected him.

“Nope. Biologist. Bunbaum said they study animals.”

Lisa sat down. I checked her blades to see if she’d knocked anything loose. “There’s a dead-end job.”

“I guess they grow them out of DNA. Study what they do. Behavior, shit like that.”

“Who hires them?”

Jaak shrugged. “Pau Foundation has three of them on staff. Origin of life guys. That’s who’s sending out this one. Mushi-something. Didn’t get his name.”

“Origin of life?”

“Sure, you know, what makes us tick. What makes us alive. Stuff like that.”

I poured a handful of tailings mud into Lisa's mouth. She gobbled it gratefully. "Mud makes us tick," I said.

Jaak nodded at the dog. "It doesn't make that dog tick."

We all looked at the dog. "It's hard to tell what makes it tick."

Lin Musharraf was a short guy with black hair and a hooked nose that dominated his face. He had carved his skin with swirling patterns of glow implants, so he stood out as cobalt spirals in the darkness as he jumped down from his chartered HEV.

The centaurs went wild about the unauthorized visitor and corralled him right up against his ship. They were all over him and his DNA kit, sniffing him, running their scanners over his case, pointing their 101's into his glowing face and snarling at him.

I let him sweat for a minute before calling them away. The centaurs backed off, swearing and circling, but didn't slag him. Musharraf looked shaken. I couldn't blame him. They're scary monsters: bigger and faster than a man. Their behavior patches make them vicious, their sentience upgrades give them the intelligence to operate military equipment, and their basic fight/flight response is so impaired that they only know how to attack when they're threatened. I've seen a half-slugged centaur tear a man to pieces barehanded and then join an assault on enemy ridge fortifications, dragging its whole melted carcass forward with just its arms. They're great critters to have at your back when the slag starts flying.

I guided Musharraf out of the scrum. He had a whole pack of memory addendums blinking off the back of his skull: a fat pipe of data retrieval, channeled direct to the brain, and no smash protection. The centaurs could have shut him down with one hard tap to the back of the head. His cortex might have grown back, but he wouldn't have been the same. Looking at those blinking triple fins of intelligence draping down the back of his head, you could tell he was a typical lab rat. All brains, no survival instincts. I wouldn't have stuck mem-adds into my head even for a triple bonus.

"You've got a dog?" Musharraf asked when we were out of reach of the centaurs.

"We think so." I led him down into the bunker, past our weapons racks and weight rooms to the common room where we'd stored the dog. The dog looked up at us as we came in, the most movement it had made since Jaak put it in the cage.

Musharraf stopped short and stared. "Remarkable."

He knelt in front of the animal's cage and unlocked the door. He held out a handful of pellets. The dog dragged itself upright. Musharraf backed away, giving it room, and the dog followed stiff and wary, snuffling after the pellets. It buried its muzzle in his brown hand, snorting and gobbling at the pellets.

Musharraf looked up. "And you found it in your tailings pits?"

"That's right."

"Remarkable."

The dog finished the pellets and snuffled his palm for more. Musharraf laughed and stood. "No more for you. Not right now." He opened his DNA kit, pulled out a sampler needle and stuck the dog. The sampler's chamber filled with blood.

Lisa watched. "You talk to it?"

Musharraf shrugged. "It's a habit."

“But it’s not sentient.”

“Well, no, but it likes to hear voices.” The chamber finished filling. He withdrew the needle, disconnected the collection chamber and fitted it into the kit. The analysis software blinked alive and the blood disappeared into the heart of the kit with a soft vacuum hiss.

“How do you know?”

Musharraf shrugged. “It’s a dog. Dogs are that way.”

We all frowned. Musharraf started running tests on the blood, humming tunelessly to himself as he worked. His DNA kit peeped and squawked. Lisa watched him run his tests, clearly pissed off that SesCo had sent out a lab rat to retest what she had already done. It was easy to understand her irritation. A centaur could have run those DNA tests.

“I’m astounded that you found a dog in your pits,” Musharraf muttered.

Lisa said, “We were going to slag it, but Bunbaum wouldn’t let us.”

Musharraf eyed her. “How restrained of you.”

Lisa shrugged. “Orders.”

“Still, I’m sure your thermal surge weapon presented a powerful temptation. How good of you not to slag a starving animal.”

Lisa frowned suspiciously. I started to worry that she might take Musharraf apart. She was crazy enough without people talking down to her. The memory addendums on the back of his head were an awfully tempting target: one slap, down goes the lab rat. I wondered if we sank him in a catchment lake if anyone would notice him missing. A biologist, for Christ’s sake.

Musharraf turned back to his DNA kit, apparently unaware of his hazard. “Did you know that in the past, people believed that we should have compassion for all things on Earth? Not just for ourselves, but for all living things?”

“So?”

“I would hope you will have compassion for one foolish scientist and not dismember me today.”

Lisa laughed. I relaxed. Encouraged, Musharraf said, “It truly is remarkable that you found such a specimen amongst your mining operations. I haven’t heard of a living specimen in ten or fifteen years.”

“I saw one in a zoo, once,” Jaak said.

“Yes, well, a zoo is the only place for them. And laboratories, of course. They still provide useful genetic data.” He was studying the results of the tests, nodding to himself as information scrolled across the kit’s screen.

Jaak grinned. “Who needs animals if you can eat stone?”

Musharraf began packing up his DNA kit. “Weeviltech. Precisely. We transcended the animal kingdom.” He latched his kit closed and nodded to us all. “Well, it’s been quite enlightening. Thank you for letting me see your specimen.”

“You’re not going to take it with you?”

Musharraf paused, surprised. "Oh no. I don't think so."

"It's not a dog, then?"

"Oh no, it's quite certainly a real dog. But what on Earth would I do with it?" He held up a vial of blood. "We have the DNA. A live one is hardly worth keeping around. Very expensive to maintain, you know. Manufacturing a basic organism's food is quite complex. Clean rooms, air filters, special lights. Recreating the web of life isn't easy. Far more simple to release oneself from it completely than to attempt to recreate it." He glanced at the dog. "Unfortunately, our furry friend over there would never survive weeviltech. The worms would eat him as quickly as they eat everything else. No, you would have to manufacture the animal from scratch. And really, what would be the point of that? A bio-job without hands?" He laughed and headed for his HEV.

We all looked at each other. I jogged after the doctor and caught up with him at the hatch to the tarmac. He had paused on the verge of opening it. "Your centaurs know me now?" he asked.

"Yeah, you're fine."

"Good." He dilated the hatch and strode out into the cold.

I trailed after him. "Wait! What are we supposed to do with it?"

"The dog?" The doctor climbed into the HEV and began strapping in. Wind whipped around us, carrying stinging grit from the tailings piles. "Turn it back to your pits. Or you could eat it, I suppose. I understand that it was a real delicacy. There are recipes for cooking animals. They take time, but they can give quite extraordinary results."

Musharraf's pilot started cycling up his turbofans.

"Are you kidding?"

Musharraf shrugged and shouted over the increasing scream of the engines. "You should try it! Just another part of our heritage that's atrophied since weeviltech!"

He yanked down the flight cocoon's door, sealing himself inside. The turbofans cycled higher and the pilot motioned me back from their wash as the HEV slowly lifted into the air.

Lisa and Jaak couldn't agree on what we should do with the dog. We had protocols for working out conflict. As a tribe of killers, we needed them. Normally, consensus worked for us, but every once in a while, we just got tangled up and stuck to our positions, and after that, not much could get done without someone getting slaughtered. Lisa and Jaak dug in, and after a couple days of wrangling, with Lisa threatening to cook the thing in the middle of the night while Jaak wasn't watching, and Jaak threatening to cook her if she did, we finally went with a majority vote. I got to be the tie-breaker.

"I say we eat it," Lisa said.

We were sitting in the monitoring room, watching satellite shots of the tailings mountains and the infrared blobs of the mining bots while they ripped around in the earth. In one corner, the object of our discussion lay in its cage, dragged there by Jaak in an attempt to sway the result. He spun his observation chair, turning his attention away from the theater maps. "I think we should keep it. It's cool. Old-timey, you know? I mean, who the hell do you know who has a real dog?"

"Who the hell wants the hassle?" Lisa responded. "I say we try real meat." She cut a line in her forearm with her razors. She ran her finger along the resulting blood beads and tasted them as the wound sealed.

They both looked at me. I looked at the ceiling. “Are you sure you can’t decide this without me?”

Lisa grinned. “Come on, Chen, you decide. It was a group find. Jaak won’t pout, will you?”

Jaak gave her a dirty look.

I looked at Jaak. “I don’t want its food costs to come out of group bonuses. We agreed we’d use part of it for the new Immersive Response. I’m sick of the old one.”

Jaak shrugged. “Fine with me. I can pay for it out of my own. I just won’t get any more tats.”

I leaned back in my chair, surprised, then looked at Lisa. “Well, if Jaak wants to pay for it, I think we should keep it.”

Lisa stared at me, incredulous. “But we could cook it!”

I glanced at the dog where it lay panting in its cage. “It’s like having a zoo of our own. I kind of like it.”

Musharraf and the Pau Foundation hooked us up with a supply of food pellets for the dog and Jaak looked up an old database on how to splint its busted bones. He bought water filtration so that it could drink.

I thought I’d made a good decision, putting the costs on Jaak, but I didn’t really foresee the complications that came with having an unmodified organism in the bunker. The thing shit all over the floor, and sometimes it wouldn’t eat, and it would get sick for no reason, and it was slow to heal so we all ended up playing nursemaid to the thing while it lay in its cage. I kept expecting Lisa to break its neck in the middle of the night, but even though she grumbled, she didn’t assassinate it.

Jaak tried to act like Musharraf. He talked to the dog. He logged onto the libraries and read all about old-time dogs. How they ran in packs. How people used to breed them.

We tried to figure out what kind of dog it was, but we couldn’t narrow it down much, and then Jaak discovered that all the dogs could interbreed, so all you could do was guess that it was some kind of big sheep dog, with maybe a head from a Rottweiler, along with maybe some other kind of dog, like a wolf or coyote or something.

Jaak thought it had coyote in it because they were supposed to have been big adapters, and whatever our dog was, it must have been a big adapter to hang out in the tailings pits. It didn’t have the boosters we had, and it had still lived in the rock acids. Even Lisa was impressed by that.

I was carpet bombing Antarctic Recessionists, swooping low, driving the suckers further and further along the ice floe. If I got lucky, I’d drive the whole village out onto a vestigial shelf and sink them all before they knew what was happening. I dove again, strafing and then spinning away from their return slag.

It was fun, but mostly just a way to kill time between real bombing runs. The new IR was supposed to be as good as the arcades, full immersion and feedback, and portable to boot. People got so lost they had to take intravenous feedings or they withered away while they were inside.

I was about to sink a whole load of refugees when Jaak shouted. “Get out here! You’ve got to see this!”

I stripped off my goggles and ran for the monitoring room, adrenaline amping up. When I got there, Jaak was just standing in the center of the room with the dog, grinning.

Lisa came tearing in a second later. “What? What is it?” Her eyes scanned the theater maps, ready for bloodshed.

Jaak grinned. “Look at this.” He turned to the dog and held out his hand. “Shake.”

The dog sat back on its haunches and gravely offered him its paw. Jaak grinned and shook the paw, then tossed it a food pellet. He turned to us and bowed.

Lisa frowned. "Do it again."

Jaak shrugged and went through the performance a second time.

"It thinks?" she asked.

Jaak shrugged. "Got me. You can get it to do things. The libraries are full of stuff on them. They're trainable. Not like a centaur or anything, but you can make them do little tricks, and if they're certain breeds, they can learn special stuff, too."

"Like what?"

"Some of them were trained to attack. Or to find explosives."

Lisa looked impressed. "Like nukes and stuff?"

Jaak shrugged. "I guess."

"Can I try?" I asked.

Jaak nodded. "Go for it."

I went over to the dog and stuck out my hand. "Shake."

It stuck out its paw. My hackles went up. It was like sending signals to aliens. I mean, you expect a bio-job or a robot to do what you want it to. Centaur, go get blown up. Find the op-force. Call reinforcements. The HEV was like that, too. It would do anything. But it was designed.

"Feed it," Jaak said, handing me a food pellet. "You have to feed it when it does it right."

I held out the food pellet. The dog's long pink tongue swabbed my palm.

I held out my hand again. "Shake." I said. It held out its paw. We shook hands. Its amber eyes stared up at me, solemn.

"That's some weird shit," Lisa said. I shivered, nodding and backed away. The dog watched me go.

That night in my bunk, I lay awake, reading. I'd turned out the lights and only the book's surface glowed, illuminating the bunkroom in a soft green aura. Some of Lisa's art buys glimmered dimly from the walls: a bronze hanging of a phoenix breaking into flight, stylized flames glowing around it; a Japanese woodblock print of Mount Fuji and another of a village weighed down under thick snows; a photo of the three of us in Siberia after the Peninsula campaign, grinning and alive amongst the slag.

Lisa came into the room. Her razors glinted in my book's dim light, flashes of green sparks that outlined her limbs as she moved.

"What are you reading?" She stripped and squeezed into bed with me.

I held up the book and read out loud.

Cut me I won't bleed. Gas me I won't breathe.

Stab me, shoot me, slash me, smash me

I have swallowed science

I am God.

Alone.

I closed the book and its glow died. In the darkness, Lisa rustled under the covers.

My eyes adjusted. She was staring at me. “‘Dead Man,’ right?”

“Because of the dog,” I said.

“Dark reading.” She touched my shoulder, her hand warm, the blades embedded, biting lightly into my skin.

“We used to be like that dog,” I said.

“Pathetic.”

“Scary.”

We were quiet for a little while. Finally I asked, “Do you ever wonder what would happen to us if we didn’t have our science? If we didn’t have our big brains and our weeviltech and our cellstims and—”

“And everything that makes our life good?” She laughed. “No.” She rubbed my stomach. “I like all those little worms that live in your belly.” She started to tickle me.

Wormy, squirmy in your belly,

wormy squirmy feeds you Nelly.

Microweevils eat the bad,

and give you something good instead.

I fought her off, laughing. “That’s no Yearly.”

“Third Grade. Basic bio-logic. Mrs. Alvarez. She was really big on weeviltech.”

She tried to tickle me again but I fought her off. “Yeah, well Yearly only wrote about immortality. He wouldn’t take it.”

Lisa gave up on the tickling and flopped down beside me again. “Blah, blah, blah. He wouldn’t take any gene modifications. No c-cell inhibitors. He was dying of cancer and he wouldn’t take the drugs that would have saved him. Our last mortal poet. Cry me a river. So what?”

“You ever think about why he wouldn’t?”

“Yeah. He wanted to be famous. Suicide’s good for attention.”

“Seriously, though. He thought being human meant having animals. The whole web of life thing. I’ve been reading about him. It’s weird shit. He didn’t want to live without them.”



“Mrs. Alvarez hated him. She had some rhymes about him, too. Anyway, what were we supposed to do? Work out weeviltech and DNA patches for every stupid species? Do you know what that would have cost?” She nuzzled close to me. “If you want animals around you, go to a zoo. Or get some building blocks and make something, if it makes you happy. Something with hands, for god’s sake, not like that dog.” She stared at the underside of the bunk above. “I’d cook that dog in a second.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. That dog’s different from a bio-job. It looks at us, and there’s something there, and it’s not us. I mean, take any bio-job out there, and it’s basically us, poured into another shape, but not that dog...” “I trailed off, thinking.

Lisa laughed. “It shook hands with you, Chen. You don’t worry about a centaur when it salutes.” She climbed on top of me. “Forget the dog. Concentrate on something that matters.” Her smile and her razor blades glinted in the dimness.

I woke up to something licking my face. At first I thought it was Lisa, but she’d climbed into her own bunk. I opened my eyes and found the dog.

It was a funny thing to have this animal licking me, like it wanted to talk, or say hello or something. It licked me again, and I thought that it had come a long way from when it had tried to take off Jaak’s arm. It put its paws up on my bed, and then in a single heavy movement, it was up on the bunk with me, its bulk curled against me.

It slept there all night. It was weird having something other than Lisa lying next to me, but it was warm and there was something friendly about it. I couldn’t help smiling as I drifted back to sleep.

We flew to Hawaii for a swimming vacation and we brought the dog with us. It was good to get out of the northern cold and into the gentle Pacific. Good to stand on the beach, and look out to a limitless horizon. Good to walk along the beach holding hands while black waves crashed on the sand.

Lisa was a good swimmer. She flashed through the ocean’s metallic sheen like an eel out of history and when she surfaced, her naked body glistened with hundreds of iridescent petroleum jewels.

When the Sun started to set, Jaak lit the ocean on fire with his 101. We all sat and watched as the Sun’s great red ball sank through veils of smoke, its light shading deeper crimson with every minute. Waves rushed flaming onto the beach. Jaak got out his harmonica and played while Lisa and I made love on the sand.

We’d intended to amputate her for the weekend, to let her try what she had done to me the vacation before. It was a new thing in L.A., an experiment in vulnerability.

She was beautiful, lying there on the beach, slick and excited with all of our play in the water. I licked oil opals off her skin as I sliced off her limbs, leaving her more dependent than a baby. Jaak played his harmonica and watched the Sun set, and watched as I rendered Lisa down to her core.

After our sex, we lay on the sand. The last of the Sun was dropping below the water. Its rays glinted redly across the smoldering waves. The sky, thick with particulates and smoke, shaded darker.

Lisa sighed contentedly. “We should vacation here more often.”

I tugged on a length of barbed-wire buried in the sand. It tore free and I wrapped it around my upper arm, a tight band that bit into my skin. I showed it to Lisa. “I used to do this all the time when I was a kid.” I smiled. “I thought I was so bad-ass.”

Lisa smiled. “You are.”

“Thanks to science.” I glanced over at the dog. It was lying on the sand a short distance away. It seemed sullen and unsure in its new environment, torn away from the safety of the acid pits and tailings mountains of its homeland. Jaak sat beside the dog and played. Its ears twitched to the music. He was a good player. The mournful sound of the harmonica carried easily over the beach to where we lay.

Lisa turned her head, trying to see the dog. “Roll me.”

I did what she asked. Already, her limbs were regrowing. Small stumps, which would build into larger limbs. By morning, she would be whole, and ravenous. She studied the dog. “This is as close as I’ll ever get to it,” she said.

“Sorry?”

“It’s vulnerable to everything. It can’t swim in the ocean. It can’t eat anything. We have to fly its food to it. We have to scrub its water. Dead end of an evolutionary chain. Without science, we’d be as vulnerable as it.” She looked up at me. “As vulnerable as I am now.” She grinned. “This is as close to death as I’ve ever been. At least, not in combat.”

“Wild, isn’t it?”

“For a day. I liked it better when I did it to you. I’m already starving.”

I fed her a handful of oily sand and watched the dog, standing uncertainly on the beach, sniffing suspiciously at some rusting scrap iron that stuck out of the beach like a giant memory fin. It pawed up a chunk of red plastic rubbed shiny by the ocean and chewed on it briefly, before dropping it. It started licking around its mouth. I wondered if it had poisoned itself again.

“It sure can make you think,” I muttered. I fed Lisa another handful of sand. “If someone came from the past, to meet us here and now, what do you think they’d say about us? Would they even call us human?”

Lisa looked at me seriously. “No, they’d call us gods.”

Jaak got up and wandered into the surf, standing knee-deep in the black smoldering waters. The dog, driven by some unknown instinct, followed him, gingerly picking its way across the sand and rabble.

The dog got tangled in a cluster of wire our last day on the beach. Really ripped the hell out of it: slashes through its fur, broken legs, practically strangled. It had gnawed one of its own paws half off trying to get free. By the time we found it, it was a bloody mess of ragged fur and exposed meat.

Lisa stared down at the dog. “Christ, Jaak, you were supposed to be watching it.”

“I went swimming. You can’t keep an eye on the thing all the time.”

“It’s going to take forever to fix this,” she fumed.

“We should warm up the hunter,” I said. “It’ll be easier to work on it back home.” Lisa and I knelt down to start cutting the dog free. It whimpered and its tail wagged feebly as we started to work.

Jaak was silent.

Lisa slapped him on his leg. “Come on, Jaak, get down here. It’ll bleed out if you don’t hurry up. You know how fragile it is.”

Jaak said, “I think we should eat it.”

Lisa glanced up, surprised. “You do?”

He shrugged. "Sure."

I looked up from where I was tearing away tangled wires from around the dog's torso. "I thought you wanted it to be your pet. Like in the zoo."

Jaak shook his head. "Those food pellets are expensive. I'm spending half my salary on food and water filtration, and now this bullshit." He waved his hand at the tangled dog. "You have to watch the sucker all the time. It's not worth it."

"But still, it's your friend. It shook hands with you."

Jaak laughed. "You're my friend." He looked down at the dog, his face wrinkled with thought. "It's, it's...an animal."

Even though we had all idly discussed what it would be like to eat the dog, it was a surprise to hear him so determined to kill it. "Maybe you should sleep on it." I said. "We can get it back to the bunker, fix it up, and then you can decide when you aren't so pissed off about it."

"No." He pulled out his harmonica and played a few notes, a quick jazzy scale. He took the harmonica out of his mouth. "If you want to put up the money for his feed, I'll keep it, I guess, but otherwise..." He shrugged.

"I don't think you should cook it."

"You don't?" Lisa glanced at me. "We could roast it, right here, on the beach."

I looked down at the dog, a mass of panting, trusting animal. "I still don't think we should do it."

Jaak looked at me seriously. "You want to pay for the feed?"

I sighed. "I'm saving for the new Immersive Response."

"Yeah, well, I've got things I want to buy too, you know." He flexed his muscles, showing off his tattoos. "I mean, what the fuck good does it do?"

"It makes you smile."

"Immersive Response makes you smile. And you don't have to clean up after its crap. Come on, Chen. Admit it. You don't want to take care of it either. It's a pain in the ass."

We all looked at each other, then down at the dog.

Lisa roasted the dog on a spit, over burning plastics and petroleum skimmed from the ocean. It tasted okay, but in the end it was hard to understand the big deal. I've eaten slagged centaur that tasted better.

Afterward, we walked along the shoreline. Opalescent waves crashed and roared up the sand, leaving jewel slicks as they receded and the Sun sank red in the distance.

Without the dog, we could really enjoy the beach. We didn't have to worry about whether it was going to step in acid, or tangle in barb-wire half-buried in the sand, or eat something that would keep it up vomiting half the night.

Still, I remember when the dog licked my face and hauled its shaggy bulk onto my bed, and I remember its warm breathing beside me, and sometimes, I miss it.

## Pocketful of Dharma

WANG JUN STOOD ON THE rain-slicked streets of old Chengdu and stared up into the drizzle at Huojianzhu.

It rose into the evening darkness, a massive city core, dwarfing even Chengdu's skyscrapers. Construction workers dangled from its rising skeleton, swinging from one section of growth to the next on long rappelling belts. Others clambered unsecured, digging their fingers into the honeycomb structure, climbing the struts with careless dangerous ease. Soon the growing core would overwhelm the wet-tiled roofs of the old city. Then Huojianzhu, the Living Architecture, would become Chengdu entirely.

It grew on lattices of minerals, laying its own skeleton and following with cellulose skin. Infrastructure strong and broad, growing and branching, it settled roots deep into the green fertile soil of the Sichuan basin. It drew nutrients and minerals from the soil and sun, and the water of the rancid Bing Jiang; sucking at pollutants as willingly as it ate the sunlight which filtered through twining sooty mist.

Within, its veins and arteries grew pipelines to service the waste and food and data needs of its coming occupants. It was an animal vertical city built first in the fertile minds of the Biotects and now growing into reality. Energy pulsed from the growing creature. It would stand a kilometer high and five wide when fully mature. A vast biologic city, which other than its life support would then lie dormant as humanity walked its hollowed arteries, clambered through its veins and nailed memories to its skin in the rituals of habitation.

Wang Jun watched Huojianzhu and dreamed in his small beggar-boy mind of ways and means that might lead him out of the wet streets and hunger and into its comforts. Already sections of it glowed with habitation. People, living high and far above him, roamed the organism's corridors. Only the powerful and wealthy would live so high above. Those with guanxi. Connections. Influence.

His eyes sought the top of the core, through the darkness and rain and mist, but it disappeared long before his eyes could find it. He wondered if the people up high saw the stars while he saw only drizzle. He had heard that if one cut Huojianzhu, its walls would bleed. Some said it cried. He shivered at the rising creature and turned his eyes back to earth to continue pushing with his stick-thin limbs and bent posture through the Chengdu crowds.

Commuters carried black umbrellas or wore blue and yellow plastic ponchos to protect them from the spitting rain. His own hair lay soaked, slicked to the contours of his skull. He shivered and cast about himself, seeking hard for likely marks, so that he nearly tripped over the Tibetan.

The man squatted on the wet pavement with clear plastic covering his wares. Soot and sweat grimed his face, so that his features sheened black and sticky under the harsh halogen glare of the street lamps. The warped and jagged stumps of his teeth showed as he smiled. He pulled a desiccated tiger claw from under the plastic and waved it in Wang Jun's face.

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Wang Jun stopped short before the waving amputated limb. Its owner was long dead so that only the sinews and ragged fur and the bone remained, dried and stringy. He stared at the relic and reached out to touch the jerky tendons and wickedly curving yellowed claws.

The Tibetan jerked it away and laughed again. There was a tarnished silver ring on his finger, studded with chunks of turquoise; a snake twining around his finger and swallowing its tail endlessly.

"You can't afford to touch." He ground phlegm and spit on the pavement beside him, leaving a pool of yellow mucus shot through with the black texturing of Chengdu's air.

"I can," said Wang Jun.

"What have you got in your pockets?"

Wang Jun shrugged and the Tibetan laughed. "You have nothing, you stunted little boy. Come back when you've got something in your pockets."

He waved his goods of virility at the interested, more moneyed buyers who had gathered. Wang Jun slipped back into the crowd.

It was true what the Tibetan said. He had nothing in his pockets. He had a ratted wool blanket hidden in a Stone-Ailixin cardboard box, a broken VTOL Micro-Machine, and a moldering yellow woolen school hat.

He had come from the green-terraced hills of the countryside with less than that. Already twisted and scarred with the passage of plague, he had come to Chengdu with empty hands and empty pockets and the recollections of a silent dirt village where no thing lived. His body carried recollections of pain so deep that it remained permanently crouched in a muscular memory of that agony.

He had had nothing in his pockets then and he had nothing in his pockets now. It might have bothered him if he had ever known anything but want. Anything but hunger. He could resent the Tibetan's dismissal no more than he might resent the neon logos which hung from the tops of towers and illuminated the pissing rain with

flashing reds, yellows, blues, and greens. Electric colors filled the darkness with hypnotic rhythms and glowing dreams. Red Pagoda Cigarettes, Five Star Beer, Shizi Jituan Software, and Heaven City Banking Corporation. Confucius Jiajiu promised warm rice wine comfort while JinLong Pharmaceuticals guaranteed long life, and it all lay beyond him.

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He watched covetously as people walked past and he called out to them in a polyglot of Mandarin, Chengdu dialect, and the only English words he knew, "Give me money. Give me money." He tugged at their umbrellas and yellow ponchos. He stroked their designer sleeves and powdered skin until they relented and gave money. Those who broke away, he spat upon. The angry ones who seized him, he bit with sharp yellow teeth.

Foreigners were few now in the wet. Late October hurried them homeward, back to their provinces, homes, and countries. Leaner times lay ahead, lean enough that he worried about his future and counted the crumpled paper the people threw to him. He held tight the light aluminum jiao coins people tossed. The foreigners always had paper money and often gave, but they grew too few.

He scanned the street, then picked at a damp chip of concrete on the ground. In Huojianzhu, it was said, they used no concrete to build. He wondered what the floors would feel like, the walls. He dimly remembered his home from before he came to Chengdu, a house made of mud, with a dirt floor. He doubted the city core was made of the same. His belly grew emptier. Above him, a video loop of Lu Xieyan, a Guangdong singer, exhorted the people on the street to strike down the Three Wrongs of Religion: Dogmatism, Terrorism, and Splittism. He ignored her screeching indictments and scanned the crowds again.

A pale face bobbed in the flow of Chinese. A foreigner, but he was a strange one. He neither pushed ahead with a purpose, nor gawked about himself at Chengdu's splendors. He seemed at home on the alien street. He wore a black coat which stretched to the ground. It was shiny, so it reflected the reds and blues of neon, and the flash of the street lamps. The patterns were hypnotic.

Wang Jun slid closer. The man was tall, two meters high, and he wore dark glasses so that his eyes were hidden. Wang Jun recognized the glasses and was sure the man saw clearly from behind the inky ovals. Microfibers in the lenses stole the light and amplified and smoothed it so that the man saw day, even as he hid his eyes

from others in the night.

from others in the night.

He peeked into the alley's mouth. Buildings crowded the passageway's darkness. He smelled excrement and dead things moldering. He thought of the Tibetan's tiger claw, dried and dead, with pieces nicked away from the bone and tendons where customers had selected their weight of virility. The foreigner's footsteps echoed and splashed in the darkness; the even footsteps of a man who saw in the dark. Wang Jun slid in after him, crouching and feeling his way blindly. He touched the roughness of the walls. Instant concrete. Stroking the darkness, he followed the receding footsteps.

Whispers broke the dripping stillness. Wang Jun smiled in the darkness, recognizing the sound of a trade. Did the foreigner buy girls? Heroin? So many things for a foreigner to buy. He settled still, to listen.

The whispers grew heated and terminated in a brief yelp of surprise. Someone gagged and then there was a rasping and a splash. Wang Jun trembled and waited, as still as the concrete to which he pressed his body.

The words of his own country echoed, "Kai deng ba." Wang Jun's ears pricked at a familiar accent. A light flared and his eyes burned under the sharp glare. When his sight adjusted he stared into the dark eyes of the Tibetan street hawker. The Tibetan smiled slowly showing the encrustations of his teeth and Wang Jun stumbled back, seeking escape.

The Tibetan captured Wang Jun with hard efficiency. Wang Jun bit at the Tibetan's hands and fought, but the Tibetan was quick and he pressed Wang Jun against the wet concrete ground so that all Wang Jun could see were two pairs of boots; the Tibetan's and a companion's. He struggled, then let his body lie limp, understanding the futility of defiance.

"So, you're a fighter," the Tibetan said, and held him clown a moment longer to make his lesson clear. Then he hauled Wang Jun upright. His hand clamped painfully at Wang Jun's nape. "NJ shi shei?" he asked.

Wang Jun trembled and whined, "No one. A beggar. No one."

The Tibetan looked more closely at him and smiled. "The ugly boy with the empty pockets. Do you want the tiger's claw after all?"

“I don’t want anything.”

“I don’t want anything.”

The Hunanese asked, “What is your name?”

“Wang Jun.”

“Which ‘Jun’?”

Wang Jun shrugged. “I don’t know.”

The Hunanese shook his head and smiled. “A farmer’s boy,” he said. “What do you plant? Cabbage? Rice?” He laughed. “The Sichuanese are ignorant. You should know how to write your name. I will assume that your ‘Jun’ is for soldier. Are you a soldier?”

Wang Jun shook his head. “I’m a beggar.”

“Soldier Wang, the beggar? No. That won’t do. You are simply Soldier Wang.” He smiled. “Now tell me, Soldier Wang, why are you here in this dangerous dark alley in the rain?”

Wang Jun swallowed. “I wanted the foreigner’s dark glasses.”

“Did you?”

Wang Jun nodded.

The Hunanese stared into Wang Jun’s eyes, then nodded. “All right, Little Wang. Soldier Wang,” he said. “You may have them. Go over there. Take them if you are not afraid.” The Tibetan’s grip relaxed and Wang Jun was free.

He looked and saw where the foreigner lay, face down in a puddle of water. At the Hunanese’s nod, he edged closer to the still body, until he stood above it. He reached down and pulled at the big man’s hair until his face rose dripping from the water, and his expensive glasses were accessible. Wang Jun pulled the glasses from the corpse’s face and laid its head gently back into the stagnant pool. He shook water from the glasses and the Hunanese and Tibetan smiled.

The Hunanese crooked a finger, beckoning.

“Now, Soldier Wang, I have a mission for you. The glasses are your payment. Put them in your pocket. Take this,” a blue datacube appeared in his hand, “and take it to the Renmin Lu bridge across the Bing Jiang. Give it to the person who wears



white gloves. That one will give you something extra for your pocket.” He leaned conspiratorially closer, encircling Wang Jun’s neck and holding him so that their noses pressed together and Wang Jun could smell his stale breath. “If you do not deliver this, my friend will hunt you down and see you die.”

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Wang Jun swallowed and nodded, closing the cube in his small hand. “Go then, Soldier Wang. Dispense your duty.” The Hunanese released his neck, and Wang Jun plunged for the lighted streets, with the datacube clutched tight in his hand.

The pair watched him run.

The Hunanese said, “Do you think he will survive?”

The Tibetan shrugged. “We must trust that Palden Lhamo will protect and guide him now.” “And if she does not?”

“Fate delivered him to us. Who can say what fate will deliver him.? Perhaps no one will search a beggar child. Perhaps we both will be alive tomorrow to know.”

“Or perhaps in another turning of the Wheel.”

The Tibetan nodded.

“And if he accesses the data?”

The Tibetan sighed and turned away. “Then that too will be fate. Come, they will be tracking us.”

THE BING JIANG ran like an oil slick under the bridge, black and sluggish. Wang Jun perched on the bridge’s railings soot-stained stone engraved with dragons and phoenixes cavorting through clouds. He looked down into the river and watched styrofoam shreds of packing containers float lazily on the thick surface of the water. Trying to hit a carton, he hawked phlegm and spat. He missed, and his mucus joined the rest of the river’s effluent. He looked at the cube again. Turning it in his hands as he had done several times before as he waited for the man with the white gloves. It was blue, with the smoothness of all highly engineered plastics. Its texture reminded him of a tiny plastic chair he had once owned. It had been a brilliant red but smooth like this. He had begged for it until a stronger boy took it.

Now he turned the blue cube in his hands, stroking its surface and probing its black data jack with a speculative finger. He wondered if it might be more valuable than the glasses he now wore. Too large for his small head, they kept slipping down off his nose. He wore them anyway, delighted by the novelty of day-sight in

darkness. He pushed the glasses back up on his nose and turned the cube again.

darkness. He pushed the glasses back up on his nose and turned the cube again.

The man with white gloves did not come.

Wang Jun coughed and spit again. If the man did not come before he counted ten large pieces of styrofoam, he would keep the cube and sell it.

Twenty styrofoam pieces later, the man with white gloves had not come, and the sky was beginning to lighten. Wang Jun stared at the cube. He considered throwing it in the water. He waited as nongmin began filtering across the bridge with their pull-carts laden with produce. Peasants coming in from the countryside, they leaked into the city from the wet fertile fields beyond, with mud between their toes and vegetables on their backs. Dawn was coming. Huojianzhu glistened, shining huge and alive against a lightening sky. He coughed and spit again and hopped off the bridge. He dropped the datacube in a ragged pocket. The Tibetan wouldn't be able to find him anyway.

Sunlight filtered through the haze of the city. Chengdu absorbed the heat. Humidity oozed out of the air, a freak change in temperature, a last wave of heat before winter came on. Wang Jun sweated. He found Three-Fingers Gao in a game room. Gao didn't really have three fingers. He had ten, and he used them all as he controlled a three-dimensional soldier through the high mountains of Tibet against the rebellion. He was known in Chengdu's triad circles as the man who had made TexTel's Chief Rep pay 10,000 yuan a month in protection money until he rotated back to Singapore. Because of the use of three fingers.

Wang Jun tugged Three-Fingers's leather jacket. Distracted, Three-Fingers died under an onslaught of staff-wielding monks.

He scowled at Wang Jun. "What?"

"I got something to sell."

"I don't want any of those boards you tried to sell me before. I told you, they're no good without the hearts."

Wang Jun said, "I got something else."

"What?"

He held out the glasses and Three-Fingers's eyes dilated. He feigned indifference. "Where did you get those?"

"Found them."

“Let me see.”

“Let me see.”

“I want one hundred.”

“Mei me’er.” He used Beijing slang. No way. He started the game. His soldier squatted on the plains, with snowy peaks rising before him. He started forward, pushing across short grasses to a hut made of the skin of earlier Chinese soldiers. Wang Jun watched and said, “Don’t go in the hut.”

“I know.”

“I’ll take fifty.”

Three-Fingers snorted. His soldier spied horsemen approaching and moved so that the hut hid him from their view. “I’ll give you twenty.”

Wang Jun said, “Maybe BeanBean will give me more.”

“I’ll give you thirty, go see if BeanBean will give you that.” His soldier waited until the horsemen clustered. He launched a rocket into their center. The game machine rumbled as the rocket exploded. “You have thirty now?”

Three-Fingers turned away from his game and his soldier perished quickly as bio-engineered yakmen boiled out of the hut. He ignored the screams of his soldier as he counted out the cash to Wang Jun. Wang Jun left Three-Fingers to his games and celebrated the sale by finding an unused piece of bridge near the Bing Jiang. He settled down to nap under it through the sweltering afternoon heat.

He woke in the evening and he was hungry. He felt the heaviness of coins in his pocket and thought on the possibilities of his wealth. Among the coins, his fingers touched the unfamiliar shape of the data cube. He took it out and turned it in his hands. He had nearly forgotten the origin of his money. Holding the data cube, he was reminded of the Tibetan and the Hunanese and his mission. He considered seeking out the Tibetan and returning it to him, but deep inside he held a suspicion that he would not find the man selling tiger bones tonight. His stomach rumbled. He dropped the datacube back into his pocket and jingled the coins it resided with. Tonight he had money in his pockets. He would eat well.

“How much for mapo dofu?”

The cook looked at him from where he stood, swirling a soup in his broad

wok, and listening to it sizzle.

wok, and listening to it sizzle.

“Shushu, I have money.” Wang Jun showed him the coins. “And I want to eat.”

The cook laughed. “Xiao Wang is rich! Well then, Little Wang, tell me what you care for.”

“Mapo dofu, yu xiang pork, two liang of rice and Wu Xing beer.” His order tumbled out in a rush.

“Little Wang has a big stomach! Where will you fit all that food, I wonder?” When Wang Jun glared at him he said, “Go, sit, you’ll have your feast.”

Wang Jun went and sat at a low table and watched as the fire roared and the cook threw chiles into the wok to fry. He wiped at his mouth to keep from drooling as the smell of the food came to his nose. The cook’s wife opened a bottle of Five Star for him, and he watched as she poured the beer into a wet glass. The day’s heat was dissipating. Rain began to spatter the street restaurant’s burlap roof. Wang Jun drank from his beer and watched the other diners, taking in the food they ate and the company they kept. These were people he might have previously harassed for their money. But not tonight. Tonight he was a king. Rich, with money in his pocket.

His thoughts were broken by the arrival of a foreigner. A broad man with long white hair pulled back in a horse’s tail. His skin was pale and he wore white gloves. He stepped under the sheltering burlap and cast alien blue eyes across the diners. The Chinese at their tables stared back. When his eyes settled on Wang Jun’s bent form, he smiled. He went to squat on a stool across from Wang Jun and said, in accented Mandarin, “You are Little Wang. You have something for me.”

Wang Jun stared at the man and then, feeling cocky with the attention of the Other Chinese said, “Ke neng.” Maybe.

The foreigner frowned, then leaned across the table. The cook’s wife came, interrupting, and set down Wang Jun’s mapo dofu, followed quickly by the pork. She went and scooped out a steaming bowl of rice, broader than Wang Jun’s hand and set it before him. Wang Jun picked up chopsticks and began shoveling the food into his mouth, all the while watching the foreigner. His eyes watered at the spiciness of the dofu and his mouth tingled with the familiar numbing of ground peppercorns.

The wife asked if the foreigner would eat with him, and Wang Jun eyed the foreigner. He felt the money in his pocket, while his mouth flamed on. He looked at the size of the foreigner and assented reluctantly, feeling his wealth now inadequate.

They spoke in Chengdu hua, the dialect of the city, so that the foreigner did not understand what they said. The man watched as the wife scooped another bowl of rice and set it in front of him with a pair of chopsticks. He looked down at the white mountain of rice in his bowl and then looked up at Wang Jun. He shook his head, and said, "You have something for me. Give it to me now."

They spoke in Chengdu hua, the dialect of the city, so that the foreigner did not understand what they said. The man watched as the wife scooped another bowl of rice and set it in front of him with a pair of chopsticks. He looked down at the white mountain of rice in his bowl and then looked up at Wang Jun. He shook his head, and said, "You have something for me. Give it to me now."

The pale white man frowned and his blue eyes were cold and angry. "Did not the Tibetan tell you to give me something?" He held out a white-gloved hand.

Wang Jun shrugged. "You didn't come to the bridge. Why should I give it to you now?"

"Do you have it?"

Wang Jun became guarded. "No."

"Where is it?"

"I threw it away."

The man reached across the small table and grasped Wang Jun's ragged collar. He pulled him close. "Give it to me now. You are very small, I can take it or you can give it to me. Little Wang, you cannot win tonight. Do not test me."

Wang Jun stared at the foreigner and saw silver flash in the man's breast pocket. On impulse he reached for the glint of silver and drew a thing up until it was between their two faces. Other people at nearby tables gasped at what Wang Jun held. Wang Jun's hand began to shake, quivering uncontrollably, until the Tibetan's severed finger, with its tarnished silver and turquoise ring still on it, slipped from his horrified grasp and landed in the yuxiang pork.

The foreigner smiled, an indifferent, resigned smile. He said, "Give me the datacube before I collect a trophy from you as well." Wang Jun nodded and slowly reached into his pocket. The foreigner's eyes followed his reaching hand.

Wang Jun's free hand reached desperately out to the table and grabbed a handful of scalding tofu from its plate. Before the man could react, he drove the contents, full of hot chiles and peppercorns, into those cold blue eyes. As the foreigner howled, Wang Jun sank his sharp yellow teeth into the pale flesh of imprisoning hands. The foreigner dropped Wang Jun to rub frantically at his burning eye sockets, and blood flowed from his damaged hands.

Wang Jun took his freedom and ran for the darkness and alleys he knew best,

leaving the foreigner still roaring behind him.

leaving the foreigner still roaring behind him.

He could still remember the countryside he had come from and, vaguely, a mud-brick home. More clearly, he remembered terrace-sculpted hills and running along those terraces. Playing in warm summer mud with a Micro-Machine VTOL in his hands while his parents labored in brown water around their ankles and green rice shoots sprouted up out of the muck. Later, he had passed those same terraces, lush and unharvested as he made his way out of his silent village.

Under the cold instant-concrete shadows of the skyscrapers, he stroked his toy VTOL. The wings which folded up and down had broken off and were lost. He turned it over, looking at its die-cast steel frame. He pulled out the datacube and stared at it. Weighed the toy and the cube in his hands. He thought of the Tibetan's finger, severed with its silver snake ring still on it, and shuddered. The white man with the blue eyes would be looking for him. He looked around at his box. He put the Micro-Machine in his pocket but left his ratted blanket. He took his yellow anchuan maozi, the traffic safety hat children wore to and from school, stolen from a child even smaller than he. He pulled the yellow wool cap down over his ears, re-pocketed the datacube, and left without looking back.

THREE-FINGERS was crooning karaoke in a bar when Wang Jun found him. A pair of women with smooth skins and hard empty eyes attended him. They wore red silk chipao, styled from Shanghai. The collars were high and formal, but the slits in the dresses went nearly to the women's waists. Three-Fingers glared through the dim red smoky light when Wang Jun approached.

"What?"

"Do you have a computer that reads these?" He held up the datacube.

Three-Fingers stared at the cube and reached out for it. "Where did you get that?"

Wang Jun held it out but did not release it. "Off someone."

"Same place you got those glasses?"

"Maybe."

Three-Fingers peered at the datacube. "It's not a standard datacube. See the

pins on the inside?” Wang Jun looked at the datasocket. “There’s only three pins. You need an adapter to read whatever’s on there. And you might not even be able to read it then. Depends what kind of OS it’s designed for.”

pins on the inside?” Wang Jun looked at the datasocket. “There’s only three pins. You need an adapter to read whatever’s on there. And you might not even be able to read it then. Depends what kind of OS it’s designed for.”

“Give it to me.”

“No.” Wang Jun backed off a step.

One of the women giggled at the interaction between the mini mob boss and

street urchin. She stroked Three-Fingers’s chest. “Don’t worry about the taofanzhe. Pay attention to us.” She giggled again.

Wang Jun glared. Three-Fingers pushed the hostess off him. “Go away.” She made an exaggerated pout, but left with her companion.

Three-Fingers held out his hand. “Let me see it. I can’t help you if you don’t let me see the tamade thing.”

Wang Jun frowned but passed the datacube over. Three-Fingers turned it over in his hands. He peered into the socket, then nodded. “It’s for HuangLong OS.” He tossed it back and said, “It’s a medical specialty OS. They use it for things like brain surgery, and DNA mapping. That’s pretty specialized. Where’d you get it?”

Wang Jun shrugged. “Someone gave it to me.”

“Fang pi.” Bullshit.

Wang Jun was silent and they regarded each other, then Three-Fingers said,

“Xing, I’ll buy it off you. Just because I’m curious. I’ll give you five yuan. You want to sell it?”

Wang Jun shook his head.

“Fine. Ten yuan, but that’s all.”

Wang Jun shook his head again.

Three-Fingers Gao frowned. “Did you get rich, suddenly?”

“I don’t want to sell it. I want to know what’s on it.”

“Well, that makes two of us now.” They regarded each other for a time longer. Three-Fingers said, “All right. I’ll help you. But if there’s any value to what’s on that, I’m taking three quarters on the profit.”

“Yi ban.”

“Yi ban.”

“Where are we going?”

Three-Fingers walked fast through chill mist. He led Wang Jun into smaller and smaller alleys. The buildings changed in character from shining modern glass and steel to mud-brick with thatched and tiled roofs. The streets became cobbled and jagged and old women stared out at them from dark wooden doorways. Wang Jun watched the old ladies with suspicion. Their eyes followed him impassively, recording his and Three-Fingers’s passage.

Three-Fingers stopped to pull out a box of Red Pagodas. He put one in his mouth. “You smoke?”

Wang Jun took the offered stick and leaned close as Three-Fingers struck a match. It flared high and yellow and then sank low under the pressure of the wet air. Wang Jun drew hard on the cigarette and blew smoke. Three-Fingers lit his own.

“Where are we going?”

Three-Fingers shrugged. “Here.” He jerked his head at the building behind them. He smoked for a minute longer, then dropped his cigarette on the damp cobbles and ground it out with a black boot. “Put out your smoke. It’s bad for the machines.” Wang Jun flicked the butt against a wall. It threw off red sparks where it bounced and then lay smoking on the ground. Three-Fingers pushed open a wooden door. Its paint was peeling and its frame warped so that he shoved hard and the door scraped loudly as they entered.

In the dim light of the room, Wang Jun could see dozens of monitors. They glowed with screen savers and data. He saw columns of characters and numbers, scrolling, connected to distant networks of information. People sat at the monitors in a silence broken only by the sound of the keys being pressed at an incessant rate.

Three-Fingers pulled Wang Jun up to one of the silent technicians and said, “He Dan, can you read this?” He nudged Wang Jun and Wang Jun held up the datacube. He Dan plucked it out of Wang Jun’s hand with spidery graceful fingers and brought it close to his eyes in the dimness. With a shrug .he began to sort through a pile of adapters. He chose one and connected it to a stray cord, then inserted the adapter into the datacube. He typed on the computer and the borders and workspaces flickered and changed color. A box appeared and he hit a single key in response.

“Where am I?” The voice was so loud that the speakers distorted and



crackled. The technicians all jumped as their silence was shattered. He Dan adjusted a speaker control. The voice came again, softer. "Hello?" It held an edge of fear. "Is there anyone there?" it asked.

crackled. The technicians all jumped as their silence was shattered. He Dan adjusted a speaker control. The voice came again, softer. "Hello?" It held an edge of fear. "Is there anyone there?" it asked.

"Where am I?" the voice quavered.

"In a computer," said Wang Jun.

Three-Fingers slapped him on the back of the head. "Be quiet."

"What?" said the voice.

They listened silently.

"Hello, did someone say I was in a computer?" it said.

Wang Jun said, "Yes, you're in a computer. What are you?"

"I'm in a computer?" The voice was puzzled. "I was having surgery. How am I in a computer?"

"Who are you?" Wang Jun ignored Three-Fingers's glowering eyes.

"I am Naed Delhi, the 19th Dalai Lama. Who are you?"

The typing stopped. No one spoke. Wang Jun heard the faint whine of cooling fans and the high resonances of the monitors humming. Technicians turned to stare at the trio and the computer which spoke. Outside Wang Jun heard someone clear their throat of phlegm and spit. The computer spoke on, heedless of the effect of its words. "Hello?" it said. "Who am I speaking to?" "I'm Wang Jun."

"Hello. Why can't I see?"

"You're in a computer. You don't have any eyes."

"I can hear. Why can I hear and yet not see?"

He Dan broke in, "Video input is not compatible with the software emulator which runs your program."

"I don't understand."

"You are an artificial intelligence construct. Your consciousness is software.

Your input comes from hardware. They are incompatible on the system we have

installed you.”

installed you.”

“Are you really the Dalai Lama?” Wang Jun asked.

“Yes,” the computer said.

“How —” Wang Jun began, but Three-Fingers pulled him away from the system before he could phrase his question. He knelt in front of Wang Jun. His hands were shaking as he held Wang Jun by the collar of his shirt. Their faces nearly touched as he hissed out, “Where did you find this cube?”

Wang Jun shrugged. “Someone gave it to me.”

Three-Finger’s hand blurred and struck Wang Jun’s face. Wang Jun jerked at its impact. His face burned. The technicians watched as Three-Fingers hissed, “Don’t lie to me. Where did you find this thing?”

Wang Jun touched his face, “From a Tibetan, I got it from a Tibetan who sold tiger bones, and a man from Hunan. And there was a body. A big foreigner. They were his glasses I sold you.”

Three-Fingers tilted his head back to stare at the ceiling. “Don’t lie to me. Do you know what it means if we’ve got the Dalai Lama on a datacube that you’ve been carrying around in your pocket?” He shook Wang Jun. “Do you know what it means?”

Wang Jun whined, “I was supposed to give it to a man with white gloves, but he never came. And there was another man. A foreigner and he killed the Tibetan and took his finger, and he wanted mine too, and I ran and —” his voice rose in a babbling whine.

Three-Fingers’s hands settled around Wang Jun’s neck and squeezed until Wang Jun’s ears rang and blackness scudded across his eyes. Distantly, he heard Three-Fingers say, “Don’t cry to me. I’m not your mother. I’ll take your tongue out if you make my life any more difficult than it already is. Do you understand?”

Wang Jun nodded in his haze.

Three-Fingers released him, saying, “Good. Go talk to the computer.” Wang Jun breathed deeply and stumbled back to the Dalai Lama.

“How did you get inside the computer?” he asked.

“How do you know I am in a computer?”

“How do you know I am in a computer?”

The computer was silent.

“What’s it like in there?” Wang Jun tried.

“Terrible and still,” said the computer. Then it said, “I was going to have surgery, and now I am here.”

“Did you dream?”

“I don’t remember any dreams.”

“Are you leading a rebellion against my homeland?”

“You speak Chinese. Are you from China?”

“Yes. Why are you making people fight in Tibet?”

“Where is this computer?”

“Chengdu.”

“Oh, my. A long way from Bombay,” the computer whispered.

“You came from Bombay?”

“I was having surgery in Bombay.”

“Is it lonely in there?”

“I don’t remember anything until now. But it is very still here. Deathly still. I can hear you, but cannot feel anything. There is nothing here. I fear that I am not here. It is maddening. All of my senses are lost. I want out of this computer. Help me. Take me back to my body.” The computer’s voice, vibrating from the speakers, was begging.

“We can sell him,” Three-Fingers said abruptly.

Wang Jun stared at Three-Fingers. “You can’t sell him.”

“Someone wants him if they’re chasing you. We can sell him.”

The computer said, “You can’t sell me. I have to get back to Bombay. I’m sure my surgery can’t be completed if I’m not there. I must go back. You must take me back.”

The computer said, “You can’t sell me. I have to get back to Bombay. I’m sure my surgery can’t be completed if I’m not there. I must go back. You must take me back.”

“Wait,” said the Dalai Lama. “Please don’t unplug me yet. I’m afraid. I’m afraid of being gone again.”

“Unplug him,” said Three-Fingers.

“Wait,” said the computer. “You must listen to me. If my body is dead, you must destroy this computer you keep me in. I fear that I will not reincarnate. Even Palden Lhamo may not be able to find my soul. She is Powerful, but though she rides across an ocean of blood astride the skin of her traitorous son, she may not find me. My soul will be trapped here, unnaturally preserved, even as my body decomposes. Promise me, please. You must not leave me —”

He Dan shut off the computer.

Three-Fingers raised his eyebrows at He Dan.

He Dan shrugged. “It could be that it is the Dalai Lama. If there are people chasing the beggar-child, it lends credence to its claims. It would not be hard to upload his identity matrix while he was undergoing surgery.”

“Who would do that?”

He Dan shrugged. “He is at the center of so many different political conflicts, it would be impossible to say. In a datacube, he makes a convenient hostage. Tibetan extremists, Americans, us, perhaps the EU; they would all be interested in having such a hostage.”

Three-Fingers said, “If I’m going to sell him, I’ll need to know who put him in there.”

He Dan nodded, and then the door exploded inward. Splinters of wood flew about and shafts of light illuminated the dim room. Outside there was a whine of VTOLs and then there were bright lights lancing through the door, followed by the rapid thud of heavy boots. Wang Jun ducked instinctively as something seemed to suck the air out of the room and the monitors exploded, showering glass on the technicians and Wang Jun. People were shouting everywhere around him and Wang Jun smelled smoke. He stood up and pulled the datacube out of its adapter and rolled underneath a table as a barrage of pellets ratcheted across the wall above him.

He saw Three-Fingers fumble with something at his belt and then stiffen as red blossoms appeared on his chest. Other technicians were failing, all of them sprouting bloody stains on their bodies. Wang Jun huddled deeper under the table as forms in black armor came through the door. He put the datacube in his mouth, thinking he might swallow it before they could find him. More explosions came and suddenly the wall beside him was gone in a cacophony of bricks and rubble. He scrambled over the collapsed wall as shouts filled the air. Hunched low and running, he became nothing except a small child shadow. An irrelevant shadow in the rain and the play of lights from the troops left behind.

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He had seen the VTOLs rise from a distance, their running lights illuminating their forms in the darkness. He had watched their wings lower and lock above the wet tile roofs. Then they were gone in a hissing acceleration. Against his better judgment he had returned, joining other residents in a slow scavenging across the rubble of the destroyed building. They moved in a methodical stooped walk. Picking at brick. Turning shattered monitor screens. Fumbling at the pockets of the bodies left behind. He had found no trace of Three-Fingers and doubted he was alive. He had found Dan, but only in pieces.

He turned the datacube again in his hands.

“Where did you get that?”

He jerked skittishly and moved to run, but a hand was holding him and he was immobile. It was a Chinese woman and she wore white gloves. He stared at the hand which held him.

“Do you have something for me?” she asked. Her Mandarin was clear and educated, perfect, as though she came from Beijing itself.

“I don’t know.”

“Is that yours?”

“No.”

“Were you supposed to give it to me?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know.”

“Why didn’t you come?”

“There were delays,” she said and her eyes became hooded and dark. Wang Jun reached out to hand her the datacube. “You have to be careful with it. It has the Dalai Lama.”

“I know. I was coming to you. I was afraid I had lost you. Come.” She motioned him. “You are cold. There is a bed and food waiting for you.” She motioned again and he followed her out of the doorway and into the rain.

She led him through the wet streets. In his mind, the images of VTOLs and exploding monitors and Three-Fingers’s blossoming red mortality made him wary as they crossed intersections and bore along the old streets of Chengdu.

The woman held his hand firm in hers, and she bore him with direction and purpose so that no matter how many twists and turns they took, they were always closer to the organic skeleton of the city core. It rose above them, glowing. Dwarfing them and the constructors who swung from it on gossamer lines. They swarmed it as ants might, slowly growing their nest.

Then they were under its bones, walking through the wet organic passageways of the growing creature. Wang Jun smelled compost and death. The air grew warm and humid as they headed deeper into the architectural animal. Glowing chips embedded in the woman’s wrists passed them through construction checkpoints until they came to a lift, a cage that rose up through Huojianzhu’s internals, sliding on smooth organic rails. Through the bars of the cage Wang Jun saw levels completed, shining and habitable, the walls with the appearance of polished steel, and fluorescent lamps, glowing, in their brackets. He saw levels where only the segmented superstructure of the beast existed. A monster with its bones exposed; wet slick things sheened with a biological ooze. Hardening silicon mucus coated the bones, flowed, and built up successive layers to form walls. Huojianzhu grew and where it grew the Biotects and constructors oversaw, guiding and ensuring that its growth followed their carefully imagined intentions. The beautiful woman, and Wang Jun with her, rose higher.

They came to a level nearly complete. Her feet echoed in a hallway, and she came to a door. Her hand leaned gently on the surface of the door and its skin moved slightly under her pressure so that Wang Jun was unsure if the door molded to her hand or reached out to caress it. The door swung open and Wang Jun saw the luxury of the heights of which he had always dreamed.

In a room with a bed so soft his back ached and with pillows so fluffy he believed he smothered, he woke. There were voices. “— a beggar. No one,” she said.

In a room with a bed so soft his back ached and with pillows so fluffy he believed he smothered, he woke. There were voices. “— a beggar. No one,” she said.

“He helped us.”

“Leave his pocket with money, then.”

Their voices became distant, and though he wished he could stay awake, he slept again.

Wang Jun sank into the enveloping cushions of a chair so deep that his feet could not touch the polished elegance of the real wooden floors. He was well rested now, having climbed finally out of the womb of bedding and pillows which had tangled him. Around him, shanshui paintings hung from smooth white walls, and recessed shelves held intricately fired vases from China’s dynasties, long dead and gone. The kitchen he had already made acquaintance with, watching the lady who looked Chinese but wasn’t as she prepared a mountain of food for him on burners that flared like suns, and made tea with water that scalded as it came from the faucet. In other rooms, lights glowed on and off as he entered and departed, and there was carpet, soft expanses of pale fiber that were always warm under his feet. Now he sat in the enveloping chair and watched with dark eyes as the lady and her foreign companion paced before him. Behind them, the Dalai Lama’s cube sat on a shelf, blue and small.

“Sile?”

Wang Jun started at the sound of her voice, and he felt his heart beating. Outside the windows of the apartment thick Chengdu mist hung, stagnant and damp. No more rain. He struggled out of the chair and went to look out the windows. He could not see the lights of Chengdu’s old city below. The mist was too thick. The woman watched him as her counterpart spoke. “Yeah, either the Chinese or the Europeans blew his head full of holes. They’re just annoyed because they lost him.”

“What should we do?”

“I’m waiting for an indication from the embassy. The Tibetans want us to destroy him. Keep whining about how his soul won’t be reborn, if we don’t destroy it.”

She laughed. “Why not write him onto a new body?”

“Don’t be sacrilegious.”

“That’s how they see it? Fanatics can be so — “

“That’s how they see it? Fanatics can be so — “

“So this whole mission is a waste?”

“He’s not much good to us without his body. The Tibetans won’t recognize

him if we write him onto a new body and he’s no good as leverage against the Chinese if he doesn’t have a following.

“She sighed. “I wish we didn’t have to work with them.”

“Without the Tibetans, we wouldn’t even have known to look for the kid.”

“Well, now they’re threatening that if we don’t give him back, the Pali Lama is going to flay our skins, or something.”

“Palden Lhamo,” said the man.

“What?”

He repeated, “Palden Lhamo. She’s a Tibetan goddess. Supposed to be the protector of Tibet and our digital friend.” He jerked his head at the datacube sitting on its shelf. “The paintings of her show her riding a mule across seas of blood and using the flayed skin of her son as a saddle blanket.”

“What a lovely culture they’ve got.”

“You should see the paintings: Red hair, necklaces of skulls —”

“Enough.”

Wang Jun said, “Can I open the window?”

The woman looked over at the man; he shrugged.

“Suibian,” she said.

Wang Jun undid the securing clasps and rolled the wide window open. Chill air washed into the room. He peered down into the orange glow of the mist, leaning far out into the air. He stroked the spongy organic exoskeleton of the building, a resilient honeycomb of holes. Below, he could just make out the shifting silhouettes of constructors clambering across the surface of the structure. Behind him the conversation continued.

“So what do we do?”



He waved at the datacube. “We could always plug his eminence into a computer and ask him for advice.”

He waved at the datacube. “We could always plug his eminence into a computer and ask him for advice.”

“Would the Chinese be interested in a deal, even if his body is gone?”

“Maybe. They’d probably keep his cube in a desk drawer. Let it gather dust. If he never reincarnated, it would be fine with them. One less headache for them to deal with.”

“Maybe we’ll be able to trade him for something still, then.”

“Not much, though. So what if he does reincarnate? It’ll be twenty years before he has an effect on them.” He sighed. “Trade talks start tomorrow. This operation’s starting to look like a scrub at the home office. They’re already rumbling about extracting us before the talks begin. At least the EU didn’t get him.”

“Well, I’ll be glad to get back to California.”

“Yeah.”

Wang Jun turned from his view and asked, “Will you kill him?”

The pair exchanged looks. The man turned away, muttering under his breath.

Wang Jun held in his response to the man’s rudeness. Instead he said, “I’m hungry.”

“He’s hungry, again,” muttered the man.

“We only have instants, now,” said the woman.

“Xing,” said Wang Jun. The woman went into the kitchen and Wang Jun’s eyes fastened on the dark blue sheen of the datacube, sitting on its shelf.

“I’m cold,” said the man. “Close the window.”

Wang Jun sniffed at the aroma of frying food coming from the woman and the kitchen. His belly rumbled, but he went to the window. “Okay.”

The mist clung to him as he clung to the superstructure of the biologic city. His fingers dug into its spongy honeycomb skin and he heard the rush of Chengdu far below, but could not see it through the mist. He heard curses and looked up. Light silhouetted the beautiful woman who looked Chinese but wasn’t and the man

as they peered out of their luxury apartment window from high above.

as they peered out of their luxury apartment window from high above.

He descended. Slipping deeper into the mist, clambering for the slick safety of the pavement far below. He passed constructors and Biotechers, working late-night shifts. They all hung precariously from the side of the mountainous building, but only he was so daring as to climb the skin of the creature without the protection of a harness. They watched him climb by with grave eyes, but they made no move to stop him. Who were they to care if his fingers slipped and he fell to the infinitely distant pavement? He passed them and continued his descent.

When he looked up again, seeking the isolated window from which he had issued, it was gone. Lost in the thickness of the chill mist. He guessed the man and woman would not follow. That they would have more pressing concerns than to find a lone beggar boy with a useless datacube somewhere in the drizzling streets of Chengdu. He smiled to himself. They would pack and go home to their foreign country and leave him to remain in Chengdu. Beggars always remained.

His arms began to shake with strain as his descent continued. The climb was already taking him longer than he had guessed possible. The sheer size of the core was greater than he had ever imagined. His fingers dug into the spongy biomass of Huojianzhu's skin, seeking another hold. The joints of his fingers ached and his arms trembled. It was cold this high even though the night air was still. The wet mist and the damp spongy walls he clung to chilled his fingers, numbing them and making him unsure of his handholds. He watched where he placed each hand in an agony of care, seeking stability and safety with every grip.

For the first time he wondered how long it would be until he fell. The descent was too long, and the clinging chill was sinking deeper into his bones. The mists parted and he could see the lights of Chengdu proper, spread out below him. His hopes sank as he saw finally how high he hung above the city.

He dug for another hand-hold and when he set his weight against it, the spongy mass gave way and he was suddenly dangling by a single weak hand while the Chengdu lights spun crazily below him. He scrambled desperately for another hand-hold. He dug his feet deep into the spongy surface and found one. He saw where his slipping hand had torn away the wall. There was a deep rent, and from it, the milky blood of the biostructure dripped slowly. His heart beat faster staring at Huojianzhu's mucus wound and he imagined himself slipping and falling; spattering across the pavement while his blood ran slick and easy into the street gutters. He fought to control his rising panic as his arms trembled and threatened to give way. Then he forced himself to move his limbs and descend, to seek some respite from

the climb, a hope of survival on the harsh skin of the core.

the climb, a hope of survival on the harsh skin of the core.

Standing on a firm surface he turned and looked out at Chengdu's spread lights. In a few more years all of Chengdu would be overwhelmed by the spreading core. He wondered where a beggar boy would run then. What streets would be left open for those such as he? He reached into his pocket and felt the hard edges of the datacube. He drew it from his pocket, and gazed on its smooth blue perfect surface. Its perfect geometric edges. So much consternation over the man who lived inside. He hefted the cube. It was light. Too light to hold the whole of a person. He remembered his brief interaction with the Dalai Lama, in a dark room under the glow of monitors. He squeezed the cube tight in his hand and then went to the edge of the duct. Chengdu lay below him.

He cocked his arm to throw. Winding it back to launch the Dalai Lama in his silicon cell out into the empty air. To arc and fall, faster and faster until he shattered against the distant ground and was released, to begin again his cycle of rebirth. He held his arm cocked, then whipped it forward in a trajectory of launch. When his arm had completed its swing, the datacube and the Dalai Lama still sat safe in his palm. Smooth and blue and undamaged.

He considered it. Stroking it, feeling its contours in his hand. Then he slid it back into his pocket and swung himself out, once again onto the skin of Huojianzhu. He smiled as he climbed, digging his fingers into the living flesh of the building. He wondered how long this infinity of climbing would last, and if he would reach the streets whole or as a bloody pulp. Chengdu seemed a long way below.

The datacube rested in his pocket. If he fell, it would shatter and the Dalai Lama would be released. If he survived? For now he would keep it. Later, perhaps, he would destroy it. The Dalai Lama was asleep in the cube, and would not overly mind the longer wait. And, Wang Jun thought, who in all the world of important people could say, as he could say, that he had the Dalai Lama in his pocket?

## PoP Squad

The familiar stench of unwashed bodies, cooked food, and shit washes over me as I come through the door. Cruiser lights flicker through the blinds, sparkling in rain and illuminating the crime scene with strobes of red and blue fire. A kitchen. A humid mess. A chunky woman huddles in the corner, clutching closed her nightgown. Fat thighs and swaying breasts under stained silk. Squad goons crowding her, pushing her around, making her sit, making her cower. Another woman, young-looking and pretty, pregnant and black-haired, is slumped against the opposite wall, her blouse spackled with spaghetti remains. Screams from the next room: kids.

I squeeze my fingers over my nose and breathe through my mouth, fighting off nausea as Pentle wanders in, holstering his Grange. He sees me and tosses me a nose cap. I break it and snort lavender until the stink slides off. Children come scampering in with Pentle, a brood of three tangling around his knees—the screamers from the other room. They gallop around the kitchen and disappear again, screaming still, into the living room where data sparkles like fairy dust on the wallscreens and provides what is likely their only connection to the outside world.

“That’s everyone,” Pentle says. He’s got a long skinny face and a sour small mouth that always points south. Weights seem to hang off his cheeks. Fat caterpillar brows droop over his eyes. He surveys the kitchen, mouth corners dragging lower. It’s always depressing to come into these scenes. “They were all inside when we broke down the door.”

I nod absently as I shake monsoon water from my hat. “Great. Thanks.” Liquid beads scatter on the floor, joining puddles of wet from the pop squad along with the maggot debris of the spaghetti dinner. I put my hat back on. Water still manages to drip off the brim and slip under my collar, a slick rivulet of discomfort. Someone closes the door to the outside. The shit smell thickens, eggy and humid. The nose cap barely holds it off. Old peas and bits of cereal crunch under my feet. They squish with the spaghetti, the geologic layers of past feedings. The kitchen hasn’t been self-cleaned in years.

The older woman coughs and pulls her nightgown tighter around her cellulite and I wonder, as I always do when I come into situations like this, what made her choose this furtive nasty life of rotting garbage and brief illicit forays into daylight. The pregnant girl seems to have slipped even further into herself since I arrived. She stares into space. You’d have to touch her pulse to know that she’s alive. It amazes me that women can end up like this, seduced so far down into gutter life that they arrive here, fugitives from everyone who would have kept them and held them and loved them and let them see the world outside.

The children run in from the living room again, playing chase: a blond, no more than five; another, younger and with brown braids, topless and in makeshift diapers, less than three; and a knee-high toddler boy, scrap diaper bunched around little muscle thighs, wearing a T-shirt stained with tomato sauce that says “Who’s the Cutest?” The T-shirt would be an antique if it wasn’t stained.

“You need anything else?” Pentle asks. He wrinkles his nose as new reek wafts from the direction of the kids.

“You get photos for the prosecutor?”

“Got ’em.” Pentle holds out a digicam and thumbs through the images of the ladies and the three children, all of them staring out from the screen like little smeared dolls. “You want me to take them in, now?”

I look over the women. The kids have run out again. From the other room, their howls echo as they chase around. Their shrieks are piercing. Even from a distance they hurt my head. “Yeah. I’ll deal with the kids.”

Pentle gets the women up off the floor and shuffles out the door, leaving me standing alone in the middle of the kitchen. It’s all so familiar: a typical floor plan from Builders United. Custom undercab lighting, black mirror tile on the floors, clever self-clean nozzles hidden behind deco trim lines, so much like the stuff Alice and I have that I can almost forget where I am. It’s a negative image of our apartment’s kitchen: light vs. dark, clean vs. dirty, quiet vs. loud. The same floor plan, everything about it the same, and yet, nothing in it is. It’s archeological. I can look at the layers of gunk and grime and noise and see what must have underlain it before...when these people worried about color coordinating and classy appliances.

I open the fridge (smudgefree nickel, how practical). Ours contains pineapples and avocados and endive and corn and coffee and brazil nuts from Angel Spire’s hanging gardens. This one holds a shelf cluttered with ground mycoprotein bars and wadded piles of nutrition supplement sacs like the kind they hand out at the government rejuv clinics. Other than a bag of slimy lettuce, there isn’t anything unprocessed in the fridge at all. No vegetables except in powder jars, ditto for fruit. A stack of self-warming dinner bins for fried rice and laap and spaghetti just like the one still lying on the kitchen table in a puddle of its own sauce, and that’s it.

I close the fridge and straighten. There’s something here in the mess and the screaming in the next room and the reek of the one kid’s poopy pants, but I’m stumped as to what it is. They could have lived up in the light and air. Instead, they hid in the dark under wet jungle canopy and turned pale and gave up their lives.

The kids race back in, chasing each other all in a train, laughing and shrieking. They stop and look around, surprised, maybe, that their moms have disappeared. The littlest one has a stuffed dinosaur by the nose. It’s got a long green neck and a fat body. A brontosaurus, I think, with big cartooney eyes and black felt lashes. It’s funny about the dinosaur, because they’ve been gone so long, but here one is, showing up as a stuffed toy. And then it’s funny again, because when you think about it, a dinosaur toy is really extinct twice.

“Sorry, kids. Mommy’s gone.”

I pull out my Grange. Their heads kick back in successive jerks, bang bang bang down the line, holes appearing on their foreheads like paint and their brains spattering out the back. Their bodies flip and skid on the black mirror floor. They land in jumbled piles of misaligned limbs. For a second, gunpowder burn makes the stench bearable.

Up out of the jungle like a bat out of hell, climbing out of Rhinehurst Supercluster's holdout suburban sprawl and then rising through jungle overstory. Blasting across the Causeway toward Angel Spire and the sea. Monkeys diving off the rail line like grasshoppers, pouring off the edge ahead of my cruiser and disappearing into the mangrove and kudzu and mahogany and teak, disappearing into the wet bowels of greenery tangle. Dumping the cruiser at squad center, no time for mopdown, don't need it anyway. My hat, my raincoat, my clothes into hazmat bags, and then out again on the other side, rushing to pull on a tux before catching a masslift up 188 stories, rising into the high clear air over the jungle fur of carbon sequestration project N22.

Mma Telogo has a new concerto. Alice is his diva viola, his prize, and Hua Chiang and Telogo have been circling her like ravens, picking apart her performance, corvid eyes on her, watching and hungry for fault, but now they call her ready. Ready to banish Banini from his throne. Ready to challenge for a place in the immortal canon of classical performance. And I'm late. Caught in a masslift on Level 55, packed in with the breath and heat of upper-deck diners and weekenders climbing the spire while the seconds tick by, listening to the climate fans buzz and whir while we all sweat and wilt, waiting for some problem on the line to clear.

Finally we're rising again, our stomachs dropping into our shoes, our ears popping as we soar into the heavens, flying under magnetic acceleration...and then slowing so fast we almost leave the floor. Our stomachs catch up. I shove out through hundreds of people, waving my cop badge when anyone complains, and sprint through the glass arch of the Ki Performance Center. I dive between the closing slabs of the attention doors.

The autolocks thud home behind me, sealing the performance space. It's comforting. I'm inside, enfolded in the symphony, as though its hands have cupped themselves around me and pulled me into a chamber of absolute focus. The lights dim. Conversational thrum falls away. I find my way to my seat more by feel than sight. Dirty looks from men in topaz hats and women in spectacle eyes as I squeeze across them. Gauche, I know. Absurdly late to an event that happens once in a decade. Plopping down just as Hua Chiang steps up to the podium.

His hands rise like crane wings. Bows and horns and flutes flash with movement and then the music comes, first a hint, like blowing mist, and then building, winding through a series of repeated stanzas that I have heard Alice play perhaps ten thousand times. Notes I heard first so long ago, stumbling and painful, that now spill like water and burst like ice flowers. The music settles, pianissimo again, the lovely delicate motifs that I know from Alice's practice. An introduction only, she has told me, intended to file away the audience's last thoughts of the world outside, repeated stanzas until Hua Chiang accepts that the audience is completely his and then Alice's viola rises, and the other players move

to support her, fifteen years of practice coming to fruition. I look down at my hands, overwhelmed. It's different in the concert hall. Different than all those days when she cursed and practiced and swore at Telogo and claimed his work couldn't be performed. Different even from when she finished her practices early, smiling, hands calloused in new ways, face flushed, eager to drink a cool white wine with me on our balcony in the light of the setting sun and watch the sky as monsoon clouds parted and starlight shone down on our companionship. Tonight, her part joins the rest of the symphony and I can't speak or think for the beauty of the whole.

Later, I'll hear whether Telogo has surpassed Banini for sheer audacity. I'll hear how critics compare living memories of ancient performances and see how critical opinion shifts to accommodate this new piece in a canon that stretches back more than a century, and that hangs like a ghost over everything that Alice and her director Hua Chiang hope for: a performance that will knock Banini off his throne and perhaps depress him enough to stop rejuv and stuff him in his grave. For me, competing against that much history would be a heavy weight. I'm glad I've got a job where forgetting is the most important part. Working on the pop squad means your brain takes a vacation and your hands do the work. And when you leave work, you've left it for good.

Except now, as I look down at my hands, I'm surprised to find pinpricks of blood all over them. A fine spray. The misty remains of the little kid with the dinosaur. My fingers smell of rust.

The tempo accelerates. Alice is playing again. Notes writhe together so fluidly that it seems impossible they aren't generated electronically, and yet the warmth and phrasing is hers, achingly hers, I've heard it in the morning, when she practiced on the balcony, testing herself, working again and again against the limitations of her self. Disciplining her fingers and hands, forcing them to accept Telogo's demands, the ones that years ago she had called impossible and which now run so cleanly through the audience.

The blood is all over my hands. I pick at it, scrape it away in flakes. It had to be the kid with the dinosaur. He was closest when he took the bullet. Some of his residue is stuck tight, bonded to my own skin. I shouldn't have skipped mopdown.

I pick.

The man next to me, tan face and rouged lips, frowns. I'm ruining a moment of history for him, something he has waited years to hear.

I pick more carefully. Silently. The blood flakes off. Dumb kid with the dumb dinosaur that almost made me miss the performance.

The cleanup crew noticed the dinosaur toy too. Caught the irony. Joked and snorted nose caps and started bagging the bodies for compost. Made me late. Stupid dinosaur.

The music cascades into silence. Hua Chiang's hands fall. Applause. Alice stands at Chiang's urging and the applause increases. Craning

my neck, I can see her, nineteen-year-old face flushed, smile bright and triumphant, enveloped in our adulation.

We end up at a party thrown by Maria Illoni, one of the symphony's high donors. She made her money on global warming mitigation for New York City, before it went under. Her penthouse is in Shoreline Curve, daringly arcing over the seawalls and the surf, a sort of flip of the finger to the ocean that beat her storm surge calculations. A spidery silver vine over dark water and the bob of the boat communities out in the deeps. New York obviously never got its money back: Illoni's outdoor patio runs across the entire top floor of the Shoreline and platforms additional petals of spun hollowform carbon out into the air.

From the far side of the Curve, you can see beyond the incandescent cores of the superclusters to the old city sprawl, dark except along where maglines radiate. A strange mangle of wreckage and scavenge and disrepair. In the day, it looks like some kind of dry red fungal collapse, a weave of jungle canopy and old suburban understory, but at night, all that's visible is the skeleton of glowing infrastructure, radial blooms in the darkness, and I breathe deeply, enjoying all the freshness and openness that's missing from those steaming hideouts I raid with the pop squad.

Alice sparkles in the heat, perfectly slim, well curved—an armful of beautiful girl. The fall air is under thirty-three degrees and pleasant, and I feel infinitely tender toward her. I pull her close. We slip into a forest of century-old bonsai sculptures created by Maria's husband. Alice murmurs that he spends all his time here on the roof, staring at branches, studying their curves, and occasionally, perhaps every few years, wiring a branch and guiding it in a new direction. We kiss in the shadows they provide, and Alice is beautiful and everything is perfect.

But I'm distracted.

When I hit the kids with my Grange, the littlest one—the one with that stupid dinosaur—flipped over. A Grange is built for nitheads, not little kids, so the bullet plowed through the kid and he flipped and his dinosaur went flying. It sailed, I mean really sailed, through the air. And now I can't get it out of my mind: that dinosaur flying. And then hitting the wall and bouncing onto the black mirror floor. So fast and so slow. Bang bang bang down the line...and then the dinosaur in the air.

Alice pulls away, seeming to sense my inattention. I straighten up. Try to focus on her.

She says, "I thought you weren't going to make it. When we were tuning, I looked out and your seat was empty."

I force a grin. "But I did. I made it."

Barely. I stood around too long with the cleanup guys while the dinosaur lay in a puddle and sopped up the kid's blood. Double extinct. The kid and the dinosaur both. Dead one way, and then dead again.



There's a weird symmetry there.

She cocks her head, studying me. "Was it bad?"

"What?" The brontosaurus? "The call?" I shrug. "Just a couple crazy ladies. Not armed or anything. It was easy."

"I can't imagine it. Cutting rejoy like that." She sighs and reaches out to touch a bonsai, perfectly guided over the decades by the map that only Michael Illoni can see or understand. "Why give all this up?"

I don't have an answer. I rewind the crime scene in my mind. I have the same feeling that I did when I stood on spaghetti maggots and went through their fridge. There's something there in the stink and noise and darkness, something hot and obsessive and ripe. But I don't know what it is.

"The ladies looked old," I say. "Like week-old balloons, all puffy and droopy."

Alice makes a face of distaste. "Can you imagine trying to perform Telogo without rejoy? We wouldn't have had the time. Half of us would have been past our prime, and we'd have needed understudies, and then the understudies would have had to find understudies. Fifteen years. And these women throw it all away. How can they throw away something as beautiful as Telogo?"

"You thinking about Kara?"

"She would have played Telogo twice as well as I did."

"I don't believe that."

"Believe it. She was the best. Before she went kid-crazy." She sighs. "I miss her."

"You could still visit her. She's not dead yet."

"She might as well be. She's already twenty years older than when we knew her." She shakes her head. "No. I'd rather remember her in her prime, not out at some single-sex work camp growing vegetables and losing the last of her talent. I couldn't stand listening to her play now. It would kill me to hear all of that gone." She turns abruptly. "That reminds me, my rejoy booster is tomorrow. Can you take me?"

"Tomorrow?" I hesitate. I'm supposed to be on another shift popping kids. "It's kind of short notice."

"I know. I meant to ask sooner, but with the concert coming up, I forgot." She shrugs. "It's not that important. I can go by myself." She glances at me sidelong. "But it is nicer when you come."

What the hell. I don't really want to work anyway. "Okay, sure. I'll get Pentle to cover for me." Let him deal with the dinosaurs.

"Really?"

I shrug. "What can I say? I'm a sweet guy."

She smiles and stands on tiptoe to kiss me. "If we weren't going to live forever, I'd marry you."

I laugh. "If we weren't going to live forever, I'd get you pregnant."

We look at each other. Alice laughs unsteadily and takes it as a joke. "Don't be gross."

Before we can talk any more, Illoni pops out from behind a bonsai and grabs Alice by the arm. "There you are! I've been looking everywhere for you. You can't hide yourself like this. You're the woman of the hour."

She pulls Alice away with all the confidence that must have made New York believe she could save it. She barely even looks at me as they hustle off. Alice smiles tolerantly and motions for me to follow. Then Maria's calling to everyone and pulling them all together and she climbs up on a fountain's rim and pulls Alice up beside her. She starts talking about art and sacrifice and discipline and beauty.

I tune it out. There's only so much self-congratulation you can take. It's obvious Alice is one of the best in the world. Talking about it just makes it seem banal. But the donors need to feel like they're part of the moment, so they all want to squeeze Alice and make her theirs, so they talk and talk and talk.

Maria's saying, "...wouldn't be standing here congratulating ourselves, if it weren't for our lovely Alice. Hua Chiang and Telogo did their work well, but in the final moment it was Alice's execution in the face of Telogo's ambitious piece that has made it resonate so strongly already with the critics. We have her to thank for the piece's flawlessness."

Everyone starts applauding and Alice blushes prettily, not accustomed to adulation from her peers and competitors. Maria shouts over the cheering, "I've made several calls to Banini, and it is more than apparent that he has no answer to our challenge and so I expect the next eighty years are ours. And Alice's!" The applause is almost deafening.

Maria waves for attention again and the applause fades into scattered whistles and catcalls which finally taper off enough to allow Maria to continue. "To commemorate the end of Banini's age, and the beginning of a new one, I would like to present Alice with a small token of affection—" and here she leans down and picks up a jute-woven gift bag shot with gold as she says, "Of course a woman likes gold and jewels, and strings for her viola, but I thought this was a particularly apt gift for the evening..."

I'm leaning against the woman next to me, trying to see, as Maria holds the bag dramatically above her head and calls out to the crowd, "For Alice, our slayer of dinosaurs!" and pulls the green brontosaurus out of the bag.

It's just like the one the kid had.

Its big eyes look right at me. For a second it seems to blink at me with its big black lashes and then the crowd laughs and applauds as they all get the joke. Banini = dinosaur. Ha ha.

Alice takes the dinosaur and holds it by the neck and swings it over her head and everybody laughs again but I can't see anything anymore because I'm lying on the ground caught in the jungle swelter of people's legs and I can't breathe.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Sure. No problem. I told you. I'm fine."

It's true, I guess. Sitting next to Alice in the waiting room, I don't feel dizzy or anything, even if I am tired. Last night, she put the dinosaur on the bedside table, right in with her collection of little jeweled music boxes, and the damn thing looked at me all night long. Finally at four

a.m. I couldn't stand it anymore and I shoved it under the bed. But in the morning, she found it and put it back, and it's been looking at me ever since.

Alice squeezes my hand. The rejoy clinic's a small one, private, carefully appointed with holographic windows of sailboats on the Atlantic so it feels open and airy even though its daylight is piped in through mirror collectors. It's not one of the big public monsters out in the clusters that got started after rejoy's patents expired. You pay a little more than you do for the Medicaid generics, but you don't rub shoulders with a bunch of starving gamblers and nitheads and drunks who all still want their rejoy even if they're wasting every day of their endless lives.

The nurses are quick and efficient. Pretty soon, Alice is on her back hooked up to an IV bladder with me sitting beside her on the bed, and we're watching rejoy push into her.

It's just a clear liquid. I always thought it should be fizzy and green for growing things. Or maybe not green, but definitely fizzy. It always feels fizzy when it goes in.

Alice takes a quick breath and reaches out for me, her slender pale fingers brushing my thigh. "Hold my hand."

The elixir of life pulses into her, filling her, flushing her. She pants shallowly. Her eyes dilate. She isn't watching me anymore. She's somewhere deep inside, reclaiming what was lost over the last eighteen months. No matter how many times I do it, I'm surprised when I watch it come over someone, the way it seems to swallow them and then they come back to the surface more whole and alive than when they started.

Alice's eyes focus. She smiles. "Oh, God. I can never get used to that."

She tries to stand up, but I hold her down and beep the nurse. Once we've got her unhooked, I lead her back out to the car. She leans heavily

against me, stumbling and touching me. I can almost feel the fizzing and tingling through her skin. She climbs into the car. When I'm inside, she looks over at me and laughs. "I can't believe how good I feel."

"Nothing like winding back the clock."

"Take me home. I want to be with you."

I push the start button on the car and we slide out of our parking space. We hook onto the magline out of Center Spire. Alice watches the city slide by outside the windows. All the shoppers and the businessmen and the martyrs and the ghosts, and then we're out in the open, on the high track over the jungle, speeding north again, for Angel Spire.

"It's so wonderful to be alive," she says, "It doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't?"

"Cutting rejoy."

"If people made sense, we wouldn't have psychologists." And we wouldn't buy dinosaur toys for kids who were never going to make it anyway. I grit my teeth. None of them make any sense. Stupid moms.

Alice sighs and runs her hands across her thighs, kneading herself, hiking up her skirt and digging her fingers into her flesh. "But it still doesn't make any sense. It feels so good. You'd have to be crazy to stop rejoy."

"Of course they're crazy. They kill themselves, they make babies they don't know how to take care of, they live in shitty apartments in the dark, they never go out, they smell bad, they look terrible, they never have anything good again—" I'm starting to shout. I shut my mouth.

Alice looks over at me. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

But I'm not. I'm mad. Mad at the ladies and their stupid toy-buying. Pissed off that these dumb women tease their dumb terminal kids like that; treat them like they aren't going to end up as compost. "Let's not talk about work right now. Let's just go home." I force a grin. "I've already got the day off. We should take advantage of it."

Alice is still looking at me. I can see the questions in her eyes. If she weren't on the leading edge of a rejoy high, she'd keep pressing, but she's so wrapped up in the tingling of her rebuilt body that she lets it go. She laughs and runs her fingers up my leg and starts to play with me. I override the magline's safeties with my cop codes and we barrel across the Causeway toward Angel Spire with the sun on the ocean and Alice smiling and laughing and the bright air whirling around us.

Three a.m. Another call, windows down, howling through the humidity

and swelter of Newfoundland. Alice wants me to come home, come back, relax, but I can't. I don't want to. I'm not sure what I want, but it's not brunch with Belgian waffles or screwing on the living room floor or a trip to the movies or...anything, really.

I can't do it, anyway. We got home, and I couldn't do it. Nothing felt right. Alice said it didn't matter, that she wanted to practice.

Now I haven't seen her for more than a day.

I've been on duty, catching up on calls. I've been going for twenty-four hours straight, powered on coppers'-little-helpers and mainlined caffeine and my hat and trench coat and hands are pinprick-sprayed with the residue of work.

Along the coastline the sea runs high and hot, splashing in over the breakwaters. Lights ahead, the glow of coalfoundries and gasification works. The call takes me up the glittering face of Palomino Cluster. Nice real estate. Up the masslifts and smashing through a door with Pentle backing me, knowing what we're going to find but never knowing how much these ones will fight.

Bedlam. A lady, this one a pretty brown girl who might have had a great life if she didn't decide she needed a baby, and a kid lying in the corner in a box screaming and screaming. And the lady's screaming too, screaming at the little kid in its box, like she's gone out of her mind.

As we come in through the door, she starts screaming at us. The kid keeps screaming. The lady keeps screaming. It's like a bunch of screwdrivers jamming in my ears; it goes on and on. Pentle grabs the lady and tries to hold her but she and the kid just keep screaming away and suddenly I can't breathe. I can barely stand. The kid screams and screams and screams: screwdrivers and glass and icepicks in my head.

So I shoot the thing. I pull out my Grange and put a bullet in the little sucker. Fragments of box and baby spray the air.

I don't do that, normally; it's against procedure to waste the kid in front of the mother.

But there we all are, staring at the body, bloodmist and gunpowder all over and my ears ringing from the shot and for one pristine crystal second, it's quiet.

Then the woman's screaming at me again and Pentle's screaming too because I screwed up the evidence before he could get a picture, and then the lady's all over me, trying to claw my eyes out. Pentle drags her off and then she's calling me a bastard and a killer and bastard and monkey man and a fucking pig and that I've got dead eyes.

And that really gets me: I've got dead eyes. This lady's headed into a rejoy collapse and won't last another twenty years and she'll spend all of it in a single-sex work camp. She's young, a lot like Alice, maybe the last of them to cross the line into rejoy, right when she came of age—not an old workhorse like me who was already forty when it

went generic—and now she'll be dead in an eye blink. But I'm the one with dead eyes.

I take my Grange and shove it into her forehead. "You want to die too?"

"Go ahead! Do it! Do it!" She doesn't stop for a second, just keeps howling and spitting. "Fucking bastard! Bastard fuckingfuckfucking—Do it! Do it!" She's crying.

Even though I want to see her brains pop out the back of her head, I don't have the heart. She'll die soon enough. Another twenty years and she's done for. The paperwork isn't worth it.

Pentle cuffs her while she babbles to the baby in the box, just a lump of blood and limp doll parts now. "My baby my poor baby I didn't know I'm sorry my baby my poor baby I'm sorry...." Pentle muscles her out to the car.

For a while I can hear her in the hall. My baby my poor baby my poor baby.... And then she's gone down the lifts and it's a relief just to be standing there with the wet smells of the apartment and the dead body.

She was using a dresser drawer as her bassinet.

I run my fingers along the splintered edge, fondle the brass pulls. If nothing else, these ladies are resourceful, making the things we can't buy anymore. If I close my eyes, I can almost remember a whole industry around these little guys. Little outfits. Little chairs. Little beds. Everything made little.

Little dinosaurs.

"She couldn't make it shut up."

I jerk my hands away from the baby box, startled. Pentle has come up behind me. "Huh?"

"She couldn't make it stop crying. Didn't know what to do with it. Didn't know how to make it calm down. That's how the neighbors heard."

"Dumb."

"Yeah. She didn't even have a tag-teamer. How the heck was she going to do grocery shopping?"

He gets out his camera and tries a couple shots of the baby. There's not a whole lot left. A 12mm Grange is built for junkies, nitheads going crazy, 'bot assassins. It's overkill for an unarmored thing like this. When the new Granges came out, Grange ran an ad campaign on the sides of our cruisers. "Grange: Unstoppable." Or something like that. There was this one that said "Point Blank Grange" with a photo of a completely mangled nithead. That one was in all our lockers.

Pentle tries another angle on the drawer, going for a profile, trying to make the best of a bad situation. "I like how she used a drawer," he says.

"Yeah. Resourceful."

"I saw this one where the lady made a whole little table and chair set for her kid. Handmade it all. I couldn't believe how much energy she put into it." He makes shapes with his hand. "Little scalloped edges, shapes painted on the top: squares and triangles and things."

"If you're going to die doing something, I guess you want to do a good job of it."

"I'd rather be parasailing. Or go to a concert. I heard Alice was great the other night."

"Yeah. She was." I study the baby's body as Pentle takes some more shots. "If you had to do it, how do you think you'd make one of them be quiet?"

Pentle nods at my Grange. "I'd tell it to shut up."

I grimace and holster the gun. "Sorry about that. It's been a rough week. I've been up too long. Haven't been sleeping." Too many dinosaurs looking at me.

Pentle shrugs. "Whatever. It would have been better to get an intact image—" He snaps another picture. "—but even if she gets off this time, you got to figure in another year or two we'll be busting down her door again. These girls have a damn high recidivism." He takes another photo.

I go to a window and open it. Salt air flows in like fresh life, cleaning out the wet shit and body stinks. Probably the first fresh air the apartment's had since the baby was born. Got to keep the windows closed or the neighbors might hear. Got to stay locked in. I wonder if she's got a boyfriend, some rejuo dropout who's going to show up with groceries and find her gone. Probably worth staking out the apartment, just to see. Keep the feminists off us for only bagging the women. I take a deep breath of sea air to get something fresh in my lungs, then light a cigarette and turn back to the room with its clutter and stink.

Recidivism. Fancy word for girls with a compulsion. Like a nithead or a coke freak, but weirder, more self-destructive. At least being a junkie is fun. Who the hell chooses to live in dark apartments with shitty diapers, instant food, and no sleep for years on end? The whole breeding thing is an anachronism—twenty-first-century ritual torture we don't need anymore. But these girls keep trying to turn back the clock and pop out the pups, little lizard brains compelled to pass on some DNA. And there's a new batch every year, little burps of offspring cropping up here and there, the convulsions of a species trying to restart itself and get evolution rolling again, like we can't tell that we've already won.

I'm keying through the directory listings in my cruiser, fiddling

through ads and keywords and search preferences, trying to zero in on something that doesn't come up no matter how I go after it.

Dinosaur.

Toys.

Stuffed animals.

Nothing. Nobody sells stuff like that dinosaur. But I've run into two of them now.

Monkeys scamper over the roof of my car. One of them lands on my forward impact rails and looks at me, yellow eyes wide, before another jumps it and they fall off the carbon petal pullout where I'm parked. Somewhere down below, suburban crumble keeps small herds of them. I remember when this area was tundra. It was a long time ago. I've talked to techs in the carbon sink business who talk about flipping the climate and building an icecap, but it's a slow process, an accretion of centuries most likely. Assuming I don't get shot by a crazy mom or a nithead, I'll see it happen. But for now, it's monkeys and jungle.

Forty-eight hours on call and two more cleanups and Alice wants me to take the weekend off and play, but I can't. I'm living on perkies, now. She feels good about her work, and wants me all day. We've done it before. Lying together, enjoying the silence and our own company, the pleasure of just being together with nothing needing to be done. There's something wonderful about peace and silence and sea breezes twisting the curtains on the balcony.

I should go home. In a week, maybe, she'll be back at worrying, doubting herself, thrashing herself to work harder, to practice longer, to listen and feel and move inside of music that's so complex it might as well be the mathematics of chaos for anyone but her. But in reality, she has time. All the time in the world, and it makes me happy that she has it, that fifteen years isn't too long to prepare for something as heartstoppingly beautiful as what she did with Telogo.

I want to spend this time with her, to enjoy her bliss. But I don't want to go back and sleep with that dinosaur. I can't.

I call her from the cruiser.

"Alice?"

She looks out at me from the dash. "Are you coming home? I could meet you for lunch."

"Do you know where Maria got that dinosaur toy?"

She shrugs. "Maybe one of the shops on the Span? Why?"

"Just wondering." I pause. "Could you go get it for me?"

"Why? Why can't we do something fun? I'm on vacation. I just had my rejoy. I feel great. If you want to see my dinosaur, why don't you



come home and get it?”

“Alice, please.”

Scowling, she disappears from the screen. In a few minutes she’s back, holding it up to the screen, shoving it in my face. I can feel my heart beating faster. It’s cool in the cruiser, but I break into a sweat when I see the dinosaur on the screen. I clear my throat. “What’s it say on the tag?”

Frowning, she turns the thing over, runs her fingers through its fur. She holds up the tag to the camera. It comes in blurry as the camera focuses, then it’s there, clear and sharp. “Ipswitch Collectibles.”

Of course. Not a toy at all.

The woman who runs Ipswitch is old, as old a rejoy as I’ve ever met. The wrinkles on her face look so much like plastic that it’s hard to tell what’s real and what may be a mask. Her eyes are sunken little blue coals and her hair is so white I think of weddings and silk. She must have been ninety when rejoy hit.

Whatever the name of it, Ipswitch Collectibles is full of toys: dolls staring down from their racks, different faces and shapes and colors of hair, some of them soft, some of them made of hard bright plastics; tiny trains that run around miniature tracks and spout steam from their pinky-sized smokestacks; figurines from old-time movies and comics in action poses: Superman, Dolphina, Rex Mutinous. And, under a shelf of hand-carved wooden cars, a bin full of stuffed dinosaurs in green and blue and red. A tyrannosaurus rex. A pterodactyl. The brontosaurus.

“I’ve got a few stegosauruses in the back.”

I look up, startled. The old woman watches me from behind the counter, a strange wrinkly buzzard, studying me with those sharp blue eyes, examining me like I’m carrion.

I pick out the brontosaurus and hold it up by the neck. “No. These’re fine.”

A bell rings. The shop’s main doors to the concourse slide open. A woman steps through, hesitant. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail and she hasn’t applied any makeup, and I can tell, even before she’s all the way through the door, that she’s one of them: a mom.

She hasn’t been off rejoy long; she still looks fresh and young, despite the plumpness that comes with kids. She still looks good. But even without rejoy-collapse telltales, I know what she’s done to herself. She’s got the tired look of a person at war with the world. None of us look like that. No one has to look like that. Nitheads look less besieged. She’s trying to act like the person she was before, like the actress or the financial advisor or the code engineer or the biologist or the waitress or whatever, putting on clothes from her life before, that used to fit perfectly and don’t now, making herself look like a person who walks without fear in the open air, and who doesn’t now.

As she wanders the aisles, I spy a stain on her shoulder. It's small but obvious if you know what to look for, a light streak of green on a creamy blouse. The kind of thing that never happens to anyone except women with children. No matter how hard she tries, she doesn't fit anymore. Not with us.

Ipswitch Collectibles, like others of its ilk, is a trap door of sorts—a rabbit hole down into the land of illicit motherhood: the place of mashed pea stains, sound-proofed walls, and furtive forays into daylight for resupply and survival. If I stand here long enough, holding my magic brontosaurus by the neck, I'll slip through entirely and see their world as it overlaps with my own, see it with the queer double vision of these women who have learned to turn a drawer into a crib, and know how to fold and pin an old shirt into a diaper, and know that "collectibles" really means "toys."

The woman slips in the direction of the train sets. She chooses one and places it on the counter. It's a bright wooden thing, each car a different color, each connected by a magnet.

The old woman takes the train and says, "Oh yes, this is a fine piece. I had grandchildren who played with trains like this when they were just a little more than one."

The mother doesn't say anything, just holds out her wrist for the charge, her eyes down on the train. She fingers the blue and yellow engine nervously.

I come up to the counter. "I'll bet you sell a lot of them."

The mother jerks. For a second she looks like she'll run, but she steadies. The old woman's eyes turn on me. Dark sunken blue cores, infinitely knowledgeable. "Not many. Not now. Not many collectors around for this sort of thing. Not now."

The transaction clears. The woman hustles out of the store, not looking back. I watch her go.

The old woman says, "That dinosaur is forty-seven, if you want it." Her tone says that she already knows I won't be buying. I'm not a collector.

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Nighttime. More dark-of-night encounters with illicit motherhood. The babies are everywhere, popping up like toadstools after rain. I can't keep up with them. I had to leave my last call before the cleanup crew came. Broke the chain of evidence, but what can you do? Everywhere I go, the baby world is ripping open around me, melons and seedpods and fertile wombs splitting open and vomiting babies onto the ground. We're drowning in babies. The jungle seems to seethe with them, the hidden women down in the suburb swelter, and as I shoot along the maglines on my way to bloody errands, the jungle's tendrils curl up from below, reaching out to me.

I've got the mom's address in my cruiser. She's hidden now. Back down the rabbit hole. Pulled the lid down tight over her head. Lying low with her brood, reconnected with the underground of women who

have all decided to kill themselves for the sake of squeezing out pups. Back in the swelter of locked doors and poopy diapers amongst the sorority who give train sets to little creatures who actually play with them instead of putting them on an end table and making you look at them every damn day....

The woman. The collector. I've been holding off on hitting her. It doesn't seem fair. It seems like I should wait for her to make her mistake before I pop her kids. But knowing that she's out there tickles my mind. I catch myself again and again, reaching to key in the homing on her address.

But then another call comes, another cleanup, and I let myself pretend I don't know about her, that I haven't perforated her hidey-hole and can now peer in on her whenever I like. The woman we don't know about—yet. Who hasn't made a mistake—yet. Instead I barrel down the rails to another call, slicing through jungle overstory where it impinges around the tracks, blasting toward another woman's destiny who was less lucky and less clever than the one who likes to collect. And these other women hold me for a little while. But in the end, parked on the edge of the sea, with monkeys screeching from the jungle and rain spackling my windshield, I punch in the collector's address.

I'll just drive by.

It could have been a rich house, before carbon sequestration. Before we all climbed into the bright air of the spires and superclusters. But now it exists at the very edge of what is left of suburbs. I'm surprised it even has electric or any services running to it at all. The jungle surrounds it, envelopes it. The road to it, off the maglines and off the maintenance routes, is heaved and split and perforated with encroaching trees. She's smart. She's as close to wilderness as it is possible to live. Beyond is only shadow tangle and green darkness. Monkeys scamper away from the spray of my headlights. The houses around her have already been abandoned. Any day now, they'll stop serving this area entirely. In another couple years, this portion will be completely overgrown. We'll cut off services and the last of the spires will go online and the jungle will swallow this place completely.

I sit outside the house for a while, looking at it. She's a smart one. To live this far out. No neighbors to hear the screaming. But if I think about it, she would have been smarter to move into the jungle entirely, and live with all the other monkeys that just can't keep themselves from breeding. I guess at the end of the day, even these crazy ladies are still human. They can't leave civilization totally behind. Or don't know how, anyway.

I get out of my car, pull my Grange, and hit the door.

As I slam through, she looks up from where she sits at her kitchen table. She isn't even surprised. A little bit of her seems to deflate, and that's all. Like she knew it was going to happen all along. Like I said: a smart one.

A kid runs in from the other room, attracted by the noise of me coming through the door. Maybe one and a half or two years old. It

stops and stares, little tow-headed thing, its hair already getting long like hers. We stare at each other. Then it turns and scrambles into its mother's lap.

The woman closes her eyes. "Go on, then. Do it."

I point my Grange, my 12mm hand cannon. Zero in on the kid. The lady wraps her arms around it. It's not a clear shot. It'll rip right through and take out the mom. I angle differently, looking for the shot. Nothing.

She opens her eyes. "What are you waiting for?"

We stare at each other. "I saw you in the toy store. A couple days ago."

She closes her eyes again, regretful, understanding her mistake. She doesn't let go of the kid. I could just take it out of her arms, throw it on the floor and shoot it. But I don't. Her eyes are still closed.

"Why do you do it?" I ask.

Her eyes open again. She's confused. I'm breaking the script. She's mapped this out in her own mind. Probably a thousand times. Had to. Had to know this day would be coming. But here I am, all alone, and her kid's not dead yet. And I keep asking her questions.

"Why do you keep having these kids?"

She just stares at me. The kid squirms around on her and tries to start nursing. She lifts her blouse a little and the kid dives under. I can see the hanging bulges of the lady's breasts, these heavy swinging mammaries, so much larger than I remember them from the store when they were hidden under bra and blouse. They sag while the kid sucks. The woman just stares at me. She's on some kind of autopilot, feeding the kid. Last meal.

I take my hat off and put it on the table and sit. I put my Grange down, too. It just doesn't seem right to blow the sucker away while it's nursing. I take out a cigarette and light it. Take a drag. The woman watches me the way anyone watches a predator. I take another drag on my cigarette and offer it to her.

"Smoke?"

"I don't." She jerks her head toward her kid.

I nod. "Ah. Right. Bad for the new lungs. I heard that, once. Can't remember where." I grin. "Can't remember when."

She stares at me. "What are you waiting for?"

I look down at my pistol, lying on the table. The heavy machine weight of slugs and steel, a monster weapon. Grange 12mm Recoilless Hand Cannon. Standard issue. Stop a nitfitter in his tracks. Take out the whole damn heart if you hit them right. Pulverize a baby. "You

had to stop taking rejuo to have the kid, right?"

She shrugs. "It's just an additive. They don't have to make rejuo that way."

"But otherwise we'd have a big damn population problem, wouldn't we?"

She shrugs again.

The gun sits on the table between us. Her eyes flick toward the gun, then to me, then back to the gun. I take a drag on the cigarette. I can tell what she's thinking, looking at that big old steel hand cannon on her table. It's way out of her reach, but she's desperate, so it looks a lot closer to her, almost close enough. Almost.

Her eyes go back up to me. "Why don't you just do it? Get it over with?"

It's my turn to shrug. I don't really have an answer. I should be taking pictures and securing her in the car, and popping the kid, and calling in the cleanup squad, but here we sit. She's got tears in her eyes. I watch her cry. Mammaries and fatty limbs and a frightening sort of wisdom, maybe coming from knowing that she won't last forever. A contrast to Alice with her smooth smooth skin and high bright breasts. This woman is fecund. Hips and breasts and belly fertile, surrounded by her messy kitchen, the jungle outside. The soil of life. She seems settled in all of this, a damp Gaia creature.

A dinosaur.

I should be cuffing her. I've got her and her kid. I should be shooting the kid. But I don't. Instead, I've got a hard-on. She's not beautiful exactly, but I've got a hard-on. She sags, she's round, she's breasty and hippy and sloppy; I can barely sit because my pants are so tight. I try not to stare at the kid nursing. At her exposed breasts. I take another drag on my cigarette. "You know, I've been doing this job for a long time."

She stares at me dully, doesn't say anything.

"I've always wanted to know why you women do this." I nod at the kid. It's come off her breast, and now the whole thing is exposed, this huge sagging thing with its heavy nipple. She doesn't cover up. When I look up, she's studying me, seeing me looking at her breast. The kid scrambles down and watches me, too, solemn-eyed. I wonder if it can feel the tension in the room. If it knows what's coming. "Why the kid? Really. Why?"

She purses her lips. I think I can see anger in the tightening of her teary eyes, anger that I'm playing with her. That I'm sitting here, talking to her with my Grange on her grimy table, but then her eyes go down to that gun and I can almost see the gears clicking. The calculations. The she-wolf gathering herself.

She sighs and scoots her chair forward. "I just wanted one. Ever

since I was a little girl.”

“Play with dolls, all that? Collectibles?”

She shrugs. “I guess.” She pauses. Eyes back to the gun. “Yeah. I guess I did. I had a little plastic doll, and I used to dress it up. And I’d play tea with it. You know, we’d make tea, and then I’d pour some on her face, to make her drink. It wasn’t a great doll. Voice input, but not much repertoire. My parents weren’t rich. ‘Let’s go shopping.’ ‘Okay, for what?’ ‘For watches.’ ‘I love watches.’ Simple. Like that. But I liked it. And then one day I called her my baby. I don’t know why. I did, though, and the doll said, ‘I love you mommy.’”

Her eyes turn wet as she speaks. “And I just knew I wanted to have a baby. I played with her all the time, and she’d pretend she was my baby, and then my mother caught us doing it and said I was a stupid girl, and I shouldn’t talk that way, girls didn’t have babies anymore, and she took the doll away.”

The kid is down on the floor, shoving blocks under the table. Stacking and unstacking. It catches sight of me. It’s got blue eyes and a shy smile. I get a twitch of it, again, and then it scrambles up off the floor, and buries its face in its mother’s breasts, hiding. It peeks out at me, and giggles and hides again.

I nod at the kid. “Who’s the dad?”

Stone cold face. “I don’t know. I got a sample shipped from a guy I found online. We didn’t want to meet. I erased everything about him as soon as I got the sample.”

“Too bad. Things would have been better if you’d kept in touch.”

“Better for you.”

“That’s what I said.” I notice that the ash on my cigarette has gotten long, a thin gray penis hanging limp off the end of my smoke. I give it a twitch and it falls. “I still can’t get over the rejuo part.”

Inexplicably, she laughs. Brightens even. “Why? Because I’m not so in love with myself that I just want to live forever and ever?”

“What were you going to do? Keep it in the house until—”

“Her,” she interrupts suddenly. “Keep her in the house. She is a girl and her name is Melanie.”

At her name, the kid looks over at me. She sees my hat on the table and grabs it. Then climbs down off her mother’s lap and carries it over to me. She holds it out to me, arms fully extended, an offering. I try to take it but she pulls the hat away.

“She wants to put it on your head.”

I look at the lady, confused. She’s smiling slightly, sadly. “It’s a game she plays. She likes to put hats on my head.”

I look at the girl again. She's getting antsy, holding the hat. She makes little grunts of meaning at me and waves the hat invitingly. I lean down. The girl puts the hat on my head, and beams. I sit up and set it more firmly.

"You're smiling," she says.

I look up at her. "She's cute."

"You like her, don't you?"

I look at the girl again, thinking. "Can't say. I've never really looked at them before."

"Liar."

My cigarette is dead. I stub it out on the kitchen table. She watches me do it, frowning, pissed off that I'm messing up her messy table, maybe, but then she seems to remember the gun. And I do, too. A chill runs up my spine. For a moment, when I leaned down to the girl, I'd forgotten about it. I could be dead, right now. Funny how we forget and remember and forget these things. Both of us. Me and the lady. One minute we're having a conversation, the next we're waiting for the killing to start.

This lady seems like she would have been a nice date. She's got spunk. You can tell that. It almost comes out before she remembers the gun. You can watch it flicker back and forth. She's one person, then another person: alive, thinking, remembering, then bang, she's sitting in a kitchen full of crusty dishes, coffee rings on her countertop and a cop with a hand cannon sitting at the kitchen table.

I spark up another cigarette. "Don't you miss the rejoo?"

She looks down at her daughter, holds out her arms. "No. Not a bit."  
The girl climbs back onto her mother's lap.

I let the smoke curl out of my mouth. "But there's no way you were going to get away with this. It's insane. You have to drop off of rejoo; you have to find a sperm donor who's willing to drop off, too, so two people kill themselves for a kid; you've got to birth the kid alone, and then you've got to keep it hidden, and then you'd eventually need an ID card so you could get it started on rejoo, because nobody's going to dose an undocumented patient, and you've got to know that none of this would ever work. But here you are."

She scowls at me. "I could have done it."

"You didn't."

Bang. She's back in the kitchen again. She slumps in her chair, holding the kid. "So why don't you just hurry up and do it?"

I shrug. "I was just curious about what you breeders are thinking."  
She looks at me, hard. Angry. "You know what I'm thinking? I'm

thinking we need something new. I've been alive for one hundred and eighteen years and I'm thinking that it's not just about me. I'm thinking I want a baby and I want to see what she sees today when she wakes up and what she'll find and see that I've never seen before because that's new. Finally, something new. I love seeing things through her little eyes and not through dead eyes like yours."

"I don't have dead eyes."

"Look in the mirror. You've all got dead eyes."

"I'm a hundred and fifty and I feel just as good as I did the day I went on."

"I'll bet you can't even remember. No one remembers." Her eyes are on the gun again, but they come up off it to look at me. "But I do. Now.

And it's better this way. A thousand times better than living forever."

I make a face. "Live through your kid and all that?"

"You wouldn't understand. None of you would."

I look away. I don't know why. I'm the one with the gun. I'm running everything, but she's looking at me, and something gets tight inside me when she says that. If I was imaginative, I'd say it was some little bit of old primal monkey trying to drag itself out of the muck and make itself heard. Some bit of the critter we were before. I look at the kid—the girl—and she's looking back at me. I wonder if they all do the trick with the hat, or if this one's special somehow. If they all like to put hats on their killers' heads. She smiles at me and ducks her head back under her mother's arm. The woman's got her eyes on my gun.

"You want to shoot me?" I ask.

Her eyes come up. "No."

I smile slightly. "Come on. Be honest."

Her eyes narrow. "I'd blow your head off if I could."

Suddenly I'm tired. I don't care anymore. I'm sick of the dirty kitchen and the dark rooms and the smell of dirty makeshift diapers. I give the Grange a push, shove it closer to her. "Go ahead. You going to kill an old life so you can save one that isn't even going to last? I'm going to live forever, and that little girl won't last longer than seventy years even if she's lucky—which she won't be—and you're practically already dead. But you want to waste my life?" I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff. Possibility seethes around me. "Give it a shot."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm giving you your shot. You want to try for it? This is your chance." I shove the Grange a little closer, baiting her. I'm tingling all over. My head feels light, almost dizzy. Adrenaline rushes through me. I push the Grange even closer to her, suddenly not even sure if I'll fight her



for the gun, or if I'll just let her have it. "This is your chance."

She doesn't give a warning.

She flings herself across the table. Her kid flies out of her arms. Her fingers touch the gun at the same time as I yank it out of reach. She lunges again, clawing across the table. I jump back, knocking over my chair. I step out of range. She stretches toward the gun, fingers wide and grasping, desperate still, even though she knows she's already lost. I point the gun at her.

She stares at me, then puts her head down on the table and sobs.

The girl is crying too. She sits bawling on the floor, her little face screwed up and red, crying along with her mother who's given everything in that one run at my gun: all her hopes and years of hidden dedication, all her need to protect her progeny, everything. And now she lies sprawled on a dirty table and cries while her daughter howls from the floor. The girl keeps screaming and screaming.

I sight the Grange on the girl. She's exposed, now. She's squalling and holding her hands out to her mother, but she doesn't get up. She just holds out her hands, waiting to be picked up and held by a lady who doesn't have anything left to give. She doesn't notice me or the gun.

One quick shot and she's gone, paint hole in the forehead and brains on the wall just like spaghetti and the crying's over and all that's left is gunpowder burn and cleanup calls.

But I don't fire.

Instead, I holster my Grange and walk out the door, leaving them to their crying and their grime and their lives.

It's raining again, outside. Thick ropes of water spout off the eaves and spatter the ground. All around me the jungle seethes with the chatter of monkeys. I pull up my collar and resettle my hat. Behind me, I can barely hear the crying anymore.

Maybe they'll make it. Anything is possible. Maybe the kid will make it to eighteen, get some black market rejuv and live to be a hundred and fifty. More likely, in six months, or a year, or two years, or ten, a cop will bust down the door and pop the kid. But it won't be me.

I run for my cruiser, splashing through mud and vines and wet. And for the first time in a long time, the rain feels new.

# The Tamarisk Hunter

A big tamarisk can suck 73,000 gallons of river water a year. For \$2.88 a day, plus water bounty, Lolo rips tamarisk all winter long.

Ten years ago, it was a good living. Back then, tamarisk shouldered up against every riverbank in the Colorado River Basin, along with cottonwoods, Russian olives, and elms. Ten years ago, towns like Grand Junction and Moab thought they could still squeeze life from a river.

Lolo stands on the edge of a canyon, Maggie the camel his only companion. He stares down into the deeps. It's an hour's scramble to the bottom. He ties Maggie to a juniper and starts down, boot-skiing a gully. A few blades of green grass sprout neon around him, piercing juniper-tagged snow clods. In the late winter, there is just a beginning surge of water down in the deeps; the ice is off the river edges. Up high, the mountains still wear their ragged snow mantles. Lolo smears through mud and hits a channel of scree, sliding and scattering rocks. His jugs of tamarisk poison gurgle and slosh on his back. His shovel and rockbar snag on occasional junipers as he skids by. It will be a long hike out. But then, that's what makes this patch so perfect. It's a long way down, and the riverbanks are largely hidden.

It's a living; where other people have dried out and blown away, he has remained: a tamarisk hunter, a water tick, a stubborn bit of weed. Everyone else has been blown off the land as surely as dandelion seeds, set free to fly south or east, or most of all north where watersheds sometimes still run deep and where even if there are no more lush ferns or deep cold fish runs, at least there is still water for people.

Eventually, Lolo reaches the canyon bottom. Down in the cold shadows, his breath steams.

He pulls out a digital camera and starts shooting his proof. The Bureau of Reclamation has gotten uptight about proof. They want different angles on the offending tamarisk, they want each one photographed before and after, the whole process documented, GPS'd, and uploaded directly by the camera. They want it done on-site. And then they still sometimes come out to spot check before they calibrate his headgate for water bounty.

But all their due diligence can't protect them from the likes of Lolo. Lolo has found the secret to eternal life as a tamarisk hunter. Unknown to the Interior Department and its BuRec subsidiary, he has been seeding new patches of tamarisk, encouraging vigorous brushy groves in previously cleared areas. He has hauled and planted healthy root balls up and down the river system in strategically hidden and inaccessible corridors, all in a bid for security against the swarms of other tamarisk hunters that scour these same tributaries. Lolo is crafty. Stands like this one, a quarter-mile long and thick with salt-laden tamarisk, are his insurance policy.

Documentation finished, he unstraps a folding saw, along with his rockbar and shovel, and sets his poison jugs on the dead salt bank. He starts cutting, slicing into the roots of the tamarisk, pausing every 30 seconds to spread Garlon 4 on the cuts, poisoning the tamarisk wounds faster than they can heal. But some of the best tamarisk, the most vigorous, he uproots and sets aside, for later use.

\$2.88 a day, plus water bounty.

\* \* \*

It takes Maggie's rolling bleating camel stride a week to make it back to Lolo's homestead. They follow the river, occasionally climbing above it onto cold mesas or wandering off into the open desert in a bid to avoid the skeleton sprawl of emptied towns. Guardie choppers buzz up and down the river like swarms of angry yellowjackets, hunting for porto-pumpers and wildcat diversions. They rush overhead in a wash of beaten air and gleaming National Guard logos. Lolo remembers a time when the guardies traded potshots with people down on the river banks, tracer-fire and machine-gun chatter echoing in the canyons. He remembers

the glorious hiss and arc of a Stinger missile as it flashed across redrock desert and blue sky and burned a chopper where it hovered.

But that's long in the past. Now, guardie patrols skim up the river unmolested.

Lolo tops another mesa and stares down at the familiar landscape of an eviscerated town, its curving streets and subdivision cul-de-sacs all sitting silent in the sun. At the very edge of the empty town, one-acre ranchettes and snazzy five-thousand-square-foot houses with dead-stick trees and dust-hill landscaping fringe a brown tumbleweed golf course. The sandtraps don't even show any more.

When California put its first calls on the river, no one really worried. A couple of towns went begging for water. Some idiot newcomers with bad water rights stopped grazing their horses, and that was it. A few years later, people started showering real fast. And a few after that, they showered once a week. And then people started using the buckets. By then, everyone had stopped joking about how "hot" it was. It didn't really matter how "hot" it was. The problem wasn't lack of water or an excess of heat, not really. The problem was that 4.4 million acre-feet of water were supposed to go down the river to California. There was water; they just couldn't touch it.

They were supposed to stand there like dumb monkeys and watch it flow on by.

"Lolo?"

The voice catches him by surprise. Maggie startles and groans and lunges for the mesa edge before Lolo can rein her around. The camel's great padded feet scuffle dust and Lolo flails for his shotgun where it nestles in a scabbard at the camel's side. He forces Maggie to turn, shotgun half-drawn, holding barely to his seat and swearing.

A familiar face, tucked amongst juniper tangle.

"Goddamnit!" Lolo lets the shotgun drop back into its scabbard. "Jesus Christ, Travis. You scared the hell out of me."

Travis grins. He emerges from amongst the junipers' silver bark rags, one hand on his gray fedora, the other on the reins as he guides his mule out of the trees. "Surprised?"

"I could've shot you!"

"Don't be so jittery. There's no one out here 'cept us water ticks."

"That's what I thought the last time I went shopping down there. I had a whole set of new dishes for Annie and I broke them all when I ran into an ultralight parked right in the middle of the main drag."

"Meth flyers?"

"Beats the hell out of me. I didn't stick around to ask."

"Shit. I'll bet they were as surprised as you were."

"They almost killed me."

"I guess they didn't."

Lolo shakes his head and swears again, this time without anger. Despite the ambush, he's happy to run into Travis. It's lonely country, and Lolo's been out long enough to notice the silence of talking to Maggie. They trade ritual sips of water from their canteens and make camp together. They swap stories about

BuRec and avoid discussing where they've been ripping tamarisk and enjoy the view of the empty town far below, with its serpentine streets and quiet houses and shining untouched river.

It isn't until the sun is setting and they've finished roasting a magpie that Lolo finally asks the question that's been on his mind ever since Travis's sun-baked face came out of the tangle. It goes against etiquette, but he can't help himself. He picks magpie out of his teeth and says, "I thought you were working downriver."

Travis glances sidelong at Lolo and in that one suspicious uncertain look, Lolo sees that Travis has hit a lean patch. He's not smart like Lolo. He hasn't been reseeding. He's got no insurance. He hasn't been thinking ahead about all the competition, and what the tamarisk endgame looks like, and now he's feeling the pinch. Lolo feels a twinge of pity. He likes Travis. A part of him wants to tell Travis the secret, but he stifles the urge. The stakes are too high. Water crimes are serious now, so serious Lolo hasn't even told his wife, Annie, for fear of what she'll say. Like all of the most shameful crimes, water theft is a private business, and at the scale Lolo works, forced labor on the Straw is the best punishment he can hope for.

Travis gets his hackles down over Lolo's invasion of his privacy and says, "I had a couple cows I was running up here, but I lost 'em. I think something got 'em."

"Long way to graze cows."

"Yeah, well, down my way even the sagebrush is dead. Big Daddy Drought's doing a real number on my patch." He pinches his lip, thoughtful. "Wish I could find those cows."

"They probably went down to the river."

Travis sighs. "Then the guardies probably got 'em."

"Probably shot 'em from a chopper and roasted 'em."

"Californians."

They both spit at the word. The sun continues to sink. Shadows fall across the town's silent structures. The rooftops gleam red, a ruby cluster decorating the blue river necklace.

"You think there's any stands worth pulling down there?" Travis asks.

"You can go down and look. But I think I got it all last year. And someone had already been through before me, so I doubt much is coming up."

"Shit. Well, maybe I'll go shopping. Might as well get something out of this trip."

"There sure isn't anyone to stop you."

As if to emphasize the fact, the thud-thwap of a guardie chopper breaks the evening silence. The black-fly dot of its movement barely shows against the darkening sky. Soon it's out of sight and cricket chirps swallow the last evidence of its passing.

Travis laughs. "Remember when the guardies said they'd keep out looters? I saw them on TV with all their choppers and Humvees and them all saying they were going to protect everything until the situation improved." He laughs again. "You remember that? All of them driving up and down the streets?"

"I remember."

"Sometimes I wonder if we shouldn't have fought them more."

“Annie was in Lake Havasu City when they fought there. You saw what happened.” Lolo shivers. “Anyway, there’s not much to fight for once they blow up your water treatment plant. If nothing’s coming out of your faucet, you might as well move on.”

“Yeah, well, sometimes I think you still got to fight. Even if it’s just for pride.” Travis gestures at the town below, a shadow movement. “I remember when all that land down there was selling like hotcakes and they were building shit as fast as they could ship in the lumber. Shopping malls and parking lots and subdivisions, anywhere they could scrape a flat spot.”

“We weren’t calling it Big Daddy Drought, back then.”

“Forty-five thousand people. And none of us had a clue. And I was a real estate agent.” Travis laughs, a self-mocking sound that ends quickly. It sounds too much like self-pity for Lolo’s taste. They’re quiet again, looking down at the town wreckage.

“I think I might be heading north,” Travis says finally.

Lolo glances over, surprised. Again he has the urge to let Travis in on his secret, but he stifles it. “And do what?”

“Pick fruit, maybe. Maybe something else. Anyway, there’s water up there.”

Lolo points down at the river. “There’s water.”

“Not for us.” Travis pauses. “I got to level with you, Lolo. I went down to the Straw.”

For a second, Lolo is confused by the non sequitur. The statement is too outrageous. And yet Travis’s face is serious. “The Straw? No kidding? All the way there?”

“All the way there.” He shrugs defensively. “I wasn’t finding any tamarisk, anyway. And it didn’t actually take that long. It’s a lot closer than it used to be. A week out to the train tracks, and then I hopped a coal train, and rode it right to the interstate, and then I hitched.”

“What’s it like out there?”

“Empty. A trucker told me that California and the Interior Department drew up all these plans to decide which cities they’d turn off when.” He looks at Lolo significantly. “That was after Lake Havasu. They figured out they had to do it slow. They worked out some kind of formula: how many cities, how many people they could evaporate at a time without making too much unrest. Got advice from the Chinese, from when they were shutting down their old communist industries. Anyway, it looks like they’re pretty much done with it. There’s nothing moving out there except highway trucks and coal trains and a couple truck stops.”

“And you saw the Straw?”

“Oh sure, I saw it. Out toward the border. Big old mother. So big you couldn’t climb on top of it, flopped out on the desert like a damn silver snake. All the way to California.” He spits reflexively. “They’re spraying with concrete to keep water from seeping into the ground and they’ve got some kind of carbon-fiber stuff over the top to stop the evaporation. And the river just disappears inside. Nothing but an empty canyon below it. Bone-dry. And choppers and Humvees everywhere, like a damn hornet’s nest. They wouldn’t let me get any closer than a half mile on account of the eco-crazies trying to blow it up. They weren’t nice about it, either.”

“What did you expect?”

“I dunno. It sure depressed me, though: They work us out here and toss us a little water bounty and then all that water next year goes right down into that big old pipe. Some Californian’s probably filling his swimming pool with last year’s water bounty right now.”

Cricket-song pulses in the darkness. Off in the distance, a pack of coyotes starts yipping. The two of them are quiet for a while. Finally, Lolo chucks his friend on the shoulder. “Hell, Travis, it’s probably for the best. A desert’s a stupid place to put a river, anyway.”

\* \* \*

Lolo’s homestead runs across a couple acres of semi-alkaline soil, conveniently close to the river’s edge. Annie is out in the field when he crests the low hills that overlook his patch. She waves, but keeps digging, planting for whatever water he can collect in bounty.

Lolo pauses, watching Annie work. Hot wind kicks up, carrying with it the scents of sage and clay. A dust devil swirls around Annie, whipping her bandana off her head. Lolo smiles as she snags it; she sees him still watching her and waves at him to quit loafing.

He grins to himself and starts Maggie down the hill, but he doesn’t stop watching Annie work. He’s grateful for her. Grateful that every time he comes back from tamarisk hunting she is still here. She’s steady. Steadier than the people like Travis who give up when times get dry. Steadier than anyone Lolo knows, really. And if she has nightmares sometimes, and can’t stand being in towns or crowds and wakes up in the middle of the night calling out for family she’ll never see again, well, then it’s all the more reason to seed more tamarisk and make sure they never get pushed off their patch like she was pushed.

Lolo gets Maggie to kneel down so he can dismount, then leads her over to a water trough, half-full of slime and water skippers. He gets a bucket and heads for the river while Maggie groans and complains behind him. The patch used to have a well and running water, but like everyone else, they lost their pumping rights and BuRec stuffed the well with Quikcrete when the water table dropped below the Minimum Allowable Reserve. Now he and Annie steal buckets from the river, or, when the Interior Department isn’t watching, they jump up and down on a footpump and dump water into a hidden underground cistern he built when the Resource Conservation and Allowable Use Guidelines went into effect.

Annie calls the guidelines “RaCAUG” and it sounds like she’s hawking spit when she says it, but even with their filled-in well, they’re lucky. They aren’t like Spanish Oaks or Antelope Valley or River Reaches: expensive places that had rotten water rights and turned to dust, money or no, when Vegas and L.A. put in their calls. And they didn’t have to bail out of Phoenix Metro when the Central Arizona Project got turned off and then had its aqueducts blown to smithereens when Arizona wouldn’t stop pumping out of Lake Mead.

Pouring water into Maggie’s water trough, and looking around at his dusty patch with Annie out in the fields, Lolo reminds himself how lucky he is. He hasn’t blown away. He and Annie are dug in. Calies may call them water ticks, but fuck them. If it weren’t for people like him and Annie, they’d dry up and blow away the same as everyone else. And if Lolo moves a little bit of tamarisk around, well, the Calies deserve it, considering what they’ve done to everyone else.

Finished with Maggie, Lolo goes into the house and gets a drink of his own out of the filter urn. The water is cool in the shadows of the adobe house. Juniper beams hang low overhead. He sits down and connects his BuRec camera to the solar panel they’ve got scabbed onto the roof. Its charge light blinks amber. Lolo goes and gets some more water. He’s used to being thirsty, but for some reason he can’t get enough today. Big Daddy Drought’s got his hands around Lolo’s neck today.

Annie comes in, wiping her forehead with a tanned arm. “Don’t drink too much water,” she says. “I haven’t been able to pump. Bunch of guardies around.”

“What the hell are they doing around? We haven’t even opened our headgates yet.”

“They said they were looking for you.”

Lolo almost drops his cup.

They know.

They know about his tamarisk reseeding. They know he’s been splitting and planting root-clusters. That he’s been dragging big healthy chunks of tamarisk up and down the river. A week ago he uploaded his claim on the canyon tamarisk — his biggest stand yet — almost worth an acre-foot in itself in water bounty. And now the guardies are knocking on his door.

Lolo forces his hand not to shake as he puts his cup down. “They say what they want?” He’s surprised his voice doesn’t crack.

“Just that they wanted to talk to you.” She pauses. “They had one of those Humvees. With the guns.”

Lolo closes his eyes. Forces himself to take a deep breath. “They’ve always got guns. It’s probably nothing.”

“It reminded me of Lake Havasu. When they cleared us out. When they shut down the water treatment plant and everyone tried to burn down the BLM office.”

“It’s probably nothing.” Suddenly he’s glad he never told her about his tamarisk hijinks. They can’t punish her the same. How many acre-feet is he liable for? It must be hundreds. They’ll want him, all right. Put him on a Straw work crew and make him work for life, repay his water debt forever. He’s replanted hundreds, maybe thousands of tamarisk, shuffling them around like a cardsharp on a poker table, moving them from one bank to another, killing them again and again and again, and always happily sending in his “evidence.”

“It’s probably nothing,” he says again.

“That’s what people said in Havasu.”

Lolo waves out at their newly tilled patch. The sun shines down hot and hard on the small plot. “We’re not worth that kind of effort.” He forces a grin. “It probably has to do with those enviro crazies who tried to blow up the Straw. Some of them supposedly ran this way. It’s probably that.”

Annie shakes her head, unconvinced. “I don’t know. They could have asked me the same as you.”

“Yeah, but I cover a lot of ground. See a lot of things. I’ll bet that’s why they want to talk to me. They’re just looking for eco-freaks.”

“Yeah, maybe you’re right. It’s probably that.” She nods slowly, trying to make herself believe. “Those enviros, they don’t make any sense at all. Not enough water for people, and they want to give the river to a bunch of fish and birds.”

Lolo nods emphatically and grins wider. “Yeah. Stupid.” But suddenly he views the eco-crazies with something approaching brotherly affection. The Californians are after him, too.

\* \* \*

Lolo doesn’t sleep all night. His instincts tell him to run, but he doesn’t have the heart to tell Annie, or to leave her. He goes out in the morning hunting tamarisk and fails at that as well. He doesn’t cut a single stand all day. He considers shooting himself with his shotgun, but chickens out when he gets the barrels in his mouth. Better alive and on the run than dead. Finally, as he stares into the twin barrels, he knows that he

has to tell Annie, tell her he's been a water thief for years and that he's got to run north. Maybe she'll come with him. Maybe she'll see reason. They'll run together. At least they have that. For sure, he's not going to let those bastards take him off to a labor camp for the rest of his life.

But the guardies are already waiting when Lolo gets back. They're squatting in the shade of their Humvee, talking. When Lolo comes over the crest of the hill, one of them taps the other and points. They both stand. Annie is out in the field again, turning over dirt, unaware of what's about to happen. Lolo reins in and studies the guardies. They lean against their Humvee and watch him back.

Suddenly Lolo sees his future. It plays out in his mind the way it does in a movie, as clear as the blue sky above. He puts his hand on his shotgun. Where it sits on Maggie's far side, the guardies can't see it. He keeps Maggie angled away from them and lets the camel start down the hill.

The guardies saunter toward him. They've got their Humvee with a .50 caliber on the back and they've both got M-16s slung over their shoulders. They're in full bulletproof gear and they look flushed and hot. Lolo rides down slowly. He'll have to hit them both in the face. Sweat trickles between his shoulder blades. His hand is slick on the shotgun's stock.

The guardies are playing it cool. They've still got their rifles slung, and they let Lolo keep approaching. One of them has a wide smile. He's maybe 40 years old, and tanned. He's been out for a while, picking up a tan like that. The other raises a hand and says, "Hey there, Lolo."

Lolo's so surprised he takes his hand off his shotgun. "Hale?" He recognizes the guardie. He grew up with him. They played football together a million years ago, when football fields still had green grass and sprinklers sprayed their water straight into the air. Hale. Hale Perkins. Lolo scowls. He can't shoot Hale.

Hale says. "You're still out here, huh?"

"What the hell are you doing in that uniform? You with the Calies now?"

Hale grimaces and points to his uniform patches: Utah National Guard.

Lolo scowls. Utah National Guard. Colorado National Guard. Arizona National Guard. They're all the same. There's hardly a single member of the "National Guard" that isn't an out-of-state mercenary. Most of the local guardies quit a long time ago, sick to death of goose-stepping family and friends off their properties and sick to death of trading potshots with people who just wanted to stay in their homes. So even if there's still a Colorado National Guard, or an Arizona or a Utah, inside those uniforms with all their expensive nightsight gear and their brand-new choppers flying the river bends, it's pure California.

And then there are a few like Hale.

Lolo remembers Hale as being an OK guy. Remembers stealing a keg of beer from behind the Elks Club one night with him. Lolo eyes him. "How you liking that Supplementary Assistance Program?" He glances at the other guardie. "That working real well for you? The Calies a big help?"

Hale's eyes plead for understanding. "Come on, Lolo. I'm not like you. I got a family to look after. If I do another year of duty, they let Shannon and the kids base out of California."

"They give you a swimming pool in your backyard, too?"

"You know it's not like that. Water's scarce there, too."

Lolo wants to taunt him, but his heart isn't in it. A part of him wonders if Hale is just smart. At first, when California started winning its water lawsuits and shutting off cities, the displaced people just followed the water — right to California. It took a little while before the bureaucrats realized what was going on, but



finally someone with a sharp pencil did the math and realized that taking in people along with their water didn't solve a water shortage. So the immigration fences went up.

But people like Hale can still get in.

"So what do you two want?" Inside, Lolo's wondering why they haven't already pulled him off Maggie and hauled him away, but he's willing to play this out.

The other guardie grins. "Maybe we're just out here seeing how the water ticks live."

Lolo eyes him. This one, he could shoot. He lets his hand fall to his shotgun again. "BuRec sets my headgate. No reason for you to be out here."

The Calie says, "There were some marks on it. Big ones."

Lolo smiles tightly. He knows which marks the Calie is talking about. He made them with five different wrenches when he tried to dismember the entire headgate apparatus in a fit of obsession. Finally he gave up trying to open the bolts and just beat on the thing, banging the steel of the gate, smashing at it, while on the other side he had plants withering. After that, he gave up and just carried buckets of water to his plants and left it at that. But the dents and nicks are still there, reminding him of a period of madness. "It still works, don't it?"

Hale holds up a hand to his partner, quieting him. "Yeah, it still works. That's not why we're here."

"So what do you two want? You didn't drive all the way out here with your machine gun just to talk about dents in my headgate."

Hale sighs, put-upon, trying to be reasonable. "You mind getting down off that damn camel so we can talk?"

Lolo studies the two guardies, figuring his chances on the ground. "Shit." He spits. "Yeah, OK. You got me." He urges Maggie to kneel and climbs off her hump. "Annie didn't know anything about this. Don't get her involved. It was all me."

Hale's brow wrinkles, puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

"You're not arresting me?"

The Calie with Hale laughs. "Why? Cause you take a couple buckets of water from the river? Cause you probably got an illegal cistern around here somewhere?" He laughs again. "You ticks are all the same. You think we don't know about all that crap?"

Hale scowls at the Calie, then turns back to Lolo. "No, we're not here to arrest you. You know about the Straw?"

"Yeah." Lolo says it slowly, but inside, he's grinning. A great weight is suddenly off him. They don't know. They don't know shit. It was a good plan when he started it, and it's a good plan still. Lolo schools his face to keep the glee off, and tries to listen to what Hale's saying, but he can't, he's jumping up and down and gibbering like a monkey. They don't know—

"Wait." Lolo holds up his hand. "What did you just say?"

Hale repeats himself. "California's ending the water bounty. They've got enough Straw sections built up now that they don't need the program. They've got half the river enclosed. They got an agreement from the Department of Interior to focus their budget on seep and evaporation control. That's where all the big benefits are. They're shutting down the water bounty payout program." He pauses. "I'm sorry, Lolo."

Lolo frowns. “But a tamarisk is still a tamarisk. Why should one of those damn plants get the water? If I knock out a tamarisk, even if Cali doesn’t want the water, I could still take it. Lots of people could use the water.”

Hale looks pityingly at Lolo. “We don’t make the regulations, we just enforce them. I’m supposed to tell you that your headgate won’t get opened next year. If you keep hunting tamarisk, it won’t do any good.” He looks around the patch, then shrugs. “Anyway, in another couple years they were going to pipe this whole stretch. There won’t be any tamarisk at all after that.”

“What am I supposed to do, then?”

“California and BuRec is offering early buyout money.” Hale pulls a booklet out of his bulletproof vest and flips it open. “Sort of to soften the blow.” The pages of the booklet flap in the hot breeze. Hale pins the pages with a thumb and pulls a pen out of another vest pocket. He marks something on the booklet, then tears off a perforated check. “It’s not a bad deal.”

Lolo takes the check. Stares at it. “Five hundred dollars?”

Hale shrugs sadly. “It’s what they’re offering. That’s just the paper codes. You confirm it online. Use your BuRec camera phone, and they’ll deposit it in whatever bank you want. Or they can hold it in trust until you get into a town and want to withdraw it. Any place with a BLM office, you can do that. But you need to confirm before April 15. Then BuRec’ll send out a guy to shut down your headgate before this season gets going.”

“Five hundred dollars?”

“It’s enough to get you north. That’s more than they’re offering next year.”

“But this is my patch.”

“Not as long as we’ve got Big Daddy Drought. I’m sorry, Lolo.”

“The drought could break any time. Why can’t they give us a couple more years? It could break any time.” But even as he says it, Lolo doesn’t believe. Ten years ago, he might have. But not now. Big Daddy Drought’s here to stay. He clutches the check and its keycodes to his chest.

A hundred yards away, the river flows on to California.

## Yellow Card Man

Machetes gleam on the warehouse floor, reflecting a red conflagration of jute and tamarind and kink-springs. They're all around now. The men with their green headbands and their slogans and their wet wet blades. Their calls echo in the warehouse and on the street. Number one son is already gone. Jade Blossom he cannot find, no matter how many times he treads her phone number. His daughters' faces have been split wide like blister rust durians.

More fires blaze. Black smoke roils around him. He runs through his warehouse offices, past computers with teak cases and iron treadles and past piles of ash where his clerks burned files through the night, obliterating the names of people who aided the Tri-Clipper.

He runs, choking on heat and smoke. In his own gracious office he dashes to the shutters and fumbles with their brass catches. He slams his shoulder against those blue shutters while the warehouse burns and brown-skinned men boil through the door and swing their slick red knives...

Tranh wakes, gasping.

Sharp concrete edges jam against the knuckles of his spine. A salt-slick thigh smothers his face. He shoves away the stranger's leg. Sweat-sheened skin glimmers in the blackness, impressionistic markers for the bodies that shift and shove all around him. They fart and groan and turn, flesh on flesh, bone against bone, the living and the heat-smothered dead all together.

A man coughs. Moist lungs and spittle gust against Tranh's face. His spine and belly stick to the naked sweating flesh of the strangers around him. Claustrophobia rises. He forces it down. Forces himself to lie still, to breathe slowly, deeply, despite the heat. To taste the sweltering darkness with all the paranoia of a survivor's mind. He is awake while others sleep. He is alive while others are long dead. He forces himself to lie still, and listen.

Bicycle bells are ringing. Down below and far away, ten thousand bodies below, a lifetime away, bicycle bells chime. He claws himself out of the mass of tangled humanity, dragging his hemp sack of possessions with him. He is late. Of all the days he could be late, this is the worst possible one. He slings the bag over a bony shoulder and feels his way down the stairs, finding his footing in the cascade of sleeping flesh. He slides his sandals between families, lovers, and crouching hungry ghosts, praying that he will not slip and break an old man's bone. Step, feel, step, feel.

A curse rises from the mass. Bodies shift and roll. He steadies himself on a landing amongst the privileged who lie flat, then wades on. Downward, ever downward, round more turnings of the stair, wading down through the carpet of his countrymen. Step. Feel. Step. Feel. Another turn. A hint of gray light glimmers far below. Fresh air kisses his face, caresses his body. The waterfall of anonymous flesh resolves into individuals, men and women sprawled across one another, pillowed on hard concrete, propped on the slant of the windowless stair. Gray light turns gold. The tinkle of bicycle bells comes louder now, clear like the ring of cibiscosis chimes.

Tranh spills out of the high-rise and into a crowd of congee sellers, hemp weavers, and potato carts. He puts his hands on his knees and gasps, sucking in swirling dust and trampled street dung, grateful for every breath as sweat pours off his body. Salt jewels fall from the tip of his nose, spatter the red paving stones of the sidewalk with his moisture. Heat kills men. Kills old men. But he is out of the oven; he has not been cooked again, despite the blast furnace of the dry season.

Bicycles and their ringing bells flow past like schools of carp, commuters already on their way to work. Behind him the high-rise looms, forty stories of heat and vines and mold. A vertical ruin of broken windows and pillaged apartments. A remnant glory from the old energy Expansion now become a heated tropic coffin without air conditioning or electricity to protect it from the glaze of the equatorial sun.

Bangkok keeps its refugees in the pale blue sky, and wishes they would stay there. And yet he has emerged alive; despite the Dung Lord, despite the white shirts, despite old age, he has once again clawed his way down from the heavens.

Tranh straightens. Men stir woks of noodles and pull steamers of baozi from their bamboo rounds. Gray high-protein U-TeX rice gruel fills the air with the scents of rotting fish and fatty acid oils. Tranh's stomach knots with hunger and a pasty saliva coats his mouth, all that his dehydrated body can summon at the scent of food. Devil cats swirl around the vendors' legs like sharks, hoping for morsels to drop, hoping for theft opportunities. Their shimmering chameleon-like forms flit and flicker, showing calico and Siamese and orange tabby markings before fading against the backdrop of concrete and crowding hungry people that they brush against. The woks burn hard and bright with green-tinged methane, giving off new scents as rice noodles splash into hot oil. Tranh forces himself to turn away.

He shoves through the press, dragging his hemp bag along with him, ignoring who it hits and who shouts after him. Incident victims crouch in the doorways, waving severed limbs and begging from others who have a little more. Men squat on tea stools and watch the day's swelter build as they smoke tiny rolled cigarettes of scavenged gold leaf tobacco and share them from lip to lip. Women converse in knots, nervously fingering yellow cards as they wait for white shirts to appear and stamp their renewals.

Yellow card people as far as the eye can see: an entire race of people, fled to the great Thai Kingdom from Malaya where they were suddenly unwelcome. A fat clot of refugees placed under the authority of the Environment Ministry's white shirts as if they were nothing but another invasive species to be managed, like cibiscosis, blister rust, and genehack weevil. Yellow cards, yellow men. Huang ren all around, and Tranh is late for his one opportunity to climb out of their mass. One opportunity in all his months as a yellow card Chinese refugee. And now he is late. He squeezes past a rat seller, swallowing another rush of saliva at the scent of roasted flesh, and rushes down an alley to the water pump. He stops short.

Ten others stand in line before him: old men, young women, mothers, boys.

He slumps. He wants to rage at the setback. If he had the energy—if he had eaten well yesterday or the day before or even the day before that he would scream, would throw his hemp bag on the street and stamp on it until it turned to dust—but his calories are too few. It is just another opportunity squandered, thanks to the ill luck of the stairwells. He should have given the last of his baht to the Dung Lord and rented body-space in an apartment with windows facing east so that he could see the rising sun, and wake early.

But he was cheap. Cheap with his money. Cheap with his future. How many times did he tell his sons that spending money to make more money was perfectly acceptable? But the timid yellow card refugee that he has become counseled him to save his baht. Like an ignorant peasant mouse he clutched his cash to himself and slept in pitch-black stairwells. He should have stood like a tiger and braved the night curfew and the ministry's white shirts and their black batons.... And now he is late and reeks of the stairwells and stands behind ten others, all of whom must drink and fill a bucket and brush their teeth with the brown water of the Chao Phraya River.

There was a time when he demanded punctuality of his employees, of his wife, of his sons and concubines, but it was when he owned a spring-wound wristwatch and could gaze at its steady sweep of minutes and hours. Every so often, he could wind its tiny spring, and listen to it tick, and lash his sons for their lazy attitudes. He has become old and slow and stupid or he would have foreseen this. Just as he should have foreseen the rising militancy of the Green Headbands. When did his mind become so slack?

One by one, the other refugees finish their ablutions. A mother with gap teeth and blooms of gray fa' gan fringe behind her ears tops her bucket, and Tranh slips forward.

He has no bucket. Just the bag. The precious bag. He hangs it beside the pump and wraps his sarong more tightly around his hollow hips before he squats under the pump head. With a bony arm he yanks the pump's handle. Ripe brown water gushes over him. The river's blessing. His skin droops off his body with the weight of the water, sagging like the flesh of a shaved cat. He opens his mouth and drinks the gritty water,

rubs his teeth with a finger, wondering what protozoa he may swallow. It doesn't matter. He trusts luck, now. It's all he has.

Children watch him bathe his old body while their mothers scavenge through PurCal mango peels and Red Star tamarind hulls hoping to find some bit of fruit not tainted with cibiscosis. 11 1mt.6... Or is it 11 1mt.7? Or mt.8? There was a time when he knew all the bio-engineered plagues that ailed them. Knew when a crop was about to fail, and whether new seedstock had been ripped. Profited from the knowledge by filling his clipper ships with the right seeds and produce. But that was a lifetime ago.

His hands are shaking as he opens his bag and pulls out his clothes. Is it old age or excitement that makes him tremble? Clean clothes. Good clothes. A rich man's white linen suit.

The clothes were not his, but now they are, and he has kept them safe. Safe for this opportunity, even when he desperately wanted to sell them for cash or wear them as his other clothes turned to rags. He drags the trousers up his bony legs, stepping out of his sandals and balancing one foot at a time. He begins buttoning the shirt, hurrying his fingers as a voice in his head reminds him that time is slipping away.

"Selling those clothes? Going to parade them around until someone with meat on his bones buys them off you?"

Tranh glances up—he shouldn't need to look; he should know the voice—and yet he looks anyway. He can't help himself. Once he was a tiger. Now he is nothing but a frightened little mouse who jumps and twitches at every hint of danger. And there it is: Ma. Standing before him, beaming. Fat and beaming. As vital as a wolf.

Ma grins. "You look like a wire-frame mannequin at Palawan Plaza."

"I wouldn't know. I can't afford to shop there." Tranh keeps putting on his clothes.

"Those are nice enough to come from Palawan. How did you get them?"

Tranh doesn't answer.

"Who are you fooling? Those clothes were made for a man a thousand times your size."

"We can't all be fat and lucky." Tranh's voice comes out as a whisper. Did he always whisper? Was he always such a rattletrap corpse whispering and sighing at every threat? He doesn't think so. But it's hard for him to remember what a tiger should sound like. He tries again, steadying his voice. "We can't all be as lucky as Ma Ping who lives on the top floors with the Dung King himself." His words still come out like reeds shushing against concrete.

"Lucky?" Ma laughs. So young. So pleased with himself. "I earn my fate. Isn't that what you always used to tell me? That luck has nothing to do with success? That men make their own luck?" He laughs again. "And now look at you."

Tranh grits his teeth. "Better men than you have fallen." Still the awful timid whisper.

"And better men than you are on the rise." Ma's fingers dart to his wrist. They stroke a wristwatch, a fine chronograph, ancient, gold and diamonds—Rolex. From an earlier time. A different place. A different world. Tranh stares stupidly, like a hypnotized snake. He can't tear his eyes away.

Ma smiles lazily. "You like it? I found it in an antique shop near Wat Rajapradit. It seemed familiar."

Tranh's anger rises. He starts to reply, then shakes his head and says nothing. Time is passing. He fumbles with his final buttons, pulls on the coat and runs his fingers through the last surviving strands of his lank gray hair. If he had a comb ... He grimaces. It is stupid to wish. The clothes are enough. They have to be.

Ma laughs. "Now you look like a Big Name."

Ignore him, says the voice inside Tranh's head. Tranh pulls his last paltry baht out of his hemp bag—the money he saved by sleeping in the stairwells, and which has now made him so late—and shoves it into his pockets.

"You seem rushed. Do you have an appointment somewhere?"

Tranh shoves past, trying not to flinch as he squeezes around Ma's bulk.

Ma calls after him, laughing. "Where are you headed, Mr. Big Name? Mr. Three Prosperities! Do you have some intelligence you'd like to share with the rest of us?"

Others look up at the shout: hungry yellow card faces, hungry yellow card mouths. Yellow card people as far as the eye can see, and all of them looking at him now. Incident survivors. Men. Women. Children. Knowing him, now. Recognizing his legend. With a change of clothing and a single shout he has risen from obscurity. Their mocking calls pour down like a monsoon rain:

"Wei! Mr. Three Prosperities! Nice shirt!"

"Share a smoke, Mr. Big Name!"

"Where are you going so fast all dressed up?"

"Getting married?"

"Getting a tenth wife?"

"Got a job?"

"Mr. Big Name! Got a job for me?"

"Where you going? Maybe we should all follow Old Multinational!"

Tranh's neck prickles. He shakes off the fear. Even if they follow it will be too late for them to take advantage. For the first time in half a year, the advantage of skills and knowledge are on his side. Now there is only time.

\* \* \* \*

He jogs through Bangkok's morning press as bicycles and cycle rickshaws and spring-wound scooters stream past. Sweat drenches him. It soaks his good shirt, damps even his jacket. He takes it off and slings it over an arm. His gray hair clings to his egg-bald liver-spotted skull, waterlogged. He pauses every other block to walk and recover his breath as his shins begin to ache and his breath comes in gasps and his old man's heart hammers in his chest.

He should spend his baht on a cycle rickshaw but he can't make himself do it. He is late. But perhaps he is too late? And if he is too late, the extra baht will be wasted and he will starve tonight. But then, what good is a suit soaked with sweat?

Clothes make the man, he told his sons; the first impression is the most important. Start well, and you start ahead. Of course you can win someone with your skills and your knowledge but people are animals first. Look good. Smell good. Satisfy their first senses. Then when they are well disposed toward you, make your proposal.

Isn't that why he beat Second Son when he came home with a red tattoo of a tiger on his shoulder, as though he was some calorie gangster? Isn't that why he paid a tooth doctor to twist even his daughters' teeth with cultured bamboo and rubber curves from Singapore so that they were as straight as razors?

And isn't that why the Green Headbands in Malaya hated us Chinese? Because we looked so good? Because we looked so rich? Because we spoke so well and worked so hard when they were lazy and we sweated every day?

Tranh watches a pack of spring-wound scooters flit past, all of them Thai-Chinese manufactured. Such clever fast things—a megajoule kink-spring and a flywheel, pedals and friction brakes to regather kinetic energy. And all their factories owned 100 percent by Chiu Chow Chinese. And yet no Chiu Chow blood runs in the gutters of this country. These Chiu Chow Chinese are loved, despite the fact that they came to the Thai Kingdom as farang.

If we had assimilated in Malaya like the Chiu Chow did here, would we have survived?

Tranh shakes his head at the thought. It would have been impossible. His clan would have had to convert to Islam as well, and forsake all their ancestors in Hell. It would have been impossible. Perhaps it was his people's karma to be destroyed. To stand tall and dominate the cities of Penang and Malacca and all the western coast of the Malayan Peninsula for a brief while, and then to die.

Clothes make the man. Or kill him. Tranh understands this, finally. A white tailored suit from Hwang Brothers is nothing so much as a target. An antique piece of gold mechanization swinging on your wrist is nothing if not bait. Tranh wonders if his sons' perfect teeth still lie in the ashes of Three Prosperities' warehouses, if their lovely timepieces now attract sharks and crabs in the holds of his scuttled clipper ships.

He should have known. Should have seen the rising tide of bloodthirsty subsects and intensifying nationalism. Just as the man he followed two months ago should have known that fine clothes were no protection. A man in good clothes, a yellow card to boot, should have known that he was nothing but a bit of bloodied bait before a Komodo lizard. At least the stupid melon didn't bleed on his fancy clothes when the white shirts were done with him. That one had no habit of survival. He forgot that he was no longer a Big Name.

But Tranh is learning. As he once learned tides and depth charts, markets and bio-engineered plagues, profit maximization and how to balance the dragon's gate, he now learns from the devil cats who molt and fade from sight, who flee their hunters at the first sign of danger. He learns from the crows and kites who live so well on scavenge. These are the animals he must emulate. He must discard the reflexes of a tiger. There are no tigers except in zoos. A tiger is always hunted and killed. But a small animal, a scavenging animal, has a chance to strip the bones of a tiger and walk away with the last Hwang Brothers suit that will ever cross the border from Malaya. With the Hwang clan all dead and the Hwang patterns all burned, nothing is left except memories and antiques, and one scavenging old man who knows the power and the peril of good appearance.

An empty cycle rickshaw coasts past. The rickshaw man looks back at Tranh, eyes questioning, attracted by the Hwang Brothers fabrics that flap off Tranh's skinny frame. Tranh raises a tentative hand. The cycle rickshaw slows.

Is it a good risk? To spend his last security so frivolously?

There was the time when he sent clipper fleets across the ocean to Chennai with great stinking loads of durians because he guessed that the Indians had not had time to plant resistant crop strains before the new blister rust mutations swept over them. A time when he bought black tea and sandalwood from the river men on the chance that he could sell it in the South. Now he can't decide if he should ride or walk. What a pale man he has become! Sometimes he wonders if he is actually a hungry ghost, trapped between worlds and unable to escape one way or the other.

The cycle rickshaw coasts ahead, the rider's blue jersey shimmering in the tropic sun, waiting for a decision. Tranh waves him away. The rickshaw man stands on his pedals, sandals flapping against calloused heels, and accelerates.

Panic seizes Tranh. He raises his hand again, chases after the rickshaw. "Wait!" His voice comes out as a whisper.

The rickshaw slips into traffic, joining bicycles and the massive shambling shapes of elephantine megodonts. Tranh lets his hand fall, obscurely grateful that the rickshaw man hasn't heard, that the decision of spending his last baht has been made by some force larger than himself.

All around him, the morning press flows. Hundreds of children in their sailor suit uniforms stream through school gates. Saffron-robed monks stroll under the shade of wide black umbrellas. A man with a conical bamboo hat watches him and then mutters quietly to his friend. They both study him. A trickle of fear runs up Tranh's spine.

They are all around him, as they were in Malacca. In his own mind, he calls them foreigners, farang. And yet it is he who is the foreigner here. The creature that doesn't belong. And they know it. The women hanging sarongs on the wires of their balconies, the men sitting barefoot while they drink sugared coffee. The fish sellers and curry men. They all know it, and Tranh can barely control his terror.

Bangkok is not Malacca, he tells himself. Bangkok is not Penang. We have no wives, or gold wristwatches with diamonds, or clipper fleets to steal anymore. Ask the snakeheads who abandoned me in the leech jungles of the border. They have all my wealth. I have nothing. I am no tiger. I am safe.

For a few seconds he believes it. But then a teak-skinned boy chops the top off a coconut with a rusty machete and offers it to Tranh with a smile and it's all Tranh can do not to scream and run.

Bangkok is not Malacca. They will not burn your warehouses or slash your clerks into chunks of shark bait. He wipes sweat off his face. Perhaps he should have waited to wear the suit. It draws too much attention. There are too many people looking at him. Better to fade like a devil cat and slink across the city in safe anonymity, instead of strutting around like a peacock.

Slowly the streets change from palm-lined boulevards to the open wastelands of the new foreigners' quarter. Tranh hurries toward the river, heading deeper into the manufacturing empire of white farang.

Gweilo, yang guizi, farang. So many words in so many languages for these translucent-skinned sweating monkeys. Two generations ago when the petroleum ran out and the gweilo factories shut down, everyone assumed they were gone for good. And now they are back. The monsters of the past returned, with new toys and new technologies. The nightmares his mother threatened him with, invading Asiatic coasts. Demons truly; never dead.

And he goes to worship them: the ilk of AgriGen and PurCal with their monopolies on U-TeX rice and Total Nutrient Wheat; the blood-brothers of the bio-engineers who generipped devil cats from storybook inspiration and set them loose in the world to breed and breed and breed; the sponsors of the Intellectual Property Police who used to board his clipper fleets in search of IP infringements, hunting like wolves for unstamped calories and gene-ripped grains as though their engineered plagues of cibiscosis and blister rust weren't enough to keep their profits high....

Ahead of him, a crowd has formed. Tranh frowns. He starts to run, then forces himself back to a walk. Better not to waste his calories, now. A line has already formed in front of the foreign devil Tennyson Brothers' factory. It stretches almost a li, snaking around the corner, past the bicycle gear logo in the wrought iron gate of Sukhumvit Research Corporation, past the intertwined dragons of PurCal East Asia, and past Mishimoto & Co., the clever Japanese fluid dynamics company that Tranh once sourced his clipper designs from.



Mishimoto is full of windup import workers, they say. Full of illegal gene-ripped bodies that walk and talk and totter about in their herky-jerky way—and take rice from real men's bowls. Creatures with as many as eight arms like the Hindu gods, creatures with no legs so they cannot run away, creatures with eyes as large as teacups that can only see a bare few feet ahead of them but inspect everything with enormous magnified curiosity. But no one can see inside, and if the Environment Ministry's white shirts know, then the clever Japanese are paying them well to ignore their crimes against biology and religion. It is perhaps the only thing a good Buddhist and a good Muslim and even the farang Grahamite Christians can agree on: windups have no souls.

When Tranh bought Mishimoto's clipper ships so long ago, he didn't care. Now he wonders if behind their high gates, windup monstrosities labor while yellow cards stand outside and beg.

Tranh trudges down the line. Policemen with clubs and spring guns patrol the hopefuls, making jokes about farang who wish to work for farang. Heat beats down, merciless on the men lined up before the gate.

"Wah! You look like a pretty bird with those clothes."

Tranh starts. Li Shen and Hu Laoshi and Lao Xia stand in the line, clustered together. A trio of old men as pathetic as himself. Hu waves a newly rolled cigarette in invitation, motioning him to join them. Tranh nearly shakes at the sight of the tobacco, but forces himself to refuse it. Three times Hu offers, and finally Tranh allows himself to accept, grateful that Hu is in earnest, and wondering where Hu has found this sudden wealth. But then, Hu has a little more strength than the rest of them. A cart man earns more if he works as fast as Hu.

Tranh wipes the sweat off his brow. "A lot of applicants."

They all laugh at Tranh's dismay.

Hu lights the cigarette for Tranh. "You thought you knew a secret, maybe?"

Tranh shrugs and draws deeply, passes the cigarette to Lao Xia. "A rumor. Potato God said his elder brother's son had a promotion. I thought there might be a niche down below, in the slot the nephew left behind."

Hu grins. "That's where I heard it, too. 'Eee. He'll be rich. Manage fifteen clerks. Eee! He'll be rich.' I thought I might be one of the fifteen."

"At least the rumor was true," Lao Xia says. "And not just Potato God's nephew promoted, either." He scratches the back of his head, a convulsive movement like a dog fighting fleas. Fa' gan's gray fringe stains the crooks of his elbows and peeps from the sweaty pockets behind his ears where his hair has receded. He sometimes jokes about it: nothing a little money can't fix. A good joke. But today he is scratching and the skin behind his ears is cracked and raw. He notices everyone watching and yanks his hand down. He grimaces and passes the cigarette to Li Shen.

"How many positions?" Tranh asks.

"Three. Three clerks."

Tranh grimaces. "My lucky number."

Li Shen peers down the line with his bottle-thick glasses. "Too many of us, I think, even if your lucky number is 555."

Lao Xia laughs. "Amongst the four of us, there are already too many." He taps the man standing in line just ahead of them. "Uncle. What was your profession before?"

The stranger looks back, surprised. He was a distinguished gentleman, once, by his scholar's collar, by his fine leather shoes now scarred and blackened with scavenged charcoal. "I taught physics."

Lao Xia nods. "You see? We're all overqualified. I oversaw a rubber plantation. Our own professor has degrees in fluid dynamics and materials design. Hu was a fine doctor. And then there is our friend of the Three Prosperities. Not a trading company at all. More like a multi-national." He tastes the words. Says them again, "Multi-national." A strange, powerful, seductive sound.

Tranh ducks his head, embarrassed. "You're too kind."

"Fang pi." Hu takes a drag on his cigarette, keeps it moving. "You were the richest of us all. And now here we are, old men scrambling for young men's jobs. Every one of us ten thousand times overqualified."

The man behind them interjects, "I was executive legal counsel for Standard & Commerce."

Lao Xia makes a face. "Who cares, dog fucker? You're nothing now."

The banking lawyer turns away, affronted. Lao Xia grins, sucks hard on the hand-rolled cigarette and passes it again to Tranh. Hu nudges Tranh's elbow as he starts to take a puff. "Look! There goes old Ma."

Tranh looks over, exhales smoke sharply. For a moment he thinks Ma has followed him, but no. It is just coincidence. They are in the farang factory district. Ma works for the foreign devils, balancing their books. A kink-spring company. Springlife. Yes, Springlife. It is natural that Ma should be here, comfortably riding to work behind a sweating cycle-rickshaw man.

"Ma Ping," Li Shen says. "I heard he's living on the top floor now. Up there with the Dung Lord himself."

Tranh scowls. "I fired him, once. Ten thousand years ago. Lazy and an embezzler."

"He's so fat."

"I've seen his wife," Hu says. "And his sons. They both have fat on them. They eat meat every night. The boys are fatter than fat. Full of U-TeX proteins."

"You're exaggerating."

"Fatter than us."

Lao Xia scratches a rib. "Bamboo is fatter than you."

Tranh watches Ma Ping open a factory door and slip inside. The past is past. Dwelling on the past is madness. There is nothing for him there. There are no wristwatches, no concubines, no opium pipes or jade sculptures of Quan Yin's merciful form. There are no pretty clipper ships slicing into port with fortunes in their holds. He shakes his head and offers the nearly spent cigarette to Hu so that he can recover the last tobacco for later use. There is nothing for him in the past. Ma is in the past. Three Prosperities Trading Company is the past. The sooner he remembers this, the sooner he will climb out of this awful hole.

From behind him, a man calls out, "Wei! Baldy! When did you cut the line? Go to the back! You line up, like the rest of us!"

"Line up?" Lao Xia shouts back. "Don't be stupid!" He waves at the line ahead. "How many hundreds are ahead of us? It won't make any difference where he stands."

Others begin to attend the man's complaint. Complain as well. "Line up! Pai dui! Pai dui!" The disturbance increases and police start down the line, casually swinging their batons. They aren't white shirts, but they have no love for hungry yellow cards.

Tranh makes placating motions to the crowd and Lao Xia. “Of course. Of course. I'll line up. It's of no consequence.” He makes his farewells and plods his way down the winding yellow card snake, seeking its distant tail.

Everyone is dismissed long before he reaches it.

\* \* \* \*

A scavenging night. A starving night. Tranh hunts through dark alleys, avoiding the vertical prison heat of the towers. Devil cats seethe and scatter ahead of him in rippling waves. The lights of the methane lamps flicker, burn low and snuff themselves, blackening the city. Hot velvet darkness fetid with rotting fruit swaddles him. The heavy humid air sags. Still sweltering darkness. Empty market stalls. On a street corner, theater men turn in stylized cadences to stories of Ravana. On a thoroughfare, swingshift megodonts shuffle homeward like gray mountains, their massed shadows led by the gold trim glitter of union handlers.

In the alleys, children with bright silver knives hunt unwary yellow cards and drunken Thais, but Tranh is wise to their feral ways. A year ago, he would not have seen them, but he has the paranoid's gift of survival now. Creatures like them are no worse than sharks: easy to predict, easy to avoid. It is not these obviously feral hunters who churn Tranh's guts with fear, it is the chameleons, the everyday people who work and shop and smile and wai so pleasantly—and riot without warning—who terrify Tranh.

He picks through the trash heaps, fighting devil cats for signs of food, wishing he was fast enough to catch and kill one of those nearly invisible felines. Picking up discarded mangos, studying them carefully with his old man's eyes, holding them close and then far away, sniffing at them, feeling their blister rusted exteriors and then tossing them aside when they show red mottle in their guts. Some of them still smell good, but even crows won't accept such a taint. They would eagerly peck apart a bloated corpse, but they will not feed on blister rust.

Down the street, the Dung Lord's lackeys shovel the day's animal leavings into sacks and throw them into tricycle carriers: the night harvest. They watch him suspiciously. Tranh keeps his eyes averted, avoiding challenge, and scuffles on. He has nothing to cook on an illegally stolen shit fire anyway, and nowhere to sell manure on the black market. The Dung Lord's monopoly is too strong. Tranh wonders how it might be to find a place in the dung shovelers' union, to know that his survival was guaranteed feeding the composters of Bangkok's methane reclamation plants. But it is an opium dream; no yellow card can slither into that closed club.

Tranh lifts another mango and freezes. He bends low, squinting. Pushes aside broadsheet complaints against the Ministry of Trade and handbills calling for a new gold-sheathed River Wat. He pushes aside black slime banana peels and burrows into the garbage. Below it all, stained and torn but still legible, he finds a portion of what was once a great advertising board that perhaps stood over this marketplace:—ogistics. Shipping. Tradin—and behind the words, the glorious silhouette of Dawn Star: one part of Three Prosperities' tri-clipper logo, running before the wind as fast and sleek as a shark: a high-tech image of palm-oil spun polymers and sails as sharp and white as a gull's.

Tranh turns his face away, overcome. It's like unearthing a grave and finding himself within. His pride. His blindness. From a time when he thought he might compete with the foreign devils and become a shipping magnate. A Li Ka Shing or a reborn Richard Kuok for the New Expansion. Rebuild the pride of Nanyang Chinese shipping and trading. And here, like a slap in the face, a portion of his ego, buried in rot and blister rust and devil cat urine.

He searches around, pawing for more portions of the sign, wondering if anyone treads a phone call to that old phone number, if the secretary whose wages he once paid is still at his desk, working for a new master, a native Malay perhaps, with impeccable pedigree and religion. Wondering if the few clippers he failed to scuttle still ply the seas and islands of the archipelago. He forces himself to stop his search. Even if he had the money he would not treadle that number. Would not waste the calories. Could not stand the loss again.

He straightens, scattering devil cats who have slunk close. There is nothing here in this market except rinds and unshoveled dung. He has wasted his calories once again. Even the cockroaches and the blood beetles have been eaten. If he searches for a dozen hours, he will still find nothing. Too many people have come before, picking at these bones.

\* \* \* \*

Three times he hides from white shirts as he makes his way home, three times ducking into shadows as they strut past. Cringing as they wander close, cursing his white linen suit that shows so clearly in darkness. By the third time, superstitious fear runs hot in his veins. His rich man's clothes seem to attract the patrols of the Environment Ministry, seem to hunger for the wearer's death. Black batons twirl from casual hands no more than inches away from his face. Spring guns glitter silver in the darkness. His hunters stand so close that he can count the wicked bladed disk cartridges in their jute bandoliers. A white shirt pauses and pisses in the alley where Tranh crouches, and only fails to see him because his partner stands on the street and wants to check the permits of the dung gatherers.

Each time, Tranh stifles his panicked urge to tear off his too-rich clothes and sink into safe anonymity. It is only a matter of time before the white shirts catch him. Before they swing their black clubs and make his Chinese skull a mash of blood and bone. Better to run naked through the hot night than strut like a peacock and die. And yet he cannot quite abandon the cursed suit. Is it pride? Is it stupidity? He keeps it though, even as its arrogant cut turns his bowels watery with fear.

By the time he reaches home, even the gas lights on the main thoroughfares of Sukhumvit Road and Rama IV are blackened. Outside the Dung Lord's tower, street stalls still burn woks for the few laborers lucky enough to have night work and curfew dispensations. Pork tallow candles flicker on the tables. Noodles splash into hot woks with a sizzle. White shirts stroll past, their eyes on the seated yellow cards, ensuring that none of the foreigners brazenly sleep in the open air and sully the sidewalks with their snoring presence.

Tranh joins the protective loom of the towers, entering the nearly extra-territorial safety of the Dung Lord's influence. He stumbles toward the doorways and the swelter of the high rise, wondering how high he will be forced to climb before he can shove a niche for himself on the stairwells.

"You didn't get the job, did you?"

Tranh cringes at the voice. It's Ma Ping again, sitting at a sidewalk table, a bottle of Mekong whiskey beside his hand. His face is flushed with alcohol, as bright as a red paper lantern. Half-eaten plates of food lie strewn around his table. Enough to feed five others, easily.

Images of Ma war in Tranh's head: the young clerk he once sent packing for being too clever with an abacus, the man whose son is fat, the man who got out early, the man who begged to be rehired at Three Prosperities, the man who now struts around Bangkok with Tranh's last precious possession on his wrist—the one item that even the snakeheads didn't steal. Tranh thinks that truly fate is cruel, placing him in such proximity to one he once considered so far beneath him.

Despite his intention to show bravado, once again Tranh's words come out as a mousy whisper. "What do you care?"

Ma shrugs, pours whiskey for himself. "I wouldn't have noticed you in the line, without that suit." He nods at Tranh's sweat-damp clothing. "Good idea to dress up. Too far back in line, though."

Tranh wants to walk away, to ignore the arrogant whelp, but Ma's leavings of steamed bass and laap and U-  
Tex rice noodles lie tantalizingly close. He thinks he smells pork and can't help salivating. His gums ache for the idea that he could chew meat again and he wonders if his teeth would accept the awful luxury....

Abruptly, Tranh realizes that he has been staring. That he has stood for some time, ogling the scraps of Ma's meal. And Ma is watching him. Tranh flushes and starts to turn away.

Ma says, "I didn't buy your watch to spite you, you know."

Tranh stops short. "Why then?"

Ma's fingers stray to the gold and diamond bauble, then seem to catch themselves. He reaches for his whiskey glass instead. "I wanted a reminder." He takes a swallow of liquor and sets the glass back amongst his piled plates with the deliberate care of a drunk. He grins sheepishly. His fingers are again stroking the watch, a guilty furtive movement. "I wanted a reminder. Against ego."

Tranh spits. "Fang pi."

Ma shakes his head vigorously. "No! It's true." He pauses. "Anyone can fall. If the Three Prosperities can fall, then I can. I wanted to remember that." He takes another pull on his whiskey. "You were right to fire me."

Tranh snorts. "You didn't think so then."

"I was angry. I didn't know that you'd saved my life, then." He shrugs. "I would never have left Malaya if you hadn't fired me. I would never have seen the Incident coming. I would have had too much invested in staying." Abruptly, he pulls himself upright and motions for Tranh to join him. "Come. Have a drink. Have some food. I owe you that much. You saved my life. I've repaid you poorly. Sit."

Tranh turns away. "I don't despise myself so much."

"Do you love face so much that you can't take a man's food? Don't be stuck in your bones. I don't care if you hate me. Just take my food. Curse me later, when your belly is full."

Tranh tries to control his hunger, to force himself to walk away, but he can't. He knows men who might have enough face to starve before accepting Ma's scraps, but he isn't one of them. A lifetime ago, he might have been. But the humiliations of his new life have taught him much about who he really is. He has no sweet illusions now. He sits. Ma beams and pushes his half-eaten dishes across the table.

Tranh thinks he must have done something grave in a former life to merit this humiliation, but still he has to fight the urge to bury his hands in the oily food and eat with bare fingers. Finally, the owner of the sidewalk stall brings a pair of chopsticks for the noodles, and fork and spoon for the rest. Noodles and ground pork slide down his throat. He tries to chew but as soon as the food touches his tongue he gulps it down. More food follows. He lifts a plate to his lips, shoveling down the last of Ma's leavings. Fish and lank coriander and hot thick oil slip down like blessings.

"Good. Good." Ma waves at the night stall man and a whiskey glass is quickly rinsed and handed to him.

The sharp scent of liquor floats around Ma like an aura as he pours. Tranh's chest tightens at the scent. Oil coats his chin where he has made a mess in his haste. He wipes his mouth against his arm, watching the amber liquid splash into the glass.

Tranh once drank Cognac: XO. Imported by his own clippers. Fabulously expensive stuff with its shipping costs. A flavor of the foreign devils from before the Contraction. A ghost from utopian history, reinvigorated by the new Expansion and his own realization that the world was once again growing smaller. With new hull designs and polymer advances, his clipper ships navigated the globe and returned with the stuff of legends. And his Malay buyers were happy to purchase it, whatever their religion. What a profit that had been. He forces down the thought as Ma shoves the glass across to Tranh and then raises his own in toast. It is in the past. It is all in the past.

They drink. The whiskey burns warm in Tranh's belly, joining the chilis and fish and pork and the hot oil of the fried noodles.

"It really is too bad you didn't get that job."

Tranh grimaces. "Don't gloat. Fate has a way of balancing itself. I've learned that."

Ma waves a hand. "I don't gloat. There are too many of us, that's the truth. You were ten thousand times qualified for that job. For any job." He takes a sip of his whiskey, peers over its rim at Tranh. "Do you remember when you called me a lazy cockroach?"

Tranh shrugs; he can't take his eyes off the whiskey bottle. "I called you worse than that." He waits to see if Ma will refill his cup again. Wondering how rich he is, and how far this largesse will go. Hating that he plays beggar to a boy he once refused to keep as a clerk, and who now lords over him ... and who now, in a show of face, pours Tranh's whiskey to the top, letting it spill over in an amber cascade under the flickering light of the candles.

Ma finishes pouring, stares at the puddle he has created. "Truly the world is turned upside down. The young lord over the old. The Malays pinch out the Chinese. And the foreign devils return to our shores like bloated fish after a ku-shui epidemic." Ma smiles. "You need to keep your ears up, and be aware of opportunities. Not like all those old men out on the sidewalk, waiting for hard labor. Find a new niche. That's what I did. That's why I've got my job."

Tranh grimaces. "You came at a more fortuitous time." He rallies, emboldened by a full belly and the liquor warming his face and limbs. "Anyway, you shouldn't be too proud. You still stink of mother's milk as far as I'm concerned, living in the Dung Lord's tower. You're only the Lord of Yellow Cards. And what is that, really? You haven't climbed as high as my ankles yet, Mr. Big Name."

Ma's eyes widen. He laughs. "No. Of course not. Someday, maybe. But I am trying to learn from you." He smiles slightly and nods at Tranh's decrepit state. "Everything except this postscript."

"Is it true there are crank fans on the top floors? That it's cool up there?"

Ma glances up at the looming high-rise. "Yes. Of course. And men with the calories to wind them as well. And they haul water up for us, and men act as ballast on the elevator—up and down all day—doing favors for the Dung Lord." He laughs and pours more whiskey, motions Tranh to drink. "You're right though. It's nothing, really. A poor palace, truly."

"But it doesn't matter now. My family moves tomorrow. We have our residence permits. Tomorrow when I get paid again, we're moving out. No more yellow card for us. No more payoffs to the Dung Lord's lackeys. No more problems with the white shirts. It's all set with the Environment Ministry. We turn in our yellow cards and become Thai. We're going to be immigrants. Not just some invasive species anymore." He raises his glass. "It's why I'm celebrating."

Tranh scowls. "You must be pleased." He finishes his drink, sets the tumbler down with a thud. "Just don't forget that the nail that stands up also gets pounded down."

Ma shakes his head and grins, his eyes whiskey bright. "Bangkok isn't Malacca."

"And Malacca wasn't Bali. And then they came with their machetes and their spring guns and they stacked our heads in the gutters and sent our bodies and blood down the river to Singapore."

Ma shrugs. "It's in the past." He waves to the man at the wok, calling for more food. "We have to make a home here, now."

"You think you can? You think some white shirt won't nail your hide to his door? You can't make them like us. Our luck's against us, here."

"Luck? When did Mr. Three Prosperities get so superstitious?"

Ma's dish arrives, tiny crabs crisp-fried, salted, and hot with oil for Ma and Tranh to pick at with chopsticks and crunch between their teeth, each one no bigger than the tip of Tranh's pinkie. Ma plucks one out and crunches it down. "When did Mr. Three Prosperities get so weak? When you fired me, you said I made my own luck. And now you tell me you don't have any?" He spits on the sidewalk. "I've seen windups with more will to survive than you."

"Fang pi."

"No! It's true! There's a Japanese windup girl in the bars where my boss goes." Ma leans forward. "She looks like a real woman. And she does disgusting things." He grins. "Makes your cock hard. But you don't hear her complaining about luck. Every white shirt in the city would pay to dump her in the methane composters and she's still up in her high-rise, dancing every night, in front of everyone. Her whole soulless body on display."

"It's not possible."

Ma shrugs. "Say so if you like. But I've seen her. And she isn't starving. She takes whatever spit and money come her way, and she survives. It doesn't matter about the white shirts or the Kingdom edicts or the Japan-haters or the religious fanatics; she's been dancing for months."

"How can she survive?"

"Bribes? Maybe some ugly farang who wallows in her filth? Who knows? No real girl would do what she does. It makes your heart stop. You forget she's a windup, when she does those things." He laughs, then glances at Tranh. "Don't talk to me about luck. There's not enough luck in the entire Kingdom to keep her alive this long. And we know it's not karma that keeps her alive. She has none."

Tranh shrugs noncommittally and shovels more crabs into his mouth.

Ma grins. "You know I'm right." He drains his whiskey glass and slams it down on the table. "We make our own luck! Our own fate. There's a windup in a public bar and I have a job with a rich farang who can't find his ass without my help! Of course I'm right!" He pours more whiskey. "Get over your self-pity, and climb out of your hole. The foreign devils don't worry about luck or fate, and look how they return to us, like a newly engineered virus! Even the Contraction didn't stop them. They're like another invasion of devil cats. But they make their own luck. I'm not even sure if karma exists for them. And if fools like these farang can succeed, than we Chinese can't be kept down for long. Men make their own luck, that's what you told me when you fired me. You said I'd made my own bad luck and only had myself to blame."

Tranh looks up at Ma. "Maybe I could work at your company." He grins, trying not to look desperate. "I could make money for your lazy boss."

Ma's eyes become hooded. "Ah. That's difficult. Difficult to say."

Tranh knows that he should take the polite rejection, that he should shut up. But even as a part of him cringes, his mouth opens again, pressing, pleading. "Maybe you need an assistant? To keep the books? I speak their devil language. I taught it to myself when I traded with them. I could be useful."

"There is little enough work for me."

"But if he is as stupid as you say—"

"Stupid, yes. But not such a stupid melon that he wouldn't notice another body in his office. Our desks are just so far apart." He makes a motion with his hands. "You think he would not notice some stick coolie

man squatting besides his computer treadle?"

"In his factory, then?"

But Ma is already shaking his head. "I would help you if I could. But the megadont unions control the power, and the line inspector unions are closed to farang, no offense, and no one will accept that you are a materials scientist." He shakes his head. "No. There is no way."

"Any job. As a dung shoveler, even."

But Ma is shaking his head more vigorously now, and Tranh finally manages to control his tongue, to plug this diarrhea of begging. "Never mind. Never mind." He forces a grin. "I'm sure some work will turn up. I'm not worried." He takes the bottle of Mekong whiskey and refills Ma's glass, upending the bottle and finishing the whiskey despite Ma's protests.

Tranh raises his half-empty glass and toasts the young man who has bested him in all ways before throwing back the last of the alcohol in one swift swallow. Under the table, nearly invisible devil cats brush against his bony legs, waiting for him to leave, hoping that he will be foolish enough to leave scraps.

\* \* \* \*

Morning dawns. Tranh wanders the streets, hunting for a breakfast he cannot afford. He threads through market alleys redolent with fish and lank green coriander and bright flares of lemongrass. Durians lie in reeking piles, their spiky skins covered with red blister rust boils. He wonders if he can steal one. Their yellow surfaces are blotched and stained, but their guts are nutritious. He wonders how much blister rust a man can consume before falling into a coma.

"You want? Special deal. Five for five baht. Good, yes?"

The woman who screeches at him has no teeth, she smiles with her gums and repeats herself. "Five for five baht." She speaks Mandarin to him, recognizing him for their common heritage though she had the luck to be born in the Kingdom and he had the misfortune to be set down in Malaya. Chiu Chow Chinese, blessedly protected by her clan and King. Tranh suppresses envy.

"More like four for four." He makes a pun of the homonyms. Sz for sz. Four for death. "They've got blister rust."

She waves a hand sourly. "Five for five. They're still good. Better than good. Picked just before." She wields a gleaming machete and chops the durian in half, revealing the clean yellow slime of its interior with its fat gleaming pits. The sickly sweet scent of fresh durian boils up and envelops them. "See! Inside good. Picked just in time. Still safe."

"I might buy one." He can't afford any. But he can't help replying. It feels too good to be seen as a buyer. It is his suit, he realizes. The Hwang Brothers have raised him in this woman's eyes. She wouldn't have spoken if not for the suit. Wouldn't have even started the conversation.

"Buy more! The more you buy, the more you save."

He forces a grin, wondering how to get away from the bargaining he should never have started. "I'm only one old man. I don't need so much."

"One skinny old man. Eat more. Get fat!"

She says this and they both laugh. He searches for a response, something to keep their comradely interaction alive, but his tongue fails him. She sees the helplessness in his eyes. She shakes her head. "Ah,



grandfather. It is hard times for everyone. Too many of you all at once. No one thought it would get so bad down there."

Tranh ducks his head, embarrassed. "I've troubled you. I should go."

"Wait. Here." She offers him the durian half. "Take it."

"I can't afford it."

She makes an impatient gesture. "Take it. It's lucky for me to help someone from the old country." She grins. "And the blister rust looks too bad to sell to anyone else."

"You're kind. Buddha smile on you." But as he takes her gift he again notices the great durian pile behind her. All neatly stacked with their blotches and their bloody wheals of blister rust. Just like stacked Chinese heads in Malacca: his wife and daughters staring out at him, accusatory. He drops the durian and kicks it away, frantically scraping his hands on his jacket, trying to get the blood off his palms.

"Ai! You'll waste it!"

Tranh barely hears the woman's cry. He staggers back from the fallen durian, staring at its ragged surface. Its gut-spilled interior. He looks around wildly. He has to get out of the crowds. Has to get away from the jostling bodies and the durian reek that's all around, thick in his throat, gagging him. He puts a hand to his mouth and runs, clawing at the other shoppers, fighting through their press.

"Where you go? Come back! Huilai!" But the woman's words are quickly drowned. Tranh shoves through the throng, pushing aside women with shopping baskets full of white lotus root and purple eggplants, dodging farmers and their clattering bamboo hand carts, twisting past tubs of squid and serpent head fish. He pelts down the market alley like a thief identified, scrambling and dodging, running without thought or knowledge of where he is going, but running anyway, desperate to escape the stacked heads of his family and countrymen.

He runs and runs.

And bursts into the open thoroughfare of Charoen Krung Road. Powdered dung dust and hot sunlight wash over him. Cycle rickshaws clatter past. Palms and squat banana trees shimmer green in the bright open air.

As quickly as it seized him, Tranh's panic fades. He stops short, hands on his knees, catching his breath and cursing himself. Fool. Fool. If you don't eat, you die. He straightens and tries to turn back but the stacked durians flash in his mind and he stumbles away from the alley, gagging again. He can't go back. Can't face those bloody piles. He doubles over and his stomach heaves but his empty guts bring up nothing but strings of drool.

Finally he wipes his mouth on a Hwang Brothers sleeve and forces himself to straighten and confront the foreign faces all around. The sea of foreigners that he must learn to swim amongst, and who all call him farang. It repels him to think of it. And to think that in Malacca, with twenty generations of family and clan well rooted in that city, he was just as much an interloper. That his clan's esteemed history is nothing but a footnote for a Chinese expansion that has proven as transient as nighttime cool. That his people were nothing but an accidental spillage of rice on a map, now wiped up much more carefully than they were scattered down.

\* \* \* \*

Tranh unloads U-Text Brand RedSilks deep into the night, offerings to Potato God. A lucky job. A lucky moment, even if his knees have become loose and wobbly and feel as if they must soon give way. A lucky job, even if his arms are shaking from catching the heavy sacks as they come down off the megadonts. Tonight, he reaps not just pay but also the opportunity to steal from the harvest. Even if the RedSilk potatoes are small and harvested early to avoid a new sweep of scabis mold—the fourth genetic variation

this year—they are still good. And their small size means their enhanced nutrition falls easily into his pockets.

Hu crouches above him, lowering down the potatoes. As the massive elephantine megodonts shuffle and grunt, waiting for their great wagons to be unloaded, Tranh catches Hu's offerings with his hand hooks and lowers the sacks the last step to the ground. Hook, catch, swing, and lower. Again and again and again.

He is not alone in his work. Women from the tower slums crowd around his ladder. They reach up and caress each sack as he lowers it to the ground. Their fingers quest along hemp and burlap, testing for holes, for slight tears, for lucky gifts. A thousand times they stroke his burdens, reverently following the seams, only drawing away when coolie men shove between them to heft the sacks and haul them to Potato God.

After the first hour of his work, Tranh's arms are shaking. After three, he can barely stand. He teeters on his creaking ladder as he lowers each new sack, and gasps and shakes his head to clear sweat from his eyes as he waits for the next one to come down.

Hu peers down from above. "Are you all right?"

Tranh glances warily over his shoulder. Potato God is watching, counting the sacks as they are carried into the warehouse. His eyes occasionally flick up to the wagons and trace across Tranh. Beyond him, fifty unlucky men watch silently from the shadows, any one of them far more observant than Potato God can ever be. Tranh straightens and reaches up to accept the next sack, trying not to think about the watching eyes. How politely they wait. How silent. How hungry. "I'm fine. Just fine."

Hu shrugs and pushes the next burlap load over the wagon's lip. Hu has the better place, but Tranh cannot resent it. One or the other must suffer. And Hu found the job. Hu has the right to the best place. To rest a moment before the next sack moves. After all, Hu collected Tranh for the job when he should have starved tonight. It is fair.

Tranh takes the sack and lowers it into the forest of waiting women's hands, releases his hooks with a twist, and drops the bag to the ground. His joints feel loose and rubbery, as if femur and tibia will skid apart at any moment. He is dizzy with heat, but he dares not ask to slow the pace.

Another potato sack comes down. Women's hands rise up like tangling strands of seaweed, touching, prodding, hungering. He cannot force them back. Even if he shouts at them they return. They are like devil cats; they cannot help themselves. He drops the sack the last few feet to the ground and reaches up for another as it comes over the wagon's lip.

As he hooks the sack, his ladder creaks and suddenly slides. It chatters down the side of the wagon, then catches abruptly. Tranh sways, juggling the potato sack, trying to regain his center of gravity. Hands are all around him, tugging at the bag, pulling, prodding. "Watch out—"

The ladder skids again. He drops like a stone. Women scatter as he plunges. He hits the ground and pain explodes in his knee. The potato sack bursts. For a moment he worries what Potato God will say but then he hears screams all around him. He rolls onto his back. Above him, the wagon is swaying, shuddering. People are shouting and fleeing. The megodont lunges forward and the wagon heaves. Bamboo ladders fall like rain, slapping the pavement with bright firecracker retorts. The beast reverses itself and the wagon skids past Tranh, grinding the ladders to splinters. It is impossibly fast, even with the wagon's weight still hampering it. The megodont's great maw opens and suddenly it is screaming, a sound as high and panicked as a human's.

All around them, other megodonts respond in a chorus. Their cacophony swamps the street. The megodont surges onto its hind legs, an explosion of muscle and velocity that breaks the wagon's traces and flips it like a toy. Men cartwheel from it, blossoms shaken from a cherry tree. Maddened, the beast rears again and kicks the wagon. Sends it skidding sidewise. It slams past Tranh, missing him by inches.

Tranh tries to rise but his leg won't work. The wagon smashes into a wall. Bamboo and teak crackle and explode, the wagon disintegrating as the megodont drags and kicks it, trying to win free completely. Tranh drags himself away from the flying wagon, hand over hand, hauling his useless leg behind him. All around, men are shouting instructions, trying to control the beast, but he doesn't look back. He focuses on the cobbles ahead, on getting out of reach. His leg won't work. It refuses him. It seems to hate him.

Finally he makes it into the shelter of a protective wall. He hauls himself upright. "I'm fine," he tells himself. "Fine." Gingerly he tests his leg, setting weight on it. It's wobbly, but he feels no real pain, not now. "Mei wenti. Mei wenti," he whispers. "Not a problem. Just cracked it. Not a problem."

The men are still shouting and the megodont is still screaming, but all he can see is his brittle old knee. He lets go of the wall. Takes a step, testing his weight, and collapses like a shadow puppet with strings gone slack.

Gritting his teeth, he again hauls himself up off the cobbles. He props himself against the wall, massaging his knee and watching the bedlam. Men are throwing ropes over the back of the struggling megodont, pulling it down, immobilizing it, finally. More than a score of men are working to hobble it.

The wagon's frame has shattered completely and potatoes are spilled everywhere. A thick mash coats the ground. Women scramble on their knees, clawing through the mess, fighting with one another to hoard pulped tubers. They scrape it up from the street. Some of their scavenge is stained red, but no one seems to care. Their squabbling continues. The red bloom spreads. At the blossom's center, a man's trousers protrude from the muck.

Tranh frowns. He drags himself upright again and hops on his one good leg toward the broken wagon. He catches up against its shattered frame, staring. Hu's body is a savage ruin, awash in megodont dung and potato mash. And now that Tranh is close, he can see that the struggling megodont's great gray feet are gory with his friend. Someone is calling for a doctor but it is half-hearted, a habit from a time when they were not yellow cards.

Tranh tests his weight again but his knee provides the same queer jointless failure. He catches up against the wagon's splintered planking and hauls himself back upright. He works the leg, trying to understand why it collapses. The knee bends, it doesn't even hurt particularly, but it will not support his weight. He tests it again, with the same result.

With the megodont restrained, order in the unloading area is restored. Hu's body is dragged aside. Devil cats gather near his blood pool, feline shimmers under methane glow. Their tracks pock the potato grime in growing numbers. More paw impressions appear in the muck, closing from all directions on Hu's discarded body.

Tranh sighs. So we all go, he thinks. We all die. Even those of us who took our aging treatments and our tiger penis and kept ourselves strong are subject to the Hell journey. He promises to burn money for Hu, to ease his way in the afterlife, then catches himself and remembers that he is not the man he was. That even paper Hell Money is out of reach.

Potato God, disheveled and angry, comes and studies him. He frowns suspiciously. "Can you still work?"

"I can." Tranh tries to walk but stumbles once again and catches up against the wagon's shattered frame.

Potato God shakes his head. "I will pay you for the hours you worked." He waves to a young man, fresh and grinning from binding the megodont. "You! You're a quick one. Haul the rest of these sacks into the warehouse."

Already, other workers are lining up and grabbing loads from within the broken wagon. As the new man comes out with his first sack, his eyes dart to Tranh and then flick away, hiding his relief at Tranh's incapacity.

Potato God watches with satisfaction and heads back to the warehouse.

"Double pay," Tranh calls after Potato God's retreating back. "Give me double pay. I lost my leg for you."

The manager looks back at Tranh with pity, then glances at Hu's body and shrugs. It is an easy acquiescence. Hu will demand no reparation.

\* \* \* \*

It is better to die insensate than to feel every starving inch of collapse; Tranh pours his leg-wreck money into a bottle of Mekong whiskey. He is old. He is broken. He is the last of his line. His sons are dead. His daughters are long gone. His ancestors will live uncared for in the underworld with no one to burn incense or offer sweet rice to them.

How they must curse him.

He limps and stumbles and crawls through the sweltering night streets, one hand clutching the open bottle, the other scrabbling at doorways and walls and methane lamp posts to keep himself upright. Sometimes his knee works; sometimes it fails him completely. He has kissed the streets a dozen times.

He tells himself that he is scavenging, hunting for the chance of sustenance. But Bangkok is a city of scavengers and the crows and devil cats and children have all come before him. If he is truly lucky, he will encounter the white shirts and they will knock him into bloody oblivion, perhaps send him to meet the previous owner of this fine Hwang Brothers suit that now flaps ragged around his shins. The thought appeals to him.

An ocean of whiskey rolls in his empty belly and he is warm and happy and carefree for the first time since the Incident. He laughs and drinks and shouts for the white shirts, calling them paper tigers, calling them dog fuckers. He calls them to him. Casts baiting words so that any within earshot will find him irresistible. But the Environment Ministry's patrols must have other yellow cards to abuse, for Tranh wanders the green-tinged streets of Bangkok alone.

Never mind. It doesn't matter. If he cannot find white shirts to do the job, he will drown himself. He will go to the river and dump himself in its offal. Floating on river currents to the sea appeals to him. He will end in the ocean like his scuttled clipper ships and the last of his heirs. He takes a swig of whiskey, loses his balance and winds up on the ground once again, sobbing and cursing white shirts and green headbands, and wet machetes.

Finally he drags himself into a doorway to rest, holding his miraculously unbroken whiskey bottle with one feeble hand. He cradles it to himself like a last bit of precious jade, smiling and laughing that it is not broken. He wouldn't want to waste his life savings on the cobblestones.

He takes another swig. Stares at the methane lamps flickering overhead. Despair is the color of approved burn methane flickering green and gaseous, vinous in the dark. Green used to mean things like coriander and silk and jade, and now all it means to him is bloodthirsty men with patriotic headbands and hungry scavenging nights. The lamps flicker. An entire green city. An entire city of despair.

Across the street, a shape scuttles, keeping to the shadows. Tranh leans forward, eyes narrowed. At first he takes it for a white shirt. But no. It is too furtive. It's a woman. A girl. A pretty creature, all made up. An enticement that moves with the stuttery jerky motion of...

A windup girl.

Tranh grins, a surprised skeleton rictus of delight at the sight of this unnatural creature stealing through the night. A windup girl. Ma Ping's windup girl. The impossible made flesh.

She slips from shadow to shadow, a creature even more terrified of white shirts than a yellow card geriatric. A waifish ghost child ripped from her natural habitat and set down in a city that despises everything she represents: her genetic inheritance, her manufacturers, her unnatural competition—her ghostly lack of a soul. She has been here every night as he has pillaged through discarded melon spines. She has been here, tottering through the sweat heat darkness as he dodged white shirt patrols. And despite everything, she has been surviving.

Tranh forces himself upright. He sways, drunken and unsteady, then follows, one hand clutching his whiskey bottle, the other touching walls, catching himself when his bad knee falters. It's a foolish thing, a whimsey, but the windup girl has seized his inebriated imagination. He wants to stalk this unlikely Japanese creation, this interloper on foreign soil even more despised than himself. He wants to follow her. Perhaps steal kisses from her. Perhaps protect her from the hazards of the night. To pretend at least that he is not this drunken ribcage caricature of a man, but is in fact a tiger still.

The windup girl travels through the blackest of back alleys, safe in darkness, hidden from the white shirts who would seize her and mulch her before she could protest. Devil cats yowl as she passes, scenting something as cynically engineered as themselves. The Kingdom is infested with plagues and beasts, besieged by so many bioengineered monsters that it cannot keep up. As small as gray fa' gan fringe and as large as megodonts, they come. And as the Kingdom struggles to adapt, Tranh slinks after a windup girl, both of them as invasive as blister rust on a durian and just as welcome.

For all her irregular motion, the windup girl travels well enough. Tranh has difficulty keeping up with her. His knees creak and grind and he clenches his teeth against the pain. Sometimes he falls with a muffled grunt, but still he follows. Ahead of him, the windup girl ducks into new shadows, a wisp of tottering motion. Her herky-jerky gait announces her as a creature not human, no matter how beautiful she may be. No matter how intelligent, no matter how strong, no matter how supple her skin, she is a windup and meant to serve—and marked as such by a genetic specification that betrays her with every unnatural step.

Finally, when Tranh thinks that his legs will give out for a final time and that he can continue no longer, the windup girl pauses. She stands in the black mouth of a crumbling high-rise, a tower as tall and wretched as his own, another carcass of the old Expansion. From high above, music and laughter filter down. Shapes float in the tower's upper-story windows, limned in red light, the silhouettes of women dancing. Calls of men and the throb of drums. The windup girl disappears inside.

What would it be like to enter such a place? To spend baht like water while women danced and sang songs of lust? Tranh suddenly regrets spending his last baht on whiskey. This is where he should have died. Surrounded by fleshly pleasures that he has not known since he lost his country and his life. He purses his lips, considering. Perhaps he can bluff his way in. He still wears the raiment of the Hwang Brothers. He still appears a gentleman, perhaps. Yes. He will attempt it, and if he gathers the shame of ejection on his head, if he loses face one more time, what of it? He will be dead in a river soon anyway, floating to the sea to join his sons.

He starts to cross the street but his knee gives out and he falls flat instead. He saves his whiskey bottle more by luck than by dexterity. The last of its amber liquid glints in the methane light. He grimaces and pulls himself into a sitting position, then drags himself back into a doorway. He will rest, first. And finish the bottle. The windup girl will be there for a long time, likely. He has time to recover himself. And if he falls again, at least he won't have wasted his liquor. He tilts the bottle to his lips, then lets his tired head rest against the building. He'll just catch his breath.

Laughter issues from the high-rise. Tranh jerks awake. A man stumbles from its shadow portal: drunk, laughing. More men spill out after him. They laugh and shove one another. Drag tittering women out with them. Motion to cycle rickshaws that wait in the alleys for easy drunken patrons. Slowly, they disperse. Tranh tilts his whiskey bottle. Finds it empty.

Another pair of men emerges from the high-rise's maw. One of them is Ma Ping. The other a farang who can only be Ma's boss. The farang waves for a cycle rickshaw. He climbs in and waves his farewells. Ma

raises his own hand in return and his gold and diamond wristwatch glints in the methane light. Tranh's wristwatch. Tranh's history. Tranh's heirloom flashing bright in the darkness. Tranh scowls. Wishes he could rip it off young Ma's wrist.

The farang's rickshaw starts forward with a screech of unoiled bicycle chains and drunken laughter, leaving Ma Ping standing alone in the middle of the street. Ma laughs to himself, seems to consider returning to the bars, then laughs again and turns away, heading across the street, toward Tranh.

Tranh shies into the shadows, unwilling to let Ma catch him in such a state. Unwilling to endure more humiliation. He crouches deeper in his doorway as Ma stumbles about the street in search of rickshaws. But all the rickshaws have been taken for the moment. No more lurk below the bars.

Ma's gold wristwatch glints again in the methane light.

Pale forms glazed green materialize on the street, three men walking, their mahogany skin almost black in the darkness, contrasting sharply against the creased whites of their uniforms. Their black batons twirl casually at their wrists. Ma doesn't seem to notice them at first. The white shirts converge, casual. Their voices carry easily in the quiet night.

"You're out late."

Ma shrugs, grins queasily. "Not really. Not so late."

The three white shirts gather close. "Late for a yellow card. You should be home by now. Bad luck to be out after yellow card curfew. Especially with all that yellow gold on your wrist."

Ma holds up his hands, defensive. "I'm not a yellow card."

"Your accent says differently."

Ma reaches for his pockets, fumbles in them. "Really. You'll see. Look."

A white shirt steps close. "Did I say you could move?"

"My papers. Look—"

"Get your hands out!"

"Look at my stamps!"

"Out!" A black baton flashes. Ma yelps, clutches his elbow. More blows rain down. Ma crouches, trying to shield himself. He curses, "Nimade bi!"

The white shirts laugh. "That's yellow card talk." One of them swings his baton, low and fast, and Ma collapses, crying out, curling around a damaged leg. The white shirts gather close. One of them jabs Ma in the face, making him uncurl, then runs the baton down Ma's chest, dragging blood.

"He's got nicer clothes than you, Thongchai."

"Probably snuck across the border with an assful of jade."

One of them squats, studies Ma's face. "Is it true? Do you shit jade?"

Ma shakes his head frantically. He rolls over and starts to crawl away. A black runnel of blood spills from his mouth. One leg drags behind him, useless. A white shirt follows, pushes him over with his shoe and

puts his foot on Ma's face. The other two suck in their breath and step back, shocked. To beat a man is one thing ... "Suttipong, no."

The man called Suttipong glances back at his peers. "It's nothing. These yellow cards are as bad as blister rust. This is nothing. They all come begging, taking food when we've got little enough for our own, and look," he kicks Ma's wrist. "Gold."

Ma gasps, tries to strip the watch from his wrist. "Take it. Here. Please. Take it."

"It's not yours to give, yellow card."

"Not ... yellow card," Ma gasps. "Please. Not your Ministry." His hands fumble for his pockets, frantic under the white shirt's gaze. He pulls out his papers and waves them in the hot night air.

Suttipong takes the papers, glances at them. Leans close. "You think our countrymen don't fear us, too?"

He throws the papers on the ground, then quick as a cobra he strikes. One, two, three, the blows rain down. He is very fast. Very methodical. Ma curls into a ball, trying to ward off the blows. Suttipong steps back, breathing heavily. He waves at the other two. "Teach him respect." The other two glance at each other doubtfully, but under Suttipong's urging, they are soon beating Ma, shouting encouragement to one another.

A few men come down from the pleasure bars and stumble into the streets, but when they see white uniforms they flee back inside. The white shirts are alone. And if there are other watching eyes, they do not show themselves. Finally, Suttipong seems satisfied. He kneels and strips the antique Rolex from Ma's wrist, spits on Ma's face, and motions his peers to join him. They turn away, striding close past Tranh's hiding place.

The one called Thongchai looks back. "He might complain."

Suttipong shakes his head, his attention on the Rolex in his hand. "He's learned his lesson."

Their footsteps fade into the darkness. Music filters down from the high-rise clubs. The street itself is silent. Tranh watches for a long time, looking for other hunters. Nothing moves. It is as if the entire city has turned its back on the broken Malay-Chinese lying in the street. Finally, Tranh limps out of the shadows and approaches Ma Ping.

Ma catches sight of him and holds up a weak hand. "Help." He tries the words in Thai, again in farang English, finally in Malay, as though he has returned to his childhood. Then he seems to recognize Tranh. His eyes widen. He smiles weakly, through split bloody lips. Speaks Mandarin, their trade language of brotherhood. "Lao pengyou. What are you doing here?"

Tranh squats beside him, studying his cracked face. "I saw your windup girl."

Ma closes his eyes, tries to smile. "You believe me, then?" His eyes are nearly swollen shut, blood runs down from a cut in his brow, trickling freely.

"Yes."

"I think they broke my leg." He tries to pull himself upright, gasps, and collapses. He probes his ribs, runs his hand down to his shin. "I can't walk." He sucks air as he prods another broken bone. "You were right about the white shirts."

"A nail that stands up gets pounded down."

Something in Tranh's tone makes Ma look up. He studies Tranh's face. "Please. I gave you food. Find me a rickshaw." One hand strays to his wrist, fumbling for the timepiece that is no longer his, trying to offer it. Trying to bargain.

Is this fate? Tranh wonders. Or luck? Tranh purses his lips, considering. Was it fate that his own shiny wristwatch drew the white shirts and their wicked black batons? Was it luck that he arrived to see Ma fall? Do he and Ma Ping still have some larger karmic business?

Tranh watches Ma beg and remembers firing a young clerk so many lifetimes ago, sending him packing with a thrashing and a warning never to return. But that was when he was a great man. And now he is such a small one. As small as the clerk he thrashed so long ago. Perhaps smaller. He slides his hands under Ma's back, lifts.

"Thank you," Ma gasps. "Thank you."

Tranh runs his fingers into Ma's pockets, working through them methodically, checking for baht the white shirts have left. Ma groans, forces out a curse as Tranh jostles him. Tranh counts his scavenge, the dregs of Ma's pockets that still look like wealth to him. He stuffs the coins into his own pocket.

Ma's breathing comes in short panting gasps. "Please. A rickshaw. That's all." He barely manages to exhale the words.

Tranh cocks his head, considering, his instincts warring with themselves. He sighs and shakes his head. "A man makes his own luck, isn't that what you told me?" He smiles tightly. "My own arrogant words, coming from a brash young mouth." He shakes his head again, astounded at his previously fat ego, and smashes his whiskey bottle on the cobbles. Glass sprays. Shards glint green in the methane light.

"If I were still a great man...." Tranh grimaces. "But then, I suppose we're both past such illusions. I'm very sorry about this." With one last glance around the darkened street, he drives the broken bottle into Ma's throat. Ma jerks and blood spills out around Tranh's hand. Tranh scuttles back, keeping this new welling of blood off his Hwang Brothers fabrics. Ma's lungs bubble and his hands reach up for the bottle lodged in his neck, then fall away. His wet breathing stops.

Tranh is trembling. His hands shake with an electric palsy. He has seen so much death, and dealt so little. And now Ma lies before him, another Malay-Chinese dead, with only himself to blame. Again. He stifles an urge to be sick.

He turns and crawls into the protective shadows of the alley and pulls himself upright. He tests his weak leg. It seems to hold him. Beyond the shadows, the street is silent. Ma's body lies like a heap of garbage in its center. Nothing moves.

Tranh turns and limps down the street, keeping to the walls, bracing himself when his knee threatens to give way. After a few blocks, the methane lamps start to go out. One by one, as though a great hand is moving down the street snuffing them, they gutter into silence as the Public Works Ministry cuts off the gas. The street settles into complete darkness.

When Tranh finally arrives at Surawong Road, its wide black thoroughfare is nearly empty of traffic. A pair of ancient water buffalo placidly haul a rubber-wheeled wagon under starlight. A shadow farmer rides behind them, muttering softly. The yowls of mating devil cats scrape the hot night air, but that is all.

And then, from behind, the creak of bicycle chains. The rattle of wheels on cobbles. Tranh turns, half expecting avenging white shirts, but it is only a cycle-rickshaw, chattering down the darkened street. Tranh raises a hand, flashing newfound baht. The rickshaw slows. A man's ropey limbs gleam with moonlit sweat. Twin earrings decorate his lobes, gobs of silver in the night. "Where you going?"



Tranh scans the rickshaw man's broad face for hints of betrayal, for hints that he is a hunter, but the man is only looking at the baht in Tranh's hand. Tranh forces down his paranoia and climbs into the rickshaw's seat. "The farang factories. By the river."

The rickshaw man glances over his shoulder, surprised. "All the factories will be closed. Too much energy to run at night. It's all black night down there."

"It doesn't matter. There's a job opening. There will be interviews."

The man stands on his pedals. "At night?"

"Tomorrow." Tranh settles deeper into his seat. "I don't want to be late."

# The Windup Girl

For Anjula

## 1

"No! I don't want the mangosteen." Anderson Lake leans forward, pointing. "I want that one, there. *Kaw pollamai nee khap*. The one with the red skin and the green hairs."

The peasant woman smiles, showing teeth blackened from chewing betel nut, and points to a pyramid of fruits stacked beside her. "*Un nee chai mai kha?*"

"Right. Those. *Khap*." Anderson nods and makes himself smile. "What are they called?"

"*Ngaw*." She pronounces the word carefully for his foreign ear, and hands across a sample.

Anderson takes the fruit, frowning. "It's new?"

"*Kha*." She nods an affirmative.

Anderson turns the fruit in his hand, studying it. It's more like a gaudy sea anemone or a furry puffer fish than a fruit. Coarse green tendrils protrude from all sides, tickling his palm. The skin has the rust-red tinge of blister rust, but when he sniffs he doesn't get any stink of decay. It seems perfectly healthy, despite its appearance.

"*Ngaw*," the peasant woman says again, and then, as if reading his mind. "New. No blister rust."

Anderson nods absently. Around him, the market *soi* bustles with Bangkok's morning shoppers. Mounds of durians fill the alley in reeking piles and water tubs splash with snakehead fish and red-fin *plaa*. Overhead, palm-oil polymer tarps sag under the blast furnace heat of the tropic sun, shading the market with hand-painted images of clipper ship trading companies and the face of the revered Child Queen. A man jostles past, holding vermilion-combed chickens high as they flap and squawk outrage on their way to slaughter, and women in brightly colored *pha sin* bargain and smile with the vendors, driving down the price of pirated U-*Tex* rice and new-variant tomatoes.

None of it touches Anderson.

"*Ngaw*," the woman says again, seeking connection.

The fruit's long hairs tickle his palm, challenging him to recognize its origin. Another Thai genehacking success, just like the tomatoes and eggplants and chiles that abound in the neighboring stalls. It's as if the Grahamite Bible's prophecies are coming to pass. As if Saint Francis himself stirs in his grave, restless, preparing to stride forth onto the land, bearing with him the bounty of history's lost calories.

"*And he shall come with trumpets, and Eden shall return. . .*"

Anderson turns the strange hairy fruit in his hand. It carries no stink of cibiscosis. No scab of blister rust. No graffiti of genehack weevil engraves its skin. The world's flowers

and vegetables and trees and fruits make up the geography of Anderson Lake's mind, and yet nowhere does he find a helpful signpost that leads him to identification.

*Ngaw*. A mystery.

He mimes that he would like to taste and the peasant woman takes back the fruit. Her brown thumb easily tears away the hairy rind, revealing a pale core. Translucent and veinous, it resembles nothing so much as the pickled onions served in martinis at research clubs in Des Moines.

She hands back the fruit. Anderson sniffs tentatively. Inhales floral syrup. *Ngaw*. It shouldn't exist. Yesterday, it didn't. Yesterday, not a single stall in Bangkok sold these fruits, and yet now they sit in pyramids, piled all around this grimy woman where she squats on the ground under the partial shading of her tarp. From around her neck, a gold glinting amulet of the martyr Phra Seub winks at him, a talisman of protection against the agricultural plagues of the calorie companies.

Anderson wishes he could observe the fruit in its natural habitat, hanging from a tree or lurking under the leaves of some bush. With more information, he might guess genus and family, might divine some whisper of the genetic past that the Thai Kingdom is trying to excavate, but there are no more clues. He slips the *ngaw's* slick translucent ball into his mouth.

A fist of flavor, ripe with sugar and fecundity. The sticky flower bomb coats his tongue. It's as though he's back in the HiGro fields of Iowa, offered his first tiny block of hard candy by a Midwest Compact agronomist when he was nothing but a farmer's boy, barefoot amid the corn stalks. The shell-shocked moment of flavor—real flavor—after a lifetime devoid of it.

Sun pours down. Shoppers jostle and bargain, but nothing touches him. He rolls the *ngaw* around in his mouth, eyes closed, tasting the past, savoring the time when this fruit must once have flourished, before cibiscosis and Nippon genehack weevil and blister rust and scabis mold razed the landscape.

Under the hammer heat of tropic sun, surrounded by the groan of water buffalo and the cry of dying chickens, he is one with paradise. If he were a Grahamite, he would fall to his knees and give ecstatic thanks for the flavor of Eden's return.

Anderson spits the black pit into his hand, smiling. He has read travelogues of history's botanists and explorers, the men and women who pierced the deepest jungle wildernesses of the earth in search of new species—and yet their discoveries cannot compare to this single fruit.

Those people all sought discoveries. He has found a resurrection.

The peasant woman beams, sure of a sale. "*Ao gee kilo kha?*" How much?

"Are they safe?" he asks.

She points at the Environment Ministry certificates laid on the cobbles beside her, underlining the dates of inspection with a finger. "Latest variation," she says. "Top grade."

Anderson studies the glinting seals. Most likely, she bribed the white shirts for stamps rather than going through the full inspection process that would have guaranteed immunity to eighth-generation blister rust along with resistance to cibiscosis 111.mt7 and mt8. The cynical part of him supposes that it hardly matters. The intricate stamps that

glitter in the sun are more talismanic than functional, something to make people feel secure in a dangerous world. In truth, if cibiscosis breaks out again, these certificates will do nothing. It will be a new variation, and all the old tests will be useless, and then people will pray to their Phra Seub amulets and King Rama XII images and make offerings at the City Pillar Shrine, and they will all cough up the meat of their lungs no matter how many Environment Ministry stamps adorn their produce.

Anderson pockets the *ngaw's* pit. "I'll take a kilo. No. Two. *Song*."

He hands over a hemp sack without bothering to bargain. Whatever she asks, it will be too little. Miracles are worth the world. A unique gene that resists a calorie plague or utilizes nitrogen more efficiently sends profits sky-rocketing. If he looks around the market right now, that truth is everywhere displayed. The alley bustles with Thais purchasing everything from generipped versions of U-*Tex* rice to vermilion-variant poultry. But all of those things are old advances, based on previous genehack work done by AgriGen and PurCal and Total Nutrient Holdings. The fruits of old science, manufactured in the bowels of the Midwest Compact's research labs.

The *ngaw* is different. The *ngaw* doesn't come from the Midwest. The Thai Kingdom is clever where others are not. It thrives while countries like India and Burma and Vietnam all fall like dominoes, starving and begging for the scientific advances of the calorie monopolies.

A few people stop to examine Anderson's purchase, but even if Anderson thinks the price is low, they apparently find it too expensive and pass on.

The woman hands across the *ngaw*, and Anderson almost laughs with pleasure. Not a single one of these furry fruits should exist; he might as well be hefting a sack of trilobites. If his guess about the *ngaw's* origin is correct, it represents a return from extinction as shocking as if a Tyrannosaurus were stalking down Thanon Sukhumvit. But then, the same is true of the potatoes and tomatoes and chiles that fill the market, all piled in such splendid abundance, an array of fecund nightshades that no one has seen in generations. In this drowning city, all things seem possible. Fruits and vegetables return from the grave, extinct flowers blossom on the avenues, and behind it all, the Environment Ministry works magic with the genetic material of generations lost.

Carrying his sacked fruit, Anderson squeezes back down the *soi* to the avenue beyond. A seethe of traffic greets him, morning commuters clogging Thanon Rama IX like the Mekong in flood. Bicycles and cycle rickshaws, blue-black water buffaloes and great shambling megodonts.

At Anderson's arrival, Lao Gu emerges from the shade of a crumbling office tower, carefully pinching off the burning tip of a cigarette. Nightshades again. They're everywhere. Nowhere else in the world, but here they riot in abundance. Lao Gu tucks the remainder of the tobacco into a ragged shirt pocket as he trots ahead of Anderson to their cycle rickshaw.

The old Chinese man is nothing but a scarecrow, dressed in rags, but still, he is lucky. Alive, when most of his people are dead. Employed, while his fellow Malayan refugees are packed like slaughter chickens into sweltering Expansion towers. Lao Gu has stringy muscle on his bones and enough money to indulge in Singha cigarettes. To the rest of the yellow card refugees he is as lucky as a king.

Lao Gu straddles the cycle's saddle and waits patiently as Anderson clammers into the passenger seat behind. "Office," Anderson says. "*Bai khap.*" Then switches to Chinese. "*Zou ba.*"

The old man stands on his pedals and they merge into traffic. Around them, bicycle bells ring like cibiscosis chimes, irritated at their obstruction. Lao Gu ignores them and weaves deeper into the traffic flow.

Anderson reaches for another *ngaw*, then restrains himself. He should save them. They're too valuable to gobble like a greedy child. The Thais have found some new way to disinter the past, and all he wants to do is feast on the evidence. He drums his fingers on the bagged fruit, fighting for self-control.

To distract himself, he fishes for his pack of cigarettes and lights one. He draws on the tobacco, savoring the burn, remembering his surprise when he first discovered how successful the Thai Kingdom had become, how widely spread the nightshades. And as he smokes, he thinks of Yates. Remembers the man's disappointment as they sat across from one another with resurrected history smoldering between them.

\* \* \*

"Nightshades."

Yates' match flared in the dimness of SpringLife's offices, illuminating florid features as he touched flame to a cigarette and drew hard. Rice paper crackled. The tip glowed and Yates exhaled, sending a stream of smoke ceilingward to where crank fans panted against the sauna swelter.

"Eggplants. Tomatoes. Chiles. Potatoes. Jasmine. Nicotiana." He held up his cigarette and quirked an eyebrow. "Tobacco."

He drew again, squinting in the cigarette's flare. All around, the shadowed desks and treadle computers of the company sat silent. In the evening, with the factory closed, it was just possible to mistake the empty desks for something other than the topography of failure. The workers might have only gone home, resting in anticipation of another hard day at their labors. Dust-mantled chairs and treadle computers put the lie to it—but in the dimness, with shadows draped across furniture and moonlight easing through mahogany shutters, it was possible to imagine what might have been.

Overhead, the crank fans continued their slow turns, Laotian rubber motorbands creaking rhythmically as they chained across the ceiling, drawing a steady trickle of kinetic power from the factory's central kink-springs.

"The Thais have been lucky in their laboratories," Yates said, "and now here you are. If I were superstitions, I'd think they conjured you along with their tomatoes. Every organism needs a predator, I understand."

"You should have reported how much progress they were making," Anderson said. "This factory wasn't your only responsibility."

Yates grimaced. His face was a study in tropic collapse. Broken blood vessels mapped rosy tributaries over his cheeks and punctuated the bulb of his nose. Watery blue eyes blinked back at Anderson, as hazy as the city's dung-choked air. "I should have known you'd cut my niche."

"It's not personal."

"Just my life's work." He laughed, a dry rattling reminiscent of early onset cibuscosis. The sound would have had Anderson backing out of the room if he didn't know that Yates, like all of AgriGen's personnel, had been inoculated against the new strains.

"I've spent years building this," Yates said, "and you tell me it's not personal." He waved toward the office's observation windows where they overlooked the manufacturing floor. "I've got kink-springs the size of my fist that hold a gigajoule of power. Quadruple the capacity-weight ratio of any other spring on the market. I'm sitting on a revolution in energy storage, and you're throwing it away." He leaned forward. "We haven't had power this portable since gasoline."

"Only if you can produce it."

"We're close," Yates insisted. "Just the algae baths. They're the only sticking point."

Anderson said nothing. Yates seemed to take this as encouragement. "The fundamental concept is sound. Once the baths are producing in sufficient quantities—"

"You should have informed us when you first saw the nightshades in the markets. The Thais have been successfully growing potatoes for at least five seasons. They're obviously sitting on top of a seedbank, and yet we heard nothing from you."

"Not my department. I do energy storage. Not production."

Anderson snorted. "Where are you going to get the calories to wind your fancy kink-springs if a crop fails? Blister rust is mutating every three seasons now. Recreational generippers are hacking into our designs for TotalNutrient Wheat and SoyPRO. Our last strain of HiGro Corn only beat weevil predation by sixty percent, and now we suddenly hear you're sitting on top of a genetic gold mine. People are starving—"

Yates laughed. "Don't talk to me about saving lives. I saw what happened with the seedbank in Finland."

"We weren't the ones who blew the vaults. No one knew the Finns were such fanatics."

"Any fool on the street could have anticipated. Calorie companies do have a certain reputation. "

"It wasn't my operation."

Yates laughed again. "That's always our excuse, isn't it? The company goes in somewhere and we all stand back and wash our hands. Pretend like we weren't the ones responsible. The company pulls SoyPRO from the Burmese market, and we all stand aside, saying intellectual property disputes aren't our department. But people starve just the same." He sucked on his cigarette, blew smoke. "I honestly don't know how someone like you sleeps at night."

"It's easy. I say a little prayer to Noah and Saint Francis, and thank God we're still one step ahead of blister rust."

"That's it then? You'll shut the factory down?"

"No. Of course not. The kink-spring manufacturing will continue."

"Oh?" Yates leaned forward, hopeful.

Anderson shrugged. "It's a useful cover."

\* \* \*

The cigarette's burning tip reaches Anderson's fingers. He lets it fall into traffic. Rubs his singed thumb and index finger as Lao Gu pedals on through the clogged streets. Bangkok, City of Divine Beings, slides past.

Saffron-robed monks stroll along the sidewalks under the shade of black umbrellas. Children run in clusters, shoving and swarming, laughing and calling out to one another on their way to monastery schools. Street vendors extend arms draped with garlands of marigolds for temple offerings and hold up glinting amulets of revered monks to protect against everything from infertility to scabies mold. Food carts smoke and hiss with the scents of frying oil and fermented fish while around the ankles of their customers, the flicker-shimmer shapes of cheshires twine, yowling and hoping for scraps.

Overhead, the towers of Bangkok's old Expansion loom, robed in vines and mold, windows long ago blown out, great bones picked clean. Without air conditioning or elevators to make them habitable, they stand and blister in the sun. The black smoke of illegal dung fires wafts from their pores, marking where Malayan refugees hurriedly scald *chapatis* and boil *kopi* before the white shirts can storm the sweltering heights and beat them for their infringements.

In the center of the traffic lanes, northern refugees from the coal war prostrate themselves with hands upstretched, exquisitely polite in postures of need. Cycles and rickshaws and megodont wagons flow past them, parting like a river around boulders. The cauliflower growths of *fa' gan* fringe scar the beggars' noses and mouths. Betel nut stains blacken their teeth. Anderson reaches into his pocket and tosses cash at their feet, nodding slightly at their *wais* of thanks as he glides past.

A short while later, the whitewashed walls and alleys of the *farang* manufacturing district come into view. Warehouses and factories all packed together along with the scent of salt and rotting fish. Vendors scab along the alley lengths with bits of tarping and blankets spread above to protect them from the hammer blast of the sun. Just beyond, the dike and lock system of King Rama XII's seawall looms, holding back the weight of the blue ocean.

It's difficult not to always be aware of those high walls and the pressure of the water beyond. Difficult to think of the City of Divine Beings as anything other than a disaster waiting to happen. But the Thais are stubborn and have fought to keep their revered city of Krung Thep from drowning. With coal-burning pumps and leveed labor and a deep faith in the visionary leadership of their Chakri Dynasty, they have so far kept at bay that thing which has swallowed New York and Rangoon, Mumbai and New Orleans.

Lao Gu forges down an alley, ringing his bell impatiently at the coolie laborers who clot the artery. WeatherAll crates rock on brown backs. Logos for Chaozhou Chinese kink-springs, Matsushita anti-bacterial handlegrrips, and Bo Lok ceramic water filters sway back and forth, hypnotic with shambling rhythm. Images of the Buddha's teachings and the revered Child Queen splash along the factory walls, jostling with hand-painted pictures of *muay thai* matches past.

The SpringLife factory rises over the traffic press, a high-walled fortress punctuated by huge fans turning slowly in its upper story vents. Across the *soi* a Chaozhou bicycle factory mirrors it, and between them, the barnacle accretion of jumbled street carts that always clog around the entrances of factories, selling snacks and lunches to the workers inside.

Lao Gu brakes inside the SpringLife courtyard and deposits Anderson before the factory's main doors. Anderson climbs down from the rickshaw, grabs his sack of *ngaw*, and stands for a moment, staring up at the eight-meter wide doors that facilitate megodont access. The factory ought to be renamed Yates' Folly. The man was a terrible optimist. Anderson can still hear him arguing the wonders of genehacked algae, digging through desk drawers for graphs and scrawled notes as he protested.

*"You can't pre-judge my work just because the Ocean Bounty project was a failure. Properly cured, the algae provides exponential improvements in torque absorption. Forget its calorie potential. Focus on the industrial applications. I can deliver the entire energy storage market to you, if you'll just give me a little more time. Try one of my demo springs at least, before you make a decision. . ."*

The roar of manufacturing envelopes Anderson as he enters the factory, drowning out the last despairing howl of Yates' optimism.

Megodonts groan against spindle cranks, their enormous heads hanging low, prehensile trunks scraping the ground as they tread slow circles around power spindles. The genehacked animals comprise the living heart of the factory's drive system, providing energy for conveyor lines and venting fans and manufacturing machinery. Their harnesses clank rhythmically as they strain forward. Union handlers in red and gold walk beside their charges, calling out to the beasts, switching them occasionally, encouraging the elephant-derived animals to greater labor.

On the opposite side of the factory, the production line excretes newly packaged kink-springs, sending them past Quality Assurance and on to Packaging where the springs are palletized in preparation for some theoretical time when they will be ready for export. At Anderson's arrival on the floor, workers pause in their labors and *wai*, pressing their palms together and raising them to their foreheads in a wave of respect that cascades down the line.

Banyat, his head of QA, hurries over smiling. He *wais*.

Anderson gives a perfunctory *wai* in return. "How's quality?"

Banyat smiles. "*Dee khap*. Good. Better. Come, look." He signals up the line and Num, the day foreman, rings the warning bell that announces full line stop. Banyat motions Anderson to follow. "Something interesting. You will be pleased."

Anderson smiles tightly, doubting that anything Banyat says will be truly pleasing. He pulls a *ngaw* out of the bag and offers it to the QA man. "Progress? Really?"

Banyat nods as he takes the fruit. He gives it a cursory glance and peels it. Pops the semi-translucent heart into his mouth. He shows no surprise. No special reaction. Just eats the damn thing without a second thought. Anderson grimaces. *Farang* are always the last to know about changes in the country, a fact that Hock Seng likes to point out when his paranoid mind begins to suspect that Anderson intends to fire him. Hock Seng probably already knows about this fruit as well, or will pretend when he asks.



Banyat tosses the fruit's pit into a bin of feed for the megodonts and leads Anderson down the line. "We fixed a problem with the cutting press," he says.

Num rings his warning bell again and workers step back from their stations. On the third sounding of the bell, the union *mahout* tap their charges with bamboo switches and the megodonts shamble to a halt. The production line slows. At the far end of the factory, industrial kink-spring drums tick and squeal as the factory's flywheels shed power into them, the juice that will restart the line when Anderson is done inspecting.

Banyat leads Anderson down the now silent line, past more *wai*-ing workers in their green and white livery, and pushes aside the palm oil polymer curtains that mark the entrance to the fining room. Here, Yates' industrial discovery is sprayed with glorious abandon, coating the kink-springs with the residue of genetic serendipity. Women and children wearing triple-filter masks look up and tear away their breathing protection to *wai* deeply to the man who feeds them. Their faces are streaked with sweat and pale powder. Only the skin around their mouths and noses remains dark where the filters have protected them.

He and Banyat pass through the far side and into the swelter of the cutting rooms. Temper lamps blaze with energy and the tide pool reek of breeding algae clogs the air. Overhead, tiered racks of drying screens reach the ceiling, smeared with streamers of generipped algae, dripping and withering and blackening into paste in the heat. The sweating line techs are stripped to nearly nothing—just shorts and tanks and protective head gear. It is a furnace, despite the rush of crank fans and generous venting systems. Sweat rolls down Anderson's neck. His shirt is instantly soaked.

Banyat points. "Here. See." He runs his finger along a disassembled cutting bar that lies beside the main line. Anderson kneels to inspect the surface. "Rust," Banyat murmurs.

"I thought we inspected for that."

"Saltwater." Banyat smiles uncomfortably. "The ocean is close."

Anderson grimaces at the dripping algae racks overhead. "The algae tanks and drying racks don't help. Whoever thought we could just use waste heat to cure the stuff was a fool. Energy efficient my ass."

Banyat gives another embarrassed smile, but says nothing.

"So you've replaced the cutting tools?"

"Twenty-five percent reliability now."

"That much better?" Anderson nods perfunctorily. He signals to the tool leader and the man shouts out through the fining room to Num. The warning bell rings again and the heat presses and temper lamps begin to glow as electricity pours into the system. Anderson shies from the sudden increase in heat. The burning lamps and presses represent a carbon tax of fifteen thousand baht every time they begin to glow, a portion of the Kingdom's own global carbon budget that SpringLife pays handsomely to siphon off. Yates' manipulation of the system was ingenious, allowing the factory to use the country's carbon allocation, but the expense of the necessary bribes is still extraordinary.

The main flywheels spin up and the factory shivers as gears beneath the floor engage. The floorboards vibrate. Kinetic power sparks through the system like adrenaline, a tingling anticipation of the energy about to pour into the manufacturing line. A megodont

screams protest and is lashed into silence. The whine of the flywheels rises to a howl, and then cuts off as joules gush into the drive system.

The line boss' bell rings again. Workers step forward to align the cutting tools. They're producing two-gigajoule kink-springs, and the smaller size requires extra care with the machinery. Further down the line, the spooling process begins and the cutting press with its newly repaired precision blades rises into the air on hydraulic jacks, hissing.

"*Khun*, please." Banyat motions Anderson behind a protection cage.

Num's bell rings a final time. The line grinds into gear. Anderson feels a brief thrill as the system engages. Workers crouch behind their shields. Kink-spring filament hisses out from alignment flanges and threads through a series of heated rollers. A spray of stinking reactant showers the rust-colored filament, greasing it in the slick film that will accept Yates' algae powder in an even coat.

The press slams down. Anderson's teeth ache with the crush of weight. The kink-spring wire snaps cleanly and then the severed filament is streaming through the curtains and into the fining room. Thirty seconds later it reemerges, pale gray and dusty with the algae-derived powder. It threads into a new series of heated rollers before being tortured into its final structure, winding in on itself, torquing into a tighter and tighter curl, working against everything in its molecular structure as the spring is tightened down. A deafening shriek of tortured metal rises. Lubricants and algae residue shower from the sheathing as the spring is squeezed down, splattering workers and equipment, and then the compressed kink-spring is being whisked away to be installed in its case and sent on to QA.

A yellow LED flashes all-clear. Workers dash out from their cages to reset the press as a new stream of rust-colored metal hisses out of the bowels of the tempering rooms. Rollers chatter, running empty. Stoppered lubricant nozzles cast a fine mist into the air as they self-cleanse before the next application. The workers finish aligning the presses then duck again behind their barriers. If the system breaks, the kink-spring filament will become a high energy blade, whipping uncontrollably through the production room. Anderson has seen heads carved open like soft mangoes, the shorn parts of people and the Pollack-spatter of blood that comes from industrial system failures—

The press slams down, clipping another kink-spring among the forty per hour that now, apparently, will have only a seventy-five percent chance of ending up in a supervised disposal fill at the Environment Ministry. They're spending millions to produce trash that will cost millions more to destroy—a double-edged sword that just keeps cutting. Yates screwed something up, whether by accident or by spiteful sabotage, and it's taken more than a year to realize the depths of the problem, to examine the algae baths that breed the kink-springs' revolutionary coatings, to rework the corn resins that enclose the springs' gear interfaces, to change the QA practices, to understand what a humidity level that hovers near 100% year-round does to a manufacturing process conceptualized in drier climes.

A burst of pale filtering dust kicks into the room as a worker stumbles through the curtains from the fining chamber. His dark face is a sweat-streaked combination of grit and palm-oil spray. The swinging curtains reveal a glimpse of his colleagues encased in pale dust clouds, shadows in a snowstorm as the kink-spring filament is encased in the

powder that keeps the springs from locking under intense compression. All that sweat, all those calories, all that carbon allotment—all to present a believable cover for Anderson as he unravels the mystery of nightshades and *ngaw*.

A rational company would shut down the factory. Even Anderson, with his limited understanding of the processes involved in this next-generation kink-spring manufacture would do so. But if his workers and the unions and the white shirts and the many listening ears of the Kingdom are to believe that he is an aspiring entrepreneur, the factory must run, and run hard.

Anderson shakes Banyat's hand and congratulates him on his good work.

It's a pity, really. The potential for success is there. When Anderson sees one of Yates' springs actually work, his breath catches. Yates was a madman, but he wasn't stupid. Anderson has watched joules pour out of tiny kink-spring cases, ticking along contentedly for hours when other springs wouldn't have held a quarter of the energy at twice the weight, or would simply have constricted into a single molecularly bound mass under the enormous pressure of the joules being dumped into them. Sometimes, Anderson is almost seduced by the man's dream.

Anderson takes a deep breath and ducks back through the fining room. He comes out on the other side in a cloud of algae powder and smoke. He sucks air redolent with trampled megodont dung and heads up the stairs to his offices. Behind him one of the megodonts shrieks again, the sound of a mistreated animal. Anderson turns, gazing down on the factory floor, and makes a note of the *mahout*. Number Four spindle. Another problem in the long list that SpringLife presents. He opens the door to the administrative offices.

Inside, the rooms are much as they were when he first encountered them. Still dim, still cavernously empty with desks and treadle computers sitting silent in shadows. Thin blades of sunlight ease between teak window shutters, illuminating smoky offerings to whatever gods failed to save Tan Hock Seng's Chinese clan in Malaya. Sandalwood incense chokes the room, and more silken streamers rise from a shrine in the corner where smiling golden figures squat over dishes of U-*Tex* rice and sticky fly-covered mangoes.

Hock Seng is already sitting at his computer. His bony leg ratchets steadily at the treadle, powering the microprocessors and the glow of the 12cm screen. In its gray light, Anderson catches the flicker of Hock Seng's eyes, the twitch of a man fearing bloody slaughter every time a door opens. The old man's flinch is as hallucinogenic as a cheshire's fade—one moment there, the next gone and doubted—but Anderson is familiar enough with yellow card refugees to recognize the suppressed terror. He shuts the door, muting the manufacturing roar, and the old man settles.

Anderson coughs and waves at the swirling incense smoke. "I thought I told you to quit burning this stuff."

Hock Seng shrugs, but doesn't stop treading or typing. "Shall I open the windows?" His whisper is like bamboo scraping over sand.

"Christ, no." Anderson grimaces at the tropic blaze beyond the shutters. "Just burn it at home. I don't want it here. Not any more."

"Yes. Of course."

"I mean it."

Hock Seng's eyes flick up for a moment before returning to his screen. The jut of his cheek bones and the hollows of his eyes show in sharp relief under the glow of the monitor. His spider fingers continue tapping at the keys. "It's for luck," he murmurs. A low wheezing chuckle follows. "Even foreign devils need luck. With all the factory troubles, I think maybe you would appreciate the help of Budai."

"Not here." Anderson dumps his newly acquired *ngaw* on his desk and sprawls in his chair. Wipes his brow. "Burn it at home."

Hock Seng inclines his head slightly in acknowledgment. Overhead, the rows of crank fans rotate lazily, bamboo blades panting against the office's swelter. The two of them sit marooned, surrounded by the map of Yates' grand design. Ranks of empty desks and workstations sit silent, the floor plan that should have held sales staff, shipping logistics clerks, HR people, and secretaries.

Anderson sorts through the *ngaw*. Holds up one of his green-haired discoveries for Hock Seng. "Have you ever seen one of these before?"

Hock Seng glances up. "The Thai call them *ngaw*." He returns to his work, treading through spreadsheets that will never add and red ink that will never be reported.

"I know what the Thai call them." Anderson gets up and crosses to the old man's desk. Hock Seng flinches as Anderson sets the *ngaw* beside his computer, eyeing the fruit as if it is a scorpion. Anderson says, "The farmers in the market could tell me the Thai name. Did you have them down in Malaya, too?"

"I—" Hock Seng starts to speak, then stops. He visibly fights for self-control, his face working through a flicker-flash of emotions. "I—" Again, he breaks off.

Anderson watches fear mold and re-mold Hock Seng's features. Less than one percent of the Malayan Chinese escaped the Incident. By any measure, Hock Seng is a lucky man, but Anderson pities him. A simple question, a piece of fruit, and the old man looks as if he's about to flee the factory.

Hock Seng stares at the *ngaw*, breath rasping. Finally he murmurs, "None in Malaya. Only Thais are clever with such things." And then he is working again, eyes fixed on his little computer screen, memories locked away.

Anderson waits to see if Hock Seng will reveal anything more but the old man doesn't raise his eyes again. The puzzle of the *ngaw* will have to wait.

Anderson returns to his own desk and starts sifting through the mail. Receipts and tax papers that Hock Seng has prepared sit at one corner of his desk, demanding attention. He begins working through the stack, adding his signature to Megodont Union paychecks and the SpringLife chop to waste disposal approvals. He tugs at his shirt, fanning himself against the increasing heat and humidity.

Eventually Hock Seng looks up. "Banyat was looking for you."

Anderson nods, distracted by the forms. "They found rust on the cutting press. The replacement improved reliability by five percent."

"Twenty-five percent, then?"

Anderson shrugs, flips more pages, adds his chop to an Environment Ministry carbon assessment. "That's what he says." He folds the document back into its envelope.

"Still not a profitable statistic. Your springs are all wind and no release. They keep joules the way the Somdet Chaopraya keeps the Child Queen."

Anderson makes a face of irritation but doesn't bother defending the erratic quality.

"Did Banyat also tell you about the nutrient tanks?" Hock Seng asks. "For the algae?"

"No. Just the rust. Why?"

"They have been contaminated. Some of the algae is not producing the. . ." Hock Seng hesitates. "The skim. It is not productive."

"He didn't mention it to me."

Another slight hesitation. Then, "I'm sure he tried."

"Did he say how bad it was?"

Hock Seng shrugs. "Just that the skim does not meet specifications."

Anderson scowls. "I'm firing him. I don't need a QA man who can't actually tell me the bad news."

"Perhaps you were not paying close attention."

Anderson has a number of words for people who try to raise a subject and then somehow fail, but he's interrupted by a scream from the megodont downstairs. The noise is loud enough to make the windows shake. Anderson pauses, listening for a follow-up cry.

"That's the Number Four power spindle," he says. "The *mahout* is incompetent."

Hock Seng doesn't look up from his typing. "They are Thai. They are all incompetent."

Anderson stifles a laugh at the yellow card's assessment. "Well, that one is worse." He goes back to his mail. "I want him replaced. Number Four spindle. Remember that."

Hock Seng's treadle loses its rhythm. "This is a difficult thing, I think. Even the Dung Lord must bow before the Megodont Union. Without the labor of the megodonts, one must resort to the joules of men. Not a powerful bargaining position."

"I don't care. I want that one out. We can't afford a stampede. Find some polite way to get rid of him." Anderson pulls over another stack of paychecks waiting for his signature.

Hock Seng tries again. "*Khun*, negotiating with the union is a complicated thing."

"That's why I have you. It's called delegating." Anderson continues flipping the papers.

"Yes, of course." Hock Seng regards him drily. "Thank you for your management instruction."

"You keep telling me I don't understand the culture here," Anderson says. "So take care of it. Get rid of that one. I don't care if you're polite or if everyone loses face, but find a way to axe him. It's dangerous to have someone like that in the power train."

Hock Seng's lips purse, but he doesn't protest any more. Anderson decides to assume that he will be obeyed. He flips through the pages of another permit letter from the Environment Ministry, grimacing. Only Thais would spend so much time making a bribe look like a service agreement. They're polite, even when they're shaking you down. Or when there's a problem with the algae tanks. Banyat. . .

Anderson shuffles through the forms on his desk. "Hock Seng?"

The old man doesn't look up. "I will take care of your *mahout*," he says as he keeps typing. "It will be done, even if it costs you when they come to bargain again for bonuses."

"Nice to know, but that's not my question." Anderson taps his desk. "You said Banyat was complaining about the algae skim. Is he having problems with the new tanks? Or the old ones?"

"I. . . He was unclear."

"Didn't you tell me we had replacement equipment coming off the anchor pads last week? New tanks, new nutrient cultures?"

Hock Seng's typing falters for a moment. Anderson pretends puzzlement as he shuffles through his papers again, already knowing that the receipts and quarantine forms aren't present. "I should have a list here somewhere. I'm sure you told me it was arriving." He looks up. "The more I think I about it, the more I think I shouldn't be hearing about any contamination problems. Not if our new equipment actually cleared Customs and got installed."

Hock Seng doesn't answer. Presses on with his typing as though he hasn't heard.

"Hock Seng? Is there something you forgot to tell me?"

Hock Seng's eyes remain fixed on the gray glow of his monitor. Anderson waits. The rhythmic creak of the crank fans and the ratchet of Hock Seng's treadle fills the silence.

"There is no manifest," the old man says, finally. "The shipment is still in Customs."

"It was supposed to clear last week."

"There are delays."

"You told me there wouldn't be any problem," Anderson says. "You were certain. You told me you were expediting the Customs personally. I gave you extra cash to be sure of it."

"The Thai keep time in their own method. Perhaps it will be this afternoon. Perhaps tomorrow." Hock Seng makes a face that resembles a grin. "They are not like we Chinese. They are lazy."

"Did you actually pay the bribes? The Trade Ministry was supposed to get a cut, to pass on to their pet white shirt inspector."

"I paid them."

"Enough?"

Hock Seng looks up, eyes narrowed. "I paid."

"You didn't pay half and keep half for yourself?"

Hock Seng laughs nervously. "Of course I paid everything."

Anderson studies the yellow card a moment longer, trying to determine his honesty, then gives up and tosses down the papers. He isn't even sure why he cares, but it galls him that the old man thinks he can be fooled so easily. He glances again at the sack of *ngaw*. Perhaps Hock Seng senses just how secondary the factory is. . . He forces the thought away and presses the old man again. "Tomorrow then?"

Hock Seng inclines his head. "I think this is most likely."

"I'll look forward to it."

Hock Seng doesn't respond to the sarcasm. Anderson wonders if it even translates. The man speaks English with an extraordinary facility, but every so often they reach an impasse of language that seems more rooted in culture than vocabulary.

Anderson returns to the paperwork. Tax forms here. Paychecks there. The workers cost twice as much as they should. Another problem of dealing with the Kingdom. Thai workers for Thai jobs. Yellow card refugees from Malaya are starving in the street, and he can't hire them. By rights, Hock Seng should be out in the job lines starving with all the other survivors of the Incident. Without his specialized skills in language and accountancy and Yates' indulgence, he would be starving.

Anderson pauses on a new envelope. It's posted to him, personally, but true to form the seal is broken. Hock Seng has a hard time respecting the sanctity of other people's mail. They've discussed the problem repeatedly, but still the old man makes "mistakes."

Inside the envelope, Anderson finds a small invitation card. Raleigh, proposing a meeting.

Anderson taps the invitation card against his desk, thoughtful. Raleigh. Flotsam of the old Expansion. An ancient piece of driftwood left at high tide, from the time when petroleum was cheap and men and women crossed the globe in hours instead of weeks.

When the last of the jumbo jets rumbled off the flooded runways of Suvarnabhumi, Raleigh stood knee-deep in rising seawater and watched them flee. He squatted with his girlfriends and then outlived them and then claimed new ones, forging a life of lemongrass and baht and fine opium. If his stories are to be believed, he has survived coups and counter-coups, calorie plagues and starvation. These days, the old man squats like a liver-spotted toad in his Ploenchit "club," smiling in self-satisfaction as he instructs newly arrived foreigners in the lost arts of pre-Contraction debauch.

Anderson tosses the card on the desk. Whatever the old man's intentions, the invitation is innocuous enough. Raleigh hasn't lived this long in the Kingdom without developing a certain paranoia of his own. Anderson smiles slightly, glancing up at Hock Seng. The two would make a fine pair: two uprooted souls, two men far from their homelands, each of them surviving by their wits and paranoia. . .

"If you are doing nothing other than watching me work," Hock Seng says, "the Megodont Union is requesting a renegotiation of their rates."

Anderson regards the expenses piled on his desk. "I doubt they're so polite."

Hock Seng's pen pauses. "The Thai are always polite. Even when they threaten."

The megodont on the floor below screams again.

Anderson gives Hock Seng a significant look. "I guess that gives you a bargaining chip when it comes to getting rid of the Number Four *mahout*. Hell, maybe I just won't pay them anything at all until they get rid of that bastard."

"The union is powerful."

Another scream shakes the factory, making Anderson flinch. "And stupid!" He glances toward the observation windows. "What the hell are they doing to that animal?" He motions at Hock Seng. "Go check on them."

Hock Seng looks as if he will argue, but Anderson fixes him with a glare. The old man gets to his feet.

A resounding trumpet of protest interrupts whatever complaint the old man is about to voice. The observation windows rattle violently.

"What the—"

Another trumpeted wail shakes the building, followed by a mechanical shriek: the power train, seizing. Anderson lurches out of his chair and runs for the window but Hock Seng reaches it ahead of him. The old man stares through the glass, mouth agape.

Yellow eyes the size of dinner plates rise level with the observation window. The megodont is up on its hind legs, swaying. The beast's four tusks have been sawn off for safety, but it is still a monster, fifteen feet at the shoulder, ten tons of muscle and rage, balanced on its hind legs. It pulls against the chains that bind it to the winding spindle. Its trunk lifts, exposing a cavernous maw. Anderson jams his hands over his ears.

The megodont's scream hammers through the glass. Anderson collapses to his knees, stunned. "Christ!" His ears are ringing. "Where's that *mahout*?"

Hock Seng shakes his head. Anderson isn't even sure the man has heard. Sounds in his own ears are muffled and distant. He staggers to the door and yanks it open just as the megodont crashes down on Spindle Four. The power spindle shatters. Teak shards spray in all directions. Anderson flinches as splinters fly past and his skin burns with needle slashes.

Down below, the *mahouts* are frantically unchaining their beasts and dragging them away from the maddened animal, shouting encouragement, forcing their will on the elephantine creatures. The megodonts shake their heads and groan protest, tugging against their training, overwhelmed by the instinctual urge to aid their cousin. The rest of the Thai workers are fleeing for the safety of the street.

The maddened megodont launches another attack on its winding spindle. Spokes shatter. The *mahout* who should have controlled the beast is a mash of blood and bone on the floor.

Anderson ducks back into his office. He dodges around empty desks and jumps another, sliding over its surface to land before the company's safes.

His fingers slip as he spins combination dials. Sweat drips in his eyes. 23-right. 106-left. . . His hand moves to the next dial as he prays that he won't screw up the pattern and have to start again. More wood shatters out on the factory floor, accompanied by the screams of someone who got too close.

Hock Seng appears at his elbow, crowding.

Anderson waves the old man away. "Tell the people to get out of here! Clear everyone out! I want everyone out!"

Hock Seng nods but lingers as Anderson continues to struggle with the combinations.

Anderson glares at him. "Go!"

Hock Seng ducks acquiescence and runs for the door, calling out, his voice lost in the screams of fleeing workers and shattering hardwoods. Anderson spins the last of the dials and yanks the safe open: papers, stacks of colorful money, eyes-only records, a compression rifle. . . a spring pistol.

*Yates.*



He grimaces. The old bastard seems to be everywhere today, as if his *phii* is riding on Anderson's shoulder. Anderson pumps the handgun's spring and stuffs it in his belt. He pulls out the compression rifle. Checks its load as another scream echoes behind. At least Yates prepared for this. The bastard was naïve, but he wasn't stupid. Anderson pumps the rifle and strides for the door.

Down on the manufacturing floor, blood splashes the drive systems and QA lines. It's difficult to see who has died. More than just the one *mahout*. The sweet stink of human offal permeates the air. Gut streamers decorate the megodont's circuit around its spindle. The animal rises again, a mountain of genetically engineered muscle, fighting against the last of its bonds.

Anderson levels his rifle. At the edge of his vision, another megodont rises onto its hind legs, trumpeting sympathy. The *mahouts* are losing control. He forces himself to ignore the expanding mayhem and puts his eye to the scope.

His rifle's crosshairs sweep across a rusty wall of wrinkled flesh. Magnified with the scope, the beast is so vast he can't miss. He switches the rifle to full automatic, exhales, and lets the gas chamber unleash.

A haze of darts leaps from the rifle. Blaze orange dots pepper the megodont's skin, marking hits. Toxins concentrated from AgriGen research on wasp venom pump through the animal's body, gunning for its central nervous system.

Anderson lowers the rifle. Without the scope's magnification, he can barely make out the scattered darts on the beast's skin. In another few moments it will be dead.

The megodont wheels and fixes its attention on Anderson, eyes flickering with Pleistocene rage. Despite himself, Anderson is impressed by the animal's intelligence. It's almost as if the animal knows what he has done.

The megodont gathers itself and heaves against its chains. Iron links crack and whistle through the air, smashing into conveyor lines. A fleeing worker collapses. Anderson drops his useless rifle and yanks out the spring gun. It's a toy against ten tons of enraged animal, but it's all he has left. The megodont charges and Anderson fires, pulling the trigger as quickly as his finger can convulse. Useless bladed disks spatter against the avalanche.

The megodont slaps him off his feet with its trunk. The prehensile appendage coils around his legs like a python. Anderson scrabbles for a grip on the door jam, trying to kick free. The trunk squeezes. Blood rushes into his head. He wonders if the monster simply plans to pop him like some blood-bloated mosquito, but then the beast is dragging him off the balcony. Anderson scrabbles for a last handhold as the railing slides past and then he's airborne. Flying free.

The megodont's exultant trumpeting echoes as Anderson sails through the air. The factory floor rushes up. He slams into concrete. Blackness swallows him. *Lie down and die*. Anderson fights unconsciousness. *Just die*. He tries to get up, to roll away, to do anything at all, but he can't move.

Colorful shapes fill his vision, trying to coalesce. The megodont is close. He can smell its breath.

Color blotches converge. The megodont looms, rusty skin and ancient rage. It raises a foot to pulp him. Anderson rolls onto his side but can't get his legs to work. He can't even

crawl. His hands scabble against the concrete like spiders on ice. He can't move quickly enough. *Oh Christ, I don't want to die like this. Not here. Not like this.* . . . He's like a lizard with its tail caught. He can't get up, he can't get away, he's going to die, jelly under the foot of an oversized elephant.

The megodont groans. Anderson looks over his shoulder. The beast has lowered its foot. It sways, drunken. It snuffles about with its trunk and then abruptly its hindquarters give out. The monster settles back on its haunches, looking ridiculously like a dog. Its expression is almost puzzled, a drugged surprise that its body no longer obeys.

Slowly its forelegs sprawl before it and it sinks, groaning, into straw and dung. The megodont's eyes sink to Anderson's level. They stare into his own, nearly human, blinking confusion. Its trunk stretches out for him again, slapping clumsily, a python of muscle and instinct, all uncoordinated now. Its maw hangs open, panting. Sweet furnace heat gusts over him. The trunk prods at him. Rocks him. Can't get a grip.

Anderson slowly drags himself out of reach. He gets to his knees, then forces himself upright. He sways, dizzy, then manages to plant his feet and stand tall. One of the megodont's yellow eyes tracks his movement. The rage is gone. Long-lashed eyelids blink. Anderson wonders what the animal is thinking. If the neural havoc tearing through its system is something it can feel. If it knows its end is imminent. Or if it just feels tired.

Standing over it, Anderson can almost feel pity. The four ragged ovals where its tusks once stood are grimy foot-diameter ivory patches, savagely sawed away. Sores glisten on its knees and scabis growths speckle its mouth. Close up and dying, with its muscles paralyzed and its ribs heaving in and out, it is just an ill-used creature. The monster was never destined for fighting.

The megodont lets out a final gust of breath. Its body sags.

People are swarming all around Anderson, shouting, tugging at him, trying to help their wounded and find their dead. People are everywhere. Red and gold union colors, green SpringLife livery, the *mahouts* clambering over the giant corpse.

For a second, Anderson imagines Yates standing beside him, smoking a nightshade and gloating at all the trouble. *"And you said you'd be gone in a month."* And then Hock Seng is beside him, whisper voice and black almond eyes and a bony hand that reaches up to touch his neck and comes away drenched red.

"You're bleeding," he murmurs.

## 2

"Lift!" Hock Seng shouts. Pom and Nu and Kukrit and Kanda all lean against the shattered winding spindle, drawing it from its cradle like a splinter pulled from the flesh of a giant, dragging it up until they can send the girl Mai down underneath.

"I can't see!" she shouts.

Pom and Nu's muscles flex as they try to keep the spindle from reseating itself. Hock Seng kneels and slides a shakelight down to the girl. Her fingers brush his and then the LED tool is gone, down into the darkness. The light is worth more than she is. He hopes they won't drop the spindle back into its seat while she's down there.

"Well?" he calls down a minute later. "Is it cracked?"

No answer comes from below. Hock Seng hopes she isn't caught, trapped somehow. He settles into a squat as he waits for her to finish her inspection. All around, the factory is a hive of activity as workers try to put the place back in order. Men swarm over the megodont's corpse, union workers with bright machetes and four-foot bone saws, their hands red with their work as they render down a mountain of flesh. Blood runs off the beast as its hide is stripped away revealing marbled muscle.

Hock Seng shudders at the sight, remembering his own people similarly disassembled, other bloodlettings, other factory wreckage. Good warehouses destroyed. Good people lost. It's all so reminiscent of when the Green Headbands came with their machetes and his warehouses burned. Jute and tamarind and kink-springs all going up in fire and smoke. Slick machetes gleaming in the blaze. He turns his eyes away, forcing down memories. Forces himself to breathe.

As soon as the Megodont Union heard one of their own was lost, they sent their professional butchers. Hock Seng tried to get them to drag the carcass outside and finish their work in the streets, to make room for the power train repairs, but the union people refused and so now in addition to the buzz of activity and cleanup, the factory is full of flies and the increasing reek of death.

Bones protrude from the corpse like coral rising from an ocean of deep red meat. Blood runs from the animal, rivers of it, rushing toward the storm drains and Bangkok's coal-driven flood-control pumps. Hock Seng watches sourly as blood flows past. The beast held gallons of it. Untold calories rushing away. The butchers are fast, but it will take them most of the night to dismember the animal completely.

"Is she done yet?" Pom gasps. Hock Seng's attention returns to the problem at hand. Pom and Nu and their compatriots are all straining against the spindle's weight.

Hock Seng again calls down into the hole. "What do you see, Mai?"

Her words are muffled.

"Come up, then!" He settles back on his haunches. Wipes sweat off his face. The factory is hotter than a rice pot. With all the megodonts led back to their stables, there is nothing to drive the factory's lines or charge the fans that circulate air through the building. Wet heat and death stench swaddle them like a blanket. They might as well be in the slaughter grounds of Khlong Toey. Hock Seng fights the urge to gag.

A shout rises from the union butchers. They've cut open the megodont's belly. Intestines gush out. Offal gatherers—the Dung Lord's people, all—wade into the mass and begin shoveling it into handcarts, a lucky source of calories. With such a clean source, the offal will likely go to feed the pigs of the Dung Lord's perimeter farms, or stock the yellow card food lines feeding the Malayan Chinese refugees who live in the sweltering old Expansion towers under the Dung Lord's protection. Whatever pigs and yellow cards won't eat will be dumped into the methane composters of the city along with the daily fruit rind and dung collections, to bake steadily into compost and gas and eventually light the city streets with the green glow of approved-burn methane.

Hock Seng tugs at a lucky mole, thoughtful. A good monopoly, that. The Dung Lord's influence touches so many parts of the city, it's a wonder that he hasn't been made Prime Minister. Certainly, if he wanted it, the godfather of godfathers, the greatest *jao por* to ever influence the Kingdom could have anything he wanted.

*But will he want what I have to offer?* Hock Seng wonders. *Will he appreciate a good business opportunity?*

Mai's voice finally filters up from underneath, interrupting his ruminations. "It's cracked!" she shouts. A moment later she claws her way out of the hole, dripping sweat and covered with dust. Nu and Pom and the rest release their hemp ropes. The spindle crashes back into its cradle and the floor shakes.

Mai glances behind her at the noise. Hock Seng thinks he catches a glimpse of fear, the realization that the spindle could have truly crushed her. The look is gone as quickly as it came. A resilient child.

"Yes?" Hock Seng asks. "Go on? Is it the core that has split?"

"Yes, *Khun*, I can slide my hand into the crack this far." She shows him, touching her hand nearly at her wrist. "And another on the far side, just the same."

"*Tamade*," Hock Seng curses. He's not surprised, but still. "And the chain drive?"

She shakes her head. "The links I could see were bent."

He nods. "Get Lin and Lek and Chuan—"

"Chuan is dead." She waves toward the smears where the megadont trampled two workers.

Hock Seng grimaces. "Yes of course." Along with Noi and Kapiphon and unfortunate Banyat the QA man who will never now hear Mr. Anderson's irritation that he allowed line contamination in the algae baths. Another expense. A thousand baht to the dead workers' families and two thousand for Banyat. He grimaces again. "Find someone else then, someone small from the cleaning gang like you. You will be going underground. Pom and Nu and Kukrit, get the spindle out. All the way out. We will need to inspect the main drive system, link by link. We cannot even consider starting again until it has been checked."

"What's the rush?" Pom laughs. "It will be a long time before we run again. The *farang* will have to pay the union bags and bags of opium before they're willing to come back. Not after he gunned down Hapreet."

"When they do return, we won't have Number Four Spindle," Hock Seng snaps. "It will take time to win an approval from the crown to cut another tree of this diameter, and then to float the log down from the North—assuming the monsoon comes at all this year—and all that time we will be running under constrained power. Think about that. Some of you will not be working at all." He nods at the spindle. "The ones who work hardest will be the ones who stay."

Pom smiles apologetically, hiding his anger, and *wais*. "*Khun*, I was loose with my words. I meant no offense."

"Good then." Hock Seng nods and turns away. He keeps his face sour, but privately, he agrees. It will take opium and bribes and a renegotiation of their power contract before the megadonts once again make their shuffling revolutions around the spindle cranks. Another red item for the balance sheets. And it doesn't even include the cost of the monks who will need to chant, or the Brahmin priests, or the *feng shui* experts, or the mediums who must consult with the *phii* so that workers will be placated and continue working in this bad luck factory—

*"Tan Xiansheng!"*

Hock Seng looks up from his calculations. Across the floor, the *yang guizi* Anderson Lake is sitting on a bench beside the workers' lockers, a doctor tending his wounds. At first, the foreign devil wanted to have her sew him upstairs, but Hock Seng convinced him to do it down on the factory floor, in public, where the workers could see him, with his white tropical suit covered with blood like a *phii* out of a graveyard, but still alive at least. And unafraid. A lot of face to be gained from that. The foreigner is fearless.

The man drinks from a bottle of Mekong whiskey that he sent Hock Seng out to buy as if Hock Seng was nothing more than a servant. Hock Seng sent Mai, who came back with a bottle of fake Mekong with an adequate label and enough change to spare that he tipped her a few baht extra for her cleverness, while looking into her eyes and saying, "Remember that I did this for you."

In a different life, he would have believed that he had bought a little loyalty when she nodded solemnly in response. In this life, he only hopes that she will not immediately try to kill him if the Thais suddenly turn on his kind and decide to send the yellow card Chinese all fleeing into the blister rusted jungle. Perhaps he has bought himself a little time. Or not.

As he approaches, Doctor Chan calls out in Mandarin, "Your foreign devil is a stubborn one. Always moving around."

She's a yellow card, like him. Another refugee forbidden from feeding herself except by wits and clever machinations. If the white shirts discovered she was taking rice from a Thai doctor's bowl. . . . He stifles the thought. It's worth it to help someone from the homeland, even if it is only for a day. An atonement of sorts for all that has gone before.

"Please try to keep him alive." Hock Seng smiles slightly. "We still need him to sign our pay stubs."

She laughs. "*Ting mafan*. I'm rusty with a needle and thread, but for you, I'd bring this ugly creature back from the dead."

"If you're that good, I'll call for you when I catch cibiscosis."

The *yang guizi* interjects in English, "What's she complaining about?"

Hock Seng eyes him. "You move about too much."

"She's damn clumsy. Tell her to hurry up."

"She also says you are very very lucky. Another centimeter difference and the splinter cuts your artery. Then your blood is on the floor with all the rest."

Surprisingly, Mr. Lake smiles at this news. His eyes go to the mountain of meat being rendered down. "A splinter. And I thought it was the megodont that was going to get me."

"Yes. You nearly died," Hock Seng says. And that would have been disastrous. If Mr. Lake's investors were to lose heart and give up the factory. . . . Hock Seng grimaces. It is so much harder to influence this *yang guizi* than Mr. Yates, and yet this stubborn foreign devil must be kept alive, if only so that the factory will not close.

It's an irritating realization, that he was once so close to Mr. Yates, and now so far from Mr. Lake. Bad luck and a stubborn *yang guizi*, and now he must come up with a new plan to cement his long-term survival and the revival of his clan.

"You should celebrate your survival, I think," Hock Seng suggests. "Make offerings to Kuan Yin and Budai for your very good luck."

Mr. Lake grins, his pale blue eyes on Hock Seng. Twin watery devil pools. "You're damn right I will." He holds up the bottle of fake Mekong, already half gone. "I'll be celebrating all night long."

"Perhaps you would like me to arrange a companion?"

The foreign devil's face turns to stone. He looks at Hock Seng with something akin to disgust. "That's not your business."

Hock Seng curses himself, even as he keeps his face immobile. He has apparently pushed too far, and now the creature is angry again. He makes a quick *wai* of apology. "Of course. I do not mean to insult you."

The *yang guizi* looks out across the factory floor. The pleasure of the moment seems drained from him "How bad is the damage?"

Hock Seng shrugs. "You are right about the spindle core. It is cracked."

"And the main chain?"

"We will inspect every link. If we are lucky, it will only be the sub-train that is affected."

"Not likely." The foreign devil offers him the whiskey bottle. Hock Seng tries to hide his revulsion as he shakes his head. Mr. Lake grins knowingly and takes another pull. Wipes his lips on the back of his arm.

A new shout rises from the union's butchers as more blood gushes from the megodont. Its head lies at an angle now, half-severed from the rest of the body. More and more, the carcass is taking on the appearance of separated parts. Not an animal at all, more a child's play set for building a megodont from the ground up.

Hock Seng wonders if there is a way to force the union to cut him in on the profits they get from selling the untainted meat. It seems unlikely, given how quickly they staked out their space, but perhaps when their power contract is renegotiated, or when they demand their reparations.

"Will you take the head?" Hock Seng asks. "You can make a trophy of it."

"No." The *yang guizi* looks offended.

Hock Seng forces himself not to grimace. It's maddening to work with the creature. The devil's moods are mercurial, and always aggressive. Like a child. One moment joyful, the next petulant. Hock Seng forces down his irritation; Mr. Lake is what he is. His karma has made him a foreign devil, and Hock Seng's karma has brought them together. It's no use complaining about the quality of U-Text when you are starving.

Mr. Lake seems to catch Hock Seng's expression and explains himself. "This wasn't a hunt. It was just an extermination. As soon as I hit it with the darts, it was dead. There's no sport in that."

"Ah. Of course. Very honorable." Hock Seng stifles his disappointment. With the foreign devil demanding the head, he could have replaced the stumpy tusk remainders with coconut oil composites and sold the ivory to the doctors near Wat Boworniwet. Now, even that money will be gone. A waste. Hock Seng considers explaining the situation to Mr. Lake, explaining the value of meat and calories and ivory lying before

them, then decides against it. The foreign devil would not understand, and the man is too easy to anger as it is.

"The cheshires are here," Mr. Lake comments.

Hock Seng looks to where the *yang guizi* indicates. At the periphery of the bloodletting, shimmering feline shapes have appeared; twists of shadow and light summoned by the carrion scent. The *yang guizi* makes a face of distaste, but Hock Seng has a measure of respect for the devil cats. They are clever, thriving in places where they are despised. Almost supernatural in their tenacity. Sometimes it seems that they smell blood before it is even spilled. As if they can peer a little way into the future and know precisely where their next meal will appear. The feline shimmers stealth toward the sticky pools of blood. A butcher kicks one away, but there are too many to really fight, and his attack is desultory.

Mr. Lake takes another pull of whiskey. "We'll never get them out."

"There are children who will hunt them," Hock Seng says. "A bounty is not expensive."

The *yang guizi* makes a face of dismissal. "We have bounties back in the Midwest, too."

*Our children are more motivated than yours.*

But Hock Seng doesn't contest the foreigner's words. He'll put out the bounty, regardless. If the cats are allowed to stay, the workers will start rumors that Phii Oun the cheshire trickster spirit has caused the calamity. The devil cats flicker closer. Calico and ginger, black as night—all of them fading in and out of view as their bodies take on the colors of their surroundings. They shade red as they dip into the blood pool.

Hock Seng has heard that cheshires were supposedly created by a calorie executive—some PurCal or AgriGen man, most likely—for a daughter's birthday. A party favor for when the little princess turned as old as Lewis Carroll's Alice.

The child guests took their new pets home where they mated with natural felines, and within twenty years, the devil cats were on every continent and *Felis domesticus* was gone from the face of the world, replaced by a genetic string that bred true ninety-eight percent of the time. The Green Headbands in Malaya hated Chinese people and cheshires equally, but as far as Hock Seng knows, the devil cats still thrive there.

The *yang guizi* flinches as Doctor Chan sticks him again and he gives her a dirty look. "Finish up," he says to her. "Now."

She *wais* carefully, hiding her fear. "He moved again," she whispers to Hock Seng. "The anesthetic is not good. Not as good as what I am used to."

"Don't worry." Hock Seng replies. "That's why I gave him the whiskey. Finish your work. I will deal with him." To Lake *Xiansheng* he says, "She is almost finished."

The foreigner makes a face but doesn't threaten her anymore, and at last the doctor completes her sewing. Hock Seng takes her aside and hands her an envelope with her payment. She *wais* her thanks but Hock Seng shakes his head. "There is a bonus in it. I wish you to deliver a letter as well." He hands her another envelope. "I would like to speak with the boss of your tower."

"Dog Fucker?" She makes a face of distaste.

"If he heard you call him that, he'd destroy whatever is left of your family."

"He's a hard one."

"Just deliver the note. That will be enough."

Doubtfully, she takes the envelope. "You've been good to our family. All the neighbors also speak of your kindness. Make offerings to your. . . loss."

"What I do is too little." Hock Seng forces a smile. "Anyway, we Chinese must stick together. Perhaps in Malaya we were still Hokkien, or Hakka or Fifth Wave, but here we are all yellow cards. I am embarrassed I cannot do more."

"It is more than anyone else." She *wais* to him, emulating the manners of their new culture, and departs.

Mr. Lake watches her go. "She's a yellow card, isn't she?"

Hock Seng nods. "Yes. A doctor in Malacca. Before the Incident."

The man is quiet, seeming to digest this information. "Was she cheaper than a Thai doctor?"

Hock Seng glances at the *yang guizi*, trying to decide what he wants to hear. Finally he says, "Yes. Much cheaper. Just as good. Maybe better. But much cheaper. They do not allow us to take Thai niches here. So she has very little work except for yellow cards—who of course have too little to pay. She is happy for the work."

Mr. Lake nods thoughtfully and Hock Seng wonders what he is thinking. The man is an enigma. Sometimes, Hock Seng thinks *yang guizi* are too stupid to have possibly taken over the world once, let alone twice. That they succeeded in the Expansion and then—even after the energy collapse beat them back to their own shores—that they returned again, with their calorie companies and their plagues and their patented grains. . . They seem protected by the supernatural. By rights, Mr. Lake should be dead, a bit of human offal mingled with the bodies of Banyat and Noi and the nameless stupid Number Four Spindle megodont handler who caused the beast to panic in the first place. And yet here the foreign devil sits, complaining about the tiny prick of a needle, but completely unconcerned that he has destroyed a ten-ton animal in the blink of an eye. The *yang guizi* are strange creatures indeed. More alien than he suspected, even when he traded with them regularly.

"The *mahout* will have to be paid off again. Bribed to come back to work," Hock Seng observes.

"Yes."

"And we will have to hire monks to chant for the factory. To make the workers happy again. *Phii* must be placated." Hock Seng pauses. "It will be expensive. People will say that your factory has bad spirits in it. That it is sited wrong, or that the spirit house is not large enough. Or that you cut down a *phii's* tree when it was built. We will have to bring a fortune teller, perhaps a *feng shui* master to get them to believe the place is good. And then the *mahout* will demand hazard pay—"

Mr. Lake interrupts. "I want to replace the *mahout*," he says. "All of them."

Hock Seng sucks air through his teeth. "It is impossible. The Megodont Union controls all of the city's power contracts. It is a government mandate. The white shirts award the power monopoly. There is nothing we can do about the unions."



"They're incompetent. I don't want them here. Not anymore."

Hock Seng tries to tell if the *farang* is joking. He smiles hesitantly. "It is Royal Mandate. One might as well wish to replace the Environment Ministry."

"There's a thought." Mr. Lake laughs. "I could team up with Carlyle & Sons and start complaining every day about taxes and carbon credit laws. Get Trade Minister Akkarat to take up our cause." His gaze rests on Hock Seng. "But that's not the way you like to operate, is it?" His eyes become abruptly cold. "You like the shadows and the bargaining. The quiet deal."

Hock Seng swallows. The foreign devil's pale skin and blue eyes are truly horrific. As alien as a devil cat, and just as comfortable in a hostile land. "It would be unwise to enrage the white shirts." Hock Seng murmurs. "The nail that stands up will be pounded down."

"That's yellow card talk."

"As you say. But I am alive when others are dead, and the Environment Ministry is very powerful. General Pracha and his white shirts have survived every challenge. Even the December 12 attempt. If you wish to poke at a cobra, be ready for its bite."

Mr. Lake looks as if he will argue, but instead shrugs. "I'm sure you know best."

"It is why you pay me."

The *yang guizi* stares at the dead megodont. "That animal shouldn't have been able to break out of its harness." He takes another drink from his bottle. "The safety chains were rusted; I checked. We aren't going to pay a cent of reparations. That's final. That's my bottom line. If they had secured their animal, I wouldn't have had to kill it."

Hock Seng inclines his head in tacit agreement, though he will not speak it out loud. "*Khun*, there is no other option."

Mr. Lake smiles coldly. "Yes, of course. They're a monopoly." He makes a face. "Yates was a fool to locate here."

Hock Seng experiences a chill of anxiety. The *yang guizi* suddenly looks like a petulant child. Children are rash. Children do things to anger the white shirts or the unions. And sometimes they pick up their toys and run away home. A disturbing thought indeed. Anderson Lake and his investors must not run away. Not yet.

"What are our losses, to date?" Mr. Lake asks.

Hock Seng hesitates, then steels himself to deliver bad news. "With the loss of the megodont, and now the cost of placating the unions? Ninety million baht, perhaps?"

A shout comes from Mai, waving Hock Seng over. He doesn't have to look to know it is bad news. He says, "There will be damage below as well, I think. Expensive to repair." He pauses, touches the delicate subject. "Your investors, the Misterys Gregg and Yee, will have to be notified. It is likely that we do not have the cash to do repairs and also to install and calibrate the new algae baths when they arrive." He pauses. "We will require new funds."

He waits anxiously, wondering what the *yang guizi*'s reaction will be. Money flows through the company so quickly sometimes Hock Seng thinks of it as water, and yet he knows this will not be pleasant news. The investors sometimes become balky at expenses. With Mr. Yates, the fights over money were common. With Mr. Lake, less so.

The investors do not complain so much now that Mr. Lake has arrived, yet it is still a fantastic amount of money to spend on a dream. If Hock Seng ran the company, he would have shut it down more than a year ago.

But Mr. Lake doesn't blink at the news. All he says is, "More money." He turns to Hock Seng. "And when will the algae tanks and nutrient cultures clear Customs?" he asks. "When, really?"

Hock Seng blanches. "It is difficult. Parting the bamboo curtain is not something done in a day. The Environment Ministry likes to interfere."

"You said you paid to keep the white shirts off our backs."

"Yes." Hock Seng inclines his head. "All the appropriate gifts have been given."

"So why was Banyat complaining about contaminated baths? If we've got live organisms breeding—"

Hock Seng hurries to interrupt. "Everything is at the anchor pads. Delivered by Carlyle & Sons last week. . ." He makes a decision. The *yang guizi* needs to hear good news. "Tomorrow the shipment will clear Customs. The bamboo curtain will part, and your shipment will arrive on the backs of megodonts." He makes himself smile. "Unless you wish to fire the Union right now?"

The devil shakes his head, even smiles a little at the joke, and Hock Seng feels a flush of relief.

"Tomorrow then. For certain?" Mr. Lake asks.

Hock Seng steels himself and inclines his head in agreement, willing it to be the truth. Still the foreigner holds him with his blue eyes. "We spend a lot of money here. But the one thing the investors can't tolerate is incompetence. I won't tolerate it, either."

"I understand."

Mr. Lake nods, satisfied. "Good then. We'll wait to talk with the home office. After we've got the new line equipment out of Customs, we'll call. Give them some good news with the bad. I don't want to ask for money with nothing to show at all." He looks at Hock Seng again. "We wouldn't want that, would we?"

Hock Seng makes himself nod. "As you say."

Mr. Lake takes another drink from his bottle. "Good. Find out how bad the damage is. I'll want a report in the morning."

With this dismissal, Hock Seng heads across the factory floor to the waiting spindle crew. He hopes that he is right about the shipment. That it will be truly released. That he will be proven right by events. It is a gamble, but not a bad one. And the devil would not have wanted to hear too much bad news at once, in any case.

When Hock Seng arrives at the winding spindle, Mai is dusting herself off from another foray into the hole. "How does it look?" Hock Seng asks. The winding spindle is fully disengaged from the line. Now drawn forth, it lies on the ground, a massive spike of teak. The cracks are large and obvious. He calls down the hole. "A lot of damage?"

A minute later, Pom crawls out covered in grease. "Those tunnels are tight." he gasps. "I can't fit down some of them." He wipes the sweat and grime with an arm. "It's the sub-train for certain, and we won't know about the rest until we send children down along the links. If the main chain is damaged, we'll have to pull up the floor."

Hock Seng peers into the revealed spindle hole with a grimace, flashing back to tunnels and rats and cowering survival in the jungles of the south. "We'll have Mai find some of her friends."

He surveys the damage again. He owned buildings like this, once. Whole warehouses filled with goods. And now look what he is, a factotum for *yang guizi*. An old man with a body that's falling apart and a clan that has been filed down to his single head. He sighs and forces down frustration. "I want to know everything about how bad the damage is, before I talk to the *farang* again. No surprises."

Pom *wais*. "Yes, *Khun*."

Hock Seng turns for the offices, limping slightly for the first few steps before forcing himself not to favor the leg. With all the activity, his knee aches, a reminder of an encounter of his own with the monsters that drive the factory. He can't help stopping at the top of the steps to study the megodont carcass, the places where the workers died. Memories scratch and peck at him, swirling like black crows, hungry to take over his head. So many friends dead. So much family gone. Four years ago, he was a big name. Now? Nothing.

He pushes through the door. The offices are silent. Empty desks, expensive treadle computers, the treadmill and its tiny communications screen, the company's massive safes. As he scans the room, religious fanatics in green headbands leap from the shadows, machetes whirling, but they are only memories.

He closes the door behind him, shutting out the sounds of butchery and repair. Forces himself not to go to the window and look down again on the blood and carcass. Not to dwell on memories of blood running down the gutters of Malacca, of Chinese heads stacked like durians for sale.

*This is not Malaya*, he reminds himself. *You are safe*.

Still, the images are there. As bright as photographs and spring festival fireworks. Even with the Incident four years in the past, he must perform calming rituals. When the feeling is bad, almost any object reminds him of menace. He closes his eyes, forces himself to breathe deeply, to remember the blue ocean and his clipper fleets white upon the waves. . . . He takes another deep breath and opens his eyes. The room is safe again. Nothing but empty desks set in careful rows and dusty treadle computers. Shutters blocking out the blaze of tropic sunlight. Dust motes and incense.

Across the room, deep in shadows, the twinned vaults of SpringLife's safes gleam dully, iron and steel, squatting there, taunting him. Hock Seng has keys to one, the petty cash safe. But the other, the great safe, only Mr. Lake can open.

*So close*, he thinks.

The blueprints are there. Just inches away. He has seen them laid out. The DNA samples of the genehacked algae, their genome maps on solid state data cubes. The specifications for growing and processing the resulting skim into lubricants and powder. The necessary tempering requirements for the kink-spring filament to accept the new coatings. A next generation of energy storage sits within his grasp. And with it, a hope of resurrection for himself and his clan.

Yates mumbled and drank and Hock Seng filled his *baijiu* glass and listened to his rambles and encouraged his trust and dependence for more than a year. And it was all a

waste. Now it comes down to this safe that he cannot open because Yates was foolish enough to raise the investors' ire, and too incompetent to bring his dream to fruition.

There are new empires waiting to be built, if only Hock Seng can reach the documents. All he has are incomplete copies from when they used to sit in the open, splashed across Yates' desk, before the drunken fool bought the cursed office safe.

Now there is a key and a combination, and a wall of iron between him and the blueprints. A good safe. Hock Seng is familiar with its sort. Benefited from its security when he too was a big name and had files he needed to protect. It is irritating—perhaps more irritating than anything else—that the foreign devils use the same brand of safe as he used for his own trading empire in Malaya: YingTie. A Chinese tool, twisted to foreign purposes. He has spent days staring at that safe. Meditating on the knowledge that it contains—

Hock Seng cocks his head, suddenly thoughtful.

*Did you close it, Mr. Lake? In all the excitement, did you forget perhaps to lock it closed once again?*

Hock Seng's heart beats faster.

*Did you lapse?*

Mr. Yates sometimes did.

Hock Seng tries to control growing excitement. He limps across to the safe. Stands before it. A shrine, an object of worship. A monolith of forged steel, impervious to everything except patience and diamond drills. Every day he sits across from it, feels it mocking him.

Could it be as simple as this? Is it possible that in the rush of disaster that Mr. Lake simply forgot to close it?

Hock Seng reaches out hesitantly and puts his hand on the lever. He holds his breath. Prays to his ancestors, prays to the elephant-headed Phra Kanet, the Thai people's remover of obstacles, to every god he knows. He leans on the handle.

One thousand *jin* of steel push back, every molecule resisting his pressure.

Hock Seng lets out his breath and steps back, forcing down his disappointment.

Patience. Every safe has a key. If Mr. Yates had not been so incompetent, if he had not somehow angered the investors, he would have been the perfect key. Now it must be Mr. Lake instead.

When Mr. Yates installed the safe, he joked that he had to keep the family jewels safe, and laughed. Hock Seng had made himself nod and *wai* and smile, but all he could think about was how valuable the blueprints were, and how stupid he had been not to copy faster, when they had been easily available.

And now Yates is gone, and in his place a new devil. A devil truly. Blue-eyed and gold-haired and hard-edged where Yates was soft. This dangerous creature who double-checks everything Hock Seng does and makes everything so much harder, and who must somehow be convinced to give up the secrets of his company. Hock Seng purses his lips. *Patience. You must be patient. Eventually the foreign devil will make a mistake.*

"Hock Seng!"

Hock Seng goes to the door and waves down to Mr. Lake, acknowledging the summons, but instead of going downstairs immediately, he goes to his shrine.

He prostrates himself before the image of Kuan Yin and begs that she will have mercy on him and his ancestors. That she will give him a chance to redeem himself and his family. Beneath the golden character for good fortune, suspended upside down so that it will gush down upon him, Hock Seng places U-TeX rice and cuts open a blood orange. The juice runs down his arm; a ripe one, clean of contamination, and expensive. One cannot cut too close to the bone with gods; they like the fat, not the lean. He lights incense.

As smoke streams into the still air, filling the office once again, Hock Seng prays. He prays that the factory will not close, and that his bribes will bring the new line equipment through the bamboo curtain without difficulty. That the foreign devil Mr. Lake will lose his head and trust him too much, and that the cursed safe will open and reveal its secrets to him.

Hock Seng prays for luck. Even an old Chinese yellow card needs luck.

### 3

Emiko sips whiskey, wishing she were drunk, and waits for the signal from Kannika that it is time for her humiliation. A part of her still struggles against it but the rest of her—the part that sits with her midriff-baring mini-jacket and tight *pha sin* skirt and a glass of whiskey in her hand—doesn't have the energy to fight.

And then she wonders if she has it backwards, if the part that struggles to maintain her illusions of self-respect is the part intent upon her destruction. If her body, this collection of cells and manipulated DNA—with its own stronger, more practical needs—is actually the survivor: the one with will.

Isn't that why she sits here, listening to the throb of beating sticks and the wail of *pi klang* as girls writhe under glow worms and men and whores shout their encouragement? Is it because she lacks the will to die? Or because she is too stubborn to allow it?

Raleigh says that all things come in cycles, like the rise and fall of the tides along the beaches of Koh Samet, or the rise and fall of a man's prick when he has a pretty girl. Raleigh slaps his girls on their bare bottoms and laughs at the jokes of the new wave *gaijin* and tells Emiko that whatever they want to do with her, money is money, and nothing is new under the sun. And perhaps he is right. Nothing that Raleigh demands has not been demanded before. Nothing that Kannika conceives to hurt her and make her cry out is truly different. Except that she draws cries and moans from a windup girl. This, at least, is novelty.

*Look! She is almost human!*

Gendo-sama used to say that she was more than human. He used to stroke her black hair after they had made love and say that he thought it a pity New People were not more respected, and really it was too bad her movements would never be smooth. But still, did she not have perfect eyesight and perfect skin and disease- and cancer-resistant genes, and who was she to complain? At least her hair would never turn gray, and she would

never age as quickly as he, even with his surgeries and pills and ointments and herbs that kept him young.

He had stroked her hair and said, "You are beautiful, even if you are New People. Do not be ashamed."

And Emiko had snuggled into his embrace. "No. I am not ashamed."

But that had been in Kyoto, where New People were common, where they served well, and were sometimes well-respected. Not human, certainly, but also not the threat that the people of this savage basic culture make her out to be. Certainly not the devils that the Grahamites warn against at their pulpits, or the soulless creatures imagined out of hell that the forest monk Buddhists claim; not a creature unable to ever achieve a soul or a place in the cycles of rebirth and striving for Nirvana. Not the affront to the Q'ran that the Green Headbands believe.

The Japanese were practical. An old population needed young workers in all their varieties, and if they came from test tubes and grew in crèches, this was no sin. The Japanese were practical.

*And isn't that why you sit here? Because the Japanese are so very practical? Though you look like one, though you speak their tongue, though Kyoto is the only home you knew, you were not Japanese.*

Emiko puts her head in her hands. She wonders if she will find a date, or if she will be left alone at the end of the night, and then wonders if she knows which she prefers.

Raleigh says there is nothing new under the sun, but tonight, when Emiko pointed out that she was New People, and there had never been New People before, Raleigh laughed, and said she was right and special and who knows, maybe that meant anything was possible. And then he slapped her bottom and told her to get up on stage and show how special she was going to be tonight.

Emiko traces her fingers through the wetness of bar rings. Warm beers sit and sweat wet slick rings, as slick as girls and men, as slick as her skin when she oils it to shine, to be soft like butter when a man touches her. As soft as skin can be, and perhaps more so, because even if her physical movements are all stutter-stop flash-bulb strange, her skin is more than perfect. Even with her augmented vision she barely spies the pores of her flesh. So small. So delicate. *So optimal.* But made for Nippon and a rich man's climate control, not for here. Here, she is too hot and sweats too little.

She wonders if she were a different kind of animal, some mindless furry cheshire, say, if she would feel cooler. Not because her pores would be larger and more efficient and her skin not so painfully impermeable, but simply because she wouldn't have to think. She wouldn't have to know that she had been trapped in this suffocating perfect skin by some irritating scientist with his test tubes and DNA confetti mixes who made her flesh so so smooth, and her insides too too hot.

Kannika grabs her by the hair.

Emiko gasps at the sudden attack. She searches for help but none of the other patrons are interested in her. They are watching the girls on stage. Emiko's peers are servicing the guests, plying them with Khmer whiskey and pressing their bottoms to their laps and running their hands over the men's chests. And anyway, they have no love for her. Even

the good-hearted ones—the ones with *jai dee*, who somehow manage to care for a windup like herself—will not step in.

Raleigh is talking with another *gaijin*, smiling and laughing with the man, but his ancient eyes are on Emiko, watching for what she will do.

Kannika yanks her hair again. "*Bai!*"

Emiko obeys, climbing down from her bar stool and tottering in her windup way toward the circle stage. The men all laugh and point at the Japanese windup and her broken unnatural steps. A freak of nature transplanted from her native habitat, trained from birth to duck her head and bow.

Emiko tries to distance herself from what is about to happen. She is trained to be clinical about such things. The crèche in which she was created and trained had no illusions about the many uses a New Person might be put to, even a refined one. New People serve and do not question. She moves toward the stage with the careful steps of a fine courtesan, stylized and deliberate movements, refined over decades to accommodate her genetic heritage, to emphasize her beauty and her difference. But it is wasted on the crowd. All they see are stutter-stop motions. A joke. An alien toy. A windup.

They have her strip off her clothes.

Kannika flicks water onto her oiled skin. Emiko glistens with water jewels. Her nipples harden. The glow worms twist and writhe overhead, sending out phosphorescent mating light. The men laugh at her. Kannika slaps her hip and makes her bow. Slaps her ass hard enough to burn, tells her to bow lower, to make obeisance to these small men who imagine themselves to be the vanguard of some new Expansion.

The men laugh and wave and point and order more whiskey. Raleigh grins from his place in the corner, the fond elder uncle, happy to teach these newcomers—these small corporate men and women high on fantasies of multinational profiteering—the ways of the old world. Kannika motions that Emiko should kneel.

A black-bearded *gaijin* with the deep tan of a clipper ship sailor watches from inches away. Emiko meets the man's eyes. He stares intently, as if he is examining an insect under a magnifying glass: fascinated, and yet also repulsed. She has the urge to snap at him, to try to force him to look at her, to see her instead of simply evaluating her as a piece of genetic trash. But instead she bows and knocks her head against the teak stage in subservience while Kannika speaks in Thai and tells them Emiko's life story. That she was once a rich Japanese plaything. That she is theirs now: a toy for them to play with, to break even.

And then she grabs Emiko's hair and yanks her up. Emiko gasps as her body arches. She catches a glimpse of the bearded man staring in surprise at the sudden violent gesture, at her abasement. A flash of the crowd. The ceiling with its glow worm cages. Kannika drags her further back, bending her like willow, forcing her to thrust her breasts out to the crowd, to arch further still, to spread her thighs as she struggles not to topple sideways. Her head touches the teak of the stage. Her body forms a perfect arc. Kannika says something and the crowd laughs. The pain in Emiko's back and neck is extreme. She can feel the crowd's eyes on her, a physical thing, molesting her. She is utterly exposed.

Liquid gushes over her.

She tries to rise, but Kannika presses her down and dumps more beer in her face. Emiko gags and splutters, drowning. Finally Kannika releases her and Emiko jerks upright, coughing. Liquid foams down her chin, spills down her neck and breasts, trickles to her crotch.

Everyone is laughing. Saeng is already offering the bearded man a fresh beer, and he is grinning and tipping Saeng and everyone is laughing at how Emiko's body twitches and jerks now that she is in a panic, coughing the liquid from her lungs. She is nothing but a silly marionette creature now, all stutter-stop motion—herky-jerky *heechy-keechy*—with no trace of the stylized grace that her mistress Mizumi-sensei trained into her when she was a girl in the crèche. There is no elegance or care to her movements now; the telltales of her DNA are violently present for all to see and mock.

Emiko continues coughing, almost retching at the beer in her lungs. Her limbs twitch and flail, giving everyone a chance to see her true nature. Finally she gets a full breath. Controls her flailing movements. She reverts to stillness, kneeling, waiting for the next assault.

In Japan she was a wonder. Here, she is nothing but a windup. The men laugh at her strange gait and make faces of disgust that she exists at all. She is a creature forbidden to them. The Thai men would happily mulch her in their methane composting pools. If they met her or an AgriGen calorie man, it is hard to say which they would rather see mulched first. And then there are the *gaijin*. She wonders how many of them claim membership in the Grahamite Church, dedicated to destroying everything that she represents: her affront to niche and nature. And yet they sit contentedly and enjoy this humiliation of her even still.

Kannika grabs her again. She has disrobed now and has a jadeite cock in her hands. She shoves Emiko down, pushing her onto her back. "Hold her hands," she says, and the men reach out eagerly, grip her wrists.

Kannika pries her legs wide and then Emiko cries out as Kannika takes her. Emiko turns her face aside, waiting out the assault, but Kannika sees her avoidance. She pinches Emiko's face in one hand and forces her to show her features so that the men can see the effect of Kannika's ministrations.

The men urge Kannika on. Begin to chant. Count in Thai. *Neung! Song! Sam! Si!*

Kannika indulges them with a building rhythm. The men sweat and watch and shout for more for the price of their admission. More men are holding her down, hands on her ankles and wrists, freeing Kannika for her abuse. Emiko writhes, her body shaking and jerking, twitching in the ways that windups do, in the ways that Kannika excels at bringing out. The men laugh and comment on the freakish movements, the stutter-stop motions, flash-bulb strange.

Kannika's fingers join the jade between Emiko's legs, play at Emiko's core. Emiko's shame builds. Again she tries to turn her face aside. Men are gathered around, close, staring. More crowd behind, straining for a glimpse. Emiko moans. Kannika laughs, low and knowing. She says something to the men and increases her tempo. Her fingers play in Emiko's folds. Emiko moans again as her body betrays her. She cries out. Arches. Her body performs just as it was designed—just as the scientists with their test tubes intended. She cannot control it no matter how much she despises it. The scientists will not allow her even this small disobedience. She comes.



The audience roars approval, laughing at the bizarre convulsions that orgasm wrings from her DNA. Kannika gestures at her movements as if to say, "You see? Look at this animal!" and then she is kneeling above Emiko's face and hissing to Emiko that she is nothing, and will always be nothing, and for once the dirty Japanese get what is coming to them.

Emiko wants to tell her that no self-respecting Japanese would do these things. Wants to tell her that all Kannika plays with is a disposable Japanese toy—a triviality of Japanese ingenuity, like Matsushita's disposable cellulose handlegrips for a cycle-rickshaw—but she has said it before and it only makes things worse. If she remains silent the abuse will end soon.

Even if she is New People, there is nothing new under the sun.

\* \* \*

Yellow card coolies crank at wide-bore fans, driving air through the club. Sweat drips from their faces and runs in gleaming rivulets down their backs. They burn calories as quickly as they consume them and yet still the club bakes with the memory of the afternoon sun.

Emiko stands beside a fan, letting it cool her as much as she can, pausing in her labors of ferrying drinks for customers and hoping that Kannika will not catch sight of her again.

Whenever Kannika gets hold of her, she drags her out to where the men can all examine her. Makes her walk in the traditional Japanese windup way, emphasizing the stylized motions of her kind. Makes her turn this way and that, and the men joke about her aloud even as they silently consider buying her once their friends have gone away.

In the center of the main room, men invite young girls in their *pha sin* and cropped jackets out onto the dance floor and make slow turns around the parquet as the band plays Contraction mixes, songs that Raleigh has dredged from his memory and translated for use on traditional Thai instruments, strange melancholy amalgamations of the past, as exotic as his children with their turmeric hair and their wide round eyes.

"Emiko!"

She flinches. It's Raleigh, motioning her toward his office. Men's gazes follow her stutter-stop movements as she passes the bar. Kannika looks up from her date where they twine hands and nuzzle close. She smiles slightly as Emiko goes by. When Emiko first came to the country, she was told that the Thais have thirteen kinds of smile. She suspects that Kannika's denotes no good will.

"Come on." Raleigh says, impatient. He leads her through a curtain and down the hall past where the girls change into their work clothes, then through another door.

The memorabilia of three lifetimes lines his office's walls, everything from yellowed photographs of a Bangkok lit entirely by electricity to an image of Raleigh wearing the traditional dress of some savage hilltribe in the North. Raleigh invites Emiko to recline on a cushion on the raised platform where he does his private business. Another man is

already sprawled there, a pale tall creature with blue eyes and blond hair and an angry scar on his neck.

The man startles when she comes into the room. "Jesus and Noah, you didn't tell me she was a windup," he says.

Raleigh grins and settles on his own cushion. "Didn't know you were a Grahamite."

The man almost smiles at the taunt. "Keeping something this risky. . . You're playing with blister rust, Raleigh. The white shirts could be all over you."

"The Ministry doesn't give a damn as long I pay the bribes. The guys who patrol around here aren't the Tiger of Bangkok. They just want to make a buck and sleep through the night." He laughs. "Buying her ice is more expensive than paying the Environment Ministry to look the other way."

"Ice?"

"Wrong pore structure. She overheats." He scowls. "If I'd known beforehand, I wouldn't have bought her."

The room reeks of opium and Raleigh busies himself filling the pipe again. He claims that opium has kept him young, vital through the years, but Emiko suspects that he sails for Tokyo and the same aging treatments Gendo-sama used. Raleigh holds the opium over its lamp. It heats and sizzles, and he turns the ball on its needles, working the tar until it turns viscous, then he quickly rolls it back into a ball and presses it into his pipe. He extends the pipe to the lamp and breathes deeply as the tar turns to smoke. He closes his eyes. Blindly offers it to the pale man.

"No, thank you."

Raleigh's eyes open. He laughs. "You should try it. It's the one thing the plagues didn't get. Lucky for me. Can't imagine going through withdrawal at my age."

The man doesn't answer. Instead, his pale blue eyes study Emiko. She has the uncomfortable feeling of being taken apart, cell by cell. Not so much that he undresses her with his gaze—this she experiences every day: the feel of men's eyes darting across her skin, clasp at her body, hungering and despising her—instead his study is clinically detached. If there is hunger there, he hides it well.

"She's the one?" he asks.

Raleigh nods. "Emiko, tell the gentleman about our friend from the other night."

Emiko glances at Raleigh, discomfited. She is fairly certain that she has never seen this pale blond *gaijin* at the club before, at least, that he has never attended any special performance. She has never served him a whiskey ice. She wracks her memories. No, she would remember. He has a sunburn, obvious despite the dim flicker of the candles and opium lamp. And his eyes are too strangely pale, unpleasantly so. She would remember him.

"Go on." Raleigh urges. "Tell him what you told me. About the white shirt. The kid you went with."

Raleigh is normally fanatic about the privacy of guests. He has even talked about building a separate stairwell for patrons, simply so they will not be seen entering and leaving Ploenchit tower at all, an access passage that would allow them to enter from a block away, under the street. And yet now he wants her to reveal so much.

"The boy?" she asks, stalling for time, unnerved by Raleigh's eagerness to expose a guest, and a white shirt, at that. She glances at the stranger again, wondering who he is, and what sort of hold he has on her papa-san.

"Go on," Raleigh motions impatiently, the opium pipe gripped in his teeth. He leans into the opium lamp to smoke again.

"He was a white shirt," Emiko begins. "He came with a group of other officers. . ."

A new one. Brought around by his friends. All of them laughing and egging him on. All of them drinking free because Raleigh knows better than to charge, their good will worth more than the liquor. The young man, drunk. Laughing and making jokes about her in the bar. And then stealthily returning later, in privacy, hidden from his colleagues' prying eyes.

The pale man makes a face. "They'll go with you? With your kind?"

"*Hai*." Emiko nods, showing nothing of what she thinks of his contempt. "White shirts and Grahamites."

Raleigh laughs softly. "Sex and hypocrisy. They go together like coffee and cream."

The stranger glances sharply at Raleigh, and Emiko wonders if the old man can see the disgust in those pale blue eyes or if he is too stoned on opium to care. The pale man leans forward, cutting Raleigh out of the conversation. "And what did this white shirt tell you?"

Is there a flicker of fascination there? Does she intrigue him? Or is it simply her story that interests him?

Despite herself, Emiko feels a stirring of her genetic urge to please, an emotion that she hasn't felt since her abandonment. Something about the man reminds her of Gendo-sama. Even though his blue *gaijin* eyes are like pools of chemical bath acid and his face is kabuki pale, he has presence. The air of authority is palpable, and strangely comforting.

*Are you a Grahamite?* she wonders. *Would you use me and then mulch me?* She wonders if she cares. He is not beautiful. He is not Japanese. He is nothing. And yet his horrifying eyes hold her with the same power that Gendo-sama used to exercise.

"What do you wish to know?" she whispers.

"Your white shirt said something about generipping," the *gaijin* says. "Do you remember?"

"*Hai*. Yes. I think perhaps he was very proud. He came with a bag of newly designed fruits. Gifts for all of the girls."

More interest from the *gaijin*. It warms her. "And what did the fruit look like?" he asks.

"It was red, I think. With. . . threads. Long threads."

"Green hairs? About so long?" He indicates a centimeter with his fingers. "Thickish?"

She nods. "Yes. That's right. He called them *ngaw*. And his aunt had made them. She was going to be recognized by the Child Queen's Protector, the Somdet Chaopraya, for her contribution to the Kingdom. He was very proud of his aunt."

"And he went with you," the man prompts.

"Yes. But later. After his friends were gone."

The pale man shakes his head impatiently. He doesn't care about the details of the liaison: the boy's nervous eyes, the way he approached the mama-san and how Emiko was sent up to wait for him to follow a safe time later, so that no one would make the connection. "What else did he say about this aunt?" he asks.

"Just that she rips for the Ministry."

"Nothing else? Not where she rips? Where they have test fields? Nothing of that sort?"

"No."

"That's it?" The *gaijin* glances at Raleigh, irritated. "This is what you dragged me here for?"

Raleigh rouses himself. "The *farang*," he prompts. "Tell him about the *farang*."

Emiko can't help but show her confusion. "Sorry?" She remembers the white shirt boy, bragging about his aunt. How his aunt would be given a prize and a promotion for her work with *ngaw*. . . nothing of *farang*. "I don't understand."

Raleigh puts down his pipe, scowling. "You told me he talked about *farang* generippers."

"No." She shakes her head. "He said nothing about foreigners. I am sorry."

The scarred *gaijin* makes a face of irritation. "Let me know when you've got something worth my time, Raleigh." He reaches for his hat, makes to stand.

Raleigh glares at her. "You said there was a *farang* generipper!"

"No. . ." Emiko shakes her head. "Wait!" She puts out a hand to the *gaijin*. "Wait. *Khun*, please wait. I know what Raleigh-san is talking about." Her fingers brush his arm. The *gaijin* jerks away from her touch. He steps out of reach with a look of disgust.

"Please," she begs. "I did not understand. The boy said nothing about *farang*. But he used a name. . . it could have been *farang*," She looks to Raleigh for confirmation. "Is this what you mean? The strange name? It could have been foreign, yes? Not Thai. Not Chinese or Hokkien. . ."

Raleigh interrupts, "Tell him what you told me, Emiko. That's all I want. Tell him everything. Every single detail. Just like you're talking to me after a date."

And so she does. As the *gaijin* sits again, listening suspiciously, she tells everything. About the boy's nervousness, how he couldn't look at her, and then how he couldn't look away. How he talked because his erection would not come. How he watched her undress. How he talked about his aunt. Trying to make himself seem important to a whore and a New People whore at that, and how strange and silly that had seemed to her, and how she hid her thoughts of him. And then finally the part that makes Raleigh smile in satisfaction and the pale scarred man's eyes widen.

"The boy said the man Gi Bu Sen gives them blueprints, but he betrays them more often than not. But his aunt discovered a trickery. And then they made the successful rip of the *ngaw*. Gi Bu Sen did hardly anything for them with the *ngaw*. It was all his aunt's work, in the end." She nods. "That is what he said. This Gi Bu Sen tricks them. But his aunt is too brilliant to be tricked."

The scarred man studies her closely. Cold blue eyes. Pale skin like a corpse. "Gi Bu Sen," the man murmurs. "You're sure that was the name?"

"Gi Bu Sen. I am sure."

The man nods, thoughtful. The lamp that Raleigh uses for his opium crackles in the silence. Far below on the street, a late-night water seller calls out, his voice floating up through the open shutters and mosquito screens. The noise seems to break the *gaijin* from his reverie. His pale eyes focus on her again. "I would be very interested to know if your friend returned for another visit."

"He was ashamed, afterward." Emiko touches her cheek, where she hides a fading bruise with makeup. "I think he will not—"

Raleigh interrupts. "Sometimes they come back. Even if they feel guilty." He shoots her a dark look. She makes herself nod in confirmation. The boy will not be coming back, but it will make the *gaijin* happy to think so. And it will make Raleigh happy. Raleigh is her patron. She should agree. Should agree with conviction.

"Sometimes." It's all she can manage. "Sometimes they come back, even if they are ashamed."

The *gaijin* eyes them both. "Why don't you go get her some ice, Raleigh?"

"It's not time for her next round. And she's got a show coming up."

"I'll cover the loss."

Raleigh clearly wants to stay, but he's smart enough not to protest. He forces a smile. "Of course. Why don't you two talk?" He looks at her significantly as he leaves. Emiko knows Raleigh wants her to seduce this *gaijin*. To entice him with herky-jerky sex and the promise of transgression. And then to listen to him and report, as all the girls are asked to.

She leans closer, letting the *gaijin* see her exposed skin. His eyes trace across her flesh, following the line of her thigh where it slips beneath her *pha sin*, the way her hip presses against fabric. He looks away. Emiko hides her irritation. Is he attracted? Nervous? Disgusted? She cannot tell. With most men, it is easy. Obvious. They fit such simple patterns. She wonders if he finds a New Person too disgusting, or if perhaps he prefers boys.

"How do you survive here?" the *gaijin* asks. "The white shirts should have mulched you by now."

"The payments. As long as Raleigh-san is willing to pay, they will ignore."

"And you live somewhere, too? Raleigh pays for that as well?" When she nods, he says, "Expensive, I suppose?"

She shrugs. "Raleigh-san keeps a tally of my debts."

As if summoned, Raleigh returns with her ice. The *gaijin* pauses as Raleigh comes through the door, waits impatiently as Raleigh sets down the glass on the low table. Raleigh hesitates, and when the scarred man ignores him, he mumbles something about enjoying themselves and leaves again. She watches the old man's departure thoughtfully, wondering at the hold this man has over Raleigh. Before her, the glass of icy water sweats, seductive. At the man's nod she reaches for it and drinks. Convulsive. Before she knows it, it is gone. She presses the cold glass against her cheek.

The scarred man watches. "So you're not engineered for the tropics," he says. He leans forward, studying her, his eyes moving across her skin. "It's interesting that your designers modified your pore structure."

She fights the urge to recoil from his interest. She steels herself. Leans closer. "It is to make my skin more attractive. Smooth." She draws her *pha sin* above her knees, lets it slide up her thighs. "Would you like to touch?"

He glances at her, questioning.

"Please." She nods permission.

He reaches out and his hand slips along her flesh. "Lovely," he murmurs. She feels a flush of satisfaction as his voice catches. His eyes have gone wide, like a child unmoored. He clears his throat.

"Your skin is burning," he says.

"*Hai*. As you say, I was not designed for this climate. "

Now he's examining every bit of her. Eyes roaming across her, starving, as if he will feed upon her with his gaze. Raleigh will be pleased. "It makes sense," he says. "Your model must only sell to elites. . . . they'd have climate control." He nods to himself, studying her. "It would be worth the trade-off, to them."

He looks up at her. "Mishimoto? Were you one of Mishimoto's then? You can't be diplomatic. The government would never bring a windup into the country, not with the palace's religious stance—" His eyes lock with hers. "You were dumped by Mishimoto, weren't you?"

Emiko fights the sudden flood of shame. It's as though he has sliced her open and gone rooting through her entrails, impersonal and insulting, like some cibiscosis medical technician making an autopsy. She sets her drink down carefully. "Are you a generipper?" she asks. "Is this how you know so much about me?"

His expression shifts in an instant, from wide-eyed fascination to smirking slyness. "More like a hobbyist," he says. "A genespotter, if you will."

"Really?" She lets him see some of the contempt she feels for him. "Not, maybe, a man from the Midwest Compact, perhaps? Not a company man?" She leans forward. "Not a *calorie man*, possibly?"

She whispers the last words, but they have their effect. The man jerks back. His smile remains, frozen, but his eyes now evaluate her the way a mongoose evaluates a cobra. "What an interesting thought," he says.

She welcomes the guarded gaze after her own feelings of shame. If she's lucky, perhaps this *gaijin* will slaughter her and be done with it. At least then she can rest.

She waits, expecting him to strike her. No one tolerates impudence from New People. Mizumi-sensei made sure that Emiko never showed a trace of rebellion. She taught Emiko to obey, to kowtow, to bend before the desires of her superiors, and to be proud of her place. Even though Emiko is ashamed by the *gaijin's* prying into her history and by her own loss of control, Mizumi-sensei would say this is no excuse to prod and bait the man. It hardly matters. It is done, and Emiko feels dead enough in her soul that she will happily pay whatever price he chooses to extract.

Instead, the man says, "Tell me again about the night with the boy." The anger has left his eyes, replaced by an expression as implacable as Gendo-sama's once was. "Tell me everything," he says. "*Now.*" His voice whips her with command.

She wills herself to resist, but the in-built urge of a New Person to obey is too strong, the feeling of shame at her rebellion too overwhelming. *He is not your patron*, she reminds herself, but even so at the command in his voice she's nearly pissing herself with her need to please him.

"He came last week. . ." She returns again to the details of her night with the white shirt. She spins out the story, telling it for this *gaijin's* pleasure much as she once played *samisen* for Gendo-sama, a dog desperate to serve. She wishes she could tell him to eat blister rust and die, but that is not her nature and so instead she speaks and the *gaijin* listens.

He makes her repeat things, asks more questions. Returns to threads she thought he had forgotten. He is relentless, pecking at her story, forcing explanations. He is very good with his questions. Gendo-sama used to question underlings this way, when he wanted to know why a clipper ship was not completed on schedule. He bored through the excuses like a genehack weevil.

Finally the *gaijin* nods, satisfied. "Good," he says. "Very good."

Emiko feels a wash of pleasure at his compliment, and despises herself for it. The *gaijin* finishes his whiskey. Reaches into his pocket and pulls out a wad of cash, peels off several bills as he stands.

"These are for you, only. Don't show them to Raleigh. I'll settle with him before I leave."

She supposes she should feel grateful, but she instead feels used. As used by this man with his questions and his words as those others, the hypocritical Grahamites and the Environment Ministry's white shirts, who wish to transgress with her biological oddity, who all slaver for the pleasure of intercourse with an unclean creature.

She holds the bills between her fingers. Her training tells her to be polite, but his self-satisfied largesse irritates her.

"What does the gentleman think I will do with his extra baht?" she asks. "Buy a pretty piece of jewelry? Take myself out to dinner? I am property, yes? I am Raleigh's." She tosses the money at his feet. "It makes no difference if I am rich or poor. I am owned."

The man pauses, one hand on the sliding door. "Why not run away, then?"

"To where? My import permits have expired." She smiles bitterly. "Without Raleigh-san's patronage and connections, the white shirts would mulch me."

"You wouldn't run for the North?" the man asks. "For the windups there?"

"What windups?"

The man smiles slightly. "Raleigh hasn't mentioned them to you? Windup enclaves in the high mountains? Escapees from the coal war? Released ones?"

At her blank expression he goes on. "There are whole villages up there, living off the jungles. It's poor country, genehacked half to death, out beyond Chiang Rai and across the Mekong, but the windups there don't have any patrons and they don't have any

owners. The coal war's still running, but if you hate your niche so much, it's an alternative to Raleigh."

"Is it true?" She leans forward. "This village, is it real?"

The man smiles slightly. "You can ask Raleigh, if you don't believe me. He's seen them with his own eyes." He pauses. "But then, I suppose he wouldn't see much benefit in telling you. Might encourage you to slip your leash."

"You're telling the truth?"

The pale strange man tips his hat. "At least as much truth as you've told me." He slides the door aside and slips out, leaving Emiko alone with a pounding heart and a sudden urge to live.

## 4

"500, 1000, 5000, 7500 . . . "

Protecting the Kingdom from all the infections of the natural world is like trying to catch the ocean with a net. One can snare a certain number of fish, sure, but the ocean is always there, surging through.

"10,000, 12,500, 15,000 . . . 25,000 . . . "

Captain Jaidee Rojjanasukchai is more than aware of this as he stands under the vast belly of a *farang* dirigible in the middle of the sweltering night. The dirigible's turbfans gust and whirl overhead. Its payload lies scattered, crates and boxes splintered open, their contents spilled across the anchor pad as though a child has recklessly strewn his toys. Sundry valuables and interdicted items lie everywhere.

"30,000, 35,000 . . . 50,000 . . . "

Around him, Bangkok's newly renovated airfield spreads in all directions, lit by high-intensity methane lamps mounted on mirror towers: a vast green-bathed expanse of anchor pads dotted with the massive balloons of the *farang* floating high overhead, and, at its edges, the thickly grown walls of HiGro Bamboo and spun barbed wire that are supposed to define the international boundaries of the field.

"60,000, 70,000, 80,000 . . . "

The Thai Kingdom is being swallowed. Jaidee idly surveys the wreckage his men have wrought, and it seems obvious. They are being swallowed by the ocean. Nearly every crate holds something of suspicion. But really, the crates are symbolic. The problem is ubiquitous: gray-market chemical baths are sold in Chatachuk Market and men pole their skiffs up the Chao Phraya in the dead of night with hulls full of next-gen pineapples. Pollen wafts down the peninsula in steady surges, bearing AgriGen and PurCal's latest genetic rewrites, while cheshires molt through the garbage of the *sois* and jingjok2 lizards vandalize the eggs of nightjars and peafowl. Ivory beetles bore through the forests of Khao Yai even as cibiscosis sugars, blister rust, and *fa' gan* fringe bore through the vegetables and huddled humanity of Krung Thep.

It is the ocean they all swim in. The very medium of life.

"90 . . . 100,000 . . . 110 . . . 125 . . . "



Great minds like Premwadee Srisati and Apichat Kunikorn may argue over best practices for protection or debate the merits of UV sterilization barriers along the Kingdom's borders versus the wisdom of pre-emptive genehack mutation, but in Jaidee's view they are idealists. The ocean always flows through.

"126 . . . 127 . . . 128 . . . 129 . . . "

Jaidee leans over Lieutenant Kanya Chirathivat's shoulder and watches as she counts bribe money. A pair of Customs inspectors stand stiffly aside, waiting for their authority to be returned to them.

"130 . . . 140 . . . 150 . . . " Kanya's voice is a steady chant. A paean to wealth, to greasing the skids, to new business in an ancient country. Her voice is clear and meticulous. With her, the count will always be correct.

Jaidee smiles. Nothing wrong with a little gift of good will.

At the next anchor pad, 200 meters away, megodonts scream as they drag cargo out of a dirigible's belly and pile the shipment for sorting and Customs approval. Turbofans gust and surge, stabilizing the vast airship anchored overhead. The balloon lists and spins. Gritty winds and megodont dung scour across Jaidee's arrayed white shirts. Kanya places a hand over the baht she is counting. The rest of Jaidee's men wait, impassive, their hands on machetes as the winds whip against them.

The turbofan gusts subside. Kanya continues her chant. "160 . . . 170 . . . 180 . . . "

The Customs men are sweating. Even in the hot season, there's no reason to sweat so. Jaidee isn't sweating. But then, he's not the one who has been forced to pay twice for protection that was probably expensive the first time.

Jaidee almost pities them. The poor men don't know what lines of authority may have changed: if payments have been rerouted; if Jaidee represents a new power, or a rival one; don't know where he ranks in the layers of bureaucracy and influence that run through the Environment Ministry. And so they pay. He's surprised that they managed to find the cash at all, on such short notice. Almost as surprised as they must have been when his white shirts smashed the doors of the Customs Office and secured the field.

"Two hundred thousand." Kanya looks up at him. "It's all here."

Jaidee grins. "I told you they'd pay."

Kanya doesn't return the smile, but Jaidee doesn't let it damp his glee. It's a good hot night and they've made a lot of money and as a bonus they've watched the Customs Service sweat. Kanya always has difficulty accepting good fortune when it comes her way. Somewhere during her young life she lost track of how to take pleasure. Starvation in the Northeast. The loss of her parents and siblings. Hard travels to Krung Thep. Somewhere she lost her capacity for joy. She has no appreciation for *sanuk*, for fun, even such intense fun, such *sanuk mak* as successfully shaking down the Trade Ministry or the celebration of Songkran. And so when Kanya takes 200,000 baht from the Trade Ministry and doesn't bat an eye except to wipe away the scouring dust of the anchor pads, and certainly doesn't smile, Jaidee doesn't let it hurt his feelings. Kanya has no taste for fun, that is her *kamma*.

Still, Jaidee pities her. Even the poorest people smile sometimes. Kanya, almost never. It's quite unnatural. She doesn't smile when she is embarrassed, when she is irritated, when she is angry or when she has joy. It makes others uncomfortable, her

complete lack of social grace, and it is why she landed at last in Jaidee's unit. No one else can stand her. The two of them make a strange pair. Jaidee who always finds something to smile at, and Kanya, whose face is so cold it might as well be carved from jade. Jaidee grins again, sending goodwill to his lieutenant. "Let's pack it up, then."

"You've overstepped your authority," one of the Customs men mutters.

Jaidee shrugs complacently. "The Environment Ministry's jurisdiction extends to every place where the Thai Kingdom is threatened. It is the will of Her Royal Majesty the Queen."

The man's eyes are cold, even though he forces himself to smile pleasantly. "You know what I mean."

Jaidee grins, shrugging off the other's ill will. "Don't look so forlorn. I could have taken twice this much, and you still would have paid."

Kanya begins packaging up the money as Jaidee sifts through the wreckage of a crate with the tip of his machete. "Look at all this important cargo that must be protected!" He flips over a bundle of kimonos. Probably shipped to a Japanese manager's wife. He stirs through lingerie worth more than his month's salary. "We wouldn't want some grubby official rifling through all of this, would we?" He grins and glances at Kanya. "Do you want any of this? It's made of real silk. The Japanese still have silk worms, you know."

Kanya doesn't look up from her work with the money. "It's not my size. Those Japanese manager wives are all fat on genehack calories from their deals with AgriGen."

"You would steal, too?" The Customs official's face is a mask of controlled rage behind a polite, gritted smile.

"Apparently not." Jaidee shrugs. "My lieutenant seems to have better taste than the Japanese. Anyway, your profits will return, I'm sure. This will be but a minor inconvenience."

"And what about the damage? How will that be explained?" The other Customs man waves at a folding screen in the Sony style that lies half-torn.

Jaidee studies the artifact. It shows what he supposes must be the equivalent of a samurai family for the late twenty-second century: A Mishimoto Fluid Dynamics manager overseeing some kind of windup workers in a field and . . . Are those *ten* hands on each worker that he sees? Jaidee shudders at the bizarre blasphemy. The small natural family pictured at the edge of the field doesn't seem perturbed, but then, they are Japanese: they even let their children be entertained by a windup monkey.

Jaidee makes a face. "I'm sure you'll find some excuse. Perhaps the freight megodonts stampeded." He claps the Customs men on their backs. "Don't look so glum! Use your imagination! You should think of this as building merit."

Kanya finishes packing up the money. She secures the woven satchel and slings it over her shoulder.

"We're done," she says.

Down field, a new dirigible is slowly descending, its massive kink-spring fans using up the last of their joules to maneuver the beast over its anchors. Cables snake down from its belly, dragged by lead weights. Anchor pad workers wait with upraised hands to secure the floating monster to their megodont teams, as though praying to some massive

god. Jaidee watches with interest. "In any case, the Benevolent Association of Retired Royal Environment Ministry Officers appreciates this. You've built merit with them, regardless." He hefts his machete and turns to his men.

"*Khun* officers!" He shouts over the drone of the dirigible fans and the scream of freight megodonts. "I have a challenge for you!" He points to the descending dirigible with his machete. "I have two hundred thousand baht for the first man who searches a crate from that new vessel over there! Come on! That one! Now!"

The Customs men stare, dumbstruck. They start to speak, but their voices are drowned out by the roar of dirigible fans. They mouth protestations: "*Mai tum! Mai tum! Mai tawng tum!* No no nonono!" as they wave their arms and object, but Jaidee is already dashing across the airfield, brandishing his machete and howling after this new prey.

Behind him, his white shirts follow in a wave. They dodge crates and laborers, leap over anchor cables, duck under megodont bellies. His men. His loyal children. His sons. The foolish followers of ideals and the Queen, joining his call, the ones who cannot be bribed, the ones who hold all of the honor of the Environment Ministry in their hearts.

"That one! That one!"

They speed like pale tigers across the landing field, leaving the carcasses of Japanese freight containers littered behind them like so much debris after a typhoon. The Customs men's voices fade. Jaidee is already far distant from them, feeling the joy of his legs pumping under him, the pleasure of clean and honorable pursuit, running faster ever faster, his men following, covering the distance with the adrenaline sprint of pure warrior purpose, raising their machetes and axes to the giant machine as it comes down from the sky, looming over them like the demon king Tosacan ten thousand feet tall, settling over them. The megodont of all megodonts, and on its side, in *farang* lettering, the words: CARLYLE & SONS.

Jaidee is unaware that a shriek of joy has escaped his lips. Carlyle & Sons. The irritating *farang* who speaks so casually about changing pollution credit systems, of removing quarantine inspections, of streamlining everything that has kept the Kingdom alive as other countries have collapsed, the foreigner who curries so much favor with Trade Minister Akkarat and the Somdet Chaopraya, the Crown Protector. This is a true prize. Jaidee is all pursuit. He stretches for the landing cables as his men surge past, younger and faster and fanatically dedicated, all of them reaching out to secure their quarry.

But this dirigible is smarter than the last.

At the sight of the white shirts swarming under its landing position, the pilot reorients his turbofans. The wash gushes over Jaidee. The fans scream and rev as the pilot wastes gigajoules in an attempt to push away from the ground. The dirigible's landing cables whip inward, winding on spindle cranks like an octopus yanking in its limbs. The turbofans shove Jaidee to the ground as they spin to full power.

The dirigible rises.

Jaidee pushes himself up, squinting into the hot winds as the dirigible shrinks into night blackness. He wonders if the disappearing monster was warned by the control towers or the Customs Service or if the pilot was simply clever enough to realize that a white shirt inspection was of no benefit to his masters.

Jaidee grimaces. Richard Carlyle. Too clever by half, that one. Always in meetings with Akkarat, always at public benefits for cibiscosis victims, tossing money about, always talking about the positives of free trade. He is just one of dozens of *farang* who have returned to the shores like jellyfish after a bitter water epidemic, but Carlyle is the loudest. The one whose smiling face annoys Jaidee most.

Jaidee pushes himself fully upright and brushes off the white hemp weave of his uniform. It doesn't matter; the dirigible will return. Like the ocean rushing onto the beach, it is impossible to keep the *farang* away. Land and sea must intersect. These men with profits in their beating hearts have no choice, they must rush in no matter the consequence, and he must always meet them.

*Kamma.*

Jaidee slowly returns to the cracked contents of the inspected shipping crates, wiping his face of sweat, breathing from the exertion of his run. He waves at his men to continue their labor. "There! Break those open over there! I don't want a single crate uninspected."

The Customs men are waiting for him. He pokes through a new crate's wreckage with the point of his machete as the two men approach. They're like dogs. Impossible to be rid of unless you feed them. One of them tries to prevent Jaidee from swinging his machete into another crate.

"We paid! We will be filing protests. There will be investigations. This is international soil!"

Jaidee makes a face. "Why are you still here?"

"We paid you a fair price for protection!"

"More than fair." Jaidee shoulders past the men. "But I am not here to debate these things. It is your *damma* to protest. It is mine to protect our borders, and if that means I must invade your 'international soil' to save our country, so be it." He swings his machete and another crate crackles open. WeatherAll wood bursts wide.

"You've overstepped yourself!"

"Probably. But you will have to send someone from the Ministry of Trade to tell me himself. Someone more much powerful than you." He spins his machete thoughtfully. "Unless you wish to debate me now, with my men?"

The two flinch. Jaidee thinks he catches a flicker of a smile on Kanya's lips. He glances over, surprised, but already his lieutenant is again the face of blank professionalism. It is pleasant to see her smile. Jaidee briefly wonders if there is something more he can do to encourage a second flash of teeth from his dour subordinate.

Sadly, the Customs men seem to be reconsidering their position; they are backing away from his machete.

"Do not think that you can insult us in this way, without consequence."

"Of course not." Jaidee chops at the shipping crate again, shattering it fully. "But I appreciate your monetary donation, even so." He looks up at them. "When you complain, make sure you tell them it was me, Jaidee Rojjanasukchai who did this work." He grins again. "And make sure you tell them that you actually tried to bribe the Tiger of Bangkok."

Around him, his men all laugh at the joke. The Customs men step back, surprised at this new revelation, the dawning comprehension of their opponent.

Jaidee surveys the destruction around him. Splinters of the balsa crate material lie everywhere. The crates are engineered for strength and weightlessness and their lattice works well enough to hold goods—as long as no one applies a machete.

The work goes quickly. Materials are pulled from crates and laid out in careful rows. The Customs men hover, taking the names of his white shirts until his men finally raise their machetes and give chase. The officers retreat, then stop and observe from a safer distance. The scene reminds Jaidee of animals fighting over a carcass. His men feeding on the offal of foreign lands while the scavengers probe and test, the ravens and cheshires and dogs all waiting their own chance to converge on the carrion. The thought depresses him a little.

The Customs men hang back, watching.

Jaidee inspects the line of sorted contents. Kanya follows close behind. Jaidee asks, "What do we have, Lieutenant?"

"Agar solutions. Nutrient cultures. Some kind of breeding tanks. PurCal cinnamon. A papaya seedstock we don't recognize. A new iteration of U-TeX that probably sterilizes any rice varietal it meets." She shrugs. "About what we expected."

Jaidee flips open a shipping container's lid and peers inside. Checks the address. A company in the *farang* manufacturing district. He tries sounding out the foreign letters, then gives up. He tries to remember if he's seen the logo before, but doesn't think so. He fingers through the materials inside, sacks of some sort of protein powder. "Nothing of wonderful interest, then. No new version of blister rust leaping out of a box from AgriGen or PurCal."

"No."

"It's a pity we couldn't catch that last dirigible. They ran quite quickly. I would have liked to search the cargo of *Khun* Carlyle."

Kanya shrugs. "They will return."

"They always do."

"Like dogs to a carcass," she says.

Jaidee follows Kanya's gaze to the Customs men, watching from their safe distance. He is saddened that they see the world so similarly. Does he influence Kanya? Or does she influence him? He used to have much more fun at this work. But then, work used to be so much more clear-cut. He's not accustomed to stalking the gray landscapes that Kanya walks. But at least he has more fun.

His reverie is broken by the arrival of one of his men. Somchai, sauntering over, his machete swinging casually. He's a fast one, as old as Jaidee but hard-edged from losses when blister rust swept the North for the third time in a single growing season. A good man, and loyal. And clever.

"There's a man watching us," Somchai mumbles as he draws close to the two of them.

"Where?"

Somchai jerks his head subtly. Jaidee lets his eyes roam the bustle of the landing fields. Beside him, Kanya stiffens.

Somchai nods. "You see him, then?"

"*Kha*." She nods affirmative.

Jaidee finally catches sight of the man, standing a good distance away, watching both the white shirts and the Customs men. He has on a simple orange sarong and purple linen shirt, as if he might be a laborer, and yet he carries nothing. He does nothing. And he seems well-fed. Not showing ribs and hollow cheeks the way most laborers do. He watches, casually leaning against an anchor hook. "Trade?" Jaidee asks.

"Army?" Kanya guesses. "He's a confident one."

As though he senses Jaidee's eyes, the man turns. His eyes lock with Jaidee for moment.

"Shit." Somchai frowns. "He's seen us." He and Kanya join Jaidee in an open study of the man. The man is unperturbed. He spits a stream of red betel and turns and saunters away, disappearing into the bustle of freight movements.

Somchai asks, "Should I go after him? Question him?"

Jaidee cranes his neck, trying to catch another glimpse of the man where he has been swallowed by the bustle. "What do you think, Kanya?"

She hesitates. "Haven't we prodded enough cobras for one night?"

Jaidee smiles slightly. "The voice of wisdom and restraint speaks."

Somchai nods agreement. "Trade will be furious as it is."

"One hopes so." Jaidee motions to Somchai to return to his inspections. As they watch him go, Kanya says, "We may have overstepped this time."

"You mean *I* may have overstepped." Jaidee grins. "You're losing your nerve?"

"Not my nerve." Her gaze travels back to where their observer disappeared. "There are bigger fish than us, *Khun* Jaidee. The anchor pads. . ." Kanya trails off. Finally, after visibly working to choose her words, she says, "It's an aggressive move."

"You're sure you're not afraid?" he teases her.

"No!" She stops short, swallows her outburst, masters her composure.

Privately, Jaidee admires her ability to speak with a cool heart. He was never so careful with his words, or his actions. He was always the sort to charge in like a megodont and try to right the trampled rice shoots after. *Jai rawn*, rather than *jai yen*. A hot heart, rather than a cool one. Kanya, though. . .

Finally she says, "This may not have been the best place to strike."

"Don't be a pessimist. The anchor pads are the best of all possible places. Those two weevils over there coughed up 200,000 baht, no trouble at all. Too much money to be involved in anything honest." Jaidee grins. "I should have come here a long time ago and taught these *heeya* a lesson. Better than wandering the river with a kink-spring skiff, arresting children for generip smuggling. At least this is honest work."

"But it will get Trade involved for certain. By law, it's their turf. "

"By any sane law, none of this should be imported at all." Jaidee waves a hand, dismissive. "Laws are confusing documents. They get in the way of justice."

"Justice is always lost where Trade is concerned."

"We're both more than aware of that. In any case, it's my head. You won't be touched a bit. You couldn't have stopped me, even if you had known where we were going tonight."

"I wouldn't—" Kanya starts.

"Don't worry about it. It's time that Trade and its pet *farang* felt a sting here. They were complacent, and needed a reminder that they still must perform the occasional *khrah* to the idea of our laws." Jaidee pauses, surveying the wreckage again. "There's truly nothing else on the black lists?"

Kanya shrugs. "Just the rice. Everything else is innocuous enough, on paper. No breeding specimens. No genetics in suspension."

"But?"

"Much of it will be misused. Nutrient cultures can't have any good purpose." Kanya is back to her blank and depressed expression. "Should we pack it all back up?"

Jaidee grimaces, finally shakes his head. "No. Burn it."

"I'm sorry?"

"Burn it. We both know what is happening here. Give the *farang* something to claim against their insurance companies. Let them know that their activity is not free." Jaidee grins. "Burn it all. Every last crate."

And for the second time that night, as shipping crates crackle with fire and WeatherAll oils rush and ignite and kick sparks into the air like prayers going up to heaven, Jaidee has the satisfaction of seeing Kanya smile again.

\* \* \*

It is nearly morning by the time Jaidee returns home. The *ji ji ji* of jingjok lizards punctuates the creak of cicadas and the high whine of mosquitoes. He slips off his shoes and climbs the steps, teak creaking under his feet as he steals into his stilt-house, feeling the smooth wood under his soles, soft and polished against his skin.

He opens the screened door and slips inside, closing the door quickly behind him. They're close to the *khlong*, only meters away, and the water is brackish and thick. The mosquitoes swarm close.

Inside, a single candle burns, illuminating Chaya where she lies on a floor couch, asleep, waiting. He smiles tenderly and slips into the bathroom to quickly disrobe and pour water over his shoulders. He tries to be quick and quiet about his bath, but water spatters flatly on the wood. He dips water again and spills it over his back. Even in the dead of night the air is warm enough that he doesn't mind the water's slight chill. In the hot season, everything is a relief.

When he comes out of his bath with a sarong wrapped around his waist, Chaya is awake, looking up at him with thoughtful brown eyes. "You're very late," she says. "I was worried."

Jaidee grins. "You should know better than to worry. I'm a tiger." He nuzzles close to her. Kisses her gently.

Chaya grimaces and pushes him away. "Don't believe everything the newspapers say. A tiger." She makes a face. "You smell like smoke."

"I just bathed."

"It's in your hair."

He rocks back on his heels. "It was a very good night."

She smiles in the darkness, her white teeth flashing, mahogany skin a dull sheen in the black. "Did you strike a blow for our Queen?"

"I struck a blow against Trade."

She flinches. "Ah."

He touches her arm. "You used to be happy when I made important people angry."

She pushes away from him and stands, starts straightening the cushions. Her movements are abrupt, irritated. "That was before. Now I worry about you."

"You shouldn't." Jaidee moves out of her way as she finishes with the couch. "I'm surprised you bother to wait up. If I were you, I would go to sleep and dream beautiful dreams. Everyone has given up on controlling me. I'm just a line-item expense for them, now. I'm too popular with the people to do anything about. They put spies on me to watch me, but they do nothing to stop me anymore."

"A hero to the people, and a thorn for the Ministry of Trade. I would rather have Trade Minister Akkarat as a friend and the people as your enemy. We'd all be safer."

"You didn't think so when you married me. You liked that I was a fighter. That I had so many victories in Lumpini Stadium. You remember?"

She doesn't answer. Instead begins rearranging the cushions again, refusing to turn around. Jaidee sighs and puts a hand on her shoulder, pulls her up to face him, so that he can see her eyes. "Anyway, why is it that you bring this up, now? Am I not here? And perfectly fine?"

"When they shot you, you weren't so fine."

"That's in the past."

"Only because they put you behind a desk, and General Pracha paid reparations." She holds up her hand, showing her own missing fingers. "Don't tell me you're safe. I was there. I know what they can do."

Jaidee makes a face. "We aren't safe in any case. If it's not Trade, it's blister rust or cibiscosis or something else, something worse. We aren't living in a perfect world anymore. This isn't the Expansion."

She opens her mouth to respond, then closes it and turns away. Jaidee waits, letting her master herself. When she turns back, her emotions are under control again. "No. You're right. None of us are safe. I wish, though."

"You might as well run to Ta Prachan market and get an amulet, for all the good wishing does."

"I did. The one with Phra Seub. But you don't wear it."

"Because it's just superstition. Whatever happens to me is my *kamma*. A magic amulet isn't going to change that."

"Still, it doesn't hurt." She pauses. "I would feel better if you wore it."



Jaidee smiles and starts to make a joke of it, but something in her expression makes him change his mind. "Fine. If it makes you happy. I'll wear your Phra Seub."

From the sleeping rooms, a noise echoes, a wet coughing. Jaidee stiffens. Chaya shifts and looks over her shoulder to the noise. "It's Surat."

"Did you take him to Ratana?"

"It's not her job to examine sick children. She has real work to do. Real genehacks to worry over."

"Did you take him or not?"

Chaya sighs. "She said it's not an upgrade. Nothing to worry about."

Jaidee tries not to let his relief show. "Good." The coughing comes again. It reminds him of Num, dead and gone. He fights off sadness.

Chaya touches his chin, pulls his attention back to her. Smiles up at him. "So what is it that left you smelling of smoke, noble warrior, defender of Krung Thep? Why so pleased with yourself?"

Jaidee smiles slightly. "You can read it in the whisper sheets tomorrow."

She purses her lips. "I'm worried about you. Really."

"That's because you have a good heart. But you shouldn't worry. They're done with heavy-handed measures against me. It went badly the last time. The papers and whisper sheets liked the story too much. And our most revered Queen has registered her own support for what I do. They'll keep their distance. Her Majesty the Queen, at least, they still respect."

"You were lucky that she was allowed to hear of you at all."

"Even that *heeya* the Crown Protector can't blind her."

Chaya stiffens at his words. "Jaidee, please. Not so loud. The Somdet Chaopraya has too many ears."

Jaidee makes a face. "You see? This is what we've come to. A Crown Protector who spends his time meditating on how to take the inner apartments of the Grand Palace. A Trade Minister who conspires with *farang* to destroy our trade and quarantine laws. And meanwhile, we all try not to speak too loudly."

"I'm glad I went to the anchor pads tonight. You should have seen how much money those Customs officers were raking in, just standing aside and letting anything at all pass through. The next mutation of cibiscosis could have been sitting in vials right in front of them, and they would have held out a hand for a bribe. Sometimes, I think we're living the last days of old Ayutthaya all over again."

"Don't be melodramatic."

"History repeats itself. No one fought to protect Ayutthaya, either."

"And so what does that make you? Some villager of Bang Rajan, reincarnated? Holding back the *farang* tide? Fighting to the last man? That sort of thing?"

"At least they fought! Which would you rather be? The farmers who held off the Burmese army for a month, or the ministers of the Kingdom who ran away and let their capital be sacked?" He grimaces. "If I were smart, I'd go to the anchor pads every night"

and teach Akkarat and the *farang* a real lesson. Show them that someone's still willing to fight for Krung Thep."

He expects Chaya to try to shut him up again, to cool his hot-hearted talk, but instead, she is silent. Finally she asks, "Do you think our lives are always reborn here, in this place? Do we have to come back and face all of this again, no matter what?"

"I don't know," Jaidee says. "That's the sort of question Kanya would ask."

"She's a dour one. I should get her an amulet, too. Something that would make her smile for once."

"She is a bit strange."

"I thought Ratana was going to propose to her."

Jaidee pauses, considering Kanya and pretty Ratana, with her breathing mask and her underground life in the Ministry's biological containment labs. "I don't pry into her private life."

"She'd smile more if she had a man."

"If someone as good as Ratana couldn't make her happy, then no man has a hope." Jaidee grins. "Anyway, if she had a man, he'd spend all his time being jealous of the men she commands in my unit. All the handsome men. . ." He leans forward and tries to kiss Chaya but she pulls away too quickly.

"Ugh. You smell like whiskey, too."

"Whiskey and smoke. I smell like a real man."

"Go off to bed. You'll wake up Niwat and Surat. And mother."

Jaidee pulls her close, puts his lips to her ear. "She wouldn't mind another grandchild."

Chaya pushes him away, laughing. "She will if you wake her up."

His hands slip along her hips. "I'll be very quiet."

She slaps his hands away, but doesn't try very hard. He catches her hand. Feels the stumps of her missing fingers, caresses their ridges. Suddenly they're both solemn again. She takes a ragged breath. "We've all lost too many things. I can't bear to lose you, too."

"You won't. I'm a tiger. And I'm no fool."

She holds him close. "I hope so. I truly do." Her warm body presses against him. He can feel her breathing, steady, full of concern for him. She draws back and looks at him solemnly, her eyes dark and full of care.

"I'll be fine," he says again.

She nods but doesn't seem to be listening. Instead she seems to be studying him, following the lines of his brow, of his smiles, of his scars and pocks. The moment seems to stretch forever, her dark eyes on him, memorizing, solemn. At last she nods, as though listening to something she tells herself, and her worried expression lifts. She smiles and pulls him close, pressing her lips to his ear. "You are a tiger," she whispers, as if she is a fortune teller pronouncing, and her body relaxes into him, pressing to him fully. He feels a rush of relief as they come together, finally.

He clasps her to him more tightly. "I've missed you," he whispers.

"Come with me." She slips free and takes him by the hand. Leads him toward their bed. She pulls aside the mosquito netting and slips under its tenting gossamer. Clothing rustles, falling away. A shadow woman teases him from within.

"You still smell like smoke," she says.

Jaidee pulls aside the nets. "And whiskey. Don't forget the whiskey."

## 5

The sun peers over the rim of the earth, casting its blaze across Bangkok. It rushes molten over the wrecked tower bones of the old Expansion and the gold-sheathed *chedi* of the city's temples, engulfing them in light and heat. It ignites the sharp high roofs of the Grand Palace where the Child Queen lives cloistered with her attendants, and flames from the filigreed ornamentation of the City Pillar Shrine where monks chant 24-7 on behalf of the city's seawalls and dikes. The blood warm ocean flickers with blue mirror waves as the sun moves on, burning.

The sun hits Anderson Lake's sixth-floor balcony and pours into his flat. Jasmine vines at the edge of the veranda rustle in the hot breeze. Anderson looks up, blue eyes slitted against the glare. Sweat jewels pop and gleam on his pale skin. Beyond the rail, the city appears as a molten sea, glinting gold where spires and glass catch the full blaze of the sun.

He's naked in the heat, seated on the floor, surrounded by open books: flora and fauna catalogs, travel notes, an entire history of the Southeast Asian peninsula scattered across teak. Moldy, crumbling tomes. Scraps of paper. Half-torn diaries. The excavated memories of a time when tens of thousands of plants lofted pollen and spores and seeds into the air. He has spent all night at work, and yet he barely remembers the many varieties he has examined. Instead, his mind returns to flesh exposed—a *pha sin* sliding up a girl's legs, the memory of peacocks on a shimmering purple weave riding high, smooth thighs damply parted.

In the far distance, the towers of Ploenchit stand tall, backlit. Three shadow fingers spiking skyward in a yellow haze of humidity. In the daylight they just look like more Expansion-era slums, without a hint of the pulsing addictions contained within.

A windup girl.

His fingers on her skin. Her dark eyes solemn as she said, "You may touch."

Anderson takes a shuddering breath, forcing away the memories. She is the opposite of the invasive plagues he fights every day. A hothouse flower, dropped into a world too harsh for her delicate heritage. It seems unlikely that she will survive for long. Not in this climate. Not with these people. Perhaps it was that vulnerability that moved him, her pretended strength when she had nothing at all. Seeing her fight for a semblance of pride even as she hiked up her skirt at Raleigh's order.

*Is that why you told her about the villages? Because you pitied her? Not because her skin felt as smooth as mango? Not because you could hardly breathe when you touched her?*

He grimaces and turns his attention again to his open books, forcing himself to attend to his true problem, the question that has brought him across the world on clipper ship and dirigible: Gi Bu Sen. The windup girl said Gi Bu Sen.

Anderson shuffles through his books and papers, comes up with a photograph. A fat man, sitting with other Midwest scientists at an AgriGen-sponsored conference on blister rust mutation. He is looking away from the camera, bored, the wattles of his neck showing.

*Are you still fat?* Anderson wonders. *Do the Thais feed you as well as we did?*

There were only three possibilities: Bowman, Gibbons and Chaudhuri. Bowman, who disappeared just before the SoyPRO monopoly broke. Chaudhuri, who walked off a dirigible and disappeared into the Indian Estates, either kidnapped by PurCal or run off, or dead. And Gibbons. Gi Bu Sen. The smartest of them all, and the one deemed least likely. Dead, after all. His seared body recovered from the ashes of his home by his children. . . and then entirely cremated before the company could perform an autopsy. But dead. And when the children were questioned with lie detectors and drugs, all they could say was that their father had always insisted that he not be autopsied. That he couldn't abide anyone cutting into his corpse and pumping it with preservatives. But the DNA matched. It was him. Everyone was sure it was him.

Except that it's easy to doubt when all you have are a few genetic clippings from the supposed corpse of the finest generipper in the world.

Anderson shuffles through more papers, hunting up the transcripts of the calorie man's final days, culled from bugging devices they kept in the labs. Nothing. Not a hint of his plans. And then he was dead. And they were forced to believe that it was true.

In that way, the *ngaw* almost makes sense. The nightshades as well. Gibbons always enjoyed flaunting his expertise. An egotist. Every colleague said so. Gibbons would delight in playing with the full range of a complete seedbank. An entire genus resurrected and then a bit of local lore to top it off. *Ngaw*. At least, Anderson assumes the fruit is local. But who knows? Perhaps it is an entirely new creation. Something sprung complete from Gibbons' mind, like Adam's rib spawning Eve.

Anderson idly thumbs through the books and notes before him. None of them mention the *ngaw*. All he has is the Thai word and its singular appearance. He doesn't even know if "*ngaw*" is the traditional moniker for the red and green fruit, or something newly named. He had hoped that Raleigh would have his own recollections, but the man is old, and addled on opium—if he knew an *Angrit* word for the historical fruit, it is lost to him now. In any case, there's no obvious translation. It will be at least a month before Des Moines can examine the samples. And there's no telling if it will be in their catalogues even then. If it's sufficiently altered, there may be no shortcut to a DNA match.

One thing is certain: the *ngaw* is new. A year ago, none of the inventory agents described anything of the sort in their ecosystem surveys. Between one year and the next, the *ngaw* appeared. As if the soil of the Kingdom had simply decided to birth up the past and deposit it in the markets of Bangkok.

Anderson thumbs through another book, hunting. Since his arrival, he has been creating a library, a historical window into the City of Divine Beings, tomes drawn from before the calorie wars and plagues, before the Contraction. He has pillaged through

everything from antiquities shops to the rubble of Expansion towers. Most of the paper of that time has already burned or rotted in the humid tropics, but he has found pockets of learning even so, families that valued their books more than as a quick way to start a fire. The accumulated knowledge now lines his walls, volume after volume of mold-fringed information. It depresses him. Reminds him of Yates, that desperate urge to excavate the corpse of the past and reanimate it.

"Think of it!" Yates had crowed. "A new Expansion! Dirigibles, next-gen kink-springs, fair trade winds. . ."

Yates had books of his own. Dusty tomes he'd stolen from libraries and business schools across North America, the neglected knowledge of the past—a careful pillaging of Alexandria that had gone entirely unnoticed because everyone knew global trade was dead.

When Anderson arrived, the books had filled the SpringLife offices and ranged around Yates' desk in stacks: *Global Management in Practice*, *Intercultural Business*, *The Asian Mind*, *The Little Tigers of Asia*, *Supply Chains and Logistics*, *Pop Thai*, *The New Global Economy*, *Exchange Rate Considerations in Supply Chains*, *Thais Mean Business*, *International Competition and Regulation*. Anything and everything related to the history of the old Expansion.

Yates had pointed to them in his final moments of desperation and said, "But we can have it again! All of it!" And then he had wept, and Anderson finally felt pity for the man. Yates had invested his life in something that would never be.

Anderson flips through another book, examining ancient photographs in turn. Chiles. Piles of them, laid out before some long dead photographer. Chiles. Eggplants. Tomatoes. All those wonderful nightshades again. If it hadn't been for the nightshades, Anderson wouldn't have been dispatched to the Kingdom by the home office, and Yates might have had a chance.

Anderson reaches for his package of Singha hand-rolled cigarettes, lights one, and sprawls back, contemplative, examining the smoke of ancients. It amuses him that the Thais, even amid starvation, have found the time and energy to resurrect nicotine addiction. He wonders if human nature ever really changes.

The sun glares in at him, bathing him with light. Through the humidity and haze of burning dung, he can just make out the manufacturing district in the distance, with its regularly spaced structures so different from the jumble tile and rust wash of the old city. And beyond the factories, the rim of the seawall looms with its massive lock system that allows the shipment of goods out to sea. Change is coming. The return to truly global trade. Supply lines that circle the world. It's all coming back, even if they're slow at relearning. Yates had loved kink-springs, but he'd loved the idea of resurrected history even more.

"You aren't AgriGen here, you know. You're just another grubby *farang* entrepreneur trying to make a buck along with the jade prospectors and the clipper hands. This isn't India, where you can walk around flashing AgriGen's wheat crest and requisitioning whatever you want. The Thais don't roll over like that. They'll cut you to pieces and send you back as meat if they find out what you are."

"You're out on the next dirigible flight," Anderson said. "Be glad the main office even approved that."

But then Yates had pulled the spring gun.

Anderson draws again on his cigarette, irritated. He becomes aware of the heat. Overhead, his room's crank fan has come to a halt. The winding man, who is supposed to arrive every day at four in the afternoon, apparently didn't load enough joules. Anderson grimaces and rises to pull the shades, blocking out the blaze. The building is a new one, built on thermal principals that allow cool ground air to circulate easily through the building, but it is still difficult to withstand the direct blaze of equatorial sun.

Now in shadow, Anderson returns to his books. Turns pages. Flips through yellowed tomes and cracked spines. Crumbling paper ill-treated by humidity and age. He opens another book. He pinches his cigarette between his lips, squinting through the smoke, and stops.

*Ngaw.*

Piles of them. The little red fruits with their strange green hairs sit before him, mocking him from within a photo of a *farang* bargaining for food with some long ago Thai farmer. All around them, brightly colored, petroleum-burning taxis blur past, but just to their side, a huge pyramidal pile of *ngaw* stares out of the photo, taunting.

Anderson has spent enough time poring over ancient pictures that they seldom affect him. He can usually ignore the foolish confidence of the past—the waste, the arrogance, the absurd wealth—but this one irritates him: the fat flesh hanging off the *farang*, the astonishing abundance of calories that are so obviously secondary to the color and attractiveness of a market that has thirty varieties of fruit: mangosteens, pineapples, coconuts, certainly. . . but there are no oranges, now. None of these. . . these. . . dragon fruits, none of these pomelos, none of these yellow things. . . *lemons*. None of them. So many of these things are simply gone.

But the people in the photo don't know it. These dead men and women have no idea that they stand in front of the treasure of the ages, that they inhabit the Eden of the Grahamite Bible where pure souls go to live at the right hand of God. Where all the flavors of the world reside under the careful attentions of Noah and Saint Francis, and where no one starves.

Anderson scans the caption. The fat, self-contented fools have no idea of the genetic gold mine they stand beside. The book doesn't even bother to identify the *ngaw*. It's just another example of nature's fecundity, taken entirely for granted because they enjoyed so damn much of it.

Anderson briefly wishes that he could drag the fat *farang* and ancient Thai farmer out of the photograph and into his present, so that he could express his rage at them directly, before tossing them off his balcony the way they undoubtedly tossed aside fruit that was even the slightest bit bruised.

He flips through the book but finds no other images, nor mentions of the kinds of fruits available. He straightens, agitated, and goes to the balcony again. Steps out into the sun's blaze and stares out across the city. From below, the calls of water sellers and the cry of megodonts echoes up. The chime of bicycle bells streaming across the city. By noon, the city will be largely stilled, waiting for the sun to begin its descent.

Somewhere in this city a generipper is busily toying with the building blocks of life. Reengineering long-extinct DNA to fit post-Contraction circumstances, to survive despite the assaults of blister rust, Nippon genehack weevil and cibiscosis.

Gi Bu Sen. The windup girl was certain of the name. It has to be Gibbons.

Anderson leans on the balcony's rail squinting into the heat, surveying the tangled city. Gibbons is out there, hiding. Crafting his next triumph. And wherever he hides, a seedbank will be close.

## 6

The problem with keeping money in a bank is that in the blink of a tiger's eye it will turn on you: what's yours becomes theirs, what was your sweat and labor and sold off portions of a lifetime become a stranger's. This problem—this banking problem—gnaws at the forefront of Hock Seng's mind, a genehack weevil that he cannot dig out and cannot pinch into pus and exoskeleton fragments.

Imagined in terms of the time—time spent earning wages that a bank then holds—a bank can own more than half of a man. Well, at least a third, even if you are a lazy Thai. And a man without one third of his life, in truth, has no life at all.

Which third can a man lose? The third from his chest to the top of his balding skull? From his waist to his yellowing toenails? Two legs and an arm? Two arms and a head? A quarter of a man, cut away, might still hope to survive, but a third is too much to tolerate.

This is the problem with a bank. As soon as you place your money in its mouth, it turns out that the tiger has gotten its teeth locked around your head. One third, or one half, or just a liver-spotted skull, it might as well be all.

But if a bank cannot be trusted, what can? A flimsy lock on a door? The ticking of a mattress, carefully unstuffed? The ravaged tiles of a rooftop lifted up and wrapped in banana leaves? A cutaway in the bamboo beams of a slum shack, cleverly sliced open and hollowed to hold the fat rolls of bills that he shoves into them?

Hock Seng digs into bamboo.

The man who rented him the room called it a flat, and in a way, it is. It has four walls, not just a tenting of coconut polymer tarps. It has a tiny courtyard behind, where the outhouse lies and which he shares—along with the walls—with six other huts. For a yellow card refugee, this is not a flat but a mansion. And yet all around he hears the groaning complaining mass of humanity.

The WeatherAll wooden walls are frankly an extravagance even if they don't quite touch the ground, even if the jute sandals of his neighbors peek underneath, and even if they reek with the embedded oils that keep them from rotting in the humidity of the tropics. But they are necessary, if only to provide places to store his money other than in the bottom of his rain barrel wrapped in three layers of dog hide that he prays may still be waterproof after six months of immersion.

Hock Seng pauses in his labors, listening.

Rustling comes from the next room but nothing indicates that anyone eavesdrops on his mouselike burrowing. He returns to the process of loosening a disguised bamboo panel at its joint, carefully saving the sawdust for later.

Nothing is certain—that is the first lesson. The *yang guizi* foreign devils learned this in the Contraction when their loss of oil sent them scuttling back to their home shores. He himself finally learned it in Malacca. Nothing is certain, nothing is secure. A rich man becomes a poor man. A noisy Chinese clan, fat and happy during Spring Festival, fed well on pork strips, *nasi goreng* and Hainan-style chicken becomes a single emaciated yellow card. Nothing is eternal. The Buddhists understand this much, at least.

Hock Seng grins mirthlessly and continues his quiet burrowing, following a line across the top of the panel, digging out more packed sawdust. He now lives in the height of luxury, with his patched mosquito net and his little burner that can ignite green methane twice a day, if he's willing to pay the local *pi lien* elder brother for an illegal tap into the city lamppost delivery pipes. He has his own set of clay rain urns sitting in the tiny courtyard, an astounding luxury in itself, protected by the honor and uprightness of his neighbors, the desperately poor, who know that there must be limits to anything, that every squalor and debauch has limits, and so he has rain barrels full of green slime mosquito eggs that he can assure himself will never be stolen from, even if he may be murdered outside his door, or the neighbor wife may be raped by any *nak leng* who takes a fancy to her.

Hock Seng pries at the tiny panel in the bamboo strut, holding his breath, trying to make no scraping sound. He chose this place for its exposed joists and the tiles overhead in the low dark ceiling. For the nooks and crannies and opportunities. All around him the slum inhabitants wake and groan and complain and light their cigarettes as he sweats with the tension of opening this hiding place. It's foolish to keep so much money here. What if the slum burns? What if the WeatherAll catches fire from some fool's candle overturned? What if the mobs come and attempt to trap him inside?

Hock Seng pauses, wipes the sweat off his brow. *I am crazy. No one is coming for me. The Green Headbands are across the border in Malaya and the Kingdom's armies will keep them well away.*

*And even if they do come, I have an archipelago's worth of distance to prepare for their arrival. Days of travel on a kink-spring train, even if the rails aren't blown by the Queen's Army generals. Twenty-four hours at least, even if they use coal for their attack. And otherwise? Weeks of marching. Plenty of time. I am safe.*

The panel comes open completely in his shaking hand, revealing the bamboo's hollow interior. The tube is watertight, perfected by nature. He sends his skinny arm questing into the hole, feeling blind.

For a moment, he thinks someone has taken it, robbed him while he was gone but then his fingers touch paper, and he fishes up rolls of cash one by one.

In the next room, Sunan and Mali are discussing her uncle, who wants them to smuggle cibi. 11.s.8 pineapples, sneaking them in on a skiff from the *farang* quarantine island of Koh Angrit. Quick money, if they're willing to take the risk of bringing in banned foodstock from the calorie monopolies.



Hock Seng listens to them mutter as he stuffs his own cash into an envelope, then tucks it inside his shirt. Diamonds, baht, and jade pit his walls all around, but still, it hurts to take this money now. It goes against his hoarding instinct.

He presses the bamboo panel closed again. Takes spit and mixes it with the meager sawdust that remains, and presses the compound into the visible cracks. He rocks back on his heels and examines the bamboo pole. It is nearly invisible. If he didn't know to count upwards four joints, he wouldn't know where to look, or what to look for.

The problem with banks is that they cannot be trusted. The problem with secret caches is that they are hard to protect. The problem with a room in a slum is that anyone can take the money when he is gone. He needs other caches, safe places to hide the opium and jewels and cash he procures. He needs a safe place for everything. For himself as well, and for that, any amount of money is worth spending.

All things are transient. Buddha says it is so, and Hock Seng, who didn't believe in or care about karma or the truths of the dharma when he was young, has come in his old age to understand his grandmother's religion and its painful truths. Suffering is his lot. Attachment is the source of his suffering. And yet he cannot stop himself from saving and preparing and striving to preserve himself in this life which has turned out so poorly.

*How is it that I sinned to earn this bitter fate? Saw my clan whittled by red machetes? Saw my businesses burned and my clipper ships sunk?* He closes his eyes, forcing memories away. Regret is suffering.

He takes a deep breath and climbs stiffly to his feet, surveys the room to ascertain that nothing is out of place, then turns and shoves his door open, wood scraping on dirt, and slips out in the squeezeway that is the slum's thoroughfare. He secures the door with a bit of leather twine. A knot, and nothing else. The room has been broken into before. It will be broken into again. He plans on it. A big lock would attract the wrong attention, a poor man's bit of leather entices no one.

The way out of the Yaowarat slum is full of shadows and squatting bodies. The heat of the dry season presses down on him, so intense that it seems no one can breathe, even with the looming presence of the Chao Phraya dikes. There is no escape from the heat. If the seawall gave way, the entire slum would drown in nearly cool water, but until then, Hock Seng sweats and stumbles through the maze of squeezeways, rubbing up against scavenged tin walls.

He jumps across open gutters of shit. Balances on planks and slips past women sweating over steaming pots of U-TeX glass noodles and reeking sun-dried fish. A few kitchen carts, ones who have bribed either the white shirts or the slum's *pi lien*, burn small dung fires in public, choking the alleys with thick smoke and frying chile oil.

He squeezes around triple-locked bicycles, stepping carefully. Clothes and cook pots and garbage spill out from under tarp walls, encroaching on the public space. The walls rustle with the movement of people within: a man coughing through the last stages of lung water; a woman complaining about her son's *lao-lao* rice wine habit; a little girl threatening to hit her baby brother. Privacy is not something for a tarp slum, but the walls provide polite illusion. And certainly it is better than the Expansion tower internments of the yellow cards. A tarp slum is luxury for him. And with native Thais all around, he has cover. Better protection than he ever enjoyed in Malaya. Here, if he doesn't open his mouth and betray his foreigner's accent, he can be mistaken for a local.

Still, he misses that place where he and his family were alien and yet had forged a life. He misses the marble-floored halls and red lacquer pillars of his ancestral home, ringing with the calls of his children and grandchildren and servants. He misses Hainan chicken and *laksa asam* and good sweet *kopi* and *roti canai*.

He misses his clipper fleet and the crews (And isn't it true that he hired even the brown people for his crews? Even had them as captains?) who sailed his Mishimoto clippers to the far side of the world, sailing even as far as Europe, carrying tea strains resistant to genehack weevil and returning with expensive cognacs that had not been seen since the days of the Expansion. And in the evenings, he returned to his wives and ate well and worried only that a son was not diligent or that a daughter would find a good husband.

How silly and ignorant he had been. He fancied himself a sea trader, and yet understood so little of the turning tides.

A young girl emerges from under a tarp flap. She smiles at him, too young to know him for a stranger, and too innocent yet to care. She is alive, burning with the limber vitality that an old man can only envy with every aching bone. She smiles at him.

She could be his daughter.

\* \* \*

Malaya's night was black and sticky, a jungle filled with the squawks of night birds and the pulse and whir of insect life. Dark harbor waters lapped before them. He and Fourth Daughter, that useless waif, the only one he could preserve, hid among piers and rocking boats, and when darkness fell completely, he guided her down to the water, to where waves rushed onto the beach in steady surges and the stars overhead were pinpricks of gold in blackness.

"Look, Ba. Gold," she whispered.

There were times when he'd told her that every star was a bit of gold that was hers for the taking, because she was Chinese and with hard work and attendance to her ancestors and traditions, she would prosper. And now, here they were under a blanket of gold dust, the Milky Way spread over them like some great shifting blanket, the stars so thick that if he were tall enough he could reach up and squeeze them and have them run down his arms.

Gold, all around, and all of it untouchable.

Amid the lapping of fishing boats and little spring craft, he found a rowboat and pulled for deep water, aiming for the bay, following the currents, a black speck on the shifting reflections of the ocean.

He would have preferred a cloudy night, but at least there was no moon, and so he pulled and pulled, while all around them sea carp surfaced and rolled, showing the fat pale bellies that people of his clan had engineered to feed a starving nation. He pulled on the oars and the carp surrounded them, showing bloated stomachs now thickened on the blood and gristle of their creators.

And then his little boat was alongside the object of his search, a trimaran anchored in the deep. The place where Hafiz's boat people slept. He climbed aboard and slipped silent among them. Studying them all as they slept soundly, protected by their religion. Safe and alive while he had nothing.

His arms and shoulders and back ached from the strain of rowing. An old man's aches. A soft man's pains.

He slipped among them, searching, too old for the nonsense survival, and yet unable to give it up. He might still survive. The one daughter mouth might survive. Even if she was a girl child. Even if she would do nothing for her ancestors, at least she was of his clan. A clipping of DNA that still might be saved. Finally he found the body he wanted, leaned down and touched it gently, covered the man's mouth.

"Old friend," he whispered.

The man's eyes went wide as he awoke. "*Encik Tan?*" He nearly saluted, even half-naked and lying on his back. And then, as if recognizing the change in their fortunes, his hand fell back, and he addressed Hock Seng as he had never dared in real life. "Hock Seng? You're still alive?"

Hock Seng pursed his lips. "This useless daughter mouth and I need to go north. I need your help."

Hafiz sat up, rubbing his eyes. He glanced furtively at the rest of his sleeping clan. He whispered, "If I turned you in, I would make a fortune. The head of Three Prosperities. I would be rich."

"You were not poor when you worked with me."

"Your head is worth more than all the Chinese skulls stacked in the streets of Penang. And I would be safe."

Hock Seng started to respond angrily but Hafiz put his hand up, indicating silence. He ushered Hock Seng to the edge of the deck, against the rail. He leaned close, his lips nearly touching Hock Seng's ear. "Do you not know the danger you bring on me? Some of my own family wear green headbands now. My own sons! It is not safe here."

"You think this is something I just learned now?"

Hafiz had the grace to look away, embarrassed. "I cannot help you."

Hock Seng grimaced. "Is this what my kindness to you has earned? Did I not attend your wedding? Gift you and Rana well? Fete you for ten days? Did I not pay for Mohammed's admission to college in K.L.?"

"You did that and more. My debts are to you are great." Hafiz bowed his head. "But we are not the men we were before. The Green Headbands are everywhere among us, and those of us who loved the yellow plague can only suffer. Your head would buy my family security. I'm sorry. It is true. I don't know why I don't strike you now."

"I have diamonds, jade."

Hafiz sighed and turned away, showing his broad muscled back. "If I took your jewels, I would just as quickly be tempted to take your life. If we speak of money, then your head must always be the most valuable prize. Best not to discuss the temptations of wealth."

"So this is how we end?"

Hafiz turned back to Hock Seng, pleading. "Tomorrow I will give your clipper ship *Dawn Star* to them and foreswear you utterly. If I were smart I would turn you in as well. All the ones who have aided the yellow plague are suspected now. We who fattened on Chinese industry and thrived under your generosity are the most hated in our new Malaya. The country is not the same as it was. People are hungry. They are angry. They call us all calorie pirates, profiteers, and yellow dogs. There is nothing to quell it. Your blood is already shed, but they have yet to decide what to do with us. I cannot risk my family for you."

"You could come north with us. Sail together."

Hafiz sighed. "The Green Headbands already sail the coasts searching for refugees. Their net is wide and deep. And they slaughter those they catch."

"But we are clever. More clever than they. We could slip past."

"No, it is impossible."

"How do you know?"

Hafiz looked away, embarrassed. "My sons boast to me."

Hock Seng scowled bitterly, holding his granddaughter's hand. Hafiz said, "I'm sorry. My shame will go with me until I die." He turned abruptly and hurried for the galley. He returned with unspoiled mangoes and papaya. A bag of U-*Tex*. A PurCal cibi melon. "Here, take these. I'm sorry I can do no more. I'm sorry. I have to think of my own survival as well." And with that he ushered Hock Seng off the boat and out into the waves.

A month later, Hock Seng crossed the border alone, crawling through leech-infested jungle after being abandoned by the snakeheads who betrayed them.

Hock Seng has heard that those who helped the yellow people later died in droves, plunging from cliffs into the sea to swim as best they could for the shore's smashing rocks, or shot where they floated. He wonders often if Hafiz was one of those to die, or if his gift of the last of Three Prosperities' unscuttled clippers was enough to save his family. If his Green Headband sons spoke for him, or if they watched coldly as their father suffered for his many, many sins.

\* \* \*

"Grandfather? Are you well?"

The little girl touches Hock Seng gently on the wrist, watching him with wide black eyes. "My mother can get you boiled water if you need to drink."

Hock Seng starts to speak, then simply nods and turns away. If he speaks to her, she will know him for a refugee. Best that he simply blend in. Best not to reveal that he lives amongst them at the whim of white shirts and the Dung Lord and a few faked stamps on his yellow card. Best to trust no one, even if they seem friendly. A smiling girl one day is a girl with a stone bashing in the brains of a baby the next. This is the only truth. One can think there are such things as loyalty and trust and kindness but they are devil cats. In the end they are only smoke and cannot be grasped.

Another ten minutes of twisting passages carries him close to the city's seawalls where hovels attach themselves like barnacles to the ramparts of revered King Rama XII's blueprint for the survival of his city. Hock Seng finds Laughing Chan sitting beside a *jok* cart eating a steaming bowl of U-*Tex* rice porridge with small bits of unidentifiable meat buried in the paste.

In his last life, Laughing Chan was a plantation overseer, tapping the trunks of rubber trees to capture latex drippings, a crew of one hundred and fifty under him. In this life, his flair for organization has found a new niche: running laborers to unload megodonts and clipper ships down on the docks and out on the anchor pads when Thais are too lazy or thick, or slow, or he can bribe someone higher up to let his yellow card crew have the rice. And sometimes, he does other work as well. Moves opium and the amphetamine *yaba* from the river into the Dung Lord's very own towers. Slips AgriGen's SoyPRO in from Koh Angrit, despite the Environment Ministry's blockades.

He's missing an ear and four teeth but that doesn't stop him from smiling. He sits and grins like a fool, and shows the gaps in his teeth, and all the while his eyes roam over the passing pedestrian traffic. Hock Seng sits and another bowl of steaming *jok* is set before him, and they eat the U-*Tex* gruel with coffee that is almost as good as what they used to drink down south, and all the while both of them watch the people all around, their eyes following the woman who serves them from her pot, the men crouched at the other tables in the alley, the commuters squeezing past with their bicycles. The two of them are yellow cards, after all. It is as much in their nature as a cheshire's search for birds.

"You're ready?" Laughing Chan asks.

"A little longer, yet. I don't want your men to be seen."

"Don't worry. We almost walk like Thais, now." He grins and his gaps show. "We're going native."

"You know Dog Fucker?"

Laughing Chan nods sharply and his smile disappears. "And Sukrit knows me. I will be below the seawall, village side. Out of sight. I have Ah Ping and Peter Siew to watch close."

"Good then." Hock Seng finishes his *jok* and pays for Laughing Chan's food as well. With Laughing Chan and his men nearby, Hock Seng feels a little better. But still, it is a risk. If this thing goes wrong Laughing Chan will be too far away to do much more than effect vengeance. And really, when Hock Seng thinks about it, he isn't sure he has paid enough for that.

Laughing Chan saunters off, slipping between tarp structures. Hock Seng continues on through the stagnant heat to the steep, rough path that runs up the side of the seawall. He climbs up through the slums, his knee aching with every step. Eventually, he reaches the high broad embankment of the city's tidal defenses.

After the sheltered stink of the slums, the sea breeze rushing over him and tugging at his clothes is a relief. The bright blue ocean reflects like a mirror. Others stand on the embankment's promenade, taking the fresh air. In the distance one of King Rama XII's coal pumps squats like a massive toad on the embankment's edge. The symbol for Korakot, the crab, is visible in its metal hide. Steam and smoke gout from its stacks in steady puffs.

Somewhere, deep underground, organized by the genius of the King, the pumps send their tendrils and suck water from beneath so that the city will not drown. Even in the hot season, seven pumps run steadily, keeping Bangkok from being swallowed. In the rainy season, all twelve of the zodiac signs run as the rain drenches down and everyone poles the thoroughfares of the city in skiffs, skin soaked, grateful that the monsoon hasn't failed and that the seawalls haven't broken.

He makes his way down the other side and out on a dock. A farmer with a skiff full of coconuts offers him one, slashing open the green top for Hock Seng to drink. Across the waters the drowned buildings of Thonburi poke up through the waves. Skiffs and fishing nets and clipper ships slip back and forth in the water. Hock Seng takes a deep breath, sucking the smell of salt and fish and seaweed deep into his lungs. The life of the ocean.

A Japanese clipper slides past, palm-oil polymer hull and high white sails like a gull's. The hydrofoil package below it is still hidden, but once it's out in the water, it will use its spring cannon to launch its high sails, and then the ship will leap up from the water like a fish.

Hock Seng remembers standing on the deck of his own first clipper, its high sails flying, slashing across the ocean like a stone skipped by a child, laughing as they tore over the waves, as spray rushed and blasted him. He had turned to his number one wife and told her that all things were possible, that the future was theirs.

He settles himself on the shoreline and drinks the rest of the green coconut water while a beggar boy watches. Hock Seng beckons. This one is smart enough, he supposes. He likes to reward the smart ones, the ones who are patient enough to linger and see what he will do with a coconut husk. He hands it to the boy. The boy takes it with a *wai* and goes to smash it on the mortared stones at the top of the seawall. Then he squats and uses a scrap of oyster shell to scrape the slimy tender meat from the interior, starving.

Eventually, Dog Fucker arrives. His real name is Sukrit Kamsing, but Hock Seng seldom hears the man's true name on the lips of yellow cards. There is too much bile and history built up. Instead, it's always Dog Fucker, and the words drip with hate and fear. He's a squat man, full of calories and muscle. As perfect for his work as a megodont is for converting calories into joules. The scars on his hands and arms show pale. The slits where his nose once stood stare at Hock Seng, two dark vertical nostril slashes that give him a porcine appearance.

There is some argument among yellow cards about whether Dog Fucker let *fa' gan* run too long, allowing its cauliflower growths to send enough tendrils deep into his flesh that doctors were forced to chop the whole thing off to save his life, or if the Dung Lord simply took his nose to teach him a lesson.

Dog Fucker squats beside Hock Seng. Hard black eyes. "Your Doctor Chan came to me. With a letter."

Hock Seng nods. "I want to meet with your patron."

Dog Fucker laughs slightly. "I broke her fingers and fucked her dead for interrupting my nap."

Hock Seng keeps his face impassive. Maybe Dog Fucker is lying. Maybe he is telling the truth. It is impossible to know. Regardless, it is a tease. To see if Hock Seng will flinch. To see if he will bargain. Perhaps Doctor Chan is gone. Another name to weigh

him down when he finally reincarnates. Hock Seng says, "Your patron will look favorably on the offer, I think."

Dog Fucker scratches absently at the slit of a nostril. "Why not meet me at my office, instead?"

"I like open places."

"You have people around here? More yellow cards? You think they'll make you safe?"

Hock Seng shrugs. He looks out at the ships and their sails. At the wide world beckoning. "I want to offer you and your patron a deal. A mountain of profit."

"Tell me what it is."

Hock Seng shakes his head. "No. I must speak with him in person. Him only."

"He doesn't talk to yellow cards. Maybe I'll just feed you to the red-fin *plaa* out there. Just like the Green Headbands did with your kind down south."

"You know who I am."

"I know who your letter says you were." Dog Fucker rubs at the edges of his nose slits, studying Hock Seng. "Here, you're just another yellow card."

Hock Seng doesn't say anything. He hands the hemp sack of money across to Dog Fucker. Dog Fucker eyes it suspiciously, doesn't take it. "What is it?"

"A gift. Look and see."

Dog Fucker is curious. But also cautious. It's a good thing to know. He isn't the sort to put his hand in a bag and come up with a scorpion. Instead, he loosens the sack and dumps it. Bundles of cash spill out, roll in the shells and dirt of low tide. Dog Fucker's eyes widen. Hock Seng keeps himself from smiling.

"Tell the Dung Lord that Tan Hock Seng, head of the Three Prosperities Trading Company has a business proposal. Deliver my note to him and you will also profit greatly."

Dog Fucker smiles. "I think perhaps that I'll simply take this money, and my men will beat you until you tell me where you hide all your paranoid yellow card cash."

Hock Seng doesn't say anything. Keeps his face impassive.

Dog Fucker says, "I know all about Laughing Chan's people here. He owes me for his disrespect."

Hock Seng is surprised that he feels no fear. He lives in fear of all things, but thuggish *pi lien* like Dog Fucker are not what fill his nights with terror. In the end, Dog Fucker is a businessman. He is not a white shirt, puffed on national pride or hungry for a little more respect. Dog Fucker works for money. Acts for money. He and Hock Seng are different parts of the economic organism, but underneath everything, they are brothers. Hock Seng smiles slightly as confidence builds.

"This is just a gift, for your trouble. What I propose will provide much more. For all of us." He takes out the last two items. One, a letter. "Give it to your master, sealed." The other, he hands across: a small box with its familiar universal spindle and braces, a palm-oil polymer casing in a dull shade of yellow.

Dog Fucker takes the object, turns it over. "A kink-spring?" He makes a face. "What's the point of this?"

Hock Seng smiles. "He'll know when he reads the letter." He stands and turns away, without even waiting for Dog Fucker to respond, feeling stronger and more assured than any time since the Green Headbands came and his warehouses went up in smoke and his clipper ships went sliding down into the ocean depths. In this moment, Hock Seng feels like a man. He walks straighter, his limp forgotten.

It's impossible to know if Dog Fucker's people will follow him and so he walks slowly, knowing that both Dog Fucker's and Laughing Chan's men surround him, a floating ring of surveillance as he works his way down the alleys and cuts into deeper slums, until, at last, Laughing Chan is there, waiting for him, smiling.

"They let you go," he says.

Hock Seng pulls out more money. "You did well. He knows it was your men, though." He gives Laughing Chan an extra roll of baht. "Pay him off with this."

Laughing Chan smiles at the pile of money. "This is twice what I need for that. Even Dog Fucker likes to use us when he doesn't want to risk smuggling SoyPRO over from Koh Angrit."

"Take it anyway."

Laughing Chan shrugs and pockets it. "It's very kind of you. With the anchor pads shut down, we can use the extra baht."

Hock Seng is turning away, but at Laughing Chan's words he turns back.

"What did you say about the anchor pads?"

"They're shut down. The white shirts raided them last night. Everything's locked tight."

"What happened?"

Laughing Chan shrugs. "I heard they burned everything. Sent it all up in smoke."

Hock Seng doesn't pause to ask any more. He turns and runs, as fast as his old bones will carry him. Cursing himself all the way. Cursing that he was a fool and didn't put his nose to the wind, that he let himself be distracted from bare survival by the urgent wish to do something more, to reach ahead.

Every time he makes plans for his future, he seems to fail. Every time he reaches forward, the world leans against him, pressing him down.

On Thanon Sukhumvit, in the sweat of the sun, he finds a news vendor. He fumbles through newspapers and the hand-cranked whisper sheets of rumor, through luck pages advertising good numbers for gambling and the names of predicted *muay thai* champions.

He tears them open, one after another, more frantic with every copy.

All of them show the smiling face of Jaidee Rojjanasukchai, the incorruptible Tiger of Bangkok.

"Look! I'm famous!"



Jaidee holds the whisper sheet picture up beside his own face, grinning at Kanya. When she doesn't smile, he puts it back in its rack, along with all the rest of his pictures.

"Eh, you're right. It's not really a good likeness. They must have bribed it out of our records department." He sighs wistfully. "But I was young then."

Still, Kanya doesn't respond, just stares morosely at the water of the *khlong*. They've spent the day hunting for skiffs smuggling PurCal and AgriGen crops up the river, sailing back and forth across the river mouth, and Jaidee still thrums with a certain exhilaration.

The prize of the day was a clipper ship anchored just off the docks. Ostensibly an Indian trading vessel sailed north from Bali, it turned out to be brimming with cibuscosis-resistant pineapples. It was satisfying to see the harbormaster and the ship's captain both stammering excuses while Jaidee's white shirts poured lye over the entire shipment, crate after crate rendered sterile and inedible. All that smuggling profit gone.

He flips through the other papers attached to the display board, finds a different image of himself. This one from his time as a *muay thai* competitor, laughing after a fight in Lumpini Stadium. *The Bangkok Morning Post*.

"My boys will like this one."

He opens the paper and scans the story. Trade Minister Akkarat is spitting mad. The quotes from the Trade Ministry call Jaidee a vandal. Jaidee is surprised they don't just call him a traitor or a terrorist. That they restrain themselves tells him just how impotent they really are.

Jaidee can't help smiling over the pages at Kanya. "We really hurt them."

Again, Kanya doesn't respond.

There's a certain trick to ignoring her bad moods. The first time Jaidee met Kanya, he almost thought she was stupid, the way her face remained so impassive, so impervious to any hint of fun, as though she were missing an organ, a nose for smell, eyes for sight, and whatever curious organ makes a person sense *sanuk* when it is right in front of them.

"We should be getting back to the Ministry," she says, and turns to scan the boat traffic along the *khlong*, looking for a possible ride.

Jaidee pays the whisper sheet man for his paper as a canal taxi glides into view.

Kanya flags it and it slides up beside them, its flywheel whining with accumulated power, waves sloshing the *khlong* embankment as its wake catches up. Huge kink-springs crowd half its displacement. Wealthy Chaozhou Chinese business people cram the covered prow of the boat like ducks on their way to slaughter.

Kanya and Jaidee jump aboard and stand on the running board outside the seating compartment. The ticket child ignores their white uniforms, just as they ignore her. She sells a 30-baht ticket to another man who boards with them. Jaidee grabs a safety line as the boat accelerates away from the dock. Wind caresses his face as they make their way down the *khlong*, aiming for the heart of the city. The boat moves quickly, zipping around small paddled skiffs and long tail boats in the canal. Blocks of dilapidated houses and shopfronts slide past, *pha sin* and blouses and sarong hang colorful in the sun. Women bathe their long black hair in the brown waters of the canal. The boat slows abruptly.

Kanya looks forward. "What is it?"

Up ahead, a tree has fallen, blocking much of the canal. Boats jam around it, trying to squeeze past.

"A *bo* tree," Jaidee says. He looks around for landmarks. "We'll have to let the monks know."

No one else will move it. And despite the shortage of wood, no one will harvest it either. It would be unlucky. Their boat wallows as the *khlong* traffic tries to slip through the tiny gap left in the canal, where the sacred tree has not blocked movement.

Jaidee makes a noise of impatience and then calls ahead. "Clear out, friends! Ministry business. Clear the way!" He waves his badge.

The sight of the badge and his bright white uniform is enough to get boats and skiffs poling aside. The pilot of their taxi flashes Jaidee a grateful look. Their kink-spring craft slips into the press, jostling for space.

As they ease around the bare branches of the tree, the *khlong* taxi's passengers all make deep *wais* of respect to the fallen trunk, pressing their palms together and touching them to their foreheads.

Jaidee makes his own *wai*, then reaches out to touch the wood, letting his fingers slide over the riddled surface as they pass. Small boreholes speckle it. If he were to peel away the bark, a fine net of grooves would describe the tree's death. A *bo* tree. Sacred. The tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. And yet they could do nothing to save it. Not a single varietal of fig survived, despite their best efforts. The ivory beetles were too much for them. When the scientists failed, they prayed to Phra Seub Nakhasathien, a last desperate effort, but even the martyr couldn't save them in the end.

"We couldn't save everything," Kanya murmurs, seeming to read his thoughts.

"We couldn't save even one thing." Jaidee lets his fingers slide along the grooves where the ivory beetle did its work. "The *farang* have so much to answer for, and yet still Akkarat seeks to treat with them."

"Not with AgriGen."

Jaidee smiles bitterly and pulls his hand away from the fallen tree. "No, not with them. But their ilk, nonetheless. Generippers. Calorie men. Even PurCal when the famines are worst. Why else to do we let them squat out on Koh Angrit? In case we need them. In case we fail, and must go begging for their rice and wheat and soy."

"We have our own generippers, now."

"Thanks to His Royal Majesty King Rama XII's foresight."

"And Chaopraya Gi Bu Sen."

"Chaopraya." Jaidee makes a face. "No one that evil should be graced with such a respectful title."

Kanya shrugs, but doesn't bait him. Soon the *bo* tree is behind them. At Srinakharin Bridge they disembark. The smell of food stalls calls to Jaidee. He motions Kanya to follow as he makes his way into a tiny *soi*. "Somchai says there's a good *som tam* cart down here. Good clean papayas, he tells me."

"I'm not hungry," Kanya says.

"That's why you're always in such a terrible mood."

"Jaidee. . ." Kanya starts, then stops.

Jaidee glances back at her, catches the worried expression on her face. "What is it? Come on then."

"I'm worried about the anchor pads."

Jaidee shrugs. "Don't be."

Up ahead, food carts and tables cluster along the walls of the alley, all jammed together. Small bowls of *nam plaa prik* sit tidily in the centers of the scavenged table planks. "You see? Somchai was right." He finds the salad cart he wants and examines the spices and fruit, starts ordering for both of them. Kanya comes up beside, a compact cloud of dark mood.

"Two hundred thousand baht is a lot of money for Akkarat to lose," she mutters as Jaidee tells the *som tam* vendor to add more chiles.

Jaidee nods thoughtfully as the woman stirs the threads of green papaya into the mix of spices. "It's true. I had no idea there was so much money being made out there."

It's enough to finance a new lab for generip research, or put five hundred white shirts on inspection in the tilapia farms of Thonburi. . . He shakes his head. And this was just one raid. It's amazing to him.

There are times when he thinks he understands how the world works, and then, every so often, he lifts the lid of some new part of the divine city and finds roaches scuttling where he never expected. Something new, indeed.

He goes to the next food cart, stacked with trays of chile-laden pork and RedStar bamboo tips. Fried snakehead *plaa*, battered and crisp, pulled from the Chao Phraya River that day. He orders more food. Enough for both of them, and Sato for drinking. He settles at an open table as the food is brought out.

Teetering on a bamboo stool at the end of his day, with rice beer warming his belly, Jaidee can't help smiling at his dour subordinate.

As usual, even with good food before her, Kanya remains herself. "*Khun* Bhirombhakdi was complaining about you at headquarters," she says. "He said he would go to General Pracha, and have your smiling lips ripped off."

Jaidee scoops chiles into his mouth. "I'm not afraid of him."

"The anchor pads were supposed to be his territory. His protection racket, his bribe money."

"First you worry about Trade, now you worry about Bhirombhakdi. That old man is afraid of his own shadow. He makes his wife taste every dish for him to make sure he won't get blister rust." He shakes his head. "Stop being so sour. You should smile more. Laugh a little. Here, drink this." Jaidee pours more Sato for his lieutenant. "We used to call our country the Land of Smiles." Jaidee demonstrates. "And there you sit, sad-faced, as though you are eating limes all day."

"Perhaps we had more to smile about, then."

"Well, that might be true." Jaidee sets his Sato back on the splintered tabletop and stares at it thoughtfully. "We must have done something terrible in our previous lives to have earned these ones. It's the only thing I can think of that explains it all."

Kanya sighs. "I sometimes see my grandmother's spirit, wandering around the *chedi* near my house. She told me one time that she couldn't reincarnate until we made a better place for her to arrive."

"Another of the Contraction *phii*? How did she find you? Wasn't she Isaan people, too?"

"She found me anyway." Kanya shrugs. "She is very unhappy with me."

"Yes, well, I suppose we'll be unhappy, too."

Jaidee has seen these ghosts as well, walking the boulevards sometimes, sitting in the trees. *Phii* are everywhere, now. Too many to count. He has seen them in the graveyards and leaning against the bones of riddled *bo* trees, all of them looking at him with some irritation.

Mediums all speak of how crazy with frustration the *phii* are, how they cannot reincarnate and thus linger, like a great mass of people at Hualamphong Station hoping for a train ride down to the beaches. All of them waiting for a reincarnation that they cannot have because none of them deserve the suffering of this particular world.

Monks like Ajahn Suthep say this is nonsense. He sells amulets to ward off these *phii* and says that they are nothing but hungry ghosts, created by the unnatural death of eating from blister rust-tainted vegetables. Anyone can go to his shrine and make a donation, or else go to the Erawan shrine and make an offering to Brahma—perhaps have the temple dancers perform for a little while—and buy a hope that the spirits may be put to rest to travel on to their next incarnation. It is possible to hope for such things.

Still, the ghosts are all around. Everyone agrees on that. The victims of AgriGen and PurCal and all their ilk.

Jaidee says, "I wouldn't take it personally, about your grandmother. On the full moon, I've seen the *phii* crowding the roads around the Environment Ministry, too. Many dozens of them." He smiles sadly. "It's really impossible to fix, I think. When I think about Niwat and Surat growing up with this. . ." He takes a breath, fighting back more emotion than he cares to show before Kanya. Takes another drink. "Anyway, the fight is good. I just wish we could get hold of some AgriGen or PurCal executives and throttle them. Maybe give them a taste of blister rust AG134.s. Then my life would be complete. I could die happy."

"You probably won't reincarnate, either," Kanya observes. "You're too good to end up in this hell again."

"If I'm lucky I'll be reborn in Des Moines, and bomb their generip labs."

"If only."

Jaidee looks up at Kanya's tone. "What's bothering you? Why so sad? We'll both be reborn somewhere beautiful, I'm sure. Both of us. Think of all the merit we earned just last night. I thought those Customs *heeya* were going to shit themselves when we burned the cargo."

Kanya makes a bitter face. "They've probably never met a white shirt they couldn't bribe."

And as quick as that, she kills his attempt at good humor. No wonder no one likes her at the Ministry. "No. That's true. Everyone takes bribes, now. It's not like before. People don't remember the worst times. They aren't afraid the way they were before."

"And now you dive down the cobra's throat with Trade." Kanya says, "After the December 12 coup, it seems as if General Pracha and Minister Akkarat are always circling one another, looking for a new excuse to fight. They never finished their feud, and now you do something to further anger Akkarat. It makes things unstable."

"Well, I was always too *jai rawn* for my own good. Chaya complains about it, too. That's why I keep you around. I wouldn't worry about Akkarat, though. He'll spit for a while, then he'll calm down. He may not like it, but General Pracha has too many allies in the Army for another coup attempt. With Prime Minister Surawong dead, Akkarat really has nothing left. He's isolated. Without megodons and tanks to back up his threats, Akkarat may be rich, but he is a paper tiger. This is a good lesson for him."

"He's dangerous."

Jaidee looks at her seriously. "So are cobras. So are megodons. So is cibiscosis. We're surrounded by dangers. Akkarat. . ." Jaidee shrugs. "Anyway, it's already done. There's nothing you can do to change it. Why worry now? *Mai pen rai*. Never mind."

"Still, you should be careful."

"You're thinking of that man at the anchor pads? The one Somchai saw? Did he frighten you?"

Kanya shrugs. "No."

"I'm surprised. He frightened me." Jaidee watches Kanya, wondering how much he should say, how much he should reveal that he knows about the world around him. "I have a very bad feeling about him."

"Really?" Kanya looks distressed. "You're frightened? Of one stupid man?"

Jaidee shakes his head. "Not afraid so that I will run and hide behind Chaya's *pha sin*, but still, I've seen him before."

"You didn't tell me."

"I wasn't sure at first. Now I am. I think he is with Trade." He pauses, testing. "I think they are hunting me again. Maybe considering another assassination. What do you think of that?"

"They wouldn't dare touch you. Her Majesty the Queen has spoken in your favor."

Jaidee touches his neck where the old spring gun scar still shows light on his dark skin. "Not even after what I did to them at the anchor pads?"

Kanya bridles. "I'll assign a bodyguard."

Jaidee laughs at her fierceness and is warmed and reassured by it. "You're a good girl, but I'd be a fool to take a bodyguard. Then everyone would know that I can be frightened. That's not the way of a tiger. Here, eat this." He scoops more snake head *plaa* onto Kanya's plate.

"I'm full."

"Don't be so polite. Eat."

"You should have a bodyguard. Please."

"I'll trust you to guard my back. You should be more than enough."

Kanya flinches. Jaidee hides a smile at her discomfort. *Ahh, Kanya*, he thinks. *We all have choices we must face in life. I've made mine. But you have your own kamma.* He

speaks gently. "Go on and eat more, you look skinny. How will you find a special friend if you're only bones?"

Kanya pushes her plate away. "I don't eat much these days, it seems."

"People are starving everywhere, and you can't eat."

Kanya makes a face and scoops a sliver of fish onto her spoon.

Jaidee shakes his head. He sets down his own fork and spoon. "What is it? You're even more glum than usual. I feel like we've just put one of our brothers in a funeral urn. What's bothering you?"

"It's nothing. Really. Just not hungry."

"Speak up, Lieutenant. I want straight talk from you. It's an order. You're a good officer. I can't stand having your sad face. I don't like any of my people to be sad-faced, even the ones from Isaan."

Kanya grimaces. Jaidee watches as his lieutenant mulls what she will say. He wonders if he was ever so tactful as this young woman. He doubts it. He has always been too brash, too easily angered. Not like Kanya, dour Kanya, all *jai yen* all the time. Not *sanuk* at all, but certainly *jai yen*.

He waits, thinking that at last he will hear her story, her full story in all its painful humanity, but when Kanya finally summons the words, she surprises him. She speaks in a near whisper. Almost too embarrassed to form the words at all.

"Some of the men complain that you don't take enough gifts of goodwill."

"What?" Jaidee sits back, goggles at her. "We won't participate in that sort of thing. We're different than the rest. And proud of it."

Kanya nods readily. "And the newspapers and whisper sheets love you for it. And the people love you for it."

"But?"

Her miserable look returns. "But you don't get promoted anymore, and the men who are loyal to you get no help from your patronage, and they lose heart."

"But look what we accomplish!" Jaidee taps the sack of money between his legs that they confiscated off the clipper ship. "They all know that if they have a need, they will be helped. We have more than enough for anyone in need."

Kanya looks down at the table and mumbles, "Some say you like to keep the money."

"What?" Jaidee stares at her, dumbstruck. "Do you think this?"

Kanya shrugs miserably. "Of course not."

Jaidee shakes his head, apologizing. "No, of course you wouldn't. You've been a good girl. You've done great things here." He smiles at his lieutenant, almost overwhelmed with compassion for the young woman who came to him starving, idolizing him and his years as a champion, wanting so much to emulate him.

"I do what I can to squash the rumors, but. . ." Kanya shrugs again, miserable. "Cadets say that being under Captain Jaidee is like starving of *akah* worms. You work and work and get skinnier and skinnier. These are good boys we have, but they can't help but feel ashamed when they have old uniforms and their comrades have new crisp ones. When they ride a bicycle two at a time, and their comrades ride kink-spring scooters."

Jaidee sighs. "I remember a time when the white shirts were loved."

"Everyone needs to eat."

Jaidee sighs again. He pulls the satchel out from between his legs and shoves it across to Kanya. "Take the money. Divide it equally amongst them. For their bravery and hard work yesterday."

She looks at him surprised. "You're sure?"

Jaidee shrugs and smiles, hiding his own disappointment, knowing that this is the best way, and yet saddened immeasurably by it. "Why not? They're good boys, as you say. And it's not as though the *farang* and the Ministry of Trade aren't reeling at this very moment. They did good work."

Kanya *wais* deep respect, ducking her head low and raising her pressed palms to her forehead.

"Oh, stop that nonsense." Jaidee pours more Sato into Kanya's glass, finishing the bottle. "*Mai pen rai*. Never mind. These are small things. Tomorrow we'll have new battles to fight. And we'll need good loyal boys to follow us. How will we ever overcome the AgriGens and PurCals of the world if we don't feed our friends?"

## 8

"I lost 30,000."

"Fifty," Otto mutters.

Lucy Nguyen stares at the ceiling. "One-Eighty Five? Six?"

"Four hundred." Quoile Napier sets his warm glass of Sato down on the low table. "I lost four hundred thousand blue bills on Carlyle's goddamn dirigible."

The entire table falls silent, stunned. "Christ." Lucy sits up, bleary with drink in the middle of the afternoon. "What were you smuggling in, cibi-resistant seedstock?"

The conversationalists sprawl on the veranda of Sir Francis Drake's, all five together, the "*Farang* Phalanx" as Lucy has styled them, all of them staring out at the dry season blast furnace and drinking themselves into a stupor.

Anderson reclines with them, half-listening to their slurred complaints as he turns the problem of the *ngaw*'s origins over in his mind. He's got another bag of the fruit between his feet, and he can't help thinking that the answer to his puzzle lies close, if only he had sufficient ingenuity to suss it out. He drinks warm Khmer whiskey and ponders.

*Ngaw*: apparently impervious to blister rust and cibiscosis even when directly exposed; obviously resistant to Nippon genehack weevil and leafcurl, or it could never have grown. A perfect product. The fruit of access to different genetic material than AgriGen and the rest of the calorie companies use for their generipping.

Somewhere in this country a seedbank is hidden. Thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands, of carefully preserved seeds, a treasure trove of biological diversity. Infinite chains of DNA, each with their own potential uses. And from this gold mine, the Thais are extracting answers to their knottiest challenges of survival. With access to the Thai

seedbank, Des Moines could mine genetic code for generations, beat back plague mutations. Stay alive a little longer.

Anderson shifts in his seat, stifling irritation, wiping away sweat. He's so close. Nightshades have been reborn, and now *ngaw*. And Gibbons is running loose in Southeast Asia. If it weren't for that illegal windup girl he wouldn't even know about Gibbons. The Kingdom has been singularly successful at maintaining its operational security. If he could just ascertain the seedbank's location, a raid might even be possible. . . They've learned since Finland.

Beyond the veranda, nothing with any intelligence is moving. Tantalizing beads of sweat run down Lucy's neck and soak her shirt as she complains about the state of the coal war with the Vietnamese. She can't hunt for jade if the Army is busy shooting anything that moves. Quoile's sideburns are matted. No breezes blow.

Out in the street, rickshaw men huddle in thin pools of shade. Their bones and joints protrude from bare taut skin, skeletons with flesh stretched tight on their frames. At this time of day they only sullenly emerge from shadow when they are called, and then only for double fee.

The entire ramshackle structure of the bar is scabbed to the outer wall of a wrecked Expansion tower. A hand-painted sign leans against one of the stairs up to the veranda, with the scrawled words: SIR FRANCIS DRAKE'S. The sign is a recent addition, relative to the decay and wreckage around it, painted by a handful of *farang* determined to name their surroundings. The fools who did the naming long ago disappeared up country, either swallowed in the jungle as blister rust rewrites swept over them, or torn apart in the tangle of war lines over coal and jade. Still, the sign remains, either because it amuses the owner, who has taken the name on as a nickname, or because no one can summon the energy to paint over it. In the meantime, it peels in the heat.

Regardless of provenance, Drake's is perfectly placed between the seawall shipping locks and the factories. Its dilapidated wreckage faces off across from the Victory Hotel so the *Farang* Phalanx can drink itself stupid and watch to see if any new foreigners of interest have washed up on the shores.

There are other, lower, dives for those sailors who manage to pass Customs and quarantine and washdown, but it is here, with the snapping white tablecloths of the Victory on one side of the cobbled street, and Sir Francis' bamboo slum on the other, where those foreigners who settle in Bangkok for any length of time eventually sink.

"What were you shipping?" Lucy asks again, prodding Quoile to explain his losses.

Quoile leans forward and lowers his voice, encouraging all of them to rouse themselves. "Saffron. From India."

A pause, and then Cobb laughs. "Good airlift product. I should have thought of that."

"Ideal for a dirigible. Low weight. More profitable than opium on the uplift," Quoile says. "The Kingdom still hasn't figured out how to crack the seedstock, and all the politicians and generals want it for their household kitchens. Lots of face, if they can get it. I had solid pre-orders. I was going to be rich. Unbelievably rich."

"Are you ruined then?"

"Maybe not. I'm negotiating with Sri Ganesha Insurance, they might cover some." Quoile shrugs. "Well, eighty percent. But all the bribes to get it into the country? All the



payoffs to the Customs agents?" He makes a face. "That's a complete loss. Still, I might get out with my skin.

"In a way, I got lucky. The shipment only falls under insurance guidelines because it was still on Carlyle's dirigible. I ought to toast that damn pilot for getting himself drowned in the ocean. If they'd unloaded the cargo and the white shirts had burned it on the ground, it would have been classified contraband. Then I'd be out there on the street with the *fa' gan* beggars and the yellow cards."

Otto scowls. "That's about the only thing to be said for Carlyle. If he wasn't so interested in touching politics, none of this would have happened."

Quoile shrugs. "We don't know that."

"It's damn certain," Lucy interjects. "Carlyle spends half his energy complaining about the white shirts and the other half cozying up with Akkarat. It's a message from General Pracha to Carlyle and the Trade Ministry. We're just the carrier pigeons."

"Carrier pigeons are extinct."

"You think we won't be? General Pracha would be happy to throw every one of us into Khlong Prem prison if he thought it would send the right message to Akkarat." Her gaze swings to Anderson. "You're awfully quiet, Lake. You didn't lose anything at all?"

Anderson stirs himself. "Manufacturing materials. Replacement parts for my line. Probably a hundred fifty thousand blue bills. My secretary's still evaluating the damage." He glances at Quoile. "Our stuff was on the ground. No insurance."

The memory of his conversation with Hock Seng is still fresh. Hock Seng first played at denial, complaining of incompetence at the anchor pads, before finally confessing that everything was lost, and that he had failed to pay all the bribe money in the first place. An ugly confessional, almost hysterical, the old man terrified of losing his job and Anderson pressing him further and further into his fear, humiliating him and shouting at him, making the old man cower, making a point of his displeasure. Still, he can't help wondering if the lesson has been learned, or if Hock Seng will try to be tricky again. Anderson grimaces. If the old man didn't free up so much of Anderson's time for more important work, he'd ship the old bastard back to the yellow card towers.

"I told you this was a stupid place to run a factory," Lucy says.

"The Japanese do it."

"Only because they have special arrangements with the palace."

"The Chaozhou Chinese do just fine, too."

Lucy makes a face. "They've been here for generations. Practically Thai at this point. We're more like yellow cards than Chaozhou, if you want to make comparisons. A smart *farang* knows not to keep too much invested in this place. The ground's always shifting. It's too damn easy to lose everything in a crackdown. Or another coup."

"We all work with the hands we're dealt." Anderson shrugs. "Anyway, Yates chose the site."

"I told Yates it was stupid, too."

Anderson recalls Yates, eyes bright with the possibilities of a new global economy. "Maybe not stupid. But definitely an idealist." He finishes his drink. The bar owner is

nowhere in sight. He waves for the waiters, who all ignore him. One of them, at least, is asleep, standing.

"You're not worried you'll get yanked the way Yates did?" Lucy asks.

Anderson shrugs. "Wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen. It's damn hot." He touches his sunburned nose. "I'm more of a northern wastes sort."

Nguyen and Quoile, dark-skinned both, laugh at that, but Otto just nods grimly, his own peeling nose a testament to his inability to adapt to the burn of the equatorial sun.

Lucy pulls out a pipe and pushes a couple of flies away before setting down her smoking tools and an accompanying ball of opium. The flies hobble away, but don't take to the air. Even the bugs seem stunned by the heat. Down an alley, near the rubble of an old Expansion tower, children are playing next to a freshwater pump. Lucy watches them as she tamps her pipe. "Christ, I wish I was a kid again."

Everyone seems to have lost the energy for conversation. Anderson pulls the sack of *ngaw* out from between his feet. Takes one out and peels it. Pries the translucent fruit from the *ngaw's* interior and tosses the hairy hollow rind on the table. Pops the fruit into his mouth.

Otto cocks his head, curious. "What's that you've got?"

Anderson digs more out of his sack, distributes them. "Not sure. Thais call them *ngaw*."

Lucy stops tamping her pipe. "I've seen them. They're all over the market. They don't have blister rust?"

Anderson shakes his head. "Not so far. The lady who sold them said they were clean. Had the certificates."

Everyone laughs, but Anderson shrugs off their cynicism. "I let them sit for a week. Nothing. They're cleaner than U-TEX."

The others follow his lead and eat their own fruits. Eyes widen. Smiles appear. Anderson opens the sack wide and sets it on the table. "Go ahead. I've been eating too many as it is."

They all rifle the bag. A pile of rinds grows in the center of the table. Quoile chews thoughtfully. "It sort of reminds me of lychee."

"Oh?" Anderson controls his interest. "Never heard of it."

"Sure. I had a drink that tasted a bit like it. Last time I was in India. Kolkata. A PurCal sales rep took me to one of his restaurants, when I first started looking at shipping saffron."

"So you think it's this. . . lychee?"

"Could be. Lychee was what he called the drink. Might not have been the fruit at all."

"If it's a PurCal product, I don't see how it would show up here," Lucy says. "These should all be out on Koh Angrit, under quarantine while the Environment Ministry finds ten thousand different ways to tax the thing." She spits the pit into her palm and tosses it off the balcony into the street. "I'm seeing these everywhere. They've got to be local." She reaches into the sack and takes another. "You know who might know about them, though. . ." She leans back and calls into the dimness of the bar. "Hagg! You still there? You awake back in there?"

At the man's name, the others stir and try to straighten themselves, like children caught by a strict parent. Anderson forces down an instinctive chill. "I wish you hadn't done that," he mutters.

Otto grimaces. "I thought he died."

"Blister rust never gets the chosen ones, don't you know?"

Everyone stifles a laugh as a form shambles out of the gloom. Hagg's face is flushed, and sweat speckles his face. He surveys the Phalanx solemnly. "Hello, all." He nods his head to Lucy. "Still trafficking with these sort, then?"

Lucy shrugs. "I make do." She nods at a chair. "Don't just stand there. Have a drink on us. Tell us your stories." She lights her opium pipe and draws on it as the man pulls up the chair beside her and sags into it.

Hagg is a solid man, well-fleshed. Not for the first time, Anderson thinks how interesting it is that Grahamite priests, of all their flock, are always the ones whose waistlines overflow their niche. Hagg waves for whiskey, and surprises everyone when a waiter appears at his elbow almost immediately.

"No ice," the waiter says on arrival.

"No, no ice. Of course not." Hagg shakes his head emphatically. "Don't want the damn calories spent, anyway."

When the waiter returns, Hagg takes the drink and downs it instantly, then sends the waiter back for a second. "It's good to be back in from the countryside," he says. "You start missing the pleasures of civilization." He toasts them all with his second glass and downs it as well.

"How far out were you?" Lucy asks around the pipe clamped in her teeth. She's starting to look a little glassy from the burning tar.

"Near the old border with Burma, Three Pagodas pass." He looks sourly at them all as if they are guilty of the sins he researches. "Looking into ivory beetle spread."

"Not safe up there, I heard." Otto says. "Who's the *jao por*?"

"A man named Chanarong. And he was no trouble at all. Far easier to work with him than the Dung Lord or any of the small *jao por* in the city. Not all of the godfathers are so focused on profits and power." Hagg looks back pointedly. "For those of us who aren't interested in pillaging the Kingdom of coal or jade or opium, the countryside is safe enough." He shrugs. "In any case, I was invited by Phra Kritipong to visit his monastery. To observe the changes in ivory beetle behavior." He shakes his head. "The devastation is extraordinary. Whole forests with not a leaf on them. Kudzu, and nothing else. The entire overstory is gone, timber fallen everywhere."

Otto looks interested. "Anything salvageable?"

Lucy gives him a look of disgust. "It's ivory beetle, you idiot. No one around here wants that."

Anderson asks, "You say the monastery invited you up? Even though you're a Grahamite?"

"Phra Kritipong is enlightened enough to know that neither Jesus Christ nor the Niche Teachings are anathema to his kind. Buddhist and Grahamite values overlap in many areas. Noah and the martyr Phra Seub are entirely complementary figures."

Anderson stifles a laugh. "If your monk saw how Grahamites operate back home, he might see it differently."

Hagg looks offended. "I am not some preacher of field burnings. I am a scientist."

"Didn't mean any offense." Anderson pulls out a *ngaw*, offers it to Hagg. "This might interest you. We just found them in the market."

Hagg eyes the *ngaw*, surprised. "The market? Which one?"

"All over," Lucy supplies.

"They showed up while you were gone," Anderson says. "Try it, they're not bad."

Hagg takes the fruit, studying it closely. "Extraordinary."

"You know what they are?" Otto asks.

Anderson peels another fruit for himself, but even as he does, he listens closely. He would never directly ask the question of a Grahamite, but he's perfectly willing to let others do the work.

"Quoile thought it was a leechie," Lucy says. "Is he right?"

"No, not a lychee. That's for certain." Hagg turns it in his hand. "It looks like it could be something the old texts called a rambutan." Hagg is thoughtful. "Though, if I recall correctly, they're somewhat related."

"Rambootan?" Anderson keeps his expression friendly and neutral. "That's a funny name. The Thais all call them *ngaw*."

Hagg eats the fruit, spits the fat pit into his palm. Examines the black seed, wet with his saliva. "I wonder if it will breed true."

"You could put it in a flower pot and find out."

Hagg gives him an irritated look. "If it doesn't come from a calorie company, it will breed. The Thais don't make sterile generips."

Anderson laughs. "I didn't think the calorie companies made tropical fruits."

"They make pineapples."

"Right. Forgot." Anderson waits. "How do you know so much about fruits?"

"I studied biosystems and ecology at Alabama New University."

"That's your Grahamite college, right? I thought all you studied was how to start a field burning."

The others suck in their breath at the provocation, but Hagg just looks back coldly. "Don't bait me. I'm not that sort. If we're ever going to restore Eden, it will take the knowledge of ages to accomplish it. Before I came over, I spent a year immersed in Pre-Contraction Southeast Asian Ecosystems." He reaches across and takes another fruit. "This must gall the calorie companies."

Lucy fumbles for another fruit. "You think we could fill a clipper ship with these and send them back across the water? You know, play calorie company in reverse? People would pay a fortune for them, I'll bet. New flavor and all? Sell it as a luxury."

Otto shakes his head. "You'd have to convince them it's not blister-rust tainted; the red skin will make people nervous."

Hagg nods agreement. "It's a route best not pursued."

"But the calorie companies do it." Lucy points out. "They ship seeds and food wherever they want. They're global. Why shouldn't we try the same?"

"Because it goes against all the Niche Teachings," Hagg says gently. "The calorie companies have already earned their place in hell. There's no reason you should be eager to join them."

Anderson laughs. "Come on, Hagg. you can't seriously be against a little entrepreneurial spirit. Lucy's on to something. We could even put your face on the side of the crates." He makes a sign of Grahamite blessing. "You know, approved by the Holy Church and all that. Safe as SoyPRO." He grins. "What do you think of that?"

"I would never participate in such blasphemy." Hagg scowls. "Food should come from the place of its origin, and stay there. It shouldn't spend its time crisscrossing the globe for the sake of profit. We went down that path once, and it brought us to ruin."

"More Niche Teachings." Anderson peels another fruit. "There must be a niche for money somewhere in Grahamite orthodoxy. Your cardinals are fat enough."

"The teachings are sound, even if the flock strays." Hagg stands abruptly. "Thank you for the company." He frowns at Anderson, but reaches across the table and grabs one more fruit before stalking away.

As soon as he's gone, everyone relaxes. "Christ, Lucy, why'd you do that?" Otto asks. "That man creeps me out. I left the Compact so I could get away from Grahamite priests looking over my shoulder. And you have to call one over?"

Quoile nods morosely. "I heard there's another priest here at the joint embassy now."

"They're everywhere. Like maggots." Lucy waves at them. "Toss me another fruit."

They return to their gorging. Anderson watches them, curious to see if these well-travelled creatures will have any other ideas about its provenance. The rambutan is an interesting possibility, though. Already, despite the bad news about the destroyed algae tanks and nutrient cultures, the day is turning out better than expected. Rambutan. A word to send back to Des Moines and the researchers. A route of investigation into the origins of this mysterious botanic object. Somewhere, there will be a historical record of it. He'll have to go back to his books and see if he can find—

"Look who's here," Quoile mutters.

Everyone turns. Richard Carlyle, in a perfectly pressed linen suit, is climbing the stairs. He takes off his hat as he reaches the shade, fanning himself.

"I fucking hate that man," Lucy mutters. She lights another pipe, draws hard.

"What's he smiling about?" Otto asks.

"Hell if I know. He lost a dirigible, didn't he?"

Carlyle pauses in the shade, scans the patrons across the room, nods at all of them. "Pretty hot one," he calls out.

Otto stares at him, red-faced and bullet-eyed, and mutters, "If it hadn't been for his fucking politicking, I'd be a rich man today."

"Don't be dramatic." Anderson pops another *ngaw* into his mouth. "Lucy, give the man a puff of your pipe. I don't feel like having Sir Francis kick us out into the heat for brawling."

Lucy's eyes have gone glassy with opium, but she waves the pipe in Otto's general direction. Anderson reaches across and plucks it from her fingers and gives it to Otto, before standing and picking up his empty glass. "Anyone else want something?" Desultory shakes of the head.

Carlyle grins as he arrives at the bar. "You get poor old Otto sorted out?"

Anderson glances back. "Lucy smokes serious opium. I doubt he'll be able to walk, let alone fight anyone."

"Devil's drug, that."

Anderson toasts him with his empty glass. "That, and booze." He peers over the edge of the bar. "Where the hell's Sir Francis?"

"I thought you were here to answer that question."

"I guess not," Anderson says. "You lose much?"

"Some."

"Really? You don't seem bothered." Anderson gestures back at the rest of the Phalanx. "Everyone else is pissing and moaning about how you keep interfering with politics, cozying up with Akkarat and the Trade Ministry. But here you are smiling ear to ear. You could be a Thai."

Carlyle shrugs. Sir Francis, elegantly dressed, carefully coiffed, emerges from a back room. Carlyle asks for whiskey and Anderson holds up his own empty glass.

"No ice," Sir Francis says. "The mulie men want more money to run the pump."

"Pay them, then."

Sir Francis shakes his head as he takes Anderson's glass. "If you bargain when they squeeze your balls, they will only squeeze again. And I cannot bribe the Environment Ministry to give me access to the coal grid like you *farang*."

He turns away and pulls down a bottle of Khmer whiskey, pours an immaculate shot. Anderson wonders if any of the rumors about the man are true.

Otto, now mumbling incoherently about "fugging dribigles," claims that Sir Francis was an old *Chaopraya*, a high assistant to the crown, forced out of the palace in a power play. This theory has as much merit as the idea that he is former servant of the Dung Lord, retired, or that he is a Khmer prince, displaced and living incognito ever since the Thai Kingdom was enlarged to swallow the East. Everyone agrees he must have been of high rank—it's the only thing that explains his disdain for his patrons.

"Pay now," he says as he sets the shots on the bar.

Carlyle laughs. "You know our credit's good."

Sir Francis shakes his head. "You both lost plenty at the anchor pads. Everyone knows it. Pay now."

Carlyle and Anderson shell out coins. "I thought we had a better relationship than that," Anderson complains.

"This is politics." Sir Francis smiles. "Maybe you are here tomorrow. Maybe you are swept away like Expansion plastic on a beach. There are whisper sheets on all the street corners, calling for Captain Jaidee to be made a *chaopraya* advisor to the palace. If he rises, then all you *farang*. . ." he makes a shooing motion with his hand, "all gone." He

shrugs. "General Pracha's radio stations are calling Jaidee a tiger and hero, and the student associations have been calling for the Trade Ministry to be closed down and placed under the white shirts. The Trade Ministry lost face. *Farang* and Trade are close like *farang* and fleas."

"Nice."

Sir Francis shrugs. "You do smell."

Carlyle scowls. "Everyone smells. It's the goddamn hot season."

Anderson intercedes. "I suppose Trade is seething, losing face like that." He takes a sip of the warm whiskey and grimaces. He used to like room-temperature liquor, before he came here.

Sir Francis counts their coins into his cash box. "Minister Akkarat is still smiling, but the Japanese want reparations for their losses and the white shirts will never give them. So either Akkarat will pay to make up for what the Tiger of Bangkok has done, or he will lose face to the Japanese as well."

"You think the Japanese will leave?"

Sir Francis makes a face of disgust. "The Japanese are like the calorie companies, always looking for a way in. They will never go away." He moves to the other end of the bar, leaving them once again isolated.

Anderson pulls out a *ngaw* and offers it Carlyle. "Want one?"

Carlyle takes the fruit and holds it up for examination. "What the hell is this?"

"*Ngaw*."

"It reminds me of cockroaches." He makes a face. "You're an experimental bastard. I'll give you that." He pushes the *ngaw* back across to Anderson and carefully wipes his hand on his trousers.

"Afraid?" Anderson goads.

"My wife liked eating new things, too. Couldn't stop herself. Had the madness for flavor. Just couldn't resist trying new foods." Carlyle shrugs. "I'll wait and see if you're spitting up blood next week."

They lean back on their stools and gaze across the dust and heat to where the Victory Hotel gleams white. Down an alley a washing woman has set out laundry in pans near the rubble of an old high-rise. Another is washing her body, carefully scrubbing under her sarong, its fabric clinging to her skin. Children run naked through the dirt, jumping over bits of broken concrete that were laid down more than a hundred years ago in the old Expansion. Far down the street the levees rise, holding back the sea.

"How much did you lose?" Carlyle finally asks.

"Plenty. Thanks to you."

Carlyle doesn't respond to the jab. He finishes his shot and waves for another. "Really no ice?" he asks Sir Francis. "Or is this just because you think we'll be gone tomorrow?"

"Ask me tomorrow."

"If I'm still here tomorrow will you have ice then?" Carlyle asks.

Sir Francis flashes a grin. "Depends how much you keep paying mulies and megodonts for unloading freight. Everyone talks about getting rich burning calories for *farang*. . . so no ice for Sir Francis."

"But if we're gone, no drinkers. Even if Sir Francis has got all the ice in the world."

Sir Francis shrugs. "As you say."

Carlyle scowls at the Thai man's back. "Megodont unions, white shirts, Sir Francis. Everywhere you turn, there's another open hand."

"Price of doing business," Anderson says. "Still, the way you were smiling when you came in, I thought you hadn't lost anything at all."

Carlyle takes his new whiskey. "I just like seeing all of you on the veranda looking like your dogs died from cibiscosis. Anyway, even if we've had losses, no one's chained us in a Khlong Prem sweat cell. No reason not to smile about that." He leans close. "This isn't the last of the story. Not by a long shot. Akkarat's still got some tricks up his sleeve."

"If you push hard enough on the white shirts, they always bite back." Anderson warns. "You and Akkarat made a lot of noise, talking about tariff and pollution credit changes. Windups, even. And now my assistant is telling me the same things that Sir Francis just said: all the Thai newspapers are calling our friend Jaidee a Queen's Tiger. Celebrating him."

"Your assistant? You mean that paranoid yellow card spider you keep in your offices?" Carlyle laughs. "That's the problem with you. You all sit around, bitching and wishing, and meanwhile I'm changing the rules of the game. You're all Contraction thinkers."

"I'm not the one who lost a dirigible."

"Cost of doing business."

"I'd think losing a fifth of your fleet would be more than just a cost."

Carlyle makes a face. He leans close and lowers his voice. "Come on, Anderson. This tiff with the white shirts isn't what it seems. Some people have been waiting for them to go too far." He pauses, making sure his words are understood. "Some of us have been working toward it, even. I've just come from speaking with Akkarat himself, and I can assure you the news is about to turn in our favor."

Anderson almost laughs, but Carlyle wags an admonishing finger. "Go ahead, shake your head now, but before I'm done you'll be kissing my ass and thanking me for the new tariff structures, and we'll all have reparations in our bank accounts."

"The white shirts never pay reparations. Not when they burn a farm, not when they confiscate a cargo. Never."

Carlyle shrugs. He looks out toward the hot light of the veranda and observes, "The monsoons are coming."

"Not likely." Anderson gives the blazing day a sour look. "They're already late by two months."

"Oh, they're coming all right. Maybe not this month. Maybe not next, but they're coming."

"And?"



"The Environment Ministry is expecting replacement equipment for the city's levee pumps. Critical equipment. For seven pumps." He pauses. "Now, where do you think that equipment is sitting?"

"Enlighten me."

"All the way across the Indian Ocean." Carlyle flashes a sudden shark-like smile. "In a certain Kolkata hanger that I happen to own."

The air seems to have left the bar. Anderson glances around, making sure no one is close. "Christ, you silly bastard. Are you serious?"

It all makes sense, now. Carlyle's bragging, his certainty. The man has always had a freebooter's willingness to take risks. But it's difficult to distinguish bluster from sincerity with Carlyle. If he says he has Akkarat's ear, perhaps he only speaks with secretaries. It's all talk. But this. . . .

Anderson starts to speak but sees Sir Francis approaching and turns away instead, grimacing. Carlyle's eyes sparkle with mischief. Sir Francis sets a new whiskey beside his hand, but Anderson doesn't care about drinks anymore. As soon as Sir Francis retreats, he leans forward.

"You're holding the city hostage?"

"The white shirts seem to have forgotten they need outsiders. We're in the middle of a new Expansion and every string is connected to every other string, and yet they're still thinking like a Contraction ministry. They don't understand how dependent they've already become on *farang*." He shrugs. "At this point, they're just pawns on a chess board. They have no idea who moves them, and couldn't stop us even if they tried."

He tosses back another shot of whiskey, grimaces and slaps it down on the bar. "We should all send flowers to that Jaidee white shirt bastard. He's done his job perfectly. With half the city's coal pumps offline. . ." He shrugs. "The nice thing about dealing with the Thais is that they're really a very sensitive people. I won't even have to make a threat. They'll figure it out all on their own, and make things right."

"Quite a gamble."

"Isn't everything?" Carlyle favors Anderson with a cynical smile. "Maybe we're all dead tomorrow from a blister rust rewrite. Or maybe we're the richest men in the Kingdom. It's all a gamble. The Thais play for keeps. So should we."

"I'd just put a spring gun to your head and trade your brains for the pumps."

"That's the spirit!" Carlyle laughs. "Now you're thinking like a Thai. But I've got myself covered there, too."

"What? With the Trade Ministry?" Anderson makes a face. "Akkarat doesn't have the muscle to protect you."

"Better than that. He's got generals."

"You're drunk. General Pracha's friends run every part of the military. The only reason the white shirts don't run the entire country already is because the old King stepped in before Pracha could squash Akkarat the last time."

"Times change. Pracha's white shirts and his payoffs have made a lot of people angry. People want a change."

"You're talking revolution, now?"

"Is it revolution if the palace asks for it?" Carlyle reaches nonchalantly across the bar for the bottle of whiskey and pours. He upends it and gets less than half a shot from the bottle. He raises an eyebrow to Anderson. "Ah. Now you're paying attention." He points to Anderson's tumbler. "Are you going to drink that?"

"How far does this go?"

"You want in on the deal?"

"Why would you offer?"

"You have to ask?" Carlyle shrugs. "When Yates set up your factory, he tripled the Megodont Union's fees for joules. Threw money everywhere. Hard not to notice that kind of funding."

He nods at the other expatriates, now playing a listless game of poker and waiting for the heat of the day to abate so that they can go on with their work or their whoring or their passive wait for the next day. "Everyone else, they're children. Little kids wearing adult clothes. You're different."

"You think we're rich?"

"Oh stop the theatrics. My dirigibles haul your cargo." Carlyle regards him. "I've seen where your supply shipments originate from," he looks at Anderson significantly, "before they arrive in Kolkata."

Anderson pretends nonchalance. "So?"

"An awful lot of material coming from Des Moines."

"You think I'm worth talking to because I've got Midwestern investors? Doesn't everyone get their investors where the money is? So what if a rich widow wants to experiment with kink-springs. You read too much into small things."

"Do I?" Carlyle looks around the bar and leans close. "People are talking about you."

"How so?"

"They say you're quite interested in seeds." He looks significantly at the rind of the *ngaw* between them. "We're all genespotters, these days. But you're the only one who pays for your intelligence. The only one who asks about white shirts and generippers. "

Anderson smiles coldly. "You've been talking to Raleigh."

Carlyle inclines his head. "If it's any consolation, it wasn't easy. He didn't want to talk about you. Not at all."

"He should have thought a little harder."

"He can't get his aging treatments without me." Carlyle shrugs. "We have shipping representatives in Japan. You weren't offering him another decade of easy living."

Anderson forces a laugh. "Of course." He smiles, but inside he is seething. He'll have to deal with Raleigh. And now perhaps Carlyle as well. He's been sloppy. He eyes the *ngaw* with disgust. He's been waving his latest interest in front of everyone. Grahamites, even, and now this. It's too easy to get comfortable. To forget all the lines of exposure. And then one day in a bar, someone slaps you in the face.

Carlyle is saying, "If I could just speak with certain people. Discuss certain propositions. . ." he trails off, brown eyes hunting for a sign of agreement in Anderson's

expression. "I don't care which company you're working for. If I understand your interests correctly, then we might find our goals lie in similar directions."

Anderson drums his fingers on the bar, thoughtful. If Carlyle were to disappear, would it rouse any interest at all? He might even be able to blame it on overzealous white shirts. . .

"You think you've got a chance?" Anderson asks.

"It wouldn't be the first time the Thais have reformed their government with force. The Victory Hotel wouldn't exist if Prime Minister Surawong hadn't lost his head and his mansion in the December 12 coup. Thai history is littered with changes in administration."

"I'm a little concerned that if you're talking to me, you're talking to others. Maybe too many others."

"Who else would I talk to?" Carlyle jerks his head toward the rest of the *Farang* Phalanx. "They're nothing. Wouldn't consider them for a second. Your people though. . ." Carlyle trails off, considering his words, then leans forward.

"Look, Akkarat has some experience with these matters. The white shirts have created a number of enemies. And not just *farang*. All our project requires is a bit of help gathering momentum." He takes a sip of his whiskey, considers the taste for a moment before setting the glass down. "The consequences would be quite favorable for us if it succeeds." He locks eyes with Anderson. "Quite favorable for you. For your friends in the Midwest."

"What do you get out of it?"

"Trade, of course." Carlyle grins. "If the Thais face outward instead of living in this absurd defensive crouch of theirs, my company expands. It's just good business. I can't imagine that your people enjoy cooling their heels on Koh Angrit, begging to be allowed to sell a few tons of U-Tex or SoyPRO to the Kingdom when there's a crop failure. You could have free trade, instead of sitting out on that quarantine island. I'd think that would be attractive to you. It certainly would benefit me."

Anderson studies Carlyle, trying to decide how much to trust the man. For two years they have drunk together, have whored occasionally, have closed shipping contracts on a handshake, but Anderson knows only a little about him. The home office has a portfolio, but it's thin. Anderson mulls. The seedbank is out there, waiting. With a pliable government. . .

"Which generals are backing you?"

Carlyle laughs. "If I told you that, you'd just think I was foolish and unable to keep secrets."

The man is all talk, Anderson decides. He'll have to make sure Carlyle disappears, soon, quietly, before his cover gets blown. "It sounds interesting. Maybe we should meet to talk a little more about our mutual goals."

Carlyle opens his mouth to respond then pauses, studying Anderson. He smiles and shakes his head. "Oh no. You don't believe me." He shrugs. "Fair enough. Just wait then. In two days time, I think you'll be more impressed. We'll talk then." He looks significantly at Anderson. "And we'll talk at a place of my choosing." He finishes his drink.

"Why wait? What's going to change between now and then?"

Carlyle settles his hat on his head and smiles. "Everything, my dear *farang*. Everything."

## 9

Emiko wakes to afternoon swelter. She stretches, breathing shallowly in the oven bake of her five-by.

There is a place for windups. The knowledge tingles within her. A reason to live.

She presses a hand up against the WeatherAll planks that divide her sleeping slot from the one above. Touching the knots. Thinking of the last time she felt so content. Remembering Japan and the luxuries that Gendo-sama bequeathed: her own flat; climate control that blew cool through humid summer days; *dangan* fish that glowed and changed colors like chameleons, iridescent and changeable dependent on their speed: blue slow fish, red fast ones. She used to tap the glass of their tank and watch them streak red through dark waters, their windup nature in brightest bloom.

She, too, used to glow brightly. She was built well. Trained well. Knew the ways of pillow companion, secretary, translator and observer, services for her master that she performed so admirably that he honored her like a dove, and released her into the bright blue arc of the sky. She had been so honored.

The WeatherAll knots stare down at her, the only decoration on the divider that separates her sleeping slot from the one above and keeps the garbage of her neighbors from raining down. Linseed reek billows off the wood, nauseating in the five-by's hot confines. In Japan there were rules about using such wood for human habitation. Here in the tower slums, no one cares.

Emiko's lungs burn. She breathes shallowly, listening to the grunt and snore of the other bodies. No sound filters down from the slot above. Puenthai must not be back. Otherwise, she would have suffered already, would have been kicked or fucked by now. It's not often that she survives a whole day without abuse. Puenthai is not yet home. Perhaps he is dead. The *fa' gan* fringe on his neck was certainly thick enough the last time she saw him.

She squirms out of her slot and straightens in the narrow gap between the five-by and the door. Stretches again, then reaches in and fumbles for her plastic bottle, yellowed and thinned with age. Drinks blood-warm water. She swallows convulsively, wishing she had ice.

Two flights up, a splintered door gives way and she spills out onto the roof. Sunlight and heat envelop her. Even with the sun hammering down, it is cooler than her five-by.

All around her, clotheslines draped with rustling *pha sin* and trousers rustle in the sea breeze. The sun is sinking, glistening from the tips of *wats* and *chedi*. The water of the *khlongs* and the Chao Phraya glistens. Kink-spring skiffs and trimaran clipper ships glide across red mirrors.

To the north, the distance is lost in the orange haze of dung burn and humidity, but somewhere out there, if the pale scarred *farang* is to be believed, windups dwell.

Somewhere beyond the armies that war for shares of coal and jade and opium, her own lost tribe awaits her. She was never Japanese; she was only ever a windup. And now her true clan awaits her, if only she can find a way.

She stares north a moment longer, hungering, then goes to the bucket she stowed the night before. There is no water on the upper levels, no pressure to reach so high, and she cannot risk bathing at the public pumps—so every night she struggles up the stairs with her water bucket, and leaves it here in anticipation of the day.

In the privacy of the open air and the setting sun, she bathes. It is a ritual process, a careful cleansing. The bucket of water, a fingerling of soap. She squats beside the bucket and ladles the warm water over herself. It is a precise thing, a scripted act as deliberate as *Jo No Mai*, each move choreographed, a worship of scarcity.

She pours a ladleful over her head. Water courses down her face, runs over breasts and ribs and thighs, trickles onto hot concrete. Another ladleful, soaking her black hair, coursing down her spine and curling around her buttocks. Again a ladle of water, sheeting over her skin like mercury. And then the soap, rubbing it into her hair and then her skin, scouring herself of the previous night's insults until she wears a pale sheen of suds. And again the bucket and ladle, rinsing herself as carefully as with the first wetting.

Water sluices away soap and grime, even some of the shame comes with it. If she were to scrub for a thousand years she would not be clean, but she is too tired to care and she has grown accustomed to scars she cannot scour away. The sweat, the alcohol, the humid salt of semen and degradation, these she can cleanse. It is enough. She is too tired to scrub harder. Too hot and too tired, always.

At the end of her rinsing, she is happy to find a little water left in the bucket. She dips one ladleful and drinks it, gulping. And then in a wasteful, unrestrained gesture, she upends the bucket over her head in one glorious cathartic rush. In that moment, between the touch of the water, and the splash as it pools around her toes, she is clean.

\* \* \*

Out on the streets, she tries to blend into the daylight street activity. Mizumi-sensei trained her to walk in certain ways, to accent and make beautiful the stutter motion of her body. But if Emiko is very careful, and fights her nature and training—if she wears *pha sin*, and does not swing her arms—she almost passes.

Along the sidewalks, seamstresses lounge beside treadle sewing machines, waiting for evening trade. Snack sellers stack the remains of their wares in tidy piles, awaiting the day's final shoppers. Night market food stalls are setting out little bamboo stools and tables in the street, the ritual encroachment on the thoroughfares that signals the end of day and the beginning of life in a tropic city.

Emiko tries not to stare; it's been a long time since she risked walking streets in daylight. When Raleigh acquired her five-by, he gave her strict instructions. He could not keep her in Ploenchit itself—even whores and pimps and drug addicts had limits—so he installed her in a slum where bribes were cheaper and the neighbors were not so picky about the neighboring offal. But his instructions were strict: walk only at night, keep to

shadows, come directly to the club, and return directly home. Anything else and there was little hope of survival.

Her nape prickles as she makes her way through the daylight crowds. Most of these people will not care about her. The benefit of the daytime is that people are far too busy with their own lives to worry about a creature like her, even if they catch sight of her odd movements. In the deep night of green methane flicker, there are fewer eyes, but they are idle ones, high on *yaba* or *laolao*, eyes with the time and opportunity to pursue.

A woman selling Environment Ministry-certified sticks of sliced papaya watches her suspiciously. Emiko forces herself not to panic. She continues down the street with her mincing steps, trying to convince herself that she appears eccentric, rather than genetically transgressive. Her heart pounds against her ribs.

*Too fast. Slow down. You have time. Not so much as you would like, but still, enough to ask questions. Slowly. Patiently. Do not betray yourself. Do not overheat.*

Her palms are wet with sweat, the only part of her body that ever really feels cool. She keeps them open wide like fans, trying to absorb comfort. She pauses at a public pump to splash water on her skin and drink deep, glad that New People fear little in the way of bacterial or parasitic infection. She is an inhospitable host. That, at least, is benefit.

If she were not a New Person, she would simply strut into Hualamphong Railway Station, and purchase a ticket on a kink-spring train, ride it as far as the wastes of Chiang Mai, and then proceed into the wilderness. It would be easy. Instead she must be clever. The roads will be guarded. Anything that leads to the Northeast and the Mekong will be clogged with military personnel transferring between the eastern front and the capital. A New Person would excite attention, particularly given that New People military models sometimes fight on behalf of the Vietnamese.

But there is another way. From her time with Gendo-sama she remembers that much of the Kingdom's freight moves by river.

Emiko turns down Thanon Mongkut toward the docks and levees, and stops short. White shirts. She cringes against a wall as the pair stalks past. They don't even look at her—she blends if she does not move—but still, as soon as they are out of sight, she has the urge to scuttle back to her tower. Most of the white shirts there have been bribed. These ones. . . She shivers.

At last, the *gaijin* warehouses and trading stations rise before her, the newly built commercial blocks. She makes her way up the seawall. At its top, the ocean spreads before her, bustling with clipper ships unloading, dock workers and coolies hauling freight, *mahout* coaxing megodonts to greater labor as pallets come off the clippers and are loaded on huge Laotian-rubber-wheeled wagons for transit to the warehouses. Reminders of her former life litter the view.

A smudge on the horizon marks the quarantine zone of Koh Angrit, where *gaijin* traders and agricultural executives squat amid stockpiles of calories, all of them waiting patiently for a crop failure or plague to beat aside the Kingdom's trade barriers. Gendo-sama once led her to that floating island of bamboo rafts and warehouses. Stood on its gently rolling decks and had her translate as he confidently sold the foreigners on advances in sailing technologies that would speed a shipment of patented SoyPRO around the world.

Emiko sighs and ducks under the draped lines of *saisin* that top the levee. The sacred thread runs down the seawall in both directions, disappearing into the distance. Every morning the monks of a different temple bless the thread, adding spiritual support to the physical defenses that push back the hungry sea.

In her former life, when Gendo-sama provided her with permits and indulgences to move inside the city with impunity, Emiko had the opportunity to see the yearly blessing ceremonies of the dikes and pumps and the *saisin* that connects it all. As the first monsoon rains poured down on the assembled people, Emiko watched Her Revered Majesty the Child Queen pull the levers that set the divine pumps roaring to life, her delicate form dwarfed by the apparatus that her ancestors had created. Monks chanted and stretched fresh *saisin* from the city pillar, the spiritual heart of Krung Thep, to all of the twelve coal-driven pumps that ringed the city, and then they had all prayed for the continued life of their fragile city.

Now, in the dry season, the *saisin* looks ragged and the pumps are largely silent. The floating docks and their barges and skiffs bob softly in red sunlight.

Emiko makes her way down into the bustle, watching faces, hoping to spy someone who seems kind. She watches people pass, keeping her body still so that she does not betray her nature. Finally steels herself. She calls out to a passing day laborer, "*Kathorh kha*. Please, *Khun*. Can you tell me where I might purchase ferry tickets north?"

The man is covered with the powder and sweat of his work but he smiles, friendly. "How far north?"

She hazards a city name, unsure even if it will be close enough to the place that the *gaijin* has described. "Phitsanulok?"

He makes a face. "There's nothing going that far, not much past Ayutthaya. The rivers have gotten too low. Some people are using mulies to pull their way north, but that is all. Some kink-spring skiffs. And the war. . ." He shrugs. "If you need to go north, the roads will be dry for a while yet."

She masks her disappointment and *wais* carefully. No river then. By road or nothing. If she could go by river, then she would also have a way to cool herself. By road. . . she imagines the long distance through the tropic blaze of the dry season. Perhaps she should wait for the rainy season. With the monsoon, the temperatures will fall and the rivers rise. . .

Emiko starts back over the seawall and down through the slums that house dock families and de-quarantined sailors on shore leave. By road then. It was foolish even for her to go looking. If she could get aboard a kink-spring train—but that would require permits. Many, many permits, just to get aboard. But if she could bribe someone, stow away. . . She grimaces. All roads lead to Raleigh. She will have to speak with him. To beg the old crow for things he has no reason to give.

A man with dragon tattoos on his stomach and a *takraw* ball tattooed on his shoulder gawks at her as she walks past. "*Heechy-keechy*," he murmurs.

Emiko doesn't slow, doesn't turn at the words, but her skin prickles.

The man follows her. "*Heechy-keechy*," he says again.

She glances back. His face is unfriendly. He's missing a hand as well, she's horrified to notice. He reaches out with the stump and prods her shoulder. She jerks away, stutter-stop reaction, betraying her nature. He smiles, and his teeth are black with betel nut.

Emiko turns down a *soi*, hoping to escape his attention. Again he calls after her. "*Heechy-keechy*."

Emiko ducks into another winding squeezeway, breaks into a faster walk. Her body warms. Her hands become slick with sweat. She pants rapidly, trying to expel the increasing heat. Still the man follows. He doesn't call out again but she hears his footsteps. She makes another turn. Cheshires scatter before her, shimmers of light flushed like cockroaches. If only she could evaporate as they do, fade against a wall and let this man slide past.

"Where are you going, windup?" the man calls. "I just want to get a look at you."

If she were still with Gendo-sama she would face this man. Would stand confident, protected by import stamps and ownership permits and consulates and the awful threat of her master's retribution. A piece of property, true, but respected nonetheless. She could even go to a white shirt or the police for protection. With stamps and a passport, she was not a transgression against niche and nature, but an exquisite valued object.

The alley opens onto a new street, full of *gaijin* warehouses and trading fronts, but the man grabs her arm before she can reach it. She's hot. Already flushed with her rising panic. She stares at the street longingly but it is all shacks and dry goods and a few *gaijin*, who will be no help for her. Grahamites are the last people she wishes to encounter.

The man drags her back into the alley. "Where do you think you're going, windup?"

His eyes are bright and hard. He's chewing something—an amphetamine stick. *Yaba*. Coolie laborers use them to keep working, to burn calories that they do not have. His eyes sparkle as he grips her wrist. He pulls her deeper into the alley, out of sight. She's too hot to run. There is nowhere to go, even if she did.

"Stand against the wall." he says. "No." He shoves her around. "Don't look at me."

"Please."

A knife appears in his good hand, glinting. "Shut up," he says. "Stay there."

His voice has the power of command, and despite her better instincts she finds herself obeying. "Please. Just let me go," she whispers.

"I fought your kind. In the jungles in the north. Windups everywhere. *Heechy-keechy* soldiers."

"I am not that kind." She whispers. "Not military."

"Japanese, same as you. I lost a hand because of your kind. And a lot of good friends." He shows her the stump where his hand is missing, pushes it against her cheek. His breath gusts hot on her nape as he wraps his arm around her neck, pressing the knife to her jugular. Indenting the skin.

"Please. Just let me go." She presses back against his crotch. "I'll do anything."

"You think I'd soil myself that way?" He shoves her hard against the wall, making her cry out. "With an animal like you?" A pause, then. "Get down on your knees."

Out on the street, cycle rickshaws clatter over cobbles. People call out, asking about the price of hemp rope and whether anyone knows the time of the Lumphini *muay thai*



fight. The knife hooks around her neck again, finds her pulse with its point. "I saw my friends all die in the forests because of Japanese windups."

She swallows, and repeats softly, "I am not that kind."

He laughs. "Of course not. You're some other creature. Another one of their devils like they keep in their shipyard across the river. Our people are starving, and your kind take their rice."

The blade presses against her throat. He will kill her. She is sure of it. His hatred is great, and she is nothing but trash. He is high and angry and dangerous and she is nothing. Even Gendo-sama couldn't have protected her from this. She swallows, feeling the blade press against her Adam's apple.

*Is this how you will die? Is this what you were meant for? To simply be bled out like a pig?*

A spark of rage flickers, an antidote to despair.

*Will you not even try to survive? Did the scientists make you too stupid even to consider fighting for your own life?*

Emiko closes her eyes and prays to Mizuko Jizo Bodhisattva, and then the *bakeneko* cheshire spirit for good measure. She takes a breath, and then with all her strength she slams her hand against the knife. The blade slices past her neck, a searing line.

"*Arai wa?!*" the man shouts.

Emiko shoves hard against him and ducks under his flailing knife. Behind her, she hears a grunt and thud as she bolts for the street. She doesn't look back. She plunges into the street, not caring that she shows herself as a windup, not caring that in running she will burn up and die. She runs, determined only to escape the demon behind her. She will burn, but she will not die passive like some pig led to slaughter.

She flies down the street, dodging pyramids of durian and hurdling over coiled hemp ropes. This suicidal flight is pointless, yet she will not stop. She shoves aside a *gaijin* haggling over burlap sacks of local U-TEX rice. He jerks away, crying out in alarm as she flashes past.

All around, the traffic of the street seems to have slowed to a crawl. Emiko weaves under the bamboo scaffolding of a construction site. Running is strangely easy. People move as if they're suspended in honey. Only she is moving. When she glances behind her, she sees that her pursuer has fallen far behind. He's astonishingly slow. Amazing that she even feared him. She laughs at the absurdity of this suspended world—

She slams into a laborer and goes sprawling, taking him down as well. The man shouts, "*Arai wa!* Watch where you're going!"

Emiko forces herself up to her knees, hands numb with abrasions. She tries to stand but the world tilts, blurry. She collapses. Pushes upright again, drunken, overwhelmed by the furnace heat within her. The ground tilts and rotates, but she manages to stand. Leans against a sun-baked wall as the man she hit shouts at her. His rage washes over her, meaningless. Darkness and heat are closing in on her. She's burning up.

Out in the street, in the tangle of mulie carts and bicycles, she catches sight of a *gaijin* face. She blinks away the closing darkness, stumbles forward a step. Is she mad? Does the *bakeneko* cheshire toy with her? She clutches the shoulder of the man who is shouting

at her, staring into the traffic, searching to confirm what her boiling brain has hallucinated. The laborer cries out and recoils from her touch, but she barely notices.

Another flash of the face in the traffic. It's the *gaijin*, the scarred pale one from Raleigh's place. The one who told her to go north. His rickshaw shows briefly before disappearing behind a megodont. And then he's there again, on the other side, looking toward her. Their eyes lock. The same man. She's sure of it.

"Grab her! Don't let that *heechy-keechy* get away!"

Her attacker, shouting and waving his knife as he clammers through bamboo scaffolding. She's amazed that he's so slow, so much slower than she would have expected. She watches, puzzled. Perhaps he is also crippled from his time in the war? But no, his gait is correct, it's just that everything around her is slow: the people, the traffic. Odd. Surreal and slow.

The laborer seizes her. Emiko lets herself be dragged, scanning the traffic for another glimpse of the *gaijin*. Did she hallucinate?

There! The *gaijin* again. Emiko throws off the laborer's grasp and lunges into traffic. With the last of her energy, she ducks under the belly of a megodont, nearly crashing into its great columnar legs and then she's on the other side, pacing the *gaijin's* rickshaw, reaching up to him like a beggar. . .

He observes her with cold eyes, completely detached. She stumbles and grabs at the rickshaw to steady herself, knowing he will shove her back. She is nothing but a windup. She was a fool. She was stupid to hope that he would see her as a person, a woman, as anything other than offal.

Abruptly he grabs her hand and pulls her aboard. The *gaijin* shouts at his driver to ride, to ride—*gan cui chi che, kuai kuai kuai!*—to hurry up. He spews words in three different languages and then they are accelerating, but slowly.

Her attacker leaps onto the rickshaw. He slashes her shoulder. Emiko watches as her blood sprays the seat. Jewel droplets suspended in sunlight. He raises the knife again. She tries to lift a hand to defend herself, to fight him off, but she's too tired. She's limp with exhaustion and heat. The man slashes again, screaming.

Emiko watches the knife descend, a movement as slow as honey poured in winter. So slow. So far away. Her flesh tears. Heat blur and exhaustion. She's fading. The knife descends again.

Suddenly the *gaijin* lunges between them. A spring gun gleams in his hand. Emiko watches, vaguely intrigued that the man carries a weapon, but the fight between the *gaijin* and the yaba addict is so very small and far away. So very very dark. . . Heat swallows her.

## 10

The windup girl does nothing to defend herself. She cries out, but barely flinches as the knife bites. "*Bai!*" Anderson shouts to Lao Gu. "*Kuai kuai kuai!*"

He shoves the attacker away as the cycle lurches forward. The Thai man hacks clumsily at Anderson, then goes after the windup girl again, slashing. She does nothing to

escape. Blood spatters. Anderson yanks a spring pistol from beneath his shirt and shoves it into the man's face. The man's eyes widen.

He drops off the rickshaw, running for cover. Anderson follows him with the barrel, trying to decide if he should put a disk in the man's head or let him escape, but the man ducks behind a megodont wagon, robbing him of the decision.

"Goddamnit." Anderson peers through the traffic, making sure the man is truly gone, then shoves his pistol back under his shirt. He turns to the slumped girl. "You're safe now."

The windup lies inert, clothes slashed and disarrayed, eyes closed, panting rapidly. When he presses his palm to her flushed forehead, she flinches and her eyelids flutter. Her skin is scalding. Listless black eyes stare up at him. "Please," she murmurs.

The heat in her skin is overwhelming. She's dying. Anderson yanks her jacket open, trying to vent her. She's burning up, overheated by her flight and poor genetic design. Absurd that anyone would do this to a creature, hobble it so.

He shouts over his shoulder, "Lao Gu! Go to the levees!" Lao Gu glances back, uncomprehending. "*Shui!* Water! *Nam!* The ocean, damn it!" Anderson motions toward the dike walls. "Quickly! *Kuai, kuai kuai!*"

Lao Gu nods sharply. He stands on his pedals and accelerates again, forcing the bike through the clotted traffic, calling out warnings and curses at obstructing pedestrians and draft animals. Anderson fans the windup girl with his hat.

At the levee walls, Anderson throws the windup girl over his shoulder and hauls her up uneven stairs. Guardian *naga* flank the stairs, their long undulating snake bodies guiding him upward. Their faces watch impassive as he staggers higher. Sweat drips in his eyes. The windup is a furnace against his skin.

He tops the levee. Red sun burns against his face, silhouetting drowned Thonburi across the waters. The sun is almost as hot as the body draped over his shoulder. He stumbles down the other side of the embankment and heaves the girl into the sea. The splash soaks him with saltwater.

She sinks like a stone. Anderson gasps and lunges after her sinking form. *You fool. You stupid fool.* He catches a limp arm and drags her body up from the depths. Holds her so that her face floats above the waves, bracing himself to keep her from sinking again. Her skin burns. He half expects the sea to boil around her. Her black hair fans out like a net in the lapping waves. She dangles in his grasp. Lao Gu jostles down beside him. Anderson waves him over. "Here. Hold her."

Lao Gu hesitates.

"Hold her, damn it. *Zhua ta.*"

Reluctantly, Lao Gu slides his hands under her arms. Anderson touches her neck, feeling for a pulse. Is her brain already cooked? He could be trying to revive a vegetable.

The windup's pulse whirs like a hummingbird's, faster than any creature her size should run. Anderson leans down to listen to her breathing.

Her eyes snap open. He jerks away. She thrashes and Lao Gu loses his grip. She disappears under water.

"No!" Anderson lunges after her.

She surfaces again, thrashing and coughing and reaching for him. Her hand locks on his and he pulls her to the bank. Her clothes swirl about her like tangled seaweed and her black hair glistens like silk. She stares up at Anderson with dark eyes. Her skin is suddenly blessedly cool.

\* \* \*

"Why did you help me?"

Methane lamps flicker on the streets, turning the city ethereal shades of green. Darkness has fallen and the lampposts hiss against the blackness. Humidity reflects on cobbles and concrete, gleams on people's skin as they lean close around candles in the night markets.

The windup girl asks again. "Why?"

Anderson shrugs, glad the darkness hides his expression. He doesn't have a good answer himself. If her attacker complains of a *farang* and a windup girl, it will trigger questions and attract white shirts to him. A foolish risk, considering how exposed he already finds himself. He's far too easy to describe, and it's not far from where he found the girl to Sir Francis', and from there to more uncomfortable questions.

He forces down his paranoia. He's as bad as Hock Seng. The *nak leng* was obviously high on *yaba*. He won't go to the white shirts. He'll slink away and lick his wounds.

Still, it was foolish.

When she fainted in the rickshaw he was sure that she was about to die, and a part of him had been glad. Relieved that he could take back that moment when he recognized her, and against all his training, tied his fate to hers.

He glances over at her. Her skin has lost its terrifying flush and furnace heat. She holds the remnants of slashed clothes around her, keeping her modesty. It's pitiable, really, that a creature so utterly owned clings to modesty.

"Why?" she asks again.

He shrugs again. "You needed help."

"No one helps a windup." Her voice is flat. "You are a fool." She pushes damp hair away from her face. A surreal stutter-stop motion, the genetic bits of her unkinking. Her smooth skin shines between the edges of her slashed blouse, the gentle promise of her breasts. What would she feel like? Her skin gleams, smooth and inviting.

She catches him staring. "Do you wish to use me?"

"No." he looks away, uneasy. "It's not necessary."

"I would not fight you," she says.

Anderson feels a sudden revulsion at the acquiescence in her voice. On another day, at another time, he probably would have taken her for the novelty. Thought nothing of it. But the fact that she expects so little fills him with distaste. He forces a smile. "Thank you. No."

She nods shortly. Looks out again at the humid night and the green glow of the street lamps. It's impossible to say if she is grateful or surprised, or if his decision even matters

to her. However her mask might have slipped in the heat of terror and relief of escape, her thoughts are carefully locked away now.

"Is there someplace I should take you?"

She shrugs. "Raleigh. He is the only one who will keep me."

"But he wasn't the first, was he? You weren't always. . ." He trails off. There's no polite word and, looking at the girl, he doesn't have the appetite to call her a toy.

She glances over at him, then out again at the passing city. Gas lights puddle the street with low green pockets of phosphor, separated by deep canyons of shadow. They pass under a lamp and Anderson catches her face, dimly illuminated, humidity sheened and pensive, before it disappears again in darkness.

"No. I was not always this way. Not. . ." she trails off. "Not like this." She falls quiet, thoughtful. "Mishimoto employed me. I had. . ." she shrugs, "an owner. An owner at the company. I was owned. Gen—my owner acquired a temporary foreign business exemption to bring me to the Kingdom. A ninety-day permit. Extendible by palace waiver because of the Japanese Friendship. I was his Personal Secretary: translation, office management and . . . companion." Another shrug, more felt than seen. "But it is expensive to return to Japan. A dirigible ticket for a New Person is the same as for your kind. My owner concluded that leaving his secretary in Bangkok was more economical. When his assignment here ended, he decided to upgrade new in Osaka."

"Jesus and Noah."

She shrugs. "I was given my final pay at the anchor pad and he went away. Up and away."

"And now Raleigh?" he asks.

Again the shrug. "No Thai wants a New Person for secretary, or translation. In Japan, okay. Common, even. Too few babies born, too much working needed. Here . . ." She shakes her head. "Calorie markets are controlled. Everyone is jealous for U-Tex. Everyone protects their rice. Raleigh does not care. Raleigh. . . likes novelty."

The clouded scent of fish frying washes over them, greasy and cloying. A night market, full of people dining by candlelight, hunched over noodles and skewers of octopus and plates of *laap*. Anderson stifles an urge to raise the rickshaw's rain hood and close the privacy curtain, to hide the evidence of her company. Woks flame brightly with the telltale green sparkles of Environment Ministry-taxed methane. The sweat sheen on the people's dark skins is barely lit. At their feet, cheshires circle, alert for charity scraps and opportunities for theft.

A cheshire shadow bleeds across the darkness, causing Lao Gu to swerve. He curses softly in his own language. Emiko laughs, a small surprised sound as she claps her hands in delight. Lao Gu glares back at her.

"You like cheshires?" Anderson asks.

Emiko looks at him in surprise. "You do not?"

"Back home, we can't kill them fast enough," he says. "Even Grahamites offer blue bills for their skins. Probably the only thing they've ever done that I agreed with."

"Mmm, yes." Emiko's brow wrinkles thoughtfully. "They are too much improved for this world, I think. A natural bird has so little chance, now." She smiles slightly. "Just think if they had made New People first."

Is it mischief in her eyes? Or melancholy?

"What do you think would have happened?" Anderson asks.

Emiko doesn't meet his gaze, looks out instead at the circling cats amongst the diners. "Generippers learned too much from cheshires."

She doesn't say anything else, but Anderson can guess what's in her mind. If her kind had come first, before the generippers knew better, she would not have been made sterile. She would not have the signature tick-tock motions that make her so physically obvious. She might have even been designed as well as the military windups now operating in Vietnam—deadly and fearless. Without the lesson of the cheshires, Emiko might have had the opportunity to supplant the human species entirely with her own improved version. Instead, she is a genetic dead end. Doomed to a single life cycle, just like SoyPRO and TotalNutrient Wheat.

Another shadow cat bolts across the street, shimmering and shading through darkness. A high-tech homage to Lewis Carroll, a few dirigible and clipper ship rides, and suddenly entire classes of animals are wiped out, unequipped to fight an invisible threat.

"We would have realized our mistake," Anderson observes.

"Yes. Of course. But perhaps not soon enough." She changes the subject abruptly. Nods at a temple rising against the night skyline. "It's very pretty, yes? You like their temples?"

Anderson wonders if she has changed the subject to avoid conflict and argument, or if she is actually afraid that he will successfully refute her fantasy. He studies the rising *chedi* and *bot* of the temple. "It's a lot nicer than what the Grahamites are building back home."

"Grahamites." She makes a face. "So concerned with niche and nature. So focused on their Noah's ark, after the flood has already happened."

Anderson thinks of Hagg, sweating and distressed at the destruction caused by ivory beetle. "If they could, they'd keep us all on our own continents."

"It is impossible, I think. People like to expand. To fill new niches."

The temple's golden filigree shines dully under the moon. The world truly is shrinking again. A few dirigible and clipper rides and Anderson clatters through darkened streets on the far side of the planet. It's astounding. In his grandparents' time, even the commute between an old Expansion suburb and a city center was impossible. His grandparents used to tell stories of exploring abandoned suburbs, scavenging for the scrap and leavings of whole sprawling neighborhoods that were destroyed in the petroleum Contraction. To travel ten miles had been a great journey for them, and now look at him. . .

Ahead of them, white uniforms materialize at the mouth of an alley.

Emiko blanches and leans close. "Hold me."

Anderson tries to shake her off, but she clings. The white shirts have stopped, are watching them approach. The windup clings more tightly. Anderson fights an urge to shove her from the rickshaw and flee. This is the last thing he needs.

She whispers, "I am against quarantine now, like Nippon genehack weevil. If they see my movement, they will know. They will mulch me." She nestles close. "I am sorry. Please." Her eyes beg.

In a sudden rush of pity he wraps his arms around her, enfolding her in whatever protection a calorie man can offer a piece of illegal Japanese trash. The Ministry men call out to them, smiling. Anderson smiles back and gives a bob of the head, even as his skin prickles. The white shirts' eyes linger. One of them smiles and says something to the other as he twirls the baton that dangles from his wrist. Emiko shivers uncontrollably beside Anderson, her smile a forced mask. Anderson pulls her closer.

*Please don't ask for a bribe. Not this time. Please.*

They slide past.

Behind them, the white shirts start laughing, either about the *farang* and the girl clutched together or about something else completely unrelated and it doesn't matter really because they are disappearing into the distance and he and Emiko are safe again.

She draws away, shaking. "Thank you," she whispers. "I was careless to come out. Stupid." She pushes her hair away from her face and looks back. The Ministry men are quickly receding. Her fists clench. "Stupid girl," she murmurs. "You are not a cheshire who disappears as you please." She shakes her head, angry, driving home her own lesson. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

Anderson watches, transfixed. Emiko is adapted for a different sort of world, not this brutal sweltering place. The city will swallow her eventually. It's obvious.

She becomes aware of his gaze. Shares a small melancholy smile. "Nothing lasts forever, I think."

"No." Anderson's throat is tight.

They stare at one another. Her blouse has fallen open again, showing the line of her throat, the inner curve of her breasts. She doesn't move to hide herself, just looks back at him, solemn. Is it deliberate? Does she mean to encourage him? Or is it simply her nature to entice? Perhaps she cannot help herself at all. A set of instincts as ingrained in her DNA as the cheshire's clever stalking of birds. Anderson leans close, unsure.

Emiko doesn't pull away, moves instead to meet him. Her lips are soft. Anderson runs his hand up her hip, pushes her blouse open and quests inside. She sighs and presses closer, her lips opening to him. Does she wish this? Or only acquiesce? Is she even capable of refusing? Her breasts press against him. Her hands slip down his body. He's shaking. Trembling like a sixteen-year-old boy. Did the geneticists embed her DNA with pheromones? Her body is intoxicating.

Mindless of the street, of Lao Gu, of everything, he pulls her to him, running his hand up to cup her breast, to hold her perfect flesh.

The windup girl's heart speeds like a hummingbird's under his palm.

Jaidee has a certain respect for the Chaozhou Chinese. Their factories are large and well-run. They have generations rooted in the Kingdom, and they are intensely loyal to Her Majesty the Child Queen. They are utterly unlike the pathetic Chinese refugees who have flooded in from Malaya, fleeing to his country in hopes of succor after they alienated the natives of their own. If the Malayan Chinese had been half as clever as the Chaozhou, they would have converted to Islam generations ago, and woven themselves fully into the tapestry of that society.

Instead, the Chinese of Malacca and Penang and the Western Coast arrogantly held themselves apart, thinking the rising tide of fundamentalism would not affect them. And now they come begging to the Kingdom, hoping that their Chaozhou cousins will aid them when they were not clever enough to help themselves.

The Chaozhou are smart, where the Malayan Chinese are stupid. They are practically Thai themselves. They speak Thai. They took Thai names. They may have Chinese roots somewhere in their distant past, but they are Thai. And they are loyal. Which, when Jaidee thinks about it, is more than can be said about some of his own race, certainly more than can be said of Akkarat and his brood at the Trade Ministry.

So Jaidee feels a certain sympathy when a Chaozhou businessman in a long white shirt, loose cotton trousers and sandals strides back and forth in front of him on the factory floor, complaining that his factory has been shut down because some coal ration has been exceeded, when he paid every white shirt who came through his door, and that Jaidee has no right—*no right*—to shut down the entire factory.

Jaidee even has sympathy when the man calls him a turtle's egg—which is certainly an annoying thing to hear, knowing that it is a terrible insult in Chinese. Yet still, he remains tolerant of the emotional explosions on the part of this businessman. It's in the Chinese nature to be a bit hot-hearted. They are given to explosions of emotion that a Thai would never indulge in.

All in all, Jaidee has sympathy for the man.

But he doesn't have sympathy for a man who shoves a finger into his chest repeatedly while he curses, and so Jaidee is sitting atop that man's chest now—with a black baton over his windpipe—explaining the finer points of respect due a white shirt.

"You seem to have mistaken me for another Ministry man," Jaidee observes.

The man gurgles and tries to get free, but the baton crushing his throat prevents him. Jaidee watches him carefully. "You of course understand that we have coal rationing because we are a city underwater. Your carbon allocation was exceeded many months ago."

"Ghghhaha."

Jaidee considers the response. Shakes his head sadly. "No. I think that we cannot allow it to continue. King Rama XII decreed, and Her Royal Majesty the Child Queen now supports that we shall never abandon Krung Thep to the invasions of the rising sea. We will not flee from our City of Divine Beings the way the cowards of Ayutthaya fled from the Burmese. The ocean is not some marching army. Once we accede to the waters, we will never again throw it out." He regards the sweating Chinese man. "And so we



must all do our part. We must all fight together, like the villagers of Bang Rajan, to keep this invader from our streets, don't you think?"

"Gghhghghghhhhh. . ."

"Good." Jaidee smiles. "I'm glad we're making progress."

Someone clears his throat.

Jaidee looks up, stifling his annoyance. "Yes?"

A young private in new whites stands respectfully, waiting. "*Khun* Jaidee" He *wais*, lowering his head to his pressed palms. Holds the pose. "I am very sorry for my interruption."

"Yes?"

"*Chao Khun* General Pracha requests your presence."

"I'm busy," Jaidee says. "Our friend here finally seems willing to communicate with a cool heart and a reasonable demeanor." He smiles kindly down at the businessman.

The boy says, "I was to tell you. . . I was told to, to. . ."

"Go ahead."

"To tell you that you should get your, your – so sorry – 'glory-seeking ass' – so sorry – back to the Ministry. Immediately if not before." He winces at the words. "If you have no cycle you were supposed to take mine."

Jaidee grimaces. "Ah. Yes. Well then." He gets up off the businessman. Nods to Kanya. "Lieutenant? Perhaps you can reason with our friend here?"

Kanya makes a face of puzzlement. "Is something wrong?"

"It seems Pracha is finally ready to rant and rave at me."

"Should I come with you?" Kanya glances at the businessman. "This lizard can wait for another day."

Jaidee grins at her concern. "Don't worry about me. Finish here. I'll let you know whether we're being exiled south to guard yellow card internments for the rest of our careers when you get back."

As they head for the door, the businessman musters new bravery. "I'll have your head for this, *heeya!*"

The sound of Kanya's club connecting and a yelp are the last things Jaidee hears as he exits the factory.

Outside, the sun glares down. He's already sweating from the exertion of working on the businessman, and the sun burns uncomfortably. He stands under the shade of a coconut palm until the messenger can bring the bike around.

The boy eyes Jaidee's sweating face with concern. "You wish to rest?"

Jaidee laughs. "Don't worry about me, I'm just getting old. That *heeya* was a troublesome one, and I'm not the fighter I used to be. In the cool season I wouldn't be sweating so."

"You won a lot of fights."

"Some." Jaidee grins. "And I trained in weather hotter than this."

"Your lieutenant could do such work," the boy says. "No need for you to work so hard."

Jaidee wipes his brow and shakes his head. "And then what would my men think? That I'm lazy."

The boy gasps. "No one would think such a thing of you. Never!"

"When you're a captain, you'll understand better." Jaidee smiles indulgently. "Men are loyal when you lead from the front. I won't have a man wasting his time winding a crank fan for me, or waving a palm frond just to keep me comfortable like those *heeya* in the Trade Ministry. I may lead, but we are all brothers. When you're a captain, promise me you'll do the same."

The boy's eyes shine. He *wais* again. "Yes, *Khun*. I won't forget. Thank you!"

"Good boy." Jaidee swings his leg over the boy's bike. "When Lieutenant Kanya is finished here, she'll give you a ride back on our tandem."

He steers out into traffic. In the hot season, without rain, not many except the insane or the motivated are out in the direct heat, but covered arches and paths hide markets full of vegetables and cooking implements and clothing.

At Thanon Na Phralan, Jaidee takes his hands off the handlebars to *wai* to the City Pillar Shrine as he passes, whispering a prayer for the safety of the spiritual heart of Bangkok. It is the place where King Rama XII first announced that they would not abandon the city to the rising seas. Now, the sound of monks chanting for the city's survival filters out onto the street, filling Jaidee with a sense of peace. He raises his hands to his forehead three times, one of a river of other riders who all do the same.

Fifteen minutes later, the Environment Ministry appears, a series of buildings, red-tiled, with steeply sloping roofs peering out of bamboo thickets and teak and rain trees. High white walls and Garuda and Singha images guard the Ministry's perimeter, stained with old rain marks and fringed with growing ferns and mosses.

Jaidee has seen the compound from the air, one of a handful taken up for a dirigible overflight of the city when Chaiyanuchit still ran the Ministry and white shirt influence was absolute, when the plagues that swept the earth were killing crops at such a fantastic rate that no one knew if anything at all would survive.

Chaiyanuchit remembered the beginning of the plagues. Not many could claim that. And when Jaidee was just a young draftee, he was lucky enough to work in the man's office, bringing dispatches.

Chaiyanuchit understood what was at stake, and what had to be done. When the borders needed closing, when ministries needed isolating, when Phuket and Chiang Mai needed razing, he did not hesitate. When jungle blooms exploded in the north, he burned and burned and burned, and when he took to the sky in His Majesty the King's dirigible, Jaidee was blessed to ride with him.

By then, they were only mopping up. AgriGen and PurCal and the rest were shipping their plague-resistant seeds and demanding exorbitant profits, and patriotic generippers were already working to crack the code of the calorie companies' products, fighting to keep the Kingdom fed as Burma and the Vietnamese and the Khmers all fell. AgriGen and its ilk were threatening embargo over intellectual property infringement, but the Thai

Kingdom was still alive. Against all odds, they were alive. As others were crushed under the calorie companies' heels, the Kingdom stood strong.

*Embargo!* Chaiyanuchit had laughed. *Embargo is precisely what we want! We do not wish to interact with their outside world at all.*

And so the walls had gone up—those that the oil collapse had not already created, those that had not been raised against civil war and starving refugees—a final set of barriers to protect the Kingdom from the onslaughts of the outside world.

As a young inductee Jaidee had been astounded at the hive of activity that was the Environment Ministry. White shirts rushing from office to street as they tried to maintain tabs on thousands of hazards. In no other ministry was the sense of urgency so acute. Plagues waited for no one. A single genehack weevil found in an outlying district meant a response time counted in hours, white shirts on a kink-spring train rushing across the countryside to the epicenter.

And at every turn the Ministry's purview was expanding. The plagues were but the latest insult to the Kingdom's survival. First came the rising sea levels, the need to construct the dikes and levees. And then came the oversight of power contracts and trading in pollution credits and climate infractions. The white shirts took over the licensing of methane capture and production. Then there was the monitoring of fishery health and toxin accumulations in the Kingdom's final bastion of calorie support (a blessing that the *farang* calorie companies thought as land-locked people and had only desultorily attacked fishing stocks). And there was the tracking of human health and viruses and bacteria: H7V9; cibiscoscosis111.b, c, d; *fa' gan* fringe; bitter water mussels, and their viral mutations that jumped so easily from saltwater to dry land; blister rust. . . There was no end to the duties of the Ministry.

Jaidee passes a woman selling bananas. He can't resist hopping off his bike to buy one. It's a new varietal from the Ministry's rapid prototyping unit. Fast growing, resistant to *makmak* mites with their tiny black eggs that sicken banana flowers before they can hope to grow. He peels the banana and eats it greedily as he pushes his bike along, wishing he could take the time to have a real snack. He discards the peel beside the bulk of a rain tree.

All life produces waste. The act of living produces costs, hazards and disposal questions, and so the Ministry has found itself in the center of all life, mitigating, guiding and policing the detritus of the average person along with investigating the infractions of the greedy and short-sighted, the ones who wish to make quick profits and trade on others' lives for it.

The symbol for the Environment Ministry is the eye of a tortoise, for the long view—the understanding that nothing comes cheap or quickly without a hidden cost. And if others call them the Turtle Ministry, and if the Chaozhou Chinese now curse white shirts as turtle's eggs because they are not allowed to manufacture as many kink-spring scooters as they would like, so be it. If the *farang* make fun of the tortoise for its slow pace, so be it. The Environment Ministry has ensured that the Kingdom endures, and Jaidee can only stand in awe of its past glories.

And yet, when Jaidee climbs off his bicycle outside the Ministry gate, a man glares at him and a woman turns away. Even just outside their own compound—or perhaps particularly there—the people he protects turn away from him.

Jaidee grimaces and wheels his cycle past the guards.

The compound is still a hive of activity, and yet it is so different from when he first joined. There is mold on the walls and chunks of the edifice are cracking under the pressure of vines. An old *bo* tree leans against a wall, rotting, underlining their failures. It has lain so for ten years, rotting. Unremarked amongst the other things that have also died. There is an air of wreckage to the place, of jungle attempting to reclaim what was carved from it. If the vines were not cleared from the paths, the Ministry would disappear entirely. In a different time, when the the Ministry was a hero of the people, it was different. Then, people genuflected before Ministry officers, three times *khhabbed* to the ground as though they were monks themselves, their white uniforms inspiring respect and adoration. Now Jaidee watches civilians flinch as he walks past. Flinch and run.

He is a bully, he thinks sourly. Nothing but a bully walking amongst water buffalo, and though he tries to herd them with kindness, again and again, he finds himself using the whip of fear. The whole Ministry is the same—at least, those who still understand the dangers that they face, who still believe in the bright white line of protection that must be maintained.

*I am a bully.*

He sighs and parks the cycle in front of the administrative offices, which are desperately in need of a whitewashing that the shrinking budget cannot finance. Jaidee eyes the building, wondering if the Ministry has come to crisis thanks to overreaching, or because of its phenomenal success. People have lost their fear of the outside world. Environment's budget shrinks yearly while that of Trade increases.

Jaidee finds a seat outside the general's office. White shirt officers walk past, carefully ignoring him. That he is waiting in front of Pracha's office should fill him with some satisfaction. It isn't often that he is called before a man of rank. He's done something right, for once. A young man approaches hesitantly. *Wais*.

"*Khun* Jaidee?"

At Jaidee's nod, the young man breaks into a grin. His hair is cropped close and his eyebrows are only slight shadows; he has just come out of the monastery.

"*Khun*, I hoped it was you." He hesitates, then holds out a small card. It is painted in the old Sukhothai-style and depicts a young man in combat, blood on his face, driving an opponent down into the ring. His features are stylized, but Jaidee can't help smiling at the sight of it.

"Where did you get this?"

"I was at the fight, *Khun*. In the village. I was only this big—" he holds his hand up to his waist "—only like this, perhaps. Maybe smaller." He laughs self-consciously. "You made me want to be a fighter. When Dithakar knocked you down and your blood was everywhere, I thought you were finished. I didn't think you were big enough to take him. He had muscles. . ." he trails off.

"I remember. It was a good fight."

The youth grins. "Yes, *Khun*. Fabulous. I thought I wanted to be a fighter, too."

"And now look at you."

The boy runs his hand over his close-cropped hair. "Ah. Well. Fighting is harder than I thought. . . but. . ." He pauses. "Would you sign it? The card? Please. I would like to give it to my father. He still speaks highly of your fights."

Jaidee smiles and signs. "Dithakar was not the most clever fighter I ever faced, but he was strong. I wish all my fights were so clear-cut."

"Captain Jaidee," a voice interrupts. "If you are quite finished with your fans."

The young man *wais* and flees. Jaidee watches him run and thinks that perhaps not all of the younger generation is a waste. Perhaps. . . Jaidee turns to face the general. "He is just a boy."

Pracha glowers at Jaidee. Jaidee grins. "And it's hardly my fault that I was a good fighter. The Ministry was my sponsor for those years. I think you won quite a lot of money and recruits because of me, *Khun* General, sir."

"Don't give me your 'General' nonsense. We've known each other too long for that. Get in here."

"Yes, sir."

Pracha grimaces and waves Jaidee into the office. "In!"

Pracha closes the door and goes to sit behind the expanse of his mahogany desk. Overhead, a crank fan beats desultorily at the air. The room is large, with shuttered windows open to allow light but little direct sun. The slits of the windows look out onto the Ministry's ragged grounds. On one wall are various paintings and photographs, including one with Pracha's graduating class of ministry cadets along with another of Chaiyanuchit, founder of their modern ministry. Another of Her Royal Majesty the Child Queen, looking tiny and terrifyingly vulnerable seated on her throne, and in a corner, a small shrine to Buddha, Phra Pikanet and Seub Nakhasathien. Incense and marigolds drape the shrine.

Jaidee *wais* the shrine then finds himself a seat in a rattan chair across from Pracha. "Where did you get that class photo?"

"What?" Pracha looks back. "Ah. We were young, then, weren't we? I found it in my mother's belongings. She had it all these years, tucked away in a closet. Who would have guessed the old lady was so sentimental?"

"It's a nice thing to see."

"You overstepped yourself at the anchor pads."

Jaidee returns his attention to Pracha. Whisper sheets lie scattered on the desk, rustling under the breeze of the crank fan: *Thai Rath*. *Kom Chad Luek*. *Phuchatkan Rai Wan*. Many of them with photos of Jaidee on the cover. "The newspapers don't think so."

Pracha scowls. He shoves the papers into a bin for composting. "The papers love a hero. It sells copies. Don't believe these people who call you a tiger for fighting the *farang*. The *farang* are the key to our future."

Jaidee nods at the portrait of his mentor Chaiyanuchit hanging below the Queen's image. "I am not certain that he would agree."

"Times change, old friend. People are hunting for your head."

"And you'll give it to them?"

Pracha sighs. "Jaidee, I've known you too long for this. I know you're a fighter. And I know you have a hot heart." He holds up a hand as Jaidee stirs to protest. "Yes, a good heart, also, just like your name, but still, *jai rawn*. Not a bit of *jai yen* in you. You relish the conflict." He purses his lips. "So I know that if I rein you in, you will fight. And if I punish you, you will fight."

"Then let me go about my business. The Ministry benefits from a loose cannon like me."

"People were offended by your action. And not just stupid *farang*. Not everyone who ships air cargo is *farang*, these days. Our interests reach far and wide. Thai interests."

Jaidee studies the general's desk. "I wasn't aware that the Environment Ministry only inspected cargo at others' convenience."

"I am trying to reason with you. My hands are full with tigers: blister rust, weevil, the coal war, Trade Ministry infiltrators, yellow cards, greenhouse quotas, *fa' gan* outbreaks. . . And yet you choose to add another."

Jaidee looks up. "Who is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Who is so angry that you're pissing your pants this way? Coming to ask me not to fight? It's Trade, yes? Someone in the Trade Ministry has you by the balls."

Pracha doesn't say anything for a moment. "I don't know who it is. Better that you don't know, either. What you do not know, you cannot fight." He slides a card across the desk. "This arrived today, under my door." His eyes lock on Jaidee so that Jaidee cannot look away. "Right here in the office. Inside the compound, you understand? We are completely infiltrated."

Jaidee turns over the card.

\* \* \*

Niwat and Surat are good boys. Four and Six. Young men. Fighters already. Niwat once came home with a bloody nose and bright eyes and told Jaidee that he had fought honorably and been horribly beaten, but that he was going to train and he would take the *heeya* next time.

Chaya despairs over this. She accuses Jaidee of filling their heads with impossible ideas. Surat follows Niwat and encourages him, tells Niwat he can't be beat. Tells him he is a tiger. The best of the best. That he will reign in Krung Thep, and bring honor to them all. Surat calls himself trainer and tells Niwat to hit harder next time. Niwat is not afraid of beatings. He is not afraid of anything. He is four.

It is at times like these that Jaidee's heart breaks. Only once when he was in the *muay thai* ring was he afraid. But many times when he has worked, he has been terrified. Fear is part of him. Fear is part of the Ministry. What else but fear could close borders, burn towns, slaughter fifty thousand chickens and inter them wholesale under clean dirt and a thick powdering of lye? When the Thonburi virus hit, he and his men wore little rice paper masks that were no protection and they shoveled avian corpses into mass graves, while their fears swirled around them like *phii*. Could the virus really have come so far in

such little time? Would it spread further? Would it continue to accelerate? Was this the virus that would finally finish them? He and his men were quarantined for thirty days while they waited to die, and fear was their only companion. Jaidee works for a ministry that cannot hold against all the threats it faces; he is afraid all the time.

It is not fighting that he fears; it is not death; it is the waiting and uncertainty, and it breaks Jaidee's heart that Niwat knows nothing of the waiting terrors, and that the waiting terrors are all around them now. So many things can only be fought by waiting. Jaidee is a man of action. He fought in the ring. He wore his Seub luck amulets blessed by Ajahn Nopadon himself in the White Temple, and went forth. He carried only his black baton and quelled the *nam* riots of Katchanaburi single-handed by striding into the crowd.

And yet the only battles that matter are the waiting battles: when his father and mother succumbed to cibiscosis and coughed the meat of their lungs out between their teeth; when his sister and Chaya's sister both saw their hands thicken and crack with the cauliflower growths of *fa' gan* before the ministry stole the genetic map from the Chinese and manufactured a partial cure. They prayed every day to Buddha and practiced non-attachment and hoped that their two sisters would find a better rebirth than this one that turned their fingers to clubs and chewed away at their joints. They prayed. And waited.

It breaks Jaidee's heart that Niwat knows no fear, and that Surat trains him so. It breaks his heart that he cannot make himself intervene, and he curses himself for it. Why must he destroy childhood illusions of invincibility? Why him? He resents this role.

Instead, he lets his children tackle him and roars, "Ahh, you are a tiger's sons! Too fierce! Too fierce by half!" And they are pleased and laugh and tackle him again, and he lets them win, and shows them tricks that he has learned since the ring, the tricks a fighter in the streets must know, where no combat is ritualized and where even a champion has things to learn. He teaches them how to fight, because it is all he knows. And the other thing—the waiting thing—is something he could never prepare them for, anyway.

These are his thoughts as he turns over Pracha's card, as his own heart closes in on itself, like a block of stone falling inward, as though the center of himself is plunging down a well, dragging all his innards with him, leaving him hollow.

Chaya.

Curled against a wall, blindfolded, hands behind her back, ankles tied before her. On the wall, "All Respect to the Environment Ministry" is scrawled in brown letters that must be blood. There is a bruise on Chaya's cheek. She wears the same blue *pha sin* that she had on when she made him a breakfast of *gaeng kiew wan* and sent him on his way this morning with a laugh.

He stares dumbly at the photo.

His sons are fighters, but they do not know this warfare. He himself does not know how to skirmish like this. A faceless foe who reaches out to touch him on the throat, who strokes a demon claw along his jaw and whispers *I can hurt you* without ever showing its face, without ever presenting itself as an opponent at all.

At first, Jaidee's voice doesn't work. Finally, he manages to croak, "Is she alive?"

Pracha sighs. "We don't know."

"Who did this?"

"I don't know."

"You must!"

"If we knew, we would already have her safe in hand!" Pracha rubs his face angrily, then glares at Jaidee. "We've received so many complaints about you, from so many quarters, that we just don't know! It could be anyone."

A new terror seizes Jaidee. "What about my sons?" He leaps to his feet. "I have to—"

"Sit down!" Pracha lunges across the desk and grabs him. "We've sent men to their school. Your own men. Loyal to you only. The only ones we could trust. They're fine. They're being brought to the Ministry. You need to have a cool heart and consider your position. You want to keep this quiet. We don't want anyone to make sudden decisions. We want Chaya to come back to us whole and alive. Too much noise and someone will lose face and then her body will surely arrive in bloody pieces."

Jaidee stares at the photograph still lying on the desk. He stands and starts to pace. "It has to be Trade." His thoughts go back to the night at the anchor pads, the man, watching him and his white shirts from across the landing fields. Casual. Contemptuous. Spitting a stream of betel like blood and slipping into the darkness. "It was Trade."

"It could have been *farang*, or the Dung Lord—he never liked that you wouldn't fix fights. It could have been some other godfather, some *jao por* who lost money on a smuggling operation."

"None of them would stoop so low. It was Trade. There is a man—"

"Stop!" Pracha slams his hand on his desk. "Everyone would like to stoop so low! You've made a lot of enemies very quickly. I've even had a *chaopraya* peer from the palace complaining. It could be anyone."

"You blame me for this?"

Pracha sighs. "There's no point in assigning blame. It's done now. You made enemies; I allowed you." He puts his head in his hands. "We need you to make a public apology. Something to appease them."

"I won't."

"Won't?" Pracha laughs bitterly. "Put away that foolish pride of yours." He fingers the picture of Chaya. "What do you think their next move will be? We haven't had *heeya* like this since the last Expansion. Money at any cost. Wealth at any price." He makes a face. "Right now, we may still be able to get her back. But if you continue?" He shakes his head. "They will surely slaughter her. They are animals."

"You will make a public apology for your actions at the anchor pads and you will be demoted. You will be transferred, probably to the south to process yellow cards and handle internments down there." He sighs and studies the picture again. "And if we are very very careful, and very lucky, perhaps you will get Chaya back."

"Don't look at me that way, Jaidee. If you were still in the *muay thai* ring, I would place every baht I own on you. But this is a different sort of fight." Pracha leans forward, nearly begging. "Please. Do what I say. Bow before these winds."

How was Hock Seng to know that the *tamade* anchor pads would be shut down? How was he to know that all his bribes would be wasted by the Tiger of Bangkok?



Hock Seng grimaces at the memory of his meeting with Mr. Lake. Of crouching before that pale monster as though he were some sort of god, kowtowing obeisance while the creature shouted and swore and rained newspapers down on his head, all of them with Jaidee Rojjanasukchai on their front pages. The Tiger of Bangkok, a curse in his own right, as bad as one of the Thais' demons.

"*Khun*—" Hock Seng tried to protest, but Mr. Lake cut him off.

"You told me you had everything arranged!" he shouted. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't fire you!"

Hock Seng huddled under the assault, forcing himself not to fight back. Tried to be reasonable. "*Khun*, everyone lost material. This is the doing of Carlyle & Sons. Mr. Carlyle is too close to Trade Minister Akkarat. He is always goading the white shirts. Always insulting them—"

"Don't change the subject! The algae tanks should have cleared Customs last week. You told me you paid the bribes. And now I find out you were keeping money back. This wasn't Carlyle, this was you. Your fault."

"*Khun*, it was the Tiger of Bangkok. He is a natural disaster. An earthquake, a tsunami. You cannot blame me for not knowing—"

"I'm tired of being lied to. You think because I'm *farang* that I'm stupid? That I don't see how you work the books? How you manipulate and lie and sneak—"

"I do not lie—"

"I don't care about your explanations and excuses! Your words are shit! I don't care what you say. I don't care what you think, what you feel, what you say. All I care about is results. Bring the line up to forty percent reliability within the month, or go back to the yellow card towers. That's your choice. You have a month before I fire your ass and find another manager."

"*Khun*—"

"Do you understand?"

Hock Seng stared bitterly at the floor, glad the creature couldn't see his expression. "Of course Lake *Xiansheng*, I understand. It will be as you say."

Before he had even finished speaking, the foreign devil was stalking out of the office, leaving Hock Seng behind. It was enough of an insult that Hock Seng considered pouring acid on the great safe and simply stealing the factory plans. In his white-hot rage, he got as far as the supply cabinets before good sense reined him in.

If harm befell the factory, or the safe were robbed, suspicion would fall to him first. And if he ever hopes to forge a life in this new country, he cannot have any more blackness attached to his name. The white shirts need few excuses to revoke a yellow card. To kick a beggar Chinese back across the border and into the hands of fundamentalists. He must be patient. He must survive in this *tamade* factory for another day.

So instead, Hock Seng lashes the employees forward, approves repairs that bleed more money, uses even his own carefully embezzled stores of cash to grease the skids so that Mr. Lake's demands will not escalate, so that the *tamade* foreign devil will not

destroy him. They run tests on the line, rip up old drive links, canvass the city for teak that can be repurposed as a spindle.

He has Laughing Chan offering a bounty to every yellow card in the city for rumors of old Expansion properties that may have crumbled and revealed structural items worth harvesting. Anything that will allow them to bring the line back to full production before the monsoons finally pour down and make river transport of a new teak spindle practicable.

Hock Seng grinds his teeth with frustration. Everything is so close to fruition. And yet now his survival depends on a line that never worked and on people who have never been successful. It's almost enough for Hock Seng to attempt a little arm twisting of his own. To tell the *tamade* devil that he knows something of Mr. Lake's extracurricular life, thanks to the reports of Lao Gu. That he knows every place Mr. Lake has visited, of his trips to libraries and old family homes in Bangkok. Of his fascination with seeds.

And now this strangest, most astonishing thing. The news that sent Lao Gu scurrying to Hock Seng as soon as it occurred. A windup girl. An illegal piece of genetic trash. A girl that Mr. Lake pursues as if he is drunk on the transgression. Lao Gu whispers that Mr. Lake brings the creature to his bed. Does so repeatedly. Pines for it.

Astonishing. Disgusting.

Useful.

But a weapon to be used as a last resort, if Mr. Lake attempts to truly eject him from the factory. Better to have Lao Gu watching and listening and gathering more information than revealed and fired. When Hock Seng first arranged Lao Gu's employment, it was for just this sort of possibility. He must not waste this one bit of leverage just because he is angry. And so instead, even as his face feels as if it has been thrown on the floor, Hock Seng jumps like a monkey to make the foreign devil happy.

Hock Seng grimaces as he crosses the factory floor, following Kit to another point of complaint. Problems. Always more problems.

All around them, the activity of repair echoes. Half the power train has been torn out of the floor and reset. Nine Buddhist monks chant steadily at the far side of the building, stretching the Thais' sacred thread that they call *saisin* everywhere and imploring the spirits that infest the place—half of them likely Contraction *phii* who are angered that the Thais are working for *farang* at all—begging them to allow the factory to work correctly. Hock Seng grimaces at the sight of monks and the expenses he is incurring.

"What's this new problem?" Hock Seng asks as they squeeze past the cutting presses and duck under the line.

"It's here, *Khun*. I'll show you," Kit says.

The salty warm stink of algae thickens, a humid reek that hangs heavy in the air. Kit points to the algae tanks where they stand in damp ranks, three dozen open surface breeding vats. Their waters are coated with the rich green skim of algae breeding. A worker is dragging her net across the surface of the tanks, drawing off the skim. She smears it across a man-sized screen before hoisting it up on hemp ropes to hang overhead with the hundreds of similar screens.

"It's the tanks." Kit says. "They are contaminated."

"Yes?" Hock Seng eyes the tanks, hiding his distaste. "What is the difficulty?"

With the healthiest vats, the skim is more than six inches thick, a pillowy vibrant chlorophyll green. The voluptuous scent of seawater and life emanates from them. Water trickles down the sides of the translucent tanks, thin lines that damp the floor and leave salty white blooms as they evaporate. Streamers of still-living algae trail down drain channels to rusty iron grates and disappear into darkness.

Pig DNA and something else. . . flax, Hock Seng thinks. It was flax that Mr. Yates always believed had been the key to this algae. That made it produce such useful skim. But Hock Seng always liked the pig proteins. Pigs are lucky. This algae should be, also. And yet it has caused nothing but trouble, despite its potential.

Kit smiles nervously as he shows Hock Seng how several of the tanks have lowered levels of algae production, an off-color skim, and a fishy reek, something more akin to shrimp paste than the verdant salty smells of the more active tanks.

"Banyat said they should not be used. That we should wait until the replacement supplies came."

Hock Seng laughs harshly and shakes his head. "We won't have any replacements. Not with the Tiger of Bangkok burning everything that comes off the anchor pads. You'll have to make do with what we have."

"But it's contaminated. There are potential vectors. The problem could spread into the other tanks."

"You're certain of that?"

"Banyat said—"

"Banyat walked under a megodont. And if we don't have this line running soon, the *farang* will be sending us all out to starve."

"But—"

"You think another fifty Thais wouldn't like your job? A thousand yellow cards?"

Kit closes his mouth. Hock Seng nods grimly. "Make this line work."

"If the white shirts inspect us, they will see that the baths are impure." Kit runs his finger through a gray froth coating the rim of one of the tanks. "We shouldn't be seeing this. The algae should be much brighter. None of this bubbling."

Hock Seng studies the tanks sourly. "If we don't get the line running we all starve." He's about to say more, but the girl Mai runs into the room.

"*Khun*. A man has come looking for you."

Hock Seng gives her an impatient look. "Is it someone with information on a new spindle? A teak log ripped from some temple *bot*, maybe?" Mai's mouth opens and closes, stunned at his blasphemy, but Hock Seng doesn't care. "If this man doesn't have a winding spindle, I don't have time for him." He turns back to Kit. "Can you drain and scrub the tanks perhaps?"

Kit shrugs noncommittally. "It can be tried, *Khun*, but Banyat said that if we don't have new nutrient cultures, we can't start completely fresh. We will be forced to reuse the cultures that come from these same tanks. The problem will likely return."

"We can't sieve it? Filter somehow?"

"The tanks and cultures cannot be fully cleaned. Eventually it will be a vector. And the rest of the tanks will be contaminated."

"Eventually? Is that all? Eventually?" Hock Seng scowls at him. "I don't care about 'eventually.' I care about this month. If this factory fails to produce, we won't have a chance to worry about this 'eventually' you speak of. You'll be back in Thonburi, picking through chicken guts and hoping you aren't hit with flu, and I'll be back in a yellow card tower. Don't worry about tomorrow. Worry about whether Mr. Lake throws us all out on the street today. Use your imagination. Find a way to make this *tamade* algae breed."

Not for the first time, he curses that he works with Thais. They simply lack the spirit of entrepreneurship that a Chinese would throw into the work.

"*Khun?*"

It's Mai, still lingering. She flinches at his glare.

"The man says that this is your last chance."

"My last chance? Show me this *heeya*." Hock Seng storms toward the main floor, shoving aside the curtains of the fining rooms. Out in the main hall, where the megodonts lean against spindle cranks burning money that they simply don't have, Hock Seng stops short, wiping algae fines from his hands, feeling like a terrified fool.

Dog Fucker stands in the middle of the factory like cibiscosis in the middle of Spring Festival, watching the whir and clatter of the QA line as it runs through tests. Old Bones and Horseface Ma and Dog Fucker. All of them standing so confidently. Dog Fucker, with his *fa' gan* fringe and his missing nose, and his thug cronies, hard-edged *nak leng* who have no pity for yellow cards and no fear of police.

It's only dumb luck that Mr. Lake is upstairs going over the books, only dumb luck that little Mai came to him and not to the foreign devil. Mai scampers ahead, leading him toward his future.

Hock Seng motions for Dog Fucker to join him out of sight of the observation windows above, but Dog Fucker, maddeningly, sets his feet and continues to study the rumbling line and the shamble of the megodonts.

"Very impressive," he says. "Is this where you make your fabulous kink-springs?"

Hock Seng glares and motions for him to move out of the factory. "We should not be having this conversation here."

Dog Fucker ignores him. His eyes are on the offices and the observation windows. He stares up at them intently. "And is that where you do your work? Up there?"

"Not for long, if a certain *farang* catches sight of you." Hock Seng forces himself to make a polite smile. "Please. It would be better if we went outside. Your presence arouses questions."

For a long moment, Dog Fucker doesn't move, still staring up at the offices. Hock Seng has the unnerving feeling that the man sees through the walls, that he sees the huge iron safe sitting up there, holding its valuable secrets tight.

"Please," Hock Seng mutters. "The workers will speak enough about this as it is."

Abruptly the gangster turns away, nodding to his men to follow. Hock Seng stifles a rush of relief as he hurries after them. "Someone wants to see you," Dog Fucker says, gesturing toward the outer gates.

The Dung Lord. Now, of all times. Hock Seng glances up at the observation window. Mr. Lake will be angry if he leaves.

"Yes. Of course." Hock Seng motions back toward the office. "I will just tidy my papers."

"Now," Dog Fucker says. "No one keeps him waiting." He motions for Hock Seng to follow. "Now or never."

Hock Seng hesitates, torn, then waves for Mai. She dashes up as Dog Fucker leads them toward the gates. Hock Seng leans low and whispers. "Tell *Khun* Anderson that I will not be returning. . . that I have an idea of where to locate a new winding spindle." He nods sharply. "Yes. Tell him that. A winding spindle."

Mai nods and starts to turn away, but Hock Seng pulls her back, pulls her close. "Remember to speak slowly, and in simple words. I don't want the *farang* to misunderstand and put me out on the street. If I go, so do you. Remember that."

Mai grins. "*Mai pen rai*. I will make him very happy that you are working so hard." She dashes back into the factory.

Dog Fucker smiles over his shoulder. "And I thought you were only the king of yellow cards. Here you have a pretty Thai girl doing your bidding, too. Not bad for a Yellow Card King."

Hock Seng makes a face. "The king of yellow cards is not a title to aspire to."

"Nor the Lord of Dung," he says. "Names hide much." He surveys the compound. "I've never been in a *farang* factory," he says. "It's very impressive. A lot of money here."

Hock Seng forces a smile. "The *farang* are crazy with how much they spend." His neck prickles at the workers' eyes watching him. He wonders how many of them know of Dog Fucker. For once he is grateful that more yellow card Chinese don't work at the factory. They would recognize in an instant who he treats with. Hock Seng forces down the irritation and fear he feels at the exposure. Of course Dog Fucker would like to see him off-balance. It is part of the bargaining process.

*You are Tan Hock Seng, head of the New Tri-Clipper. Do not let petty tactics unsettle you.*

This mantra of self-assurance lasts until they reach the outer gates. Hock Seng stops short.

Dog Fucker laughs as he opens the door for Hock Seng. "What's the matter? You've never seen a car before?"

Hock Seng stifles an urge to slap the man for his arrogance and stupidity. "You're a fool," he mutters. "Do you know how this exposes me? How people will speak of an extravagance like this, parked in front of this factory?"

He ducks inside. Dog Fucker climbs in after him, still grinning. The rest of his men crowd in after. Old Bones calls forward to the driver. The machine's engine rumbles to life. They start to roll.

"Is it coal diesel?" Hock Seng asks. He can't help whispering.

Dog Fucker grins. "The boss does so much for the carbon load. . ." He shrugs. "This is a small extravagance."

"But the cost. . ." Hock Seng trails off. The exorbitant cost of turning this steel behemoth into acceleration. An extraordinary waste. A testament to the Dung Lord's

monopolies. Even in his wealthiest days in Malaya, Hock Seng would never have considered such an extravagance.

Despite the heat in the car, he shivers. There is an ancient solidity to the thing, so heavy and massive—it might as well be a tank. It's as if he's locked inside one of SpringLife's safes, isolated from the world beyond. Claustrophobia swallows him.

Dog Fucker smiles as Hock Seng tries to master his emotions. "I hope you aren't wasting his time," he says.

Hock Seng makes himself meet Dog Fucker's gaze. "I think you would like it better if I failed."

"You're right." Dog Fucker shrugs. "If it were up to me, we would have let your kind die on the other side of the border."

The car accelerates, pressing Hock Seng into the leather seat.

Outside the windows, Krung Thep slides past, utterly removed from him: crowds of sun-drenched skin and dusty draft animals and bicycles like schools of fish. Eyes turn toward the car as it forges past. Mouths open wide and silent as people shout and point at his passage.

The speed of the machine is appalling.

\* \* \*

Yellow cards crowd around the tower entrances, Malayan Chinese men and women trying to look hopeful as they wait for labor opportunities that have already faded in the heat of the afternoon. And yet still they try to look vital, try to show that their bony limbs have calories to spare, if only someone will allow them to burn.

Everyone stares as the Dung Lord's car arrives. When the door opens, they kneel in a wave, all of them performing *khrebs* of abasement, triple bows to the patron who keeps them housed, the one man in Krung Thep who willingly shoulders the burden of them, who provides a measure of safety from the red machetes of the Malays and the black batons of the white shirts.

Hock Seng's eyes slide over yellow card backs, wondering if he knows any of them, momentarily surprised that he is not among them performing his own *khreb* of obeisance.

Dog Fucker leads him into the tower darkness. The skitter of rats and the smell of close-packed sweating bodies convects down from the floors above. At a pair of gaping elevator shafts he flips open a tarnished brass speaking tube and shouts with brisk authority. They wait, eyes on one another: Dog Fucker bored; Hock Seng carefully hiding anxiety. A rattling comes from above, gears clicking, the scrape of iron on stone. A lift sinks into view.

Dog Fucker drags open the gate and steps in. The woman at the elevator controls disengages the brake and shouts into the speaking tube before yanking the gate closed again. Dog Fucker smiles through the gate. "Wait here, yellow card." And then he is whisked up into darkness.

A minute later, ballast men slide into view in the secondary shaft. They squeeze out of the lift and dash for the stairwell in a herd. One of them catches sight of Hock Seng. Mistakes his look.

"There aren't any more places. He has enough of us already."

Hock Seng shakes his head. "No. Of course not," he mutters, but the men are already disappearing back up the stairs, sandals slapping as they scramble for the sky to make the ballast drop again.

From where he stands inside the building, the glare of the tropics is a distant rectangle, clotted with refugees, all watching the street with nothing to do and nowhere to go. A few yellow cards shuffle the halls. Babies cry, their small voices echoing against hot concrete. From somewhere above, the grunt of sex comes. People screwing in halls like animals, out in the open because they have given up on privacy. It is all so familiar. Extraordinary that he once lived in this same building, sweltered in this same pen.

Minutes tick by. Perhaps the Dung Lord has changed his mind. Dog Fucker should have returned by now. Movement catches the corner of Hock Seng's eye and he flinches, but there is nothing but shadow.

Sometimes he dreams that the Green Headbands have become cheshires, that they can molt and appear where he least expects them—while he pours water over his head as he makes his bath, or as he eats a bowl of rice, or squats over the latrine. . . they simply shimmer into existence and grab him and gut him and stack his head on the streets as a warning. Just like Jade Blossom and First Wife's elder sister. Just like his sons. . .

The lift rattles. A moment later Dog Fucker descends. The elevator woman is gone, Dog Fucker's own hand runs the brake system.

"Good. You didn't run away."

"I'm not afraid of this place."

Dog Fucker gives him an appraising look. "No. Of course not. You came from it, didn't you?" He steps out and motions toward the tower dimness. Guards materialize where Hock Seng thought only shadows existed. He forces himself not yelp, but Dog Fucker still catches his twitch. Smiles at it. "Search him."

Hands pat Hock Seng's ribs, run down his legs, prod at his genitals. When the guards are finished, Dog Fucker gestures Hock Seng into the lift. He guesses the heft of them and shouts up the speaking tube.

From high above, the rattle of men climbing into the ballast cage filters down. And then they are rising, climbing up through the layers of hell. The heat thickens. Deep in the heart of the building, exposed as it is to the full force of the tropic sun, it is an oven.

Hock Seng remembers sleeping in the stairwells here, struggling to breathe as the bodies of his fellow refugees stank and rolled about him. Remembers how his belly pressed against his spine. And then, all in a rush he remembers blood on his hands, hot and alive. A fellow yellow card, reaching out to him, begging for aid, even as he drove the knife edge of his whiskey bottle into the man's throat.

Hock Seng closes his eyes, forcing away memory.

*You were starving. There was no other way.*

But he has a hard time convincing himself.

They continue to rise. A breeze caresses him. The air cools. Scents of hibiscus and citrus.

An open hall flashes by—a promenade, exposed to the city air, careful gardens, lime trees bordering the edges of wide balconies. Hock Seng wonders at the amount of water men must carry to this height. Wonders at the calories that must be spent and the man who has access to such power. It's both thrilling and terrifying. He is close. So very close.

They reach the top of the building. The sun-drenched expanse of the city spreads before them. The gold spires of the Grand Palace where the Child Queen holds court and the Somdet Chaopraya pulls the strings, the *chedi* of Mongkut's temple on its hill, the only thing that will survive if the levees fail. The broken and tumbling spires of the old Expansion. And all around, the sea.

"It's a good view, isn't it, yellow card?"

Across the wide roof, a white pavilion has been erected. It rustles gently in salt breezes. Under its shade, in a rattan chair, the Dung Lord sprawls. The man is fat. Fatter than anyone Hock Seng has seen since Pearl Koh in Malaya cornered the market on blister rust-resistant durian. Perhaps not as fat as Ah Deng who ran a sweet stand in Penang, but still, the man is astonishingly fat, given the privations of the calorie economy.

Hock Seng approaches slowly, *wais*, lowering his head until his chin touches his chest and his pressed palms are nearly above his head with the respect he shows the man.

The fat man regards Hock Seng. "You wish to treat with me?"

Hock Seng's throat catches. He nods. The man waits, patient. A servant brings cold sweet coffee and offers it to the Dung Lord. He takes a sip. "Are you thirsty?" he asks.

Hock Seng has the presence of mind to shake his head. The Dung Lord shrugs. Sips again. Says nothing. Four servants in white suits shuffle over, carrying a linen draped table. They set the table before him. The Dung Lord nods to Hock Seng.

"Come now, don't worry about being polite. Eat. Drink."

A chair is produced for him. The Dung Lord offers Hock Seng wide fried U-*Tex* noodles, a crab and green papaya salad, along with *laab mu*, *gaeng gai*, and steamed U-*Tex*. Along with it all, he offers a plate of sliced papaya. "Don't be afraid. The chicken is latest generip and the papaya are just picked, from my eastern plantation. Not a trace of blister rust in the last two seasons."

"How—?"

"We burn any trees that show the disease and those around them as well. Also, we have widened our buffer perimeter to five kilometers. With UV sterilization, it seems to be enough."

"Ah."

The Dung Lord nods at the small kink-spring, sitting on the table. "A gigajoule?"

Hock Seng nods.

"And you have them to sell?"

Hock Seng shakes his head. "The way of making them."

"What makes you think I am a buyer?"



Hock Seng shrugs, forcing himself to hide his nervousness. There was a time when this sort of bargaining was easy for him. Second nature. But he wasn't desperate then. "If you are not, then there are others."

The Dung Lord nods. Finishes his coffee. A servant pours more. "And why do you come to me?"

"Because you are rich."

The Dung Lord laughs at that. He nearly spits out his coffee. His belly rolls and his body shakes. The servants freeze, watchful. When the Dung Lord finally controls his laughter, he wipes his mouth and shakes his head. "A fair answer, that." His smile disappears. "But I am also dangerous."

Hock Seng buries his nervousness and speaks directly. "When the rest of the Kingdom would have rejected our kind, you took us in. Not even our own people, the Thai-Chinese, were so generous. Her Royal Majesty the Queen showed mercy, allowing us to come across the border, but it was you who provided safe haven."

The Dung Lord shrugs. "No one uses these towers anyway."

"And yet you are the only one who showed compassion. An entire country full of good Buddhist people, and only you gave shelter, instead of forcing us back across the border. I would be dead by now if not for you."

The Dung Lord studies Hock Seng a moment longer. "My advisors thought it was foolish. That it would put me in opposition with the white shirts. Set me at odds with General Pracha. Maybe even threaten my methane deals."

Hock Seng nods. "Only you had enough influence to risk it."

"And what do you want for this wondrous bit of technology?"

Hock Seng readies himself. "A ship."

The Dung Lord looks up, surprised. "Not money? Not jade? Not opium?"

Hock Seng shakes his head. "A ship. A fast clipper. Mishimoto-designed. Registered and approved to transport cargo to the Kingdom and throughout the South China Sea. Under the protection of her Majesty the Queen. . ." He waits a beat. "And your patronage."

"Ah. Clever yellow card." The Dung Lord smiles. "And I thought you were truly grateful."

Hock Seng shrugs. "You are the only person who has the influence to provide such permits and guarantees."

"The only one who can make a yellow card truly legitimate, you mean. The only one who could convince white shirts to allow a yellow card shipping king to develop."

Hock Seng doesn't blink. "Your union lights the city. Your influence is unparalleled."

Unexpectedly, the Dung Lord forces himself out of his seat, stands. "Yes. Well. So it is." He turns and shambles across the patio to the edge of his terrace, hands behind his back, surveying the city below. "Yes. I suppose I still have strings I can pull. Ministers I can influence." He turns back. "You're asking for a lot."

"I give even more."

"And if you're selling this to more than one?"

Hock Seng shakes his head. "I do not need a fleet. I need one ship."

"Tan Hock Seng, seeking to restore his shipping empire here in the Thai Kingdom"  
The Dung Lord turns abruptly. "Maybe you've already sold it to others."

"I can only swear that it is not so."

"Would you swear on your ancestors? On your family's ghosts all walking hungry in Malaya?"

Hock Seng shifts uneasily. "I would."

"I want to see this technology you claim."

Hock Seng looks up surprised. "You haven't already started to wind it?"

"Why don't you demonstrate now?"

Hock Seng grins. "You're afraid it is a booby trap of some sort? A blade bomb maybe?" He laughs. "I do not play games. I come for business only." He looks around. "You have a winding man? Let us both see how many joules he can put into it. Wind it and see. But do be careful with it. It is not as resilient as a standard spring, because of the torque it operates under. It cannot be dropped." He points at a servant. "You there, put this spring on your winding spindle, see how many joules you can shove into it."

The servant looks uncertain. The Dung Lord nods agreement. A sea breeze rustles across the high garden as the young man sets the kink-spring on its spindle and settles on the winding cycle.

Hock Seng is suddenly seized by new worry. He confirmed with Banyat that he was taking one of the good springs, that it had passed QA, unlike the ones that always failed and cracked as soon as they started their winding. Banyat assured him that he should take one from a certain stack. But now, as the servant prepares to lean on his pedals, doubt flares. If he chose wrong, if Banyat was wrong. . . and now Banyat is dead under the feet of a crazed megodont. Hock Seng couldn't confirm one last time. He was sure. . . and yet. . .

The servant leans against the pedals. Hock Seng holds his breath. Sweat appears on the servant's brow and he looks over at Hock Seng and the Dung Lord, surprised at the resistance. He changes gears. The pedals turn, slowly at first, then faster. He begins cycling up through the gears as his momentum increases, jamming more and more energy into the kink-spring.

The Dung Lord watches thoughtfully. "I knew a man who worked at your kink-spring company. A few years ago. He didn't spread his wealth around as you do. Didn't curry favor with so many of his fellow yellow cards." He pauses. "I understand that the white shirts killed him for his watch. Beat him bloody, robbed him blind, right in the street, because he was out after curfew."

Hock Seng shrugs, forcing down memories of a man lying on cobbles, a ruined mess, broken already, begging for help. . .

The Dung Lord's eyes are thoughtful. "And now you work for this company as well. It seems like an unlikely coincidence."

Hock Seng doesn't say anything.

The Dung Lord says, "Dog Fucker should have paid more attention. You're a dangerous one."

Hock Seng shakes his head emphatically. "I only wish to reestablish myself."

The servant continues to pedal, cranking more joules into the spring, forcing more energy into the tiny box. The Dung Lord watches, trying to hide his astonishment as the process continues, but still, his eyes have widened. Already the servant has pushed more energy into the box than any spring its size should accept. The cycle whines as the servant pedals. Hock Seng says, "It will take all night for a man like this to wind it. You should take it to a megodont."

"How does it work?"

Hock Seng shrugs. "There is a new lubricating solution, it allows the springs to be tightened to significantly higher tensions, without breaking or locking."

The man continues to pour power into the spring. Servants and bodyguards begin to gather around, all of them watching with a certain awe as he cranks away at the box.

"Astonishing," the Dung Lord mutters.

"If you chain it to a more efficient animal—a megodont or a mulie—the calorie-to-joule transfer is nearly lossless," Hock Seng says.

The Dung Lord watches the spring as the man continues to wind. He is smiling. "We'll test your spring, Hock Seng. If it performs as well as it winds, you'll have your ship. Bring the specifications and blueprints. Your kind I can do business with." He motions to a servant and orders liquor. "A toast. To a new business partner."

Relief floods through Hock Seng. For the first time since blood washed his hands in an alley long ago, since a man begged for mercy and found none, liquor flows in Hock Seng's veins, and he is content.

## 13

Jaidee remembers when he first met Chaya. He had just finished one of his early *muay thai* bouts; he can't even remember who he competed against but he remembers coming out of the ring, people congratulating him, everyone saying that he moved better even than Nai Khanom Tom. He drank *laolao* that night, and then stumbled out into the streets with his friends, all of them laughing, trying to kick a *takraw* ball, drunk, absurd, and all of them flushed with victory and with life.

And there Chaya was, closing her parents' shop, propping up the wooden panels that secured the storefront where they sold marigolds and newly reengineered jasmine flowers for temple offerings. When he smiled at her, she gave him and his drunk friends a look of disgust. But Jaidee felt a shock of recognition—as if they had known one another in a past life, and were at last meeting again, fated lovers.

He had stared at her, stunned, and his friends had caught the look—Suttipong and Jaiporn and all the rest, all of them lost when the violet comb epidemic hit and they went into the breach to burn the villages where it had struck, all of them gone—but he remembers them all catching him staring, suddenly stupid with infatuation, and how they teased him. Chaya looked at him with a studied contempt and sent him stumbling away.

For Jaidee, it had always been easy to attract a girlfriend, some girl either pleased by his *muay thai* or his white uniform. But Chaya had simply looked through him and turned her back.

It took him a month to get up the nerve to return. That first time, he dressed well, shopped for temple offerings, took his change, and slipped out silently. Over the course of weeks he dropped by, talking with her more, establishing a connection. At first, he thought that she knew him for the drunken fool trying to make amends, but over time it became apparent that she had not made the connection, that the arrogant drunk on the streets that night had been completely forgotten.

Jaidee never told her how they first met, not even after they were married. It was too humiliating to admit to what she had seen in him that night on the street. To tell her that the man she loved was that other fool as well.

And now he prepares to do something worse. He puts on his white dress uniform while Niwat and Surat watch. They are solemn as he prepares to bring himself low in their eyes. He kneels before them.

"Whatever you see today, do not let it shame you."

They nod solemnly, but he knows they do not understand. They are too young to understand pressures and necessity. He pulls them close, and then he goes out into blinding sunlight.

Kanya awaits him in a cycle rickshaw, compassion in her eyes, even if she is too polite to speak what is in her heart.

They ride silently through the streets. The Ministry appears ahead and they ride through the gates. Servants and rickshaw men and carriages clog the outer gates, waiting for their patrons to return. The witnesses have already been arriving, then.

Their own rickshaw makes its way to the temple. Wat Phra Seub was erected inside the Ministry in honor of the biodiversity martyr. It is the place where white shirts make their vows and are formally ordained as protectors of the Kingdom, before they are given their first ranks. It is here that they receive their ordination, and it is here—

Jaidee starts, and nearly jumps to his feet in anger. *Farang* are milling all around the temple's steps. Foreigners inside the Ministry compound. Traders and factory owners and Japanese, sunburned sweating stinking creatures, invading the Ministry's most sacred place.

"*Jai yen yen*," Kanya mutters. "It's Akkarat's doing. Part of the bargain."

Jaidee can't hide his disgust. Worse yet, Akkarat is standing beside the Somdet Chaopraya, saying something to him, telling a joke, perhaps. The two of them have become too close by far. Jaidee looks away and sees General Pracha watching from the top of the temple steps, his face expressionless. Around him, the brothers and sisters that Jaidee has worked with and warred with are all streaming into the temple. Bhirombhakdi is there, smiling widely, pleased to have his revenge for his lost revenue.

People catch sight of Jaidee's arrival. A hush overtakes the crowd.

"*Jai yen yen*," Kanya murmurs again, and then they are climbing down and he is being escorted inside.

Golden statues of Buddha and Phra Seub gaze down on the assembling people, serene. The screens on the temple walls portray scenes of the fall of Old Thailand: The *farang* releasing their plagues on the earth, animals and plants collapsing as their food webs unravelled; his Royal Majesty King Rama XII mustering his final pitiful human forces, flanked by Hanuman and his monkey warriors. Images of Krut and Kirimukha

and an army of half-human *kala* fighting back the rising seas and plagues. Jaidee's eyes sweep over the panels, remembering how proud he had been at his own ordination.

No cameras are allowed anywhere inside the Ministry, but the whisper sheet scribblers are there with their pencils. Jaidee removes his shoes and enters, followed by the jackals who slaver after this rendering down of their greatest enemy. The Somdet Chaopraya kneels beside Akkarat.

Jaidee eyes the designated protector of the Queen, wondering how someone as divine as the last king could have been fooled into making the Somdet Chaopraya the protector of Her Royal Majesty the Child Queen. The man has so little that is good. Jaidee shivers at the thought of the Queen so close to someone so well-known for his darkness—

Jaidee sucks in his breath. The man from the anchor pads is kneeling beside Akkarat. A long rat-face, watchful and arrogant.

"Cool heart," Kanya mutters again as she leads him forward. "It's for Chaya."

Jaidee forces down his rage, the shock of seeing the man. He leans close to Kanya. "That's the one who took her. The one from the airfields. Right there! Beside Akkarat."

Kanya scans the faces. "Even if it is true, we must do this. It's the only way."

"Do you truly believe that?"

Kanya has the grace to duck her head. "I am sorry, Jaidee. I wish—"

"Don't worry, Kanya." He nods toward the man and Akkarat. "Just remember those two. Remember that they will stop at nothing for power." He looks at her. "Will you remember that?"

"I will."

"You swear on Phra Seub?"

She has the grace to look embarrassed, but she nods. "If I could perform the triple bow before you, I would."

He thinks he sees tears in her eyes as she backs away. The crowd hushes as the Somdet Chaopraya stands and steps forward to witness the proceedings. Four monks begin to chant. On happier occasions, they would be seven or nine in number, and consecrating a wedding, or blessing the laying of a new building's cornerstone. Instead they are here to oversee a humiliation.

Minister Akkarat and General Pracha go to stand before the assembled people. Incense fills the room along with the monk's chanting, a drone in Pali as they remind everyone that all is transient, that even Phra Seub in his despair recognized transience, even as his compassion for the natural world overwhelmed him.

The chanting of the monks dies. The Somdet Chaopraya motions for both Akkarat and Pracha to come before him. To *khrab* and make obeisance. The Somdet Chaopraya watches without emotion as the two ancient enemies pay their respects to the only thing that binds them together: their respect for royalty and the palace.

The Somdet Chaopraya is a tall man, well fed, and he towers over them. His face is hard. Rumors circle around him, about his tastes, about his darkness, but still, he is the one designated to protect Her Majesty the Child Queen until her ascension. He is not royalty, could never be so, and it terrifies Jaidee that she lives within his circle of influence. If it weren't for the fact that the man's own fate is tied so tightly to hers, he

would probably. . . Jaidee stifles the nearly blasphemous thought as Pracha and Akkarat approach.

Jaidee kneels. Around him, whisper sheet pencils scratch frantically as he performs a *khrah* before Akkarat. Akkarat smiles with satisfaction and Jaidee stifles an urge to lunge at the man. *I will pay you back in my own time.* He stands carefully.

Akkarat leans close. "Well done, Captain. I almost believe you really are sorry."

Jaidee keeps his features impassive, turns to address the people, the scribblers—his heart closes as he sees that his sons are present, brought to witness the humiliation of their father.

"I have overstepped my authority." His eyes go to General Pracha, watching coldly from the edge of the dais, "I have dishonored my patron, General Pracha, and I have dishonored the Environment Ministry.

"All my life, the Ministry has been my home. I am ashamed that I have selfishly used its powers for my own benefit. That I have mislead my fellow officers, and my patrons. That I have been bankrupt morally." He hesitates. Niwat and Surat are watching, held by their grandmother, Chaya's mother, all of them watching as he humiliates himself. "I beg forgiveness. I beg an opportunity to rectify my wrongs."

General Pracha strides toward him. Jaidee drops again to his knees and makes a *khrah* of submission before him. General Pracha ignores, him, walks past his bowing face, his feet within inches of Jaidee's head. Speaks to the assembly.

"An independent investigating tribunal has determined that Captain Jaidee is guilty of accepting bribes, of corruption and the abuse of his powers." He glances down at Jaidee. "It has further been determined that he is no longer fit for service with the Ministry. He will become a monk, and perform a penance of nine years. His possessions will be disposed of. His sons will be adopted into the care of the Ministry, but their family name will be erased."

He looks down at Jaidee. "If the Buddha is merciful, you will eventually come to understand that your pride and avarice has brought this upon you. We hope that if you do not attain understanding in this life, that your next one will provide you with hope of improvement." He turns away, leaving Jaidee still in his bow.

Akkarat speaks, "We accept the apologies of the Environment Ministry and the failures of General Pracha. We look forward to an improved working relationship in the future. Now that this snake has had its fangs pulled."

The Somdet Chaopraya motions to the two great powers of the government that they should show one another respect. Jaidee remains crouched. A sigh runs through the crowd. And then people are streaming out, to tell of what they have seen.

Only once the Somdet Chaopraya is gone is Jaidee invited to stand by a pair of monks. Their aspect is serious, their heads shaven, their saffron robes aged and faded. They indicate to him where they will take him next. He is theirs now. Nine years of penance, for doing the right thing.

Akkarat steps before him. "Well, *Khun* Jaidee. It seems that you have at last discovered limits. It's a pity you didn't listen to warnings. All of this was so unnecessary."

Jaidee forces himself to *wai*. "You have what you wanted," he mutters. "Now let Chaya go."

"So sorry. I don't know what you're talking about."

Jaidee searches the man's eyes, hunting for the lie, but he can't tell.

*Are you my enemy? Or is it another? Is she dead already? Is she still alive, trapped in one of your friends' prison cells, an unnamed prisoner? Alive or dead?*

He forces down his worries. "Bring her back, or I'll hunt you down and kill you like a mongoose killing a cobra."

Akkarat doesn't flinch. "Careful with the threats, Jaidee. I'd hate to see you lose anything else." His eyes stray toward Niwat and Surat.

A chill runs through Jaidee. "Stay away from my children."

"Your children?" Akkarat laughs. "You have no children now. You have nothing at all. You're lucky that General Pracha is your friend. If I were him, I would have turned those two boys of yours out into the street to beg for blister rust scraps. That would have been a true lesson."

## 14

Crushing the Tiger of Bangkok should be more satisfying. But frankly, without a cue card of the various names involved, the ceremony looks like any number of impenetrable Thai religious and social events. In fact, the man's actual demotion is surprisingly quick.

Within twenty minutes of being ushered into the Environment Ministry's temple, Anderson finds himself watching silently as the vaunted Jaidee Rojjanasukchai makes *khrabs* of humility to Trade Minister Akkarat. The golden statues of the Buddha and Seub Nakhasathien gleam dully, overseeing the solemn moment. None of the participants show any expression at all. Not even a smile of triumph from Akkarat. And then a few minutes, later the chanting monks end their droning, and everyone is standing to leave.

That's it.

And so now Anderson finds himself cooling his heels outside the Phra Seub Temple *bot*, waiting to be escorted out of the compound. After enduring the astonishing series of security checks and body searches to get into the Environment Ministry campus, he had begun to fantasize that he might glean some useful bit of intelligence about the place, perhaps get some better sense of where their lovely seedbank might be tucked away. It was foolish, and he knew it, but after the fourth patdown he was almost convinced that he was about to run into Gibbons himself, perhaps cradling a newly engineered *ngaw* like a proud father.

Instead, he encountered grim cordons of white shirts and was whisked by cycle rickshaw directly to the temple steps where he was required to remove his shoes and stand in bare feet under tight supervision before being led inside with all the other witnesses.

Around the temple, a thicket of rain trees prevents much view of the place at all. AgriGen-arranged "accidental" dirigible overflights have given him more information about the compound than he's got right now, standing dead in the heart of the thing.

"I see you got your shoes back."

Carlyle, sauntering over, grinning.

"The way they inspected," Anderson says, "I thought they were going to lock them in quarantine."

"They just don't like your *farang* smell." Carlyle pulls out a cigarette and offers Anderson one as well. Under the close gaze of their white shirt guards, they light up. "Enjoy the ceremony?" Carlyle asks.

"I thought there might be more pomp and circumstance."

"They don't need it. Everyone knows what this means. General Pracha has lost his face." Carlyle shakes his head. "For a second I was sure we were going to look up and see their Phra Seub statue crack in half with the shame. You can feel the Kingdom changing. It's in the air."

Anderson thinks of the few buildings he glimpsed as he was escorted to the temple. They were all dilapidated. Water stained and covered with vines. If the Tiger's fall isn't proof enough, the fallen trees and unkempt grounds are fine indicators. "You must be very proud of what you've accomplished."

Carlyle draws on his cigarette and exhales slowly. "Let's just say it's a satisfying step."

"You've impressed them." Anderson nods toward the *Farang* Phalanx, who seem to be already drunk on their reparation money. Lucy is trying to convince Otto to sing the Pacific Anthem under the stern gazes of the armed white shirts. The trader catches sight of Carlyle and lurches over. His breath stinks with *laolao*.

"Are you drunk?" Carlyle asks.

"Completely." Otto smiles dreamily. "I had to finish everything at the gate. Bastards wouldn't let me bring the celebration bottles inside. Took Lucy's opium, too."

He drapes an arm over Carlyle's shoulder. "You were right, you bastard. Right as rain. Look at all these damn white shirts' expressions. They've been eating bitter melon all day!" He gropes for Carlyle's hand, tries to shake it. "God damn it's good to see them taken down a notch. Them and their thieving 'gifts of goodwill.' You're a good man, Carlyle. Good man."

His grins bleakly. "I'm going to be rich because of you. Rich!" He laughs and paws for Carlyle's hand again. "Good man," he says as he gets a grip. "Good man."

Lucy shouts for him to get back in line. "Rickshaw's here, you drunk bastard!"

Otto stumbles away and with Lucy's help tries to crawl into the rickshaw. The white shirts watch coldly. A woman in an officer's uniform studies them all from the top of the temple steps, her face expressionless.

Anderson watches her. "What do you think she's thinking?" he asks, nodding up at the woman officer. "All these drunk *farang* crawling through her compound? What does she see?"

Carlyle draws on his cigarette and lets out smoke in a slow stream. "The dawn of a new era."

"Back to the future," Anderson murmurs.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing." Anderson shakes his head. "Something Yates used to say. We're in the sweet spot, now. The world's shrinking."



Lucy and Otto finally manage to climb into the rickshaw. They roll out with Otto shouting blessings on all the honorable white shirts who have made him so rich with their reparation money. Carlyle quirks an eyebrow at Anderson, the question unspoken. Anderson draws on his cigarette, considering the branches of possibility that underlie Carlyle's question.

"I want to talk to Akkarat directly."

Carlyle snorts. "Children want all sorts of things."

"Children don't play this game."

"You think you can twist him around your finger? Turn him into a good little administrator, like in India?"

Anderson favors him with a cold eye. "More like Burma." He smiles at Carlyle's stricken expression. "Don't worry. We're not in the nation-breaking business anymore. All we're interested in is a free market. I'm sure we can work toward that common goal, at least. But I want the meet."

"So cautious." Carlyle drops his cigarette on the ground, grinds it out with his foot. "I would have thought you'd have a more adventurous spirit."

Anderson laughs. "I'm not here for the adventure. That's for all of those drunks over there. . ." He trails off, stunned.

Emiko is in the crowd, standing with the Japanese delegation. He catches a glimpse of her movement in the knot of business people and political officers as they cluster around Akkarat, talking and smiling.

"My god." Carlyle sucks in his breath. "Is that a windup? In the compound?"

Anderson's tries to say something, but can't make his throat work.

No, he's wrong. It's not Emiko. The movement is the same, but the girl is not. This one is richly dressed, with gold glimmering around her throat. A slightly different face. She lifts her hand, stutter-stop motion, tucks black silk hair behind an ear. Similar, but not the same.

Anderson's heart starts beating again.

The windup girl smiles graciously at whatever story Akkarat is telling. She turns to make introductions for a man Anderson recognizes from intelligence photos as a general manager of Mishimoto. Her patron says something to her and she ducks her head to him, then hurries away to the rickshaws, odd and graceful.

She's so much like Emiko. So stylized, so deliberate. Everything about the windup before him reminds him of that other, so much more desperate girl. He swallows, remembering Emiko in his bed, small and alone. Starving for information about windup villages. *What are they like? Who lives within them? Do they really live without patrons?* So desperate for hope. So different from this glittering windup that threads gracefully between white shirts and officials.

"I don't think she was allowed in the temple," Anderson finally says. "They couldn't have gone that far. The white shirts must have made her wait outside."

"Still, they must be seething." Carlyle cocks his head, watching the Japanese delegation. "You know, Raleigh has one of those, too. Uses it for a freak show in the back of his place."

Anderson swallows. "Oh? I hadn't heard."

"Sure. It'll fuck anything. You should see it. Truly bizarre." Carlyle laughs low. "Look, she's catching attention. I think the Queen's Protector is actually smitten."

The Somdet Chaopraya is staring at the windup, wide-eyed like a cow struck on the side of the head before slaughter.

Anderson frowns, shocked despite himself. "He wouldn't risk his status. Not with a windup."

"Who knows? The man doesn't exactly have a clean reputation. Positively debauched, from what I've heard. He was better when the old king was alive. Kept himself under control. But now. . ." Carlyle trails off. He nods at the windup girl. "I wouldn't be surprised if the Japanese end up making a gift of goodwill in the near future. No one refuses the Somdet Chaopraya."

"More bribes."

"Always. But the Somdet Chaopraya would be worth it. From everything I've heard, he's taken over most of the palace functions. Accumulated a lot of power. And that would give you a lot of insurance when the next coup happens." Carlyle observes. "Everyone looks calm, but below the surface things are boiling. Pracha and Akkarat can't go on like this. They've been circling each other ever since the December 12 coup." He pauses. "With the right pressure, we help decide who comes out on top."

"Sounds expensive."

"Not to your people. A bit of gold and jade. Some opium." He lowers his voice. "Might even be cheap, by your standards."

"Stop selling me. Am I going to meet Akkarat or not?"

Carlyle claps Anderson on the back and laughs. "God, I love working with *farang*. At least you're direct. Don't worry. It's already arranged." And then he's striding back toward the Japanese delegation and hailing Akkarat. And Akkarat is looking at Anderson with bright appraising eyes. Anderson *wais* a greeting. Akkarat, as befits his high rank, favors Anderson with the barest nod of acknowledgement.

\* \* \*

Outside the gates of the Environment Ministry, as Anderson hails Lao Gu for a ride back to the factory, a pair of Thais sweep up on either side.

"This way, *Khun*."

They take Anderson by the elbows and guide him down the street. For a moment, Anderson thinks he's being grabbed by the white shirts, but then he sees a coal-diesel limo. He fights down paranoia as he's guided inside.

*If they wanted to kill you, they could wait for any number of better times.*

The door slams closed. Trade Minister Akkarat sits across from him.

"*Khun* Anderson." Akkarat smiles. "Thank you for joining me."

Anderson scans the vehicle, wondering if he can break out or if the locks are controlled up front. The worst part of any job is the moment of exposure, when too many people suddenly know too many things. Finland went that way: Peters and Lei, with nooses around their necks and their feet kicking air as they were raised above the crowds.

"*Khun* Richard tells me that you have a proposal," Akkarat prompts.

Anderson hesitates. "I understand we have mutual interests."

"No." Akkarat shakes his head. "Your people have tried to destroy mine for the last five hundred years. We have nothing in common."

Anderson smiles tentatively. "Of course, we see some things differently."

The car starts to roll. Akkarat says, "This is not a question of perspective. Ever since your first missionaries landed on our shores, you have always sought to destroy us. During the old Expansion your kind tried to take every part of us. Chopping off the arms and legs of our country. It was only through our Kings' wisdom and leadership that we avoided your worst. And yet still you weren't done with us. With the Contraction, your worshipped global economy left us starving and over-specialized." He looks pointedly at Anderson. "And then your calorie plagues came. You very nearly took rice from us entirely."

"I didn't know the Minister of Trade was a conspiracy theorist."

"Which are you?" Akkarat studies him. "AgriGen? PurCal? Total Nutrient Holdings?"

Anderson spreads his hands. "I understand that you would like help in arranging a more stable government. I have resources to offer, provided that we can come to an agreement."

"What is it you want?"

Anderson looks him in the eye, serious. "Access to your seedbank."

Akkarat jerks back. "Impossible." The car turns and begins to accelerate down Thanon Rama XII. Bangkok streams by in a blur of images as Akkarat's retinue clears the avenue ahead of them.

"Not to own." Anderson puts out a calming hand. "Only to sample from."

"The seedbank has kept us independent of your kind. When blister rust and genehack weevil swept the globe, it was only the seedbank that allowed us to stave off the worst of the plagues, and even so, our people died in droves. When India and Burma and Vietnam all fell to you, we stood strong. And now you come asking for our finest weapon." Akkarat laughs. "I may want to see General Pracha with his hair and eyebrows shaved off, living in a forest monastery and despised by all, but on this, at least, he and I agree. No *farang* should ever touch the heart of us. You may take an arm or a leg from our country, but not the head, and certainly not the heart."

"We need new genetic material," Anderson says. "We've exhausted many of our options and the plagues keep mutating. We don't have a problem sharing our research results. Profits, even."

"I'm sure you offered the same to the Finns."

Anderson leans forward. "Finland was a tragedy, and not just for us. If the world is going to keep eating, we need to stay ahead of cibiscosis and blister rust and Nippon genehack weevil. It's the only way."

"You're saying that you yoked the world to your patented grains and seeds, happily enslaved us all—and now you finally realize that you are dragging us all to hell."

"That's what the Grahamites like to say." Anderson shrugs. "The reality is that weevils and blister rust don't wait. And we're the only ones with the scientific resources to hack our way out of this mess. We're hoping that somewhere in your seedbank we'll find a key."

"And if you don't?"

"Then it won't really matter who runs the Kingdom; we'll all be coughing blood from the next mutation of cibiscosis."

"It's impossible. The Environment Ministry controls the seed stock."

"I was under the impression that we were discussing a change in administration."

Akkarat frowns. "You want samples, this is all? You're offering weapons, equipment, payoffs, and this is all you want?"

Anderson nods. "And one other thing. A man. Gibbons." He watches Akkarat for a reaction.

"Gibbons?" Akkarat shrugs. "I have never heard of him."

"A *farang*. One of ours. We'd like him back. He's been infringing on our intellectual property."

"And that bothers you a great deal, I'm sure." Akkarat laughs. "It's very interesting to actually meet one of your kind. Of course we all talk about the calorie men crouching on Koh Angrit, like demons or *phii krasue*, plotting to swallow the Kingdom, but you. . ." He studies Anderson. "I could have you executed by megodont if I chose, ripped apart and left for kites and crows. And no one would raise a finger. In the past, if even a whisper of a calorie man amongst us touched the streets it was enough to trigger protests and riots. And yet here you sit. So confident."

"Times have changed."

"Not as much as you suggest. Are you brave, or simply foolish?"

"I could ask the same question," Anderson says. "Not many people poke the white shirts in the eye and expect to get away with it."

Akkarat smiles. "If you had come to me last week with your offers of money and equipment, I would have been very grateful." He shrugs. "This week, in light of present circumstances and recent successes, I will take your offer under advisement." He taps on the window for the driver to pull over.

"You're lucky I'm in a good mood. On another day, I would have seen a calorie man torn into blood pieces and called it a very good day." He indicates that Anderson should get out. "I'll consider your offer."

The hope of it runs through Emiko's head every day, every minute, every second. The memory of the *gaijin* Anderson, and his conviction that the place truly exists. His hands on her in the darkness, eyes solemn as he nodded and confirmed.

So now she stares at Raleigh every night, wondering what the man knows, and if she dares to ask him about what he has seen in the north. About the route to safety. Three times she has approached him and each time her voice has failed her, leaving the question unasked. Each night she returns home, exhausted from the abuse that Kannika metes out, and falls into dreams of a place where New People dwell in safety, without patrons or masters.

Emiko remembers Mizumi-sensei at the *kaizen* studio where she taught all the young New People as they knelt in kimono and took their lessons.

*"What are you?"*

*"New People."*

*"What is your honor?"*

*"It is my honor to serve."*

*"Who do you honor?"*

*"I honor my patron."*

Mizumi-sensei was swift with a switch, 100 years old and terrifying. An early New Person, her skin was nearly unaged. Who knew how many young ones she had shepherded through her studio? Mizumi-sensei, always there, always advising. Brutal in her anger, and yet fair in her punishments. And always the instruction, the faith that if they served their patron well, that they had attained their highest state.

Mizumi-sensei introduced them all to Mizuko Jizo Bodhisattva, who has compassion even for New People, and who would hide them in his sleeves after their deaths and smuggle them out of the hell world of genetically engineered toys and into the true cycle of life. Their duty was to serve, their honor was to serve, and their reward would come in the next life, when they became fully human. Service would yield the greatest rewards.

How Emiko had hated Mizumi-sensei when Gendo-sama abandoned her.

But now her heart beats again at the thought of a new patron: a wise man, a guide into a different world, one who can provide what Gendo-sama would not.

*Another who lies to you? Who will betray you?*

She squashes the thought. It is the other Emiko who thinks this. Not her highest self at all, as if she is nothing but a cheshire, bent on glutting herself, unconcerned with what her niche may be, overrunning everything. Not a thought appropriate to New People at all.

Mizumi-sensei taught that there are two parts to a New Person's nature. The evil half, ruled by the animal hungers of their genes, by the many splicings and additions that changed them into what they were. And balanced against this, the civilized self, the side that knows the difference between niche and animal urge. That comprehends its place in the hierarchies of their country and people, and appreciates the gift their patrons provide by giving them life. Dark and light. *In-Yo*. Two sides of a coin, two sides of the soul. Mizumi-sensei helped them own their souls. Prepared them for the honor of service.

To be honest, it is only Gendo-sama's poor treatment of her that makes Emiko think so badly of him. He was a weak man. Or, perhaps, if she is honest, she was not all she

could have been. She did not serve to her utmost. That is the sad truth. A bit of shame that she must accept, even as she strives to live without the loving hand of a patron. But perhaps this strange *gaijin*. . . perhaps. . . She will not let the cynical animal into her mind tonight; she will let herself dream.

Emiko spills out of her tower slum into Bangkok's cooling evening. A carnival feel informs the green-tinged streets, woks burning their nighttime noodles, offering simple dishes to the farmers of the market before they return to distant fields for the night. Emiko wanders through the night market, one eye out for white shirts, one on dinner.

She finds a vendor of grilled squid and takes one dipped in chile sauce. In the candlelight and shadows, she has cover of sorts. Her *pha sin* hides the movement of her legs. It is only her arms she must concern herself with, and if she is slow, careful, and keeps them close to her side, her movements can be mistaken for daintiness.

From a woman and her daughter, Emiko buys a folded banana leaf plate, cupping a nest of fried U-*Tex padh seeu*. The woman fries the noodles over blue methane, illegal, but not impossible to obtain. Emiko sits at a makeshift counter to shovel them in, her mouth burning at the spice. Others look at her strangely, a few make faces of distaste, but they do nothing. Some of them are even familiar with her. The rest have enough troubles without tangling themselves in the business of windups and white shirts. It is a strange advantage, she supposes. The white shirts are so despised that people don't draw their attention unless absolutely necessary. She shovels the noodles into her mouth and again thinks of the *gaijin's* words.

*There is a place for New People.*

She tries to imagine it. A village full of people with stuttering telltale motions and smooth smooth skin. She craves it.

But there is an opposing feeling, also. Not fear. Something she never expected.

Revulsion?

No, too strong a word. More a shiver of distaste that so many of her kind have shamefully fled their duties. All of them living among one another, and not a single one as fine as Gendo-sama. A whole village of New People who have no one to serve.

Emiko shakes her head forcefully. And what has service gotten her? People like Raleigh. And Kannika.

And yet. . . a whole tribe of New People, huddled in the jungle? What would it be like to hold an eight-foot laborer in her arms? Would that be her lover? Or one of the tentacle monsters of Gendo-sama's factories, ten arms like a Hindu god and a drooling mouth that demands nothing but food and a place to put its hands? How can such a creature make its way north? Why are they there, in the jungle?

She forces back her revulsion. It is surely no worse than Kannika. She has been enslaved to think against New People, even when she herself is one of them. If she thinks logically, she knows that no New Person can be any worse than the client last night, who fucked her and then spat on her before he left. Surely, to lie with a smooth-skinned New Person could not be worse.

But what kind of life could it be in the village? Eating cockroaches and ants and whatever leaves haven't succumbed to ivory beetle?

*Raleigh is a survivor. Are you?*

She stirs her noodles with her four-inch RedStar bamboo chopsticks. What would it be like, to serve no one? Would she dare? It makes her dizzy, almost giddy to think of it. What would she do without a patron? Would she then become a farmer? Perhaps grow opium in the hills? Smoke a silver pipe and blacken her teeth as she has heard some of those strange hilltribe ladies do? She laughs to herself. Can she imagine it?

Lost in her thoughts, she nearly misses it. Only luck—the chance movement of a man at the table across from her, his startled glance and then the duck of his head as he buries his attention in his food—saves her. She freezes.

The night market has fallen silent.

And then, like hungry ghosts, the men in white appear behind her, talking in their quick song-song to the woman at the wok. The woman bustles to serve, obsequious. Emiko trembles before them, noodles halfway between mouth and lips, her slender arm suddenly shaking under the strain. She wants to put the chopsticks down, but there is nothing to do. No way to hide herself if she moves, and so she sits frozen while the men speak behind her, looming over her as they wait.

". . . finally overstepped himself. I heard Bhirombhakdi was screaming up and down the offices saying he was going to get his head. 'Jaidee's head on a platter, he's gone too far!'"

"He gave 5000 baht to his men, every one of them, for the raid."

"A lot of good it does them now that he's been stripped."

"Still, five thousand, no wonder Bhirombhakdi was spitting blood. It must have been half a million that he lost."

"And Jaidee just charged in like a megodont. The old man probably thought Jaidee was Torapee the bull, measuring his father's footprint. Looking to take him down."

"Not anymore."

Emiko trembles as they jostle her. This is the end. She will drop the chopsticks and they will see the windup girl, as they haven't seen her yet though they cluster around her, though they bump against her with a self-confident maleness, though one white shirt's hand is touching her neck as though accidentally pressed there by the jostle of others. Suddenly she will no longer be invisible. She will appear before them, fully formed, a New Person with nothing but expired papers and import licenses and then she will be mulched, recycled as quickly as they compost dung and cellulose, thanks to the telltale twitching movements that mark her as clearly as if she were painted in the excreta of glowworms.

"I never thought I'd see him *khra*b before Akkarat, though. That was a bad thing. We all lose face with that."

There is a pause. Then one of them says, "Auntie. It looks like your methane is the wrong color."

The woman grins uncomfortably. Her daughter's smile mirrors the uncertainty. "We made a gift to the Ministry last week," she says.

The man who has his hand on Emiko's neck speaks, caressing her idly. She tries not to shiver under his touch. "Then perhaps we were told wrong."

The woman's smile falters. "Perhaps my memory is bad."

"Well, I'm happy to check the state of your accounts."

She keeps the smile on her face. "No need to trouble yourself. I'll send my daughter, now. In the meantime, why not just take these two fish for yourselves? You don't get paid enough to eat well." She pulls two large tilapia off her grill and offers them to the men.

"That's very kind of you, auntie. I am hungry." With the banana-leaf wrapped *plaa* tucked in their hands, the white shirts turn away and continue their journey through the night market, seemingly unaware of the terror they spread before them.

The woman's smile fades as soon as they're gone. She turns to her daughter and pushes baht into her hands. "Go down to the police box and make sure that Sergeant Siriporn is the one you give the money to. I don't want those two coming back."

The touch of the white shirt burns on the back of Emiko's neck. Too close. Too close by far. Strange how she sometimes forgets that she is hunted. Sometimes fools herself and thinks she is almost human. Emiko shovels the last of her noodles into her mouth. She cannot delay anymore. She must face Raleigh.

\* \* \*

"I wish to leave this place."

Raleigh turns on his barstool, expression bemused. "Really, Emiko?" He smiles. "You have a new patron, do you?"

Around them, the other girls are arriving, chattering and laughing with one another, making *wais* to the spirit house, a few of them making little offerings in hopes of encouraging a kind customer or rich patron.

Emiko shakes her head. "Not a new patron. I wish to go north. To the villages where New People live."

"Who told you about that?"

"It exists, yes?" From his expression she knows that it does. Her heart starts to pound. It's not just a rumor. "It exists," she says more firmly.

He gives her an appraising look. "It might." He signals Daeng the bartender for another drink. "But I should warn you, it's a hard life out there in the jungle. You eat bugs to survive if your crops fail. Not much to hunt, not after blister rust and Nippon genehack weevil killed so much fodder." He shrugs. "A few birds." He looks at her again. "You should stay closer to the water. You'll overheat out there. Take it from me. It's damn hard living. You should look for a new patron, if you really want to get out of here."

"The white shirts almost caught me today. I will die here, if I stay."

"I pay them not to catch you."

"No. I was at a night market—"

"What the hell were you doing at a night market? You want something to eat, you come here." Raleigh scowls.

"I am so sorry. I must go. Raleigh-san, you have influence. People you can influence to help me get travel permits. To allow me to pass the checkpoints."



Raleigh's drink arrives. He takes a sip. The old man is like a crow, all death and putrescence sitting on his barstool, watching his whores arrive for their night's work. He looks her over with barely masked disgust, as if she is a piece of dog shit stuck to his shoe. He takes another drink. "It's a hard road north. Damn expensive."

"I can earn my passage."

Raleigh doesn't respond. The bartender finishes polishing the bar. He and an assistant set out a chest of ice from the luxury manufacturer *Jai Yen, Nam Yen*. Cool Heart, Cool Water.

Raleigh holds out his glass and Daeng drops a pair of cubes in with a tinkling report. Out of the insulated chest, they start to melt in the heat. Emiko watches the ice cubes sag into liquid. Daeng pours water over the cubes. She is burning up, herself. The club's open windows do nothing to catch the breeze and at this early hour the swelter inside the building is still overwhelming. None of the yellow card fan men have arrived yet, either. The club radiates heat from walls and floor, encasing them. Raleigh takes a swallow of his cool water.

Emiko watches, burning, wishing she could sweat. "*Khun* Raleigh. Please. So sorry. Please," she hesitates, "a cold drink."

Raleigh sips his water and watches as more of his girls filter in. "Keeping a windup is damn expensive."

Emiko smiles embarrassment, hoping to assuage him. Finally, Raleigh makes a face of irritation. "Fine." He nods to Daeng. A glass of ice water is passed across. Emiko tries not to lunge for it. She holds it to her face and neck, almost gasping with relief. She drinks and presses the glass against herself again, clutching it like a talisman. "Thank you."

"Why should I help you get out of the city?"

"I will die if I stay here."

"It's not good business. Wasn't good business to hire you. And it's definitely not good business to bribe you all the way north."

"Please. Anything. I will pay it. I will do it. You may use me."

He laughs. "I've got real girls." His smile disappears. "The problem, Emiko, is that you've got nothing to give. You drink the money you earn every night. Your bribes cost money, your ice costs money. If I weren't so nice, I'd just throw you out in the street for the white shirts to mulch. You're not a good business proposition."

"Please."

"Don't piss me off. Go get ready for work. I want you out of your street clothes when the customers arrive."

His words have the finality of true authority. Reflexively, Emiko starts to bow, acquiescing to his wishes. She stops short. *You are not a dog*, she reminds herself. *You are not a servant. Service has gotten you abandoned amongst demons in a city of divine beings. If you act like a servant, you will die like a dog.*

She straightens. "So sorry, I must go north, Raleigh-san. Soon. How much would it cost? I will earn it."

"You're like a goddamn cheshire." Raleigh stands suddenly. "You just keep coming back to pick over the dead."

Emiko flinches. Even though he is old, Raleigh is still *gaijin*, born and fed before the Contraction. He stands tall. She takes another step back, unnerved by his sudden loom. Raleigh smiles grimly. "That's right, don't forget your place. You'll go north, all right. But you'll do it when I'm good and ready. And not until you've earned every baht for the white shirt bribes."

"How much?"

His face reddens. "More than you've made 'til now!"

She jumps back but Raleigh grabs her. He yanks her close. His voice is a low whiskey growl. "You were useful to someone, once, so I see how a windup like you might forget herself. But let's not fool ourselves. I own you."

His bony hand fumbles at her breast, seizes a nipple and twists. She whimpers in pain and wilts under his hand. His pale blue water eyes watch her like a snake's.

"I own every part of you," he murmurs. "If I want you mulched tomorrow, you're gone. No one will care. People in Japan might value a windup. Here, you're just trash." He squeezes again. She takes a shuddering breath, trying to keep her feet. He smiles. "I own you. Remember that."

He releases her abruptly. Emiko stumbles back and catches the bar's edge.

Raleigh returns to his drink. "I'll let you know when you've earned enough to go north," he says. "But you'll work for it, and work for it good. No more of your picky ways. If a man wants you, you go with him and make him happy enough that he wants to come back and try the novelty again. I've got plenty of natural girls offering natural sex. If you're going to go north, you'd better start offering something more."

He upends his drink, gulping it, and slaps the glass down on the bar for Daeng to refill.

"Now quit sulking and start earning."

## 16

Hock Seng scowls at the safe where it squats across from him. It's early morning in the SpringLife office, and he should be busy forging a ledger before Mr. Lake arrives, but the safe is all he can focus on. It mocks him, sitting there, enveloped in the smoke of offerings which have done nothing to open it.

Ever since the anchor pad incident the safe is always locked, and now the devil Lake is always looking over his shoulder, asking about the state of accounts, always prying and asking questions. And still the Dung Lord waits. Hock Seng has seen him twice more. Each time the man has been patient, and yet Hock Seng senses a growing irritation, a willingness perhaps to take matters into his own hands. The window of opportunity is closing.

Hock Seng scratches numbers into the ledger, reconciling the money he skimmed from the purchase of a temporary spindle. Should he simply rob the safe? Take the risk of suspicion falling on himself? There are industrial supplies in the factory that would burn through the iron in mere hours. Is this better than making the Dung Lord wait, risking that

the godfather of all godfathers will do the deed himself? Hock Seng ponders his options. All his choices come loaded with risks that make his skin crawl. If the safe is damaged, his face will soon be plastered on lampposts and it is a very bad time to be an enemy of the foreign devils. With Akkarat in ascendancy, the *farang* are also on the rise. Every day brings more news of white shirt humiliation. The Tiger of Bangkok is now a shaven-headed monk without family or property.

What if Mr. Lake were removed entirely? An anonymous knife in the gut as he walks down the street perhaps? It would be easy. Cheap, even. For fifteen baht Laughing Chan would do it willingly, and the foreign devil would trouble Hock Seng no more.

A knock at the door startles him. Hock Seng straightens and shoves the newly forged ledger under the desk. "Yes?"

It's Mai, the skinny girl from the production line, standing at the threshold. Hock Seng relaxes slightly as she *wais*. "*Khun*. There is a difficulty."

He uses a cloth to wipe the ink from his hands. "Yes? What is it?"

Her eyes flick around the room. "It would be better if you came. Yourself."

She positively reeks of fear. The hairs on the back of Hock Seng's neck prickle. She's little more than a child. He has done her decent favors. She has even earned bonuses crawling down the tight passages of the drive trains, inspecting the links as they brought the factory back into working order. . . and yet, something in her demeanor reminds him of when the Malays turned on his people. When his workers, always so loyal and appreciative, suddenly could not look him in the eye. If he had been clever, he would have seen the turn of the tide. Seen that the days of the Malayan Chinese were numbered. That even a man of his stature—who gave freely to charities, who helped his employees' children as if they were his own—that even his head was slated to be stacked in a gutter.

And now here is Mai, looking shifty. Is this the way they will come for him? Furtive? Sending a harmless-looking girl as bait? Is this the end of the yellow cards? Is it the Dung Lord, moving against him? Hock Seng feigns nonchalance and reclines slightly in his chair even as he watches her. "If you have something to say," he murmurs, "then say it now. Here."

She hesitates. Her fear is obvious. "Is the *farang* near?"

Hock Seng glances at the clock on the wall. Six o'clock. "He shouldn't be here for another hour or two. He is seldom early."

"Please, if you could just come."

So this is the way it will be. He nods shortly. "Yes, of course."

He stands and crosses to her. Such a pretty girl. Of course they would send a pretty one. She looks so harmless. He scratches at his back, lifting the loose hem of his shirt and slips the knife out, holds it behind his back as he approaches. Waits until the last moment—

He grabs her hair and yanks her close. Presses the knife against her throat.

"Who sent you? The Dung Lord? White shirts? Who?"

She gasps, unable to free herself without cutting her throat. "No one!"

"Do you think I'm a fool?" He presses the knife home, breaking skin. "Who is it?"

"No one! I swear!" She is shaking with fear but Hock Seng doesn't release her.

"Is there something you wish to say? Some secret you must keep? Tell it now."

She gasps at the pressure of his blade on her neck. "No! *Khun!* I swear! No secret! But. . . But. . ."

"Yes?"

She sags against him. "The white shirts," she whispers. "If the white shirts find out. . ."

"I'm no white shirt."

"It's Kit. Kit is ill. And Srimuang. Both of them. Please. I don't know what to do. I don't want to lose the job. I don't know what to do. Please don't tell the *farang*. Everyone knows the *farang* might close the factory. Please. My family needs. . . Please. Please." She is sobbing now, sagging against him, begging him as if he might be her savior, mindless of the knife.

Hock Seng grimaces and pulls the knife away, suddenly feeling old. This is what it is to live in fear. To suspect thirteen-year-old girls, to think that daughter mouths intend your death. He feels sick. He can't meet her eyes. "You should have said so," he mutters gruffly. "Stupid girl. These are not matters to be coy about." He lifts his shirt and slides the knife back into its sheathe. "Show me your friends."

She carefully wipes her tears away. She is not resentful. She is adaptable as young people often are. With the crisis past, she obediently leads him out of the office.

Down on the factory floor, workers are beginning to arrive. The great doors rattle wide and sun pours into the huge hall. Dung and dust motes swirl in the light. Mai leads him through the fining room, kicking through pale dust residue and on into the cutting rooms.

Overhead, the screens of algae fill the room with the sea reek of their drying. She leads him past the cutting presses, and ducks under the line. On the other side, the algae tanks sit in silent ranks, full of salt and life. More than half of the tanks show signs of reduced production. Algae barely covers their surfaces, even though the skim should be more than four inches thick after a night without harvesting.

"There," Mai whispers, pointing. Kit and Srimuang both lie against a wall. The two men look up at Hock Seng with dull eyes. Hock Seng kneels close, but doesn't touch.

"Have they eaten together?"

"I don't think so. They are not friends."

"It couldn't be cibiscosis? Blister rust? No." He shakes his head. "I'm a stupid old man. It is neither. There is no blood on their lips."

Kit moans, tries to sit up. Hock Seng flinches away, fighting an urge to wipe his hands on his shirt. The other man, Srimuang, looks even worse.

"What was this one's responsibility?"

Mai hesitates. "I think he fed the tanks. Poured the sacks of fish meal for the algae."

Hock Seng's skin crawls. Two bodies. Lying beside the tanks that Hock Seng himself brought back to full production for the benefit of Mr. Anderson, rushing to please him. Is it coincidence? He shivers, eyeing the room from a new perspective. Overflow from the vats dampens the floor and pools near the rusting drains. Blooms of algae decorate the

damp surface, feeding on left-over nutrients. Vectors everywhere, if there is something wrong with the tanks.

Hock Seng instinctively starts to wipe his hands, then stops short, skin crawling anew. The gray powders of the fining room cling to his palms, marking where he pushed the curtains aside as he passed through. He's surrounded by potential vectors. Overhead, the drying screens hang suspended, their racks filling the warehouse dimness, bank after bank, smeared with blackening skim. A drop of water falls from a screen. Spatters the floor beside his foot. And with it comes awareness of a new sound. He never heard it when the factory was full of people. But now, in this early morning quiet, it is all around: the gentle patter of rain from the screens above.

Hock Seng stands abruptly, fighting rising panic.

*Don't be a fool. You don't know it is the algae. Death comes in many forms. It could be any sort of disease.*

Kit's breathing is strangely ragged in the stillness, a panting bellows as his chest rises and falls.

"Do you think it is pandemic?" Mai asks.

Hock Seng glares at her. "Don't say those words! Do you wish to bring demons down on us? White shirts? If news gets out, they'll shut down the factory. We'll be starving like yellow cards."

"But—"

Outside, in the main hall, voices echo.

"Hush, child." Hock Seng motions her to silence, thinking furiously. A white shirt investigation would be disastrous. Just the excuse the foreign devil Mr. Lake would need to shut the place down, to fire Hock Seng. To send him back to the towers to starve. To die after coming so far, after coming so close.

More morning greetings echo from the rest of the factory. A megadont groans. Doors rattle wide. The main flywheels rumble to life as someone runs a line test.

"What should we do?" Mai asks.

Hock Seng glances around at the vats and machinery. The still empty rooms. "You're the only one who knows they are sick?"

Mai nods. "I found them when I came in."

"You're sure? You didn't mention it to anyone else as you came to find me? No one else has been in here? No one was here with you and perhaps thought they would take the day off when they saw these two?"

Mai shakes her head. "No. I came alone. I catch a ride with a farmer near the edge of the city. He brings me on his long-tail, up the *khlongs*. I always get here early."

Hock Seng, looks down at the two sick men, then at the girl. Four of them in the room. Four. He winces at the thought. Such an unlucky number, four. *Sz*. Four. *Sz*. Death. A better number is three, or two. . .

Or one.

One is the ideal number for a secret. Unconsciously, Hock Seng's hand strays to his knife, considering the girl. Messy. But still, less messy than the number four.

The girl's long black hair is tied up in a careful bun at the top of her head to keep it free of running line equipment. Her neck is exposed. Her eyes are trusting. Hock Seng looks away, evaluating the bodies again, calculating against inauspicious numbers. Four, four, four. Death. One is better. One is best. He takes a breath and makes a decision. He reaches for her. "Come here."

She hesitates. He scowls at her, waves her closer. "You want to keep your job, yes?"

She nods slowly.

"Then come. These two need to go to a hospital, yes? We cannot help them here. And two sick men lying beside the algae baths will do none of us any good. Not if we want to keep on eating. Gather them and meet me at the side door. Not through the main room. The side one. Go under the line with them, through the service access. The side, you understand?"

She nods uncertainly. He claps his hands together, spurring her to action. "Quickly now! Quickly! Drag them if you must!" He motions to the bodies. "People will be arriving. One person is already too many to keep a secret, and here we stand, four. Let us make this a secret of two, at least. Anything is better than four." *Death.*

She takes a frightened breath, then her eyes narrow with determination. She crouches to wrestle with Kit's body. Hock Seng watches to make sure she is underway, then ducks out.

In the main hall, people are still stowing their lunches and laughing. No one in a rush. The Thai are lazy. If they were Chinese yellow cards they would already be working and all would be lost. For once, Hock Seng is glad he works with Thais. He still has a little time. He ducks out the side door.

Outside, the alley is empty. High factory walls pin the narrow way. Hock Seng jogs toward Phosri Street and its jumble of breakfast stalls, steaming noodles and ragged children. A cycle rickshaw flashes across the gap.

"*Wei!*" He calls out. "*Samloh! Samloh! Wait!*" But he is too far away.

He limps to the intersection favoring his bad knee, catches sight of another rickshaw. He flags the driver. The man glances behind to see if he is threatened by competition, then angles toward Hock Seng with a lackadaisical pedal, allowing the slight slope of the street to let him coast.

"Faster!" Hock Seng shouts. "*Kuai yidian, you dog fucker!*"

The man ignores the abuse, lets his cycle coast to a stop. "You called me, *Khun?*"

Hock Seng climbs in and waves down the alley. "I have passengers for you, if you'll hurry up."

The man grunts and steers down the narrow way. The cycle's chain clicks sedately. Hock Seng grits his teeth. "Double pay. Quickly, quickly!" He motions the man onward.

The man leans on his pedals marginally more aggressively, but still he shambles like a megodont. Ahead, Mai appears. For a moment Hock Seng is afraid that she will be stupid and bring out the bodies before the rickshaw arrives, but Kit is nowhere in sight. It is only when the rickshaw comes close that she slips back inside and drags the first incoherent worker into view.

The rickshaw man shies at the body, but Hock Seng leans over his shoulder and hisses, "Triple pay." He grabs Kit and wrestles him into the rickshaw's seat before the man can protest. Mai disappears back inside.

The cycle-rickshaw man eyes Kit. "What's wrong with him?"

"He's a drunk," Hock Seng says. "He and his friend. If the boss catches them, they're fired."

"He doesn't look drunk."

"You're mistaken."

"No. That one looks like—"

Hock Seng stares at the man. "The white shirts will cast their net over you as surely as they will me. He is on your seat, in your breathing presence."

The rickshaw man's eyes widen. He draws back. Hock Seng nods confirmation, holding the man's gaze. "There's no point in making a complaint now. I say they are drunk. Triple pay to you, when you return."

Mai reappears with the second worker and Hock Seng helps lever him into the seat. He ushers Mai into the rickshaw with the men. "Hospitals," he says. And then he leans close. "But different hospitals, yes?"

Mai nods sharply.

"Good. Clever girl." Hock Seng steps back. "Go on then! Go! Beat it!"

The rickshaw man sets off, pedalling much faster than before. Hock Seng watches them ride away, the heads of the three passengers and the rickshaw man, rattling and bouncing as the bike's wheels chatter over cobbles. He grimaces. Four again. A bad number for certain. He pushes paranoia away, wondering if he is even capable of strategizing these days. An old man who jumps at shadows.

Would he be better off if Mai and Kit and Srimuang were feeding red-fin *plaa* in the murky waters of the Chao Phraya River? If they were just a collection of anonymous parts bobbing amongst the roiling bodies of hungry carp, would he not be safer?

Four. *Sz*. Death.

His skin crawls at the proximity of sickness. He rubs his hands unconsciously against his trousers. He'll have to bathe. Rub down with a chlorine bleach scrub and hope it does the job. The rickshaw man turns out of sight, carrying his diseased cargo. Hock Seng heads back inside, to the factory floor where the lines rattle with test runs and voices call out to one another in morning greeting.

*Please let it be coincidence, he prays. Please don't let it be the line.*

How many nights has he gone without sleep? One night? Ten nights? Ten thousand? Jaidee cannot remember anymore. Moons have passed awake and suns have passed in dream and everything is counting, numbers spinning out in a steady accumulation of days and hopes dashed. Propitiations and offerings unanswered. Fortune tellers with their

predictions. Generals with their assurances. Tomorrow. Three days, for certain. There are indications of a softening, whispers of a woman's whereabouts.

Patience.

*Jai yen.*

Cool heart.

Nothing.

Apologies and humiliations in the newspapers. A personal criticism, by his own hand. More false admissions of greed and corruption. 200,000 baht that he cannot repay. Editorials and condemnations in the whisper sheets. Stories spread by his enemies that he spent stolen money on whores, on a private stock of U-TeX rice against famines, that he squirrelled it away for personal benefit. The Tiger was nothing more than another corrupt white shirt.

Fines are meted out. The last of his property confiscated. The family home burned, a funeral pyre, while his mother-in-law wails and his sons, already stripped of his name, watch somnolent.

It has been decided that he will not serve his penance in a nearby monastery. Instead he will be banished to the forests of Phra Kritipong where ivory beetle has turned the land into waste and where blister rust rewrites waft across the border from Burma. Banished to the wastelands to contemplate the *damma*. His eyebrows are shaved, his head is a simple pate. If he happens to return from his penance alive, he looks forward to a lifetime of guarding yellow cards in their internments down in the south: the lowest work, for the lowest white shirt.

And yet still no word of Chaya.

Is she alive? Is she dead? Was it Trade? Was it another? A *jao por*, incensed at Jaidee's audacity? Was it someone within the Environment Ministry? Bhirom-bhakdi, irritated at Jaidee's disregard for protocol? Was it meant as a kidnapping, or murder? Did she die fighting to get free? Is she still in that concrete room of the photograph, somewhere in the city, sweating in an abandoned tower, waiting for him to rescue her? Does her corpse feed cheshires in an alley? Does she float in the Chao Phraya, food now for the Boddhi Carp rev 2.3 that the Ministry has bred with such success? He has nothing but questions. He shouts into the well, but no echo returns.

And so now he sits in a barren monk's *kuti* on the temple grounds of Wat Bowonniwet, waiting to hear whether Phra Kritipong's monastery will actually accept the task of reforming him. He wears the white of a novice. He will not wear orange. Not ever. He is not a monk. He does a special penance. His eyes follow rusty water stains on the wall, the blooms of mold and rot.

On one wall, a *bo* tree is painted, the Buddha sitting beneath it as he seeks enlightenment.

Suffering. All is suffering. Jaidee stares at the *bo* tree. Just another relic of history. The Ministry has artificially preserved a few, ones that didn't burst to kindling under the internal pressure of the ivory beetles breeding, the beetles burrowing and hatching in the tangled trunks of the *bo* until they burst forth, flying, and spread to their next victim and their next and their next. . .

All is transient. Even *bo* trees cannot last.



Jaidee touches his eyebrows, fingering the pale half-moons above his eyes where hair once stood. He still hasn't gotten used to his shaven state. Everything changes. He stares up at the *bo* tree and the Buddha.

*I was asleep. All along, I was asleep and never understood.*

But now, as he stares at the relic *bo* tree, something shifts.

Nothing lasts forever. A *kuti* is a cell. This cell is a prison. He sits in a prison, while the ones who took Chaya live and drink and whore and laugh. Nothing is permanent. This is the central teaching of the Buddha. Not a career, not an institution, not a wife, not a tree. . . All is change; change is the only truth.

He stretches a hand toward the painting and traces the flaking paint, wondering if the man who painted it used a real living *bo* tree as model, if he was lucky enough to live when they lived, or if he modeled it from a photo. Copied from a copy.

In a thousand years will they even know that *bo* trees existed? Will Niwat and Surat's great-grandchildren know that there were other fig trees, also all gone? Will they know that there were many many trees and that they were of many types? Not just a Gates teak, and a generipped PurCal banana, but many, many others as well?

*Will they understand that we were not fast enough or smart enough to save them all? That we had to make choices?*

The Grahamites who preach on the streets of Bangkok all talk of their Holy Bible and its stories of salvation. Their stories of Noah Bodhisattva, who saved all the animals and trees and flowers on his great bamboo raft and helped them cross the waters, all the broken pieces of the world piled atop his raft while he hunted for land. But there is no Noah Bodhisattva now. There is only Phra Seub who feels the pain of loss but can do little to stop it, and the little mud Buddhas of the Environment Ministry, who hold back rising waters by barest luck.

The *bo* tree blurs. Jaidee's cheeks are wet with tears. Still he stares up at it and the Buddha in his pose of meditation. Who would have thought the calorie companies would attack figs? Who would have thought the *bo* trees would die as well? The *farang* have no respect for anything but money. He wipes the water off his face. It is stupid to think that anything lasts forever. Perhaps even Buddhism is transient.

He stands and gathers his white novice robes around him. He *wais* to the flaking paint of the Buddha under his disappeared tree.

Outside, the moon shines bright. A few green methane lamps glow, barely lighting the paths through the reengineered teak trees to the monastery gates. It is foolish to grasp for things that cannot be regained. All things die. Chaya is already lost to him. Such is change.

No one guards the gates. It is assumed that he is obedient. That he will scrape and beg for any hope of Chaya's return. That he will allow himself to be broken. He's not even sure if anyone cares now about his final fate. He has served his purpose. Dealt a blow to General Pracha, lost face for the entire Environment Ministry. If he stays or leaves, what of it?

He walks out onto the night streets of the City of Divine Beings and heads south, toward the river, toward the Grand Palace and the glittering lights of the city, down

through streets half-populated. Toward the levees that keep the city from drowning under the curse of the *farang*.

The City Pillar Shrine rises ahead of him, its roofs gleaming, Buddha images alight with offerings, sweet incense pouring from them. It was here that Rama XII declared that the city of Krung Thep would not be abandoned. Would not fall to the likes of the *farang* the way that Ayutthaya fell to the Burmese so many centuries before.

Over the chanting of nine hundred ninety-nine monks dressed in saffron robes, the King declared that the city would be saved, and from that moment he charged the Ministry of the Environment with its defense. Charged them with the building of the great levees and the tide pools that would buffer the city against the wash of monsoon flood and the surge of typhoon waves. Krung Thep would stand.

Jaidee walks on, listening to the steady chant of monks who pray every minute of the day, summoning the power of the spirit worlds to Bangkok's aid. There were times when he himself knelt on the cool marble of the shrine, prostrate before the city's central pillar, begging for the help of the King and the spirits and whatever life force the city was imbued with as he went forth to do his work. The city pillar was talismanic. It gave him faith.

Now he walks past in his white robes and doesn't look twice.

*All things are transient.*

He continues through the streets, makes his way into the crowded quarters along the back of Charoen Khlong. The waters lap quietly. No one poles its dark surface this late at night. But ahead, on one of the screened porches a candle flickers. He steals closer.

"Kanya!"

His old lieutenant turns, surprised. She composes her features, but not before Jaidee has a chance to read her shock at what stands before her: this forgotten man without a hair on his head, without even his eyebrows, grinning madly at her from the foot of her steps. He removes his sandals and climbs in white like a ghost up the stairs. Jaidee is aware of the appearance he presents, can't help but enjoy the humor as he opens the screens and slips within.

"I thought you had already gone to the forests," Kanya says.

Jaidee settles beside her, arranging his robes around him. He stares out at the stinking waters of the *khlong*. A mango tree's branches reflect against the moonlight liquid silver. "It takes a long time to find a monastery willing to soil itself with my sort. Even Phra Kritipong seems to have second thoughts when it comes to enemies of Trade."

Kanya makes a face. "Everyone talks about how they are in ascendancy. Akkarat speaks openly of allowing windup imports."

Jaidee startles. "I hadn't heard of such. A few *farang*, but. . ."

Kanya makes a face. "All respect to the Queen, but windups do not riot." She forces her thumb into the hard peel of a mangosteen. Its purple skin, nearly black in the darkness, peels away. "Torapee measuring his father's footprints."

Jaidee shrugs. "All things change."

Kanya grimaces. "How can one fight their money? Money is their power. Who remembers their patrons? Who remembers their obligations when money comes surging

in as strong and deep as the ocean against the seawalls?" She grimaces. "We are not fighting the rising waters. We are fighting money."

"Money is attractive."

Kanya makes a bitter face. "Not to you. You were a monk even before they sent you to a *kuti*."

"Perhaps that's why I make such a poor novice."

"Shouldn't you be in your *kuti* now?"

Jaidee grins. "It was cramping my style."

Kanya stills, looks hard at Jaidee. "You're not ordaining?"

"I'm a fighter, not a monk." He shrugs. "Sitting in a *kuti* and meditating will do no good. I let myself become confused about that. Losing Chaya confused me. "

"She will return. I'm sure of it."

Jaidee smiles sadly at his protégé, so full of hope and faith. It's surprising that a woman who smiles so little and sees so much melancholy in the world can believe that in this case—this one exceptional case—that the world will turn in a positive direction.

"No. She will not."

"She will!"

Jaidee shakes his head. "I always thought you were the skeptical one."

Kanya's face is anguished. "You've done everything to signal capitulation. You have no face left! They must let her go!"

"They will not. I think that she was dead within a day. I only clung to hope because I was mad for her."

"You don't know she'd dead. They could still be holding her."

"As you pointed out, I have no face left. If this were a lesson, she would have returned by now. It was a different sort of message than we thought." Jaidee contemplates the still waters of the *khlong*. "I need a favor from you."

"Anything."

"Loan me a spring gun."

Kanya's eyes widen. "*Khun*. . ."

"Don't worry. I'll bring it back. I don't need you to come with me. I just need a good weapon."

"I. . ."

Jaidee grins. "Don't worry. I'll be fine. And there's no reason to destroy two careers."

"You're going after Trade."

"Akkarat needs to understand that the Tiger still has teeth."

"You don't even know if it was Trade who took her."

"Who else, really?" Jaidee shrugs. "I have made many enemies, but in the end, there is really only one." He smiles. "There is Trade and there is me. I was foolish to let people convince me otherwise."

"I'll come with you."

"No. You will stay here. You will keep an eye on Niwat and Surat. That is all I ask of you, Lieutenant."

"Please don't do this. I will beg Pracha, I will go to—"

Jaidee cuts her off, before she speaks of ugliness. There was a time when he would have let her lose face before him, would have allowed her apologies to spill forth like a waterfall during the monsoon, but not anymore.

"I don't wish for anything else," he says. "I am content. I will go to Trade and I will make them pay. All of this is *kamma*. I was not meant to keep Chaya forever, or she to keep me. But I think there are still things we can do if we hold tight to our *damma*. We all have our duties, Kanya. To our patrons, to our men." He shrugs. "I've had many different lives. I was a boy, and a *muay thai* champion, and a father, and a white shirt." He glances down at the folds of his novice's clothes. "A monk, even." He grins. "Don't worry about me. I have a few more stages yet to traverse before I give up on this life and go to meet Chaya." He lets his voice harden. "I still have unfinished business, and I won't stop until it is done."

Kanya watches him, eyes anguished. "You can't go alone."

"No. I will take Somchai."

\* \* \*

Trade: the ministry that functions with impunity, that scoffs at him so easily, that steals his wife and leaves a hole in him the size of a durian.

*Chaya.*

Jaidee studies the building. In the face of all those blazing lights, he feels like a savage in the wilderness, like a hilltribe spirit doctor staring at the advance of a megadont army. For a moment, his sense of mission falters.

*I should see the boys, he tells himself. I could go home.*

And yet here he is in the darkness, watching the lights of the Ministry of Trade, where they burn their coal allocation as though the Contraction never happened, as though there are no seawalls needed to keep back the ocean.

Somewhere in there a man squats and plans. The man who watched him at the anchor pads so long ago. Who spat betel and sauntered away as if Jaidee were nothing more than a cockroach to be crushed. Who sat beside Akkarat and observed silently as Jaidee was thrown down. That man will lead to Chaya's resting place. That man is the key. Somewhere inside those glowing windows.

Jaidee ducks back into the darkness. He and Somchai wear dark street clothes, stripped of all identifiers, the better to blend with the night. Somchai is a fast one. One of the best. Dangerous close in, and quiet. He knows his way around a lock, and, like Jaidee, he is motivated.

Somchai's face is serious as he studies the building. Almost as serious as Kanya, when Jaidee considers it. The demeanor seems to creep up on all of them, eventually. Seems to come with the work. Jaidee wonders if the Thai ever really smiled as he has

heard in legends. Every time he hears his boys laugh, it is as if some beautiful orchid has blossomed in the forest.

"They sell themselves cheaply," Somchai murmurs.

Jaidee nods shortly. "I remember when Trade was just a bit portfolio under Agriculture, and now look at it."

"You're showing your age. Trade was always a big ministry."

"No. Just a tiny department. A joke." Jaidee waves at the new complex with its high-tech convection vents, with its awnings and porticos. "It's a new world, once again."

As if to taunt him, a pair of cheshires jump up on a balustrade to preen and wash. They molt in and out of view, careless of discovery. Jaidee pulls out his spring gun and takes aim. "That's what Trade has given us. Cheshires should be on their badge."

"Please don't."

He looks at Somchai. "It carries no karmic cost. They have no soul."

"They bleed like any other animal."

"You could say the same of ivory beetles."

Somchai ducks his head, but doesn't say anything more. Jaidee scowls and puts his spring gun back in its holster. It would be waste of ammunition anyway. There are always more.

"I used to be on the poison details for cheshires," Somchai says finally.

"Now it's you who shows your age."

Somchai shrugs. "I had a family then."

"I didn't know."

"Cibiscosis. 118.Aa. It was quick."

"I remember. My father died with that one as well. A bad iteration."

Somchai nods. "I miss them. I hope they reincarnated well."

"I'm sure they did."

He shrugs. "One can hope. I became a monk for them. Ordained for a full year. I prayed. Did many offerings." He says again, "One can hope."

The cheshires yowl again as Somchai watches. "I've killed thousands of them. Thousands. I've killed six men in my life and never regretted any of them, but I've killed thousands of cheshires and have never felt at ease." He pauses, scratches behind his ear at a bloom of arrested *fa' gan* fringe. "I sometimes wonder if my family's cibiscosis was karmic retribution for all those cheshires."

"It couldn't be. They're not natural."

Somchai shrugs. "They breed. They eat. They live. They breathe." He smiles slightly. "If you pet them, they will purr."

Jaidee makes a face of disgust.

"It's true. I have touched them. They are real. As much as you or I."

"They're just empty vessels. No soul fills them."

Somchai shrugs. "Maybe even the worst monstrosities of the Japanese live in some way. I worry that Noi and Chart and Malee and Prem have been reborn in windup bodies."

Not all of us are good enough to become Contraction *phii*. Maybe some of us become windups, in Japanese factories, working working working, you know? We're so few in comparison to the past, where did all the souls go? Maybe to the Japanese? Maybe into windups?"

Jaidee masks his uneasiness at the direction of Somchai's words. "It's impossible."

Somchai shrugs again. "Still. I could not bear to hunt a cheshire again."

"Then let's hunt men."

Across the street, a door is opening and a Ministry worker steps outside. Jaidee is already crossing the street, sprinting to catch the man. Their target strides to a rack of bicycles and bends down to unlock a wheel. Jaidee's club slides free. The man looks up and gasps and then Jaidee is on top of him, baton swinging. The man has time to raise an arm. Jaidee swats it aside and then he is inside the man's reach and clubs him across the head.

Somchai catches up. "You're fast for an old man."

Jaidee smiles. "Take his feet."

They lug the body back across the street, slipping into the puddled blackness between the methane lamps. Jaidee goes through his pockets. Keys jingle. He grins and raises them to show the prize. He ties the man quickly, blindfolds and gags him. A cheshire drifts close, watching, a molting of calico and shadow and stone.

"Will the cheshires eat him?" Somchai wonders.

"If you cared, you would have let me kill them."

Somchai ponders this, but doesn't say anything. Jaidee finishes binding the man. "Come on." They jog back across the street, slip to the door. The key enters easily, and they are inside.

In the glare of electricity, Jaidee stifles the urge to locate light switches and plunge the Ministry into darkness. "Stupid to have people working so late. Burning all this carbon."

Somchai shrugs. "Our man may be here in the building, even now."

"Not if he's lucky." But Jaidee has the same thought. He wonders if he will be able to restrain himself if he catches Chaya's killer. Wonders why he should.

They slip through more lighted halls. A few people are still present, but no one gives them a second glance as they stride by. Both of them walk with authority, have the air of men others must defer to. Jaidee acknowledges others with a quick inclination of his head as he walks past. Eventually he finds the records offices he requires. Somchai and Jaidee pause in front of glass doors. Jaidee hefts his baton.

"Glass." Somchai notes.

"You want to try?"

Somchai examines the lock, pulls out a set of tools, sets to work probing the aperture, massaging its tumblers. Jaidee stands beside him, waiting impatiently. The corridor blazes with light.

Somchai fiddles with the locks.

"Eh. Never mind." Jaidee hefts his baton. "Move aside."

The shattering is quick; the sound echoes and fades. They wait for footsteps but there are none. They both slip inside and proceed to rifle through the cabinets. Eventually Jaidee finds the personnel files, and then there is a long period of examining poor photographs, of setting aside ones that seem familiar, sifting, sorting.

"He knew me." Jaidee mutters. "He looked right at me."

"Everyone knows you," Somchai observes. "You are famous."

Jaidee grimaces. "You think he was at the anchor pads to collect something? Or just there for the inspections themselves?"

"Or perhaps they wanted whatever was in Carlyle's holds. Or some other dirigible that aborted arrival and dropped in Occupied Lanna, instead. There are a thousand possibilities, no?"

"Here!" Jaidee points. "This is the one."

"You're sure? His face was narrower, I thought."

"I'm sure of it."

Somchai frowns as he scans the file over Jaidee's shoulder. "A low-level man. Not important at all. No one with influence."

Jaidee shakes his head. "No. He has power. I saw the way he looked at me. He was at the ceremony when I was demoted." He frowns. "There is no address information from him. Just Krung Thep."

The sound of scuffling comes from outside. A pair of men stand in the broken doorway with their spring guns drawn. "Hold!"

Jaidee grimaces. Clasps the file behind his back. "Yes? There is a difficulty?" The guards step through the door, survey the office.

"Who are you?"

Jaidee looks at Somchai. "I thought you said I was famous."

Somchai shrugs. "Not everyone loves *muay thai*."

"But still, everyone gambles. They should have at least placed bets on my fights."

The guards come closer. They order Jaidee and Somchai onto their knees. As the guards come around to secure them, Jaidee lashes out with an elbow. Catches one guard in the gut. Whirls with a knee that slams the man in the head. The other guard fires a stream of blades before Somchai hits him in the throat. The man falls, dropping his pistol, gurgling through a broken windpipe.

Jaidee grabs the surviving guard, drags him close. "Do you know this man?" He holds up the picture of his target. The guard's eyes widen and he shakes his head, tries to crawl away towards his pistol. Jaidee kicks it out of reach, then kicks the man in his ribs. "Tell me everything about him! He's yours. Akkarat's."

The guard shakes his head. "No!"

Jaidee kicks him in the face, drawing blood. Gets down beside the mewling man. "Tell me, or you follow your friend."

Both their eyes travel to the gurgling man, strangling on his own crushed airway.

"Tell me," Jaidee says.

"No need for that."

At the door, the object of Jaidee's hunger stands.

Men pour in through the door ahead of him. Jaidee draws his pistol, but they fire and blades slash into his gun arm. He drops the pistol. Blood pours. He turns to run for the office's windows, but men tackle him, skidding on the wet marble. Everyone goes down in a tangle of limbs. Somewhere far away, Jaidee hears Somchai bellowing. His arms are yanked behind him. Zip straps bind his wrists in rattan bonds.

"Tourniquet that!" the man orders. "I don't want him bleeding to death."

Jaidee looks down. Blood is welling out of his arm. His captors staunch the flow. He's not sure if he's lightheaded from blood loss or the sudden lust he has for his enemy's death. They yank him upright. Somchai joins him, his nose pouring blood, his eye closed. Teeth red. Behind him on the floor, two men lie still.

The man studies the two of them. Jaidee returns the gaze, refusing to look away.

"Captain Jaidee. You were supposed to have entered the monkhood."

Jaidee tries to shrug. "My *kuti* didn't have enough light. I thought I'd do my penance here, instead."

The man smiles slightly. "We can arrange that." He nods to his men. "Take them upstairs."

The men yank him and Somchai out of the room, drag them down the corridor. They reach an elevator. A real electric elevator, with dials that glow and designs of the Ramakin on the walls. Each button a small demon's mouth, and busty women playing *saw duang* and *jaka* around the edges. The doors close.

"What is your name?" Jaidee asks the man.

The man shrugs. "It's not important."

"You're Akkarat's creature."

The man doesn't answer.

The doors open. They come out on the roof. Fifteen stories into the air. The men shove him and Somchai toward the lip of the building.

"Go on," says the man. "You wait up here. Over by the edge, where we can see you."

They point their spring guns and order him forward until he and Somchai stand at the lip, looking down on the faint glows of the methane lamps. Jaidee studies the plunge.

So this is what it is to face death. He stares down into the depths. The street far below. The air waiting for him.

"What did you do with Chaya?" he calls back to the man.

The man smiles. "Is that why you are here? Because we didn't return her to you soon enough?"

Jaidee feels a thrill of hope. Could he have been wrong? "You can do what you want with me. But let her go."

The man seems to falter. Is it guilt that makes him hesitate? Jaidee cannot tell. He is too far away. Is Chaya dead then, for certain? "Just let her go. Do what you want with me."

The man doesn't say anything.



Jaidee wonders if there is anything he should have done differently. It was brash of him to come here. But she was lost already. And the man has made no promises, no taunts to suggest she is alive. Was he foolish?

"Is she alive or not?" he asks.

The man smiles slightly. "I suppose it hurts not to know."

"Let her go."

"It wasn't personal, Jaidee. If there had been another way. . ." The man shrugs.

She is dead. Jaidee is sure of it. All part of some plan. He shouldn't have let Pracha convince him otherwise. He should have attacked immediately with the full power of his men, taught Trade a lesson in retribution. He turns to Somchai. "I'm sorry about this."

Somchai shrugs. "You were always a tiger. It's in your nature. I knew that when I came with you."

"Still, Somchai, if we die here. . ."

Somchai smiles. "Then you will come back as a cheshire."

Jaidee can't help a bark of surprised laughter. It feels good, this bubbling noise. He finds he can't stop. The laughter fills him up, lifting him. Even the guards snicker. Jaidee catches another glimpse of Somchai's widening smile, and his mirth redoubles.

Behind them, footsteps. A voice. "Such a humorous party. So much laughter for a pair of thieves."

Jaidee can barely master himself. He gasps for breath. "There must be a mistake. We just work here."

"I think not. Turn around."

Jaidee turns. The Trade Minister stands before him. Akkarat in the flesh. And beside him. . . Jaidee's hilarity leaves him like hydrogen gusting from a dirigible. Akkarat is flanked by bodyguards. Black Panthers. Royal Elites, a sign of the palace's esteem to have them on his leash. Jaidee's heart goes cold. No one in the Environment Ministry is so protected. Not even General Pracha himself.

Akkarat smiles slightly at Jaidee's shock. He surveys Jaidee and Somchai as though examining tilapia in the market but Jaidee does not care. His eyes are on the nameless man behind him. The unassuming one. The one. . . Puzzle pieces click into place. "You're not Trade at all." He murmurs. "You're with the palace."

The man shrugs.

Akkarat speaks. "You're not so bold now, are you Captain Jaidee?"

"There, I told you you were famous," Somchai murmurs.

Jaidee almost laughs again, though the implications of this new understanding are deeply troubling. "You truly have the palace's backing?"

Akkarat shrugs. "Trade is in ascendancy. The Somdet Chaopraya favors an open policy."

Jaidee measures the distance between them. Too far. "I'm surprised a *heeya* like you would dare come so close to your dirty work."

Akkarat smiles. "I wouldn't miss this. You've been an expensive thorn."

"Do you intend to push us yourself, then?" Jaidee taunts. "Will you stain your own *kamma* with my death, *heeya*?" He nods at the men around them. "Or will you try to put the stain on your men? See them come back as cockroaches in their next life to be squashed ten thousand times before a decent rebirth? Blood on their hands for killing in cold blood. For the sake of profit?"

The men shift nervously and glance at one another. Akkarat scowls. "You're the one who will come back as a cockroach."

Jaidee grins. "Come then. Prove your manhood. Push the defenseless man to his death."

Akkarat hesitates.

"Are you a paper tiger?" Jaidee goads. "Come on then. Hurry up! I'm getting dizzy, waiting so close to the edge."

Akkarat studies him. "You've gone too far, white shirt. This time, you've gone too far." He strides forward.

Jaidee whirls. His knee rises, slams into the Trade Minister's ribs. The men are all shouting. Jaidee leaps again, moving as smoothly as he ever did in the stadiums. It's almost as though he never left Lumphini. Never left the crowds and the roar of gamblers. His knee crushes the Trade Minister's leg.

Fire crackles in Jaidee's joints, unused to these contortions, but even with his hands tied behind his back, his knees still fly with the efficiency of a champion's. He kicks again. The Trade Minister grunts and stumbles to the building's edge.

Jaidee raises his foot to drive Akkarat over the precipice but pain blossoms in his back. He stumbles. Blood mists in the air. Spring gun disks rip through him. Jaidee loses his rhythm. The building's edge surges toward him. He glimpses Black Panthers grabbing their patron, yanking him away.

Jaidee kicks again, trying for a lucky strike, but he hears the whine of more blades in the air, the whirl of pistol springs unwinding as they spit disks into his flesh. The blooms of pain are hot and deep. He slams against the edge of the building. Falls to his knees. He tries to rise again, but now the spring gun whine is steady—many men firing; the high-pitched squeal of releasing energy fills his ears. He can't get his legs under him. Akkarat is wiping blood off his face. Somchai is struggling with another pair of Panthers.

Jaidee doesn't even feel the shove that sends him over the edge.

The fall is shorter than he expected.

## 18

The rumor travels like fire in the dead timber of Isaan. The Tiger is dead. Trade is in ascendancy for certain. Hock Seng's neck prickles as tension blossoms in the city. The man who sells a newspaper to him does not smile. A pair of white shirts on patrol scowls at every pedestrian. The people who sell vegetables seem suddenly furtive, as if they are dealing contraband.

The Tiger is dead, shamed somehow, though no one seems to know the specifics. Was he truly unmanned? Was his head truly mounted in front of the Environment Ministry as a warning to the white shirts?

It makes Hock Seng want to gather his money and flee, but the blueprints in the safe keep him bound to his desk. He hasn't felt undercurrents like this since the Incident.

He stands and goes to the office shutters. Peers out to the street. Goes back to his treadle computer. A minute later, he moves to the factory's observation window to study the Thais working on the lines. It's as if the air is charged with lightning. A storm is coming, full of water spouts and tidal waves.

Hazards outside the factory, and hazards within. Halfway into the shift, Mai came again, shoulders slumped. Another sick worker, sent off to a third hospital, Sukhumvit this time. And down below, at the heart of the manufacturing system, something foul reaches for them all.

Hock Seng's skin crawls at the thought of disease brewing in those vats. Three is too many for coincidence. If there are three, then there will be more, unless he reports the problem. But if he reports anything, the white shirts will burn the factory to the ground and Mr. Lake's kink-spring plans will go back across the seas, and everything will be lost.

A knock comes on the door.

"Lai."

Mai slips into the room, looking frightened and miserable. Her black hair is disarranged. Her dark eyes scan the room, looking for signs of the *farang*.

"He's gone to his lunch." Hock Seng supplies. "Did you deliver Viyada?"

Mai nods. "No one saw me drop her."

"Good. That's something."

Mai gives him a miserable *wai* of acknowledgment.

"Yes? What is it?"

She hesitates. "There are white shirts about. Many of them. I saw them at the intersections, all the way to the hospital."

"Did they stop you? Question you?"

"No. But there are a lot of them. More than usual. And they seem angry."

"It is the Tiger, and Trade. That is all. It can't be us. They don't know about us."

She nods doubtfully, but does not leave. "It is difficult for me to work here," she says. "It's too dangerous now. The sickness." She stumbles on her words, finally says, "I'm very sorry. If I'm dead. . ." she trails off. "I'm very sorry."

Hock Seng nods sympathetically. "Yes. Of course. You do no good for yourself if you are sick." Privately, though, he wonders what safety she can really find. Nightmares of the yellow card slum towers still wake him at night, shaking and grateful for what he has. The towers have their own diseases, poverty is its own killer. He grimaces, wondering how he himself would balance the terrors of some unknown sickness against the certainty of work.

No, this work is not a certainty. This is the same thinking that caused him to leave Malaya too late. His unwillingness to accept that a clipper ship was sinking and to abandon it when his head was still above the waves. Mai is wise where he is dull. He nods sharply. "Yes. Of course. You should go. You have youth. You are Thai. Something will come to you." He forces a smile. "Something good."

She hesitates.

"Yes?" he asks.

"I hoped I could have my last pay."

"Of course." Hock Seng goes to the petty cash safe, swings it open, reaches in and pulls out a handful of red paper. In a fit of reckless generosity that he doesn't quite understand himself, he hands the entire wad over to her. "Here. Take this."

She gasps at the amount. "*Khun*. Thank you." She *wais*. "Thank you."

"It's nothing. Save it. Be careful with it—"

A shout rises from the factory floor, then more shouts. Hock Seng feels a surge of panic. The manufacturing line stalls. The stop bell rings belatedly.

Hock Seng rushes to the door, looks down at lines. Ploi is waving her hand toward the gates. Others are abandoning their posts, running to the doors. Hock Seng cranes his neck, seeking the cause.

"What is it?" Mai asks.

"I can't tell." He turns and runs to the shutters, yanks them open. White shirts fill the avenue, marching in ordered ranks. He sucks in his breath. "White shirts."

"Are they coming here?"

Hock Seng doesn't answer. He looks over his shoulder at the safe. *With a little time*. . . No. He's being a fool. He waited too long in Malaya; he won't make the same mistake twice. He goes to the petty cash safe and begins pulling out all the remaining cash. Stuffing it into a sack.

"Are they coming because of the sick?" Mai asks.

Hock Seng shakes his head. "It doesn't matter. Come here." He goes to another window and opens the shutters, revealing the blaze of the factory rooftop.

Mai peers out over hot tiles. "What's this?"

"An escape route. Yellow cards always prepare for the worst." He smiles as he hoists her up. "We are paranoid, you know."

## 19

"You emphasized to Akkarat that this was a time-sensitive offer?" Anderson asks.

"What are you complaining about?" Carlyle toasts Anderson over a warm glass of rice beer. "He hasn't had you ripped apart by megodonts."

"I can put resources in his hands. And we aren't asking for much in return. Not by historical standards."

"Things are going his way. He might not think he needs you. Not with the white shirts bowing and scraping. He hasn't had this much influence since before the December 12 debacle."

Anderson makes a face of irritation. He reaches for his drink then sets it back. He doesn't want more warm booze. Between the swelter of the day and the Sato, his mind is already dumb and clouded. He's starting to suspect that Sir Francis is trying to drive *farang* away, slowly whittling them down with empty promises and warm whiskey—*no*

*ice today, so sorry.* Around the open bar, the few other patrons all look as heat-stunned as he is.

"You should have joined up when I first offered," Carlyle observes. "You wouldn't be stewing now."

"When you first offered, you were a blowhard who'd just lost an entire dirigible."

Carlyle laughs. "Missed the big picture on that one, didn't you?"

Anderson doesn't respond to the man's needling. It's annoying to have Akkarat dismiss the offer of support so easily, but the truth is, Anderson can barely focus on his job. Emiko fills his thoughts, and his time. Every night he seeks her out at Ploenchit, monopolizes her, rains baht on her. Even with Raleigh's greed, the windup's company is cheap. In a few more hours, the sun will sink, and she will once again totter up on stage. The first time he saw her perform, she caught him watching and her eyes had clutched at him, begging to be saved from what was about to occur.

"My body is not mine," she told him, her voice flat when he asked about the performances. "The men who designed me, they make me do things I cannot control. As if their hands are inside me. Like a puppet, yes?" Her fists clenched, opening and closing unconsciously, but her voice remained subdued. "They made me obedient, in all ways."

And then she had smiled prettily and flowed into his arms, as if she had made no complaint at all.

She is an animal. Servile as a dog. And yet if he is careful to make no demands, to leave the air between them open, another version of the windup girl emerges. As precious and rare as a living *bo* tree. Her soul, emerging from within the strangling strands of her engineered DNA.

He wonders if she were a real person if he would feel more incensed at the abuse she suffers. It's an odd thing, being with a manufactured creature, built and trained to serve. She herself admits that her soul wars with itself. That she does not rightly know which parts of her are hers alone and which have been inbuilt genetically. Does her eagerness to serve come from some portion of canine DNA that makes her always assume that natural people outrank her for pack loyalty? Or is it simply the training that she has spoken of?

The sound of marching boots intrudes on Anderson's thoughts. Carlyle straightens from his slump, craning for a view of the commotion. Anderson turns, and nearly knocks over his beer.

White uniforms fill the street. Pedestrians and bicycles and food carts are scattering aside, frantically piling against the walls of rubble and factories, making way for the Environment Ministry's troops. Anderson cranes his neck. Spring rifles and black batons and gleaming white uniforms as far as he can see. A streaming dragon of determination marching past. The resolute face of a nation that has never been conquered.

"Jesus and Noah," Carlyle mutters.

Anderson watches carefully. "That's a lot of white shirts."

At some unknown signal, two of the white shirts peel away from the main group and enter Sir Francis'. They survey the *farang* lying stupid in the heat with barely masked disgust.

Sir Francis, normally so absent and unconcerned, bustles out and *wais* deeply to the men.

Anderson jerks his head toward the door. "Time to go, you think?"

Carlyle gives a grim nod. "Let's not be too obvious, though."

"A little late for that. You think they're looking for you?"

Carlyle's face is tight. "I was actually hoping it was you they were after."

Sir Francis finishes speaking with the white shirts. He turns and calls out to his patrons. "So sorry. We are closed now. Everything is closed. You must leave immediately."

Anderson and Carlyle both sway to their feet. "I shouldn't have drunk so much." Carlyle mutters.

They stumble outside with the other bar patrons. Everyone stands under the blazing sun, blinking stupidly as more white shirts stream by. The thud of bootfalls fills the air. Echoes from the walls. Thrums with the promise of violence.

Anderson leans close to Carlyle's ear. "This isn't another of Akkarat's manipulations, I don't suppose? Not like your lost dirigible or anything?"

Carlyle doesn't answer but the grim expression on his face tells Anderson everything he needs to know. Hundreds of white shirts fill the street, and more keep coming. The uniformed river is unending.

"They have to be pulling troops in from the countryside. There's no way this many white shirts work in the city."

"They're the Ministry's front line, for the burnings," Carlyle says. "For when cibiscosis or poultry flu gets out of hand." He starts to point then drops his hand, not wanting to draw attention to them. Nods instead. "See the badge? The tiger and the torch? They're practically a suicide division. That's where the Tiger of Bangkok got his start."

Anderson nods grimly. It's one thing to complain about the white shirts, to joke about their stupidity and hunger for bribes. It's another to watch them march by in shining ranks. The ground shakes with tramping feet. Dust rises. The street reverberates with their increasing number. Anderson has an almost uncontrollable urge to flee. They are predators. He is prey. He wonders if Peters and Lei had even this much warning before Finland went wrong.

"You have a gun?" he asks Carlyle.

Carlyle shakes his head. "More trouble than they're worth."

Anderson scans the street for Lao Gu. "My rickshaw man's gone missing."

"Goddamn yellow cards." Carlyle laughs quietly. "Always got their fingers to the wind. I'll bet there's not a yellow card in the city who's not in hiding right now."

Anderson grips Carlyle's elbow. "Come on. Try not to draw attention to yourself."

"Where we going?"

"To put our own fingers to the wind. See what's happening."

Anderson leads him down a side street, aiming for the main freight *khlong*, the canal that leads to the sea. Almost immediately, they run into a cordon of white shirts. The guards lift their spring rifles and wave Anderson and Carlyle away.

"I think they're securing the whole district," Anderson says. "The locks. The factories."

"Quarantine?"

"They'd have masks if they were here to burn."

"A coup then? Another December 12?"

Anderson glances at Carlyle. "A bit ahead of schedule for that, aren't you?"

Carlyle eyes the white shirts. "Maybe General Pracha has gotten the jump on us."

Anderson tugs him in the opposite direction. "Come on. We'll go to my factory. Maybe Hock Seng knows something."

All along the street, white shirts are busily rousting people from their shops, encouraging them to close their doors. The last of the shop keepers are shoving wooden panels into sockets and sealing their storefronts. Another company of white shirts marches by.

Anderson and Carlyle arrive at the SpringLife factory in time to see megadonts streaming out of the main gates. Anderson snags one of the megadont men. The *mahout* switches his beast to halt and regards Anderson as the megadont snorts and shuffles its feet impatiently. Line workers stream around their obstruction.

"Where's Hock Seng?" Anderson asks. "Yellow Card Boss. Where?"

The man shakes his head. More workers are hurrying out.

"Did the white shirts come here?" he asks.

The man says something too fast for Anderson to pick up. Carlyle translates. "He says the white shirts are coming for revenge. Coming to get back their face."

The man motions emphatically and Anderson steps out of the way.

Across the street, the Chaozhou factory is also evacuating its workers. None of the street's storefronts are open now. Food carts have all been dragged indoors or wheeled away in fright. Every door on the street is shut. A few Thais peer out from high windows but the street itself contains only disbursing workers and marching white shirts. The last of the SpringLife workers hurry past, none of them looking at Carlyle or Lake as they flee.

"Worse by the minute," Carlyle mutters. His face has gone pale under his tropical tan.

A new wave of white shirts rounds the corner, six wide, a snake extending down the length of the street.

Anderson's skin prickles at the sight of the closed shop fronts. It's as if everyone is preparing for a typhoon. "Let's make like the natives and get inside." He grabs one of the heavy iron gates and hauls against it. "Help me."

It takes them both to drag the gates closed and set the crossbars. Anderson slaps locks into place and leans against hot iron, panting. Carlyle studies the bars. "Does this mean we're safe? Or trapped?"

"We're not in Khlong Prem Prison yet. So let's assume we're winning."

But inwardly, Anderson wonders. There are too many variables in play, and it makes him nervous. He remembers a time in Missouri when the Grahamites rioted. There had been tension, some small speeches, and then it had simply erupted in field burning. No

one had seen the violence coming. Not a single intelligence officer had anticipated the cauldron boiling beneath the surface.

Anderson had ended up perched atop a grain silo, choking on the smoke of HiGro fields going up in sheets of flame, firing steadily at rioters on the ground with a spring rifle he'd salvaged from a slow-moving security guard, and all the while he had wondered how everyone had missed the signs. They lost the facility because of that blindness. And now it is the same. A sudden eruption, and the surprise of realizing that the world he understands is not the one he actually inhabits.

Is this Pracha, making a play for absolute power? Or Akkarat, causing more trouble? Or is it simply a new plague? It could be anything. As Anderson watches white shirts stream past, he can almost smell the smoke of burning silos and HiGro.

He waves Carlyle into the factory. "Let's find Hock Seng. If anyone knows anything, it will be him."

Upstairs, the administrative offices are empty. Hock Seng's incense burns steadily, sending up gray silk streamers. Papers lie abandoned on his desk, rustling under the gentle breeze of the crank fans.

Carlyle laughs, low and cynical. "Lost an assistant?"

"Looks that way."

The petty cash safe is unlocked. Anderson peers at the shelves. At least 30,000 baht gone missing. "Goddamn. The bastard robbed me."

Carlyle pushes open a shutter, revealing roof tiles stretching down the length of the factory. "Take a look at this."

Anderson frowns. "He was always messing with the latches on that one. I thought he wanted to keep people out."

"I think he's ducked out of it, instead." Carlyle laughs. "You should have fired him when you had a chance."

The tramp of more boots on cobbles echoes up to them, the only sound now in the street.

"Well, give him points for foresight."

"You know what the Thais say: 'When a yellow card runs, watch out for the megodont behind him.'"

Anderson surveys the offices one last time, then leans out the window. "Come on. Let's see where my assistant went."

"You serious?"

"If he didn't want to meet the white shirts, then we don't either. And he obviously had a plan." Anderson hoists himself up and climbs out into the sun. His hands burn on the tiles. He straightens, shaking them. It's like standing on a skillet. He studies the roof, breathing shallowly in the blast furnace heat. Down the length of the roof, the Chaozhou factory beckons. Anderson goes a few paces then turns and calls back. "Yeah. I think he went this way."

Carlyle climbs out onto the roof. Sweat gleams on his face and soaks his shirt. They make their way over reddish tiles as the air boils around them. At the far end of the roof,



their route terminates at an alley, shielded from Thanon Phosri by a winding of the lane. Across the gap, a ladder dangles to the ground.

"I'll be damned."

They both stare down into the alley three stories below. "Your old Chinaman jumped that?" Carlyle asks.

"Looks like it. And then went down the ladder." Anderson peers over the edge. "Long way down." He can't help smiling darkly at Hock Seng's resourcefulness. "Sly bastard."

"It's a long jump."

"Not too bad. And if Hock Seng—"

Anderson doesn't get a chance to finish his sentence. Carlyle flies past him, hurtling across the gap. The man lands hard and hits the roof rolling. A second later he's up, grinning and waving for Anderson to follow.

Anderson scowls and makes his own run at the gap. The landing rattles his teeth. By the time he straightens, Carlyle is already disappearing over the edge, climbing down the ladder. Anderson follows, favoring a bruised knee. Carlyle is surveying the alley when Anderson drops down beside him.

"That way goes back to Thanon Phosri and our friends," Carlyle says. "We don't want that."

"Hock Seng is paranoid," Anderson says. "He'll have a path worked out. And it won't be on main streets." He heads in the opposite direction. Almost immediately, a slot between two factory walls appears.

Carlyle shakes his head in admiration. "Not bad." They squeeze into the narrow way, scraping along for more than a hundred meters until they reach a door of rusted tin. As they push aside the crude gate, a grandmother looks up from a bundle of washing. They're in a courtyard of sorts. Laundry hangs everywhere, sun pouring a rainbow through damp fabrics. The old woman waves at them to proceed past her.

A moment later, they're out in a tiny *soi*, which in turn gives way to a series of maze-like alleys that twist through a makeshift slum for the coolie laborers who work the levee locks, transporting goods from the factories to the sea. More micro alleys, laborers crouched over noodles and fried fish. Weathered shacks. Sweat and the dimness of overhanging roofs. Burning chile smoke that makes them cough and cover their mouths as they forge through the swelter.

"Where the hell are we?" Carlyle murmurs. "I'm completely turned around."

"Does it matter?"

They thread past dogs lying dazed in the heat and cheshires perched atop refuse piles. Sweat runs down Anderson's face. The buzz of afternoon alcohol is long gone. More shadowy alleys, more tight walking spaces, twists and turns, squeezing around bicycles and scavenged piles of metal and coconut plastics.

A gap opens. They spill out into diamond sunlight. Anderson sucks at the relatively fresh air, grateful to be out of the claustrophobia of the alleys. It is not a large road, but still, there is traffic on it. Carlyle says, "I think I recognize this. There's a coffee guy somewhere around here that one of my clerks likes."

"No white shirts, at least."

"I need to find a way back to the Victory." Carlyle says. "I've got money in their safe."

"How much is your head worth?"

Carlyle grimaces. "Eh. Maybe you're right. I need to get in touch with Akkarat, at least. Find out what's going on. Decide on our next move."

"Hock Seng and Lao Gu both disappeared." Anderson says. "For now, let's make like the yellow cards and lie low. We can take a rickshaw to Sukhumvit *khlong*, and then take a boat to near my place. That will keep us far away from any of the factory and trade areas. And far away from all those damn white shirts."

He flags down a rickshaw man, not bothering to bargain as he and Carlyle climb aboard.

Away from the white shirts, Anderson can feel himself relaxing. Almost feels foolish for his earlier fear. For all he knows, they could have just walked down the street and never been bothered. No need to go running across rooftops at all. Perhaps. . . He shakes his head, frustrated. There's too little information.

Hock Seng didn't wait. Just gathered up the money and ran. Anderson thinks back on the carefully planned escape route again. The jump. . . He can't help laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Just Hock Seng. He had it all worked out. Everything set. As soon as there was trouble—Shooo! Out the window he goes."

Carlyle grins. "I never knew you were keeping a geriatric ninja."

"I thought—" Anderson breaks off. The traffic is slowing. Up ahead, he catches a glimpse of white and stands for a better view. "Hell." The starched whites of the Environment Ministry are in the road, blocking traffic.

Carlyle pops up beside him. "Checkpoint?"

"Looks like this isn't just the factories." Anderson glances behind, hunting for a way out, but more people and cyclists are piling up, jamming the way.

"Should we make a run for it?" Carlyle asks.

Anderson scans the crowd. Beside him, another rickshaw driver stands on his pedals, studying the scene, then settles back on his seat and jangles his passing bell irritably. Their own rickshaw man joins the bell ringing.

"No one seems worried."

Along the road, Thais barter over piled reeking durian, baskets of lemon grass and bubbling buckets of fish. They, too, seem unconcerned.

"You just want to bluff through?" Carlyle asks.

"Hell if I know. Is this some kind of power play of Pracha's?"

"I keep telling you, Pracha's had his teeth pulled."

"Doesn't look like it."

Anderson cranes his neck, trying to glimpse what's happening at the road block. From what he can make out, someone is arguing with the white shirts, gesturing as he speaks. A Thai man, deep mahogany skin and a flash of gold thumb rings on his hands. Anderson

strains to hear, but the words are drowned out as more cyclists pile into the jam and join in the impatient ringing of their bells.

The Thais seem to believe this is nothing but an irritating traffic jam. No one is frightened, just impatient. More bicycle bells tinkle and chime, surrounding him in music.

"Oh. . . Shit," Carlyle murmurs.

The white shirts yank the arguing man off his bicycle. His arms flail as he goes over. His thumb rings flash in the sunlight and then he disappears under a knot of white uniforms. Ebony clubs rise and fall. Blood whips from the clubs, glistening.

A doglike yelping fills the street.

The cyclists all stop ringing their bells. The street noise fades as everyone turns and cranes their necks to see. In the silence, the man's ragged pleading carries easily. Around them, hundreds of bodies shift and breathe. People glance left and right, suddenly nervous, like an ungulate herd that has suddenly found a predator in its midst.

The dull slap of the clubs continues.

Finally, the man's sobbing breaks off. The white shirts straighten. One of them turns and motions traffic forward. It is an impatient gesture, businesslike, as though the people have stopped to gawk at flowers or a carnival. Hesitantly, cyclists push forward. Traffic begins to roll. Anderson sits down in his seat. "Christ."

Their rickshaw man stands on his own pedals and they start forward. Carlyle's expression has gone tight with anxiety. His eyes flick from left to right. "Last chance to run for it."

Anderson can't take his gaze from the approaching white shirts. "We'll be obvious if we bolt."

"We're fucking *farang*. We're already obvious."

Pedestrians and cyclists inch forward, merging through the chokepoint, shuffling past the carnage.

A half-dozen white shirts stand around the body. Blood pools from the man's head. Flies already buzz in the red rivulets, sticky winged, drowning in the surfeit of calories. A cheshire shadow crouches eagerly at the periphery, blocked from the congealing pool by a white picket barrier of uniformed trouser legs. All the officers' cuffs are spattered red, dew kisses of kinetic energy absorbed.

Anderson stares at the carnage. Carlyle clears his throat nervously.

A white shirt glances up at the noise and their eyes lock. Anderson isn't sure how long they stare at one another, but the hate in the officer's eyes is unmistakable. The white shirt raises an eyebrow, challenging. He slaps his club against his leg, leaving a bloody smear.

Another slap of the club and the officer jerks his head sideways, indicating that Anderson should look away.

Death is a stage. A transience. A passage to a later life. If Kanya meditates on this idea long enough, she imagines that she will be able to assimilate it, but the truth is that

Jaidee is dead and they will never meet again and whatever Jaidee earned for his next life, whatever incense and prayers Kanya offers, Jaidee will never be Jaidee, his wife will never be returned, and his two fighting sons can only see that loss and suffering are everywhere.

Suffering. Pain is the only truth. But it is better for young ones to laugh a while and feel the softness, and if this desire to coddle a child ties a parent to the wheel of existence so be it. A child should be indulged. This is what Kanya thinks as she rides her bicycle across the city toward the Ministry and the housing that Jaidee's descendants have been placed in: a child should be indulged.

The streets are patrolled by white shirts. Thousands of her colleagues out on the street, locking down Trade's crown jewels, barely controlling the rage that all in the Ministry feel.

The fall of the Tiger. The slaughter of their father. The living saint, fallen.

It's as painful as if they had lost Seub Nakhasathien again. The Environment Ministry mourns and the city will mourn with them. And if all proceeds according to General Pracha's plan, Trade and Akkarat will mourn as well. Trade has finally overstepped itself. Even Bhirombhakdi says that someone must pay for the insult.

At the Ministry gates, she shows her passes and makes her way into the compound. She cycles down bricked paths between teak and banana trees to the housing quarters. Jaidee's family always kept a modest house. Modest, as Jaidee was modest. But now the last whittlings of his family live in something infinitely smaller. A bitter end for a great man. He deserved better than these mildewed concrete barracks.

Kanya's own home is much larger than Jaidee's ever was, and she lives alone. Kanya leans her bicycle against a wall and stares up at the barracks. It is one of several the Ministry has abandoned. In front of the place, there is a patch of weeds and a broken swing. Not far away is a weedy *takraw* court for the use of Ministry men. At this time of day, no one is playing, and the net hangs limp in the heat.

Kanya stands outside the dilapidated building, watching children play. None of them are Jaidee's. Surat and Niwat are apparently within. Probably already preparing for his funeral urn, calling the monks to chant and help ensure his successful trip into his next incarnation. She takes a breath. An unpleasant task, truly.

*Why me?* she wonders. *Why me? Why was I forced to work for a bodhisattva? Why was I the one?*

She always suspected that Jaidee knew of the extra take she got for herself and the men. But there was always Jaidee: pure Jaidee, clear Jaidee. Jaidee did the work because he believed. Not like Kanya. Cynical Kanya. Angry Kanya. Not like the others who did the job because it had the potential to pay well and a pretty girl might pay attention to a man in dress whites, a man who also had the authority to shut down her *pad thai* cart.

Jaidee fought like a tiger, and died like a thief. Dismembered, disemboweled, tossed to dogs and cheshires and crows so that there was little left of him. Jaidee, with his cock in his mouth and blood on his face, a package delivered to the Ministry grounds. An invitation to war—if only the Ministry could be sure of its enemy. Everyone whispers Trade, but only Kanya knows for certain. She has kept Jaidee's last mission to herself.

Kanya burns at the shame of it. She starts up the stairs. Her heart thuds in her chest as she climbs. Why couldn't that damn honorable Jaidee keep his nose out of Trade? Take the warning? And now she must visit herself on the sons. Must tell the warrior boys that their father was a good fighter, and had a pure heart. *And now I must have his equipment. Thank you so much. It is, after all, the Ministry's.*

Kanya raps on the door. Goes back down the steps to give the family time to arrange itself. One of the boys, Surat she thinks, opens the door, *wais* deeply to her, calls back inside. "It's Elder Sister Kanya." Soon Jaidee's mother-in-law is at the door. Kanya *wais* and the old woman *wais* even more in return and lets her in.

"I'm sorry to bother you."

"No bother." Her eyes are red. The two boys regard her solemnly. Everyone stands uncertainly together. The old woman finally says, "You'll want to collect his things."

Kanya is almost too embarrassed to answer, but she manages to nod. The mother-in-law guides her inside to a sleeping room. It is a sign of the old woman's grief that nothing is in order. The boys watch. The old woman points to a small desk jammed into a corner, a box of his belongings. Files that Jaidee was reading. "That's everything?" Kanya asks.

The old woman shrugs dully. "It's what he kept with him after the house was burned. I haven't touched it. He brought it here before he went to the *wat*."

Kanya smiles her embarrassment. "*Kha*. Yes. Sorry. Of course."

"Why did they do this to him? Hadn't they done enough?"

Kanya shrugs helplessly. "I don't know."

"Will you find them? Will you get revenge on them?"

She hesitates. Niwat and Surat watch her solemnly. Their playfulness is entirely gone. They have nothing. Kanya ducks her head, *wais*. "I will find them. I swear it. If it takes me all my life."

"Do you have to take his things?"

Kanya smiles uncertainly. "It's protocol. I should have come before. But. . ." She trails off helplessly. "We hoped that the tides would turn. That he would be back on the job. If there are private effects or mementos, I will return them. But I need his equipment."

"Of course. It's valuable."

Kanya nods. She kneels beside the WeatherAll box of files and gear. It is a careless mangle of files and papers and envelopes and Ministry gear. A spare clip of blades for a spring gun. A baton. His zip cuffs. Files. All piled together.

Kanya imagines Jaidee filling this box, Chaya already lost to him, everything else soon to be lost. No wonder he didn't bother being careful with any of it. She sifts through the stuff. Finds a photograph of Jaidee during his cadet days, standing next to Pracha, both of them looking young and confident. She takes it out, thoughtful, and sets it on the desk.

She looks up. The old woman has left the room but Niwat and Surat are still there, watching her like a pair of crows. She holds out the photo. Finally, Niwat reaches out and takes it, shows it to his brother.

Kanya goes through the rest of the box quickly. Everything else seems to be the Ministry's. She's obscurely relieved; she won't have to return, then. A small teak box catches her attention. She opens it. Medals from Jaidee's *muay thai* championships gleam. Kanya hands them over to the silent boys. They cluster around the evidence of their father's triumphs as Kanya finishes going through the papers.

"There's something in here," Niwat says. He holds up an envelope. "Is this for us, as well?"

"It was with the medals?" Kanya shrugs, continuing to go through the box. "What's in it?"

"Pictures."

Kanya looks up, puzzled. "Let me see."

Niwat passes them across. Kanya shuffles through them. They seem to be a record of suspicious people that Jaidee was interested in. Akkarat figures in many. *Farang*. Many photos of *farang*. Smiling photos of men and women around the Minister like ghosts, hungry to suck at his blood. Akkarat, unaware, smiling with them, happy to be standing with them. Kanya shuffles more photos. Men she doesn't recognize. Trader *farang*, presumably. Here a fat one, glutted on calories from abroad, some PurCal or AgriGen representative visiting from Koh Angrit perhaps, looking to curry favor in the newly opening kingdom where Trade is in ascendancy. There another, the Carlyle man who lost his dirigible. Kanya smiles slightly. How that one must have hurt. She flips past the photo and sucks in her breath, stunned.

"What is it?" Niwat asks. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Kanya forces herself to say. "It's nothing."

The photo is of herself, drinking with Akkarat on his pleasure barge. A long lens, a bad image, but herself, clearly.

*Jaidee knew.*

Kanya stares at the photo for a long time, forcing herself to breathe. Staring at the photo. Meditating on *kamma* and duty, while Jaidee's sons watch her, solemn. Meditating on her patron who never spoke of this photo. Meditating on what a man of Jaidee's stature knows, and what he does not reveal, and what secrets can cost a person. She studies the photo, debating. Finally she pulls it and puts it in her pocket. The rest she shoves back into the envelope.

"Was it a clue?"

Kanya nods solemnly. The boys nod back. They do not ask for more. They are good boys.

She goes over the rest of the room carefully, looking for other evidence that she might have missed, but finds nothing. Finally she bends down to pick up the box of equipment and files. It's heavy but none of it weighs as heavily as the photo that now sits in her breast pocket like a coiled cobra.

Outside, in the open air, she forces herself to breathe deeply. The stink of shame is strong in her nostrils. She can't make herself look back at the boys in the doorway. The orphans who pay the price for their father's unbending bravery. They suffer because their

father chose an opponent worthy of him. Instead of shaking down noodle carts and night markets, he chose a true enemy, an implacable and relentless one. Kanya closes her eyes.

*I tried to tell you. You shouldn't have gone. I tried.*

She straps the box of belongings to her cycle's cargo rack and pedals across the compound. By the time she arrives at the main administrative building, she has recovered.

General Pracha stands under the shade of a banana tree, smoking a Gold Leaf cigarette. She is surprised that she can meet the man's eyes. She approaches and *wais*.

The general nods, accepting Kanya's greeting. "You have his belongings?"

Kanya nods.

"And you've seen his sons?"

She nods again.

He scowls. "They piss in our house. On our own doorstep they leave his body. It should not be possible, and yet here, within our own Ministry, they throw down their challenge." He grinds out the cigarette.

"You're in charge now, Captain Kanya. Jaidee's men are yours. It's time that we fought as Jaidee always wished. Make the Trade Ministry bleed, Captain. Get our face back."

## 21

On the crumbling tower's precipice, Emiko stares north.

She has done it every day since Raleigh confirmed the windup land. Ever since Anderson-sama hinted that it was possible. She cannot help herself. Even when she lies in Anderson-sama's arms, even when he sometimes invites her to stay with him, paying her bar fines for days at a time, she cannot help dreaming of that place without patrons.

North.

She breathes deep, taking in the scents of sea and burning dung and the bloom of orchid creepers. Down below, the wide delta of the Chao Phraya laps at Bangkok's levees and dikes. On the far side, Thonburi floats as best it can on bamboo rafts and stilt houses. The Temple of the Dawn's *prang* rise from the water, surrounded by the rubble of the drowned city.

North.

Shouts come from below, breaking her reverie. It takes a moment for her brain to translate the noise filtering up, but then her mind shifts from Japanese to Thai and the sounds become words. The words become screams.

*"Be quiet!"*

*"Mai ao! No! No nonono!"*

*"Down! Map lohng dieow nee! On your face!"*

*"Please pleaseplease!"*

*"Get down!"*

She cocks her head, listening to the altercation. She has good hearing, another thing the scientists gave her along with her smooth skin and her doglike urge to obey. She listens. More screams. The thud of footsteps and something breaking. Her nape prickles. She wears nothing but slim pants and a string halter. Her other clothing lies below, awaiting her change into street clothes.

More shouts filter up. The scream of someone in pain. Primal, animal pain.

White shirts. A raid. Adrenaline surges through her. She has to get off the roof before they arrive. Emiko turns and runs for the stairs but stops short at the stairwell. The tramp of feet echoes up.

*"Squad Three. Clear!"*

*"Wing Clear?"*

*"Secure!"*

She shoves the door closed and presses her back to it, trapped. Already they clog the stairwells. She casts about the rooftop, looking for another escape route.

*"Check the roof!"*

Emiko sprints for the edge of the tower. Thirty feet below, the first of the tower's balconies extends. A penthouse balcony from a time when the tower must have been luxurious. She stares down at the tiny balcony, dizzy. Below it, there is nothing but the plunge to the street and the people who fill it like black spider mites.

Wind gusts, tugging her toward the edge. Emiko sways and barely catches her balance. It's as if the spirits of the air are trying to kill her. She stares down at the balcony. No. It's impossible.

She turns and runs back to the door, searching for something to wedge it shut. Chips of brick and tile litter the rooftop along with the clothing draped on drying lines, but nothing—she spies a piece of an old broom. Scrambles for it and jams it against the door frame.

The door's hinges are so rusted that it sags with the pressure she applies. She shoves the broom handle tighter against it, grimacing. The WeatherAll of the broom is stronger than the metal of the door.

Emiko casts about for another solution. She's already boiling from running back and forth like a frantic rat. The sun is a thick red ball, sinking for the horizon. Long shadows stretch across the broken surface of the building's roof. She turns in a panicked circle. Her eyes fall on the clothing and the lines. Perhaps she can use the rope to climb down. She runs to the clotheslines and tries to yank one off but it's tough and well-tied. It won't come free. She yanks again.

Behind her, the door shudders. A voice on the other side curses. "Open up!" The door jumps in its frame as someone slams against it, trying to force past her improvised brace.

Inexplicably, she hears Gendo-sama in her head, telling her she is perfect. Optimal. Delightful. She grimaces at the old bastard's voice as she yanks again on the line, hating him, hating the old snake who loved her and discarded her. The line cuts into her hands but refuses to give way. Gendo-sama. Such a traitor. She will die because she is optimal, but not optimal enough for a return ticket.

*I'm burning up.*



Optimal.

Another thud from behind her. The door cracks. She gives up on the line. Turns in another circle, searching desperately for a solution. There is nothing except rubble and the open air all around. She might as well be a thousand miles high. Optimally high.

A hinge shatters, throwing bits of metal. The door sags. With a final glance at the door, Emiko sprints again for the edge of the building, still hoping for a solution. A way to climb down.

She stops, windmilling at the edge. The precipice yawns. The wind gusts. There is nothing. No handholds. No way to climb. She looks back at the clotheslines. If only—

The door breaks from its hinges. A pair of white shirts spill through, stumbling, waving spring guns. They catch sight of her and charge across the roof. "You! Come here!"

She peers over the edge. The people are dots far below; the balcony is as small as a postage envelope.

*"Stop! Yoot dieow nee! Halt!"*

The white shirts are running for her—running full bore—and yet somehow, strangely, they suddenly seem slow. Slow as honey on a cold day.

Emiko watches them, puzzled. They are halfway across the roof, but they are so very very slow. They seem to be running through rice porridge. Their every motion drags. So slow. As slow as the man who chased her in the alleys and tried to knife her. So slow. . .

Emiko smiles. Optimal. She steps up onto the roof ledge.

The white shirts' mouths open to shout again. Their spring guns rise, seeking her. Emiko watches their slit barrels zero in on her. Wonders absently if perhaps she is actually the slow one. If gravity itself will be too slow.

The wind gusts around her, beckoning. The spirits of the air tug at her, blow the black net of her hair across her eyes. She pushes it aside. Smiles calmly at the white shirts—still running, still pointing their spring guns—and steps backward into open air. The white shirts' eyes widen. Their guns glint red. Disks spit toward her. One, two, three. . . she counts them as they fly. . . four, five—

Gravity yanks her down. The men and their projectiles disappear. She smashes into the balcony. Her knees slam into her chin. Her ankle twists as metal shrieks. She rolls, crashing into the balcony's railing. It shatters and peels away and she plunges into open air. Emiko grabs for a broken copper balustrade as she goes over. Yanks to a stop, dangling above an abyss.

Empty air yawns all around, beckoning free-fall. Hot wind gusts. Tugs at her. Emiko pulls herself up to the listing balcony, gasping. Her whole body is shaking, feels bruised, and yet all her limbs still work. She has not broken a single bone in the fall. *Optimal*. She swings a leg up onto the balcony, and hauls herself to safety. Metal grinds. The balcony sags under her weight, its ancient bolts loosening. She's burning up. She wants to collapse. To let herself slide from her precarious ledge and pour into the open air. . .

Shouts from above.

Emiko looks up. White shirts peer over the edge, aiming their spring guns at her. Disks pour down like silver rain. They ricochet, slash her skin, spark on metal. Fear gives

her strength. She lunges for the safety of the balcony's glass doors. *Optimal*. The doors shatter. Glass slices her palms. Sparkling shards envelope her and then she's through the glass and in the apartment and she's running fast, blurringly fast. People are staring at her, shocked, impossibly slow—

Frozen.

Emiko smashes through another door and out into the hall. White shirts surround her. She plunges through them. Their surprised shouts are leaden as she streaks past. Down the stairwells. Down, down, down the stairs, leaving the white shirts far behind. Shouts from high above.

Her blood is on fire. The stairwells burn. She stumbles. Leans against a wall. Even the heat of the concrete is better than her skin. She's becoming dizzy, but still she stumbles on. Men shout from above, chasing after her. Their boots thump on the stairs.

Around and around and down she goes. She shoves through obstructing knots of people, jams herself between dwellers roused by the raid. She is delirious with the furnace inside her.

Tiny beads of sweat speckle her skin, forcing their way out through her absurdly designed pores, but in the heat and humidity, it does nothing to cool her. She has never felt moisture on her skin before. Always she is dry—

She brushes against a man. He recoils in surprise from her blazing skin. She's burning up. She cannot blend amongst these people. Her limbs move like the flash-frame pages of a child's animation book, fast, fast, fast, but choppy. Everyone is staring.

She turns from the stairwell and jams through a door, stumbles down a hall, leans against a wall, panting. She can hardly keep her eyes open with the fire that burns within.

*I jumped*, she thinks.

*I jumped*.

Adrenaline and shock. Cocktail terror, giddy amphetamine high. She's shaking. A windup's jitters. She's boiling. Faint with heat. She presses herself against the wall, trying to absorb its cool.

*I need water. Ice.*

Emiko tries to control her breathing, to listen, to know where the exterminators come from, but her mind is dizzy and clouded. How far down is she? How many flights?

*Keep moving. Keep going.*

Instead, she collapses.

The floor is cool. Her breath saws in and out of her lungs. Her halter is torn. There is blood on her arms and hands where she went through the glass. She stretches out, fingers wide, palms pressed to tile, trying to absorb the coolness of the floor. Her eyes close.

*Get up!*

But she can't. She tries to control her beating heart and listen for her pursuers, but she can barely breathe. She's so hot, and the floor is so cool.

Hands seize her. Voices exclaim and drop her. Grab her again. Then the white shirts are all around, dragging her down the stairs, and she's grateful, thankful that they're at least dragging her down and out into the blessed evening air, even as they scream at her and slap her.

Their words wash over her. She can't understand any of it. It's all just sounds, dark and dizzy heat. They do not speak Japanese, they are not even civilized. None of them are optimal—

Water splashes over her. She gags and chokes. Another deluge, in her mouth, her nose, drowning her.

People are shaking her. They yell into her face. Slap her. Ask questions. Demand answers.

They grab her hair and jam her face down into a bucket of water, trying to drown her, to punish her, to kill her and all she can think is *thank you thank you thank you thank you* because some scientist made her optimal, and in another minute this slip of a windup girl that they shout at and slap will be cool.

## 22

The white shirts are everywhere: inspecting passes, stalking through food markets, confiscating methane. It's taken hours for Hock Seng to cross the city. Rumors say that all the Malayan Chinese have been interned in the yellow card towers. That they're about to be shipped south, back across the border to the mercy of the Green Headbands. Hock Seng listens to every whisper as he scuttles through alleys on his way back to his cash and gems, sending native Mai ahead of him, using her local's accent to scout.

By the time night falls, they are still far from his destination. SpringLife's stolen money weighs heavy on him. At times he fears that Mai will suddenly turn on him and report him to the white shirts in return for a share of the cash he carries. At other times, he mistakes her for a daughter mouth, and wishes he could protect her from everything that is coming.

*I'm going mad, he thinks. To mistake some silly Thai girl for my own.*

And yet still he trusts the slight girl, the child of fish farmers, who previously proved so obedient when he still had a scrap of managerial authority, and who he prays will not turn on him now that he is a target.

Darkness falls completely.

"Why are you so frightened?" Mai asks.

Hock Seng shrugs. She does not—cannot—understand the complexities swirling around them. For her it is a game. Frightening, to be sure, but still a game.

"When the brown people turned on the yellow people in Malaya, it was like this. All at once, everything was different. The religious fanatics came with their green headbands and their machetes. . ." He shrugs. "The more careful we are, the better."

He peers out into the street from their hiding place and ducks back. A white shirt is pasting up another image of the Tiger of Bangkok, edged in black. Jaidee Rojjanasukchai. How quickly he falls from grace, and then rises like a bird to sainthood. Hock Seng grimaces. A lesson of politics.

The white shirt moves on. Hock Seng scans the street again. People are starting to come out, encouraged by the relative cool of the evening. They walk through the humid darkness, coming out to do their shopping, to find a meal, to locate a favorite *som tam* cart. White shirts glow green under approved-burn methane. They move in teams,

hunting like jackals for wounded meat. Small shrines to Jaidee have appeared before store fronts and homes. His image surrounded by flickering candles and draped with marigolds, displaying solidarity and begging for protection against white shirt rage.

Accusations fill the airwaves on National Radio. General Pracha speaks of the need to protect the Kingdom from those—carefully unnamed—who would topple it. His voice crackles over the people, tinny from hand-cranked radios. Vendors and housewives. Beggars and children. The green of the methane lamps turns skin shimmery, a carnival. But amongst the rustle of sarongs and *pha sin* and the clank of red and gold megodont handlers, there are always the white shirts, hard eyes looking for an excuse to vent their rage.

"Go on." Hock Seng prods Mai forward. "See if it is safe."

A minute later Mai is back, motioning for him, and they are off again, threading through the crowds. Knots of silence warn them when new white shirts are near, fear sending laughing lovers silent, and children running. Heads duck low as the white shirts pass. Hock Seng and Mai work their way past a night market. His eyes rove over candles, frying noodles, cheshire shimmers.

A shout rises ahead of them. Mai darts forward, scouting. She's back a moment later, tugging at his hand. "*Khun*. Come quickly. They're distracted." And then they're slipping past a clot of white shirts and the object of their abuse.

An old woman lies beside her cart, her daughter at her side, clutching a shattered knee. A crowd has gathered as the daughter struggles to drag her mother upright.

All around, the glass cases that held their ingredients are shattered. Shards glitter in chile sauce, amongst bean sprouts, on lime, like diamonds under the green light of methane. The white shirts stir through the woman's ingredients with their batons.

"Come Auntie, there must be some more money here. You thought you could bribe white shirts, but you haven't done nearly enough to burn untaxed fuel."

"Why are you doing this?" the daughter cries. "What have we done to you?"

The white shirt studies her coldly. "You took us for granted." His baton crashes down on her mother's knee again. The woman shrieks and the daughter cowers.

The white shirt calls to his men. "Put their methane tank in with the rest. We have three more streets to go." He turns to the watching silent crowd. Hock Seng freezes as the officer's eyes travel across him.

*Don't run. Don't panic. You can pass, as long as you don't speak.*

The white shirt smiles at the watching people. "Tell your friends what you see here. We are not dogs you feed with scraps. We are tigers. Fear us." And then he raises his baton and the crowd scatters, Hock Seng and Mai with them.

A block later, Hock Seng leans against a wall, panting with the effort of their flight. The city has grown monstrous. Every street holds hazard now.

Down the alley, a hand-cranked radio crackles with more news. The docks and factories have been shut down. Access to the waterfront is restricted to those with permits.

Hock Seng suppresses a shiver. It's happening again. The walls are going up and he is stuck inside the city, a rat in a trap. He fights down panic. He planned for this. There are contingencies. But first he has to make it home.

*Bangkok is not Malacca. This time you are prepared.*

Eventually the familiar shacks and smells of the Yaowarat slums surround them. They slip through tight squeezeways. Past the people who do not know him. He forces down another rush of fear. If the white shirts have influenced the slum's godfathers, he could be in danger. He forces the thought away, drags open the door to his hovel, guides Mai inside.

"You did well." He digs in his bag and hands her a bundle of the stolen money. "If you want more, come back to me tomorrow."

She stares at the wealth that he has so casually handed her.

If he were smart, he would strangle her and reduce the chances that she will turn on him for the rest of his savings. He forces down the thought. She has been loyal. He must trust someone. And she is Thai, which is useful when yellow cards are suddenly as disposable as cheshires.

She takes the money and stuffs it into a pocket.

"You can find your way from here?" he asks.

She grins. "I'm not a yellow card. I don't have anything to fear."

Hock Seng makes himself smile in return, thinking that she does not know how little anyone cares to separate wheat from chaff, when all anyone wants to do is burn a field.

## 23

"Goddamn General Pracha and goddamn white shirts!"

Carlyle pounds the railing of the apartment. He's unshaven and unbathed. He hasn't been back to the Victory in a week, thanks to the lockdown of the *farang* district. His clothing is beginning to show the wear of the tropics.

"They've got the anchor pads locked down, they've got the locks closed. Banned access to the piers." He turns and comes back inside. Pours himself a drink. "Fucking white shirts."

Anderson can't help smiling at Carlyle's irritation. "I warned you about poking cobras."

Carlyle scowls. "It wasn't me. Someone in Trade had a bright idea and went too far. Fucking Jaidee," he fumes. "They should have known better."

"Was it Akkarat?"

"He's not that stupid."

"It doesn't matter, I suppose." Anderson toasts him with warm scotch. "A week of lockdown, and it looks like the white shirts are just getting started."

Carlyle glowers. "Don't look so satisfied. I know you're hurting, too."

Anderson sips. "Honestly, I can't say that I care. The factory was useful. Now it's not." He leans forward. "Now I want to know if Akkarat has really done as much

groundwork as you claimed." He nods toward the city. "Because it's looking like he's overstretched."

"And you think that's funny?"

"I think that if he's isolated, he needs friends. I want you to reach out to him again. Offer him our sincere support in this crisis."

"You've got a better offer than the one that had him threatening to have you trampled?"

"The price is the same. The gift is the same." Anderson sips again. "But maybe Akkarat is willing to listen to reason now."

Carlyle stares out at the green glow of methane lamps. Grimaces. "I'm losing money every day."

"I thought you had leverage with your pumps."

"Stop smirking." Carlyle scowls. "You can't even threaten these bastards. They won't take messengers."

Anderson smiles slightly. "Well, I don't feel like waiting until the monsoons for the white shirts to come to their senses. Set up a meeting with Akkarat. We can offer him all the help he needs."

"You think you'll just swim out to Koh Angrit and lead a revolution back in? With what? A couple clerks and shipping captains? Maybe some junior trade rep who sits out there drinking all day and hoping the Kingdom will have a famine and drop its embargoes? Pretty threatening."

Anderson smiles. "If we come, we'll come from Burma. And no one will notice until it's too late." He holds Carlyle's eyes until the man looks away.

"Same terms?" Carlyle asks. "You're not changing anything?"

"Access to the Thai seedbank, and a man named Gibbons. That's all."

"And you'll give what?"

"What does Akkarat need? Money for bribes? Gold? Diamonds? Jade?" He pauses. "Shock troops."

"Christ. You're serious about the Burma thing."

Anderson waves his glass toward the night beyond. "My cover here is blown. I accept that and move forward or I pack up and head back to Des Moines with my tail between my legs. Let's be honest. AgriGen has always played for keeps. Ever since Vincent Hu and Chitra D'Allessa started the company. We're not afraid of a little mess."

"Like Finland."

Anderson smiles. "I'm hoping for a better return on investment, this time."

Carlyle grimaces. "Christ. All right. I'll set up the meeting. But you better remember me when this is over."

"AgriGen always remembers its friends."

He ushers Carlyle out the door and closes it behind him, thoughtful. It's interesting to see what crisis brings out in a man. Carlyle, always so cocky and confident, now harried by the realization that he stands out as if he were painted blue. That the white shirts could

begin interning *farang* or executing them at any time, and no one would mourn. Suddenly Carlyle's confidence is stripped away like a used filter mask.

Anderson goes to the balcony and stares out at the darkness, to the waters far beyond, to the island of Koh Angrit and the powers that wait so patiently at the Kingdom's edge.

Almost time.

## 24

Amid the wreckage of white shirt reprisals, Kanya sits, sipping coffee. In the far corner of the noodle shop, a few patrons squat sullenly, listening to a *muay thai* match on a hand-cranked radio. Kanya, monopolizing the customer bench, ignores them. No one dares to sit beside her.

Before, they might have hazarded the companionship, but now the white shirts have shown their teeth and she sits alone. Her men have already proceeded ahead of her, ravening like jackals, cleaning out old history and bad alliances, starting fresh.

Sweat trickles off the owner's chin as he leans over steaming bowls of rice noodles. Water beads on his face, glinting blue with the flare of illegal methane. He doesn't look at Kanya, probably rues the day he decided to buy fuel on the black market.

The radio's tinny crackle and the faint shout of the Lumpini crowds competes with the burn of the wok as he boils *sen mi* for soup. None of the listeners look at her.

Kanya sips her coffee and smiles grimly. Violence, they understand. A soft Environment Ministry they ignored or scoffed at. But this Ministry—one with its batons swinging and spring guns ready to cut a body down—elicits a different response.

How many illegal burn stands has she already trashed? Ones just like this one? Ones where some poor coffee or noodle man couldn't afford the Kingdom's taxed and sanctioned methane? Hundreds, she supposes. Methane is expensive. Bribes are cheaper. And if black market fuel lacked the additives that turned the methane a safe shade of green, well, that was a risk they all took willingly.

*We were so easy to bribe.*

Kanya pulls out a cigarette and lights it on the damning blue flame under the man's wok. He doesn't stop her, acts as though she doesn't exist—a comfortable fiction for both of them. She is not a white shirt sitting at his illegal burn stand; he is not a yellow card that she could throw into the towers to sweat and die with his countrymen.

She draws on her cigarette, thoughtful. Even if he doesn't show his fear, she knows his feelings. Remembers when the white shirts came to her own village. They filled her aunt's fish ponds with lye and salt and burned her poultry in slaughter piles.

*You're lucky, yellow card. When the white shirts came for us, they didn't care about preserving anything at all. They came with their torches and they burned and burned. You'll get better treatment than we did.*

The memory of those sooty pale men, demon-eyed behind biohazard masks makes her want to cower even now. They came at night. There was no warning. Her neighbors and cousins fled naked and screaming ahead of the torches. Behind them, their stilt houses erupted in flames, bamboo and palm roaring orange and alive in the blackness. Ash swirled around them, scalding skin, sending everyone coughing and retching. She

still carries scars from that burning, pale pocks where flakes of burning palm landed hot and permanent on her thin childish arms. How she hated the white shirts. She and her cousins had huddled together, watching in awe and terror as the Environment Ministry razed their village, and she had hated them with all her heart.

And now she marshals her own troops to do the same. Jaidee would appreciate the irony.

In the distance, shouts of fear rise up like smoke, as black and oily as farmers' hovels burning. Kanya sniffs. It's nostalgic, in a way. The smoke is the same. She draws again on her cigarette, exhales. Wonders if her men have gotten ahead of themselves. A fire in these WeatherAll slums would be problematic. The oils that keep the wood from rotting ignite easily in the heat. She takes another puff of her cigarette. Nothing she can do about it now. Perhaps it is only an officer torching illegally scavenged scrap. She reaches out to sip her coffee and eyes the bruise on the cheek of the man who serves her.

If the Environment Ministry had anything to say about it, all these yellow card refugees would be on the other side of the border. A Malayan problem. The problem of another sovereign country. Not a problem for the Kingdom at all. But Her Royal Majesty the Child Queen is merciful, compassionate in a way Kanya is not.

Kanya snuffs her cigarette. It's a good tobacco, Gold Leaf, local engineering, better than anything else in the Kingdom. She pulls another cigarette from its switchgrass-cellophane box, lights it on the blue flame.

The yellow card keeps his expression polite as Kanya motions for him to pour more sweet coffee. The radio crackles with the stadium's cheers and the men huddling around it all cheer as well, momentarily forgetting the white shirt nearby.

The footsteps are almost silent, timed with the sound of pleasure, but the yellow card's expression gives the arrival away. Kanya doesn't look up. She motions for the man standing behind to join her.

"Either kill me or sit down," she says.

A low chuckle. The man sits.

Narong wears a loose black high-collar shirt and gray trousers. Tidy clothes. He could work as a clerk perhaps. Except for his eyes: his eyes are too alert. And his body is too relaxed. There is an easy confidence to him. An arrogance that has difficulty fitting into his clothes. Some people are simply too powerful to pretend a lower status. It made him stand out at the anchor pads as well. She bottles her anger, waits without speaking.

"You like the silk?" He touches his shirt. "It's Japanese. They still have silk worms." She shrugs. "I don't like anything about you, Narong."

He smiles at that. "Come now, Kanya. Here you are, promoted to captain and not a single smile in you."

He motions to the yellow card for coffee. They watch the rich brown liquid splash into a glass. The yellow card sets a bowl of soup down before Kanya, fish balls and lemongrass and chicken stock. She starts fishing out U-TeX noodles.

Narong sits quietly, patiently. "You asked for this meeting," he says finally.

"Did you kill Chaya?"



Narong straightens. "You always lacked social grace. Even after all these years in the city and all the money we've given to you, you might as well be a Mekong fish farmer."

Kanya looks at him coldly. If she's honest with herself, he frightens her, but she won't let that show. Behind her, another cheer from the radio. "You're the same as Pracha. You're all disgusting," she says.

"You didn't think so when we came to you, a very small and vulnerable girl, and invited you to Bangkok. You didn't think so when we supported your aunt through the rest of her years. You didn't think so when we offered you an opportunity to strike at General Pracha and the white shirts."

"There are limits. Chaya did nothing."

Narong is as still as spider, regarding her. Finally he says, "Jaidee overstepped himself. You even warned him. Be careful that you don't dive down the cobra's throat yourself."

Kanya starts to speak, then closes her mouth. Starts again, keeping her voice under control. "Will you do the same to me as you did to Jaidee?"

"Kanya, how long have I known you?" Narong smiles. "How long have I cared for your family? You are our valued daughter." He slides a thick envelope across to her. "I would never hurt you," he says. "We are not like Pracha." Narong pauses. "How is the loss of the Tiger affecting the department?"

"Look around you." Kanya jerks her head toward the sounds of conflict. "The general is enraged. Jaidee was almost a brother to him."

"I hear he wants to come after Trade directly. Maybe even burn the Ministry to the ground."

"Of course he wants to go after Trade. Without Trade, our problems would be halved."

Narong shrugs. The envelope sits between them. It might as well be Jaidee's heart laying the counter. The return on her long-ago investment in revenge.

*I'm sorry, Jaidee. I tried to warn you.*

She takes the envelope, empties the money and stuffs it into a belt pouch as Narong looks on. Even the man's smiles are sharp with cutting edges. His hair is slicked back on his head, sleek. He is both entirely still and entirely terrifying.

*And this is the sort you consort with,* mutters a voice inside her head.

Kanya jerks at the voice. It sounds like Jaidee. It has the telltales of Jaidee, of his humor and his relentlessness. The hint of laughter along with judgment. Jaidee never lost his sense of *sanuk*.

*I'm not your kind,* Kanya thinks.

Again the grin and the chuckle. *I knew that.*

*Why didn't you simply kill me if you knew?*

The voice is silent. The sound of the *muay thai* match continues to crackle behind them. Charoen and Sakda. A good match. But either Charoen has radically improved, or Sakda has been paid to fail. Kanya's bet will be a losing one. The match reeks of interference. Perhaps the Dung Lord has taken an interest in the fight. Kanya makes a face of irritation.

"Bad match?" Narong asks.

"I always bet on the wrong man."

Narong laughs. "That's why it's so helpful to have information ahead of time." He hands her a scrap of paper.

Kanya looks through the names on the list. "These are Pracha's friends. Generals, some of them. They're protected by him as the cobra sheltered the Buddha."

Narong grins. "That's why they will be so surprised when he suddenly turns on them. Hit them. Make them hurt. Let them know that the Environment Ministry is not to be trifled with. That the Ministry views *all* infractions equally. No more favoritism. No more friendships and easy deals. Show them that this new Environment Ministry is unbending."

"You're trying to drive a wedge between Pracha and his allies? Make them angry at him?"

Narong shrugs. Doesn't say anything. Kanya finishes her noodles. When no other instructions seem to be forthcoming, she stands. "I must go. I can't have my men see me with you."

Narong nods, dismissing her. Kanya stalks out of the coffee shop, followed by new groans of disappointment from the radio listeners as Sakda is cowed by Charoen's newfound ferocity.

On the street corner, under the green glow of methane, Kanya straightens her uniform. There is a blotchy stain on her jacket, residue of the destruction she has wreaked tonight. She frowns with distaste. Brushes at it. Again opens the list that Narong gave her, memorizing the names.

The men and women are General Pracha's closest friends. And they will now be enforced against as vigorously as the yellow cards in their towers. As vigorously as General Pracha once enforced against a small village in the northeast, leaving starving families and burning homes behind him.

Difficult. But, for once, fair.

Kanya crumples the list in her hand. *This is the shape of our world*, she thinks. *Tit for tat until we're all dead and cheshires lap at our blood.*

She wonders if it was really better in the past, if there really was a golden age fueled by petroleum and technology. A time when every solution to a problem didn't engender another. She wants to curse those *farang* who came before. The calorie men with their active labs and their carefully cultured crop strains that would feed the world. Their modified animals that would work so much more efficiently on fewer calories. The AgriGens and PurCals who claimed that they were happy to feed the world, to export their patented grains, and then always found a way to delay.

*Ah, Jaidee*, she thinks. *I am sorry. So sorry. For everything I have done to you and yours. I did not set out to hurt you. If I had known how much it would cost to balance against Pracha's greed, I would have never come to Krung Thep.*

Instead of going after her men, she makes her way to a temple. It is small, a neighborhood shrine more than anything, with only a few monks in attendance. A young boy kneels before the glittering Buddha image with his grandmother, but otherwise, the

place is empty. Kanya buys some incense from the vendor at the gate and goes inside. She lights the incense and kneels, holds the burning sticks to her forehead, raises them three times in the Triple Gem: *buddha, damma, sanga*. She prays.

How many evils has she committed? How much bad *kamma* must she atone for? Was it more important to honor Akkarat and his promises of a balancing of the scales? Or was it more important to honor her adoptive father, Jaidee?

A man comes to your village with a promise of food for your belly, a life in the city, and money for your aunt's cough and your uncle's whiskey. And he doesn't even want to buy your body. What else can one wish for? What else could buy loyalty? Everyone needs a patron.

*May you have much better friends in your next life, loyal fighter.*

*Ah, Jaidee, I am sorry.*

*May I wander as a ghost for a million years to make atonement.*

*May you be reborn in a better place than this.*

She stands and makes a final *wai* to the Buddha and goes out of the temple. On the steps, she looks up at the stars. She wonders how it is that her *kamma* has so destroyed her. She closes her eyes, fighting back tears.

In the distance, a building explodes in flame. She has over a hundred men working this district, letting everyone feel the pain of real enforcement. Laws are a fine thing on paper, but painful when no bribery can ease their bind. People have forgotten this. Suddenly she feels tired. She turns away from the carnage. She has enough blood and soot on her hands for one night. Her men know their work. Home is not far.

\* \* \*

"Captain Kanya?"

Kanya opens her eyes to dawn light filtering into her home. For a moment, she is too groggy to remember anything about the days, about her position. . .

"Captain?" The voice is calling in through her screened window.

Kanya pulls herself out of bed and goes to her door. "Yes?" she calls through. "What is it?"

"You're wanted at the Ministry."

Kanya opens the door and takes an envelope from the man, unbinds the seal. "This is from the Quarantine Department," she says, surprised.

He nods. "It was a volunteer duty that Captain Jaidee had. . ." he trails off. "With everyone working, General Pracha asked. . ." he hesitates.

Kanya nods. "Yes. Of course."

Her skin crawls, remembering Jaidee's stories of the wars against early strains of cibiscosis. How he worked with his heart in his throat alongside his men, all of them wondering who would die before the week was done. All of them in a terror of sickness and a sweat of work as they burned whole villages: homes and *wats* and Buddha images

all going up in smoke while monks chanted and called spirits to their aid and people all around them lay on the ground and died, gagging on fluids as their lungs ruptured. The Quarantine Department. She reads the message. Nods sharply to the boy. "Yes. I see."

"Any return?"

"No." She sets the envelope on a side table, a scorpion crouched. "This is all I need."

The messenger salutes and runs down the steps to his bicycle. Kanya closes the door, thoughtful. The envelope hints at horrors. Perhaps this is her *kamma*. Retribution.

In a short time she is on her way to the Ministry, cycling through leafy streets, crossing canals, coasting down city boulevards built for five lanes of petroleum-burning cars that now carry herds of megadonts.

At the Quarantine Department, she endures a second security check before she is allowed to enter the complex.

Computer and climate fans hum relentlessly. The whole building seems to vibrate with the energy burning within. More than three-quarters of the Ministry's carbon allocation goes to this single building, the brain of the Quarantine Department that evaluates and predicts the shifts in genetic architecture that necessitate a Ministry response.

Behind glass walls, LEDs on servers wink red and green, burning energy, drowning Krung Thep even as they save it. She walks down the halls, past a series of rooms where scientists sit before giant computer screens and study genetic models on the brightly glowing displays. Kanya imagines that she can feel the air combusting with all the energy being burned, all the coal being consumed to keep this single building running.

There are stories of the raids that were necessary to create the Quarantine Department. Of the strange marriages that gave them footholds in these technologies. *Farang* brought across at great expense, foreign experts used to transfer the viruses of their knowledge, the invasive concepts of their generip criminality to the Kingdom, the knowledge needed to preserve the Thai and keep them safe in the face of the plagues.

Some of these people are famous now, as important in folklore as Ajahn Chanh and Chart Korbjitti and Seub Nakhasathien. Some of them have become *boddhis* in their own right, merciful spirits, dedicated to the salvation of an entire kingdom.

She passes through a courtyard. In the corner, a small spirit house sits, housing miniature statues of Teacher Lalji, looking like a small wizened *saddhu*, and the AgriGen Saint Sarah. The twinned *boddhis*. Male and Female, the calorie bandit and the generipper. The thief and the builder. There are only a few incense sticks burning, the usual plate of breakfast and garlands of marigolds that are always strung. When the plagues are bad, the place seethes with prayers as scientists struggle to find a solution.

Even our prayers are to *farang*, Kanya thinks. A *farang* antidote for a *farang* plague.

*Take any tool you can find. Make it your own*, Jaidee said in times past, explaining why they consorted with the worst. Why they bribed and stole and encouraged monsters like Gi Bu Sen.

*A machete doesn't care who wields it, or who made it. Take the knife and it will cut. Take the farang if they will be a tool in your hand. And if it turns on you, melt it down. You will have at least the raw materials.*

Take any tool. He was always practical.

But it hurts. They hunt and beg for scraps of knowledge from abroad, scavenge like cheshires for survival. So much knowledge sits inside the Midwest Compact. When a promising genetic thinker arises somewhere in the world, they are cowed and bullied and bribed to work with the other best and brightest in Des Moines or Changsha. It takes a strong researcher to resist a PurCal or AgriGen or RedStar. And even if they do stand up to the calorie companies, what does the Kingdom offer them? Even their best computers are generations behind those of the calorie companies.

Kanya shakes off the thought. *We are alive. We are alive when whole kingdoms and countries are gone. When Malaya is a morass of killing. When Kowloon is underwater. When China is split and the Vietnamese are broken and Burma is nothing but starvation. The Empire of America is no more. The Union of the Europeans splintered and factionalized. And yet we endure, even expand. The Kingdom survives. Thank the Buddha that he extends a compassionate hand and that our Queen has enough merit to attract these terrifying farang tools without which we would be completely defenseless.*

She reaches a final checkpoint. Endures another inspection of her papers. Doors slide aside and then she is invited into an electric elevator. She feels the air sucked in with her, negative pressure, and then the doors close.

Kanya plunges into the earth, as though she is falling into hell. She thinks of the hungry ghosts that populate this awful facility. The spirits of the dead who sacrificed themselves to leash the demons of the world. Her skin prickles.

Down.

Down.

The elevator's doors open. A white hall and an airlock. Out of her clothes. Into a shower heavy with chlorine. Out on the other side.

A boy offers her lab clothes and reconfirms her identification from a list. He informs her she won't need secondary containment procedures and then leads Kanya down more halls.

The scientists here carry the haunted looks of people who know they are under siege. They know that beyond a few doors, all manner of apocalyptic terrors wait to swallow them. If Kanya thinks about it, her bowels go watery. That was Jaidee's strength. He had faith in his past lives and future ones. Kanya, though? She will be reborn to die of cibiscosis a dozen times before she is allowed to progress once more. *Kamma.*

"You should have considered that before you gave me up to them," Jaidee says.

Kanya stumbles at his voice. Jaidee is trailing a few paces behind her. Kanya gasps and presses her back against a wall. Jaidee cocks his head, studying her. Kanya can't breathe. Will he simply strangle her here, to pay her back for her betrayals?

Her guide stops. "Are you sick?" he asks.

Jaidee is gone.

Kanya's heart is pounding. She's sweating. If she were any further into containment, she would have to ask to be quarantined, beg not to be let out, to accept that some bacteria or virus had made the jump and that she was going to die.

"I'm—" she gags, remembering the blood on the steps of General Pracha's administrative building. Jaidee's dismembered body, a careful brutal package. Ragged death.

"Do you need a doctor?"

Kanya tries to control her breathing. Jaidee is haunting her. His *phii* following her. She tries to control her fear. "I'm fine." She nods to the guide. "Let's go. Finish this now."

A minute later the guide indicates a door and nods that Kanya should step through. As Kanya opens the door, Ratana looks up from her files. Smiles slightly in the glow of her monitor.

The computers down here all have large screens. Some of them are models that haven't existed in fifty years and burn more energy than five new ones, but they do their work and in return are meticulously maintained. Still, the amount of power burning through them makes Kanya weak in the knees. She can almost see the ocean rising in response. It's a horrifying thing to stand beside.

"Thank you for coming," Ratana says.

"Of course I came."

No mention of earlier trysts. No mention of shared history, gone awry. That Kanya could not play *tom* and *dee* with one she would inevitably betray. That was too much hypocrisy, even for Kanya. And yet Ratana is still beautiful. Kanya remembers laughing with her, taking a skiff out across the Chao Phraya and watching paper boats glowing all around them during Loi Kratong. Remembers the feel of Ratana curled against her as the waves lapped and as thousands of little candles burned, the city's wishes and prayers blanketing the waters.

Ratana motions her over. Shows her a set of photos on her screen. She catches sight of Kanya's captain's tags on her white collar. "I'm sorry about Jaidee. He was. . . good."

Kanya grimaces, trying to shake off the memory of his *phii* in the halls outside. "He was better than that." She studies the bodies that glow in front of her. "What am I seeing?"

"Two men. From two different hospitals."

"Yes?"

"They had something in them. Something worrisome. It seems to be a variant of blister rust."

"Yes? And? They ate something tainted. They died. So?"

Ratana shakes her head. "It was hosted in them. Propagating. I've never seen it host itself in a mammal."

Kanya looks over the hospital records. "Who are they?"

"We don't know."

"No family visited them? No one saw them arrive? They didn't say?"

"One was incoherent when he was admitted. The other was already deep into blister rust collapse."

"You're sure they didn't just eat tainted fruit?"

Ratana shrugs. Her skin is smooth and pale from a life underground. Not like Kanya whose skin has darkened like a peasant's in the harsh sun of active patrol. And yet Kanya would always choose to work above ground, not down here, in the darkness. Ratana is the brave one. Kanya is sure of it. She wonders what personal demons have driven Ratana to work in this hellish place. When they were together, Ratana never talked about her past. About her losses. But they are there. They have to be, like rocks under the waves and froth of a coastline. There are always rocks.

"No, of course I'm not sure. Not one hundred percent."

"Fifty percent?"

She shrugs again, uncomfortable, goes back to her papers. "You know I can't make assertions like that. But the virus is different, the protein alterations in their samples are variants. The breakdown of the tissue doesn't match the standard fingerprint of blister rust. In testing, it conforms to blister rusts we've seen before. AgriGen and TotalNutrient variations, AG134.s and TN249.x.d Both of them offer strong similarities." She pauses.

"Yes?"

"But it was in the lungs."

"Cibiscosis, then."

"No. It was blister rust." Ratana looks at Kanya. "You see the problem?"

"And we know nothing about their history, their travel? Were they abroad maybe? On a clipper ship? Crossing into Burma. Over into South China? They're not from the same village, perhaps?"

Ratana shrugs. "We have no history for either of them. Just the sickness to link them. We used to have a population database with DNA records, family history, work and housing data, but they were taken offline to provide more processing power for pre-emptive research." She shrugs. "In any case, so few people were bothering to register, it didn't make any sense."

"So we have nothing. Any other cases?"

"No."

"You mean not so far."

"This is beyond me here. We only noticed it because of the crackdowns. The hospitals are reporting everything, far more than they normally do, just to show that they're compliant. It was an accident that they reported and another that I noticed it in all the other reports that are coming in. We need Gi Bu Sen's help."

Kanya's skin crawls. "Jaidee's dead. Gi Bu Sen won't help us now."

"Sometimes he takes an interest. Not just in his own research. With this, it's possible." She looks up at Kanya, hopeful. "You went with Jaidee before. You saw him convince the man. Perhaps he will take an interest in you, too?"

"It's doubtful."

"Look at this." Ratana shuffles through the medical charts. "It has the markings of an engineered virus. DNA shifts don't look like ones that would reproduce in the wild. Blister rust has no reason to jump the animal kingdom barrier. Nothing is encouraging it, it is not easily transferred. The differences are marked. It's as though we're looking into

its future. At what it will be like after being reborn 10,000 times. It's a true puzzle. And truly worrisome."

"If you're right, we're all dead. General Pracha will have to be briefed. The palace told."

"Quietly," Ratana begs. She reaches out, grasps Kanya's sleeve, her face anguished. "I could still be wrong."

"You aren't."

"I don't know that it can jump, or how readily. I want you to go to Gi Bu Sen. He will know."

Kanya makes a face. "All right. I'll try. In the meantime, put out word to the hospitals and street clinics to look out for more symptoms. Draw up a list. With everyone already worried about crackdowns, it won't even look suspicious for us to demand more information from them. They'll think we're just trying to keep them on their toes. That will tell us something, at least."

"There will be riots if I'm right."

"There will be worse than that." Kanya turns for the door, feeling sick. "When your tests are done and your data is ready for him to examine, I'll meet your devil." She makes a face of distaste. "You'll have your confirmations."

"Kanya?"

She turns.

"I'm truly sorry about Jaidee," Ratana says. "I know you were close."

Kanya grimaces. "He was a tiger." She pulls open the door, leaving Ratana to her demon's lair. An entire facility dedicated to the Kingdom's survival, kilowatts of power burning all day and all night, and none of it of any real use.

## 25

Anderson-sama appears without warning, sitting down on a bar stool beside her, ordering water with ice for her and a whiskey for himself. He doesn't smile at her, hardly acknowledges her at all but still Emiko feels a rush of gratitude.

For the last several days she has hidden in the bar, waiting for the moment when the white shirts will decide to mulch her. She exists on sufferance and astronomical bribes and now she knows as Raleigh looks at her that it is unlikely he will let her go. He has too much invested in her now to allow her departure.

And then Anderson-sama appears, and for a moment, she feels safe, feels as though she is back in the arms of Gendo-sama. She knows it is her training that does this and yet she cannot help it. She smiles when she sees him sitting beside her, under the phosphorescent light of glow worms, his *gaijin* features so strange amongst the sea of Thais and the few Japanese men who know of her existence.

As is proper, he does not acknowledge her existence, but he stands and goes over to Raleigh and she knows that as soon as her performance is done, that she will sleep safe tonight. For once since the crackdown, she will not live in fear of the white shirts.



She is surprised when Raleigh comes over immediately. "Looks like you're doing something right. The *farang* wants to fine you out early."

"No show tonight?"

Raleigh shrugs. "He paid."

Emiko feels a rush of relief. She hurries to ready herself and then she's slipping down the stairs. Raleigh has arranged that the white shirts will only come and raid at specific times, and so she has assurance that within the confines of Ploenchit she can do as she likes. Nevertheless she is cautious. There were three raids early on, before the new patterns were settled. A number of owners spat blood before a new *detente* was agreed upon. Not Raleigh though. Raleigh seems to have a supernatural understanding of the workings of enforcement and bureaucracy.

Outside Ploenchit, Anderson is waiting in his rickshaw, smelling of whiskey and tobacco, his face rough with evening stubble. She leans against him. "I hoped you would come."

"I'm sorry it took so long. Things are a bit unsettled for me."

"I missed you." She is surprised to find that it is true.

They ease through the night traffic, past shambling shadow megodonts and cheshire flickers, past burning candles and sleeping families. They pass white shirt uniforms patrolling, but the officers are busy checking a vegetable stall. The green illumination of the gas lights flickers over them.

"Are you all right?" He nods at the white shirts. "Is the Ministry raiding?"

"It was bad at first. But now it is better."

There was panic during the first raids, as the white shirts stormed up the stairwells rousting mama-sans, shutting off pirate methane taps, swinging their batons. Ladyboys screaming, owners rushing to find more cash and then falling under the clubs when they failed to bribe their way free. Emiko had huddled amongst the other girls, still as a statue as the white shirts stalked the bar, pointing out problems, threatening to beat them all until they couldn't earn. Not a trace of good humor in them, only anger at the loss of their Tiger, only an urge to teach lessons to everyone who had ever laughed at white shirt rules.

Terror. Nearly pissing herself as she held still amongst the girls, sure that Kannika would shove her out and reveal her, that she would choose this moment to effect Emiko's demise.

Raleigh, performing careful obeisances to all of them, a farce for some of the regular takers of his bribes, some of them even looking directly at her—Suttipong and Addilek and Thanachai—all of them fully aware of her and her role in the place, having gone so far as to sample her even, and all of them staring at her, trying to decide if they would "discover" her. Everyone playing their roles, and Emiko waiting for Kannika to break the charade, to force everyone to look at the windup girl that had been so lucrative a source for bribes.

Emiko shivers at the memory. "It is better now," she says again.

Anderson-sama nods.

Their rickshaw stops in front of his building. He climbs down first, checks to ensure that no white shirts are about, then ushers her inside. The paired security guards scrupulously ignore her existence. When she leaves, she will tip them to make sure that they forget entirely. She may disgust them, but they will play along if she is respectful, and if she pays. With the white shirts on edge, she will have to pay more. But it can be done.

She and Anderson-sama enter the elevator, and the elevator woman calls out the estimated weight, her face carefully expressionless.

Safely inside his flat, they come together. Emiko is surprised at how happy she is that he delights in her, that he runs his hands over her skin, that he wishes to touch her. She has forgotten what it is to look almost human, to be nearly respected. In Japan, there was no such compunction about looking upon her. But here she feels as if she is an animal every day.

It is a relief to be loved, even if it is only for her physicality.

His hands run over her breasts, down across her stomach, slip between her legs, burrow deeper. She is relieved that it is easy, that he will know her pleasure. Emiko presses herself to him, and their mouths find one another, and for a time she forgets entirely that people call her windup and *heechy-keechy*. For a moment she feels entirely human, and she loses herself in the touching. In Anderson-sama's skin. In the security of pleasure and duty.

But after their union, her depression returns.

Anderson-sama brings her cool water, solicitous of her exertion. He lies down beside her, naked, careful not to touch, not to add to the heat she has built up. "What's the matter?" he asks.

Emiko shrugs, tries to make herself into a smiling New Person. "It is nothing. Nothing that can be changed." It's almost impossible to speak her needs. It goes against all her nature. Mizumi-sensei would strike her for it.

Anderson-sama watches her, his eyes surprisingly tender for a man with scars that crisscross his body. She can catalogue those scars. Each one a mystery of violence on his pale skin. Perhaps the puckered scars on his chest came from spring gun attacks. Perhaps the one on his shoulder came from a machete. The ones on his back look like whip marks, almost certainly. The only one she's certain about is the neck scar, from his factory.

He reaches out to touch her gently. "What's wrong?"

Emiko rolls away from him. She can barely speak through her embarrassment. "The white shirts. . . they will never let me out of the city. And now Raleigh-san has paid more bribes to keep me. He will never let me go, I think."

Anderson-sama doesn't respond. She can hear his breathing, slow and steady, but nothing else. Her shame is all encompassing.

*Stupid greedy windup girl. You should be grateful for what he is willing to provide.*

The silence stretches. Finally, Anderson-sama asks, "You're sure Raleigh can't be convinced? He's a businessman."

Emiko listens to the sound of his breathing. Is he offering to buy her free? If he were Japanese, it would be an offer, carefully couched. But with Anderson-sama, it is hard to tell.

"I do not know. Raleigh-san likes money. But I think also that he likes to see me suffer."

She waits, straining for a clue as to what he is thinking. Anderson-sama doesn't ask for more information. Leaves her hint dangling. She can feel his body though, close to her, the heat of his skin. Is he listening still? If he were civilized, she would take this lack of response as a definitive slap. But *gaijin* are not subtle.

Emiko steels herself. Presses again, almost gagging with humiliation as she overcomes her training and genetic imperatives. Fighting to keep herself from cowering like a dog, she tries again.

"I am living in the bar, now. Raleigh-san pays the bribes to keep the white shirts away, triple bribes now, some to the other bars, and some to the white shirts, to allow me to be there. I do not know how much longer I can last. My niche is vanishing, I think."

"Do you. . ." Anderson-sama breaks off, hesitating. Then says, "You could stay here."

Emiko's heart skips. "Raleigh-san would follow, I think."

"There are ways to handle people like Raleigh."

"You can free me from him?"

"I doubt I have the funds to buy you out."

Emiko's heart crashes as Anderson-sama continues, "With tension so high, I can't provoke him by just taking you away. Not when he could just send the white shirts hunting here. It would be too risky. But I think I can arrange for you to sleep here at least. Raleigh might even appreciate the lessened exposure."

"But would this not create problems for you? The white shirts do not like *farang*, either. You are very precarious now." *Help me fly from this place. Help me find the New People villages. Help me, please.* "If I were to pay Raleigh-san's fines. . . I could go north."

Anderson-sama tugs her shoulder gently. Emiko lets herself be pulled back to him. "You hope for too little," he says. His hand traces across her stomach. Idle. Thoughtful. "A lot of things may be changing soon. Maybe even for windups." He favors her with a small secretive smile. "The white shirts and their rules won't be here forever."

She is begging for survival, and he speaks of fantasy.

Emiko tries to keep her disappointment hidden. *You should be content, greedy girl. Grateful for what you have.* But she can't keep the bitterness from her voice. "I am a windup. Nothing will change. We will always be despised."

He laughs at that, pulls her close. "Don't be so sure." His lips brush her ear, whispering. Conspiratorial. "If you pray to that *bakeneko* cheshire god of yours, I might be able to give you something better than a village in the jungle. With a little luck, you might end up with a whole city."

Emiko pushes away, looks at him sadly. "I understand if you cannot change my lot. But you should not tease me."

Anderson-sama only laughs again.

Hock Seng crouches in an alley just outside the *farang* manufacturing district. It's night, but still there are white shirts everywhere. Everywhere he goes, he finds cordons of uniforms. On the quays, clipper ships sit isolated, waiting for permission to unload cargo. In the factory district, Ministry officers stand on every corner, preventing access for workers and owners and shopkeepers alike. Only a few people are allowed in and out, ones who show residence cards. Locals.

With only a yellow card for identification, it took Hock Seng half the evening to traverse the city, avoiding checkpoints. He misses Mai. Those young eyes and ears made him feel safe. Now he crouches with cheshires and the stink of urine, watching white shirts check another man's identification and cursing that he is cut off from the SpringLife factory. He should have been brave. Should have simply robbed the safe when he had the chance. Should have risked everything. And now it's too late. Now the white shirts own every inch of the city, and their favorite target is yellow cards. They like to test their batons on yellow card skulls, like to teach them lessons. If the Dung Lord didn't have so much influence, Hock Seng is sure that the ones in the towers would already be slaughtered. The Environment Ministry sees yellow cards the same way it sees the other invasive species and plagues it manages. Given a choice, the white shirts would slaughter every yellow card Chinese and then make a *khrah* of apology for their over-enthusiasm to the Child Queen. But only after the fact.

A young woman shows her pass and clears the cordon. She disappears down the street, deeper into the manufacturing district. Everything is so tantalizingly close, and yet so impossibly out of reach.

Looked at objectively, it is probably best that the factory is closed. Safer for everyone. If he weren't so dependent on the contents of the safe, he would just report the line's infections and be done with the *tamade* thing entirely. And yet, in the midst of all that illness, ensconced above the miasma of the algae baths, the blueprints and specifications still beckon.

Hock Seng wants to tear out the last of his hair with frustration.

He glares at the checkpoint, willing the white shirts to go away, to look somewhere else. Wishing, praying to the goddess Kuan Yin, begging to fat gold Budai for a little luck. With those manufacturing plans and the support of the Dung Lord, so much would be possible. So much future. So much life. Offerings for his ancestors again. Perhaps a wife. Perhaps a son to carry on his name. Perhaps. . .

A patrol stalks past. Hock Seng eases deeper into shadow. The enforcers remind him of when the Green Headbands began patrolling at night. They started out looking for couples holding hands in the evening, displaying immorality.

At the time, he told his children to watch themselves, to understand that the tides of conservatism came and went and if they could not live as freely and openly as their parents had, well then, what of it? Didn't they have food in their bellies and family and friends whose company they enjoyed? And within their high-walled compounds, it was irrelevant what the Green Headbands thought.

Another patrol. Hock Seng turns and slips back down the alley. There is no way to sneak into the manufacturing district. The white shirts are determined to shut down Trade and hurt the *farang*. He grimaces and begins the long circuitous route back through the *sois* toward his hovel.

Others in the Ministry were corrupt, but not Jaidee. Not if anyone is honest about the man. Even *Sawatdee Krung Thep!*, the whisper sheet which loved him most, and then denigrated him so completely during his disgrace, has printed pages and pages in praise of the hero of the country. Captain Jaidee was too well-loved to be cut into pieces, to be treated like offal that is dumped in methane composters. Someone must be punished.

And if Trade is to blame, then trade must be punished. So the factories are closed along with anchor pads and roads and docks, and Hock Seng cannot squeeze out. He cannot book passage on a clipper, cannot ride upriver to the ruined Ayutthaya, cannot flee on a dirigible to Kolkata or Japan.

He makes his way past the docks and, sure enough, the white shirts are still there, along with small knots of workers, squatting on the ground, idled by the blockade. A beautiful clipper ship lies anchored a hundred meters offshore, rocking gently in the water. As beautiful a clipper as he ever owned. Latest generation, switch hulls and hydrofoils, palm oil polymer, wind wings. Fast. Capable of hauling plenty of cargo. It sits out there, gleaming. And he stands on the dock, staring at it. It might as well be docked in India.

He spies a food cart, a vendor frying generipped tilapia in a deep wok. Hock Seng steels himself. He has to ask, even if he reveals himself as a yellow card. He is blind without information. With the white shirts at the other end of the dock, if the man calls out, he should still have time to flee.

Hock Seng eases close. "Is there any way of passengers crossing?" he murmurs. He tilts his head toward the clipper. "Over there?"

"No transit for anyone," the vendor mutters.

"Not even a single man?"

The man scowls, nods at the others in the shadows, squatting and smoking cigarettes, playing at cards. Huddled around the hand-crank radio of a shop keeper. "Those ones have been there for the last week. You'll have to wait, yellow card. Just like everyone else."

Hock Seng fights the urge to flinch at being identified. Forces himself to pretend as if they are all equals in this, to create a hopeful fiction that the man will see him as a person, and not as some unwelcome cheshire. "You haven't heard of small boats, further down the coast? Away from the city? For money?"

The fish vendor shakes his head. "No one's going either way. They've caught two different groups of passengers trying to make their way ashore from the ships, too. The white shirts won't even allow a resupply boat to go out. We're betting on whether the captain will weigh anchor or the white shirts will open up first."

"What are the odds?" Hock Seng asks.

"I'll give you eleven to one that the clipper leaves first."

Hock Seng makes a face. "I don't think I'll risk it."

"Twenty to one, then."

A few others seem to have been listening to the exchange. They laugh quietly. "Don't bet unless he gives you fifty to one," one of them says. "The white shirts aren't going to bend. Not this time. Not with the Tiger dead."

Hock Seng makes himself laugh with them. He pulls out a cigarette and lights it, offers more to the people around him. A small gift of good will for these Thais, for this moment of shared brotherhood. If he were not a yellow card with a yellow card accent, he might even try a gift of goodwill for the white shirts, but on a night like tonight it will earn him nothing but a baton on the skull. He has no interest in seeing his head splintered against paving stones. He smokes and studies the blockade.

Time is passing.

The idea of a sealed city makes his hands shake. *This isn't about yellow cards*, he tells himself. *We are not the reason for this*. But he has a hard time believing a noose isn't tightening. It might be about Trade right now, but there are too many yellow cards in the city and if trade is cut off for long, even these friendly people will begin to notice the lack of work, and then they will drink, and then they will think of the yellow cards in the towers.

The Tiger is dead. His face is on every gaslight pole. Pasted to every building. Three images of Jaidee in a fighting pose stare out from a warehouse wall even now. Hock Seng smokes his cigarette and scowls at that face. The hero of the people. The man who could not be bought, who faced down ministers and *farang* companies and petty businessmen. The man who was willing to fight even his own ministry. Sent to a desk job when he became too troublesome, and then put back on the street when he became even more so. The man who laughed at death threats, and survived three assassinations before the fourth felled him.

Hock Seng grimaces. The number four is everywhere in his mind these days. The Tiger of Bangkok only got four chances. How many has he himself used up? Hock Seng studies the docks and the clustered people, all unable to make their ships. With the sharpened senses of a refugee, he smells hazard in the wind, sharper than the sea air that sweeps across a clipper and presages typhoon.

The Tiger is dead. Captain Jaidee's painted eyes stare out at Hock Seng, and Hock Seng has the sudden, horrified feeling that the Tiger is not dead. That in fact, he is hunting.

Hock Seng shies away from the poster as if it is a blister-rusted durian. He knows in his bones, knows as surely as his clan is all dead and buried in Malaya, that it's time to run. Time to hide from tigers that hunt though the night. Time to plunge into leech-infested jungles and eat cockroaches and slither through the mud of the rainy season as it gushes in torrents. It doesn't matter where he goes. All that matters is that it's time to flee. Hock Seng stares out at the anchored clipper ship. Time to make hard decisions. Time, in truth, to give up on the SpringLife factory and its blueprints. Delays will only make it worse. Money must be spent. Survival secured.

This raft is sinking.

Carlyle is already waiting anxiously in the rickshaw when Anderson comes out of his building. The man's eyes flick from right to left, cataloguing the darkness around him in a nervous rotation. The man has the trembling cautiousness of a rabbit.

"You look jumpy," Anderson notes as he climbs in.

Carlyle grimaces. "The white shirts just took the Victory. Confiscated everything."

Anderson glances up at his own apartment, glad that poor old Yates chose to locate far from the rest of the *farang*. "You lose much?"

"Cash in the safe. Some customer lists that I was keeping away from our offices." Carlyle calls forward to the rickshaw driver, giving directions in Thai. "You'd better have something to offer these people."

"Akkarat knows what I'm offering."

They begin rolling through the humid night. Cheshires scatter. Carlyle glances behind them, scanning for followers. "No one's officially going after *farang*, but you know we're next on the list. I'm not sure how much longer we'll be able to keep a toehold in the country."

"Look on the bright side. If they go after *farang*, Akkarat won't be far behind."

They spin across the darkened city. Ahead of them, a checkpoint materializes. Carlyle mops his forehead. He's sweating like a pig. The white shirts hail their rickshaw and they slow.

Anderson feels a prickle of tension. "You're sure this will work?"

Carlyle wipes his brow again. "We'll know soon enough." The rickshaw coasts to a stop and the white shirts surround them. Carlyle speaks rapidly. Hands across a piece of paper. The white shirts confer for a moment, and then they're giving obsequious *wais* and motioning the *farang* forward.

"I'll be damned."

Carlyle laughs, relief obvious in his voice. "The right stamps on a piece of paper do wonders."

"I'm amazed that Akkarat still has any influence."

Carlyle shakes his head. "Akkarat couldn't do this."

The buildings turn to slums as they near the seawall. The rickshaw swerves around pieces of concrete that have fallen from the heights of an old Expansion hotel. Anderson supposes that it must have been lovely in the past. The terraced levels rise above them, silhouetted in moonlight. But now slum shacks lap all around it, and the last bits of its plate glass windows glimmer like teeth. The rickshaw slows to a halt at the foot of the seawall's embankment. Paired guardian *naga* flank the stairs to the top of the seawall. They watch as Carlyle pays the rickshaw man.

"Come on." Carlyle leads Anderson up the steps, his hand trailing along the scales of the *naga*. From the top of the levee, they have a clear view of the city. The Grand Palace shines in the distance. High walls obscure the inner courts that house the Child Queen

and her entourage, but its gold-spiked *chedi* rise above, gleaming softly in the moonlight. Carlyle tugs Anderson's sleeve. "Don't dawdle."

Anderson hesitates, searching the darkness of the shoreline below. "Where are the white shirts? They should be all over this place."

"Don't worry. They don't have authority here." He laughs at some secret joke and ducks under the *saisin* that strings along the levee's top. "Come on." He scrambles down the rubble embankment, picking his way toward the lap of the waves. Anderson hesitates, still scanning the open area, then follows.

As they reach the shoreline, a kink-spring skiff materializes out of the darkness, hurtling toward them. Anderson almost bolts, thinking it's a white shirt patrol, but Carlyle whispers, "It's ours." They wade out into the shallows and clamber aboard. The boat pivots sharply and they cut away from shore. Moonlight glints on the waves, a blanket of silver. The only sounds in the boat come from the slap of waves on the hull and the tick of kink-springs unwinding. Ahead of them, a barge looms, dark except for a few LED running lights.

Their skiff bumps up against the side. A moment later, a rope ladder lofts over the side, and they clamber up into the darkness. Crewmen *wai* respectfully as they come aboard. Carlyle makes a motion for Anderson to keep quiet as they are led below decks. At the end of corridor, guards flank a door. They call through, announcing the arriving *farang*, and the door opens, revealing a group of men at a large dining table, all laughing and drinking.

One of the men is Akkarat. Another Anderson recognizes as an admiral who harries the calorie ships going to Koh Angrit. Another he thinks is perhaps a southern general. In one corner, a sleek man wearing a black military uniform stands watching, eyes attentive. Another. . .

Anderson sucks in his breath.

Carlyle whispers, "Get down and show some respect." He's already falling to his knees and making a *khrab*. Anderson drops as quickly as he can.

The Somdet Chaopraya watches expressionless as they pay obeisance.

Akkarat laughs at their bowing and scraping. He comes around the table and brings them to their feet. "No need for so much formality here," he says, smiling. "Come. Join us. We're all friends here."

"Indeed." The Somdet Chaopraya smiles and raises a glass. "Come and drink."

Anderson *wais* again, as deeply as he is able. Hock Seng claims that the Somdet Chaopraya has killed more people than the Environment Ministry has slaughtered chickens. Before he was appointed protector of the Child Queen, he was a general, and his campaigns in the east are the brutal stuff of legend. If it weren't for the accident of his common birth line, it is speculated that he might even think to supplant royalty. Instead, he looms behind the throne, and all *khrab* before him.

Anderson's heart is pounding. With the Somdet Chaopraya backing a change of government, anything is possible. After years of searching and the failure in Finland, a seedbank is close. And with it, the answer to nightshades and *ngaw* and a thousand other genetic puzzles. This hard-eyed man who toasts him with a smile that could be friendly or feral holds the keys to everything.



A servant offers wine to Anderson and Carlyle. They join the assembled men at the table. "We were just talking about the coal war," Akkarat supplies. "The Vietnamese have given up on Phnom Penh for the moment."

"Good news, then."

The conversation continues, but Anderson only half listens. Instead, he furtively observes the Somdet Chaopraya. The last time he saw the man was outside the Environment Ministry's temple to Phra Seub, as they both gawked at the Japanese delegation's windup girl. In person, the man appears much older than in the pictures that adorn the city and depict him as a loyal defender of the Child Queen. His face is mottled with drink, and his eyes are sunken with the debauch he is rumored to like so well. Hock Seng claims that his brutal reputation on the battlefield is matched in his private life, and though the Thais may *krab* before his image, he is not loved as the Child Queen is. And now, as the Somdet Chaopraya looks up and catches Anderson's gaze, Anderson thinks he sees why.

He's met calorie executives like this. Men intoxicated on their power and influence, their ability to bring nations to heel with the threat of a SoyPRO embargo. A hard, brutal man. Anderson wonders if the Child Queen will actually reach the fullness of her power with this man standing so close. It seems unlikely.

Conversation around the table continues to carefully avoid the reason for their midnight rendezvous. They speak of harvests in the north, and discuss the problem of the Mekong now that the Chinese have placed more dams at its source. They talk about new clipper ship designs that Mishimoto is preparing for production.

"Forty knots with favorable winds!" Carlyle pounds the table gleefully. "A hydrofoil package and fifteen hundred tons of cargo. I'm going to buy a fleet of them!"

Akkarat laughs. "I thought air freight was the future. Heavy-lift dirigibles."

"With those clippers? I'm willing to hedge my bets. During the old Expansion there was a mix of transit options. Air and sea. I don't see why it won't be the same this time."

"The new Expansion is on everyone's minds these days." Akkarat's smile fades. He glances at the Somdet Chaopraya, who gives a barely discernable nod. The Trade Minister goes on, speaking directly to Anderson. "Some elements in the Kingdom oppose this progress. Benighted elements, to be sure, but inconveniently tenacious as well."

"If you're asking for assistance," Anderson says, "we remain happy to provide it."

Another pause. Akkarat's eyes stray again to the Somdet Chaopraya. He clears his throat. "There are concerns, still, about the nature of your assistance. The history of your sort doesn't invite confidence."

"A bit like climbing into bed with a nest of scorpions," the Somdet Chaopraya supplies.

Anderson smiles slightly. "It seems you are already surrounded by a number of nests. With your permission, some of them could be removed. To mutual benefit."

"The price you're asking is too high," Akkarat says.

Anderson keeps his voice neutral. "We are asking for nothing other than access."

"And this man, this Gibbons."

"You know of him, then?" Anderson leans forward. "You know where he is?"

The table falls silent. Akkarat glances again at the Somdet Chaopraya. The man shrugs, but it's enough of an answer for Anderson. Gibbons is here. Somewhere in the country. Probably in the city. No doubt designing a follow-up triumph to the *ngaw*.

"We're not asking for the country," Anderson says. "The Thai Kingdom is nothing like Burma or India. It has its own history, one of independence. We respect that absolutely."

The assembled men's faces turn stony.

Anderson curses himself. *Fool. You're speaking to their terrors.* He changes tacks. "There are significant opportunities here. Cooperation benefits both parties. My people are prepared to offer significant assistance to the Kingdom if we can come to agreement. Help with your border disputes, calorie security that hasn't been enjoyed since the Expansion, all of this can be yours. This is an opportunity for all of us."

Anderson trails off. The general is nodding. The admiral is frowning. Akkarat and the Somdet Chaopraya are blanks. He can't read them at all.

"Please excuse us," Akkarat says.

It is not a request. The guards indicate that Anderson and Carlyle should leave. A moment later they are out in the passageway with four guards surrounding them.

Carlyle stares at the floor. "They don't seem convinced. Can you think of any reason why they wouldn't trust you?"

"I've got weapons and the money for bribes ready to be landed. If they can open communication with Pracha's generals, I can buy and equip them. Where is the risk for them?" Anderson shakes his head, irritated. "They should be jumping at the opportunity. It's the most equitable deal we've ever offered."

"It's not the offer. It's you. You, and AgriGen, and every bit of your damn history. If they trust you, it happens. If not. . ." Carlyle shrugs.

The door opens and they're invited back in. Akkarat says, "Thank you so much for your time. I'm sure that we will take your offer under advisement."

Carlyle slumps, deflated by the polite refusal. The Somdet Chaopraya smiles slightly as the news is delivered. Pleased, perhaps, to slap the *farang* down. More polite words are passed around the cabin, but Anderson hardly hears them. Rejection. He's so close he can almost taste the *ngaw*, and still they throw up barriers. There has to be a way to reopen discussion. He stares at the Somdet Chaopraya. He needs a lever. Something to break this impasse—

Anderson almost laughs out loud. Pieces click into place. Carlyle is still mumbling disappointment, but Anderson just smiles and *wais*, hunting for a way in. A way to keep the conversation going a bit longer. "I completely understand your concerns. We have not earned sufficient trust. Perhaps we could discuss something different. A project of friendship, say. Something less high stakes."

The admiral grimaces. "We want nothing from your hand."

"Please, don't be hasty. We offer in good faith. And regarding that other project, if you change your mind about our assistance, whether it happens in a week, or a year, or ten years, you will always find us supportive."

"A very fine speech." Akkarat says. He's smiling, even as he shoots the admiral a sharp look. "I'm sure there are no hard feelings, here. Please, at least have one last drink. We've troubled you to come so far, there's no reason we shouldn't part as friends."

Still in the game then. Anderson feels a rush of relief. "Our sentiments exactly."

Soon the drink is flowing, and Carlyle is promising that he would happily ship an order of saffron from India as soon as the current embargo is lifted, and Akkarat is telling a story about a white shirt trying to take three bribes from three different food stalls who keeps losing his count, and all the while, Anderson watches the Somdet Chaopraya, waiting for an opening.

When the man goes to a window to look out at the water, Anderson moves to join him.

"It's a pity that your proposal wasn't accepted," the man says.

Anderson shrugs. "I'm happy to be walking out alive. A few years ago, I would have been trampled by megodonts for simply trying to meet with you."

The Somdet Chaopraya laughs. "You're confident we'll let you walk out?"

"Confident enough, anyway. It's not a bad gamble," Anderson says. "You and Akkarat are honorable, even if we don't agree on every particular. I don't consider it a particularly risky bet."

"No? Half the people in this room suggested that feeding you to the river carp tonight was the wisest course." He pauses, hard sunken eyes staring at Anderson. "It was a very close thing."

Anderson makes himself smile. "I gather you weren't in agreement with your admiral?"

"Not tonight."

Anderson *wais*. "Then I'm grateful."

"Don't thank me yet. I may yet decide to have you killed. Your kind have a very poor reputation."

"Would you at least give me a chance to bargain for my life?" Anderson asks wryly.

The Somdet Chaopraya shrugs. "It wouldn't do you any good. Your life is the most interesting thing I could take."

"Then I would have to offer something unique."

The man's hollow eyes flick back to Anderson. "Impossible."

"Not at all," Anderson says. "I can give you something you've never seen before. Could do it tonight even. Something exquisite. It's not for the squeamish, but it is astonishing and unique. Would that keep you from feeding to the river carp?"

The Somdet Chaopraya gives him a look of annoyance. "There is nothing you can show me that I have not already seen."

"Would you care to wager?"

"Still gambling, *farang*?" The Somdet Chaopraya laughs. "Haven't you risked enough for one night?"

"Not at all. I'm just trying to make sure my limbs stay attached. It hardly seems like a risk, given how much I might lose otherwise." He meets the Somdet Chaopraya's eye. "But I am willing to bet. Are you?"

The Somdet Chaopraya gives him a hard look, calls to his men. "Our calorie man is a gambler! He says he can show me something I haven't seen before. What do you all think of that?"

His men all laugh. "The odds are very much against you," the Somdet Chaopraya observes.

"Still, I think the bet is a good one. And I'm willing to place good money on it."

"Money?" The Somdet Chaopraya makes a face. "I thought we were talking about your life."

"What about the plans for my kink-spring factory, then?"

"I could simply take that, if I wanted." The Somdet Chaopraya snaps his fingers, irritated. "Just like that, and they're mine."

"All right." Anderson grimaces. *All or nothing*. "What if I offered you and your Kingdom my company's next iteration of U-*Tex* rice? Would that be a worthwhile bet? And not just the rice, but the grain before it is rendered sterile. Your people can plant it and replant it for as long as it's viable against blister rust. My life can't be worth more than that."

The room falls quiet. The Somdet Chaopraya studies him. "And to balance that risk? What is it you want if you win?"

"I want to go forward with the political project we discussed earlier. Under the same terms as we already proposed. Terms which we both know are entirely favorable to you and your Kingdom."

The Somdet Chaopraya's eyes narrow. "You're a tenacious one, aren't you? And what's to keep you from simply withholding the U-*Tex* you're offering, if you lose?"

Anderson smiles and waves a hand toward Carlyle. "I assume that you would have myself and Mr. Carlyle here torn apart by megodonts if we fail to make good. Would that be satisfactory?"

Carlyle laughs, his voice tinged with hysteria. "What kind of bet is that?"

Anderson doesn't take eyes away from the Somdet Chaopraya. "The only one that matters. I trust absolutely that his Excellency will be honest if I manage to surprise him. And we will place ourselves in his hands as a token of that trust. It's a perfectly reasonable bet. We're both honorable men."

The Somdet Chaopraya smiles. "I accept your bet." He laughs and claps Anderson on the back. "Surprise me *farang*. And good luck to you. To see you trampled would be a pleasure."

\* \* \*

They make a strange party as they move across the city. The Somdet Chaopraya's retinue guarantees them access through checkpoints, and the surprised shouts of white shirts echo in the darkness as they realize who they are trying to halt.

Carlyle wipes his forehead with a handkerchief. "Christ, you're a crazy bastard. I should have never agreed to introduce you."

Now that the bet is made and the risk defined, Anderson is inclined to agree. The U-  
Tex rice offering is a real risk. Even if his handlers back the play, the finance people will fight. One lost calorie man is infinitely more replaceable than primary seedstock. If the Thais start exporting the rice, it will undercut profits for years. "It's fine," he mutters. "Trust me."

"Trust you?" Carlyle's hands are shaking. "Trust you to put me under a megadont?" He glances around. "I should just run for it."

"Don't bother. The Somdet Chaopraya gave his guards instructions. If we have second thoughts now. . ." He jerks his head back toward the men riding in the rickshaw behind. "They'll kill you as soon as you try to run."

A few minutes later, familiar towers rise into view.

"Ploenchit?" Carlyle asks. "Jesus and Noah, you're seriously taking the Somdet Chaopraya here?"

"Calm down. You're the one who gave me the idea."

Anderson gets down from his rickshaw. The Somdet Chaopraya and his retinue all mill before the entrance. The Somdet Chaopraya gives him a pitying look. "This is the best you can do? Girls? Sex?" He shakes his head.

"Don't be too quick to judge." Anderson indicates that they should come inside. "Please. I'm sorry that we'll have to climb the stairs. The accommodations do not befit your rank, but I assure you that the experience is worth it."

The Somdet Chaopraya shrugs and lets Anderson lead. His guards crowd close, nervous in the dark confines. The junkies and whores in the stairwells all catch sight of the Somdet Chaopraya and collapse into panicked *khrebs*. Word of their arrival rushes up the stairwells. The Chaopraya's guards run ahead, searching the darkness.

The doors of Soil open. Girls drop to their knees. The Somdet Chaopraya looks around himself with distaste. "This is a place you *farang* frequent?"

"As I said, not the finest. I am very sorry for that." Anderson beckons him. "It's this way." He strides across the room and pulls aside the curtain, revealing the inner theater.

Emiko lies on stage with Kannika kneeling over her. Men crowd around as Kannika draws out the telltale movements of the windup girl's design. Her body twitches and jerks in the light of glow worms. The Somdet Chaopraya stops short and stares.

"I thought only the Japanese had them," he murmurs.

Kanya starts. It's Pai, standing at her doorway. Kanya rubs her face. She was sitting at her desk, trying to write another report, waiting for word from Ratana. And now drool soaks the back of her hand and her pen leaks everywhere. Asleep. And dreaming of Jaidee who simply sits and pokes fun at all her justifications.

"Were you sleeping?" Pai asks.

Kanya rubs her face. "What time is it?"

"Second hour in the morning. The sun's been up for a while." Pai waits patiently for her to gather her wits, a pockmarked man who should be her senior, but who Kanya has overtaken. He is of the old guard. One who worshipped Jaidee and his ways, and whom remembers the Environment Ministry when it was not ridiculed, but feted. A good man. A man whose bribes are all known to Kanya. Pai may be corrupt, but she knows who owns which parts, and so she trusts him.

"We found another," he repeats.

Kanya straightens. "Who else knows?"

Pai shakes his head.

"You took it to Ratana?"

He nods. "It wasn't tagged as a suspicious death. It took some effort to find. This is like looking for a silver minnow in the rice paddies."

"Not even tagged?" Kanya sucks in her breath, lets it out in an irritated hiss. "They're all incompetent. No one remembers how it always comes. They forget so quickly."

Pai nods easily, listening to his mistress rant. The pits and holes of his face stare back at her. Another worming disease. Kanya can't remember if it was a genehack weevil that did it, or a variation on *phii* bacteria. All Pai says is, "This makes two, then?"

"Three." Kanya pauses. "A name? Did the man have a name?"

Pai shakes his head. "They were careful."

Kanya nods sourly. "I want you to go around to the districts and see if anyone has reported any missing relatives. Three people missing. Get photos taken."

Pai shrugs.

"You have a better idea?"

"Perhaps forensics will find something to link them," he suggests.

"Yes, fine. Do that as well. Where is Ratana?"

"She has sent the body to the pits. She asks for you to meet her."

Kanya grimaces. "Of course." She tidies her papers and leaves Pai to his futile searches.

As she leaves the administrative building, she wonders what Jaidee would do in this situation. For him, inspiration came easily. Jaidee would stop in the middle of the road, struck suddenly by enlightenment, and then they would be off, running through the city, hunting for the source of contamination, and invariably, the man would be *right*. It sickens Kanya to think that the Kingdom must rely on her instead.

*I am bought, she thinks. I am paid for. I am bought.*

When she first arrived at the Environment Ministry as Akkarat's mole, it was a surprise to discover that the little privileges of the Environment Ministry were always

enough. The weekly take from street stalls to burn something other than expensive approved-source methane. The pleasure of a night patrol spent sleeping well. It was an easy existence. Even under Jaidee, it was easy. And now by ill-luck she must work, and the work is important, and she has had two masters for so long that she cannot remember which one should be ascendant.

*Someone else should have replaced you, Jaidee. Someone worthy. The Kingdom falls because we are not strong. We are not virtuous, we do not follow the eightfold path and now the sicknesses come again.*

And she is the one who must stand against them, like Phra Seub—but without the strength or moral compass.

Kanya strides across the quads, nodding at other officers, scowling. *Jaidee, what is it in your kamma that placed me second to you? That placed your life's work in my fickle hands? What joker did this? Was this Phii Oun, the cheshire trickster spirit, happy to see more carrion and offal in the world? Happy to see our corpses piled high?*

Ahead, men wearing filter masks jump to attention as they spy her pushing open the gates to the crematory grounds. She has a mask issued, but leaves it dangling around her neck. It does no good for an officer to show fear, and she knows the mask will not save her. She places more faith in a Phra Seub amulet.

The open dirt expanse of the pits lays before her, massive holes cut into the red earth, lined to keep out the seep of the water table that lies close below. Wet land, and yet the surface bakes in the heat. The dry season never ends. Will the monsoon even come this year? Will it save them or drown them? There are gamblers who bet on nothing else, changing the odds on the monsoon daily. But with the climate so much altered, even the Environment Ministry's own modelling computers are unsure of the monsoon from year to year.

Ratana stands at the edge of a pit. Oily smoke roils up from the burning bodies below. Overhead a few ravens and vultures circle. A dog has gotten into the compound and skulks along the walls, looking for scraps.

"How did that get in?" Kanya asks.

Ratana looks up and spies the dog. "Nature finds a way," she observes dully. "If we leave food, it will reach for it."

"You found another body?"

"Same symptoms." Ratana's body is slumped, her shoulders bowed inward. Below them, the fires crackle. A vulture sweeps low. A uniformed officer fires a cannon and the explosion sends the vulture screeching skyward again. It circles. Ratana closes her eyes briefly. Tears threaten at the corners of her eyes. She shakes her head, seeming to steel herself. Kanya watches sadly, wondering if either of them will be alive at the end of this newest plague.

"We should warn everyone," Ratana says. "Inform General Pracha. The palace as well."

"You're sure now?"

Ratana sighs. "It was in a different hospital. Across the city. A street clinic. They assumed it was *yaba* stick overdose. Pai found them by accident. A casual conversation on his way to Bangkok Mercy to look for evidence."

"By accident." Kanya shakes her head. "He didn't tell me that. How many could there be out there? Hundreds already? Thousands?"

"I don't know. The only good thing is that we haven't seen any sign that they themselves are contagious."

"Yet."

"You must go ask Gi Bu Sen for advice. He is the only one who knows what sort of monster we face. These are his children, coming to torment us. He will recognize them. I'm having the new samples prepared. Between the three, he will know. "

"There's no other way?"

"Our only other choice is to begin quarantining the city, and then the riots will begin and there will be nothing left to save."

\* \* \*

Rice paddies sprawl in all directions, emerald green, bright and neon in the tropic sun. Kanya has been inside the sinkhole of Krung Thep for so long that it's a relief to see this growing world. It makes her imagine that there is hope. That the rice grasses will not wilt red under some new variant of blister rust. That some engineered spore will not float over from Burma and take root. Flooded fields still grow, the dikes still hold, and His Royal Majesty King Rama XII's pumps still move water.

Tattooed farmers make *wais* of respect as Kanya cycles past. By the stamps on their arms, most of them have already done corvée labor for the year. A few others are marked for the start of the rainy season when they will be required to come to the city and shore up its dikes for the deluge. Kanya has her own tattoos from her time in the countryside, before Akkarat's agents tasked her with this burrowing into the very heart of the Environment Ministry.

After an hour of steady pedalling down raised causeways, the compound materializes. First the wires. Then the men with their dogs. Then the walls topped with glass and razor wire and high bamboo stakes. Kanya keeps to the road, avoiding trip patches. Technically, it is simply the home of a wealthy man, perched atop an artificial hill of concrete and Expansion tower rubble.

Given the loss of life over the last century it is an impressive focusing of human labor for something so silly—when dikes need repairs and fields need sowing and wars need fighting—that a man was able to channel labor into the building of a hill. A rich man's retreat. It was originally Rama XII's, and officially it is still the property of the palace. From the vantage of a dirigible passing overhead, it is nothing. Just another compound. An extravagance for some branch of royalty. And yet, a wall is a wall, a tiger pit is a tiger pit, and men with dogs look both ways.

Kanya shows the guards her papers as mastiffs growl and lunge against their chains. The beasts are larger than any natural dog. Windups. Hungry and deadly and well-built for their work. They weigh twice what she does, all muscle and teeth. The horror of Gi Bu Sen's imagination, brought to life.



The guards unpattern encryptions with their hand-cranked code breakers. They wear the black livery of the Queen's own, and are frightening in their seriousness and efficiency. Finally they wave her past their dogs' straining teeth. Kanya cycles toward the gate, her neck prickling with the knowledge that she can never ride as fast as those dogs can run.

At the gates, another set of guards reconfirm her passes before guiding her inside to a tiled terrace, and a blue jewel swimming pool.

A trio of ladyboys titter and smile from where they lounge in the shade of a banana tree. Kanya smiles in return. They are pretty. And if they love a *farang*, then they are only foolish.

"I am Kip," one of them says. "The doctor is having his massage." She nods at the blue water. "You can wait for him by the pool."

The scent of the ocean is strong. Kanya walks to the edge of the terrace. Below her, waves lap and curl, scrubbing white across beach sands. A breeze pours over her, clean and fresh and astonishingly optimistic after the claustrophobic stink of Bangkok behind its seawalls.

She takes a deep breath, enjoying the salt and wind. A butterfly flutters past and alights on the terrace railing. Closes its jewel wings. Opens them gently. Folding itself over and over again, bright and cobalt and gold and black.

Kanya studies it, stricken by its beauty, the gaudy evidence of a world beyond her own. She wonders what hungers have driven it to fly to this alien mansion with its strange *farang* prisoner. Of all the things of beauty, here is one that cannot be denied. Nature has worked itself into a frenzy.

Kanya leans close, studying it as it clings to the rail. An unwary hand might brush it and grind it into dust without ever realizing the destruction.

She reaches out with a careful finger. The butterfly startles, then allows her to gather it in, to walk it into her cupped palm. It has come a long distance. It must be tired. As tired as she feels. It has travelled continents. Crossed high steppes and emerald jungles to land here, amongst hibiscus and paving stones, so that Kanya can now hold it in her hand and appreciate its beauty. Such a long way to travel.

Kanya makes a fist on its fluttering. Opens her hand and lets its dust drop to the tiles. Wing fragments and pulped body. A manufactured pollinator, wafted from some PurCal laboratory most likely.

Windups have no souls. But they are beautiful.

A splash comes from behind her. Kip is wearing a bathing suit now. She flickers under water, rises, pushing her long black hair back and smiling, before turning and beginning another lap. Kanya watches her swim, the graceful crawl of blue suit and brown limbs. A pretty girl. A pleasant creature to watch.

Eventually, the demon wheels out to the pool edge. He is much worse than when she last saw him. *Fa' gan* scars mark his throat and curl to his ear. An opportunistic infection that he fought off despite the doctor's prognosis. He is in a wheelchair, pushed by an attendant. A thin blanket covers his stick legs.

So his disease truly is progressing. For a long time, she thought it was only a myth, but now she can see. The man is ugly. Horrifying in his disease and his burning intensity.

Kanya shivers. She'll be glad when the demon finally goes on to his next life. Becomes a corpse they can burn in quarantine. Until then, she hopes the drugs will continue to suppress his contagion. He is a crabbed hairy man with brushy eyebrows, a fat nose, and wide rubbery lips that break into a hyena grin when he sees Kanya.

"Ah. My jailer."

"Hardly."

Gibbons glances at Kip where she swims. "Just because you give me pretty girls with pretty mouths doesn't mean I am not jailed." He looks up. "So, Kanya, I haven't seen you in a while. Where is your upright lord and master? My most favorite keeper? Where is our fighting Captain Jaidee? I don't deal with subordinates—" He breaks off, studying Kanya's collar ranks. His eyes narrow. "Ah. I see." He leans back, regarding Kanya. "It was just a matter of time before someone disposed of him. Congratulations on your promotion, Captain."

Kanya forces herself to remain impassive. On her previous visits it was Jaidee who always treated with the devil. They went away into interior offices, leaving Kanya to wait beside the pool with whatever creature the doctor had chosen for his pleasure. When Jaidee returned, it was always with a purse-lipped silence.

On one occasion, as they left the compound, Jaidee had nearly spoken, had nearly said whatever was churning in his head. He opened his mouth and said, "But—" a protest that remained half-formed, dead as soon as it passed his lips.

Kanya had the impression that Jaidee was still carrying on a conversation, a verbal battle that pinged back and forth, like a *takraw* game. A war of words, flying and ricocheting, with Jaidee's skull as the playing court. On another occasion, Jaidee had simply left the compound with a scowl and the words, "He is too dangerous to keep."

Kanya had responded, confused. "But he does not work for AgriGen any longer," and Jaidee had looked at her surprised, only then realizing that he had spoken aloud.

The doctor was legendary. A demon to frighten children with. When Kanya first met him, she expected the man to be bound in chains, not sitting complacently and scooping out the guts of a *Koh Angrit* papaya, happy and grinning with juice running down his chin.

Kanya was never sure if it was guilt or some other strange driving force that had sent the doctor to the Kingdom. If the lure of ladyboys and his imminent death had caused it. If a falling out with his colleagues had driven him. The doctor seemed to have no regrets. No concerns over the damage he had inflicted in the world. Spoke jokingly of foiling Ravaita and Domingo. Of wrecking ten years' labor for Doctor Michael Ping.

A cheshire steals across the patio, breaking Kanya's thoughts. It leaps into the doctor's lap. Kanya steps back, disgusted, as the man scratches behind the cheshire's ears. It molts, legs and body changing hue, taking on the colors of the old man's quilt.

The doctor smiles. "Don't cling too tightly to what is natural, Captain. Here, look," he bends forward, makes cooing noises. The shimmer of the cheshire cranes toward his face, mewling. Its tortoiseshell fur glimmers. It licks tentatively at his chin. "A hungry little beast," he says. "A good thing, that. If it's hungry enough, it will succeed us entirely, unless we design a better predator. Something that hungers for it, in turn."

"We've run the analysis of that," Kanya says. "The food web only unravels more completely. Another super-predator won't solve the damage already done."

Gibbons snorts. "The ecosystem unravelled when man first went a-seafaring. When we first lit fires on the broad savannas of Africa. We have only accelerated the phenomenon. The food web you talk about is nostalgia, nothing more. Nature." He makes a disgusted face. "*We* are nature. Our every tinkering is nature, our every biological striving. We are what we are, and the world is ours. We are its gods. Your only difficulty is your unwillingness to unleash your potential fully upon it."

"Like AgriGen? Like U Texas? Like RedStar HiGro?" Kanya shakes her head. "How many of us are dead because of *their* potential unleashed? Your calorie masters showed us what happens. People die."

"Everyone dies." The doctor waves a dismissal. "But you die now because you cling to the past. We should all be windups by now. It's easier to build a person impervious to blister rust than to protect an earlier version of the human creature. A generation from now, we could be well-suited for our new environment. Your children could be the beneficiaries. Yet you people refuse to adapt. You cling to some idea of a humanity that evolved in concert with your environment over millennia, and which you now, perversely, refuse to remain in lockstep with."

"Blister rust is our environment. Cibiscosis. Genehack weevil. Cheshires. They have adapted. Quibble as you like about whether they evolved naturally or not. Our environment has changed. If we wish to remain at the top of our food chain, we will evolve. Or we will refuse, and go the way of the dinosaurs and *Felis domesticus*. Evolve or die. It has always been nature's guiding principle, and yet you white shirts seek to stand in the way of inevitable change." He leans forward. "I want to shake you sometimes. If you would just let me, I could be your god and shape you to the Eden that beckons us."

"I'm Buddhist."

"And we all know windups have no souls." Gibbons grins. "No rebirth for them. They will have to find their own gods to protect them. Their own gods to pray for their dead." His grin widens. "Perhaps I will be that one, and your windup children will pray to me for salvation." His eyes twinkle. "I would like a few more worshippers, I must admit. Jaidee was like you. Always such a doubter. Not as bad as Grahamites, but still, not particularly satisfactory for a god."

Kanya makes a face. "When you die, we will burn you to ash and bury you in chlorine and lye and no one will remember you."

The doctor shrugs, unconcerned. "All gods must suffer." He leans back in his chair, smiling slyly. "So, would you like to burn me at the stake now? Or would you like to prostrate yourself before me, and worship my intelligence once again?"

Kanya hides her disgust at the man. Pulls out the bundle of papers and hands them across. The doctor takes them, but doesn't do anything else. Doesn't open them. Barely glances at them.

"Yes?"

"It's all in there," she says.

"You haven't knelt yet. You give more respect to your father, I'm sure. To the city pillar, for certain."

"My father is dead."

"And Bangkok will drown. It doesn't mean you shouldn't show respect."

Kanya fights the urge to take out her baton and club him.

Gibbons smiles at her resistance. "Shall we chat awhile then, first?" he asks. "Jaidee always liked to talk. No? I can see from your expression you despise me. You think I'm some murderer, perhaps? Some killer of children? You won't break bread with one such as me?"

"You *are* a killer."

"Your killer. Your tool entirely. What does that make you?" He watches her, amused. It feels to Kanya as if the man is using his eyes to carefully cut open her innards, lifting and examining each organ in turn: lungs, stomach, liver, heart. . .

Gibbons smiles slightly. "You want me dead." His pale mottled face splits into a wider grin, his eyes mad and intense. "You should shoot me if you hate me so." When Kanya doesn't respond, he throws up his hands in disgust. "Fuck me, you're all so shy! Kip's the only one of you who's worth a damn." His eyes turn to the girl where she swims, watches her, mesmerized for a moment. "Go ahead and kill me. I'd be happy to die. I'm only alive because you keep me this way."

"Not for much longer."

The doctor looks down at his paralyzed legs, laughs. "No. Not for long. And then what will you do when AgriGen and its ilk launch another assault? When spores float to you from Burma? When they wash up on the beach from India. Will you starve the way the Indians did? Will your flesh rot off you as it did for the Burmese? Your country only stays one step ahead of the plagues because of me, and my rotting mind." He waves at his legs. "Will you rot with me?" He pulls aside his blankets, shows the sores and scabs on his pale fishy legs, pasty with the loss of blood and weals of suppurating flesh. "Will you die like this?" He grins mirthlessly.

Kanya looks away. "You deserve it. It's your *kamma*. Your death will be painful."

"Karma? Did you say karma?" The doctor leans closer, brown eyes rolling, tongue lolling. "And what sort of karma is it that ties your entire country to me, to my rotting broken body? What sort of karma is it that behooves you to keep me, of all people, alive?" He grins. "I think a great deal about your karma. Perhaps it's your pride, your hubris that is being repaid, that forces you to lap seedstock from my hand. Or perhaps you're the vehicle of my enlightenment and salvation. Who knows? Perhaps I'll be reborn at the right hand of Buddha thanks to the kindnesses I do for you."

"That's not the way it works."

The doctor shrugs. "I don't care. Just give me another like Kip to fuck. Throw me another of your sickened lost souls. Throw me a windup. I don't care. I'll take what flesh you throw me. Just don't bother me. I'm beyond worrying about your rotting country now."

He tosses the papers into the pool. They scatter across the water. Kanya gasps, horrified, and nearly lunges after them before steeling herself and forcing herself to draw

back. She will not allow Gibbons to bait her. This is the way of the calorie man. Always manipulating. Always testing. She forces herself to look away from the parchment slowly soaking in the pool and turn her eyes to him.

Gibbons smiles slightly. "Well? Are you going to swim for them or not?" He nods at Kip. "My little nymph will help you. I'd enjoy seeing you two little nymphs frolicking together."

Kanya shakes her head. "Get them out yourself."

"I always like it when an upright person such as yourself comes before me. A woman with pure convictions." He leans forward, eyes narrowed. "Someone with real qualifications to judge my work."

"You were a killer."

"I advanced my field. It wasn't my business what they did with my research. You have a spring gun. It's not the manufacturer's fault that you are likely unreliable. That you may at any time kill the wrong person. I built the tools of life. If people use them for their own ends, then that is their karma, not mine."

"AgriGen paid you well to think so."

"AgriGen paid me well to make them rich. My thoughts are my own." He studies Kanya. "I suppose you have a clean conscience. One of those upright Ministry officers. As pure as your uniform. As clean as sterilizer can make you." He leans forward. "Tell me, do you take bribes?"

Kanya opens her mouth to retort, but words fail her. She can almost feel Jaidee drifting close. Listening. Her skin prickles. She forces herself not to look over her shoulder.

Gibbons smiles. "Of course you do. All of your kind are the same. Corrupt from top to bottom."

Kanya's hand slides toward her pistol. The doctor watches, smiling. "What? Are you threatening to shoot me? Do you want a bribe from me as well? Would you like me to suck your cunt? To offer you my not-quite girl?" He stares at Kanya, hard-eyed. "You've taken my money already. My life is already shortened and full of pain. What else do you want? Why not take my girl?"

Kip looks up expectantly from the pool, treading water. Her body shimmers under the clear ripples of the waves. Kanya looks away. The doctor laughs. "Sorry, Kip. We don't have the bribes this one likes." His drums his fingers on his chair. "What about a young boy, then? There's a lovely twelve-year-old who works my kitchen. He would be happy to perform. The pleasure of a white shirt is always paramount."

Kanya glares at him. "I could break your bones."

"Do it then. But hurry up. I want a reason not to help you."

"Why did you help AgriGen for so long?"

The doctor's eyes narrow. "The same reason you run like a dog for *your* masters. They paid me in the coin I wanted most."

Her slap rings across the water. The guards start forward, but Kanya is already drawing back, shaking off the sting in her hand, waving away the guards. "We're fine. Nothing is wrong."

The guards pause, unsure of their duty and loyalties. The doctor touches his broken lip, examines the blood thoughtfully. Looks up. "A sore spot, there. . . How much of yourself have you already sold?" He smiles showing teeth rimed bloody from Kanya's strike. "Are you AgriGen's then? Complicit?" He looks into Kanya's eyes. "Are you here to kill me? To end my thorn in their side?" He watches closely, eyes peering into her soul, observant, curious. "It is only a matter of time. They must know that I am here. That I am yours. The Kingdom couldn't have fared so well for so long without me. Couldn't have released nightshades and *ngaw* without my help. We all know they are hunting. Are *you* my hunter, then? Are you my destiny?"

Kanya scowls. "Hardly. We're not done with you yet."

Gibbons slumps. "Ah, of course not. But then, you never will be. That is the nature of our beasts and plagues. They are not dumb machines to be driven about. They have their own needs and hungers. Their own evolutionary demands. They must mutate and adapt, and so you will never be done with me, and when I am gone, what will you do then? We have released demons upon the world, and your walls are only as good as my intellect. Nature has become something new. It is ours now, truly. And if our creation devours us, how poetic will that be?"

"*Kamma*," she murmurs.

"Precisely." Gibbons leans back, smiling. "Kip. Get the pages. Let us see what can be deciphered from this puzzle." He drums his fingers on his ruined legs, thoughtful. Smirks at Kanya. "Let us see how close to death your precious Kingdom lies."

Kip swims to collect the pages, rippling through the water as she gathers them to her, pulling them dripping and limp from the pool. A smile flickers across Gibbons' lips as he watches her swim. "You're lucky I like Kip. If I didn't, I would have let you all succumb years ago."

He nods to his guards. "The captain will have samples on her bicycle. Get them. We'll take them down into the lab."

Kip finally emerges from the pool and sets the sopping stack of papers on the doctor's lap. He motions and she begins pushing him toward the door of his villa. The doctor waves for Kanya to follow.

"Come on, then. This won't take long."

\* \* \*

The doctor squints over one of the slides. "I'm surprised you think this is an inert mutation."

"Three cases, only."

The doctor looks up. "For now." He smiles. "Life is algorithmic. Two becomes four, becomes ten thousand, becomes a plague. Maybe it's everywhere in the population already and we never noticed. Maybe this is end-stage. Terminal without symptoms, like poor Kip."

Kanya glances at the ladyboy. Kip gives a gentle return smile. Nothing shows on her skin. Nothing shows on her body. It is not the doctor's disease she dies of. And yet. . . Kanya steps away, involuntarily.

The doctor grins. "Don't look so worried. You have the same sickness. Life is, after all, inevitably fatal." He looks into the microscope. "Not an indie genehack. Something else. Not a blister rust. Nothing of AgriGen's markings." Abruptly, he makes a face of disgust. "This is nothing interesting for me. Just a stupid mistake by some fool. Hardly worth my intellect at all."

"That's good, then?"

"An accidental plague kills just as surely."

"Is there a way to stop it?"

The doctor picks up a crust of bread. A greenish mold covers it. He eyes the stuff. "So many growing things are beneficial to us. And so many are deadly." He offers the piece of bread to Kanya. "Try it."

Kanya recoils. Gibbons grins and takes a bite. Offers it again. "Trust me."

Kanya shakes her head, forcing herself not to mouth superstitious prayers to Phra Seub for luck and cleanliness. She envisions the revered man sitting in a lotus, forces herself not to respond to the doctor's taunts, touches her amulets.

The doctor takes another bite. Grins as crumbs cascade down his chin. "If you take a bite, I'll guarantee you an answer."

"I wouldn't take anything from your hand."

The doctor laughs. "You already have. Every injection you took as a child. Every inoculation. Every booster since." He offers the bread. "This is just more direct. You'll be glad you did."

Kanya nods at the microscope. "What is that thing? Do you need to test it more?"

Gibbons shakes his head. "That? It's nothing. A stupid mutation. A standard outcome. We used to see them in our labs. Junk."

"Then why haven't we ever seen it before?"

Gibbons makes a face of impatience. "You don't culture death the way we do. You don't tinker with the building blocks of nature." Interest and passion flicker briefly in the old man's eyes. Mischief and predatory interests. "You have no idea what things we succeeded in creating in our labs. This stuff is hardly worth my time. I hoped you were bringing me a challenge. Something from Drs. Ping and Raymond. Or perhaps Mahmoud Sonthalia. Those are challenges." For a moment, his eyes lose their cynicism. He becomes entranced. "Ah. Now those are worthy opponents."

*We are in the hands of a gamesman.*

In a flash of insight, Kanya understands the doctor entirely. A fierce intellect. A man who reached the pinnacle of his field. A jealous and competitive man. A man who found his competition too lacking, and so switched sides and joined the Thai Kingdom for the stimulation it might provide. An intellectual exercise for him. As if Jaidee had decided to fight a *muay thai* match with his hands tied behind his back to see if he could win with kicks alone.

*We rest in the hands of a fickle god. He plays on our behalf only for entertainment, and he will close his eyes and sleep if we fail to engage his intellect.*

A horrifying thought. The man exists only for competition, the chess match of evolution, fought on a global scale. An exercise in ego, a single giant fending off the attacks of dozens of others, a giant swatting them from the sky and laughing. But all giants must fall, and then what must the Kingdom look forward to? It makes Kanya sweat, thinking about it.

Gibbons is watching her. "You have more questions for me?"

Kanya shakes off her terror. "You're sure about this? You know what we need to do, already? You can tell just by looking?"

The doctor shrugs. "If you don't believe me, then go back and follow your standard methods. Textbook your way to your deaths. Or you can simply burn your factory district to the ground and root out the problem." He grins. "Now there's a blunt-instrument solution for you white shirts. The Environment Ministry was always fond of those." He waves a hand. "This garbage isn't particularly viable, yet. It mutates quickly, certainly, but it is fragile, and the human host is not ideal. It needs to be rubbed on the mucus membranes: in the nostrils, in the eyes, in the anus, somewhere close to blood and life. Somewhere it can breed."

"Then we're safe. It's no worse than a hepatitis or *fa' gan*."

"But *much* more inclined to mutate." He looks at Kanya again. "One other thing you should know. The manufacturer you want will have chemical baths. Someplace where they can culture biological products. A HiGro factory. An AgriGen facility. A windup manufactory. Something like that."

Kanya glances at the mastiffs. "Would windups carry it?"

He reaches down and pats one of the guard dogs, goading her. "If it's avian or mammalian, it could. A bath facility is where I would look first. If this were Japan, a windup crèche would be my first guess, but anyone involved in biological products could be the index source."

"What kind of windups?"

Gibbons blows out an exasperated breath. "It's not a *kind*. It's a matter of *exposure*. If they were cultured in tainted baths, they may be carriers. Then again, if you leave that garbage to mutate, it will be in people soon enough. And the question of its index will be moot."

"How long do we have?"

Gibbons shrugs. "This isn't the decay of uranium or the velocity of a clipper ship. This is not predictable. Feed the beasts well, and they will learn to gorge. Culture them in a humid city of dense-packed people and they will thrive. Decide for yourself how worried you should be."

Kanya turns, disgusted, and heads out the door.

Gibbons calls after her, "Good luck! I'll be interested to see which of your many enemies kills you first."

Kanya ignores the taunt and bolts into clean open air.

Kip approaches her, towelling her hair. "Was the doctor helpful?"



"He gave me enough."

Kip laughs, a soft twittering. "I used to think so. But I've learned that he never tells everything the first time. He leaves things out. Vital things. He likes company." She touches Kanya's arm and Kanya has to force herself not to recoil. Kip sees the movement but only smiles gently. "He likes you. He'll want you to return."

Kanya shivers. "He'll be disappointed then."

Kip watches her with wide liquid eyes. "I hope you don't die too soon. I also like you."

As Kanya leaves the compound, she catches sight of Jaidee, standing at the edge of the ocean, watching the surf. As if sensing her gaze, he turns and smiles, before shimmering into nothingness. Another spirit with no place to go. She wonders if Jaidee will ever manage to reincarnate, or if he will continue to haunt her. If the doctor is right, perhaps he is waiting to come back as something that will not fear the plagues, some creature that has not yet been conceived. Maybe Jaidee's only hope for reincarnation is to find new life in the husk of a windup body.

Kanya squashes the thought. It's an evil idea. She hopes instead that Jaidee will reincarnate into some heaven where windups and blister rust can never be, that even if he never achieves *nibbana*, never finishes his time as a monk, never makes his way into buddha-hood, that at least he will be saved from the anguish of watching the world he so dutifully defended stripped of its flesh by the slaving mass of nature's new successes, these windup creatures that seethe all around.

Jaidee died. But perhaps that is the best that anyone can hope for. Perhaps if she put a spring gun in her mouth and pulled the trigger, she would be happier. Perhaps if she had no large house and no *kamma* of betrayal. . .

Kanya shakes her head. If anything is certain, she must do her duty here. Her own soul will certainly be sent back to this world again, at best as a human being, at worst as something else, some dog or cockroach. Whatever mess she leaves behind, she will undoubtedly face it again and again and again. Her betrayals guarantee it. She must fight this battle until her *kamma* is finally cleansed. To flee it now in suicide would be to face it in an uglier form in the future. There is no escape for such as she.

## 29

Despite the curfews and the white shirts, Anderson-sama seems almost reckless with his attentions. It's almost as if he is making up for something. But when Emiko repeats her concerns about Raleigh, Anderson-sama only smiles a secret smile and tells her she needn't worry. All things are in flux. "My people are coming," he says. "Very soon, everything will be different. No more white shirts."

"It sounds very beautiful."

"It will be," he says. "I'll be gone for a few days, making arrangements. When I get back, everything will be different."

And then he disappears, leaving her with the admonishment that she should not change her patterns, and should not tell Raleigh anything. He gives her a key to his flat.

And so it is that Emiko wakes on clean sheets in a cool room in the evening, with a crank fan beating slowly overhead. She can barely remember the last time she slept without pain or fear, and she is groggy with it. The rooms are dim, lit only by the glow of the street's gaslights flickering alive like fireflies.

She is hungry. Ravenous. She finds Anderson-sama's kitchen and roots through sealed bins for snacks, for crackers, for snaps, for cakes, anything. Anderson-sama has no fresh vegetables, but he has rice and there is soy and fish sauce and she heats water on a burner, marvelling at the methane jug that he keeps unsecured. It is difficult for her to remember that she ever took such things for granted. That Gendo-sama kept her in accommodations twice as luxurious, on the top floor of a Kyoto apartment with a view of Toji Temple and the slow movement of old men tending the shrine in their black robes.

That long-ago time is like a dream to her. The autumn sky with its clear breathless blue. She remembers the pleasure of watching New People children from their crèche feeding the ducks or learning a tea ceremony with attention both total and without redemption.

She remembers her own training. . .

With a chill, she sees that she was trained to excellence, to the eternal service of a master. She remembers how Gendo-sama took her and showered her with affection and then discarded her like a tamarind hull. It was always her destiny. It was no accident.

Her eyes narrow as she stares at the pan and its boiling water, at the rice she has so perfectly measured by sight alone, without a measure cup but simply scooped with a bowl, knowing precisely how much she needed, and then unconsciously settling that rice into a perfect layer as if it were a gravel garden, as if she were preparing to perform *zazen* meditation on its grains, as if she would rake and rake and rake for her life with a little bowl of rice.

She lashes out. The rice bowl shatters, shards spinning in different directions, the pot of water flying, scalding jewels gleaming.

Emiko stands amidst the whirlwind, watching droplets fly, rice grains suspended, all of it stopped in motion, as if grain and water are windups, stuttering in flight as she herself is forced to stumble herky-jerky through the world, strange and surreal in the eyes of the naturals. In the eyes of the people she so desperately desires to serve.

*Look what service has brought you.*

The pot hits the wall. Rice grains skitter across marble. Water soaks everything. Tonight she will learn the location of this New People village. The place where her own kind live and have no masters. Where New People serve only themselves. Anderson-sama may say that his people are coming, but in the end, he will always be natural, and she will always be New People, and she will always serve.

She stifles the urge to clean up the rice, to make things neat for Anderson-sama when he returns. Instead, she makes herself stare at the mess and recognize that she is no longer a slave. If he wishes rice cleaned off the floor there are others to do his dirty work. She is something else. Something different. Optimal in her own way. And if she was once a falcon tethered, Gendo-sama has done one thing she can be grateful for. He has cut her jesses. She can fly free.

\* \* \*

It is almost too easy to slip through the darkness. Emiko bobs amid the crowds, new color bright on her lips, her eyes darkened, glinting silver hoops at her lobes.

She is New People, and she moves through the crowds so smoothly that they do not know she is there. She laughs at them. Laughs and slips between them. There is something suicidal ticking in her windup nature. She hides in the open. She does not scuttle. Fate has cupped her in its protective hands.

She slips through the crowds, people jerking away startled from the windup in their midst, from the bit of transgressive manufactury that has the effrontery to stain their sidewalks, as if their land were half as pristine as the islands that have ejected her. She wrinkles her nose. Even Nippon's effluent is too good for this raucous stinking place. They simply do not recognize how she graces them. She laughs to herself, and realizes when others look at her that she has laughed out loud.

White shirts ahead. Flashes of them between the trundle of megadonts and handcarts. Emiko stops at the rail of a *khlong* bridge, looking down into the waters, waiting for the threat to pass. She sees herself in the canal's reflection with the green glow of the lamps all around, backlighting her. She feels perhaps she could become one with the water, if she simply stares at the glow long enough. Become a water lady. Already is she not part of the floating world? Does she not deserve to float and slowly sink? She stifles the thought. That is the old Emiko. The one who could never teach her to fly.

A man approaches and leans against the rail. She doesn't look up, watches his reflection in the water.

"I like to watch when the children race their boats through the canals," he says.

She nods slightly, not trusting herself to speak.

"Is there something you see in the water? That you look so long?"

She shakes her head. His white uniform is tinged green. He is so close he can reach out and touch her. She wonders what his kind eyes would look like if his hands touched the furnace of her skin.

"You don't have to be afraid of me," he says. "It's just a uniform. You haven't done anything wrong."

"No." she whispers. "I am not afraid."

"That's good. A pretty girl like you shouldn't be." He pauses. "Your accent is odd. When I first saw you, I thought you might be Chaozhou. . ."

She shakes her head, slightly. A jerk. "So sorry. Japanese."

"With the factories?"

She shrugs. His eyes bore into her. She makes her head turn—slowly, slowly, smoothly, smoothly, not a single stutter, not a single jerk—and meet his eyes, return his steady gaze. Older than she first thought. Middle-aged, she thinks. Or not. Perhaps he is young and only worn down by the evils of his job. She stifles the urge to extend pity to him, fights her genetic need to serve him even if he would sooner see her dismembered. Slowly, slowly, she turns her eyes back to the water.

"What is your name?"

She hesitates. "Emiko."

"A nice name. Does it mean something?"

She shakes her head. "Nothing important."

"So modest, for a woman so beautiful."

She shakes her head, "No. Not so. I am ugly—" she breaks off, sees him staring, realizes that she has forgotten herself. Her movements have betrayed her. His eyes are wide, surprised. She backs away from him, all pretense of humanity forgotten.

His eyes harden. "*Heechy-keechy*," he breathes.

She smiles tightly. "It was an honest mistake."

"Show me your import permits."

She smiles. "Of course. I'm sure they are here. Of course." She backs away, flashbulb movements broadcasting every kink in her DNA. He reaches for her, but she pulls her arm from his grasp, a quick twist, and then she is turning away, breaking into flight, blurring into traffic as he shouts after her.

"Stop her! Stop! Ministry business! Stop that windup!"

Her whole essence cries to stop and give herself up, to bend to his command. It is all she can do to keep running, to push herself against the lashings of Mizumi-sensei when she dared disobey, the disapproving sting of Mizumi's tongue when she dared to object to another's desires.

Emiko burns with shame as his commands echo behind her, but then the crowds have swallowed her and the surge of megadont traffic is all around, and he is far too slow to discover which alley hides her as she recovers.

\* \* \*

It takes extra time to avoid the white shirts, but at the same time, it is a game. Emiko can play this game now. If she is quick and careful, and allows time between her sudden surges she evades them easily. At speed, she marvels at the movements of her body, how startlingly fluid she becomes, as if she is finally being true to her nature. As if all the training and lashes from Mizumi-sensei were designed to keep this knowledge buried.

Eventually she makes Ploenchit and climbs the tower. Raleigh is waiting by the bar, as he always is, impatient. He glances up. "You're late. I'm fining you for that."

Emiko forces herself not to feel guilt, even as she apologizes. "So sorry, Raleigh-san."

"Hurry up and get changed. You have VIP guests tonight. They're important, and they'll be here soon."

"I want to ask you about the village."

"What village?"

She keeps her face pleasant. Did he lie about it? Was it always a lie? "The place for New People."

"Still worrying about that?" He shakes his head. "I told you. Earn up and I'll make sure you get there, if that's what you want." He waves her toward the dressing rooms. "Now go get changed."

Emiko starts to press again, then simply nods. Afterward. When he is drunk. When he is pliable, she will pry the information from him.

In the dressing room, Kannika is already pulling on her performance clothes. She makes a face at Emiko but doesn't say anything as Emiko changes and then goes out to get her first glass of ice for the evening. She drinks carefully, savoring the coolness and sense of well-being that overcomes her even in the swelter of the tower. Out beyond the roped-off windows, the city glows. From a height it is beautiful. Without natural people in it, she thinks that she could even enjoy it here. She drinks more water.

A rustle of warning and surprise. Women drop to their knees and press their foreheads to the ground in a *khrah*. Emiko joins them. The man is back, again. The hard man. The one who came with Anderson-sama before. She searches for signs of Anderson-sama, hoping that he will be there too, but there is no sign of him. The Somdet Chaopraya and his friends are already flushed and drunk as they come through the doors.

Raleigh rushes to them and ushers them into his VIP room.

Kannika slips up behind her. "Finish your water, *heechy-keechy*. You've got work to do."

Emiko stifles the urge to snap at the girl. It would be insane to do so. But she looks at Kannika and prays that when she knows the village's location that she will have an opportunity to pay the woman back for all the abuse she has delivered.

The VIP room is crowded with men. There are windows to the outside, but with the door closed, there is little circulation. And the act is worse than when Emiko is on the stage. Normally there are patterns to Kannika's abuse. Here though, Kannika leads her around, introducing her to the men, encouraging them to touch her and feel the heat of her skin, saying things like, "You like her? You think she's a nasty dog? Watch. You'll see a nasty one tonight." The powerful one and his bodyguards and his friends are all laughing and making jokes at the sight of her, at the feel of her as they pinch her ass and tug at her breasts, run their fingers up between her thighs, all of them a little nervous at this novelty of entertainment.

Kannika points to the table. "Up."

Emiko climbs awkwardly onto the gleaming black surface. Kannika snaps at her, making her walk, making her bow. Makes her totter back and forth in her strange windup way while liquor flows and more girls come in and sit with the men and laugh and make jokes and all the while Emiko is shown off, and then, as it must be, Kannika takes her.

She forces Emiko down on the table. The men gather round as Kannika begins her abuse. Slowly, it builds, first playing at her nipples, then sliding the jadeite cock between her legs, encouraging the reactions that have been designed into her and which she cannot control, no matter how much her soul fights against it.

The men cheer at Emiko's degradation, encouraging escalation, and Kannika, flushed with excitement, begins to devise new tortures. She squats over Emiko. Parts the cheeks of her ass and encourages Emiko to plumb her depths. The men laugh as Emiko obeys and Kannika narrates:

"Ah yes, I feel her tongue now."

Then: "Do you like it with your tongue there, dirty windup?"

To the men: "She likes it. All these dirty windups like it."

More laughter.

"More, nasty girl. More."

And then she is pressing down, smothering her, encouraging Emiko to redouble her efforts as her humiliation mounts, encouraging her to work harder to please. Kannika's hand joins Emiko's tongue, playing, taking pleasure from Emiko's subservience.

Emiko hears Kannika speaking again. "You want to see her? Go ahead."

Hands on Emiko's thighs, pushing them apart so that she is completely exposed. Fingers play at her folds, penetrate her. Kannika laughs. "You want to fuck her? Fuck the windup girl? Here. Give me her legs." Her hands close on Emiko's ankles, pull them up, exposing her completely.

"No." Emiko whispers, but Kannika is implacable. She pries Emiko's legs wide. "Be a good little *heechy-keechy*." Kannika settles herself again over Emiko, narrating her degradation to the assembled men. "She'll eat anything you put in her mouth," she says, and the men are laughing. And then Kannika is pressing down hard on Emiko's face and Emiko can't see anymore, can only hear as Kannika calls her a slut and a dog and a nasty windup toy. Calls her no better than a dildo. . .

And then there is silence.

Emiko tries to move, but Kannika keeps her pinned, muffled from the world. "Stay there," Kannika says.

Then: "No. Use this."

Emiko feels men taking her arms, pinning her down. Fingers prod her, invade her, slide in.

"Oil it," Kannika whispers, excitement in her voice. Her hands tighten on Emiko's ankles.

Wetness at her anus, slick, and then a pressure, cold pressure.

Emiko moans a protest. The pressure lets up for a moment, but then Kannika says, "You call yourselves men? Fuck her! Look how she jerks. Look at her arms and legs when you push! Make her do her *heechy-keechy* dance."

And then the pressure comes back and the men are holding her down more tightly, and she can't get up and the cold thing presses again against her ass, penetrates her, spreads her wide, splits her open, fills her and she is crying out.

Kannika laughs. "That's right windup; earn your keep. You can get up when you make me come."

And then Emiko is licking again, slobbering and lapping like a dog, desperate, as the champagne bottle penetrates her again, as it withdraws and shoves deep into her, burning.

The men all laugh. "Look at how she moves!"

Tears jewel in her eyes. Kannika encourages her to greater effort and the falcon if there is any falcon in Emiko at all, if it ever existed, is a dead thing, dangling. Not meant

to live or fly or escape. Meant to do nothing but submit. Emiko learns her place once again.

All night long, Kannika teaches the merits of obedience and Emiko begs to obey and stop the pain and violation, begs to serve, to do anything at all, anything at all to let the windup live just a little longer and Kannika laughs and laughs.

\* \* \*

By the time Kannika is done with her, it is late. Emiko sits against a wall, exhausted and broken. Her mascara has run. Inside, she is dead. Better to be dead than a windup, she thinks. She watches dully as a man starts to mop the club. At the other end of the bar, Raleigh drinks his whiskey and laughs.

The man with the mop slowly approaches. Emiko wonders if he will try to mop her away with the rest of the filth. If he will take her out and throw her into one of the trash piles, leave her for the Dung Lord's collection. She can simply lie there, and let them mulch her. . . thrown away as Gendo-sama should have discarded her. She is trash. Emiko understands this now. The man pushes his rag mop around her.

"Why don't you throw me away?" she croaks. The man looks at her uncertainly, then turns his eyes to his work. Keeps mopping. She says it again. "Answer me!" she shouts. "Why don't you throw me away?" Her words echo in the open room.

Raleigh glances up and frowns. She realizes that she has been speaking in Japanese. She says it again in Thai. "Throw me away, why not? I'm trash, too. Throw me away!" The mopping man flinches and draws back, smiling uncertainly.

Raleigh approaches. Kneels down beside her. "Emiko. Get up. You're frightening my cleaning guy."

Emiko makes a face. "I don't care."

"Sure you do." He nods toward the door, to the private room where the men are still reclining, drinking and talking after their abuse of her. "I've got a bonus for you. Those guys tip well."

Emiko looks up at him. "They tip Kannika, too?"

Raleigh studies her. "It's not your business."

"They tip her triple? Give me 50 baht?"

His eyes narrow. "Don't."

"Or what? Or you throw Emiko into a methane composter? Dump me with the white shirts?"

"Don't push me. You don't want to piss me off." He stands up. "Come get your money when you're done feeling sorry for yourself."

Emiko watches dully as he stalks back to his barstool, gets himself a drink. He glances back at her, makes a comment to Daeng, who smiles dutifully and pours water with ice. Raleigh waves the water at her. Sets it on top of a purple sheaf of baht. He goes back to his drinking, seeming to ignore her staring.

What happens to windup girls who are broken? She never knew a windup girl who died. Sometimes an old patron did. But the windup girl lived. Her girlfriends lived. They lasted longer. Something she never asked Mizumi-sensei. Emiko hobbles to the bar, stumbles. Leans against it. Drinks the ice. Raleigh shoves the money over.

She finishes the ice water. Swallows the cubes. Feels their cold seeping into her core. "Have you asked, yet?"

"About what?" He's playing solitaire on the bar.

"Going north."

He glances up at her, then flips another set of cards. He's quiet for a second. "That's tough work. Not something you set up in a day."

"Have you asked?"

He glances at her. "Yeah. I asked. And no one's going anywhere while the white shirts are pissed off about the Jaidee massacre. I'll let you know when the situation changes."

"I want to go north."

"You already told me. Earn up, and it will happen."

"I earn plenty. I want to go now."

Raleigh's slap comes fast, but she sees it coming. It is fast for him, but not for her. She watches his hand proceed toward her face with the sort of servile gratitude that she used to feel when Gendo-sama took her to dinner at a fancy restaurant. Her cheek stings and then floods with puffy numbness. She touches it with her fingers, savoring the wound.

Raleigh looks at her coldly. "You'll go when it's damn well convenient."

Emiko bows her head slightly, allowing the well-deserved lesson to filter into her core. "You aren't going to help me, are you?"

Raleigh shrugs, goes back to his cards.

"Does it even exist?" she asks.

Raleigh glances over at her. "Sure. If it makes you happy. It's there. If you keep hassling me about it, it doesn't. Now get out of my face."

The falcon dangles dead. She is dead. Mulch for composters. Meat for the city, rot for gaslights. Emiko stares at Raleigh. The falcon lies dead.

And then she thinks that some things are worse than dying. Some things can never be borne.

Her fist is very fast. Raleigh-san's throat is soft.

The old man topples, hands flying to his throat, eyes wide with shock. It is all slow-motion: Daeng turning at the sound of the stool clattering to the floor; Raleigh sprawling, his mouth working, trying to suck air; the cleaning man dropping his mop; Noi and Saeng at the other side of the bar with their men waiting to escort them home, all of them turning toward the sound, and every one of them is slow.

By the time Raleigh hits the floor, Emiko is already bolting across the room, toward the VIP door and the man who hurt her most. The man who sits and laughs with his friends and thinks nothing of the pain he inflicts.



She slams into the door. Men look up with surprise. Heads turn, mouths open to cry out. The bodyguards are reaching for their spring guns, but all of them are moving too too slow.

None of them are New People.

## 30

Pai crawls up beside Kanya, stares down at the shadow village below. "That's it?"

Kanya nods and glances back at the rest of her squad, who have spread out to cover the other approaches to the shrimp farms where they breed bitter water-resistant prawns for the Krung Thep fish markets.

The houses are all on bamboo rafts currently grounded, but when the floods come, the houses will float, rising, as water and silt rushes across their paddy and ponds. Her own family on the Mekong used something similar long years ago, before General Pracha came.

"It was a good lead," she murmurs.

Ratana had been almost ecstatic. A link, a clue: fish mites between the third body's toes.

And if fish mites, then shrimp farms, and if shrimp farms then the only ones that would have sent a worker into Bangkok. And that meant shrimp farms that had experienced a die-off. Which led her to this Thonburi half-floating settlement with all of her men at the edge of the embankment, ready to raid in the darkness.

Down below, a few candles flicker inside the bamboo houses. A dog barks. They're all wearing their containment suits. Ratana insisted that the likelihood of a jump was slender, and yet still a worry. A mosquito whines in Kanya's ear. She slaps it away and draws her containment suit's hood tight. Starts to sweat in earnest.

The sound of laughter carries across the fish ponds. A family, all together in the warmth of their hut. Even now, with all their hardship, people still can laugh. Not Kanya, though. Something in her is broken, it seems.

Jaidee always insisted that the Kingdom was a happy country, that old story about the Land of Smiles. But Kanya cannot think of a time when she has seen smiles as wide as those in museum photos from before the Contraction. She sometimes wonders if those people in the photos were acting, if perhaps the National Gallery is intended to depress her, or if it is really true that at one point people smiled so totally, so fearlessly.

Kanya pulls her mask over her face. "Send them in."

Pai signals the men, and then her troops are all up and over the edges, coming down on the village, surrounding it as they always do before the burning begins.

When they came to her own village, the white shirts appeared between two huts in the space of a minute, flares hissing and sparking in their hands. This is different. No blaring megaphones. No officers splashing through ankle-deep waters, dragging screaming people away from their houses as bamboo and WeatherAll burst orange and alive with flame.

General Pracha wants it quiet. As he signed the quarantine waivers he said, "Jaidee would have turned this into an emergency, but we don't have the resources to stir the

cobra nest with Trade and also handle this. It could even be used against us. Deal with this quietly."

"Of course. Quietly."

The dog starts barking madly. It's joined by others as they approach. A few villagers come out on their porches, peer out into the darkness. Catch the gleam of white in the night. They shout warnings to their families as Kanya's white shirts break into a run.

Jaidee kneels beside her, watching the action. "Pracha talks about me as if I were some sort of a megadont, trampling rice shoots," he says.

Kanya ignores him but Jaidee doesn't shut up. "You should have seen him when we were both cadets," he says. "He would piss his pants when we went out into the field."

Kanya glances over at Jaidee. "Stop. Just because you are dead doesn't mean that you should heap disrespect upon him."

Her men's shakelight LEDs blaze alive, illuminating the village in a bitter glare. Families are dashing about like chickens, trying to hide food and animals. Someone tries to dash past the cordon, splashing through the water, diving into a pond and flailing for the other side. . . where more of Kanya's net appears. The man treads water in the center of the muddy shrimp hole, trapped.

Jaidee asks, "How can you call him your leader when we both know where your true loyalties lie?"

"Shut up."

"Is it hard being a horse ridden by two men at once? Both of them riding you like—"

"Shut up!"

Pai startles. "What is it?"

"Sorry." Kanya shakes her head. "My fault. I was thinking."

Pai nods down at the villagers. "It looks like they're ready for you."

Kanya gets to her feet and she and Pai and Jaidee—uninvited but smiling and pleased with himself—all descend. She has a photo of the dead man, a black and white thing developed in the lab with fumbling dark fingers. She shows it to the farmers under the beam of her shakelight's LEDs, shining it from the photo to their eyes, trying to catch them in a flinch of recognition.

With some people, a white uniform opens doors, but with fish farmers it is always a problem. She knows them well, reads the calluses on their hands, smells the stink of their successes and failures in the reek of the ponds. She sees herself through their eyes, and knows she might as well be an enforcer from a calorie company, hunting for signs of a genehack. Still the charade continues, all of them shaking their heads, Kanya shining her light into each one's eyes. One by one, they look away.

Finally she finds a man and waves the picture in front of him. "Do you know him? Won't his relatives be looking for him?"

The man looks at the picture and then at Kanya's uniform. "He doesn't have any relatives."

Kanya jerks with surprise. "You know him? Who was he?"

"He's dead then?"

"Doesn't he look dead?"

They both study the bloodless photo, the ravaged face. "I told him there were better things than factory jobs. He didn't listen."

"You say he worked in the city."

"That's right."

"Do you know where?"

He shakes his head.

"Where did he live?"

The man points toward a black shadow stilt-house. Kanya waves at her men. "Quarantine that hut."

She tightens her mask and enters, sweeping her light around the space. It's gloomy. Broken and strange and empty. Dust gleams in her beam. Knowing that the owner is already dead gives her a sense of foreboding. The man's spirit might be here. His hungry ghost lurking and angry that he is still in this world, that he has been sickened. That he may have been murdered. She fingers the man's few effects and wanders around the place. Nothing. She steps back outside. Off in the distance, the city rises, haloed in green, the place the dead man ran to when fish farming proved untenable. She goes back to the man. "You're sure you don't know anything about where he worked?"

The man shakes his head.

"Nothing? Not a name? Anything." She tries not to let her desperation show. He shakes his head again. She turns in frustration and surveys the village blackness. Crickets chirp. Ivory beetles creak steadily. They're in the right place. She's so close. Where is this factory? Gi Bu Sen was right. She should just burn the entire factory district. In the old days, when the white shirts were strong, it would have been easy.

"You want to burn now?" Jaidee snickers beside her. "Now you see my side?"

She ignores his jab. Not far away, a young girl is watching her intently. When Kanya catches her staring, she looks away. Kanya touches Pai on the shoulder. "That one."

"The girl?" He's surprised. Kanya is already walking, closing on her. The girl looks as if she will bolt. Kanya kneels, still a good distance away. Beckons her over. "You. What's your name?"

The girl is obviously torn. She wants to flee, but Kanya has an authority that cannot be denied. "Come over here. Tell me your name." She beckons again and this time the girl allows herself to be reeled close.

"Mai," the girl whispers.

Kanya holds up the photo. "You know where this man worked, don't you?"

Mai shakes her head, but Kanya knows the girl is lying. Children are terrible liars. Kanya had been a terrible liar. When the white shirts questioned where her family was hiding their carp breeding stock, she had told them south and they had gone north, with knowing adult smiles.

She offers the photo to the girl. "You understand how dangerous this is, yes?"

The girl hesitates. "Will you burn the village?"

Kanya tries to keep the flood of reaction off her face. "Of course not." She smiles again, speaks soothingly. "Don't worry, Mai. I know what it is to fear. I grew up in a village like this. I know how hard it is. But you must help me find the source of this sickness, or more will die."

"I was told not to tell."

"And it is good for us to respect our patrons," Kanya pauses. "But we all owe loyalty to Her Royal Majesty the Queen, and she wishes that we all be safe. The Queen would want you to help us."

Mai hesitates, then says, "Three others worked at the factory."

Kanya leans forward, trying to hide her eagerness. "Which one?"

Mai hesitates. Kanya leans close. "How many *phii* will blame you if you allow them to die before their *kamma* allots their passing?"

Still Mai hesitates.

Pai says, "If we break her fingers, she will tell us."

The girl looks frightened. But Kanya holds out a soothing hand. "Don't worry. He won't do anything. He is a tiger, but I have his leash. Please. Just help us save the city. You can help us save Krung Thep."

The girl looks away, toward the crumbling glow of Bangkok across the waters. "The factory is closed now. Closed by you."

"That's very good then. But we must make sure the disease doesn't go any further. What is the name of the factory?"

The answer comes unwillingly. "SpringLife."

Kanya frowns, trying to remember the name. "A kink-spring company? One of the Chaozhou?"

Mai shakes her head. "*Farang*. Very rich *farang*."

Kanya settles beside her. "Tell me more."

## 31

Anderson finds Emiko huddled outside his door, and all at once a good night becomes an uncertain one.

For the last several days he has worked frantically to prepare the invasion, all of it crippled by the fact that he never expected to be cut off from his own factory. His own piss-poor planning forced him to waste extra days scouting a safe route back into the SpringLife facility without being caught by the plethora of white shirt patrols that cordoned the manufacturing district. If it hadn't been for the discovery of Hock Seng's escape route, he might still have been lurking around the back alleys, wishing for an access method.

As it was, Anderson slipped in through the shutters of the SpringLife offices with a blackened face and grapple slung over his shoulder while giving thanks to a crazy old man who just days before had robbed the company's entire payroll.

The factory had reeked. The algae baths had all gone to rot but not a thing moved in the gloom, and for that he was grateful. If the white shirts had posted guards within. . .

Anderson held a hand over his mouth as he slipped down to the main hall and then down along the manufacturing lines. The stink of rot and megodont dung thickened.

Under the shadow of algae racks and the loom of the cutting presses, he examined the floor. This close to the algae tanks, the stink was horrific, as if a cow had died and rotted. The end-stage reek of Yates' optimistic plan for a new energy future.

Anderson knelt and pushed away desiccated algae strands from around one of the drains. He felt along the edges, seeking purchase. Lifted. The iron grate came up with a squeal. As quietly as he could, Anderson rolled the heavy grate away and set it with a clank on concrete. He lay down on the floor, prayed he wouldn't surprise a snake or scorpion, and plunged his arm down the hole. His fingers scrabbled in the darkness, questing. Straining deeper into moist blackness.

For a moment he feared it had slipped loose, had floated down the drain and on through the sewers to King Rama's groundwater pumps, but then his fingers touched oilskin. He peeled it from the drain wall, drew it out, smiling. A code book. For contingencies that he never seriously believed would come to pass.

In the blackness of the offices, he dialed numbers and brought operators alert in Burma and India. Sent secretaries scurrying for code strings unused since Finland.

Two days later, he stood on the floating island of Koh Angrit, arranging the last details with strike team leaders in the AgriGen compound. The weaponry would arrive within days, the invasion teams were assembling. And the money had already been shipped across, the gold and jade that would help generals change their loyalties and turn on their old friend General Pracha.

But now, with all the preparations completed, he returns to the city to find Emiko huddled at his door, miserable, and covered with blood. As soon as she sees him, she lunges into his arms, sobbing.

"What are you doing here?" he whispers. Cradling her against him he unlocks the door and urges her inside. Her skin burns. The blood is everywhere. Slashes mark her face and scar her arms. He shuts the door quickly. "What happened to you?" He pries her off him, tries to inspect her. She's a furnace of blood, but the wounds on her face and arms don't account for the sticky spattering that coats her. "Whose blood is this?"

She shakes her head. Begins sobbing again.

"Let's get you cleaned up."

He leads her into the bath, turns on cool water spray, puts her under it. She's shivering now, her eyes fever bright and panicked as she looks around. She looks half-mad. He tries to peel off her half-jacket, to get rid of the bloody clothing, but her face twists, enraged.

"No!" She slashes at him with her hand and he jerks back, touching his cheek.

"What the hell?!" He stares at her, shocked. Christ she was fast. He's hurting. His hand comes away bloody. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

The panicked animal flicker leaves her eyes. She stares at him blankly, and then seems to recover herself, becomes human. "I am sorry," she whispers. "So sorry." She collapses, curls into a ball under the water. "So sorry. So sorry." She lapses into Japanese.

Anderson squats down beside her, his own clothing becoming soaked in the spray. "Don't worry about it." He speaks gently. "Why don't you get out of those clothes? We'll get you something else. Okay? Can you do that?"

She nods dully. Peels off her jacket. Unwraps her *pha sin*. Huddles nude in the cool water. He leaves her in the spray. Takes her bloody clothes and bundles them into a sheet and carries them down the stair, out into the darkness. People are all around. He ignores them, walking quickly into the shadows, carrying the clothes until he reaches a *khlong*. Tosses the bloody garments into the water, where snakehead fish and boddhi carp will consume them with an obsessive determination. The water roils, splashing as they tear at the blood food scent.

By the time he's back in his apartment, Emiko is out of the shower, her black hair clinging to her face, a small frightened creature. He goes to his medicine supplies. Pours alcohol on the cuts, rubs antivirals in after. She doesn't cry out. Her nails are broken and ravaged. Bruises are blooming all across her body. But for all the blood she arrived with, she seems miraculously little damaged.

"What happened?" he asks gently.

She huddles against him. "I'm alone," she whispers. "There is no place for New People." Her shaking increases.

He pulls her to him, feeling the burning heat through her skin. "It's all right. Everything will change soon. It will be different."

She shakes her head. "No. I do not think so."

A moment later, she is asleep, breathing steadily, her body finally releasing its tension into unconsciousness.

\* \* \*

Anderson wakes with a start. The crank fan has stopped, run out of joules. He's covered with sweat. Beside him Emiko moans and thrashes, a furnace. He rolls away and sits up.

A slight breeze from the sea runs through the apartment, a relief. He stares out through mosquito nets to the blackness of the city. All the methane has been shut off for the night. Off in the distance, he can see a few glimmers in the floating sea communities of Thonburi where they farm fish and float from one genehack to the next in a perpetual seeking of survival.

Someone pounds on his door. Hammering insistently.

Emiko's eyes snap open. She sits up. "What is it?"

"Someone's at the door." He starts to climb out of bed but she grabs him, ragged nails digging into his arm.

"Don't open it!" she whispers. Her skin is pale in the moonlight, her eyes wide and frightened. "Please." The banging on his door increases. Thudding, insistent.

"Why not?"

"I—" she pauses. "It will be white shirts."

"What?" Anderson's heart skips over. "They followed you here? Why? What happened to you?"

She shakes her head miserably. He stares at her, wondering what sort of animal has invaded his life. "What happened tonight, really?"

She doesn't answer. Her eyes remain locked on the door as the thumping continues. Anderson climbs out of bed and hurries to the door. Shouts, "Just a second! I'm getting dressed!"

"Anderson!" The voice from the far side of door is Carlyle's. "Open up! It's important!"

Anderson turns and looks pointedly at Emiko. "It's not white shirts. Now hide."

"No?" For a moment relief floods Emiko's features. But it disappears almost as quickly. She shakes her head. "You are mistaken."

Anderson glares at her. "Was it white shirts that you tangled with? Is that where you got those cuts?"

She shakes her head miserably, but says nothing, just huddles in a small defensive ball.

"Jesus and Noah." Anderson goes and pulls clothes out of his closet, tosses them at her, gifts that he bought her as tokens of his intoxication. "You might be ready to go public, but I'm not ready to be ruined. Get dressed. Hide in my closet."

She shakes her head again. Anderson tries to control his voice, to speak reasonably. It's as though he's talking to a block of wood. He kneels and takes her chin in his hands, turns her face to him.

"It's one of my business associates. It's not about you. But I still need you to hide until he goes away. Do you understand? You just need to hide for a little while. I want you to hide until he's gone. I don't want him to see us together. It might give him leverage."

Slowly, her eyes focus. The look of hypnotized fatalism fades. Carlyle bangs on the door again. Her eyes flick to the door, then back to Anderson. "It is white shirts," she whispers. "There are many of them out there. I can hear them." She suddenly seems to collect herself. "It will be white shirts. Hiding will do no good."

Anderson fights the urge to scream at her. "It's not white shirts."

The banging continues on his door. "Open the fuck up, Anderson!"

He calls back, "Just a second!" He pulls on a pair of pants, glaring at her. "It's not the damn white shirts. Carlyle would slit his throat before he'd get into bed with white shirts."

Carlyle's voice again echoes through the door. "Hurry up, goddamnit!"

"Coming!" He turns to her, orders her. "Hide. *Now.*" Not a request anymore, but an order, driving at her genetic heritage and her training.

Her body goes still, then suddenly she becomes animated. Nodding. "Yes. I will do as you say."

Already she is dressing. Her stutter motion is fast, almost a blur. Her skin gleams as she pulls on a blouse and a pair of loose trousers. Suddenly she's shockingly fast. Fluid in her movements, strangely and suddenly graceful.

"Hiding will do no good," she says. She turns and runs for the balcony.

"What are you doing?"

She turns back and smiles at him, seems about to say something, but instead she plunges over the balcony's edge and disappears into the blackness.

"Emiko!" Anderson runs to the balcony.

Below, there is nothing. No person, no scream, no thud, no complaints from the street as she spatters across the ground. Nothing. Only emptiness. As though the night has swallowed her completely. The banging on the door comes again.

Anderson's heart thuds in his chest. Where is she? How did she do that? It is unnatural. She was so fast, so determined at the end. One minute on the balcony, the next gone, over the edge. Anderson peers into the blackness. It's impossible that she jumped to another balcony, and yet. . . Did she fall? Is she dead?

The door crashes open. Anderson whirls. Carlyle spills into the apartment room, stumbling.

"What the—?"

Black Panthers pour in after Carlyle, slamming him aside. Combat armor gleams in the dimness, military shadows. One of the soldiers grabs Anderson, whirls him about and slams him into the wall. Hands search his body. When he struggles they jam his face against the wall. More men pour in. Doors are being kicked open, splintering. Boots thud around him. An avalanche of men. Glass breaks. Dishes in his kitchen shatter.

Anderson cranes his neck to see what is happening. A hand grabs him by the hair and slams his face back against the wall. Blood and pain flood his mouth. He's bitten his tongue. "What the hell are you doing? Do you know who I am?"

He chokes off as Carlyle is dumped on the floor beside him. He can see now that the man is tied. Bruises pepper his face. One eye is swollen shut, black blood scabs on the orbital bone. His brown hair is clotted with blood.

"Christ."

The soldiers wrench Anderson's hands behind his back and bind them. They grab his hair and jerk him around. A soldier shouts at him, speaking so fast he can't understand. Wide eyes and spittle in his face as the man rages. Finally Anderson catches words: *Heechy-keechy*.

*"Where is the windup? Where is it? Where? Where?"*

The Panthers tear through his apartment. Rifle butts to smash open locks and doors. Huge black windup mastiffs scramble inside, barking and slavering, snuffling everywhere, howling as they catch their target's scent. A man shouts at him again, some kind of captain.

"What's going on?" Anderson demands again. "I have friends—"

"Not many."

Akkarat strides through the door.

"Akkarat!" Anderson tries to turn but the Panthers slam him back against the wall. "What's going on?"

"We have the same question for you."



Akkarat shouts orders in Thai to the men tossing Anderson's apartment. Anderson closes his eyes, desperately thankful that the windup girl didn't hide in the closet as he suggested. To be found with her, caught out. . .

One of the Panthers returns, carrying Anderson's spring gun.

Akkarat makes a face of distaste. "Do you have a permit to be armed?"

"We're starting a revolution and you're asking about permits?"

Akkarat nods to his men. Anderson slams back against the wall. Pain explodes in his skull. The room dims and his knees buckle. He staggers, barely keeps his feet. "What the hell's going on?"

Akkarat motions for the pistol. Takes it. Pumps it idly, the heavy dull thing massive in his fist. "Where is the windup girl?"

Anderson spits blood. "Why do you care? You're not a white shirt or a Grahamite."

The Panthers slam Anderson against the wall again. Colored dots swim in Anderson's vision.

"Where did the windup come from?" Akkarat asks.

"She's Japanese! From Kyoto I think!"

Akkarat puts the pistol to Anderson's head. "How did you get her into the country?"

*"What?"*

Akkarat strikes him with the butt of the pistol. The world darkens.

—water gushes into his face. Anderson gasps and splutters. He's sitting on the floor. Akkarat presses the spring gun to Anderson's throat, pushing him to climb up to his feet again, then to teeter onto his toes. Anderson gags at the pressure.

"How did you get the windup into the country?" Akkarat repeats.

Sweat and blood sting Anderson's eyes. He blinks and shakes his head. "I didn't get her in." He spits blood again. "She was a Japanese discard. How would I get my hands on a windup?"

Akkarat smiles, says something to his men. "A military windup is a Japanese discard?" He shakes his head. "I think not." He slams the pistol butt into Anderson's ribs. Once. Twice. Each side, cracking. Anderson yowls and doubles over, coughing and cringing away. Akkarat drags him upright. "Why would a military windup be in our City of Divine Beings?"

"She's not military," Anderson protests. "She's just a secretary. . . was just a—"

Akkarat's expression doesn't change. He spins Anderson around and forces his face against the wall, grinding bones. Anderson thinks his jaw is broken. He feels Akkarat's hands, prying his fingers apart. Anderson tries to make a fist, whimpering, knowing what is coming, but Akkarat's hands are strong, prying them open. Anderson experiences a moment of tingling helplessness.

His finger twists in Akkarat's grip. Snaps.

Anderson howls into the wall as Akkarat supports him.

When he's done whimpering and shaking, Akkarat grabs him by the hair and pulls his head back so that they can look into one another's eyes. Akkarat's voice is steady.

"She is military, she is a killer, and you are the one who introduced her to the Somdet Chaopraya. Where is she now?"

"A killer?" Anderson shakes his head, trying to think straight. "But she's nothing! A Mishimoto discard. Japanese trash—"

"The Environment Ministry is right about one thing. You AgriGen animals can't be trusted. You call the windup a simple pleasure toy, and so conveniently introduce your assassin to the Queen's protector." He leans close, eyes full of rage. "You might as well have killed royalty."

"But that's impossible!" Anderson doesn't even try to keep the hysteria from his voice. His broken finger throbs, blood fills his mouth again. "She's just a piece of trash. She couldn't do something like that. You have to believe me."

"She killed three men and their bodyguards. Eight trained men. The proof is unassailable."

Unbidden, he remembers Emiko huddled on his doorstep, soaked in blood. *Eight men?* Remembers her disappearing over the balcony, plunging into darkness like some kind of spirit creature. *What if they're right?*

"There's got to be another explanation. She's just a goddamn windup. All they do is obey."

*Emiko in bed, huddled. Sobbing. Her body torn and scratched.*

Anderson takes a breath, tries to control his voice. "Please. You have to believe me. We would never jeopardize so much. AgriGen doesn't benefit from the Somdet Chaopraya's death. Nobody does. This plays right into the Environment Ministry's hands. We have too much to gain from a good relationship."

"And yet you introduced the killer to him."

"But it's insane. How would anyone get a military windup here and keep it under wraps? That windup has been around for years and years. Ask around. You'll see. She bribed her way with the white shirts, her papa-san had that show running for ages. . ."

He's babbling, but he can see Akkarat listening now. The cold rage is gone from the man's eyes. Now there is consideration. Anderson spits blood and looks Akkarat in the eye. "Yes. I introduced that creature. But it was only because she was a novelty. Everyone knows his reputation." He flinches as a new surge of anger twists Akkarat's face. "Please listen to me. Investigate this. If you investigate, you'll find out it wasn't us. There has to be another explanation. We had no idea. . ." He breaks off, tiredly. "Just investigate. "

"We cannot. The Environment Ministry has the case."

"*What?*" Anderson can't hide his surprise. "By what authority?"

"The windup makes it a case for their Ministry. She is an invasive."

"And you think I'm the one behind it? When those bastards are controlling the investigation?"

Anderson works through the implications, hunting for reasons, excuses, anything to buy time. "You can't trust them. Pracha and his people. . ." He pauses. "Pracha would set us up. He'd do it in a second. Maybe he's caught wind of our plans, he could be moving

against us right now. Using this as cover. If he knew the Somdet Chaopraya was against him—"

"Our plans were secret," Akkarat says.

"Nothing's secret. Not on the scale we're working. One of the generals could have leaked to their old friend. And now he's just assassinated three of ours, and we're pointing fingers at each other."

Akkarat considers. Anderson waits, breath held.

Finally Akkarat shakes his head. "No. Pracha would never attack royalty. He is garbage, but still, he is Thai."

"But it wasn't me, either!" He looks down at Carlyle. "It wasn't us! There has to be another explanation." He starts to cough with panic, a cough that becomes an uncontrolled spasm. At last it stops. His ribs ache. He spits blood, and wonders if his lung is punctured from the beating.

He looks up at Akkarat, trying to control his words. To make them count. To sound reasonable. "There must be some way to find out what really happened to the Somdet Chaopraya. Some connection. Something."

A Panther leans forward and whispers in Akkarat's ear. Anderson thinks he recognizes him from the party on the barge. One of the Somdet Chaopraya's men. The hard one with the feral face and the still eyes. He whispers more words. Akkarat nods sharply. "*Khap*." Motions his men to push Anderson and Carlyle into the next room.

"All right, *Khun* Anderson. We will see what we can learn." They shove him down on the floor beside Carlyle. "Make yourself comfortable," Akkarat says. "I've given my man twelve hours to investigate. You had better pray to whatever Grahamite god you worship that your story is confirmed."

Anderson feels a surge of hope. "Find out everything you can. You'll see it wasn't us. You'll see." He sucks on his split lip. "That windup isn't anything other than a Japanese toy. Someone else is responsible for this. The white shirts are just trying to get us to go after each other. Ten to one says it's the white shirts, moving on us all."

"We will see."

Anderson lets his head loll back against the wall, adrenaline and nervous energy firing under his skin. His hand throbs. The broken finger dangles useless. Time. He's bought time. Now it's just a matter of waiting. Of trying to find the next fingerhold to survival. He coughs again, wincing at the pain in his ribs.

Beside him, Carlyle groans, but doesn't wake up. Anderson coughs again and stares at the wall, collecting himself for the next round of conflict with Akkarat. But even as he considers the many angles, trying to understand what has caused this rapid change in circumstance, another image keeps intruding. The sight of the windup girl running for the balcony and plunging into darkness, faster than anything he has ever seen, a wraith of movement and feral grace. Fast and smooth. And at speed, terrifyingly beautiful.

Smoke billows around Kanya. Four more bodies discovered, in addition to the ones they'd already found in the hospitals. The plague is mutating more quickly than she

expected. Gi Bu Sen hinted that it might, but the counting of bodies fills her with foreboding.

Pai moves along the edges of a fish pond. They've thrown lye and chlorine into the pond, huge sacks. Clouds of acrid scent waft across everyone, making them cough. The stench of fear.

She remembers other ponds filled, other people huddled while the white shirts ranged through the village, burning burning burning. She closes her eyes. How she had hated the white shirts then. And so when the local *jao por* found her intelligent and driven, he sent her to the capital with instructions: to volunteer with the white shirts, to work for them, to ingratiate herself. A country godfather, working in concert with the enemies of the white shirts. Seeking revenge for the usurpation of his power.

Dozens of other children went south to beg on the Ministry's doors, and all of them with the same instructions. Of the ones she arrived with, she is the only one who rose so high, but there are others, she knows, others like her, seeded throughout. Other embittered loyal children.

"I forgive you," Jaidee murmurs.

Kanya shakes her head and ignores him. Waves to Pai that the ponds are ready to be buried. If they are lucky, the village will cease to exist entirely. Her men work quickly, eager to be gone. They all have masks and suits, but in the relentless heat these shields are more torture than protection.

More clouds of acrid smoke. The villagers are crying. The girl Mai stares at Kanya, her expression flat. A formative moment for the child. This memory will lodge like a fish bone in the throat; she will never be free of it.

Kanya's heart goes out to her. *If only you could understand.* But it is impossible for one so small to comprehend the gray brutalities of life.

*If only I could have understood.*

"Captain Kanya!"

She turns. A man is coming across the dikes, stumbling in the mud of the paddies, stumbling through jewel-green rice shoots. Pai looks up with interest, but Kanya waves him away. The messenger arrives breathless. "Buddha smiles on you, and the Ministry." He waits expectantly.

"Now?" Kanya stares at him. Looks back at the burning village. "You want me now?"

The young boy looks around nervously, surprised at her response. Kanya waves impatiently. "Tell me again. Now?"

"Buddha smiles on you. And the Ministry. All roads start at the heart of Krung Thep. All roads."

Kanya grimaces and calls to her lieutenant. "Pai! I must go."

"Now?" He masters his surprise as he comes over to her.

Kanya nods. "It's unavoidable." She waves at the flaming bamboo houses. "Finish up here."

"What about the villagers?"

"Keep them roped here. Send food. If no one else sickens this week, we are likely finished."

"You think we could be so lucky?"

Kanya makes herself smile, thinking how unnatural it is to reassure someone with Pai's experience. "We can hope." She waves at the boy. "Take me, then." She glances at Pai. "Meet me at the Ministry when you have finished here. We have one more place left to burn."

"The *farang* factory?"

Kanya almost smiles at his eagerness. "We cannot let the source go uncleansed. Is that not our job?"

"You are a new Tiger!" Pai exclaims. He claps her on the back before he remembers his station and *wais* apology for his forwardness and then hurries back to the destruction of the village.

"A new Tiger," Jaidee mutters beside her. "Very nice for you."

"It's your own fault. You trained them to need a radical."

"And so they choose you?"

Kanya sighs. "If you carry a burning torch, apparently it is enough."

Jaidee laughs at that.

\* \* \*

A kink-spring scooter is waiting for her on the far side of the dikes. The boy climbs on and waits for her to perch behind and then they are off through the city streets, weaving around megodons and bicycles. Their little air horn blares. The city blurs past. Fish sellers, cloth merchants, amulet men with their Phra Seubs which Jaidee used to make so much fun of and which Kanya secretly keeps herself, close to her heart on a small chain.

"Currying favor with too many gods," Jaidee observed when she touched it before leaving the village. But she ignored his mockery and still whispered prayers to Phra Seub, hoping for protection that she knew she didn't deserve.

The scooter slews to a stop and she hops down. The gold filigree of the City Pillar Shrine gleams in the dawn. All around, women sell marigolds for offerings. The chanting of monks carries over the whitewashed walls along with the music of *khon* dances. The boy is gone before she has a chance to thank him. Just another of the many who owe favors to Akkarat. Likely the scooter is a gift from the man, and loyalty the price of it.

"And what do you get, dear Kanya?" Jaidee asks.

"You know," Kanya mutters. "I get what I swore I would get."

"And do you still desire it?"

She doesn't answer him, steps over the barrier door to the shrine's interior. Even at dawn, the shrine is crowded with worshippers, people crouched before the Buddha statues and the shrine of Phra Seub, second only to the one at the Ministry. The grounds bustle with people making offerings of flowers and fruit, shaking out their fortunes with divining sticks—and over it all, the monks chant, guarding the city with their prayers and amulets and the *saisin* that stretches from the shrine to the dikes and pumps. The sacred

thread wavers in the gray light, held aloft on poles where it crosses thoroughfares, stretching miles from this blessed hub to the pumps and then circling the seawalls. The monks' chanting is a steady drone, keeping the City of Divine Beings safe from the swallowing waves.

Kanya buys her own incense and food offering, takes it into the cool confines of the pillar shrine, down the marble steps. She kneels before the old city pillar of sacked Ayutthaya, and the larger one of Bangkok. The place where all miles are marked from. The heart of Krung Thep, and the home of the spirits that protect it. If she stands in the shrine's doorway and looks out toward the dikes, she can see the rise of the levees. It is obvious that they are in the depths of a bathtub. They are exposed on all sides. This shrine. . . she lights her incense and pays her respects.

"Don't you feel like a hypocrite, coming here, of all places, at Trade's whim?"

"Shut up, Jaidee."

Jaidee kneels beside her. "Well, at least you're giving some good fruit."

"Shut up."

She wants to pray, but with Jaidee bothering her, it's useless. After another minute, she gives up and goes back outside to the increasing morning light and heat. Narong is there, leaning against a post, watching the *khon* dances. The drums beat and the dancers go through their stylized turns, their voices raised high and stark, competing with the drone of the ranked monks across the courtyard. Kanya joins him.

Narong holds up a hand. "Wait until they're done."

She masters her irritation and finds a seat, watches as the story of Rama is played out. Finally Narong nods, satisfied. "It's good, isn't it?" He tilts his head toward the pillar shrine. "Have you made your offerings?"

"You care?"

Other white shirts cluster in the compound, making their own offerings. Asking for promotions to better paying assignments. Asking for success in their investigations. Asking for protection from the diseases that they run up against every day. By its nature, this is a shrine for the Environment Ministry, almost as important as the temple of Phra Seub, the biodiversity martyr. It makes her nervous to speak with Narong in front of them all, but he appears entirely unconcerned.

"We all love the city," he says. "Not even Akkarat will fail to defend it."

Kanya makes a face. "What do you want from me?"

"So impatient. Let's walk."

She scowls. Narong seems unhurried, and yet he has summoned her as if it is an emergency. She tamps her fury and mutters, "Do you know what you've interrupted?"

"Tell me as we walk."

"I have a village with five dead and we still haven't isolated the cause."

He glances over, interested. "A new cibiscosis?" He guides her out of the compound, past the marigold sellers. Walking onward.

"We don't know." She masters her frustration. "But you're delaying me from my work, and though it may please you to make me run like a dog when you call—"

"We have a problem," Narong interrupts. "And though you think your village is important, it is nothing in comparison to this. There has been a death. A very prominent one. We need your help in the investigation."

She laughs, "I'm not the police—"

"It's not a police matter. There was a windup involved."

She stops short. "A what?"

"The killer. We believe it is an invasive. A military windup. *Heechy-keechy*."

"How is that possible?"

"It is something we also are trying to understand." Narong looks at her seriously. "And we cannot ask the question, because General Pracha has taken control of the investigation, claiming jurisdiction because the windup is an interdicted creature. As if it were a cheshire or a yellow card." He laughs bitterly. "We are blocked entirely. You will investigate on our behalf."

"That's difficult. It is not my investigation. Pracha will not—"

"He trusts you."

"Trusting me to do my job and allowing me to meddle are two different things." She shrugs and turns away. "It's impossible."

"No!" Narong grabs her and yanks her back. "This is vital! We must know the details!"

Kanya whirls, throws Narong's hand off her shoulder. "Why? What is so important about this? People die all over Bangkok, every day. We find bodies faster than we can shovel them into methane composters. What's so important about this one, that you'd have me cross the general?"

Narong pulls her close. "It's the Somdet Chaopraya. We have lost Her Royal Majesty's protector."

Kanya's knees buckle. Narong drags her upright, keeps talking, fiercely insistent. "Politics has become uglier since I started in this game." He has a smile on his face, but now Kanya sees the rage banked below. "You're a good girl, Kanya. We have always held our part of the bargain. But this is why you are here. I know this is difficult. You have loyalty to your superiors in the Environment Ministry as well. You pray to Phra Seub. This is good. It is right for you. But we require your help. Even if you have no taste for Akkarat anymore, the palace requires it."

"What do you want?"

"We need to know if this was Pracha's doing. He has been quick to take over the investigation. We *must* know if it was he who drove the knife. Your patron and the safety of the palace depends on this. It is possible that Pracha wishes to hide something. It could be some of his December 12 elements striking against us."

"It's not possible—"

"It is too convenient. We have been locked out entirely because it is a windup who did the killing." Narong's voice cracks with a sudden intensity. "We *must* know if the windup was planted by your ministry." He passes her a bundle of cash. Kanya stares at the amount, shocked. "Bribe anyone who gets in your way," he says.

She shakes off her paralysis, takes the money and stuffs it into her pockets. He touches her gently. "I am very sorry, Kanya. You're all I have. I depend on you to find our enemies and root them out."

\* \* \*

The heat of a Ploenchit tower in the middle of the day is stifling. Investigators clog the dingy rooms of the club, adding to the swelter. It is a sick place to die. A place of hunger and desperation and appetites unfilled. Palace staffers crowd in the halls. Watching, conferring, preparing to collect the Somdet Chaopraya's body for placement in his funeral urn, waiting as Pracha's people investigate. Anxiety and anger hang in the air, politeness filed to an exquisite edge in this most humiliating and frightening moment. The rooms have the feeling of the monsoon just about to break, electric with energy, fraught with the unknown darkness of roiling clouds.

The first body lies on the floor outside, an old *farang*, surreal and alien. There is little physical damage to him, except the bruising where his throat was crushed, the livid torture that was done to his windpipe. He sprawls beside the bar with the mottled look of a corpse raised from the river. Some gangster bit of fish bait. The old man stares at her with wide blue eyes, two dead seas. Kanya studies the damage without speaking, then allows General Pracha's secretary to lead her to the interior rooms.

She gasps.

Blood stains everything, great swirls of it spatter the walls and drool across the floors. Bodies lie in tangled heaps. And among them lies the Somdet Chaopraya, his throat not smashed as was the old *farang*, but literally torn out, as though a tiger has fed upon him. His bodyguards lie dead, one with a spring gun blade buried in his eye socket, the other still clutching his own spring gun but peppered with blades.

"*Kot rai*," Kanya murmurs. She hesitates, uncertain of what to do in the presence of this sordid death. Ivory beetles tangle in the bloody froth. They skitter and scatter through it all, making tracks in the coagulant.

Pracha is in the room, conferring with his subordinates. He looks up at her gasp of dismay. The others have their own looks of shock, anxiety and embarrassment flickering on their faces. The thought that Pracha could arrange such a killing fills Kanya with sickness. The Somdet Chaopraya was no friend of the Environment Ministry, but the enormity of the act makes her ill. It is one thing to plot coups and counter-coups, another to reach inside the palace. She feels like a bamboo leaf drowning in floodwater currents.

*So we all go, she tells herself. Even the richest and the most powerful are only meat for cheshires in the end. We are all nothing but walking corpses and to forget it is folly. Meditate on the nature of corpses and you will see this.*

And yet still she is unnerved, almost panicked by the sight of a near-god's mortality before her. *What have you done, General?* It is too horrifying to consider. The flood currents threaten to suck her under.

"Kanya?" Pracha waves her over. She searches her general's face for signs that he carries the guilt for this act, but Pracha seems only puzzled. "What are you doing here?"



"I—" she has words prepared. Excuses. But they fail her with the Crown Protector and his retinue strewn about the room. Pracha's eyes follow her gaze to the Protector's body. His voice softens. He touches her gently on the arm. "Come. This is too much." Guides her out.

"I—"

Pracha shakes his head. "You've heard already." He sighs. "By the end of the day, it will be all over the city."

Kanya finds her voice, spills her lie, pretending to the role that Narong has given her. "I didn't think it could be true."

"Worse than that." Pracha shakes his head grimly. "It was a windup that did it."

Kanya forces herself to show surprise. She glances back at the bloodshed. "A windup? Just one?" Her eyes trace along a peppering of spring blades embedded in the walls. She recognizes one of the other bodies as a Trade Ministry official, the son of a secondary patriarch. Another from a Chaozhou manufacturing clan, a man making his way in the business press. All of them faces from the whisper sheets. All of them great tigers. "It's awful."

"It doesn't seem possible, does it? Six bodyguards. Three men additionally. And only a single windup, if we believe the witnesses." Pracha shakes his head. "Even cibiscosis kills more cleanly."

His eminence the Somdet Chaopraya's neck has been ripped entirely away, breaking it, snapping and tearing so that though the spine seems attached still, it acts as a hinge rather than a support. "It looks like a demon tore him open."

"A wild animal, anyway. It's the sort of thing a military genehack would do. We've seen this sort of activity in the north, where the Vietnamese operate. They use Japanese windups as scouts and shock troops. We're lucky they don't have many." He looks seriously at Kanya. "It will go hard on us. Trade will say that we failed in this. That we allowed this animal into the country. They'll try to take advantage. Make a pretext out of it to seize more power." His expression turns bleak. "We have to find out why this windup was here. If Akkarat has set us up, has used the Protector as a pawn, to seize power."

"He would never—"

Pracha makes a face of dismissal. "Politics is ugly. Never doubt what small men will do for great power. We think Akkarat was here before. Some of the staff seem to recognize his image, seem to recall—" he shrugs. "But of course, everyone is afraid. No one wants to admit too much. But it looks as if Akkarat and some of his *farang* trader friends brought the Somdet Chaopraya to the *heechy-keechy*."

*Is he playing me? Does he know that I work for Akkarat? Kanya stifles her fears. If he knew, he would never have promoted me to Jaidee's position.*

Jaidee whispers in her ear. "You never know. A snake in its nest is better than a snake slithering through the jungle. This way, he always knows exactly where you are."

"I need you to go to the records department," Pracha says. "We don't want information to conveniently disappear, you understand? Trade has its own agents amongst us. Pull everything you find and bring it to me. Find out how she lived here, and survived. As soon as word gets out, there will be a cover-up. Men will lie. Permit records

will disappear. Someone was allowing the windup to exist against all our laws. The Ministry is vulnerable on this. Someone took the bribes. Someone allowed the windup to live here. I want to know who, and I want to know if they are on Akkarat's payroll."

"Why me?"

Pracha smiles sadly. "Jaidee is the only one I would trust more."

"He's setting you up," Jaidee comments. "If he wants to blame this on Trade, you're the perfect tool. The mole in the ministry."

There is no guile in Pracha's face, but he is a clever man. *How much does he know?*

"Find the information for me," Pracha says. "Bring it to me. And speak to no one of this."

"I will do it," she says. Inside though, she wonders if the records even exist anymore. So many ways to profit. A cover-up would have already been effected. If it is truly a murder plot against the Protector, the payoffs would go to all levels. She shivers, wonders who would do such a thing. Political killings are one thing. To touch the palace in this way. . . Rage and frustration threaten to overwhelm her. She forces it down. "What do we know of the windup, so far?"

"She claimed to be a Japanese discard. The girls here say she has been in place for years."

Kanya makes a face of distaste. "It's difficult to believe that anyone would soil—," she breaks off, finding herself on the verge of scorning the Somdet Chaopraya. Sick feelings of confusion and sadness overwhelm her. She masks her discomfort by asking another question. "How did the Protector come to be here?"

"All we know is that he was accompanied by Akkarat's ilk."

"Will you question Akkarat?"

"If we could find him."

"He's missing?"

"You're surprised? Akkarat was always good at protecting himself. It's why he's managed to survive so many times." Pracha grimaces. "He might as well be a cheshire. Nothing ever touches him." Pracha looks at her seriously. "We must find who allowed this windup creature to live here so long. How it got into the city. How the assassination was arranged. We are blind in this, and when we are blind, we are vulnerable. This news will make everything unstable."

Kanya *wais*. "I will do everything I can." Even if Jaidee peers over her shoulder and laughs at her. "I may need more information than this. To track down those responsible."

"You have enough to start. Find where this windup came from. Who took the bribes. This is what I must know."

"And Akkarat and these *farang* who introduced the windup to the Protector?"

Pracha smiles slightly. "I will attend to it."

"But—"

"Kanya, it is understandable that you wish to do more. We all care for the well-being of the palace and the Kingdom. But we must secure and protect the information we have about this windup creature."

Kanya controls her response. "Yes. Of course. I will locate the information on the bribes." She pauses delicately. "Will someone be required to demonstrate their regrets as well?"

Pracha makes a face. "A little harmless bribe income is one thing. It is not a rich year for the Ministry. But this?" He shakes his head.

"I remember when we were respected," Kanya murmurs.

Pracha glances at her. "Do you? I thought that had ended by the time you came to us." He sighs. "Don't worry. This will not be a cover-up. Atonements will be made. I will ensure it personally. Do not doubt my commitment to the Kingdom or Her Royal Majesty the Queen. The guilty will be punished."

Kanya studies the Protector's body and the dingy room where he met his end. A windup. A whore and a windup. She tries to contain her sickness at the thought. A windup. That someone would try to. . . she shakes his head. An ugly affair. A destabilizing move. And now some young men will have to pay for it. Whoever took the bribes in Ploenchit, perhaps others.

On the street, Kanya flags down a cycle rickshaw. From the corner of her eye, she catches a glimpse of palace Panthers, formed in ranks at the door. A crowd is gathering, watching with interest. In a few more hours rumors and news will be all over the city.

"The Environment Ministry, as quickly as you can."

She waves Akkarat's bribe money at the rickshaw man, encouraging greater effort, but even as she does, she wonders on whose behalf she waves it.

### 33

At noon, an army truck arrives. It's a huge thing, gouting exhaust, astonishingly loud, like something out of the old Expansion. She can hear it coming from a block away, but even with so much warning, she almost cries out when she sees the thing. So fast. So awfully loud. Once in Japan, Emiko saw a similar vehicle. Gendo-sama explained that it was powered by liquefied coal. Astonishingly dirty and terrible for carbon limits, but almost magically powerful. As if a dozen megadonts were chained within. Perfect for military applications, even if civilians could not justify either the power or the taxation.

Exhaust clouds swirl blue around it as it comes to a halt. A small fleet of kink-spring scooters sweep up behind, ridden by men wearing the black of the palace's Panthers and the green of the Army. Men begin to pour from the truck and charge for Anderson-sama's tower entrance.

Emiko crouches lower in her alley hiding place. At first she thought to flee, but before she had gone a block she realized there was no place left to run. Anderson-sama was her only raft left in the raging ocean.

And so she remains close by, watching the hive of ants that is Anderson-sama's tower. Trying to understand. She's still astounded that the people who came crashing through the door were not in fact white shirts. They should have been. In Kyoto, the police would have already hunted her down with sniffer dogs, and she would have already been compassionately put down. She has never heard of a New Person so

completely failing to show obedience. Certainly not anything like her own ugly bloodletting and flight. She burns with shame and hatred at the same time. She cannot stay, and yet it is more than apparent that the *gaijin's* apartment, invaded though it is, is her last place of safety. The city around her is no friend.

More men pour from the military truck. Emiko slips deeper into the alley as they approach, expecting them to widen their search, preparing herself for a burst of heat and motion to escape. If she runs she can reach the *khlong*, and cool herself before fleeing again.

But they only post themselves along the major thoroughfares and do not seem to care to search for her.

Another flurry of motion. Panthers dragging out a pair of burlap-hooded men with pale hands. *Gaijin* for certain. One of them is Anderson-sama, she thinks. The clothes are his. They shove him forward, making him stumble. He slams into the back of the truck.

Cursing, two of the Panthers drag him aboard. They cuff him beside the other *gaijin*. More troops swarm inside, surrounding them.

A limousine sweeps up to the curb, purring with its own coal-diesel engine. It's strange and silent in comparison to the roar of the troop carrier, but the exhaust is the same. A rich man's vehicle. Almost unimaginable that someone could be so wealthy—

Emiko gasps. It's Trade Minister Akkarat, being hustled by bodyguards into the car. Onlookers pause and stare. Emiko gawks with them. Then the limousine is moving and the troop carrier as well, its massive engine roaring. The two vehicles tear down the street trailing clouds of smoke and disappear around the corner.

Silence rushes into the void, almost physical after the rumble of the truck engine. She hears people murmuring, "Political . . . Akkarat . . . *farang?* . . . General Pracha . . ."

But even with her excellent hearing, it makes no sense. She stares after the truck. With determination, she might follow. . . She gives up the idea. It is impossible. Wherever Anderson-sama has gone, she cannot involve herself. Whatever political problem he has become entangled in will end with the ugliness of all such conflicts.

Emiko wonders if she can simply slip back inside the apartment now that everyone is gone. Near the building's entrance, a pair of men have begun handing out fliers to everyone they can reach. Another pair coast past on a cargo bike, its bin stacked with more fliers. One man jumps down and sticks a flier to a lamp post before hopping back up on the slowly moving bike.

Emiko starts toward the bike to collect a flier herself, but a prickle of paranoia stops her. Instead, she lets them rattle past, then cautiously approaches the light pole to read what they have posted. She moves carefully, all her energy focused on making her movement appear natural, trying not to draw undue attention. She pushes gently into a gathering crowd, bumping against them, craning for a view over the sea of black hair and straining bodies.

An angry murmur rises. Someone sobs. A man turns away, his eyes wide with grief and terror. He shoves past her. Emiko slips forward into the gap. The murmur grows. Emiko eases closer, careful, careful, slow, slow. . . Her breath catches.

The Somdet Chaopraya. The Protector of Her Majesty the Queen. And words. . . she forces her brain to work, to translate from Thai to Japanese and as she does, she becomes

aware of the people all around her, the people who press in on every side, all of them reading about a windup girl who walks amongst them, a windup who slaughters the Queen's own protector, an agent of the Environment Ministry, a creature of deadly power.

People jostle around her as they try to read, shoving closer, squeezing past, all of them thinking she is one of them. All of them allowing her to live only because they do not yet see.

## 34

"Will you sit down? Your pacing makes me nervous."

Hock Seng pauses in the perambulation of his hovel to glare at Laughing Chan. "I pay for *your* calories, not the other way around."

Laughing Chan shrugs and goes back to playing cards. They've all been huddled in the room for the last several days. Laughing Chan is a congenial companion along with Pak Eng and Peter Kuok. But even the most congenial company. . .

Hock Seng shakes his head. It doesn't matter. The storm is coming. Bloodshed and mayhem on the horizon. It's the same feeling he had before the Incident, before his sons were beheaded and his daughters raped senseless. And he sat in the middle of that brewing storm, willfully ignorant, telling anyone who would listen that the men in K.L. would never let what had happened down in Jakarta happen to the good Chinese here. After all, were they not loyal? Did they not contribute? Did he not have friends at every level of government who assured him that the Green Headbands were but a bit of political posturing?

The storm was surging all around him, and he had refused to accept it. . . but not this time. This time, he is prepared. The air is electric with what is about to occur. Ever since the white shirts closed down the factories it was apparent. And now it is about to break. And this time, he is ready. Hock Seng smiles to himself, examines his little bunker with its stores of money and gems and food.

"Is there any more word on the radio?" he asks.

The three men exchange glances. Laughing Chan nods at Pak Eng. "It's your turn to wind it."

Pak Eng scowls and goes over to the radio. It's an expensive device, and Hock Seng is regretting that he purchased it at all. There are other radios in the slums, but lurking beside them draws attention and so he spent money on this one, unsure if it would even carry anything other than rumor, and yet unable to deny himself another source of information.

Pak Eng kneels beside the thing and starts to wind it. Its speaker crackles to life, barely loud enough over the whine of the crank.

"You know, if you fitted this with a decent gear system, it would be a lot more efficient."

Everyone ignores him, their attention entirely focused on the tiny speaker: Music, *saw duang*. . .

Hock Seng crouches by the radio, listening intently. Changes the dial. Pak Eng is starting to sweat. He winds for another thirty seconds and stops, puffing. "There. That should last a little while."

Hock Seng works the dial on the machine, listening to the divining winds of radio waves. Twirls across stations. Nothing but entertainments. Music.

Laughing Chan looks up. "What time is it?"

"Four, perhaps?" Hock Seng shrugs.

"There should be *muay thai*. They should be doing the opening rituals by now."

Everyone exchanges glances. Hock Seng moves through more stations. Music only. No news. Nothing. . . And then a voice. Filling all the stations, speaking as one voice and one station. They all crouch round, listening.

"Akkarat, I think." Hock Seng pauses. "The Somdet Chaopraya has died. Akkarat is blaming the white shirts." He looks at them all. "It is beginning."

Pak Eng and Laughing Chan and Peter all look at Hock Seng with respect. "You were right."

Hock Seng nods impatiently. "I learn."

The storm is gathering. The megodonts must do battle. It is their fate. The power sharing of the last coup could never last. The beasts must clash and one will establish final dominance. Hock Seng murmurs a prayer to his ancestors that he will come out of this maelstrom alive.

Laughing Chan stands. "I guess we'll have to earn this bodyguard money after all."

Hock Seng nods seriously. "It will not be pretty, not for anyone who is not prepared."

Pak Eng begins pumping his spring gun. "It reminds me of Penang."

"Not this time," Hock Seng says. "This time, we are ready." He waves to them. "Come. It's time we saw to whatever else we can—"

A banging on the door makes them all straighten.

"Hock Seng! Hock Seng!" A hysterical voice, more pounding from outside.

"It's Lao Gu." Hock Seng pulls open the door and Lao Gu stumbles in.

"They've taken Mr. Lake. The foreign devil and all his friends."

Hock Seng stares at the rickshaw man. "The white shirts are moving against him?"

"No. The Trade Ministry. I saw Akkarat himself do the deed."

Hock Seng frowns. "It makes no sense."

Lao Gu shoves a flier into his hands. "It's the windup. The one that he kept bringing to his flat. She's the one that killed the Somdet Chaopraya."

Hock Seng reads quickly. Nods to himself. "You're sure about this windup creature? Our foreign devil was working with an assassin?"

"I only know what it says on the whisper sheet, but that's the *heechy-keechy* for sure, from the way it describes her. He brought her from Ploenchit many times. Let her sleep there, even."

"Is it a problem?" Laughing Chan asks.

"No." Hock Seng shakes his head, allows himself a smile. He goes and digs a ring of keys out from under his mattress. "An opportunity. A better one than I expected." He turns to them all. "We won't be hiding here after all."

"No?"

Hock Seng grins. "There's one last place we must go before we depart the city. One last thing to collect. Something from my old offices. Gather up the weapons."

To his credit, Laughing Chan does not question. Simply nods and holsters his pistols, slings a machete across his back. The rest do the same. Together, they file out through the door. Hock Seng closes it behind him.

Hock Seng jogs down the alley after his people, the keys to the factory jingling in his hand. For the first time in a long time, fate moves in his favor. Now all he needs is a little luck and a little more time.

Up ahead, people are shouting about white shirts and the death of their Queen's protector. Angry voices, ready for a riot. The storm is brewing. The battle pieces are being aligned. A little girl hurries past, pressing whisper sheets into each of their hands before dashing on. The political parties are already at work. Soon the godfather of the slum will have his own people down in the alleys inciting violence.

Hock Seng and his men make their way out of the squeezeways and pour out into the street. Nothing is moving. Even the freelance rickshaw men have gone to ground. A group of shopkeepers huddle around a hand-crank radio. Hock Seng waves at his men to wait, goes over to the listeners. "What news?"

A woman looks up. "National Radio says the Protector. . ."

"Yes, I know that. What else does it say?"

"Minister Akkarat has denounced General Pracha."

It's happening even faster than he expected. Hock Seng straightens and calls to Laughing Chan and the others. "Come on. We're going to run out of time if we don't hurry."

As he calls to them, a huge truck comes around the corner, engine revving. It is astonishingly noisy. Exhaust trails behind it like an illegal dung fire. Dozens of hard-faced troops stare out from the back as it roars by. Hock Seng and his men duck back into the alley, coughing. Laughing Chan peers out, following the truck's progress. "Its running on coal diesel," he says wonderingly. "It's the army."

Hock Seng wonders if it is December 12 loyalists, some component of the Northeastern generals coming to aid General Pracha and retake the National Radio Tower. Or perhaps they are Akkarat's allies, rushing to secure the sea locks or the docks or the anchor pads. Or perhaps they are simply opportunists, getting ready to take advantage of the coming chaos. Hock Seng watches as they disappear around a corner. Harbingers of the storm, regardless.

The last pedestrians are disappearing into their homes. Shop keepers are barring their storefronts from within. The clank and rattle of locks fills the street. The city knows what is going to happen.

Memories peck and swirl at Hock Seng. Alleys running thick with blood. The scent of green bamboo, smoking and burning. He reaches for the reassurance of his spring gun

and machete. The city may be a jungle full of tigers, but this time he is not some little deer, running from Malaya. At last, he has learned. It is possible to prepare for chaos.

He motions to his men. "Come. This is our time."

## 35

"It was not Pracha! He's not involved in this!"

Kanya shouts into the crank phone, but she might as well be raving through the bars of a jail cell for all the impact it makes. Narong hardly seems to be listening. The line crackles with jumbled voices and the hum of machinery, and Narong, apparently, speaking to someone nearby, his words unintelligible.

Suddenly Narong's voice crackles loud, blotting out the background sounds. "I'm sorry, we have our own information."

Kanya scowls at the whisper sheets on her desk, the ones that Pai brought in with a grim smile. Some speak of the fallen Somdet Chaopraya, others of General Pracha. They all talk of the assassin windup girl. Fast-copies of *Sawatdee Krung Thep!* are already pouring into the city. Kanya scans the words. It's full of impassioned complaints against the white shirts who shut down harbors and anchor pads but cannot protect the Somdet Chaopraya from a single invasive.

"These whisper sheets are yours then?" she asks.

Narong's silence is answer enough.

"Why did you even ask me to investigate?" She can't keep the bitterness from her voice. "You were already moving."

Narong's cold voice crackles on the line. "It's not your place to question."

His tone brings her up short. "Did Akkarat do it?" she whispers fearfully. "Was he the one responsible? Pracha says that Akkarat was involved somehow. Did he do it?"

Another pause. Is it a thoughtful one? She can't tell. Finally Narong says, "No. I swear this. We are not the ones responsible."

"So you guess it must be Pracha then?" She shuffles through the licenses and permits on her desk. "I'm telling you he is not the one! I have all the windup's records here. Pracha himself *wanted* me to investigate. To find every trace of her. I have her arrival papers with the Mishimoto people. I have disposal papers. I have visas. Everything."

"Who signed the disposal papers?"

She fights her frustration. "I can't read the signature. I need more time to cross-reference who was on duty around that time."

"And by the time you do, they will inevitably be dead."

"Then why did Pracha set me to the task of finding this information? It doesn't make sense! I talked to the officers who took the bribes at that bar. They were nothing but silly boys, making a little extra money."

"He's clever then. He's covered his tracks."

"Why do you hate Pracha so much?"

"Why do you love him? Did he not order your village razed?"



"Not from malice."

"No? Did he not sell the fish farming permits to another village the next season? Sell them and line his pockets with the profits?"

She falls silent. Narong moderates his tone. "I'm sorry, Kanya. There's nothing we can do. We are certain of his crime. We have authorization from the palace to resolve this."

"With riots?" She shoves the whisper sheets off her desk. "With a burning of the city? Please. I can stop this. It's not necessary. I can find the proof that we need. I can prove that the windup is not Pracha's. I can prove it."

"You're too close to this. Your loyalties are divided."

"I'm loyal to our Queen. Just give me a chance to stop this madness."

Another pause. "I can give you three hours. If you have nothing by sunset, I can do nothing more."

"But you'll wait until then?"

She can almost hear the smile on the other end of the line. "I will." And then the line is closed. And she is alone in her office.

Jaidee settles himself on her desk. "I'm curious. How will you prove Pracha's innocence? It's obvious that he's the one who placed her."

"Why can't you leave me alone?" Kanya asks.

Jaidee smiles. "Because it's *sanuk*. Very fun to watch you flail around and try to run for two masters." He pauses, studying her. "Why do you care what happens to General Pracha? He's not your real patron."

Kanya looks at him with hatred. She waves at the whisper sheets strewn about her office. "It's just like it was five years ago."

"With Pracha and Prime Minister Surawong. With the December 12 gatherings." Jaidee studies the whisper sheets. "Akkarat moving against us, this time, though. So it's not entirely the same."

Outside the window of her office, a megadont bellows. Jaidee smiles. "You hear that? We're arming. There's no way you can keep these two old bulls from clashing. I don't know why you would even try. Pracha and Akkarat have been bellowing and snorting at each other for years. It's time we had a good fight."

"This isn't *muay thai*, Jaidee."

"No. You're right about that." For a moment his smile turns sad.

Kanya stares at the whisper sheets, the collected paperwork on the windup's import. The windup is missing. But still, it came from the Japanese. Kanya studies the notes: she was brought across on a dirigible flight from Japan. An executive assistant—

"And a killer," Jaidee interjects.

"Shut up. I'm thinking."

A Japanese windup. An abandoned bit of the island nation. Kanya stands abruptly, grabs her spring gun and shoves it into her holster as she gathers papers.

"Where are you going?" Jaidee asks.

She favors him with a thin smile. "If I told you, that would take away the *sanuk*."

Jaidee's *phii* grins. "Now you're getting into the spirit of things."

## 36

The crowd around Emiko grows. People jostle her. There's nowhere to run. She's in the open, waiting to be discovered.

Her first urge is to slash her way free, to fight for survival, even though there is no hope of escaping the crowd before she overheats. *I will not die like an animal. I will fight them. They will bleed.*

She forces down that increasing panic. Tries to think. More people squeeze around her, trying to get close to the posted sheet. She is trapped among them, but no one has noticed her yet. As long as she doesn't move. . .

The press of the crowd is almost an advantage. She can barely shake, let alone display the stutter-stop motions that would betray her.

*Slowly. Carefully.*

Emiko allows herself to lean against the people, to push slowly through them, head down, pretending to be a woman sobbing, shaking with grief at a blow against the palace. She stares at her feet, finding her way through the crowd, pressing carefully through until she reaches the outer edge. People huddle in groups, crying, sitting on the ground, staring around the street, stunned. Emiko feels a certain pity for them. Remembers watching Gendo-sama board his dirigible after he told her that he had done her a kindness, even as he abandoned her to the streets of Krung Thep.

*Focus*, she tells herself angrily. She needs to get away. Needs to reach the alley where people will not notice her. Wait for darkness.

*Your description is everywhere: on methane posts, on the street, being trampled by the crowds. You have nowhere to go.* She stifles the thought. The alley is enough. The alley, first. Then a new plan. She keeps her eyes on the ground. Clutches herself and mimes at sobbing. Shuffles for the alley. Slowly. Slowly.

"You! Get over here!"

Emiko freezes. Forces herself to look up slowly. A man beckons her, angry. She starts to speak, to protest, but someone behind her speaks instead.

"You have something to say to me, *heeya*?"

A young man pushes past her, wearing a yellow headband and carrying a fistful of leaflets.

"What's that you've got there, boy?"

Others begin to drift over to watch the argument. The two start shouting at one another, posturing as they each try to establish dominance. Others start to take sides. To shout encouragement. Emboldened, the older slaps the younger and tries to tear off his yellow headband. "You're not for the Queen. You're a traitor!" He strips the flyers from the young man's hand and throws them onto the ground. Stamps on them. "Get out of here! Take *heeya* Pracha's lies with you." As leaflets blow through the crowd, Emiko catches a glimpse of Akkarat's face, drawn in caricature, smiling as he tries to eat the Grand Palace.

The younger one scrambles after his leaflets. "They're not lies! Akkarat seeks to tear down the Queen. It's obvious!"

People in the crowd jeer at him. But others shout encouragement. The boy turns away from the man, speaks to the crowd. "Akkarat is hungry for power. He always wants—"

The man kicks him in the ass. The boy whirls, enraged, and attacks. Emiko sucks in her breath. The boy is a fighter. *Muay thai* for certain. His elbow smashes into the man's head. The man collapses. The boy stands over him, screaming epithets, but his voice is drowned out by the crowd shouting and then others surge forward, enveloping him in a clot of fists. His screams fill the street.

Emiko turns and slips through the growing fight, no longer careful of her movements. People jostle her, rushing to aid or defend, and she shoves through as quickly as she can. In this moment, she is nothing to any of these people. She stumbles out of the riot and into the alley's shadows.

The fight is spreading down the street. Emiko hunts for garbage to cover herself. Behind her, glass shatters. Someone is screaming. She huddles beside a shattered WeatherAll crate, pulling refuse around her, durian rinds, the ripped hemp of a basket, discarded banana leaves, anything to give her cover. She freezes and hunkers low as rioters pelt down the alley, shouting. Everywhere she looks, she sees faces twisted with rage.

## 37

The main compounds of Mishimoto & Co. lie on the far side of the water, in Thonburi. The boat makes its way into a *khlong*, Kanya's hand careful on the tiller. Even here, outside of Bangkok proper, whisper sheets complain of Pracha and the windup killer.

"Do you think it's a good idea to come alone?" Jaidee asks.

"I've got you. It's enough company for anyone."

"I'm not so great at *muay thai* in this state."

"Pity."

The company's gates and jetties rise over the waves. The late afternoon sun scalds down on them. A water merchant paddles close, but even though Kanya is hungry, she does not dare waste even a moment. Already the sun seems to be crashing out of the sky. Her boat thumps against the pier and she whips its bow rope around a cleat.

"I don't think they'll let you in," Jaidee says. Kanya doesn't bother answering. It's odd that he has remained with her all the way across the water. The pattern of his *phii* was to take interest in her for a short time, and then to drift off to other things and other people. Perhaps he visited his children. Made apologies to Chaya's mother. But now he is with her all the time.

Jaidee says, "They won't be impressed with that white uniform, either. They've got too much influence with the Trade Ministry and the police."

Kanya doesn't answer, but sure enough, a Thonburi detachment of a police patrol guards the main gates of the compound. All around, the sea and *khlongs* lap. The

Japanese are forward-looking, and have built themselves entirely on the water, on floating bamboo rafts that are said to lie nearly fifty feet thick, creating a compound nearly impervious to the floods and tides of the Chao Phraya River.

"I need to speak with Mr. Yashimoto."

"He is not available."

"It concerns property of his that was damaged during the unfortunate raids on the airfields. Paperwork for reparations."

The guard smiles uncertainly. Ducks inside.

Jaidee snickers. "Clever."

Kanya makes a face at him. "At least you have some use."

"Even if I'm dead."

A moment later they are being led into the halls of the compound. It is not a long walk. High walls obscure all evidence of manufacturing activity. The Megodont Union complains that no work could be accomplished without a power source, and yet the Japanese neither import their own megodonts, nor hire the union. It reeks of illegal technology. And yet the Japanese have provided a great deal of technical assistance to the Kingdom. In return for Thai seedstock advances, the Japanese provide the best of their sailing technologies. And so everyone is exquisitely careful not to ask too many questions about how a ship's hull is built and if the development process is entirely legal.

A door opens. A pretty girl smiles and bows. Kanya nearly draws her spring gun. The creature before her is a windup. The girl doesn't seem to notice Kanya's unease, though. Simply motions in her stutter-stop way for her to enter. Inside, the room is carefully decorated with tatami mats and Sumi-e paintings. A man Kanya assumes is Mr. Yashimoto kneels, painting. The windup leads Kanya to a seat.

Jaidee admires the art on the walls. "He painted it all, you know."

"How would you know?"

"I came to see if they really have ten-hands in their factory. Right after I died."

"And do they?"

Jaidee shrugs. "Go look for yourself."

Mr. Yashimoto dips his brush, and in an exquisitely swift motion completes the painting. He rises and bows to Kanya. He begins speaking in Japanese. The windup girl's own voice follows a second later, with a translation into Thai.

"I am honored by your visit."

He is silent for a moment and the windup girl falls silent as well. She is very pretty, Kanya supposes. In a strange porcelain way. Her cropped jacket is open at the collar, revealing the hollow of her throat, and her pale skirt molds fetchingly around her hips. She would be beautiful, if she were not so perverse.

"You know why I'm here?"

He nods shortly. "We have heard rumors of an unfortunate incident. And have seen our country discussed in your papers and whisper sheets." He looks at her significantly. "Many voices are being raised against us. Most unfair and inaccurate observations."

Kanya nods. "We have questions—"

"I wish to assure you that we are a friend of the Thai. From times long ago when we cooperated in the great war to now, we have always been a friend of the Thai."

"I want to know how—"

Yashimoto interrupts again. "Tea?" he offers.

Kanya forces herself to remain polite. "You're very kind."

Yashimoto motions to the windup girl, and she stands and leaves the room.

Unconsciously, Kanya relaxes. The creature is. . . unsettling. And yet now that she is gone, silence stretches between them as they wait for the translator to return. Kanya feels seconds ticking away, minutes being lost. Time, time, time moving. Storm clouds gathering and here she sits, waiting for tea.

The windup girl returns, kneels beside them at the low table. Kanya forces herself not to speak, not to interrupt the girl's precise whisking and steeping of the tea, but it is an effort. The windup girl pours, and as Kanya watches the creature's strange movements, she thinks she sees a little of what the Japanese desired from their engineered servants. The girl is perfect, precise as clockwork, and contextualized by the tea ceremony, all her motions take on a ritual grace.

The windup carefully does not observe Kanya in return. Does not say anything about her being a white shirt. Does not observe that in another context Kanya would happily mulch her. She ignores Kanya's Environment Ministry uniform entirely. Exquisitely polite.

Yashimoto waits for Kanya to sip her tea, then sips himself. Sets his tea deliberately on the table. "Our countries have been friends always," he says. "Ever since our Emperor made a gift of tilapia to the Kingdom in the time of your great scientist King Bhumibol's time. We have always been steadfast." He looks at her significantly. "I hope that we can help you in this matter, but I wish to emphasize that we are friends of your country."

"Tell me about windups," Kanya says.

Yashimoto nods. "What do you wish to know?" He smiles, motions at the girl kneeling beside them. "This one, you can see for yourself."

Kanya keeps her expression impassive. It is difficult. The creature beside her is beautiful. Her skin is sleek, her movements surprisingly elegant. And she makes Kanya's skin crawl. "Tell me why you have them."

Yashimoto shrugs. "We are an old nation; our young are few. Good girls like Hiroko fill the gap. We are not the same as the Thai. We have calories but no one to provide the labor. We need personal assistants. Workers."

Kanya carefully makes no show of disgust. "Yes. You Japanese are very different. And except for your country, we have never granted this sort of niche—"

"Crime," Jaidee supplies.

"—exemption," she finishes. "No one else is allowed to bring in creatures like this one." She nods unwillingly at the translator, trying to hide the disgust in her voice. "No other country. No other factory."

"We are aware of the privilege."

"And yet you abuse it by bringing a military windup—"

Hiroko's words cut her off, even as Kanya continues to speak. Hiroko instead picks up the vehement response from her owner.

"No! This is impossible. We have no contact with such technology. None!"

Yashimoto's face is flushed, and Kanya wonders at his sudden anger. What sort of cultural insult has she unwittingly delivered? The windup girl continues her translation, no trace of emotion on her own face as she speaks with her owner's voice. "We work with New Japanese like Hiroko. She is loyal, thoughtful, and skilled. And a necessary tool. She is as necessary as a hoe for a farmer or a sword for a samurai."

"Strange that you mention a sword."

"Hiroko is no military creature. We do not have such technology."

Kanya reaches into her pocket and slaps down the picture of the windup killer. "And yet one of yours, imported by you, registered to your staff, has now assassinated the Somdet Chaopraya and eight others, and disappeared into thin air, as if she is some raging *phii*. But you sit before me and tell me that it is impossible for a military windup to be here!" Her voice rises to a shout, and the windup girl's translation finishes at a similar intensity.

Yashimoto's face stills. He takes the picture and studies it. "We will have to check our records."

He nods to Hiroko. She takes the photo and disappears out the door. Kanya watches Yashimoto for traces of anxiety or nervousness, but there are none. Irritation, she sees, but no fear. She regrets that she cannot speak directly with the man. Listening to her words echo into Japanese, Kanya wonders what surprise is lost when the windup girl delivers them. What preparation Hiroko provides for his shock.

They wait. He silently offers more tea. She refuses. He does not drink anymore himself. The tension in the room is so thick that Kanya half expects the man to leap to his feet and cut her down with the ancient sword that adorns the wall behind him.

A few minutes later, Hiroko returns. She hands the picture back to Kanya with a bow. Then speaks to Yashimoto. Neither of them betray any emotion. Hiroko kneels again beside them. Yashimoto nods at the photograph. "You're sure this was the one?"

Kanya nods. "There is no question."

"And this assassination explains the increasing rage in the city. There are crowds gathering outside the factory. Boat people. The police have driven them away, but they were coming with torches."

Kanya stifles her nervousness at the increasing frenzy. Everything is moving too fast. At some point, Akkarat and Pracha will be unable to back off without losing face and then everything will be lost. "The people are very angry," she says.

"It is misplaced anger. She is not a military windup." When Kanya tries to challenge him, he looks at her fiercely and she subsides. "Mishimoto knows *nothing* of military windups. Nothing. Such creatures are kept under strict control. They are used by our Defense Ministry, only. I could never possess one." He locks eyes with her. "Never."

"And yet—"

He continues to speak, with Hiroko translating, "I know of the windup you describe. She had fulfilled her duty—"

The windup girl's voice breaks off even as the old man continues speaking. She straightens and her eyes flick to Yashimoto. He frowns at her break in decorum. Says something to the windup. She ducks her head. "*Hai.*"

Another pause.

He nods at her to continue. She regains her composure, finishes translating. "She was destroyed according to requirements, rather than repatriated." The windup's dark eyes are on Kanya, steady, unblinking now, betraying nothing of the surprise she evinced a moment before.

Kanya watches the girl and the old man, two alien people. "And yet she apparently survived," she says finally.

"I was not the manager at the time," Yashimoto says. "I can only speak to what I know from our records."

"Records lie, apparently."

"You are correct. For this, there is no excuse. I am ashamed of what others have done, but I have no knowledge of the thing."

Kanya leans forward. "If you cannot tell me how she survived, then please, tell me how it is that this girl, capable of killing so many men in the space of heartbeats could come into this country. You tell me she is not military, but, to be direct, I'm having difficulty believing that she is not. This is a gross breach of our country's agreements."

Unexpectedly, the man's eyes crinkle with a smile. He picks up his tea and sips, considering the question, but the mirth does not leave his eyes, even as he finishes his tea. "This I can answer."

Without warning, he flings his cup at Hiroko's face. Kanya starts to cry out. The windup girl's hand blurs. The teacup smacks into her palm. The girl gapes at the cup in her hand, as surprised apparently, as Kanya.

The Japanese man gathers the folds of his kimono around himself. "All New Japanese are fast. You have mistaken the question to ask. How they use their innate qualities is a question of their training, not of their physical capabilities. Hiroko has been trained from birth to pace herself appropriately, with decorum."

He nods at her skin. "She is manufactured to have a porcelain skin and reduced pores, but it means she is subject to overheating. A military windup will not overheat, it is built to expend considerable energy without impact. Poor Hiroko here would die if she exerted herself like that over any significant amount of time. But all windups are potentially fast, it is in their genes." His tone becomes serious. "It is surprising though, that one has shaken off her training. Unwelcome news. New People serve us. It should not have happened."

"So your Hiroko here could do the same thing? Kill eight men? Armed ones?"

Hiroko jerks and looks at Yashimoto, dark eyes widening. He nods. Says something. His tone is gentle.

"*Hai.*" She forgets to translate, then finds her words. "Yes. It is possible. Unlikely, but possible." She continues, "But it would take an extraordinary stimulus to do so. New People value discipline. Order. Obedience. We have a saying in Japan, 'New People are more Japanese than the Japanese.'"

Yashimoto places a hand on Hiroko's shoulder. "Circumstances would have to be extraordinary to make Hiroko into a killer." He smiles confidently. "This one you seek has fallen far from her proper place. You should destroy her before she can cause any more damage. We can provide assistance." He pauses. "Hiroko here can help you."

Kanya tries not to recoil, but her face gives her away.

\* \* \*

"Captain Kanya, I do believe you're smiling."

Jaidee's *phii* is still with her, perched on the prow of the skiff as it cuts across the Chao Phraya's wide mouth on a stiff breeze. Spray blows through his form, leaving him unaffected, even though Kanya expects him to be drenched each time. She favors him with a smile, allowing her sense of well-being to reach out to him.

"Today, I did something good."

Jaidee grins. "I listened to both ends of the conversation. Akkarat and Narong were very impressed with you."

Kanya pauses. "You were with them as well?"

He shrugs. "I can go almost anywhere, it seems."

"Except on to your next life."

He shrugs again and smiles. "I still have work here."

"Harassing me, you mean." But her words have no venom. Under the warm light of the setting sun, with the city opening before her and waves splashing against her boat's hull as they cut across the water, Kanya can only be grateful that the conversation went so well. Even as she was talking to Narong, they were issuing orders to their people to pull back. She heard the radio announcement go out. They would meet with the December 12 loyalists. The beginning of a stand-down. If the Japanese had not been so willing to take the blame for their rogue windup, it might have been different. But reparations were already being offered and Pracha was exonerated by the copious documentation the Japanese offered, and for once, all things were turning out well.

Kanya can't help but feel a measure of pride. Wearing the yoke of two patrons has finally paid off. She wonders if it is *kamma* that places her so that she can bridge the gap between General Pracha and Minister Akkarat for the good of Krung Thep. Certainly, no one else could have pierced the barriers of face and pride that the two men and their factions had erected.

Jaidee is still grinning at her. "Imagine the things our country could accomplish if we were not always fighting one another."

In a burst of optimism, Kanya says, "Maybe anything is possible."

Jaidee laughs. "You still have a windup to catch."

Involuntarily, Kanya's eyes go to her own windup girl. Hiroko has folded her legs under her and gazes out at the city that is rapidly approaching, watching with curious eyes as they thread between clipper ships and sailing skiffs and kink-spring patrol boats. As if sensing Kanya's gaze, she turns. Their eyes lock. Kanya refuses to drop her gaze.



"Why do you hate New People?" the windup asks.

Jaidee laughs. "Can you lecture her about niche and nature?"

Kanya looks away, glances behind her to the floating factories and drowned Thonburi. The *prang* of Wat Arun stand tall against the blood red sky.

Again the question comes. "Why do you hate my kind?"

Kanya eyes the woman. "Will you be mulched when Yashimoto-sama returns to Japan?"

Hiroko lowers her gaze. Kanya feels obscurely embarrassed that she seems to have hurt the windup's feelings, then shakes off the guilt. It's just a windup. It apes the motions of humanity, but it is only a dangerous experiment that has been allowed to proceed too far. A windup. Stutter-stop motion and the telltale jerk of a genetically engineered beast. A smart one. And dangerous if pushed, apparently. Kanya watches the water as she guides her craft across the waves, but still she watches the windup out of the corner of her eye, viscerally aware that this windup contains the same wild speed of the other one. That all these windups have the potential to become lethal.

Hiroko speaks again. "We are not all like this one you hunt."

Kanya turns her gaze back on the windup. "You are all unnatural. You are all grown in test tubes. You all go against niche. You all have no souls and have no *kamma*. And now one of you has—" she breaks off, overwhelmed at the enormity, "—destroyed our Queen's protector. You are more than similar enough for me."

Hiroko's eyes harden. "Then send me back to Mishimoto."

Kanya shakes her head. "No. You have your uses. You are good proof, if nothing else, that all windups are dangerous. And that the one we hunt is not a military creature. For that, you will be useful."

"We are not all dangerous," she insists again.

Kanya shrugs. "Mr. Yashimoto says you will be of some help in finding our killer. If that's true, then I have a use for you. If not, I would just as soon compost you with the rest of the daily dung collection. Your master insists that you will be useful, though I can't think how."

Hiroko looks away, across the water to her factories on the far side.

"I think you hurt her feelings," Jaidee murmurs.

"Are their feelings any more real than their souls?" Kanya leans against the tiller, angling the little skiff toward the docks. There is still so much to be done.

Abruptly, Hiroko says. "She will seek a new patron."

Kanya turns, surprised. "What do you mean?"

"She has lost her Japanese owner. She has now lost this man who ran the bar she worked for."

"She killed him."

Hiroko shrugs. "It is the same. She has lost her master. She must find a new one."

"How do you know?"

Hiroko looks at her coldly. "It is in our genes. We seek to obey. To have others direct us. It is a necessity. As important as water for a fish. It is the water we swim in."

Yashimoto-sama speaks correctly. We are more Japanese than even the Japanese. We must serve within a hierarchy. She must find a master."

"What if this one is different? If this one doesn't?"

"She will. She has no choice."

"Just like you."

Hiroko's dark eyes sweep back to her. "Just so."

Is there a flicker of rage and despair in those eyes? Or does Kanya simply imagine it? Is it something Kanya assumes must be lurking deep within, an anthropomorphizing of a thing that is not and never will be human? A pretty puzzle. Kanya returns her attention to the water and their imminent arrival, checks the surrounding waves for other craft she will have to jostle with for slip space. She frowns. "I don't know those barges."

Hiroko looks up. "You keep such close watch on the waters?"

Kanya shakes her head. "I used to work the docks, when I was first inducted. Spot raids, checking imports. Good money." She studies the barges. "Those are built for heavy loads. More than just rice. I haven't seen. . ."

She trails off, her heart starting to pound as she watches the machines wallow forward, great dark beasts, implacable.

"What is it?" Hiroko asks.

"They aren't spring-driven."

"Yes?"

Kanya pulls at her sail, letting the breezes of the river delta yank at the small boat, cutting away from the oncoming craft.

"It's military. They're all military."

## 38

Anderson can barely breathe under the hood. The blackness is total, hot with his own breath and suppressed fear. No one explained why he was being hooded and marched out of the flat. Carlyle was awake by then, but when he tried to protest their treatment, one of the Panthers clipped his ear with a rifle butt, letting blood, and they'd both fallen silent and allowed the hoods to be drawn over their heads. An hour later, they were kicked to their feet and herded down to some kind of transport that rumbled with exhaust fumes. Army, Anderson guessed, as he was shoved aboard.

His broken finger hangs limply behind his back. If he flexes his hand the pain becomes extreme. He practices a careful breathing under the hood, controlling his fears and speculations. The close dusty fabric makes him cough, and when he coughs, his ribs send spikes of pain deep into his core. He breathes shallowly.

Will they execute him as some kind of example?

He hasn't heard Akkarat's voice in some time. Hasn't heard anything. He wants to whisper to Carlyle, to see if they are being kept in the same room, but doesn't feel like being clubbed again if it turns out there's a guard in the room with him.

When they were let down from the vehicle and dragged into a new building, he had been unsure if Carlyle was even there. And then they were in an elevator. He thinks they

descended into some sort of bunker, but it is ghastly hot in the place where they kicked him down. The place is stifling hot. The hood's fabric itches. Of all the things he wishes, he wishes he could scratch his nose where sweat trickles and then damp the fabric, leaving it itching. He tries to move his face, tries to get the fabric away from his mouth and nose. If he could just get a breath of clean air—

A door clicks. Footsteps. Anderson freezes. Muffled voices above him. Suddenly hands grab him and yank him to his feet. He gasps as they jostle his broken ribs. The hands drag him along, guiding him through a series of turns and stops. A breeze kisses his arms, cooler, fresher air, some kind of air vents. He gets a whiff of the sea. Thai voices mutter around him. Footsteps. People moving. He has the sense that he is being led down a corridor. The steady arrival and recession of Thai voices. When he stumbles, his captors jerk him upright again and shove him onward.

At last, they stop. The air is fresher here. He feels the wind of circulation systems, hears the ratchet of treadles and the high whine of flywheels. Some kind of processing center. His captors push him to stand straight. He wonders if this is how they will execute him. If he will die without seeing daylight again.

The windup girl. The goddamn windup girl. He remembers the way she flew from the balcony, plunging into darkness. It wasn't the look of a suicide. The more he thinks about it, the more he is convinced that the look on her face was one of supreme confidence. Did she really kill the Queen's protector? But if she were the killer, how could she have been so afraid? It doesn't make sense. And now everything is wrecked. Christ, his nose itches. He sneezes, sucks dusty hood air, and starts coughing again.

He doubles over, coughing, ribs screaming.

The hood is ripped off his face.

Anderson blinks as light spears his eyes. He sucks gratefully at the luxury of fresh air. Slowly straightens. A large room, full of men and women in army uniform. Treadle computers. Kink-spring drums sitting in the room with them. Even an LED wall screen with views of the city as if they are in one of AgriGen's own processing centers.

And a view. He was wrong, he didn't go down. He went up. High above the city. Anderson reorients his confused perceptions. They're in a tower somewhere, an old Expansion tower. Through the open windows he can see across the city. The setting sun glazes the air and buildings a dull red.

Carlyle is there, too, looking dazed.

"My goodness, you both smell terrible."

Akkarat, standing nearby. Smiling with a certain sly humor. The Thais are said to have thirteen kinds of smile. Anderson wonders what sort he is looking at now. Akkarat says, "We'll have to get you a shower."

Anderson starts to speak, but another fit of coughing overwhelms him. He sucks air, trying to get his lungs under control, but keeps coughing. The cuffs dig into his wrists as he convulses. His ribs are a mass of pain. Carlyle doesn't say anything at all. He has blood on his forehead. Anderson can't tell if he fought his captors or if he's been tortured.

"Get him a glass of water," Akkarat says.

Anderson's guards push him against a wall, shove him down until he's seated. This time he narrowly avoids jostling his broken finger. Water arrives. A guard holds the cup

to Anderson's lips, letting him drink. Cool water. Anderson swallows, absurdly grateful. His coughing subsides. He makes himself look up at Akkarat. "Thanks."

"Yes. Well. It seems we have a problem," Akkarat says. "Your story checked out. Your windup is a rogue, after all."

He squats down beside Anderson. "We have all been victims of bad luck. They say in the military that a good battle plan can last as long as five minutes in real fighting. After that, it comes down to if the general is favored by fate and the spirits. Bad luck, this. We must all adjust. And now, of course, I have many new problems that I must adjust to as well." He nods at Carlyle. "You both, of course, are angry at your treatment." He grimaces. "I could offer my apologies, but I'm not sure that it would be enough."

Anderson keeps his expression steady as he looks Akkarat in the eye. "If you hurt us, you'll pay."

"AgriGen will punish us." Akkarat nods. "Yes. That is a problem. But then, AgriGen is always angry with us."

"Untie me, and we forget all this."

"Trust you, you mean. I worry that this is not wise."

"Revolutions are a rough business. I don't hold a grudge." Anderson grins, feral, willing the man to believe. "No harm, no foul. We still want the same things. Nothing's been done that can't be undone."

Akkarat cocks his head, thoughtful. Anderson wonders if he's about to get a knife in the ribs.

Abruptly, Akkarat smiles. "You are a hard man."

Anderson stifles a flutter of hope. "Just practical. Our interests are still aligned. No one benefits with us dead. This is still a small misunderstanding that we can undo."

Akkarat considers. Turns to one of the guards and requests a knife. Anderson holds his breath as it comes close, but then the blade is slicing between his wrists, setting him free. His arms flood with tingling blood. He works them slowly. They feel like blocks of wood. Needle pricks follow. "Christ."

"It will take a little while for your circulation to recover. Be glad we were gentle with you." Akkarat catches sight of the way Anderson cradles his injured hand. Smiles with embarrassment and apology. Calls for a doctor before going over to Carlyle.

"What is this place?" Anderson asks.

"An emergency command center. When it was determined that the white shirts were involved I moved our operations here, for security." Akkarat nods at the kink-spring drums. "We have megadont teams in the basement sending up power. And no one should know that we had this center equipped."

"I didn't know you had something like this."

Akkarat smiles. "We are partners, not lovers. I do not share all my secrets with anyone."

"Have you caught the windup yet?"

"It's only a matter of time. Her likeness is now posted everywhere. The city will not permit her to live amongst us. It is one thing to bribe a few white shirts. Another to attack the palace."

Anderson thinks back to Emiko, to her huddled fear. "I still can't believe that a windup could do something like that."

Akkarat glances up. "It is confirmed by witnesses, and by the Japanese who constructed her. The windup is a killer. We will find her and execute her in the old way, and we will be done with her. And the Japanese will be made to pay reparations unimaginable for their criminal carelessness." Abruptly he smiles. "On this at least, the white shirts and I agree."

Carlyle's hands come free. Akkarat is called away by an army officer.

Carlyle pulls off his gag. "We friends again?"

Anderson shrugs, watching the activity around them. "As much as anyone in a revolution can be."

"How you doing?"

Anderson touches his chest gingerly. "Broken ribs." He nods at his hand where the doctor is splinting his finger. "Busted finger. Think my jaw's okay." He shrugs. "You?"

"Better than that. I think my shoulder's sprained. But I wasn't the one who introduced the rogue windup."

Anderson coughs and winces. "Yeah, well, lucky you."

One of the army people is cranking a radio phone, gears ratcheting. Akkarat takes a call.

"Yes?" He nods, speaks in Thai.

Anderson can only catch a few words, but Carlyle's eyes widen as he listens. "They're taking the radio stations," he whispers.

"What?" Anderson scrambles to his feet, wincing, pushing aside the doctor still working on his hand. Guards lunge in front of him, blocking him from Akkarat. Anderson calls over their shoulders as they shove him back against the wall. "You're starting? Now?"

Akkarat glances up from his phone, finishes his conversation calmly and hands the receiver back to his communications officer. The winding man settles back on his haunches, waiting for the next call. The flywheel hum slows.

Akkarat says, "The Somdet Chaopraya's assassination has brought out a great deal of hostility for the white shirts. Protests outside the Environment Ministry. Even the Megodont Union is involved. People were already angry at the Ministry's crackdowns. I have decided we will capitalize on this."

"But we don't have our assets in place," Anderson protests. "You don't have all your army units down from the northeast. My strike teams aren't supposed to be ashore for another week."

Akkarat shrugs and smiles. "Revolutions are a messy business. It is better to take the opportunities that come before us. Still, I think that you will be pleasantly surprised." He turns back to his hand-cranked radio phone. The steady whirl of the flywheel fills the room as Akkarat talks to people under his command.

Anderson watches Akkarat's back. The man, once so obsequious in the presence of the Somdet Chaopraya, is now in charge. He issues orders in a steady stream. Every so often the phone buzzes again for attention.

"This is crazy," Carlyle murmurs. "Are we still in it at all?"

"Hard to say."

Akkarat glances over at them, seems about to say something, but instead he cocks his head. "Listen," he says. His voice has become reverent.

A rumble rolls across the city. Through the command post's open windows, light flares briefly, like lightning in a storm. Akkarat smiles.

"It's starting."

## 39

Pai is waiting for Kanya in her office when she comes bursting in. "Where are the men?" she asks, panting.

"They were formed up in the bachelor's housing." He shrugs. "We came back from the village when we heard things were—"

"Are they still there?"

"Maybe some of them. I heard Akkarat and Pracha were going to negotiate."

"No!" She shakes her head. "Get them, now." She's rushing around the room, grabbing extra spring gun clips. "Get them formed up and armed. We don't have much time."

Pai stares at Hiroko. "Is that the windup?"

"Don't worry about her. Do you know where General Pracha is?"

He shrugs. "I heard he inspected our walls and then he was going to speak with the Megodont Union about the protests—"

She grimaces. "Get the men formed up. We can't wait anymore."

"You're crazy—"

An explosion shakes the ground. Outside, trees crackle as they crash to the ground. Pai leaps to his feet, a look of shock on his face. He runs to the window and stares outside. A warning klaxon starts to sound.

"It's Trade," Kanya says. "They're already here." She grabs her spring gun. Hiroko is preternaturally still, standing with her head cocked as though she is some sort of dog, listening. And then she turns slightly, her attention leaning forward, anticipatory. Another series of explosions rock the compound. The entire building shudders. Plaster crackles off the ceiling.

Kanya rushes out of her office. Other white shirts stream out with her, those few who were working evening shifts, or who hadn't yet been assigned to patrol and containment on the docks and anchor pads. She dashes down the hall, followed closely by Hiroko and Pai, and charges outside.

The night has the scent of jasmine blossoms, sweet and strong, along with the smell of smoke and the tang of something else, something she has not smelled since military convoys rolled across the ancient friendship bridge, over the Mekong and on toward the insurgents in Vietnam. . .

A tank smashes through the outer walls.

It is a metal monster, taller than two men, jungle-mottled and belching smoke from its furnace. Its main gun fires. The muzzle flashes and the tank heaves back on its treads. Its turret swivels, gears clanking, choosing another target. Masonry and marble shower down over Kanya. She dives for cover.

Behind the tank, war megodonts rush through the gap. Their tusks glint in the darkness, their riders are all in black. In the dimness, the few white shirts who have come out to defend the compound stand out like pale ghosts, easy targets. The whine of high-capacity springs comes from atop the megodonts and then the chatter of disks slashing all around her. Concrete chips rain down. Kanya's cheek opens. Suddenly she is lying on the ground, buried under the weight of Hiroko, who has shoved her down as more spring gun disks slash the air and crackle against the walls behind her.

Another explosion. The noise fills her whole head. She realizes that she is whimpering. Sounds have suddenly become distant. She's shaking with fear.

The tank rumbles into the center of the courtyard. Rotates. More megodonts pour through, their feet tangled in a wave of shock troops also rushing the gap. It's too far away to even make out which general has decided to betray Pracha. Scattered small arms spit from the upper stories of the Ministry buildings. Screams echo, Ministry people dying. Kanya pulls out her spring gun and takes aim. Beside her, a records clerk takes a disk and falls. Kanya holds her pistol carefully, fires a shot. Can't tell if it hits her man or not. Fires again. Sees him fall. The mass of troops flowing toward her is like a tsunami.

Jaidee appears at her shoulder. "What about your men?" he asks. "Are you going to sell yourself so easily and neglect those boys who rely on you?"

Kanya pulls the trigger again. She can barely see. She is crying. Men are spreading across the courtyards, squads leapfrogging under covering fire.

"Please, Captain Kanya." Hiroko begs. "We must run."

"Go!" Jaidee urges. "It's too late to fight."

Kanya lets her finger off the trigger. Disks chatter around her. She rolls and scrambles for the doorway, lunges back into the relative safety of the building. Scrambles to her feet and runs for the exit at the opposite side of the building. More shells hit. The building shakes. She wonders if it will collapse before she makes the far side.

Memories from her childhood flood her as she jumps bloody bodies, following Hiroko and Pai. Memories of destruction and horror. Of coal-burning tanks roaring through villages, screaming down the remaining paved roads of the provinces in long columns before plowing out across rice paddies. Tanks running hard and fast for the Mekong, their treads tearing up the earth on their way to defend the Kingdom from the first surprise incursions of the Vietnamese. Black smoke roiling in their wake as they went to hold the border. And now the monsters are here.

She bursts through the far side of the Ministry and into a firestorm. Trees burning. Some sort of napalm strike. Smoke roils around her. Another tank smashes a distant gate, coming faster than any megodont. It is difficult for her mind to process how quickly they move. They are like tigers, streaking across the grounds. Men fire their spring guns, but they are nothing against the iron shells of the tanks; they are not built for warfare. The chatter of weapons fire rattles along with bright flashes of light. Silvery disks chatter all

around, bouncing and slashing. White shirts run for cover, but they have no place to go. Red blossoms on white. Men are disassembled by explosions. More tanks pour through.

"Who are they?" Pai screams.

Kanya shakes her head dumbly. The armored division ravages through the burning trees of the Environment Ministry's grounds. More troops are pouring in. "They have to be from the northeast. Akkarat is making his move. Pracha has been betrayed."

She yanks at Pai, points him toward a slight rise and the shadows of unburned trees, pointing toward where the Phra Seub Temple may still be standing. Perhaps they can escape. Pai stares, but doesn't move. Kanya yanks him again and then they are off and running across the grounds. Palm trees crash down in their path, crackling and flaming. Coconuts rain green around them along with shrapnel bursts. The screams of men and women being torn apart by the well-oiled military machine fill the air.

"Where now?" Pai yells.

Kanya doesn't have an answer. She ducks as wood splinters shower her and dives behind the partial cover of a fallen burning palm.

Jaidee flops down beside her and grins, not even sweating. He peers over the top of the log, then glances back at Kanya.

"So. Who will you fight for now, Captain?"

## 40

The tank surprises them all. One moment they are riding a pair of cycle rickshaws down a nearly empty street, the next, a roaring fills the air and a tank bursts into the intersection ahead. It has a loudspeaker that squawks something, perhaps a warning, and then its turret spins in their direction.

"Hide!" Hock Seng shouts as they all try to scramble off their bikes. The tank's barrel roars. Hock Seng hits the ground. A building face collapses, showering them with debris. Clouds of gray dust billow over him. Hock Seng coughs and tries to get up and crawl away but a rifle chatters and he throws himself flat again. He can't see anything in the dust. Answering small arms fire crackles from a nearby building and then the tank is firing again. The smoke clears slightly.

From an alley, Laughing Chan waves for Hock Seng. His hair is powdered gray and his face is coated with dust. His mouth moves but no sound comes out. Hock Seng tugs at Pak Eng and they scramble for safety. The hatch of the tank pops open and an armored gunner appears, firing with a spring rifle. Pak Eng goes down, his chest blossoming red. Peter Kuok ducks into an alley and Hock Seng glimpses him running. Hock Seng dives flat again and worms himself into the rubble. The tank fires again, rocking back on its treads. More small arms fire chatters from somewhere down the street. The man in the turret flops forward, dead. His rifle slides down the tank's armor. The tank engages and spins on its treads, clanking. Garbage and leaflets swirl around it. It lurches toward Hock Seng and accelerates. Hock Seng lunges aside as the tank crashes past, showering him with more debris.



Laughing Chan stares after the retreating vehicle. He says something but Hock Seng's ears are still ringing. He waves for Hock Seng to join him again. Hock Seng staggers upright and stumbles into the *soi's* relative safety. Laughing Chan cups his hands around Hock Seng's ear. His shout is a whisper.

"It's fast! Faster than a megodont!"

Hock Seng nods. He's shaking. It appeared so suddenly. So much faster than anything he has ever seen. Old Expansion technology. And the men driving it seemed mad. Hock Seng looks around at the rubble. "I don't even know what they were doing here. There's nothing to secure," he says.

Laughing Chan suddenly begins to laugh. His distant words tunnel past the ringing in Hock Seng's ears. "Maybe they're lost!"

And then they are both laughing, and Hock Seng is almost hysterical with relief. They sit in the alley, resting and trying to catch their breath and giggling. Slowly, Hock Seng's hearing returns.

"It's worse than the Green Headbands." Laughing Chan says, looking out at the street wreckage. "At least with them, it was personal." He makes a face. "You could fight them. These ones are too fast. And too crazy. *Fengle*, all of them."

Hock Seng is inclined to agree. "Still, dead is dead. I would rather not face either."

"We'll have to be more careful," Laughing Chan says. He nods at Pak Eng's body. "What should we do about him?"

"Do you want to carry him back to the towers?" Hock Seng asks pointedly.

Chan shakes his head, grimacing. Another explosion rumbles. From the sound of it, it's no more than a few blocks away.

Hock Seng looks up. "The tank again?"

"Let's not wait to find out."

They set off down the street, keeping to doorways. A few others are out in the open, looking toward the rumbling explosions. Trying to see where the noises are coming from, to see what is happening. Hock Seng remembers standing on a similar street only a few years before, the scent of the sea and the promise of the monsoon bright in the air the day the Green Headbands started their cleansing. And on that day, too, people had looked up like pigeons, heads swiveling toward the sound of slaughter, suddenly aware that they were in danger.

Ahead, unmistakable, the chatter of spring guns. Hock Seng motions to Laughing Chan and they turn into a new alley. He's too old for this foolishness. He should be reclining on a couch, smoking a bowl of opium while a pretty fifth wife massages his ankles. Behind them, the rest of the people on the street are still standing out in the open, still staring toward the sounds of battle. The Thais don't know what to do. Not yet. They have no experience with true slaughter. Their reflexes are wrong. Hock Seng turns into an abandoned building.

"Where are you going?" Laughing Chan asks.

"I want to see. I need to know what's happening."

He climbs. One stairwell, two stairwells, three, four. He's panting. Five. Six. Then out into a hall. Broken doors, stifling close heat, the smell of excrement. Another explosion rumbles distant.

Through an open window, tracers of fire arc across the darkening sky and boom in the distance. Small arms snap and chatter in the streets like Spring Festival fireworks. Smoke pillars rise from a dozen points in the city. *Nagas* coiling, black against the setting sun. The anchor pads, the sea locks, the manufacturing district. . . the Environment Ministry. . . .

Laughing Chan grabs Hock Seng's shoulder and points.

Hock Seng sucks in his breath. The Yaowarat slum blazes, WeatherAll shanties exploding in a spreading curtain of flame. "*Wode tian.*" Laughing Chan murmurs. "We won't be going back there."

Hock Seng stares at the burning slum that had been his home, watching with horror as all his cash and gems turn to ash. Fate is fickle. He laughs wearily. "And you thought I wasn't lucky. We'd be roasted like pigs by now, if we had stayed."

Laughing Chan makes a mock *wai* at him. "I will follow the lord of the Three Prosperities into the nine hells." He pauses. "But what do we do now?"

Hock Seng points. "We follow Thanon Rama XII, and then—"

He doesn't see the missile strike. It's too fast for any human being's eyes. Perhaps a military windup would have time to prepare, but he and Laughing Chan are thrown off their feet by the shockwave. A building collapses across the street.

"Never mind!" Laughing Chan grabs Hock Seng and drags him back toward the safety of the stairwells. "We'll work it out. I don't want to lose my head for the sake of your view."

Newly cautious, they slip through the darkening streets, working their way toward the manufacturing district. The streets are becoming more deserted as the Thais finally learn there is no safety in the open.

"What's that?" Laughing Chan whispers.

Hock Seng squints into the gloom. A trio of men crouch around a hand-cranked radio. One of them has an antenna in his hands that he holds over his head, trying to get reception. Hock Seng slows to walk, then urges Laughing Chan across the street to them.

"What news?" Hock Seng puffs.

"Did you see that missile hit?" one of them asks. He looks up. "Yellow cards," he murmurs. His companions exchange glances as they catch sight of Laughing Chan's machete, then smile nervously and start to shy away.

Hock Seng sketches a clumsy *wai*. "We just want the news."

One of them spits betel nut, still watching suspiciously, but he says, "It's Akkarat, on the air." He gestures for them to listen. His friend lifts the antenna again, pulling in static.

"—stay indoors. Do not go outside. General Pracha and his white shirts have attempted to topple Her Royal Majesty the Queen herself. It is our duty to defend the realm—" The voice crackles out of reception and the man begins fiddling with the knobs on the wireless again.

One of them shakes his head. "It's all lies."

The one doing the tuning murmurs a disagreement, "But the Somdet Chaopraya—" "Akkarat would kill Rama himself if he saw a benefit."

Their friend lowers the antenna. The radio hisses static and the transmission is lost entirely as he speaks. "I had a white shirt in my shop the other day, and he wanted to take my daughter home with him. A 'gift of good will,' he called it. They're all monitor lizards. A little corruption is one thing but these *heeya* will—"

Another explosion shakes the ground. Everyone turns, Thais and yellow cards together, trying to fix on the location.

*We're like little monkeys, trying to understand a huge jungle.*

The thought frightens Hock Seng. They're piecing together clues, but they have nothing to provide context. No matter how much they learn, it can never be enough. They can only react to events as they unfold, and hope for luck.

Hock Seng tugs Laughing Chan's arm. "Let's go." The Thais are already hurriedly gathering the radio and ducking back into their shop. When Hock Seng looks back again, the street corner is entirely empty, as if the moment of political discussion hadn't existed at all.

The fighting worsens as they near the manufacturing district. The Environment Ministry and the Army seem to be everywhere, warring. And for every professional unit on the street, there are others, the volunteers and student associations and civilians and loyalists, mobilized by political factions. Hock Seng pauses in a doorway, panting, as explosions and rifle fire echo.

"I can't tell any of them apart," Laughing Chan mutters as a group of university students carrying short machetes and wearing yellow armbands runs past, headed for a tank that's busy shelling an old Expansion tower. "They're all wearing yellow."

"Everyone wants to claim loyalty to the Queen."

"Does she even exist?"

Hock Seng shrugs. A student's spring gun blades bounce off the tank's armor. The thing is huge. Hock Seng can't help being impressed that the Army has successfully loaded so many tanks into the capital. He supposes the Navy and its admirals provided assistance. Which means General Pracha and his white shirts have no allies left. "They're all crazy," Hock Seng mutters. "It doesn't make any difference who is who." He studies the street. His knee is hurting, his old injury making him slow. "I wish we could find some bicycles. My leg. . ." He grimaces.

"If you were on a bike, shooting you would be as easy as shooting a grandmother on a stoop."

Hock Seng rubs his knee. "Still, I'm too old for this."

Rubble showers them from another explosion. Laughing Chan brushes debris out of his hair. "I hope this is worth the trip."

"You could be back in the slums, roasting alive."

"That's true." Laughing Chan nods. "But let's hurry. I don't want to keep testing our luck."

More dark intersections. More violence. Rumors flying on the streets. Executions in Parliament. The Trade Ministry in flames. Thammasat University students rallying on

behalf of the Queen. And then another radio broadcast. A new frequency, everyone says, as they all huddle around the tinny speaker. The announcer sounds shaken. Hock Seng wonders if there is a spring gun at her head. *Khun Supawadi*. She was always so popular. Always introduced such interesting radio plays. And now her voice trembles as she begs her countrymen to stay calm while tanks rush through the streets, securing everything from the anchor pads to the docks. The radio's speaker crackles with the sound of shelling and explosions. A few seconds later, explosions rumble in the distance like muffled thunder, a perfect echo of the ones on the radio.

"She's closer to the fighting than we are," Laughing Chan says.

"Is that a good sign, or a bad one?" Hock Seng wonders.

Laughing Chan starts to answer but a megodont's screams of rage interrupt, followed by the whine of spring guns unleashing. Everyone looks down the street. "That sounds bad."

"Hide," Hock Seng says.

"Too late."

A wave of people pours around the corner, running and screaming. A trio of carbon-armored megodonts thunders behind them. The massive heads sweep low, slashing from side to side, their tusks slash through the fleeing people with attached scythe blades. Bodies split like oranges and fly like leaves.

From atop the megodonts, machine gun cages open fire. Flickering silver streams of bladed disks pour into the packed crowd. Hock Seng and Laughing Chan crouch in a doorway as people flee past. The white shirts in their midst fire their own spring guns and single-shot rifles as they run, but the disks are entirely ineffective against the armored megodonts. The Environment Ministry isn't equipped for this sort of warfare. Ricocheting ammunition flurries around them as the machine guns chatter. People collapse in bloody writhing piles, howling agony as the megodonts trample over them. Dust and smoke and musk choke the street. A man is flung aside by a megodont and slams into Hock Seng. Blood gouts from his mouth, but he is already dead.

Hock Seng crawls out from under the corpse. More people are forming up and firing at the megodonts. Students, Hock Seng thinks, perhaps from Thammasat, but it's impossible to tell who they are loyal to, and Hock Seng wonders if even they know who they are fighting.

The megodonts wheel and charge. People pile up against Hock Seng, trying to get out of the way. Their mass crushes him. He can't breathe. He tries to cry out, to clear space for himself, but the crush is too great. He screams. The weight of desperate fleeing people presses down upon him, squeezing out the last of his air. A megodont sweeps into them. It backs and charges again, tearing into the clot of people, swinging its bladed tusks. Students throw bottles of oil up at the megodonts and hurl torches up after, spinning lights and fire—

More razor disks rain down. Hock Seng cowers as the guns sweep toward him, spitting silver. A boy stares into his eyes, yellow headband slipped down over his bleeding face. Hock Seng's leg blossoms with pain. He can't tell if he's shot or if his knee is broken. He screams in frustration and fear. The weight of bodies pushes him to the ground. He's going to die. Crushed under the dead. Despite everything, he failed to

understand the capriciousness of warfare. In his arrogance he thought he could prepare. Such a fool. . .

Silence comes suddenly. His ears are ringing, but there's no more weapons fire and no more trumpeting megodonts. Hock Seng takes a shuddering breath beneath the weight of bodies. All around him, he hears only moans and sobbing.

"Ah Chan?" he calls.

No answer.

Hock Seng claws his way out. Others are dragging themselves free of the massacre as well. Helping their wounded. Hock Seng can barely stand. His leg is awash with pain. He's covered with blood. He searches through the bodies, trying to find Laughing Chan, but if the man is in the pile, he is covered in too much blood and there are too many bodies and it is too dark to pick him out.

Hock Seng calls for him again, peering into the mass. Down the street, a methane lamp burns bright, shattered, its neck spurting gas into the sky. Hock Seng supposes it could explode at any moment, ripping through the methane pipes of the city, but he can't muster the energy to care.

He stares around at the bodies. Most of them are students, it seems. Just foolish children. Trying to do battle with megodonts. Fools. He forces down memories of his own children, dead and piled. The massacres of Malaya, writ on Thai pavement. He pries a spring gun from a dead white shirt's hands, checks its load. Only a few disks left, but still. He pumps the spring, adding energy. Shoves it into his pocket. Children playing at war. Children who don't deserve to die, but are too foolish to live.

In the distance, the battle rages still, moved on to other avenues and other victims. Hock Seng limps down the street. Bodies lie everywhere. He reaches an intersection and hobbles across, too tired to care about the risk of being caught in the open. At the far side, a man lies slumped against a wall, his bicycle lying beside him. Blood soaks his lap.

Hock Seng picks up the bicycle.

"That's mine," the man says.

Hock Seng pauses, studying the man. The man can barely keep his eyes open, yet still he clings to normalcy, to the idea that something like a bicycle can be owned. Hock Seng turns and wheels the bicycle down off the sidewalk. The man calls out again, "That's mine." But he doesn't stand and he doesn't do anything to stop Hock Seng as he swings a leg over the frame and sets his feet on the pedals.

If the man complains again, Hock Seng doesn't hear it.

## 41

"I thought we weren't going to move for another two weeks," Anderson protests. "We don't have everything in place."

"Plans must change. Your weapons and funding are still quite helpful." Akkarat shrugs. "In any case, having *farang* shock troops in the city would not necessarily smooth the transition. It's possible that this accelerated timetable is best."

Explosions rumble across the city. A methane fire is burning, bright and green, yellowing now as it finds dry bamboo and other materials. Akkarat studies the burn,

waves to the man with the radio phone. The private cranks at the power as Akkarat speaks quietly, issuing orders for fire teams to be dispatched to the blaze. He glances at Anderson, explains. "If the fires get out of control, we won't have a city to defend."

Anderson studies the spreading fire, the gleam of palace *chedi*, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha. "That fire's near the city pillar."

"*Khap*. We can't allow the pillar to burn. It would be a bad omen for a new regime that is supposed to be strong and forward-looking."

Anderson goes and leans on a balcony railing. His hand, splinted now, still throbs, but with the bone reset by a military doctor, it feels better than it has in hours. A swaddling layer of morphine helps keep the pain at bay.

Another arc of fire crosses the sky, a missile that buries itself in the distance, somewhere in the Environment Ministry compound. It's hard to believe the forces that Akkarat has mustered for his ascension. The man had far more power at his disposal than he let on. Anderson pretends nonchalance as he asks the next question.

"I assume this accelerated schedule won't affect the specifics of our agreement."

"AgriGen remains a favored partner in the new era." At these soothing words, Anderson relaxes, but Akkarat's next sentence yanks him alert. "Of course, the situation has changed somewhat. After all, you were unable to bring certain promised resources to bear."

Anderson looks at him sharply. "We had a timetable. The promised troops are en route, along with more weapons and funding."

Akkarat smiles slightly. "Don't look so concerned. I'm sure we'll work something out."

"We want the seedbank still."

Akkarat shrugs. "I understand your position."

"Don't forget that Carlyle also has the pumps you'll need before the rainy season."

Akkarat glances at Carlyle. "I'm sure separate arrangements can be made."

"No!"

Carlyle grins, glances from one to the other, then holds up his hands as he backs away. "You all work this out. It's not my argument."

"Just so." Akkarat turns back to the arrangements of the battle.

Anderson watches, eyes narrowed. They still have leverage on this man. Guarantees of fertile, latest generation seedstock. Rice that will resist blister rust for at least a dozen plantings. He considers how best to affect Akkarat, to bring him back into alignment, but the morphine and exhaustion of the last twenty-four hours are wearing on him.

Smoke from one of the fires drifts across them, sending everyone into coughing fits before the wind shifts again. More tracer fire and shells arc across the city, followed by the distant rumble of explosions.

Carlyle frowns. "What was that?"

"Probably the Army's Krut Company. Their commander refused our friendship offer. He'll be shelling the anchor pads on behalf of Pracha." Akkarat says. "The white shirts don't want to allow a resupply. They'll also go after the seawalls if we let them."

"But the city would drown."

"And it would be our fault." Akkarat grimaces. "In the December 12 coup, the dikes were barely defended successfully. If Pracha feels he is losing—and by now he must know he is—then the white shirts may try to take the city hostage to force a more favorable surrender." He shrugs. "It's a pity we don't already have your coal pumps delivered."

"As soon as the shooting stops," Carlyle says, "I'll contact Kolkata and ship them out."

"I would have expected no less." Akkarat's teeth gleam.

Anderson fights to keep the scowl off his own face. He doesn't like their friendly banter. It's almost as if their earlier captivity is forgotten, and Carlyle and Akkarat are old friends. He doesn't like the way Akkarat seems to have separated Anderson's own interests from Carlyle's.

Anderson studies the landscape, mulling his options. If he just knew the location of the seedbank, he could order a strike team to move in and take it in the confusion of this urban war. . .

Shouts filter up from below. People milling in the streets, all of them looking toward the havoc, all of them curious what this warfare bodes for them. He follows the gaze of the confused throng. Old Expansion towers stand black amongst the fires, bits of remnant glass windows twinkling merrily with the blazes all around. Beyond the city and the fires, the black ocean ripples, a sheet of darkness. From high up, the seawalls seem curiously insubstantial. A ring of gas lights, and then nothing beyond except hungry blackness.

"Can they really breach the dikes?" he asks.

Akkarat shrugs. "There are weak points. We had planned to defend them with additional Navy personnel from the south, but we think we can hold."

"And if you don't?"

"The man who allows the city to drown will never be forgiven," Akkarat says. "It cannot be allowed. We will fight for the dikes as if we are the villagers of Bang Rajan."

Anderson watches the burning fires and the sea beyond. Carlyle leans on the railing beside him. His face glimmers in the light. He has the satisfied smile of a man who cannot lose. Anderson leans over. "Akkarat might have influence here, but AgriGen is everywhere else." He locks eyes with the trader. "Remember that." He's pleased to see Carlyle's smile falter.

More gunfire echoes across the landscape. From high up, the battle lacks visceral power. It's a battle of ants fighting over piles of sand. As if someone has kicked two nests together to test the clash of trivial civilizations. Mortars rumble. Fires twinkle and flare.

In the distance, a shadow descends from the black night overhead. A dirigible, sinking toward the city blazes. It floats low over the fires and suddenly a portion of a blaze winks out as a deluge of seawater pours from its belly.

Akkarat watches, smiling. "Ours," he says.

And then, as though the fire is not snuffed, but actually airborne, the dirigible explodes. Flames roar around it, pieces of its skin blazing and peeling off, fluttering away as the whole great beast sinks toward the city and crashes to pieces on the buildings.

"Christ," Anderson says, "you sure you don't want our reinforcements now?"

Akkarat's face remains impassive. "I didn't think they would have time to deploy missiles."

A massive explosion rocks the city, green gas burning bright, rising at the skyline's edge. A cloud of flame, roiling and expanding. Unimaginable pounds of compressed gas going up in a roaring green mushroom.

"The Environment Ministry's strategic reserve, I think," Akkarat comments.

"Beautiful," Carlyle murmurs. "Fucking beautiful."

## 42

Hock Seng shelters in an alley as tanks and trucks rumble down Thanon Phosri. He shudders at the thought of the fuel burning. It has to be much of the Kingdom's diesel stock, all of it going up in a single orgy of violence. Coal smoke fills the air as stoked tanks surge past on clanking treads. Hock Seng crouches in garbage. Everything he planned has fallen apart in this moment of crisis. Instead of waiting and moving north as a careful unit, he left his valuables to burn for the sake of one long-shot risk.

*Quit complaining, you old fool. You would have roasted, your purple baht and your yellow card friends all together, if you hadn't left when you did.*

Still, he wishes he'd had the forethought to bring at least some of that carefully squirrelled insurance. He wonders if his karma is so broken that he cannot ever truly hope to succeed.

He peers into the street again. The SpringLife offices are within view. Best of all, there are no guards present. Hock Seng allows himself a smile at that. The white shirts have their own troubles now. He wheels the bicycle across the street, using it as a crutch to keep him upright.

Inside the compound, it looks as though there was brief fighting. A trio of bodies lie against a wall, seemingly executed. Their yellow armbands have been pulled off and tossed in the dust beside them. More foolish children playing at politics—

Movement behind him.

Hock Seng turns and jams his spring gun into his stalker. Mai gasps as his gun barrel buries itself in her guts. Mewls with fear, eyes wide.

"What are you doing here?" Hock Seng whispers.

Mai stumbles back from his gun. "I came to look for you. The white shirts found our village. People are sick there." She sobs. "And then your house burned."

For the first time he sees the soot and cuts covering her body. "You were in Yaowarat? In the slums?" he asks, shocked.

She nods. "I was lucky." She fights back a sob.

Hock Seng shakes his head. "Why come here?"

"I couldn't think of any other place. . ."

"And more people are sick?"

She nods, fearful. "The white shirts questioned us, I didn't know what to do, I told—"



"Don't worry," Hock Seng sets a soothing hand on her shoulder. "The white shirts won't trouble us anymore. They have their own problems."

"Do you have—" She stops. Finally says, "They burned our village. Everything."

She is a pathetic creature. So small. So vulnerable. He imagines her fleeing her destroyed home, seeking refuge in the only place left to her. And then finding herself in the heart of warfare. A part of him wants to be rid of her burden, but too many have already died around him, and he is obscurely pleased for her company. He shakes his head. "Foolish child." He motions her into the factory. "Come with me."

A furious stink envelopes them as they enter the main hall. They both cover their faces, breathing shallowly.

"The algae baths," Hock Seng murmurs. "The kink-springs have stopped running the fans. Nothing is being vented."

He climbs the steps to the office, shoves open the door. The room is close and hot and reeks as badly as the manufacturing floor from the long days without air flow. He pushes open shutters, letting in night breeze and city burn. Across the roofs, flames flicker, sparking in the night like prayers going up to heaven.

Mai comes to stand beside him, her face illuminated in the irregular glow. A gas lamp is burning freely down on the street, broken. They must be burning all over the city. Hock Seng is somewhat surprised that no one has cut off the gas lines. Someone should have done it already, and yet still this one flares, bright and green, reflecting on Mai's face. She is pretty, he realizes. Slight and beautiful. An innocent trapped amongst warring animals.

He turns from the window and goes to squat before the safe. Studies its dials and heavy locks, its combinations and levers. Expensive to manufacture something with so much steel. When he had his own company, when the Tri-Clipper ruled the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, he had one like it in his offices, an heirloom, salvaged from an old bank when it lost liquidity, straight from the vault and carried into Three Prosperities Trading Company with the help of two megadons. This one sits before him, taunting him. He must destroy it at its joints. It will take time. "Come with me," he says.

He leads her back down to the factory floor. Mai hangs back when he wants to go into the fining rooms. He hands her a line-worker's mask. "It should be enough."

"You're sure?"

He shrugs. "Stay, then."

But she follows him anyway, back to where they store the curing acid. They walk gingerly. He uses a rag to push aside the fining room curtains, careful to let nothing touch him. His breath is loud inside the mask, ragged sawing. The manufacturing rooms are disarrayed. White shirts have been here, inspecting. The stink of the rotting algae tanks is intense, even through the mask. Hock Seng breathes shallowly, forcing himself not to gag. Overhead, the drying screens are all black with withered algae. A few streamers dangle down, black emaciated tentacles. Hock Seng fights the urge to duck from them.

"What are you doing?" Mai pants.

"Looking for a future." He spares her small smile before he realizes she can't see his expressions through the mask. He digs gloves out of a supply cabinet and hands her a pair. Gives her an apron as well. "Help me with this." He indicates a sack of powder. "We're working for ourselves, now. No more foreign influences, yes?" He stops her as

she reaches for the sack. "Don't get any on your skin," he says. "And don't let your sweat touch it." He guides her back up to the offices.

"What is it?"

"You shall see, child."

"Yes, but—"

"It's magic. Now go get some water from the *khlong* out back."

When she returns, he takes a knife and carefully slices into the sacking. "Bring me the water." She pulls the bucket close. He dips into the water with his knife, then runs it through the powder. The powder hisses and begins to boil. When he takes the knife out, it's half gone, melted into nothing, still hissing.

Mai's eyes go wide. A viscous liquid pours off the knife. "What is it?"

"A specialized bacteria. Something the *farang* have created."

"Not acid, though"

"No. It's alive. In a way."

He takes the knife and begins to scrape it along the face of the safe. The knife disintegrates completely. Hock Seng grimaces. "I need something else, something long, to spread it with."

"Put water on the safe," Mai suggests. "Then pour on the powder."

He laughs. "Clever child."

Soon the safe is soaking. He prepares a paper funnel and lets the powder stream through in a tiny fountain. Wherever it touches the metal face it begins to boil. Hock Seng steps back, horrified at the speed of the stuff. Fights the urge to wipe his hands. "Don't get any on your skin," he mutters. Stares at his gloves. If there is a trace of powder on them and they are wetted. . . His skin crawls. Mai is already backed away to the far side of the office, watching with terrified eyes.

Metal pours off the face, eaten and discarded iron, peeling away in sheaves, layers of it flaking away as if blown by autumn winds. The bright leaves of melting iron land on teak flooring. They hiss and spread. The flakes burn on, creating a lattice of broken seared wood.

"It doesn't stop," Mai says, awed. Hock Seng watches with increasing unease, wondering if the yeastlike stuff will eat away the floor below and send the safe crashing down into the manufacturing lines. He finds his voice. "It is alive. It should lose its ability to digest, soon."

"This is what the *farang* make." Mai's voice is frightened and awed.

"Our people have made such things as well." Hock Seng shakes his head. "Don't think the *farang* are so much as all that."

The safe continues to disintegrate. If only he had been brave before. He could have done this when there wasn't a war boiling outside the window. He wishes he could go back in time to his former frightened paranoid self, so worried about deportation, about angering foreign devils, about preserving his good name, and simply whisper in that old man's ear that there was no hope. That he should steal and run, and it could not turn out worse.

A voice interrupts his thoughts. "Well, well. Tan Hock Seng. How nice to see you here."

Hock Seng turns. Dog Fucker and Old Bones, along with six others, are standing in the doorway. All of them carrying spring guns. They're scratched and sooted from the warfare of the streets, but smiling and confident.

"We all seem to have been thinking along the same lines," Dog Fucker observes.

An explosion lights the sky, casting orange across the office. The rumble of destruction trembles through Hock Seng's soles. It's hard to tell how far away it was. The shells seem to fall randomly. If there is intelligence guiding them, it's not for them to understand. Another rumble, this one closer. The white shirts, defending the levees, most likely. Hock Seng fights an urge to flee. The cracking of the iron-digesting bacteria continues. Leaves of metal waft to the floor.

Hock Seng tests the waters. "I'm glad you're here. Help me, then. Come on."

Old Bones smiles. "I think not."

The men shoulder past Hock Seng. All of them larger than he. All of them armed. All of them uncaring of his and Mai's presence. Hock Seng staggers as they bump him aside.

"But it's mine," he protests. "You can't take it! I told you where it was!"

The men ignore him.

"You can't take it!" Hock Seng fumbles for his gun. Suddenly a pistol presses against his skull. Old Bones, smiling.

Dog Fucker watches with interest. "Another killing will make little difference on my rebirth. Don't test me."

Hock Seng can barely control his rage. A part of him wants to fire anyway, to steal away the man's smug expression. The safe's metal continues to bubble and hiss, falling away, slowly revealing his last object of hope. The *nak leng* all watch Hock Seng and Old Bones. They're loose, smiling. Unafraid. They haven't even lifted their pistols. They simply watch, interested, as Hock Seng points his pistol at them.

Dog Fucker grins. "Go away, yellow card. Before I change my mind."

Mai tugs at Hock Seng's hand. "Whatever it is, it isn't worth your life."

"She's right, yellow card," Old Bones says. "This is not a fight you can win."

Hock Seng lowers his pistol and allows Mai to pull him away. They back out of the office. The Dung Lord's men watch with small smiles, and then Hock Seng and Mai are going down the stairs and out into the factory, and from there into the rubble streets.

In the distance, a megodont screams in pain. The wind gusts, carrying ash and political pamphlets and the scent of burning WeatherAll. Hock Seng feels old. Too old to still be striving against a fate that clearly wishes him destroyed. Another whisper sheet tumbles past. The headline screams of windup girls and murder. Amazing that Mr. Lake's windup could cause so much trouble. And now everyone in the city is hunting for her. He almost smiles. Even if he's a yellow card, he's not as disadvantaged as that sorry creature. He probably owes her thanks. If it hadn't been for her and the news of Mr. Lake's arrest, he supposes he would be dead by now, burned in the slums with all his jade and cash and diamonds.

*I should be grateful.*

Instead, he feels the weight of his ancestors pressing down upon him, crushing him with their judgments. He took what his father and grandfather before him had built in Malaya and turned it to ash.

The failure is overwhelming.

Another whisper sheet flutters up against the factory wall. The windup girl again, along with accusations against General Pracha. Mr. Lake was obsessed with that windup girl. Couldn't stop fucking her. Couldn't resist bringing her to his bed at every opportunity. Hock Seng picks up the whisper sheet, suddenly thoughtful.

"What is it?" Mai asks.

*I am too old for this.*

But still, Hock Seng feels his heart beating faster. "I have an idea," he says. "A possibility."

A new absurd flicker of hope. He cannot help it. Even when he has nothing, he must strive.

## 43

A tank round explodes. Dirt and woody debris showers Kanya's head. They've abandoned the Ministry buildings—giving ground is what Kanya has called it, but in truth it's a rout—running as fast as they can from the oncoming tanks and megodonts.

The only thing that has saved them so far is that the army seems intent on securing the main campus of the Ministry, and so its strength remains gathered there. Still, she and her men have encountered three commando units coming over the south walls of the compound and they have cut Kanya's platoon in half. And now another tank, just as they were about to slip out a secondary exit. The tank smashed through the gate and blocked their escape.

She has ordered her men into the forest groves near Phra Seub's temple. It is in shambles. The carefully tended garden has been trampled by war megodonts. Its main columns have been burnt by a fire bomb attack that swept through the dry teak of the forest like a raging demon, shrieking and roaring, so now they shelter in ash and stumps and smolder.

Another tank shell drops into their hillside position. More commandos slip around the tank, break into teams and dash across the compound. It looks as though they're heading for the biological laboratories. Kanya wonders if Ratana is working there, if she even knows of the warfare above ground. A tree shatters beside her as another tank round explodes.

"They know we're up here, even if they can't see us," Pai says. As if to emphasize his words, a hail of disks whines overhead, embedding themselves in the burnt forest trunks, gleaming silver in the black wood. Kanya motions to her men that they should pull back. The other white shirts, all their uniforms carefully smeared now with soot and ash, scamper deeper into the guttering forest.

Another shell drops below them. Burning teak splinters whine through the air.

"This is too close." She gets up and runs, Pai dogging her. Hiroko streaks past, takes cover behind a black fallen log and waits for them to catch up.

"Can you imagine fighting that?" Pai gasps.

Kanya shakes her head. Already the windup has saved them twice. Once by spying out the shadow movement of commandos coming toward them, the second time pushing Kanya down a moment before a rain of spring disks shredded the air above her head. The windup's eyes are sharp where Kanya's are not, and she is blisteringly fast. Already, though, she is flushed, her skin dry and scalding to the touch. Hiroko is not built for this tropic warfare, and even though they pour water on her and try to keep her cool, she is fading.

When Kanya catches up, Hiroko looks up at her with fever-bright eyes. "I will have to drink something soon. Ice."

"We don't have any."

"The river then. Anything. I must return to Yashimoto-sama."

"There's fighting all along the river." Kanya has heard from others that General Pracha is at the levees, trying to repel the landing Navy boats. Fighting his old ally, Admiral Noi.

Hiroko reaches out with a scalding hand. "I cannot last."

Kanya searches around her, seeking an answer. Bodies are everywhere. It's worse than a plague, the men and women ripped by high explosives. The carnage is immense. Arms and legs, a foot separated and flung into a tree branch. Bodies piled and burning. Napalm hissing. The clank of tanks rumbling through the compounds, the burn of coal exhaust. "I need the radio," she says.

"Pichai had it last."

But Pichai is dead and they aren't sure where the radio has gone.

*We aren't trained for this sort of thing. We were supposed to stop blister rust and influenza, not tanks and megodonts.*

When she finally finds a radio, it is from a dead hand that she takes it. She cranks the handset. Tests the codes that the Ministry uses for discussing plagues, not warfare. Nothing. Finally she speaks in the clear. "This is Captain Kanya. Is there anyone else out there? Over?"

A long pause. The crackle and static. She repeats herself. Again she repeats. Nothing. And then, "Captain? This is Lieutenant Apichart."

She recognizes the assistant's voice. "Yes? Where is General Pracha?"

More silence. "We don't know."

"You aren't with him?"

Another pause. "We think he's dead." He coughs. "They used a gas."

"Who is our ranking officer?"

Another long pause. "I believe it is you, ma'am."

She pauses, shocked. "It can't be. What about the fifth?"

"We haven't heard."

"General Som?"

"He was found in his home, assassinated. Also Karmatha, and Phailin."

"It's not possible."

"It is rumor. But they have not been seen, and General Pracha believed it when we received word."

"No other captains?"

"Bhirombhakdi was at the anchor pads, but all we see is fire from there."

"Where are you?"

"An Expansion tower, near Phraram Road."

"How many do you have with you?"

"Maybe thirty."

She surveys her people with dismay. Wounded men and women. Hiroko lying against a dead shorn banana tree, face flushed like a Chinese paper lantern, eyes closed. Perhaps dead already. Fleetingly she wonders if she cares about the creature or. . . Her men are all around her, watching. Kanya takes in their pathetic ammunition. Their wounds. So few of them.

The radio crackles. "What should we do, Captain?" Lieutenant Apichart asks. "Our guns don't do anything against tanks. There's no way for us—" The channel crackles with static.

From the direction of the river, a deep explosion rumbles.

Private Sarawut climbs down from a tree. "They stopped shelling the docks."

"We're alone," Pai murmurs.

## 44

It's the silence that wakes her. Emiko has passed the night in a blurry sprawl, periods of sleep broken by the rumble of high explosives and the whine of high-capacity springs unleashing. Tanks clank down the streets burning coal, but much of it is distant, battles fought in other districts. On the streets bodies lie abandoned, casualties of the riot, now forgotten in the larger conflict.

A strange silence has settled over the city. A few candles twinkle in windows where people keep midnight watch on the ravaged city, but nothing else is lit. No gas lights in the buildings or on the streets. Total blackness. It seems that either the city's methane has run out, or someone has finally shut off the mains.

Emiko pulls herself out of the garbage, wrinkling her nose in disgust at the discarded melon rinds and banana peels. Against the flame-orange sky, she can see a few columns of smoke, but nothing else. The streets are empty. There is no better time for what she plans.

She turns her attention to the tower. Six stories above, Anderson-sama's apartment waits. If only she can get to it. At first, she had hoped to simply speed through the lobby and find her way higher, but the doors are locked and guards patrol within. And she is now too well-known to risk an attempt at direct entrance. But she has an alternative.

She is hot. Terribly hot. A green coconut that she found and smashed early in the night is a wistful memory now. She counts the balconies again, one after the other, rising above her. Water is up there. Breezes. Survival and a temporary hiding place, if she can make it.

A rumble comes from the distance, then a crackle like fireworks. She listens. Best not to wait any longer. She scrambles for the lowest balcony. It is cased in iron bars, as is the one above. She pulls herself up the face of the first and second balconies, using the easy handholds of the bars to climb.

She stands at last on the open third balcony, panting with the effort. She feels dizzy with the heat building within her. Below her, the alley cobbles beckon. She looks up at the balcony lip of the fourth floor. She gathers herself and jumps. . . and is rewarded with a good handhold. She pulls herself up.

On the fourth balcony, she perches on its railing, staring up at the fifth. The heat of her exertion is building. She takes a breath and jumps. Her fingers catch. She dangles in the open air. She looks down and immediately regrets it. The alley is far below, now. She slowly pulls herself up, gasping.

The apartment within is dark. No one stirs. Emiko tests the iron lattice of the security gate, hoping for a lucky entrance, but it is locked. She would give anything to drink water now, to pour it over her face and body. She studies the security gate's construction, but there is no way for her to break in.

*One more jump.*

She returns to the balcony's edge. Her hands are the only part of her that seem to sweat like a normal creature's, and now they are as slick as oil with her body's moisture. She wipes them again and again, trying to make them dry. The intense flush of too much exertion is swallowing her. She scrambles up onto the balcony's lip, balances. Dizzy. She crouches, steadying herself.

She leaps.

Her fingers scrabble at the balcony rim, then slip. She crashes back, slamming across the lower railing. Her ribs explode with pain as she flips over and smashes into potted jasmine vines. Another blossom of pain flares in her elbow.

She lies whimpering amongst shattered pottery and night jasmine perfume. Blood gleams black on her hands. She can't stop whimpering. Her whole body is shaking. She's burning up with the exertion of climbing and jumping.

She pushes herself up awkwardly, cradling her damaged arm, expecting people to come charging out at her, but the apartment beyond the gate remains dark.

Emiko staggers to her feet and leans against the balcony rail, looking up at her goal.

*You foolish girl. Why do you try so hard to survive? Why not just jump and die? It would be so much simpler.*

She peers down into the black alley below. She doesn't have an answer. It is something in her genetics, as deeply ingrained as her urge to please. She hauls herself up again onto the railing, balancing awkwardly, cradling her throbbing arm. She looks upward, praying to Mizuko Jizo the windup bodhisattva to give her mercy.

She jumps, reaching one-handed for salvation.

Her fingers catch. . . then slip away.

Emiko lashes out with her bad hand and catches hold. Her elbow's ligaments tear away. She yelps as the bones separate, then crack wide. Sobbing, breath sawing in and out of her throat, she scrabbles for the railing with her good hand. Seizes a handhold. She lets her broken arm fall and hang limp.

Emiko dangles one-handed, high above the street. Her arm is nothing but flame. She whimpers quietly, preparing to wound herself once again. She lets out a ragged sob and then reaches up once again with her ruined arm. Her hand closes on the railing.

*Please. Please. Just a little more.*

She lets her weight settle onto the arm. White pain. Emiko's breath saws ragged in her throat. She hauls a leg up, feeling with her foot, scrabbling for a toehold, finally it hooks on the iron. She pulls herself up, teeth gritted, sobbing, refusing to let go.

*Only a bit more.*

The barrel of a spring gun presses against her forehead.

Emiko opens her eyes. A young girl grips the pistol in trembling hands. She stares at Emiko, terror-stricken. "You were right," she whispers.

An old Chinese man looms behind her, his expression shadowed. They peer over the balcony precipice, watching Emiko as she dangles. Emiko's hands begin to slip. The pain is almost unbearable now.

"Please," Emiko whispers. "Help me."

## 45

The gas lights in Akkarat's operations center gutter out. Anderson straightens in the sudden darkness, surprised. The fighting has been desultory for some time, but all across the city it is the same. Krung Thep's gas lamps are winking out, green points of light smothered down the thoroughfares, one by one. A few zones of conflict still flicker yellow and orange with burning WeatherAll, but all the green is gone from the city. A black blanket covers it, almost as complete as that of the ocean beyond the levees.

"What's happening?" Anderson asks.

The dim glow of computer monitors is all that still lights the room. Akkarat comes back inside from the balcony. The operations room buzzes with activity. Emergency hand-cranked lantern LEDs come to life, spattering light around the room, illuminating Akkarat's smiling face. "We've taken the methane works," he says. "The country is ours."

"You're certain?"

"The anchor pads and the docks are secure. The white shirts are surrendering. We've gotten word from their commanding officer. They will be laying down their weapons and surrendering unconditionally. The word is going out over their coded radio now. A few will fight on, but we have the city now."

Anderson rubs at his broken ribs. "Does that mean we can leave?"



Akkarat nods. "Of course. I will detail men to escort you back to your homes in just a little while. The streets will still take a bit of time to settle." He smiles. "I think you will be very happy with the new management of our Kingdom."

A few hours later they're being ushered into an elevator.

They plunge to street level and find Akkarat's personal limousine waiting. Outside, the sky is just starting to lighten.

Carlyle stops on the verge of climbing into the car, staring down the thoroughfare to where the yellow edge of dawn is thickening. "Now that's something I wasn't expecting to see."

"I thought we were dead."

"You seemed cool enough."

Anderson shrugs gingerly. "Finland was worse." But as he climbs into the car, he has another coughing fit. It goes on for half a minute, wracking him. He wipes blood off his lips as Carlyle stares

"Are you all right?" Carlyle asks.

Anderson nods as he gingerly pulls the door closed. "I think I'm busted up inside. Akkarat used a pistol on my ribs."

Carlyle studies him. "You sure you haven't caught something?"

"Are you kidding?" Anderson laughs, which makes his ribs hurt. "I work for AgriGen. I'm inoculated against diseases that haven't even been released yet."

The car accelerates away from the curb with an escort of kink-spring scooters swarming around the coal-diesel limo. Anderson settles himself more comfortably in his seat, watching as the city slides past beyond the glass.

Carlyle taps a leather armrest thoughtfully. "I'll have to get me one of these. Once the trade starts flowing, I'm going to have a lot of money to spend."

Anderson nods, distracted. "We're going to need to start shipping calories right away. Famine relief. I want to commission your dirigibles immediately, as a stopgap. We'll bring U-Tex in from India. Give Akkarat something to crow about. Benefits of open markets, all that. Lots of good press from the whisper sheets. Get things cemented."

"You can't just enjoy the moment?" Carlyle laughs. "It's not often you escape a black hood, Anderson. The first thing we do is go find some whiskey and a rooftop, and watch the damn sun rise over the country we just bought. That's what we do first. The rest of the crap will all wait for tomorrow."

The limousine makes a turn onto Phraram I Road and their escort forges ahead of them, hurtling across the rapidly lightening city. They come down off a flyway and detour around a rubble-topped Expansion tower that has been entirely toppled in the fighting. A few people are scavenging in the wreckage, but no one is armed.

"It's over," Anderson murmurs. "Just like that." He feels tired. A pair of white shirt bodies lie half-off the curb, rag-doll limp. A vulture stands beside them, edging closer. Anderson touches his ribs gingerly, suddenly glad to be alive.

"You know someplace we can buy that whiskey?"

The old Chinese man and the young girl crouch away from her, watching carefully as she guzzles water. Emiko was surprised when the old man allowed the girl to help her crawl over the balcony's edge. But now that she is safe, he keeps his spring gun trained on her and Emiko understands that he is not motivated by charity.

"Did you really kill them?" he asks.

Emiko gingerly lifts her glass and drinks again. If she didn't hurt so much, she could almost enjoy the fact that they are afraid of her. With water, she feels vastly improved, even with her right arm lying limp and swollen in her lap. She sets the glass on the floor and cradles her wounded elbow close. She breathes shallowly through the pain.

"Did you?" he asks again.

She shrugs slightly. "I was fast. They were slow."

They are speaking Mandarin, a language she hasn't used since her time with Gendo-sama. English, Thai, French, Mandarin Chinese, accounting, political protocol, catering and hospitality. . . So many skills she doesn't use anymore. It took a few minutes for her memories of the language to surface but then it was there, like a limb that had atrophied from long neglect, and then miraculously turned out to be strong. She wonders if her broken arm will heal as easily, if her body still holds surprises for her.

"You are the yellow card secretary from the factory," she says. "Hock Seng, yes? Anderson-sama told me that you ran away when the whites shirts came."

The old man shrugs. "I came back."

"Why?"

He grins without humor. "We cling to whatever flotsam we have."

Outside, an explosion rumbles. They all look toward the sound.

"I think it's ending," the girl murmurs. "That's the first one in more than an hour."

Emiko thinks that with the two of them distracted, she could probably kill them both, even with her shattered arm. But she is so tired. Tired of destruction. Tired of slaughter. Beyond the balcony, the city smokes against a lightening sky. An entire city torn to ribbons over. . . what? A windup girl who couldn't keep her place.

Emiko closes her eyes against the shame of it. She can almost see Mizumi-sensei frowning disapproval. She's surprised that the woman still holds any power over her at all. Perhaps she will never be free of her old teacher. Mizumi is as much a part of her as her wretched pore structure. "You want to collect the reward for me?" she asks. "Wish to profit from catching a killer?"

"The Thais want you very badly."

The apartment's locks rattle. They all look up as Anderson-sama and another *gaijin* stumble through the door. Dark bruises decorate the foreigners' faces, but they're laughing and smiling. They both stop short. Anderson-sama's eyes flick from Emiko to the old man, to the pistol that now points at him.

"Hock Seng?"

The other *gaijin* backpedals and slips behind Anderson-sama. "What the hell?"

"Good question." Anderson-sama is studying the scene before him, pale blue eyes evaluating.

The girl Mai makes a reflexive *wai* to the *gaijin*. Emiko almost smiles in recognition. She too knows that knee-jerk urge to show respect.

"What are you doing here, Hock Seng?" Anderson-sama asks.

Hock Seng gives him a thin smile. "You aren't pleased to capture the killer of the Somdet Chaopraya?"

Anderson-sama doesn't respond, just looks from Hock Seng to Emiko and back again. Finally he asks, "How did you get in here?"

Hock Seng shrugs. "I did, after all, find this flat for Mr. Yates. Presented the keys to him myself."

Anderson-sama shakes his head. "He was a fool, wasn't he?"

Hock Seng inclines his head.

With a chill, Emiko sees that this confrontation can only turn against her. The only person here who is disposable is herself. If she is quick, she can simply strip the pistol from the old man's hand. Just as she took the pistols from those slow bodyguards. It will hurt, but it can be done. The old man is no match for her.

The other *gaijin* is slipping out the door without another word, but Emiko is surprised to see Anderson-sama does not retreat as well. Instead, he eases into the room, hands held up, palms out. One of his hands is bandaged. His voice is soothing.

"What do you want, Hock Seng?"

Hock Seng backs away, keeping space between himself and the *gaijin*. "Nothing." Hock Seng shrugs slightly. "The killer of the Somdet Chaopraya, righteously punished. That is all."

Anderson-sama laughs. "Nice." He turns and settles carefully into a couch. Grunts and winces as he leans back. Smiles again.

"Now, what do you really want?"

The old man's lips quirk, sharing the joke. "What I've always wanted. A future."

Anderson-sama nods thoughtfully. "You think this girl will help you get that? Get you a nice reward?"

"The capture of a royal assassin will surely earn me enough to rebuild my family."

Anderson-sama doesn't say anything, just stares at Hock Seng with his cold blue eyes. His gaze turns to Emiko. "Did you kill him? Really?"

A part of her wants to lie. She can see in his eyes that he wants that lie as well, but she can't force the words out. "I am sorry, Anderson-sama."

"And all the bodyguards, too?"

"They hurt me."

He shakes his head. "I didn't believe it. I was sure Akkarat set it all up. But then you jumped off the balcony." His unsettling blue eyes continue to watch her. "Are you trained to kill?"

"No!" She recoils, shocked at the suggestion. Rushes to explain. "I did not know. They hurt me. I was angry. I didn't know—" She has an overwhelming urge to kowtow

before him. To try to convince him of her loyalty. She fights the instinct, recognizing her own genetic need to roll over on her back and bare her belly.

"So you're not an assassin, trained?" he asks. "A military windup?"

"No. Not military. Please. Believe me."

"But still dangerous. You tore the Somdet Chaopraya's head off with your bare hands."

Emiko wants to protest, to say that she is not that creature, that it was not her, but the words won't come out. All she can do is whisper, "I did not take off his head."

"You could kill us all if you wanted, though. Before we even knew you were coming. Before Hock Seng could even lift his pistol."

At these words, Hock Seng whips his spring gun back to point at her. Pathetically slow.

Emiko shakes her head. "I do not wish it," she says. "I only wish to leave. To go north. That is all."

"But still, you're a dangerous creature," Anderson-sama says. "Dangerous to me. To other people. If anyone saw me with you, now." He shakes his head and grimaces. "You're worth far more dead than alive."

Emiko readies herself, prepares for the excruciating pain that will come. First the Chinese, then Anderson-sama. Maybe not the little girl—

"I'm sorry, Hock Seng," Anderson-sama says abruptly. "You can't have her."

Emiko stares at the *gaijin*, shocked.

The Chinese laughs. "You will stop me?"

Anderson-sama shakes his head. "Times are changing, Hock Seng. My people are coming. In force. All our fortunes will be changing. It won't just be the factory anymore. It'll be calorie contracts, freight shipping, R&D centers, trade negotiations. . . Starting today, everything changes."

"And this rising tide will raise my ship as well?"

Anderson-sama laughs, then winces, touching his ribs. "More than ever, Hock Seng. We'll need people like you more than ever."

The old man looks from Anderson-sama to Emiko. "What about Mai?"

Anderson-sama coughs. "Stop worrying about small things, Hock Seng. You're going to have an almost unlimited expense account. Hire her. Marry her. I don't care. Do what you like. Hell, I'm sure Carlyle would find a place for her too, if you don't want her on your own payroll." He leans back and shouts out into the hall. "I know you're still out there, you coward. Get in here."

The *gaijin* Carlyle's voice calls in. "You're really going to protect that windup?" He peers around the corner, cautious.

Anderson-sama shrugs. "Without her, we wouldn't even have had an excuse for the coup." He gives her a crooked smile. "That must be worth something."

He looks again at Hock Seng. "Well? What do you think?"

"You swear this?" the old man asks.

"If we break faith, you can always report her later. She's not going anywhere soon. Not with everyone on the lookout for a windup assassin. We all benefit, every one of us, if we come to agreement. Come on, Hock Seng. This is an easy call. Everyone wins, for once."

Hock Seng hesitates, then gives a sharp nod and lowers his gun. Emiko feels a sudden flood of relief. Anderson smiles. He turns his attention to her and his expression softens. "Many things will be changing now. But we can't let anyone see you. There are too many people who will never forgive. You understand?"

"Yes. I will not be seen."

"Good. Once things calm down, we'll see about getting you out of here. For the moment, you'll stay here. We'll splint up that arm. I'll get someone to bring in a case of ice. Would you like that?"

The relief is almost overwhelming. "Yes. Thank you. You are kind."

Anderson-sama smiles. "Where's that whiskey, Carlyle? We need a toast." He gets up, wincing, and comes back with an array of glasses and a bottle.

As he sets the glassware down on a small end-table, he coughs.

"Goddamn Akkarat," he mutters, and then he coughs again, a deep hoarse sound.

Suddenly he doubles over. Another cough wracks him and then more follow in a wet rattling series. Anderson-sama puts out a hand to steady himself but instead jostles the table. Tips it.

Emiko watches as the glasses and whiskey bottle slide toward the edge of the table, spill off. They fall very slowly, glinting in the light of the rising sun. They're very pretty, she thinks. So clean and bright.

They shatter across the floor. Anderson-sama's coughing spasm continues. He collapses to his knees amongst the shards. He tries to get up, but another spasm seizes him. He curls over on his side.

When the coughing finally releases him, he looks toward Emiko, blue eyes staring out from sunken hollows.

"Akkarat really cracked me up," he rasps.

Hock Seng and Mai are backing away. Carlyle has an arm over his mouth, frightened eyes peering over the crook of an elbow.

"It's like the factory," Mai murmurs.

Emiko crouches down beside the *gaijin*.

He suddenly seems small and frail. He reaches for her, clumsy, and she takes his hand. Blood spackles his lips.

The formal surrender occurs on the open parade grounds before the Grand Palace. Akkarat is there to greet Kanya and accept her *khrab* of submission. Already AgriGen ships are in the docks, unloading U-Tex rice and SoyPRO onto the docks. The sterile seeds of the grain monopolies—some to feed people now, some to go to Thai farmers in

the next planting cycle. From where she stands in the parade grounds, Kanya can see the corporate sails with their red wheat crest logos billowing above the levee rim.

There was a rumor that the young Queen would oversee the ceremony and cement the new government under Akkarat, and so the throngs are larger than would be expected. But at the last moment, word came that she would not, after all, attend, and so they all stand in the heat of the dry season that has gone on too long already, sweating and sweltering as Akkarat steps up on a dais while monks chant. He swears oaths as the new Somdet Chaopraya to protect the Kingdom in this unsettled state of military law, then he turns and faces the army and civilians and remaining white shirts under Kanya, all arrayed before him.

Sweat trickles down Kanya's temples but she refuses to move. Even though she surrendered the Environment Ministry into Akkarat's hands, still she wishes to present it in the best, most disciplined light, and so she remains at attention, sweating, with Pai in the front rank beside her, his face schooled into careful immobility.

She catches sight of Narong standing a little behind Akkarat, watching the proceedings. He inclines his head to her and it is all she can do not to scream at him, to shriek that all of this destruction is his fault. Wanton and pointless and avoidable. Kanya grits her teeth and sweats and drills her hatred into Narong's forehead. It's stupid. The one she hates is herself. She will formally surrender the last of her good men and women to Akkarat and see the white shirts disbanded.

Jaidee stands beside her, watching thoughtfully.

"You have something you want to say?" Kanya mutters.

Jaidee shrugs. "They took the rest of my family. In the fighting."

Kanya sucks in her breath. "I am sorry." She wishes she could reach out. Touch him.

Jaidee smiles sadly. "It is war. I always tried to explain that to you."

She wants to answer but Akkarat beckons for her. Now is the time for her abasement. She hates the man so. How is it that her youthful rage can be so undone? She swore as a child she would destroy the white shirts, and yet now her victory has the reek of the Ministry's burning grounds. Kanya climbs the steps and performs her *khrab*. Akkarat allows her to remain prostrate for a long time. Above her, she can hear him speaking.

"It is natural to grieve a man such as General Pracha," he says to the multitudes. "Though he was not loyal, he was passionate, and for that, if nothing else, we owe him a measure of respect. His last days were not his only days. He labored on behalf of the Kingdom for many years. He worked to preserve our people in times of great uncertainty. I will never speak against his good work, even if, at the end, he went astray."

He pauses, then says, "We, as a Kingdom, must heal." He looks down at them all. "In the spirit of good will, I am very happy to announce that the Queen has accepted my request that all the combatants who fought on behalf of General Pracha and his coup attempt are granted amnesty. Unconditionally. For those of you who still wish to work at the Environment Ministry, I hope that you will continue to work there with pride. We face all manner of hardships, and we cannot know what our future holds."

He motions to Kanya to stand and walks across to her.

"Captain Kanya, though you fought against the Kingdom and the palace, I grant you both a pardon and something more." He pauses. "We must reconcile. We, as a kingdom and nation, must reconcile. Must reach across to one another."

Kanya's stomach tightens, she feels sick with disgust at the whole proceeding. Akkarat says, "As you are the highest ranking member of the Environment Ministry, I now appoint you to its head. Your duty is as it was. Protect the Kingdom and Her Royal Majesty the Queen."

Kanya stares at Akkarat. Behind him, Narong is smiling slightly. He inclines his head, showing respect. Kanya is speechless. She *wais*, deeply shocked. Akkarat smiles.

"You may dismiss your men, General. Tomorrow we must once again rebuild."

Still speechless, she *wais* again, then turns. Her first attempt at an order comes out as a croak. She swallows and give the order again, her voice cracking. Faces, as surprised and uncertain as her own feels, stare at up at her. For a moment, she fears that they know her for a fraud, that they will not obey. Then ranks of white shirts turn as one. They march away, uniforms flashing in the sunlight. Jaidee marches with them. But before he does, he *wais* to her as if she truly is a general, and this hurts more than anything that has come before.

## 48

"They're leaving. It's done."

Anderson lets his head fall back on the pillow. "We've won then."

Emiko doesn't respond; she's still looking out toward the distant parade grounds.

Morning light burns through the window. He is shivering. Freezing and grateful for the onslaught of sun. Sweat pours off of him. Emiko lays a hand on his forehead and he's surprised to feel that it is cool.

He looks up at her through his haze of fever and sickness. "Is Hock Seng here yet?"

She shakes her head sadly. "Your people are not loyal."

Anderson almost laughs at that. He pushes ineffectually at his blankets. Emiko helps him strip them away. "No. They're not." He turns his face to the sun again, soaking it up, allowing it to bathe him. "But I knew that." He would laugh more, if he weren't so tired. If his body didn't feel as if it was breaking apart.

"Do you want more water?" she asks.

The thought doesn't appeal. He's not thirsty. Last night, he was thirsty. When the doctor came at Akkarat's order he could have drunk the ocean, but now, he is not.

After examining him, the doctor went way, fear in his eyes, saying that he would send people. That the Environment Ministry would have to be notified. That white shirts would come to work some black containment magic upon him. All that time Emiko hid, and after the doctor went away, she waited with Anderson through the days and nights.

At least, he remembers her in fractured moments. He dreamed. Hallucinated. Yates sat with him for a time on his bed. Laughed at him. Pointed out the futility of his life. Peered into his eyes and asked him if he understood. And Anderson tried to answer but his throat was parched. No words could force their way out. And Yates laughed at that as well, and asked him what he thought of the newly arrived AgriGen Trade Representative

coming to take his niche. If Anderson liked being replaced any better than he had. And then Emiko was there with a cool cloth and he was grateful, desperately grateful for any sort of attention, for her human connection. . . and he had laughed weakly at the irony.

Now he looks at Emiko through bleary vision and thinks about debts he owes, and wonders if he will live long enough to pay them.

"We're going to get you out," he whispers.

A new wave of shivering takes him. All through the night, he was hot, and now, abruptly he is cold, shaking with the freezing feel, as if he has returned to the Upper Midwest and freezes in those still cold winters, as if he looks out at snow. Now he is cold, and not thirsty at all, and even a windup girl's fingers feel icy against his face.

He pushes weakly at her hand. "Is Hock Seng here yet?"

"You're burning up." Emiko's face is full of concern.

"Has he come?" Anderson asks. It is intensely important that the man come. That Hock Seng be here, in the room with him. Though he can barely remember why. It is important.

"I think he will not come." she says. "He has all the letters he needed from you. The introductions. He is already busy with your people. With the new representative. The Boudry woman."

A cheshire appears on the balcony. It yowls low and slips inside. Emiko doesn't seem to notice or care, but then, she and it are siblings. Sympathetic creatures, manufactured by the same flawed gods.

Anderson watches dully as the cat makes its way across his bedroom and molts through the door. If he weren't so weak, he would throw something at it. He sighs. He's past that, now. Too tired to complain about a cat. He lets his gaze roll up to the ceiling and the slow whirl of the crank fan.

He wants to still be angry. But even that has gone. At first, when he discovered that he was sick, when Hock Seng and the girl had pulled back, alarmed, he had thought they were crazy. That he hadn't been exposed to any vectors, but then, looking at them, at their fear and certainty, he had understood.

"The factory?" he'd whispered, repeating the girl Mai's words, and Hock Seng had nodded, keeping his hand over his face.

"The fining rooms, or the algae baths," he murmured.

Anderson had wanted to be angry then, but the sickness was already sapping his strength. All he could summon was a dull rage that quickly burned away. "Has anyone survived?"

"One," the girl had whispered.

And he had nodded, and they had slunk away. Hock Seng. Always with his secrets. Always with his angles and his planning. Always waiting. . .

"Is he coming?" He has a hard time forcing the words out.

"He will not come," Emiko murmurs.

"You're here."



She shrugs. "I am New People. Your sicknesses do not frighten me. That one will not come. Not the Carlyle man either."

"At least they're leaving you alone. Kept their word, there."

"Maybe," she says, but she lacks conviction.

Anderson wonders if she's right. Wonders if he is wrong about Hock Seng as he was wrong about so many things. Wonders if his every understanding of the place was wrong. He forces away the fear. "He'll keep faith. He's a businessman."

Emiko doesn't answer. The cheshire jumps onto the bed. She shoos it away, but it jumps up again, seemingly sensing the carrion opportunity he represents.

Anderson tries to raise a hand. "No," he croaks. "Let it stay."

## 49

AgriGen people march off the docks. Kanya and her men stand at attention, an honor guard for demons. The *farang* all stand and squint at the tropic sun, taking in the land they have never before seen. They point rudely at young girls walking down the street, talk and laugh loudly. They are an uncouth race. So confident.

"They're very self-satisfied," Pai mutters.

Kanya startles at hearing her own thoughts voiced aloud, but doesn't respond. Simply waits while Akkarat meets these new creatures. A blond, scowling woman called Elizabeth Boudry is at their head, an AgriGen creature through and through.

She has a long sweeping black cloak as do others of the AgriGen people, all of them with their red wheat crest logos shining in the sun. The only satisfying thing about seeing these people in their hated uniforms is that the tropic heat must be awful for them. Their faces shine with sweat.

Akkarat says to Kanya. "These are the ones who will be going to the seedbank."

"Are you sure about this?" she asks.

He shrugs. "They only want samples. Genetic diversity for their generipping. The Kingdom will benefit as well."

Kanya studies the people who used to be called calorie demons and who now walk so brazenly in Krung Thep, the City of Divine Beings. Crates of grain are coming off the ship and being stacked on megodont wagons, the AgriGen logo prominent on every one.

Seeming to sense her thoughts, Akkarat says, "We've passed the time when we can hide behind our walls and hope to survive. We must engage with this outside world."

"But the seedbank," Kanya protests quietly. "King Rama's legacy."

Akkarat nods shortly. "They will only be taking samples. Do not concern yourself." He turns to another *farang* and shakes hands with him in the foreign style. Speaks with him using the *Angrit* language and sends him on his way.

"Richard Carlyle," Akkarat comments as he returns to Kanya's side. "We'll have our pumps, finally. He's sending out a dirigible this afternoon. With luck we'll beat the rainy season." He looks at her significantly. "You understand all this? You understand what I'm doing here? It is better to lose a little of the Kingdom than everything. There are times to

fight and times to negotiate. We cannot survive if we are entirely isolated. History tells us we must engage with the outside world."

Kanya nods stiffly.

Jaidee leans over her shoulder. "At least they never got Gi Bu Sen."

"I would rather give them Gi Bu Sen than the seedbank," Kanya mutters.

"Yes, but I think that losing the man was even more irritating to them." He nods at the Boudry woman. "She was quite enraged. Shouted, even. Lost all her face. Paced back and forth waving her arms." He demonstrates.

Kanya grimaces. "Akkarat was angry, too. He was after me all day, demanding to know how we could have allowed the old man to escape."

"A clever man, that one."

Kanya laughs. "Akkarat?"

"The generipper."

Before Kanya can plumb more of Jaidee's thoughts, the Boudry woman and her seed scientists approach. An ancient yellow card Chinese man approaches with her. He stands ramrod straight, nods to Kanya. "I will be translating for *Khun* Elizabeth Boudry."

Kanya makes herself smile politely as she studies the people before her. This is what it comes to. Yellow cards and *farang*.

"Everything is change." Jaidee sighs. "It would be good for you to remember it. Clinging to the past, worrying about the future. . ." He shrugs. "It's all suffering."

The *farang* are waiting for her. Impatient. She guides them down into the war-damaged streets. Somewhere in the distance, off near the anchor pads, a tank booms. Perhaps a cell of holdout students, people not under her control. People beholden to different sorts of honor than she. She waves to two of her new underlings, Malivalaya and Yuthakon, if she remembers correctly.

"General," one of them starts, but Kanya scowls at him.

"I told you, no more generals. No more of that nonsense. I am a captain. If captain was good enough for Jaidee, then I won't name myself higher."

Malivalaya *wais* apology. Kanya orders the *farang* into the comfort of the coal-diesel car, and then they are whispering through the streets. It is a luxury that she has never experienced, but she forces herself not to exclaim at Akkarat's suddenly exposed wealth. The car slides through the empty streets, making its way toward the City Pillar Shrine.

Fifteen minutes later, they emerge from the car into burning sun. Monks lower their heads in courtesy to her, acknowledging her authority. She nods back, feeling sick. In this, King Rama XII placed the Environment Ministry above even monks.

The monks throw open gates and lead her and the rest of the entourage down below, down into the cool deeps. Airtight doors swing up, filtered air under negative pressure wafts out. Perfectly humid air, chilly. She forces herself not to clutch her arms to her as the cool increases. More vault doors open, revealing interior corridors, powered by coal-burning systems, triple fail-safed.

Monks in saffron wait politely, stepping away from her to ensure that she doesn't come in contact with them. She turns to the Boudry woman. "Don't touch the monks. They have taken vows not to touch women."

The yellow card translates into the *farang's* squawking language. Kanya hears a snort of laughter behind her but forces herself not to react. The Boudry woman and her generipper scientists all chatter excitedly as they work their way deeper into the seedbank. The yellow card translator doesn't bother to explain their weird exclamations, but Kanya can guess most of it from the delighted expressions.

She leads them deeper into the vaults, to the cataloging rooms, all the time thinking on the nature of loyalty. Better to give up a limb than to give up the head. The Kingdom survives when other countries fall because of Thai practicality.

Kanya glances back at the *farang*. Their greedy pale eyes scan the shelves, the vacuum-sealed containers of thousands of seeds, each one a potential line of defense against their kind. The true treasure of a kingdom, laid out before them. The spoils of war.

When the Burmese toppled Ayutthaya, the city fell without a fight. And now, again, it is the same. In the end, after all the blood and sweat and deaths and toil, after the struggles of seed saints and martyrs like Phra Seub, after the sale of girls like Kip to Gi Bu Sen and all the rest, it comes down to this. *Farang* standing triumphant at the heart of a kingdom betrayed once again by ministers uncaring for the crown.

"Don't take it so badly." Jaidee touches her on her shoulder. "We all must come to terms with our failures, Kanya."

"I am sorry. For everything."

"I forgave you a long time ago. We all have our patrons and our loyalties. It was *kamma* that brought you to Akkarat before you came to me."

"I never thought it would come to this."

"It is a great loss." Jaidee agrees. Then he shrugs. "But even now, it doesn't have to be this way."

Kanya glances over at the *farang*. One of the scientists catches her eye, says something to the woman. Kanya can't tell if it is mocking or thoughtful. Their wheat crest logos gleam in the flicker of electric lighting.

Jaidee raises an eyebrow. "There is always Her Majesty the Queen, yes?"

"And what can that accomplish?"

"Would you not prefer to be remembered as a villager of Bang Rajan who fought when all was lost, and held the Burmese at bay for a little while, than as one of the cowardly courtiers of Ayutthaya who sacrificed a kingdom?"

"It's all ego," Kanya mutters.

"Maybe." Jaidee shrugs. "But I'll tell you true: Ayutthaya was nothing in our history. Did the Thai not survive the sack of it? Have we not survived the Burmese? The Khmers? The French? The Japanese? The Americans? The Chinese? The calorie companies? Have we not held them all at bay when others fell? It is our people who carry the lifeblood of this country, not this city. Our people carry the names that the Chakri gave us, and it is our people who are everything. And it is this seedbank that sustains us."

"But His Majesty declared that we would always defend—"

"King Rama did not care an ounce for Krung Thep; he cared for us, and so he made a symbol for us to protect. But it is not the city, it is the people that matter. What good is a city if the people are enslaved?"

Kanya's breathing has become rapid. Icy air saws in and out of her lungs. The Boudry woman says something. The generippers yawp in their awful tongue. Kanya turns to Pai.

"Follow my lead."

She draws her spring gun and fires it point blank into the *farang* woman's head.

## 50

Elizabeth Boudry's head jerks back. Blood sprays Hock Seng in fine mist, spattering his skin and newly tailored clothes. The white shirt general turns and Hock Seng immediately drops to his knees, making a *khrah* of obeisance beside the collapsed body of the foreign devil.

The blond creature's surprised dead eyes stare out at him as he prostrates himself. Spring gun disks chatter across the walls, people are screaming. Suddenly there is silence.

The white shirt general yanks him to his feet and shoves her spring gun into his face.

"Please," Hock Seng whispers in Thai. "I am not their kind."

The general's hard eyes study him. She nods sharply, and shoves him aside. He huddles against a wall as she begins barking orders to her men. They quickly drag the AgriGen bodies aside, then coalesce around her. Hock Seng is surprised at how quickly the unsmiling woman musters her troops. She goes to the monks of the seedbank. Makes her own *khrah* of respect and begins speaking quickly. Even though she performs a *khrah* to their spiritual authority, there can be no doubt that she is the one who is the master of the place.

Hock Seng's eyes widen as he hears what she is planning. It's terrifying. An act of destruction that cannot be allowed. . . and yet, the monks are nodding and now people are streaming out of the seedbank, all of them working quickly. The general and her men begin throwing open doors, revealing rack after rack of weaponry. She begins assigning teams: the Grand Palace, Korakot Pump, Khlong Toey Seawall Lock. . .

The general spares a glance at Hock Seng as she finishes dispatching her people. The monks are already taking seeds down from the shelves. Hock Seng cringes at her attention. After what he has heard, she cannot intend to let him live. The bustle of activity increases. More and more monks stream in. They stack the seeds cases carefully. Rank after rank of seeds coming down from the shelves. Seeds from more than a hundred years ago, seeds that every so often are cultured in the strictest of isolation chambers and then carried back to this underground safe, to be stored again. The heritage of millennia in the boxes, the heritage of the world.

And then the monks are streaming out of the seedbank, carrying the boxes on their shoulders, a river of shaven-headed men in saffron robes, bearing forth their nation's treasure. Hock Seng watches, breathless at the sight of so much genetic material disappearing into the wilds. Somewhere outside, he thinks he hears monks chanting, blessing this project of renewal and destruction, and then the white shirt general is looking at him again. He forces himself not to duck his head. Not to grovel. She will kill him. She must. He will not grovel and piss himself. At least he will die with dignity.

The general purses her lips, then simply jerks her head toward the open doors. "Run, yellow card. This city is no longer a refuge for you."

He stares at her, surprised. She jerks her head again and the shadow of a smile touches her lips. Hock Seng *wais* quickly and climbs off his knees. He hurries through the tunnels and out into hot open air, the river of saffron-robed men all around him. Once they reach the temple grounds, the monks disperse through various gates, separating into smaller and smaller groups, a diaspora bound eventually for some pre-arranged place of distant safety. A secret place, far from calorie company reach, watched over by Phra Seub and all the spirits of the nation.

Hock Seng watches for a moment longer as the monks continue to pour from the seedbank, and then he runs for the street.

A rickshaw man sees him and slows to a stop. Hock Seng leaps in.

"Where to?" the man asks.

Hock Seng hesitates, thinking furiously. The anchor pads. It is the only certain way to escape the coming chaos. The *yang guizi* Richard Carlyle is probably still there. The man and his dirigible, preparing to fly for Kolkata to retrieve the Kingdom's coal pumps. There will be safety in the air. But only if Hock Seng is fast enough to catch the foreign devil before he untethers the last anchor.

"Where to?"

*Mai.*

Hock Seng shakes his head. Why does she torment him now? He owes her nothing. She is nothing, in truth. Just some fishing girl. And yet against his better judgment he allowed her to stay with him, told her he would hire her as a servant of some sort. Would keep her safe. It was the least he could do. . . . But that was before. He was going to be flush with money from the calorie companies. It was a different sort of promise, then. She will forgive him.

"The anchor pads," Hock Seng says. "Quickly. I don't have much time."

The rickshaw man nods and the bike accelerates.

*Mai.*

Hock Seng curses himself. He is a fool. Why does he never focus on the most important goal? Always he is distracted. Always he fails to do what would keep him alive and safe.

He leans forward, angry with himself. Angry at Mai. "No. Wait. I have another address. First to Krungthon Bridge, then to the anchor pads."

"That's in the opposite direction."

Hock Seng grimaces. "You think I don't know it?"

The rickshaw man nods and slows. He turns his bike and aims it back the way he came. He stands on his pedals, getting up to speed. The city slides past, colorful and busy with cleanup activity. A city completely unaware of its impending doom. The cycle weaves through the sunshine, shifting smoothly through its gears, faster and faster toward the girl.

If he is very lucky there will be enough time. Hock Seng prays that he will be lucky. Prays that there will be enough time to collect Mai and still make the dirigible. If he were smart, he would simply run.

Instead, he prays for luck.

## Epilogue

The destroyed locks and sabotaged pumps take six days to kill the City of Divine Beings. Emiko watches from the balcony of the finest apartment tower in Bangkok as water rushes in. Anderson-sama is nothing but a husk. Emiko squeezed water into his mouth from a cloth and he sucked at it like a baby before he finally expired, whispering apologies to ghosts that only he could see.

When she first heard the colossal explosions at the edge of the city, she did not guess at first what was happening, but as more explosions followed and twelve coils of smoke rose like *naga* along the levees it became clear that King Rama XII's great floodwater pumps had been destroyed, and that the city was once again under siege.

Emiko watched the fight to save the city for three days, and then the monsoons came and the last attempts at holding back the ocean were abandoned. Rain gushed down, a vast deluge sweeping out dust and debris, sending every bit of the city swirling and rising. People swarmed from their homes with their belongings on their heads. The city slowly filled with water, becoming a vast lake lapping around second-story windows.

On the sixth day, her Royal Majesty the Child Queen announces the abandonment of the divine city. There is no Somdet Chaopraya now. Only the Queen, and the people rally to her.

The white shirts, so despised and disgraced just days before, are everywhere, guiding people north under the command of a new Tiger, a strange unsmiling woman who people say is possessed by spirits and who drives her white shirts to struggle and save as many of the people of Krung Thep as possible. Emiko herself is forced to hide as a young volunteer in a white uniform works the halls of her building offering assistance to anyone who needs food or safe water. Even as the city dies, the Environment Ministry is rehabilitated.

Slowly, the city empties. The lap of seawater and the wowl of cheshires replace the call of durian sellers and the ring of bicycle bells. At times, Emiko suspects that she is the only person living. When she cranks a radio she hears that the capital has decamped north to Ayutthaya, once again above sea level. She hears that Akkarat has shaven his head and become a monk to atone for his failure to protect the city. But it is all distant.

With the wet season, Emiko's life becomes bearable. The flooded metropolis means that there is always water nearby, even if it is a stagnant bathtub stinking with the refuse of millions. Emiko locates a small skiff and uses it to navigate the city's wilderness. Rain pours down daily and she lets it bathe her, washing away everything that has come before.

She lives by scavenge and the hunt. She eats cheshires and catches fish with her bare hands. She is very quick. Her fingers flash down to spear a carp whenever she desires it. She eats well and sleeps easily, and with water all around, she does not so greatly fear the

heat that burns within her. If it is not the place for New People that she once imagined, it is still a niche.

She decorates her apartment. She crosses the wide mouth of the Chao Phraya to investigate the Mishimoto factory where she had once been employed. It is shuttered, but she finds remnants of her past and collects some of them. Calligraphy torn and left behind, Raku *chawan* bowls.

A few times, she encounters people. Most of them are too occupied with their own problems of survival to bother with a tick-tock creature more glimpsed than seen, but there are a few who prey on a lone girl's perceived weakness. Emiko deals with them quickly, and with as much mercy as she knows how.

The days pass. She becomes comfortable entirely in her world of water and scavenge. She is so comfortable, in fact, that when the *gaijin* and the girl find her, scrubbing her laundry from atop a second-floor apartment rail, they surprise her utterly.

"And who is this?" a voice asks.

Emiko draws back, startled, and nearly falls from where she perches. She jumps down and darts splashing into the safety of the abandoned apartment's shadows.

The *gaijin's* boat bumps up against the rail. "*Sawatdi khrap?*" he calls. "Hello?"

He's old, mottled skin and bright intelligent eyes. The girl is lithe and brown with a soft smile. They both lean against the balcony railing, peering into the dimness from their boat. "Don't run away little thing," the old man says. "We are quite harmless. I can't walk at all, and Kip here is a gentle soul."

Emiko waits. They don't give up, though. Just continue to peer in at her.

"Please?" the girl calls.

Against her better judgment, Emiko steps out, wading carefully in the ankle-deep water. It has been a long time since she has spoken with a person.

"*Heechy-keechy,*" the girl breathes.

The old *gaijin* smiles at the words. "New People, they call themselves." His eyes contain no judgment. He holds up a limp pair of cheshires. "Would you like to dine with us, young lady?"

Emiko motions toward the balcony rail where she has tethered her own day's catch just under water. "I do not need your help."

The man looks down at the string of fish, then up at her with new respect. "I suppose you don't. Not if your design is the one I know." He invites her closer. "You live near here?"

She points upstairs.

"Lovely real estate. Perhaps we could dine with you this evening. If cheshire is not to your taste, we would certainly enjoy a bite of fish."

Emiko shrugs, but she is lonely and the man and girl seem harmless. As night falls, they light a fire of kindled furniture on her apartment's balcony and roast the fish. Stars show through gaps in the clouds. The city stretches before them, black and tangled. When they are finished eating, the old *gaijin* drags his wounded body closer to the fire while the girl attends him.

"Tell me, what is a windup girl doing here?"

Emiko shrugs. "I was left behind."

"Ourselves, as well." The old man exchanges smiles with his friend. "Though I think our vacation will be ending soon. It seems we are to return to the pleasures of calorie detente and genetic warfare, so I think that the white shirts will once again have uses for me." He laughs at that.

"Are you a generipper?" Emiko asks.

"More than just that, I hope."

"You said you know about my. . . platform?"

The man smiles. He beckons his girl over to him and runs his hand idly up her leg as he studies Emiko. Emiko realizes that the girl is not entirely what she seems; she is boy and girl, together. The girl smiles at Emiko, seeming to sense her thoughts.

"I have read about your kind," the old man says. "About your genetics. Your training. . .

"Stand up!" he barks.

Emiko is standing before she knows it. Standing and shaking with fear and the urge to obey.

The man shakes his head. "It's a hard thing they have done to you."

Emiko blazes with anger. "They also made me strong. I can hurt you."

"Yes. That's true." He nods. "They took shortcuts. Your training masks that, but the shortcuts are there. Your obedience. . . I don't know where they got that. A Labrador of some sort, I suspect." He shrugs. "Still, you are better than human in almost all other ways. Faster, smarter, better eyesight, better hearing. You are obedient, but you don't catch diseases like mine." He waves at his scarred and oozing legs. "You're lucky enough."

Emiko stares at him. "You are one of the scientists who made me."

"Not the same, but close enough." He smiles slightly. "I know your secrets, just as I know the secrets of megodonts and TotalNutrient wheat." He nods at his dead cheshires. "I know everything about these felines here. If I cared enough, I might even be able to drop a genetic bomb in them that would strip away their camouflage and over the course of generations turn them back into their less successful version."

"You would do this?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "I like them better this way."

"I hate your kind."

"Because someone like me made you?" He laughs again. "I'm surprised you aren't more pleased to meet me. You're as close as anyone ever comes to meeting God. Come now, don't you have any questions for God?"

Emiko scowls at him, nods at the cheshires. "If you were my God, you would have made New People first."

The old *gaijin* laughs. "That would have been exciting."

"We would have beaten you. Just like the cheshires."

"You may yet." He shrugs. "You do not fear cibiscosis or blister rust."



"No." Emiko shakes her head. "We cannot breed. We depend on you for that." She moves her hand. Telltale stutter-stop motion. "I am marked. Always, we are marked. As obvious as a ten-hands or a megodont."

He waves a hand dismissively. "The windup movement is not a required trait. There is no reason it couldn't be removed. Sterility. . ." He shrugs. "Limitations can be stripped away. The safeties are there because of lessons learned, but they are not required; some of them even make it more difficult to create you. Nothing about you is inevitable." He smiles. "Someday, perhaps, all people will be New People and you will look back on us as we now look back at the poor Neanderthals."

Emiko falls silent. The fire crackles. Finally she says, "You know how to do this? Can make me breed true, like the cheshires?"

The old man exchanges a glance with his ladyboy.

"Can you do it?" Emiko presses.

He sighs. "I cannot change the mechanics of what you already are. Your ovaries are non-existent. You cannot be made fertile any more than the pores of your skin supplemented."

Emiko slumps.

The man laughs. "Don't look so glum! I was never much enamored with a woman's eggs as a source of genetic material anyway." He smiles. "A strand of your hair would do. You cannot be changed, but your children—in genetic terms, if not physical ones—they can be made fertile, a part of the natural world."

Emiko feels her heart pounding. "You can do this, truly?"

"Oh yes. I can do that for you." The man's eyes are far away, considering. A smile flickers across his lips. "I can do that for you, and much, much more."

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