

Scareship

The illustration depicts a man in profile, looking at a computer monitor in a dimly lit room. A glowing white stag with large, antlers made of question marks stands in the background, emitting a greenish light. The scene is set in a room with a desk, a lamp, and a computer monitor displaying data. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and technological.

Science Fiction & Fantasy

ISSUE 10

JUNE 2013

CHASING THE WHITE STAG

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Scareship

Science Fiction & Fantasy

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Issue 10, June 2013

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Hector

by Colin Grubel

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How I heard the story is that it all started with a crack. Hector, a mid-sized conch, had acquired it in his shell when he went for a jaunt on the beach. Snails of his sort generally avoided the beach. It was risky, full of hungry gulls and shell-collecting humans.

Hector didn't care. He was sure that his magnificent shell would protect him from the gulls and that the humans would leave him alone once they realized that he was unwilling to part with it.

So he went to the beach. He enjoyed the hot sunlight and the pleasantly weird feel of drying sand under his foot. It was a weekday, the beach wasn't crowded and he was free to roam the beach unmolested by humans or gulls who were haunting more populated areas. It was as pleasant a holiday for him as could be—until a large truck rolled over him. The weight of the state-issued buggy pressed him deep into the sand as it rolled by in search of trashcans to empty. The driver never saw him nor did he hear the loud crack as Hector's shell split open along the top.

Hector's shell was his pride. Swirly in shape and beige with subtle shades of cream, orange and pink, it was quite attractive. Now it was marred by a crack that ran a third of the way down its length, letting all the world glimpse his soft gray flesh inside. Aside from the shell, Hector was unharmed. As his fear dissipated, his anger grew. Climbing out of the snail-shaped hole in the sand, he had a mind to demand an apology and compensation from the errant driver, but the man was long gone. Road rage without a target to be taken out on is an impotent thing but sticky nonetheless, and so he took it home with him.

He no longer saw humans as simple, pitiable predators. They were assholes—in a world of dog-eat-dog, fish-eat-fish and snail-eat-snail, *that* was by far the greater offense. Thus it was that his anger and indignation only mounted as he made his slow way home.

He lived near a good-sized reef, teeming with life. Usually he avoided the reef itself, finding it crowded and noisy with millions of individuals talking to millions of other individuals. Mostly, everyone told each other to “make way,” or “stay off my tail,” but lots of inane gossip made the rounds as well. As a general rule, snails kept to themselves. Until then, Hector had been the same, but now, self-important with his news, Hector sought out the reef. He made sure to tell the ordeal to everyone he encountered. “Wait till you hear what just happened to me!” he would say. Since snails have never had a strong concept of time, the immediacy of the story never changed, even several days later.

Soon everyone knew. While they all agreed that the humans had displayed a shameful degree of rudeness, most did not see the event as exceptional. People, after all, routinely broke off pieces of coral for souvenirs; many visiting humans had even been known to chase fish around for little more than fun. Even his brethren, the snails, were unmotivated, feeling it wise to mind their own business.

Hector had hoped for a reaction equal to his own, had dreamed of a maritime uprising of sorts—snails, crabs, and fish banding together to send the humans a message, perhaps something along the lines of “We won’t be ignored any longer.” But such a dream seemed silly when faced with the mighty resignation of the reef community. Hector’s cause might have dwindled away to nothing in a few days’ time if not for the sea slugs.

Sea slugs, whose bodies are colorful enough to shame the most outrageous Mardi Gras celebrant, are as flamboyant and dramatic as their exuberantly colored bodies suggest. They are constantly talking about who ate who or giving unasked for advice

about keeping one's scales healthy. Now they swept each other up in the exciting indignation to which Hector had introduced them. They repeated the tale and invented new ones to go along with it. They even sought to give their stories a more personal touch, many testifying to verbal abuse suffered from divers or about times they themselves were stepped on by snorkelers.

It is the very nature of such stalwart gossips to grow to believe what they say. Word becomes belief faster than a lone herring becomes lunch. Their conviction grew and infected the other denizens of the reef and then the ocean. The news affected all in a deep and personal way as each individual began to recall their own stories of insult and humiliation.

What some humans would call the "Rape of the Seas"—wholesale and unconcerned slaughter of sea life for expensive seafood restaurants—was not an issue for the sea life itself. Bigger concerns included having camera flash bulbs strobe in one's face, being ignored by divers in favor of prettier fish, being stepped on (ever a popular choice with those who could think of nothing else, following in the now famous Hector's example), and being thrown about in the wake of speeding boats. It was all quite inexcusable.

But what to do about it? Fish, for many of whom a long life is similar to the Holy Grail—wonderful but imaginary—had little interest in planning to redress ills by others. People, with their lofty, land-dwelling, better-than-thou attitudes, were considered a lost cause.

Once again it was the sea slugs who saved the day. In their excitement they had spread the word that Hector was already in the middle of drafting a revolution to take to the humans. The process was quite different than similar maritime revolutions which were typically quick and violent. A classic example was the sharks' overthrow of the remoras, who used to be the kings of the deep. Though not as big as many other fish, remoras could gang up on and eat anybody that they wanted to, and they wanted to a lot. Finally, the sharks decided to take exception to their greed. The

fighting (and eating) was fast and furious and before you could say *Echeneis naurates*, the sharks ruled the seas with remoras as their constant flunkies.

In contrast, or so the sea slugs assured everyone (also assuring them that Hector, who they all knew on a close and personal basis, had assured *them* of this), human revolutions started with a draft which was then brought to the king for ratification. As Hector had the revolution well in foot, everyone was very excited to see what happened with it.

It should be mentioned that Hector had no knowledge of this. He had once griped about the need for a formal complaint to be brought before the humans, but had done no more than that. Now though, passing sea creatures would ask how the revolution was going. Many even had suggestions of things to include in the draft. Although initially confused by this, he quickly realized that this was the opportunity he had been waiting for.

He stopped ignoring them. Instead of giving a non-committal answer or, on a bad day, telling them to bugger off, he started saying things like “Yes, that’s a great idea,” or “I’ll be leaving tomorrow.” This went on for some weeks before he actually set off anywhere. By then he had amassed quite a large following. Creatures came from all the world’s oceans to join him—snails, eels, scallops, jellyfish, octopi, sharks, ctenophores, whales—animals of every shape and size made up his retinue.

The sharks, being the ruling class, knew something of the human world and it was they who told Hector about the Nawk Sea—a large human city where the *un* was located. It was in the *un* that the human king held court. So it was that Hector, guided by sharks, cheered on by sea slugs and followed by any number of other creatures, made his way to Nawk Sea as the locals called it. The trip took a few months—being a snail, slow of body and too obstinate to accept a ride, he led them to their destination slowly but they finally made it.

It was a beautiful July day when approximately 55,000 snails, 130,000 amphipods, 40,000 worms, 6,000 crabs (there had been more originally but, always argumentative, the majority split off at the Bahamas, certain that Nawk Sea lay 100 miles to the west), 17,000 octopi, 7,000 sea turtles, and a plenitude of other land-capable sea creatures climbed up the pilings and onto the pavement a few blocks from the United Nations building in Manhattan.

Traffic stopped, people stared. Cats hissed and sought refuge in high places. Seagulls were so astonished that they completely forgot to eat the delicious bounty marching before them—well, most did anyway.

The army slithered, crawled and flopped its way down the pavement. The human onlookers felt awe and no small amount of unease. I would like to think that their unease came from the aura of angry determination given off by the mass of seafood but honestly, it was probably more from the general feeling of “Ick!” most Americans have towards fish. Either way, it worked in Hector’s favor, and as people scrambled to get out of their way, a sense of imminent achievement flooded through him.

By three o’clock in the afternoon, he had made it to the large building housing the General Assembly which, it so happened, was in session and that very moment. The guards watched the slippery animals inch by, uncertain what protocol to use. In the end they all simultaneously decided to go on lunch rather than face the daunting task of trying to keep the living tide out.

Once inside, the maze of corridors and rooms was quickly overrun as Neptune’s children spread out in search of the assembled nations. Within an hour, Hector had found the Assembly. The debate on the floor (something about illegal hot-air balloons in Chad) stopped as a squelching, smooshing, splatting sound drew the ambassadors’ attention to the back of the room where Hector and his brethren-at-arms were slowly making their way towards the front. The army came slithering down the aisles, perching atop empty desks and chairs.

The humans were overcome with shock. One and all remained in their assigned seats, jaws agape like feeding whales.

By the time Hector made it to the front of the room, the gathered assembly was coming back to themselves and a low hum of quiet, conspiratorial conversation was filling the room. As two seals flanked the podium and a ring of crabs formed a menacing semi-circle in front, Hector inched up and onto the slanted top of the Secretary General's podium.

The Secretary General stood behind the podium and despite himself, nodded to the snail as he would any human speaker before taking a step back. The room grew silent.

Hector reared up, faced the gathering and dropped a small glassy pebble onto the polished wood with a clatter. Having no clue or concept of how to draft a revolution, he had at least remembered that he had to draft it *on* something. This shiny pebble, awash in blues and greens, had seemed perfect for the purpose.

With all eyes on him, he adjusted his cracked shell in a stately fashion and began his practiced speech. "Dear Humans, for many a year now, we have joyfully shared the world with you. Though separated by the coasts of the world, we have always recognized our kinship with you. Life is a beautiful, often violent thing full of the joys of food, beauty, sex, eggs, and conversation.

"Lately, we have grown weary of your species' repeated attempts to intrude on our happiness. We are deserving of your respect. With this in mind, we have come here with our Revolution, which we have drafted according to your customs." Here he nudged the pebble with his foot, much as a teacher will tap the blackboard with a piece of chalk when drawing attention to what is written on it.

"Our demands are as follows: Never step on any of us. Don't mispronounce our names. Stop flashing your bright camera flashbulbs in our faces. If you are going to blind one of us with a camera flash, please be kind enough to share the experience with

all. If you try to touch a fish that doesn't want to be touched, leave it alone. Don't step on us. If you pass us in the water, be polite and say hi. Don't stick your hands in other bodies' dens."

The list continued for a while before Hector at last wound it up. "We have gathered here today to ask that you heed our demands. Pay us the respect we deserve. It's a big, blue world—let's treat it that way." He finished this long, inspired, repetitive, and often contradictory speech to cheers from all the sea creatures gathered around. The speech was, despite its flaws, beautiful and earnest, heartfelt and passionate. It was also the first televised speech by a sea snail.

All the human audience heard was "splish, slurp, smooosh." When it was done, the assembled humans erupted in applause as each saw their own chosen message in this miraculous and very wet gathering.

Their revolution done and so obviously successful, the collected snails, crabs, octopi, amphipods, worms, seals, and others made their way back outside to the water where they related the wondrous news of their success to all the fish and others who could not carry onto land themselves. In their excitement, they failed to notice that the General Assembly had soon after erupted into a heated argument about what it all meant.

Hector was the only one who did get to see it. It was his fortune, good or bad, to be scooped up and into a small fish bowl which some attendant had thoughtfully fetched from his office when the speech began. Thus it was that he was still present when the clamor died down and the assembly voted successfully to reduce fishing and cut down on pollution in the world's oceans.

If Hector could have cried, he most assuredly would have—they had missed the whole point.

* * *

Life in the sea returned to normal. It was widely known that Hector had stayed behind as their ambassador, a reminder to all humans to show sea creatures the respect they deserve. No one ever forgot his contribution either—the sea slugs made sure of that. Many, when asked (or not), would even proudly present the pebble on which the famous revolution had been drafted. The fact that many other sea creatures also possessed rocks or pebbles they claimed to be the original never fazed anyone. What exactly had been gained through the revolution varied as often as the colors, sizes and shapes of the pebbles in question, but although fishing pressures lessened and pollution decreased, these were never cited as effects resulting from the revolution.

The concept of drafting a revolution, so bloodless and yet so obviously effective, took off and became the number one method of effecting change in the oceans. Some of the big changes gained through this method included equal feeding rights at thermal vents, limits on the number of barnacles allowed to colonize whales and a two-second head start for fish being chased by predators (this was a bit of a dubious success since none of the fish involved could tell time). Whether these bloodless revolutions will stay in vogue remains to be seen.

Hector may have been proud of his legacy, or he may not have. He had bigger algae to fry. Hector's fate was to be kept in a good-sized tank while it travelled the world. He screamed and raged in frustration at the deaf ears of his captors, as they displayed him to gawking groups of school children while recounting the now famous story of the marine invasion of the U.N. "This is the very snail that perched on top of the podium, inspiring the Assembly to..." Their voices droned on through the well rehearsed lesson every day.

After a year of these lectures, visiting such places as London, Dubai, St. Petersburg, Sydney, Hong Kong, Tokyo and Buenos Aires, his travels finally ended. He now resides in the New York Aquarium, sharing a large tank with blue tangs, surgeonfish,

butterfly fish, moray eels and spiny lobsters. The last I heard, he was trying to rally his neighbors to revolt in the hopes of keeping tourists from tapping on the glass of the tank. No one is joining him this time (there are reportedly no sea slugs in the tank).

All I have said is true in every detail, no matter how miraculous it may seem—after all, I heard it from a sea slug, and it assured me that it knew Hector intimately.

8

Address to the Science Fiction Convention

by Robin Wyatt Dunn

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(in the corner on the soapbox in the hotel lobby)

And Kell knew the world was gone; that it had vanished. Because what else would have come to pass? Would we have expected kings and queens to celebrate this? Many would guess not, but that is what they did and how they did it, and what of that?

Should we curse their names? Should we crease our trousers for a full fun game of their treacheries? Let us do so and see where it gets us.

Out of bed, out in the morning, ready to shout the greased words and mannerisms we delight; ready to horse the show out into the road and proclaim it worthy, declare it punishably fine.

We say this day is our own but this is unreasonable, because we’re taking the narrow view, because we’ve had too many martinis, because this light is unbourn, unborn, untrammeled, uncreased or greased, unmarked by the usuals, and so unfit for rule by such as us, unfit for the marvel of our discontents.

Why should we move? Is it our right to announce these things so fine and furrowed into the evening with our sticks and our staves stacked up and five-fine with the whistle in the hatch and the

woman on the road with her gnome on the go, groping for herds that we can whistle in, five Johnny on the long spot, like a long blue dream, won sweet and cold in the midsummer set, pounded and grounded like a long 9-11 airline, no leaving till it's done, no whining till we shut our biscuit off, no softening of the fury of your voices, matched fine to quit and loosed on the grave like libation wine—

But no libation for us! We are not dead!

We are not dead and yet we dance like the dead! We are not dead and yet we sleep like the dead! Sleeping and dancing in life like death!

What world is this, Millicent Idly? What world is this, Old Stone? What world have we rumbled by, our ossuaries and mossinaries gravitating towards oneness, longing for others' music, wringing our hands in the night to job out a series of missives to the procreators, instantiators, politicians and good hardluck fans, whiling away the nights with our fatal fuliginous songs of wrought wine, winded maelstromese fruits and sanded horn-swords that we grew for the flu we suffer from, these long nights and tremulous musics in the wind—

But what of it! Did we not grieve to see you so confined, and laugh for it too? In the darker days where we begrudged each other carafes of water and reasonable looks, when the Red Dawn laughed, chuffing our salubricities amix with ease under the tentacled masses screaming in the New York City heights, planted like a bomb, waiting to grow: then we knew it was only another weekend, so-called, a plock on the carpet for our men and children to wimple over, cosseting our hats and graves for a fine five-over, even with a whiskey or two, if only to disguise the masks we were on to wear,

All seven hundred of them, cretinous and divine, wide-worlded, neither broad-banged nor festipucian, merely a green-duff kind of a hat, with a kind of Swedish music to it, and a long low fine fig of it come like you did, that old Sunday caught calling across the wooden pavements: wherefore came you? Dear God, I need a drink.

And you've found solutions for it, I know. You've taled long winters through its barren noise-sorts, like that fellow last week with his barren eyesight and busterly rims about his hat, he knew it was for him—the cure!—something he'd long wanted, but it couldn't gruel his fuel just fight, couldn't mix the fat with the East Wind, or the North Death-Sentence, whatever it was, he reported us to the Science Fiction police, and we put on our finer clothes, to face the waygog band.

And it played a fine set! All governments in despair! The waygog band played its finest stuff-its in the Chameleon Bar, their Lairs and their Laundromats bleaching our tears and wringing our necks like a good hen-stock for the holiday, all in a decade's business, election-proof, no forewarning or hornswagging, merely the Dental Deliverance, Truth as Hard as Your Teeth, the Mainstay of MainChickens, the Announcement we ForeSwore so Long Ago in our Haysides, the Swearance and Signatures were made.

Oh yes, they were made, under eyesight of the Seered Waygogs, the Government Men, we swore to it and sealed it with a coffee dram or two, but what was it, men?

What was it? Where did we steal the cold calm madness with it? Only because of nostalgia? Only primitive retribution? I clothe my own sadness in a whelp, a child of rags animated by demons like Pinnochio that I lift for you upon my hand, bespeckled and bewrinkled, horrified face and grim tutelage opened wide before

you, fine people, dressed and drawered and delivering the day's champions to their oars, I grimble this puppet on my hand and on my chin for you and yours and ours this many weeks of moments spun into the dark!

Can you catch a final curtain? And step under the middle rim? Let our typists poke their prayers under the mainsailed warts we forgot about some years we passed, for we'll need them soon again, and what prayer better than a typist's to bespeak the necessity of revivifying some old and misremembered flesh, only somewhat decayed, and so necessary, an inkled form of a man, or woman, the zombie true, that is our authochtonous display all outgoing, life bourn anew I say, it is not old, merely stinky, and neither is everything old new again either, merely different again, and with that aphorism we can be sure that old weapons will fight new battles and be sorry for it, in new ways, with the same tears or mad chirps buzzed out about it.

I'm sorry that you stepped over the barn circle and made so little deal about it, we could have forefended honor, destiny and other hornswaggles if we'd had a moment to decide to, but even so, I see you might have the necessary 'bout you, in your storn step and stretched gladthings, raucous anewed in our hot cowboy streets—what was it hurt you?

Ladies? And Gentlemen?

Who was it tore the knot right off our blistered thought and chambered us anew inside an alien pumping heart betwixt betwain our familiar repasts and homes? Was it our own dream? Someone else's? An Enemy's?

I know its light is bright. I know you burned so many houses in your missions out to sea for king and country on your wagon train

of novel novel novel, but it was only measliness we tore away,
wasn't it? Wasn't it only pork rind fat and nibbled loose chins we
scorned when we tore away the ceiling, and the sky?

So it's blinding white light, so what white? Is it the end of this
Earth?

Let it all go gampered—what of it? And let your walk now be
slower by the day you marked the cage and cadence of your over-
throat, the tingling mastodon you circled round your chokehold
cravated and molded right for the party, your beautiful dinosaur
tie—

Go slow, and winded—go true and oberhosed—go low, on the
grove of our new horns, devil's or bedeviled eggs, little baby
bumps on your temples, but only the useful mutation, and only the
right appointment in the board room of our Dreams—

Go! Go out to the stone and scrape out hedonies and argonies and
musicals that catch your healed hurt on the fire of your life!

8

Pursuit

by Katherine Garrigan

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Her body glowed on the bench in a harmony of particles and waves. As I observed her from my window ten floors up, the light seemed to shape itself around her form and cast her in a glowing outline. Her clothing hit the right balance of fabric and color, form and function. Each spill and turn of her chestnut hair against her dark skin paid homage to a creator god.

Perfect. So perfect.

I turned from the open window to face my simulator. Time to practice. I had spent almost as long crafting the hardware and building the software as I had watching her. If I had grander ambitions, I could patent my system and make billions. Virtual reality; safely view the world from the comfort and protection of your own home. The whole machine only takes up the same space as a small one bedroom apartment. I can see the ads now.

But not until after I meet her. There will be plenty of time for marketing then.

My living space overflowed with wires connecting heavy, dull metal boxes stacked on shelves. More wires ran across the floor up to the top of the doorframe of my closet, the entrance to the actual experience. There, thick cables fused with my own creation. Strands of slender, silver machines hung loosely across the top of the frame and branched out into nothingness as they fell to the ground. In my dreams, those strands changed into tendrils of her hair and welcomed me into their embrace.

I took a deep breath and readied myself to enter. The strands softly brushed my thoughts as I walked through, then I felt a sharp pain as if all of my nerves lit up at once.

Blinking away the immediate disorientation, I found myself outside my building. The bench sat three blocks away to my left, and a morning sun heated my shoulders. The rendering lacked perfect resolution. Each sidewalk crack repeated itself every four feet and a patch of flat green represented the grass of the park instead of lush, verdant strands. The scenery remained a little too smooth when I walked, but it worked.

The background was not that important, anyway. I had worked on making the simulation more realistic by adding details, but I focused most of my time on coding *her*.

I had to practice. Our meeting would be perfect—in real life. When it happened.

Walking up to her this time, I would notice the library book she held and comment on it. I had to say something. I spent a month just walking by in the hopes that she would say anything to me, but she never did. She never even looked up from her book.

This would be the first time I instigated the conversation.

Here we go.

“Hey,” I said as I approached her sitting on the bench, “*Asleep*, didn’t they make a movie out of it?”

She peered up at me from underneath her clock-spring lashes. Her light, golden brown eyes narrowed as she looked at me. “Uh, yeah.” She turned her body away from me and hid her face with the book.

Fuck.

I mumbled something and walked back towards my apartment building. I pushed myself out of the simulation by picturing a large exit door, instead of just walking back to my apartment. Walking back in did not work, it was too weird. As the image of the door bubbled in my mind, the silver strands pulled me back into my real apartment.

I restarted the simulation. As it waited for me, I checked out the window to see if she still graced the corner. After confirming her presence, I re-entered the program.

But what to say this time? She did not respond to my book query. Maybe I will be bolder.

I walked up to her. “You’re perfection,” I told her. I tried my best to smile an endearing smile, or at least a confident grin. “Let’s go for coffee.” She started and stared at me. She shoved the book in her bag and stood up.

Could this be it? Was it this easy? My heart thudded in my chest.

She backed away from me. “I’m sorry; I’m late getting back to work.” She smiled, but her eyes radiated fear. Was fear better than disdain? She turned her heels and walked away as quick as she could without resorting to running.

God, this is hard.

I tried over and over that afternoon. I talked to her about the weather, her hair, or the artisan bag she toted over her shoulder. Her responds varied between vapid and dismissive.

Maybe this stupid simulation was wrong. I had poured myself over the coding for months. I watched her for so many hours, assembling what her responses might be based on her reaction to environmental aspects. This crumbled in my hands the longer I played at it.

Once more, I thought. I had at least another hour in the real world before she grew bored of her book and wandered away back to work. Enough time to find the perfect thing to say and rush down.

Well, not rush. I did not want to be sweaty.

I dove through the door.

“Hey,” I said. The simple approach. The easy approach. The less-than-creepy approach.

She looked at me with a bland expression. “Hi?”

Well, no rejection yet. There was hope. I took another deep breath. “Oh, hi, I live around the corner and I’ve noticed you reading a couple times here on my way home.”

Her body tensed. “Oh, yeah? That gray building over there?” She clutched the book like a weapon.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to sound like such a stalker.” I tried to smile and held my body in a non-offensive posture. I spent a great deal of time researching body language online. “There’s a great little coffee place right across the street if you like coffee. I mean, they have tea too—”

I lost her. I knew it the second she leaned back and the expression on her face hardened. She had lessened her grip on the book at first, but it was back to square one now. She tucked it in her tote like a sword.

“Oh, yeah, thanks, no...I like coffee.” She offered me a tight smile. “See you around, maybe.” She began to walk away from me without looking back, her hips swaying underneath her tweed skirt. Well, I got that bit of code right.

A direct dismissal this time. Not even my programs worked with my desires.

Something snapped inside my brain.

I grabbed her by the hair and bashed her head into the bench. I screamed obscenities at her, daring her to contradict or dismiss me now. Her body was limp under the assault. She slid off the bench onto the ground with lifeless eyes. Her hair sprayed out from her head like a halo. I kicked the book into the flat greenness of the park.

No, I thought, no this is all wrong.

I snapped back into reality. Cold sweat covered my body and my hands shook.

This was not like me, this violence. I swear I never raised a hand in real life to anything.

I sat looking out the window at her until she left for the day. Maybe I just needed a break from the simulation. Maybe I coded everything completely wrong. Maybe I set myself up for failure before I even began.

I rinsed my face off and patted myself dry with a rough towel. I made myself change my old t-shirt and put on a real pair of pants. It was time to pull myself outside to get some dinner – metal boxes infested my kitchen. I had not cooked in weeks.

I walked the streets in a haze, unnoticed or ignored by the people milling around. It was a fight just to order dumplings from a street cart like a normal person. After I got my take out secured into a greasy plastic bag, I ran back to my apartment and locked the door.

After finishing my dinner, I steeled myself. I could not simulate every step of my life forever. Tomorrow, I talk to real people, and not just those I created in my computer. I did not always need to plan the perfect thing to say.

I slipped in an out of nightmares that night on my futon mattress, wedged in between the machines. An invisible figure kept making me repeat all my actions until they were perfect. I woke up soaked in sweat more than once.

The next day she was back on her bench. I can go down and just say hi, I thought to myself.

But it couldn't hurt to practice just once.

8

Chasing the White Stag

by E. Firdawsi

“Chasing the White Stag” copyright © 2013 by E. Firdawsi.

1

The coffee is hot, black. Tastes more like the wax paper cup than genuine Colombian brew. It’s mid-September. Ten thirty on the nose. The American elms glisten under a coating of fresh rain, and the Burnside street corner stinks of gasoline and urine.

Raymond Flores forces down another mouthful of stale coffee, crosses the street, and, sidestepping a bicyclist, heads toward a brick building. Rain dribbles down the green awning in rivulets to form growing puddles along the cracked sidewalk.

Flores opens the building’s steel front door and climbs the creaking, crooked staircase. Trips on a tear in the carpet, catches himself.

Bernie’s already awake, sitting cross-legged on the landing and ripping into a breakfast sandwich. Bits of fried egg nest in his gray beard. Bernie holds out his free hand, letting his white terrier lick the grease. Then he looks up. “I like your hair,” he says.

Flores ignores him. It’s a daily greeting. Behind the plate glass window bearing the name “Flores and Associates,” his office is empty. When he unlocks the door and strides inside, the bulbous plastic cat fastened to the reception desk swivels its head. In a rumbling synthesizer voice it says, “Good morning, Mr. Flores. You just missed Mrs. O’Neri.”

Nothing new there. “Did anyone come by while I was gone?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.” The cat’s ears twitch. It licks a paw with a shining metal tongue. “A repossession agent left a message this morning. A gentleman named Ted. He said he’ll be coming for the chairs on Thursday.”

Something curdles in Flores’ gut. Tossing the coffee in a rattan wastebasket, he stares at the waiting room’s six guest chairs. Motel quality, each one upholstered in a different fabric--taupe, neon stripes, zebra, lemongrass. Muttering, he goes into the back room.

There’s a sticky note from O’Neri; she’s following a lead on Leo Bailey’s mistress. The woman lives off Hawthorne, near the Baghdad Theatre. “Feel free to join me anytime,” the note says at the end.

Flores powers on the brain-machine interface deck, unwinds two cords, and snaps the fasteners to the input plugs behind his ear. Reclined, jacked in, he cradles his face in one hand as semi-consciousness sweeps through. He flies past spiral arms of advertisements and hates every second of it.

The DA is always wired in, her mind an invisible force, AI strong. Tugging at him. He scrambles away and runs into an old client. Mrs. Fields, in the form of a nagi. “Mr. Flores,” her avatar says, “my husband’s run off again. You haven’t raised your rates, have you?”

Behind her, Ted the repo man waits.

Flores hears a door slam shut. A man’s voice.

The cat’s synthesizer purr cuts through the demanding, virtual crowd. “Sir, you have visitors.”

He rips out the wires and tucks the interface deck into a drawer. “Send them in.”

Flores notices the man first, recognizing him from the convenience store two blocks down. Sideburn Chuck; tall, heavy-set, with thick black sideburns that wreath his round, red face. Flores stands to shake his hand. It’s not until Chuck lumbers forward that Flores notices the girl behind him.

She's Mexican, and not older than thirteen. Fourteen, tops. The eye shadow and lipstick are meant to make her look older. Nobody with half a brain would ever fall for it. She isn't crying, but there's a desperate, empty look in her eyes as she clutches her arms and shivers. Wet, barefoot, and in her nightgown.

Flores drops back into his chair.

"I found her wandering outside my store," Chuck starts, chewing on his lower lip. "She was talking fast, but she doesn't speak a word of English. So I thought..."

She needs to go to the police. I can't talk to her.

The girl speaks in rapid Spanish before he can put the thought into words. Her name is Buena, she says, and then delves into a story she's been waiting years to tell. Flores struggles not to wince as image after image slams into him. A low-rise, dingy cityscape she calls Ensenada. A deep-water port, a small house with a wood porch. Faces of her parents, her little brother.

He sees a white woman with bright red hair, smells her floral perfume. In stilted Spanish, she talks with Buena's parents, describing a job in America. Buena's mother and father argue, the American pretending not to notice: "She's only eleven. She's not ready to be on her own." Another flash: Buena climbing into the back of a white Escalade. Redolent of lavender and new leather. Flores can feel the fuzz of the SUV's carpet under Buena's fingers, as well as her bubbling anxiety.

Buena speaks faster, hands bunching around the fabric of her nightgown. Flores recognizes San Diego streets, sees a suburban two-story house. Buena cleans and feeds the woman's son and sleeps on the utility room floor. "If you run away," the woman says in Spanish, "the police will just throw you in jail, honey. So don't even think about it. You're here illegally. And I'm telling you, the police here are worse than back in Mexico." Buena believes her.

Then Buena is in Brookings. Another house, this one on a hill. There are no California palm trees, just tall evergreens. The woman is gone, replaced with another family. The new woman

beats her, accuses her of seducing the woman's husband. One night, she grabs a pan of hot frying oil from the kitchen and throws it on Buena's thighs. The screaming wakes the baby. The residual burns sear him. Biting back a gasp, Flores claws at his slacks underneath the desk, nails digging into his skin.

No more. He pants through his teeth, but Buena doesn't stop.

She's in Portland now, and there's a man taking care of her. Han Chinese. Buena only knows him as Luzzy. Flores memorizes his buzz cut and pockmarked cheeks. The man takes her on a walk at the riverfront, one hand grazing the small of her back. She shares a room with four other girls. None talk to her. A young woman with pink barrettes in her hair gives Buena brand new clothes. She sends her somewhere new every night. Different cars, black city streets. Stink of cologne and semen. Buena runs away once, but the police find her wandering the streets and take her back. The woman kicks her, orders one of the other girls to force a gardening tool—

“¡*Basta!*” Flores shouts. Buena flinches and goes quiet, cutting off the horrible barrage of images and scents and feelings. Flores dabs his forehead with a sleeve and swallows. “*Basta.*”

The convenience store owner shifts his weight between feet. “What she said, it must've been pretty bad, huh? Was she... you know?”

Flores rubs the bridge of his nose and looks the man over. Buena shivers and wipes a strand of wet hair from her eyes. “Chuck, there's a jacket in the closet over there. Would you mind?”

“Sure thing.” Nodding, Chuck grabs one of O'Neri's old coats and hands it to the girl. Then he shifts around again, hands in pockets. He wants to leave, but doesn't know how to excuse himself. Flores doesn't care; he isn't done with him yet.

Flores opens a drawer in his desk and retrieves a pad of paper. He clicks a pen. Back to Spanish: “Buena, please describe the

house. The one you just ran away from. In as much detail as possible.”

She slides her arms through the jacket’s sleeves and zips it up. “It’s a big white house, far away from the city. There are lion statues in the front, and a covered pool and a lot of weeds in the back yard.”

He gets flashes of the house—it’s pale yellow, not white, with navy shutters on the white-paned windows. Two stories, with a loft at top overlooking the road. A well-kept front yard with rhododendrons and stone front steps. Green sedan parked in the side alley. The numbers above the door are fuzzy, a detail she never thought to notice, but as Flores concentrates, the underlying reality shows through: 3626.

As Buena continues, Flores gets more flashes on the interior. He sketches out a basic floor plan while the images are still fresh. There are holes—two rooms she’s never seen. “Do you know the street name?” he asks.

“I—I don’t know, *señor*. I’m sorry.”

It occurs to him that she has no idea who he is or what he does. “I’m a private investigator. I can help you.”

“Is that—”

“I’m not with the police.”

Her shoulders fall forward and she smiles.

“Now, what route did you take to get here?”

Buena describes running past rows upon rows of houses as Luzzy’s people chase her. Flores feels her panting. She’s running for close to half a mile, sometimes going in circles, until she finds the MAX station. Buena boards the first train without a ticket, not knowing or caring where it takes her. Aware of the passengers’ stares, Buena watches the trees fluttering past the window like a shuffled deck of cards. The train heads west on the blue line; she gets off at PGE Park station, certain she’s going the wrong way.

“I want to go home,” Buena finishes. Home is over a thousand miles away.

“I know,” Flores says. “And you will.” But he stops himself from making any promises. He turns to Chuck and says in English, “I need to go follow this lead. Do me a favor and stay with her until I get back.”

Chuck throws up his hands. “I don’t know, man, I have to get back.”

“Right.” Flores opens his wallet and withdraws a twenty. “Get her something warm to eat. From your store, or whatever. You can take her back there if you want, fine, I just don’t want her alone.” If Portland’s finest catches on, she’ll be deported without a second thought. Or sent back to Luzzy’s house of pleasure. He jots a quick note and tosses it on O’Neri’s desk by the window. “My partner will come by and take the girl off your hands. It won’t be too long.”

Chuck turns the money over in his hands. “Okay. Sure.”

2

The Mustang needs gas; Flores goes easy on the accelerator and sticks to the right lanes. He crosses the Morrison Bridge and jumps on I-84 East. Traffic on the Banfield is thankfully light for 11 AM. Buena’s memories linger in his mind, his inner thighs still burning. He forces himself to concentrate on the road. The closer he draws to Laurelhurst, the more certain he becomes. This is the right spot.

Once off the expressway, Flores circles around the neighborhoods, looking right, looking left. The rubber wipers squeal as they fan over the windshield, smearing the rain. The houses are older builds, decades old, each one unique. Yellowing cherry trees and black walnuts dot the streets.

When he turns on Peerless, he spots Luzzy’s house. A brick chimney juts out like a straw, wheezing a waving smoke flag. Flores parks two blocks down, pops the trunk, and grabs a wood

baseball bat lying over the spare tire. He eyes the green sedan sitting in the alley as he tugs on his gloves.

Flores tests the bat's weight in hand and approaches the house. The rain taps steadily against his fedora. Ignoring the front door, he throws the bat over the black chain-link fence and climbs over. The back yard is disheveled as promised, weeds poking through cracks in the concrete porch. The hot tub is covered, but he can hear it humming. A sliding glass door leads into the house.

Back pressed to the muddy siding, Flores listens for signs of activity. There's muffled dialogue and dramatic music from a television, but no human voices. A good sign. He's not confident in his ability to fight off more than one person.

Flores swings the bat. The glass cracks, fragmentizes. Two more swings and it shatters.

Inside a man shouts a curse. There's a thudding of feet—only one pair—and the metallic snap of a slide drawing back. Flores stays put. He waits.

A wiry man appears in the shattered doorway, inspects the damage, and whips his head around. He spots Flores in the corner and glowers. "You picked the wrong place to rob, you stupid spic."

Flores smiles. "*¿Qué pasa?*"

The man heaves a long sigh, raises his pistol. He holds it one-handed at the hip, like a cowboy ready for a duel. Flores chuckles. The man doesn't like that one bit. "Get lost, Poncho. Nice and slow."

Flores rushes forward. John Wayne's eyes widen as he squeezes off a round. The bullet misses Flores by half a foot, hitting the house. Flores swings wide, going for a home run. The bat cracks against the man's ear and he thuds to the ground, one leg sticking out of the broken glass door.

The man groans, doesn't get up. Avoiding bits of glass, Flores rolls him over, feels him for other weapons, and cuffs the man's hands behind his back. Unloading the pistol, he tosses it into the nearest garbage can and glances around the living room. The

furnishings are barely a step up from his office—spare and worn. Flores switches off the television and crosses over into the lemon and avocado kitchen. Pouring a glass of water from the tap, he stares out at the street. If anyone heard the shot, they aren't making a racket about it.

Flores sets the glass on the counter. The house is empty. They've cleared out, set up shop somewhere else, but why leave John Wayne behind?

On the first floor, there's a master bedroom and adjoining bathroom. Buena's never been in here, so the rooms don't look familiar. They probably wouldn't ring a bell even if she had; the bed has been stripped to the mattress and the closets lie empty. The same goes for the second floor. Both bedrooms have been cleared of any personal belongings past the rent-a-room furniture. The loft, where Luzzy kept the girls, is bare of sleeping bags and clothes. A wrinkled teen magazine sits in the corner. Hardly incriminating.

I'm missing something.

Flores finds it in the second floor bathroom. There's a Christmas rug emblazoned with candy canes and prancing reindeer, thrown over the gray Berber carpet. In September. Dug out from the attic three months early. He lifts a corner and peers underneath at a wide, crusted bloodstain. The edges are smeared, the stain discolored as if ineffectively sprayed down with bleach.

Downstairs, Flores splashes the water on the back of John Wayne's head and prods him in the side with his shoe. The man grunts and groans, muttering about the sting in his ear, and rolls over. He glares at Flores and spits at him, but only manages to drool over his chin.

"Nice shot, John Wayne," Flores says.

"So you *do* speak English." He licks his lips. "How'd you dodge that bullet?"

"I didn't dodge it."

"Bullshit. I shot you point-blank."

"You missed."

“Bullshit.”

Flores pulls out the BMI deck from his breast pocket and wires himself. “What’s your name?”

Hesitation, then: “Alfred Keefe.”

Flores contacts Sergeant Wendell at the Portland Police Bureau. Wendell’s avatar is a minotaur, covered in orange fur. It hovers over Flores’ elbow and shakes a horned head. “Hey there, Flores,” it says in Wendell’s voice. “Need me to run some records?”

“Yeah. Alfred Keefe.”

The avatar disappears. A minute later, Keefe’s file opens. The picture matches the man on the floor.

“Who died in here?” Flores asks.

Keefe snorts. “I bet a lot of people. This is an old house, asshole.”

“Cut the shit or I’ll reintroduce you to little Sammy Sosa.” Flores notices Keefe’s eyes darting warily to the baseball bat propped against the couch. “Whoever hired you, he’s not too high up on the totem pole, I figure. Because you rank a ten on the arrogance scale and a one on competence. No high-dealing criminal worth his salt would pay a dime for a dollar store thug like you. Come clean and talk. There’s no point risking a concussion.”

“Get fucked.”

Flores reaches for the baseball bat.

“Christ.” Keefe hisses and wipes spit on the carpet. “His name was Dwaine Lu, but everyone called him Luzzy.”

Flores grabs Wendell’s avatar again. After a series of stalls, they find the right Lu. The photo on file matches the image of the man in Buena’s memory. Second generation Chinese—an ABC. Rap sheet a mile long—statch rape, B&E, assault and battery. Same buzz cut and pockmarked face. “When’d he die?”

“Last night, during the evening news. We heard a crash.”

Flashes of Keefe's dick in his hand. A deck full of porn plugging over his retinas. "Who's 'we'?"

"Me and a couple of the guys."

"And where were the girls?"

"Out for the night, I guess."

"Fine. So you heard a crash. Then what?"

"We ran into the bathroom, where all the noise came from. His throat was sliced open like he was a pig. Don't ask me who did it, 'cause we don't fucking know. Whoever it was slipped in and out, right past us. Fucking creepy shit."

Flores gets an image of Luzzy lying on his side, blood all over the bathroom. Suddenly he's impressed by whoever did the cleanup. There are other questions, like where they disposed of the body, and how much the police know. But Flores can tell that Keefe was left out of that loop. Besides, he's not here for Luzzy. Good riddance to him. "So the boss was murdered, and the rest of the troupe ran." And during the shuffle, Buena had made her escape. They'd chased her for a while before giving up.

Keefe grunts.

"But they left you here." Flores taps his chin. "You think the killer's coming back."

"Maybe he's you."

"Your killer is Chinese." It's nothing but a knee-jerk guess, easily as wrong as right. "Where are the girls? I want all the names of everyone involved, everyone you know, and where they're going."

Keefe fingers so many people, Flores can't look up their names fast enough. They're taking the girls across the Columbia River, to Longview, Washington. It will be a trek. Perhaps with a well-placed tip, those girls will soon be on their way home, safe and sound.

Flores crouches behind Keefe and unlocks the cuffs. "Thank you for your time. You've been a lovely snitch."

Flores enjoys a cigarette and takes the long way back. When he climbs up the stairs to the office, it's near one o'clock. He finds O'Neri sitting at the edge of her desk, talking quietly to Buena.

The receptionist cat greets him. "Welcome back, Mr. Flores."

O'Neri meets his eyes, slowly shakes her head. She's tied her blonde hair back into a French twist. Underneath her worn leather jacket she wears a ragged green sweater-dress, acid-wash jeans, and pewter boots with thick rubber soles. He's tried for years to get her to wear more professional attire—for the agency's image—but she's rebuffed him with excuses about "girlie clothes" not fitting her broad shoulders, or being too expensive.

Buena twists in her seat and smiles. She's still wearing the jacket and soggy nightgown, but her hair has dried into dark brown curls frizzed against her cheeks.

Flores returns the interface deck to his desk. In English, he asks, "What are you two talking about?"

"Oh, you know. The usual. Dolls, lip gloss, boys." O'Neri sips from a scuffed thermos and switches to Spanish for Buena's benefit. "And she made fun of my accent."

Buena laughs. It's light, easy. It puts Flores at ease.

"Seriously, though," O'Neri continues in English, "I can see why you ran off so fast. This girl's been dealt a shitty hand. Just listening to her story was making me ill. How bad was it, the flashes?"

"I couldn't let her finish."

O'Neri dips her chin. "You've gotta wonder where evil fucks like that come from."

"Same place as everyone else."

"Yeah. She said they were moving the other girls when she ran away. Did you figure out where?"

“Longview. I’ll take care of it.” Flores shakes rain from his hat and says to Buena, “Did you know that Luzzy’s dead? Murdered, specifically.”

If she’d known, he would’ve seen it in one of the flashes, when she described running away. Buena flinches. “He’s dead?” She touches her face, petting her own cheek in slow strokes. “This morning?”

“Happened some time last night.” Flores contemplates sparing her the details, then adds, “His throat was cut open.”

Buena turns away, looking out the window, and says nothing. Flores is about to ask how she’s feeling when O’Neri tugs him by the arm into the reception room. Her grip threatens to wrench the limb from its socket. “What’s your plan here?”

Flores winces. “*Vivian*.”

“What? Oh. Sorry.” She lets go, smooths her hair. “What were you thinking? We’re trying to run a business here, not a church. We can’t devote energy to this case. The girl’s sweet, I’ll give you that, and I feel sorry for her, but she can’t pay us.”

“We have enough cases. A freebie won’t kill us.”

“I’m not so sure about that. Our overhead costs, for one thing—I have bills stacking up, and no one’s being particularly charitable to me.”

“I’ll think of something.” *I always do*, he says to himself.

“Yeah?” She raises her brows pointedly. “Okay, try this one on: where’s she gonna stay?”

“I thought maybe you—”

“You’re joking, right? My little house? With a husband and two kids? You’re not passing this off on me, my friend. Not this time. Why don’t *you* step up?”

“You’re a woman.”

She lets out a bark of laughter. “The sisterhood doesn’t work that way. You’re the deep feeling, empathic one. Me, I rip people’s arms off. I can’t understand what she’s going through the way you

can. I'm sorry. I'll help any way I can, but either you need to take care of her, or let the blues handle it."

No. Passing Buena over to the police isn't an option. "If we do that, she'll get a trip back to Mexico, no compensation for three lost years, while the scum responsible go on living without a care in their heads."

"That's inevitable. That Luzzy guy is dead, so he's out of the picture. Washington's sheriff's department will find the other girls. Two possible outcomes: they'll either do it right and the DA will prosecute Luzzy's people, or they'll bungle it. Out of our control. As for the other scum—the ones that smuggled her in the first place—you don't have any evidence or resources to find it. The case is closed, Ray. Let the poor kid go home."

Flores nods, considering the advice, and moves toward the door. "I'm getting lunch. We can sort this out when I get back." He pauses. "You want the usual?"

"Make it lamb this time."

The rain has died down to a sprinkle, but thick gray clouds block the sun, giving the impression of early evening. Flores sits at a corner café, eating an egg sandwich, and watches shoppers with heavy paper bags jump over the puddles. On his way back, he stops off at the meat market. Frosted windows and cartoon cow heads announce beef specials. While the butcher wraps a lamb shoulder in white parchment, Flores stares across the street at Enlai Hsiung's office. As he does every lunch hour.

Five years ago, Flores was the top PI in North Portland. He had an upscale office in the Pearl District, sandwiched between an art gallery and boutique. Black leather loveseats and mahogany tables. Blood splatter paintings and sepia photographs of warehouses and windmills. Now it's Hsiung's name on the door, and Hsiung's client waiting on the leather loveseat. Gold-painted fingers slide over a shining black interface deck. Her face is covered by sunglasses and a wide brim cotton hat.

"How long has that woman been waiting there?" Flores asks.

The butcher leans forward across the counter, following Flores' finger with his eyes. "I'd say 'bout twenty minutes. What's-his-face likes to keep 'em waiting. Wish I could get away with that kind of customer service, am I right?" He hands over the package of meat. "Enjoy, bud. Come by tomorrow and I'll give you a discount on the pork loin."

Flores tips his hat and crosses the street. As he crosses the threshold of Hsiung's office, the speakers play Beethoven's Fidelio overture in pompous fashion. Abstract paintings with names like "Quasar IV" and "Dolphin Beak" hang along saffron walls. Above the curved receptionist desk, a portrait of Hsiung himself dangles between velvet drapes. Dressed in leather jacket and navy jeans, he lounges in a Queen Anne wingback, one hand curled around a revolver. Gold rings form a glittering line of gaudiness along his fingers. His black, spiked hair juts at careless angles. His moustache and goatee frame a white, dental office grin. With one boot propped on an ottoman, Hsiung favors the camera with a gratuitous shot of his crotch. His Anglo associates flank the chair. Two suited men—one peering through binoculars while the other jots notes—stand in the back. A woman in stilettos straddles the chair's arm, pulling back a pistol's slide. Flores scowls at Hsiung's eternally smirking face.

From the couch, the woman with the cotton hat lifts her head. "He seems a confident man."

Flores does an obvious toe-to-head scan: jeweled slingback heels; Dooney & Bourke handbag; boatneck, sleeveless, black leather dress. Red lips quirk as she notices the stare.

Flores sets the lamb shoulder on the front desk, where a boy with slick-backed hair reclines. Lost in a deck daze. "Is Enlai in?" Flores says, like he and Hsiung are good friends.

The boy blinks, clearing the fog over his eyes. "He's at court testifying for a client. He'll be back soon."

"And his associates?"

"They're all out on cases. But they'll be back soon."

“They’ll be back soon,” Flores echoes. He nods in mock understanding, tips back his hat, and glances over at the woman on the loveseat. “Have you been kept waiting long?”

Her head dips to one side, returning the lingering glance-over. “I’m willing to wait. Mr. Enlai Hsiung is well-known for his extraordinary skills and connections.”

That burns like sand in the eyes. “A fact he’ll inform you of at every turn.”

“Do you know him well?”

“We’ve shared many cases together,” Flores says, and it isn’t a *complete* lie. “We’re old colleagues.”

“Yet you don’t speak of him fondly.”

Fidelio ends, becomes Schumann’s first symphony. “I won’t lie and call him a cheat and a worthless drunk. He’s a proficient PI, and good at what he does.” Even that small compliment tastes bitter. “But we have different ideas about how people should be treated. He goes over the edge.”

“I have little concern for any of that. Who is better? You or him?”

“I am.”

“I’d like to validate that.” She unhooks the wires behind her ear. The interface deck disappears into the purse. “Where is your office?”

“Old Town Chinatown.”

Her mouth opens, as if she’s about to laugh. “Then let’s go,” she says, standing.

“But,” protests the boy, “Mr. Hsiung will be back any minute.”

Smiling, Flores slides his calling card over the desk. “Tell your boss I said hello.”

O’Neri wrings her hands, waiting. When she finally hears footsteps on the stairs, she rushes to the door. Voices on the landing stop her. Flores and a woman.

Flores comes in with a smug smile—a rare expression—but O’Neri only cares about the package of meat he’s carrying. “And this is my associate, Vivian O’Neri,” he says. “Vivian, this is Ms. Andrea Meng.”

The woman’s perfume clouds O’Neri’s senses with labdanum and cardamom, blocks out the scent of lamb blood. “Nice to meet you,” she mumbles, and hopes it doesn’t come off as deranged. *Fuck it. I don’t care.* She snatches the package, mutters a quick “excuse me” and flees to the office’s back room.

The room is small, the size of a walk-in closet and intended only for storage. O’Neri sets the meat on a box and yanks off her clothes as if eager to make love to it. As she transforms, there’s a twinge of fear that Buena or the Meng woman will hear, but she trusts Flores to keep them out of earshot. Soon all rational thought is gone. She tears into the lamb shoulder with fangs and claws. Crunches on bones and cartilage.

With the meat devoured, she returns to human form and wipes blood from her chin. O’Neri dresses quickly and checks a tarnished mirror in the corner. She picks hairpins from the floor and ties her hair back in a lazy bun.

When she emerges, Meng is by the window, looking out at the Burnside Bridge. Sunglasses cover half her face. “You’ve returned,” Meng says, in a catty tone that grates on O’Neri’s nerves. She’s eaten cats before.

“Sorry about that. What’d I miss?”

Flores says, “Ms. Meng is a new potential client. I found her in Hsiung’s office.”

There’s no missing his meaning. O’Neri chuckles. “You poached her? About damn time.”

Meng unfolds her sunglasses. Early to mid-forties, but she could likely pass for younger. “Now that you’re here, I’d like to explain what I want, because the timing is critical. Last night my daughter, Sarah, was kidnapped from her room. I’m offering a large sum of money if you can return her to me. One hundred thousand dollars.”

O’Neri lets out a breath.

“Perhaps more. But before I go into further detail, I want to know something about both of you. Most people in your line of work are good at it because they have some skill. They’re good at deductive reasoning. Enlai Hsiung is apparently quite observant.” Her eyes rest on Flores’ face. “What about you?”

Flores hesitates, and O’Neri can’t blame him. His ability gives him an edge, especially because clients are given to lying or bending the truth. Once they know how it works, they avoid tipping it off.

But it’s a hundred grand.

He must come to the same conclusion, because he says, “When people tell me things that have happened to them, I can see it. Vividly. Not just see it, but feel it with all my senses as if I’m there. As if I’m that person.”

“Is it filtered through that person’s perception?” asks Meng.

Flores shakes his head. “If someone lies to me, or misremembers, I can see what they were actually doing. The image is stronger than memory. I can see details you’ve forgotten.”

Meng’s expression doesn’t change. “Hm.”

O’Neri starts, “And I—”

“I know what you are,” Meng says with a dismissive wave.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’ve hired your kind before. Animorphs. Foxes, bobcats, bears, wolves, and they’re all the same. They’re all beasts.”

A few choice phrases come to O’Neri’s mind. “Get stuffed” features prominently. But Flores is giving her the stink eye, and dollar signs are dancing over Meng’s head. So O’Neri sits beside

Buena and smiles graciously. Like a lady. “Well, since you now know who we are, why don’t you start at the beginning?”

5

“It was about fifteen past nine, last night,” Meng begins, sipping her whiskey, “and I was just coming home.”

A large house framed in darkness. The porch light glows as Meng pulls her car into the garage.

O’Neri interrupts. “Where had you been?”

“Does that matter?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. I won’t know until you tell me.”

“I was at a steering committee meeting.” Meng turns her back on O’Neri and favors Flores with a brief smile. “The house was dark, which is unusual because Sarah never turns off the lights, even when she’s going out. We’ve had several discussions about this. And when I switched them on—”

Flash of a woman lying, face down, at the foot of the stairs. Long curls of auburn hair. An axe in her hands, blood seeping into plush white carpet.

“I found Jodie dead, she—”

“Last name?” says O’Neri. “What was her relationship to you?”

“Berger. Jodie Berger. She managed the house. Her throat had been cut open.”

Flores remembers Luzzy on the bathroom floor, his neck a red rictus. “Was there any sign of forced entry? A broken window or door?”

“None. Not even the security alarm triggered.” Meng dips into her purse and removes a silk bundle. Gingerly, she draws back the folds of the kerchief. Inside are three knives, each with a ribbon of salmon muslin tied to a ring at the end. “One was in her neck, and the other two in her chest.”

“Throwing knives?” O’Neri says, taking the bundle and examining its contents under the light.

“I went upstairs,” Meng continues, “and that’s where I found Edison, my daughter’s guard.” She empties the glass, gestures to O’Neri for a refill. “I hired him after Sarah ran away the third time.”

“When—” Flores hesitates, seeing Valina in Meng’s descriptions. “When did that behavior start?”

“I couldn’t say with certitude. She’s always been a willful girl, but lately her antics have been tiring. Edison was upstairs, outside her room, with his neck broken. And Sarah was gone, obviously.”

The flashes support the story, but Flores is struck by her lack of emotion. She moves from room to room with little reaction. Yet Meng downs the whiskey quickly; either that’s an act, or the shock of the experience is finally sinking in. Double homicide and a kidnapped daughter.

“What did you do with the bodies?” Flores asks.

It’s an easily dismissed question, now that Meng knows how to circumvent his ability. She doesn’t. Meng meets his eyes and says, “I had them removed.”

Scent of moss and wet soil. Gold-tipped fingers suspended over a car’s vented heaters. Animal grunting and bones crunching. Meng turns her head, and a thick forest glows under the car’s headlights. Needled hemlocks, Douglas firs, and brilliant yellow larches. Then the silhouette of two massive, hairy creatures stomping the soil. Curving, muddy tusks and twitching snouts. One beast rears its head, pulverizing a human femur between its jaws.

Flores remembers the night O’Neri tore into a live calf and focuses on that, pushing the other images aside.

Meng smiles and reaches for the whiskey bottle. “Shall I pour you some? You’ve gone pale.”

O’Neri’s hand grasps his elbow.

“I’m fine,” Flores says. Unless the two dead employees were friendless and without family, it would be a matter of time before

someone wondered where they went. And if Missing Persons got wind, Meng would be the first suspect. Even if she didn't murder them, even if there *wasn't* a scrap of bone left, that kind of human desecration shouldn't go unpunished. "Was there a note?"

Meng dips into her purse again. "It's in Chinese, and I hadn't thought to translate it because of Hsiung, but it shouldn't take long. Essentially," Meng says as she writes, "all it says is that my daughter is being held, no specification where or by whom. It goes on to demand that I go to Beijing on an appointed flight reserved under my name. The date is one week from now." Once her pen stops its scribbling, she tears off the sheet.

Flores reads the translation carefully. "What's the 'White Stag'?"

"Nothing of concern to your investigation. Handing it over to these criminals is not an option."

This time, Flores gets nothing from her. Not a single image or sensation.

"Do you have any idea who might be behind this?" O'Neri asks.

"No."

Flores folds up the translation and the original, taps it against his knee. "Who cleaned up the blood?"

Meng raises a brow. "Pardon me?"

"The blood. The blood that was all over the staircase and the floor. You didn't clean it up. Who did?"

"You're a clever man, Mr. Flores. I can tell you and I will get along." Meng smiles. "You're right. The maid took care of the mess. She was there last night, and likely saw it all, the poor thing. She only speaks Indonesian, though."

"That shouldn't be a big problem," O'Neri says.

Meng stands, pulls out a checkbook from her purse, and begins filling it out on the desk. "This should be enough to get you both started. Draw up the contract, and I'll sign."

Flores has the receptionist cat prepare a form contract. It prints beside his desk.

Meng glances through the text and signs. “If you can find a suitable translator, you can ask the maid any questions you like. I’ve sent you a dossier on my daughter as well. And, Mr. Flores, you’re welcome at the house at any time.” Her lips quirk, and Flores struggles to return the smile.

When the door has finally shut behind her, O’Neri says, “I don’t like that woman.”

Flores appraises the check for ten grand. “You have good instincts.”

6

When the guard finally slips the interface deck in Enlai’s hands, it’s like being reunited with a lost limb. The second he’s past the courthouse’s glass doors, he’s wired in and heading down the street. Glance at his wristwatch: 3:28 PM. Bobby is slow to pick up. After a minute of silence, a scarlet pimperl blossoms in Enlai’s periphery.

“What’s up with the delay, Bobby?” Enlai stops beside his sedan and snatches a parking ticket lodged under the wiper blades. “You tripping on deck haze already?”

“Sorry, Mr. Hsiung,” says the flower.

“Whatever, don’t worry about it. They kept me two hours longer than necessary, and I’m jonesing for unagi. What do you say, Bobby? You want in on some sushi?”

“Uhm, sure, Mr. Hsiung.”

“Good.” Enlai slides into the driver’s seat and starts the car. “Hey, did Donna tell you what number she and Meng eventually settled on?”

“Uhm. Mr. Hsiung, I have bad news.”

Enlai watches traffic crawl by. “So we’re getting less the two hundred grand? That’s not a big deal.”

“No, that’s not it. Don’t be mad...”

“When have I ever been mad?”

The flower wobbles, wilts, springs back into a lush bloom. “Mrs. McHenry was called away on a follow-up before Ms. Meng arrived. And Mr. Daniels and Mr. Buckson were out on cases.”

Enlai tries to anticipate the problem. Bobby wouldn’t be worried if Meng merely had to wait twenty minutes for one of his associates to return. “And she left in a huff? I’ll call her back and win her over.”

“No, Mr. Hsiung. A man came in, asking after you. I thought he knew you, so I didn’t think—he started talking to Ms. Meng, and then... and then they left together.”

“This man,” Enlai says. “What’d he look like? Snappy dresser? Dark? Sexy? Like a Mexican Cary Grant?”

“I, uh, I guess. He left his card. It says his name’s Raymond Flores. I’m terribly sorry about this, Mr. Hsiung. I swear I tried to stop them.”

Enlai wants a word with his brilliant associates who left the Two Hundred Grand Lady waiting in the foyer. But none of that is Bobby’s fault. He reassures the young man and signs off the interface. There’s still a chance he can clean up this mess.

He’d first met Flores five years ago. The Silver was newly reopened after months of renovation, and Enlai was damn proud of the result. Thousands of dollars invested into paint, flooring, lights, stages, new faces. People would think twice before ever linking “tittybar” with “dive” again. It flourished. Two months later, he opened a PI business in the Pearl District, right across from a competitor. It was a whim, but his best ideas came on whims. Enlai had enough friends, enough capital that the business could tank without him feeling it.

The other associates he’d hired on complained about the tedium, but Enlai found the cases thrilling. He turned Chinatown

acquaintances into customers and poached clients from the established firms. He could afford to operate at a loss, so Enlai kept his rates low. His competitors took notice, fired off angry letters; Enlai crumpled them and laughed it off.

It was early June, and Oregon was caught in a heat wave. Enlai had followed a middle aged man to the city fair on the request of two grown children convinced that their mother's new beau was a scumbag. Proof was short in coming. From the petting zoo tent, Enlai snapped photos of the man laughing with two teens over a baby goat. At the Ferris wheel: the man playing kissy face with the girls. Round and round. Grinning, Enlai lit a joint and marveled. "God, I love this job."

Enlai was at the waterfront, sipping a beer and pretending to photograph the fleet when he spotted a man in a suit several yards away, glaring at him. Enlai had thought it impossible to glower in such close proximity to a dancing clown, but this guy pulled it off. Meeting his gaze, Enlai lifted his beer in a silent toast. The suited man came over.

"You know," Enlai started, keeping one eye on his client's target. They were at a shooting booth, sharing cotton candy. "It's impolite to stare."

The suited man gave him a lingering glance-over.

Enlai didn't mind the silence. He fingered the peaked lapels on the man's trenchcoat. "It's ninety degrees out here. Aren't you hot?" The man's eyes settled on the camera around Enlai's neck. "You like that? Set me back three grand, but the *quality*. Wanna see?"

Pulling off the camera, Enlai let the man huddle close and examine the day's photos. He was so focused on the man's invigorating cologne—nice and *woods*y—that he didn't notice him grab the camera until he'd thrown it over the waterfront railing. Children's screams and roaring motors drowned out the splash.

"Hey!" Grabbing the railing, Enlai gaped down at the Willamette River. "What was that for?"

The man gave him a light shove. “You stay away from my clients, *pendejo*.”

“You must have me confused with—”

“I’m Raymond Flores.”

“Who?”

“Raymond Flores, the private investigator.”

“Nope. Not ringing any bells.”

“You’ve been *stealing my clients*.”

Enlai’s mind dinged with recognition; he slapped his forehead. “Oh, right. Flores. Sorry, but if it’s not under contract, then it’s fair game. Market forces, baby.”

Flores stabbed a finger at Enlai’s chest. “There’s a force greater than the market you should learn to respect.”

Enlai puzzled out the threat. *Is this guy for real?*

“And one more thing,” Flores added before walking past. “Keep your client’s damn pictures confidential.”

“Right.” Enlai peered back down at the river. “Thanks for the ethical advice.”

7

Their layover flight from LAX to La Aurora International is delayed by an hour. Nuwa spends the time patting the girl’s hand as she lies slumped in the wheelchair. The neurotoxin is working through the girl’s system, leaving her incapable of moving. Talking is impossible; her eyes are blank and unfocused.

“I know how scared you are,” Nuwa says, wiping drool from the corner of the girl’s mouth. “Believe me.” That’s the only comfort she’s willing to offer.

At least neurotoxins eventually wear off.

They’re getting stares from other waiting passengers. Most avert their eyes at the sight of the girl’s unsightly condition, but one man won’t look away. Nuwa catches his attention and taps two

fingers against her temple. He flinches and buries his face in a magazine.

First class begins to board, and Nuwa rolls the girl through the jetway. Once the attendants have helped get the girl seated, Nuwa fastens their belts and cracks open a book on Oregon wildlife. The flight attendants gesticulate in her periphery. The plane is pulling out of the terminal when a red light flashes across her left eye. It forms a fiery symbol, demanding her return.

Nuwa has dreaded this moment since she left Meng's. But she doesn't have a choice.

With practiced efficiency, Nuwa sits back and props her chin in a hand. A mental execution freezes her muscles in place. Her entire body goes rigid.

Begrudgingly, she closes her eyes and disconnects.

Disjointed and in freefall, closed in by darkness. Suffocating. The rhythmic sucking of the ventilator brings her back. Hisses echo through the metal casket and join the slosh of water. Hot tears run down the sides of her face. Cool water laps her cheeks. Nuwa bobs.

Sometimes, in between the long wait, Nuwa wonders how deep her water tomb goes. Three feet. Three miles. She can't flail her arms around to find out.

At last, there is a thump outside the casket, and a man's voice. The doors groan and open like butterfly wings. Nuwa squeezes her eyes shut in reflex; outside, the nest is dark as a cave, but bright compared to the tomb.

"How's he doing?" the boss asks, addressing the android nurse always posted during these visits.

"His blood pressure is still very low," a female voice replies, "but you may speak to him."

Black loafers appear on the steel grating above Nuwa's head. The boss crouches down until his stupid face is inches from hers. She can't smell him, but she imagines he reeks of rotten orchids.

“How are you today, Mr. Zhang?” He taps Nuwa’s cheek gently. “I heard you came down with a bad infection. You had us worried.”

Nuwa swears she feels rage curdling behind her breastbone. It’s gone as quickly as she notices it.

The boss fumbles with the transparent screen jutting from the casket’s folded outer doors. He tilts it back and forth, adjusting its height, and presses a button along the screen’s edge. The button lights up blue. “Go ahead.”

Nuwa tilts her head up to stare at the nest’s ceiling. The water sloshes as she puts thoughts to words. Like walking, it’s both deliberate and automatic. In the corner of her eye she sees the words appear on the screen. “I didn’t know I had an infection.”

The boss nods. “Respiratory. You needed round-the-clock care.”

“How bad was it?”

His eyes drift away from her face. He’s tired of looking at her. “It was close. But the nurses had it all under control, so there was no need to bring you out. It would’ve been cruel.”

Cruel, she repeats. The thought dances around on the screen. Over and over.

“You’re taking on a vampiric appearance.”

“Are we done? May I go back now?”

“Not yet,” says the boss. He smiles playfully, easily, like a man teasing his lover. “Let’s talk about Meng.”

“What about her?”

“Don’t be so cagey. Despite what you might think, I don’t bring you out for the sheer torture. Tell me about Meng. Will she take the offer, or will she run?”

Nuwa frowns. She hadn’t stayed in Portland long enough to gauge the woman’s reaction, but every time someone described her, they used a reiteration of the same word: ruthless. “She won’t run. But she won’t cooperate.”

“What about the girl?” the boss says. “That was a new move from you.”

“It was another tactic.”

“It’s a needless complication, playing with someone’s children. It makes them irrational.”

“Killing her wouldn’t have worked.”

“I’ll have to trust you there. Anyway, that should be good enough for now. Yanhong will meet you in Guatemala City for the next assignment. Relax until you’re called again.” He lumbers to his feet and pulls the screen up along with him. He’s half-turned away when he hesitates. “Are you sure you don’t want a male body this time?”

Nuwa takes pleasure in rolling her eyes.

Shrugging, the boss gestures to the android nurse. “Throw him back in.”

8

Flores is loitering outside Sunburn’s shop on 4th Avenue when the interface deck vibrates in his jacket pocket. He peels out the wires, tilts his head up to the sky as the rain pours down, and snaps in.

O’Neri’s green-tailed mermaid swings in front of him. “Is she settled in?”

“As much as expected.” Buena had frowned at the bargain store sweaters, jeans, and shoes he’d bought to replace the nightgown. If it was because she was used to dressing like a denizen of the Red Light District, or because he simply had poor taste, Flores didn’t know. She had donned the clothes without further complaint.

“You’re doing the right thing,” O’Neri says. The avatar glides forward. “I found a translator at PSU willing to do this for peanuts. She’s talking with Meng’s maid right now.”

“Good, I’ll stay patched in. My weapons expert should be opening shop soon.”

The avatar disappears, but he can feel it still swirling around. There's a nagging sensation that he's being watched. Sunburn—a tall, longhaired man with lumberjack beard and sandals—plods down the street in his direction.

“You're about fifteen minutes late,” Flores says as the man unlocks the shop's door.

“Pussy.”

Sunburn's one-word excuse gives Flores flashes of a naked woman leaning over a balcony.

Inside the shop, weapons of varying shapes, sizes, and quality hang on the walls and sit in glass counters on faux velvet settings. Tridents, axes, swords, pole arms, spears, slings, clubs, and shields. Not ornaments, not toys. Many are decades or centuries old. Some have seen battle.

Once Sunburn is behind the register, fiddling with its wobbly drawer, Flores sets down the kerchief of throwing knives on a glass case displaying a wood bow. “Can you tell me what these are?”

Sunburn casts a glance at the knives and returns to muttering at the drawer. “Fei biao.”

“Where were the knives—”

“Not knives. Throwing darts.”

“Where were they made?”

“Same place as everything else. China.”

“I was hoping you'd be more specific.”

Sunburn squares his shoulders. He casts Flores a dour stare and scoops the bundle into his large hand. Presently, he says, “I haven't seen anything like this floating on our side of the coast. It's a replica, but real high quality steel.”

“How would someone go about getting their hands on one of these?”

“I couldn't tell you. Prolly specially made. Where'd you find them?”

“They were used in a murder.”

Sunburn grins. “I'll give you a hundred bucks for each one.”

“I—” Flores hesitates. Meng had thoroughly washed them before handing the weapons over. If there are any further clues to be gleaned from the darts, Flores is doubtful. Whoever left the knives behind wasn’t sloppy. That person knew they wouldn’t be traced back. “One hundred fifty.”

“One twenty-five.” Sunburn counts out a stack of bills from the register and tucks them into Flores’ front jacket pocket. “If I figure anything else out, I’ll give you a buzz.”

Back outside in the pouring rain, Flores taps the interface deck. O’Neri’s avatar twirls into view. “Those knives are a dead end,” he says.

“The maid hasn’t been much help either. She was doing some laundry when she heard a loud thud from upstairs—I’d guess that’s the bodyguard, Edison, going down--and the next moment this woman is carrying Meng’s daughter down the hall like she’s nothing.”

“What’d the woman look like?”

“Barefoot, wearing white silk all over. Face covered. No identifying marks or tattoos. After that, the woman carried the girl down the stairs, and I guess Jodie was hiding down there with an axe she picked up from the shed. I’m thinking Jodie either let the assassin in, or the assassin forced her way inside. Either way, she ignored Jodie, went upstairs, killed the bodyguard, then grabbed the girl. And on the way back, out popped Jodie swinging the axe. Then Jodie went down.”

“Did the maid see any of that?”

“Jack shit. She hid the second she saw the assassin.”

Flores nods. “Sounds like we don’t have much to go on, besides knowing our killer is Chinese.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, after you’re done looking around, meet me back at my place. I have some ideas.” Flores yanks out the wires, making the avatar blink away, and walks north, back to his apartment.

He still can’t shake the feeling that he’s being followed.

Enlai punches the sedan's defrost button. The fog over the windshield slowly clears, revealing the dingy façade of Residential Arms. Rent controlled one bedrooms, by the look of it. Occupied by more rats than human beings. He's parked behind the mailboxes, well out of view from Flores' front window.

The dashboard clock clicks over to eight o'clock. He'd been following Flores for four hours, stalking him through department stores while the man checked price tags on dresses and girl's underwear.

Enlai slides down in the seat as a muscled blonde woman makes her way across the parking lot, umbrella in hand, and presses the door buzzer. O'Neri. A moment later, she goes through.

Dicks.

Enlai considers getting himself buzzed in, going up there and having it out with the two of them. He doesn't. He taps on the steering wheel to the tune of Fortunate Son, even long after the song has faded into another.

Five minutes later, Flores and O'Neri emerge from the building and pile into his 1985 Mustang. Since Enlai last saw that junk heap, it has lost its muffler. As it putters out of the lot, he fires up his sedan. He counts to ten and follows, being sure to keep two cars between them.

The clunker crosses the Morrison Bridge and merges onto I-5 North. It crosses over into the far left lane, going seventy, and Enlai curses as he gets lodged between a Winnebago and truck. By the time he reaches the left lane, the clunker is zipping through traffic. It suddenly exits the highway on the right. Enlai nearly clips a car in his haste to get over in time.

Flores takes the exit ramp at grandmotherly speeds, turns, and eases back onto I-5 South. The clunker jumps back to seventy miles an hour.

Enlai feels himself grin. *I'm being fucked with.*

This time he stays close behind the clunker, riding its bumper. When Flores exits onto I-405, Enlai is right behind. It gets off the highway at Broadway, pulls into a gas station, and parks beside a pump.

Enlai gets out of the car, slamming the door behind him, and approaches the jalopy. Flores has already rolled down the window. “What the hell was that about?” Enlai says.

Flores has the audacity to look surprised to see him. “Mr. Hsiung.”

“Don’t give me that. You stole one of my clients.”

Beside Flores, O’Neri says, “Tables have turned now, huh? And you were the one stalking us.”

“Hey, that’s different. That’s—” Enlai cuts himself off as a teenaged attendant in a neon yellow vest approaches.

“What can I do you for?” the kid asks.

Flores holds out a card. “Fill it with premium, please.”

“Anyway,” Enlai continues, “as I was saying, this situation is different. That woman who came into my office wasn’t just some jealous middle-class housewife. She’s loaded.” All he knew was that Meng’s missing daughter had a juvie record for vandalism. Mom, in a show of tough love, had let the charges go through. The girl was probably with her friends right now, smoking cigarettes and drinking PBR. “And she was going to offer me two hundred grand for that little case you just stole. So, yes, I’m a tad annoyed.”

Flores’ face falls. “Did you say ‘two hundred’?”

O’Neri smacks her hand against the dashboard. “*Fuck*. I can’t believe it.”

“What?” Enlai says. “Can’t believe what?”

Flores shakes his head. Suddenly the mood in the jalopy has gone forlorn. “Nothing. Look, we’re working a lead right now. If you want to park and follow along, fine. It’s only two blocks from here.”

Enlai ponders the sudden change in emotion. “Feeling bad you screwed over your old friend?”

“Hardly. But if you’re going to tag along, you might as well make yourself useful.”

10

Enlai takes a piss at the mini mart and follows them down SW Broadway and into a residential neighborhood full of sad little houses. Apartment towers rise on all sides, darkened by steel gray clouds. O’Neri’s sharing her umbrella with Flores as she explains the case, leaving Enlai to hold a copy of *The Oregonian* over his head to keep off the pattering rain. As she talks, describing the maid’s story and the lack of concrete leads on the assassin, Enlai reassesses his impression that this case would be an easy two hundred grand.

“Here it is.” Flores stops in front of a shriveled gablefront cottage. Ivy consumes half its wooden roof and chipped purple siding. The front lawn is nothing but a strip of weed-ridden grass, hidden underneath an overturned garbage can and clumps of dog shit. There’s no car in the driveway, but the lights are on inside.

Enlai examines the house, then the neighborhood. The street ends abruptly three houses down in an untended mess of yellowing trees and blackberry bushes. It feels familiar. “Is this Ryan Chu’s dump?”

“The very same.” Flores holds the chain gate open, letting O’Neri through first.

Enlai is on her heels. Chu is a loan shark, a drug dealer, and chronically paranoid. “How do you know a shithead like him?”

“I don’t,” Flores says. “He’s an old friend of yours.”

“I wouldn’t call him a friend so much as—”

A spaniel mutt darts from the back yard, barking wildly and growling. O’Neri stops, squares her shoulders, and lets loose an inhuman growl of her own. The dog shrinks back and bolts, whimpering. Enlai shudders.

“I hate dogs,” she says, as if that’s an explanation.

“I can tell.” Enlai glances back at Flores. “Are you still digging into my background?”

Flores smiles thinly, knowingly, and rights the garbage can back on its wheels. “Let’s go up,” he says, climbing up the stairs to the front door.

The instant he rings the bell, there’s a sharp banging inside. Then thumping footsteps. A white woman in a skirt and torn nylons throws open the door and holds a hand over the screen, as if to keep it closed. She eyes Flores closely. “What d’you want?”

“Good evening, ma’am.” The woman gives him a bleary-eyed blink. “Is Mr. Chu in?”

She leans heavily on the screen. Eyes dilated. Drugged out of her mind. “D’you have a warrant?”

“We’re not cops.” Flores opens his wallet; Enlai catches a glint of gold. “We’re private investigators. We only want to ask him a few questions. It won’t take long.”

“Uh, I dunno. He’s kinda busy right now.”

“Let’s hurry this up.” O’Neri sighs and pushes against the screen’s frame. It flies open. The woman stumbles back, eyes wide.

Shrugging, Flores follows O’Neri inside. “No need to get impatient.”

“Can’t hem and haw all day.”

Enlai pauses at the screen door and frowns. O’Neri had barely exerted any force, at least by the look of it.

He glances over at the woman. She’s scrambled over to the kitchen and is clutching a steak knife in her fist. It trembles as if attached to a power drill.

Tossing aside the newspaper, Enlai feels for the Beretta M9 inside his bomber jacket. But the woman doesn’t move. She only holds the knife to her chest, blade down, like it’s a crucifix. A good luck charm.

“Ryan!” she shouts. “There’s some people coming in here!”

From a back corner of the house, Chu's voice: "In the can!"

Flores leads the way, weaving through a narrow hallway. The carpet has been pulled out in sections. He's reaching for a glass doorknob when O'Neri grabs it instead and steps inside. Enlai follows into the tiled bathroom and catches a glimpse of the toilet. Unoccupied.

Movement in the mirror. The shower curtain draws back. Out pops Chu, covered in sweat, a semi-auto combat shotgun pressed against his shoulder. He trains the barrel on Flores' chest. Flores stares at it indifferently. "Oh, that you again," Chu says in broken English. "What your name?"

"Flores."

"Flowers. That right. And you bring a lady." Chu's eyes dart from O'Neri to Enlai. Back to Flores. "Why you two working together? You tell me you two no like each other."

"We don't."

"Take the gun off him," Enlai says in Mandarin. "Go on, put it down. We just want to ask some questions."

Chu doesn't waver. "Not in mood for questions. I do nothing wrong."

"He's high off his ass," O'Neri says warily. There's no denying the shaking and sweating. Chu's been known to dabble in his own meth supply.

Chu steps forward, bringing the shotgun barrel closer to Flores' chest. Flores—the dipshit—doesn't even try putting distance between them. "I no joking around, you understand? You get lost. I count to three, okay? One."

Chu isn't bluffing. Enlai's fingers twitch, groping for the Beretta. Maybe, if he's fast enough—but there's always the chance Chu will pull the trigger the second the pistol reaches Enlai's hands.

"Two."

O'Neri makes a violent gesture. "Put the gun down, asshole!"

Enlai doesn't hear the word "three." There's a flash, an earsplitting blast; Enlai throws himself to the floor and goes for the Beretta. It's in his hands, he's shouting, rolling on his shoulder and aiming as Chu squeezes off two more shells.

Enlai freezes as a snarl cuts through the shots. The beast is as tall as the ceiling, all gray fur and claws, bent over Flores, almost hugging him. Protecting him. Drool drips from its fangs as it growls, hackles raised. Absurdly, Enlai notices a pair of tiny azure earrings dangling from the creature's ears.

Screaming, Chu fires wave after wave of buckshot into the creature. It only roars louder.

Enlai's lost track of the shells. Chu's fired eight, maybe nine times. When he pulls the trigger again, nothing happens. The tube is empty. In a second, the monster turns, bats the shotgun from Chu's hands and leaps into the bathtub after him. Chu shrieks, arms and legs flailing, trying to keep the beast back.

It snaps its jaws, angling for Chu's neck.

Flores jumps to his feet. "Stop!" The beast lifts its head, ears twitching. It's about to tear into Chu's jugular when he rushes forward. "I said *stop!* Bad girl. Let it go. Let it go right now."

The beast turns to Flores and growls. Enlai flinches, expecting the creature to turn on both of them, but it backs away from Chu. Shuffling, it sits on its haunches in front of Flores. It continues to growl, but presses into Flores' hand when he scratches its muzzle. Enlai gapes. "What the fuck am I looking at here?"

"Good girl." Flores snaps his fingers in Enlai's direction. "Meat. *Hurry.*"

Enlai starts. He takes issue with being ordered around, but the rest of him just wants to get out of there. He rushes to the kitchen, where the woman is still clutching her good luck steak knife, and throws open the fridge. "Please tell me you guys aren't fucking vegetarians," he mutters, shoving aside milk and mustard and cheese and peanut butter. Who the hell refrigerates peanut butter?

Grabbing a sheaf of bacon, two packages of lunch meat, a tube of ground beef, and a Styrofoam container of frozen shrimp, Enlai carries the armload back to the bathroom. The knife woman calls after him, but he ignores her. “Meat man’s here,” he announces. “Is this good enough?”

Flores releases a sigh of obvious relief. “Dump it on the floor.”

Enlai doesn’t like the way the monster is staring at him with its wide amber eyes. “Shouldn’t I take it out of the plastic first?”

“Just dump it on the floor.”

Enlai drops the load and hops away as the beast moves forward. It sniffs the packages, opens its mouth, and crushes them between massive jaws. It swallows all of it down.

In a blink, the beast disappears, and O’Neri—disheveled and naked—stands in its place. She wipes her mouth with the back of a hand.

Flores pulls off his jacket and sets it loosely over her shoulders. She doesn’t bother buttoning it, giving Enlai a good frontal view of her bush and pink nipples. Any other night, he would’ve found the sight alluring. Now he only stares out of dumbstruck awe.

O’Neri sniffs. “Flores, your jacket smells like piss.”

“It’s not mine.”

“What, did you steal it?” She sniffs its collar deeply, then glances into the bathtub, where Chu is loudly whimpering. “Never mind.”

Flores crosses over to the bathtub and hoists Chu up by the t-shirt. “All right, tell me what’s got you freaking out. Besides the crack and whatever else is floating through your system.”

“N-nothing.” Chu shakes his head. “I do nothing. That *thing*...”

Enlai stands beside Flores. “If you don’t start talking,” he tells Chu, “your withdrawal hallucinations are going to start looking like happy fantasies. Did you see what that lady just did?”

“I-I no know. I hear shit about people dying.” He stares at Flores. “I think, maybe you—”

“People like who?” Flores interrupts. “People like Luzzy?”

Chu cringes. Enlai says, “Who’s Luzzy?”

“A small-time criminal. Got his throat sliced open. Our working theory is that whoever is behind this kidnapping also did Luzzy in.”

Chu sways, looking ready to faint. “Luzzy, yes, yes. Poor Luzzy.”

From the corner, O’Neri groans. “God, I feel sick to my stomach.”

Enlai turns back to her. “It’s probably from that pound of plastic you just wolfed down.”

“Only a pound?” She snorts. “I once ate an entire tire because there was a mouse inside it.”

Flores has Chu sit on the throne and starts lobbing questions. “Keep talking, Chu. There’s a girl missing. Who else has been killed, and what’ve they done to deserve it?”

“I—I first notice years before. It’s not ever anyone I know. I only hear about people killed. Chinese who talk too much. In America. Europe. Whatever. That what I hear. Some of us get together—we afraid.”

“Afraid you’d be next?”

“Yes. But nobody ever come.” Chu scratches his chest. “It go away for a long time. Years. And now Luzzy.”

“How did these other people die?” Enlai says.

“It never show up in the paper, okay? But I hear assassins do it.”

Flores sighs. “So you hear.”

“Luzzy not a political man, though. If they come after him, then...”

“What about the White Stag? Ever hear of that?”

“No.” Suddenly Chu’s head shoots up. “You ask Satyricon Peng. Peng knows.”

“Fuck me,” Enlai says. The last thing he needs is to be dealing with that gangster.

A suspicious look from Flores. “Another one of your colleagues?”

“I don’t have half as many colleagues as you think. Satyricon Peng is this crazy homeless man,” Enlai lies. “Big fat guy, long gray beard and moustache. I’ve had to kick him out of my office more than once.”

Flores stares at Enlai. “You’re lying.”

Chu waves him away. “He not crazy. And he not homeless.”

“He’s homeless,” Enlai insists. Much as Flores might hate him, he should take his word over a tweaker like Chu.

“Peng a good painter,” Chu says. “We old friends, back in the day. The assassins come after him, because of what he painting, right? But he get away. He not easy to find—he hide. He wander around between old Satyricon nightclub and Broadway Bridge. That where you look.”

“What a waste of time,” Enlai mutters. He has to get away from the stench of piss and gunpowder.

As he’s leaving, he walks past the woman, still in the kitchen. Still holding her knife.

11

“When you’re someone like me,” O’Neri says, tugging on a fresh pair of panties in the back seat of Flores’ car, “you’ve gotta be prepared. And that means carrying around extra clothes.”

Enlai is sitting shotgun. She notices him staring at Flores and wonders what he’s thinking.

Presently, Enlai says, “Can you do that?”

“Do what?” Flores deadpans. “Change my clothes in the back seat?”

“Turn into a fucking *werewolf*.”

O’Neri rolls on a fresh sweater. “If he could, don’t you think he would’ve done it?” Her backpack rustles as she paws through it. A bottle of Jagermeister and a shot glass glint under the street lamps. “Okay, Hsiung, let’s go.”

Enlai eyeballs the Jager. “You want to do shots with me?”

“That’s how she adopts you into the pack,” Flores explains. “You don’t want to know the other options.”

“Whoa, I never said I wanted to be part of the pack.”

O’Neri unscrews the cap, pours the black liquor. “My ass. You’ve been chasing us for years. At first it was on the pretense of you stealing our clients, trying to prop yourself up. You’re doing better now—fuck, you’ve won. Yet you’re still following us around.” That’s not the complete truth. Enlai had poached their clients, but his real beef had always been with Flores. She just got caught in the middle. But O’Neri won’t point that out. Not with Flores in the car. It wouldn’t be fair.

Enlai takes the glass, then looks at it as if unsure how it got there. “I have to drive.”

“Flores will take you home.”

In the rearview mirror, Flores peers at her. Either annoyance or suspicion. Too dark to tell. Rain patters on the car’s roof. “Bottoms up,” Enlai says, tossing the shot back. He winces, passes the glass over. O’Neri refills. The shots exchange hands mechanically, like an assembly line.

“So,” Enlai drawls after the seventh round, “where did you two meet?”

O’Neri says, “We’re jumping right to the good stuff, huh?” Her head is already buzzing, which means Enlai must be feeling it all over. The Jager burns the throat. Tongue is a licorice tingle. When Flores makes no move to answer the question, she continues, “We went to high school together in Beaverton. He helped me with my Spanish homework.”

“I *did* your Spanish homework,” Flores says.

“We became really close. Then I went to college in California, and he flat-out disappeared. I ended up going to law school. So I’m unemployed for two fucking years, and I’m reaching out to everybody for help. I guess Flores heard about it through the grapevine. He calls me up after nearly ten years of silence and says he’s started up a PI business, and do I want a job? It’s not what I expected, but—” O’Neri shrugs, takes another shot.

Enlai licks his lips. “And where does the werewolf thing come in?”

“I was *born* this way,” O’Neri says, in a tone that demands no follow-up questions.

Enlai’s smart enough to take the hint. “And that’s your big secret?” he asks Flores. “A werewolf bodyguard?”

“One,” she says, “I’m not his bodyguard. Two, that’s not his big secret.” Flores gives the warning glare as she snuggles up to the driver’s seat and rests her chin against his shoulder. She never was able to keep a secret worth shit, and the booze doesn’t help. “Last night,” she whispers, loud enough for Enlai to overhear, “I transformed again.” Flores flinches, jaw clenched, and she feels the tension radiating down his neck and shoulders.

Enlai watches Flores’ reactions and frowns. “I don’t get it. What, he has a good imagination?”

“That’s none of your damn business,” Flores snaps. “O’Neri, don’t tell him—”

“It’s not just that,” O’Neri says. “When I describe transforming into the wolf—” Flores squirms and she pecks his cheek. “He sees and feels the whole thing. In vivid detail.”

“Even with that little bit of information?”

“Even with that little bit of information. He sees it from *my* perspective. Feels it, tastes the raw rodent.”

“So... he has *magical empathy*,” Enlai says, doing air quotes. “Sounds like he got the short end when they were passing out super powers.”

“You’d be surprised,” Flores says.

Before, when they were younger, O’Neri was wary about disclosing any intimate details to Flores. It was a breach of trust, on one level, and a kind of creepy vicarious sex on another. She’d stopped the moment she figured out what it did to him—that discomfort, that odd shame. Voyeur and participant. When they grew closer, though, he began to ask her for details. “Nobody talks about the good things in their lives,” he’d said. “They tell me how their dog died, or how their uncle hurt them. It’s almost never anything happy. And I have to sit here with it in my head all day long, every day. It never goes away because my memories aren’t the kind that fade. I just want someone I trust to tell me something—something *nice*.”

And she had. She let the good memories spill from her mouth and hoped they pushed away the bad.

Enlai rubs his palms together in an exaggerated show of malevolence. “Let’s see. I once had an orgy in a Vegas hotel room. There were dicks flying everywhere.”

Flores sighs. “It doesn’t work if it didn’t happen.”

“It happened.”

“It didn’t, and I *know* it didn’t because I can’t see anything. That’s how I can tell when people are lying.”

Enlai stares down at his shot glass. “Shit.”

“He can be a real killjoy,” O’Neri says.

Flores turns the key in the ignition. The engine roars, and the vents blow cold air in O’Neri’s face. “It’s how I knew you were lying about Satyricon Peng,” she hears Flores whisper.

It’s been a long flight, and although Nuwa doesn’t know exhaustion, she appreciates the hot tub’s jets massaging the small of her back and tickling her heels. Yanhong sits on the balcony, eating her room service dinner of pan seared salmon and steamed

vegetables. She's dressed in a green silk gown, ready for roulette in the longue. Nuwa watches her through white-paned French doors.

They'd had an evening planned out—dinner, perhaps a show, or a hand of blackjack. Yanhong is skilled at finding the best rackets.

Nuwa is dipping her hair back in the bubbling water when Yanhong jumps up. Her lips move. Silence under the whirling jets. "What are you saying?" Nuwa raises her voice. "I can't hear you!"

Yanhong walks out of view of the French doors.

The girl. Nuwa climbs out of the tub and wraps herself in a towel.

Outside, Meng's daughter is lying on a plastic bench, arms and legs twitching as the neurotoxin wanes. Her eyes flash to Yanhong, then rest on Nuwa. She snarls something in English.

"She wants to know where she is," Yanhong translates. "And she called you a few uncomplimentary names."

"Doesn't she speak Chinese?"

Yanhong and the girl exchange staccato sentences; Yanhong's tone is measured and polite, the girl's fierce and accusatory. "She says she never learned."

Why would someone not teach their child their native language? It smacks of irresponsibility. Nuwa sighs and rubs her eyelashes between thumb and forefinger, coaxing out a glass needle. It makes a satisfying pop as it ejects the eyelid, like a burst pimple. "Ask her what her name is."

There's a short back-and-forth. Yanhong says, "Sarah."

"Go ahead and tell Sarah that she's here until her mother cooperates. And if she knows anything about the White Stag, it'll make her stay much shorter."

While Yanhong explains the situation to the girl, Nuwa steps forward with the needle. Sarah jerks preemptively and throws out a leg, but the kick is slow from the toxin and easily sidestepped. Fluidly, Nuwa grabs Sarah's left arm and slides the needle

underneath the skin. Sarah releases a clipped shriek, and then goes limp.

Yanhong raises a brow. “More neurotoxin? Won’t that damage her in the long term?”

“It was only a sedative,” Nuwa says, picking up the girl and carrying her to one of the bedrooms. Once Sarah is propped on the bed, Nuwa switches on the television and surfs until reaching Spanish language cartoons. She’s already severed the phone cords and instructed Yanhong to not leave her deck lying around. The girl won’t be contacting anyone or making an escape. Not while doped up.

Back in her own room, Nuwa changes from her swimsuit into one of the party dresses Yanhong brought along. Yanhong slips inside. “I’m not sure how I feel about this.”

“You and the boss. You worry too much. It’ll work out.”

“This wasn’t his idea, then?” Yanhong walks around and zips up the dress in the back. “It was yours?”

Yanhong isn’t the judgmental type; there isn’t a hint of disapproval in her tone. So Nuwa has to imagine it. “It’s better than killing her. It’s—” She glances over a shoulder, smiling. “The best form of disobedience I can muster.”

Yanhong’s fingers graze up Nuwa’s arm. “You don’t need to disobey, you just have to wait. They can’t hold you forever.”

“No, in fact, they *can*. I’d be a fool to expect them to let me go. I’m too valuable—they’ve invested too much.” Nuwa crouches to fasten her stilettos. “What do they have on you?” Yanhong’s eyes flit to the carpet. Nuwa doesn’t press her. “You need to stay with the girl, okay? Make sure she doesn’t leave the room. I have someone to scout.”

Her heels clip down the hotel carpet as she heads for the target’s room.

The drunks cackle throughout the drive, trying to distract Flores with tales of sexual conquests. O’Neri recounts an episode with a washing machine, and Enlai describes a behind-the-wheel blowjob from a male prostitute. This time he isn’t lying. Compared to some of the memories he’s seen and felt today, these are nothing.

He drops O’Neri at her house; she pounds the trunk, bidding them goodnight, and stumbles to the front door. Once she’s gone, the car falls silent. Flores pulls onto the road.

Enlai says, “I suspect you know where I live now?” He lights a joint, not bothering to ask permission. “So many nights spent looking through each other’s garbage.”

“It was more involved than that.”

Enlai takes several slow drags. “What’d you find out?”

Flores smiles. It’s a nagging thing, that curiosity. Nothing nags harder than a man who doggedly refuses to spill every bean. Perhaps that’s what makes this business so irresistible. Traffic lights cast bars of color over the car. Blinding glare through the rain.

“Well?”

“Are you aware that Portland has more strip clubs per capita than Las Vegas?”

“You can’t be blaming *me* for that. At the risk of sounding defensive: it was like that before I got here, officer.”

“Your little enterprise hasn’t been helping this city’s image. They call it Pornland. And I have a girl in my apartment who’s been sold into sex slavery.”

“Inter-esting,” Enlai says, over-pronouncing the word. “Very inter-esting. But what’s that have to do with me?”

“It always starts innocent enough. Strip clubs, maybe some pornography. Then it goes to prostitution. As far as I’m concerned, you’re no better than that Luzzy character.”

“Except for one detail—I haven’t committed any crimes.”

Another lie. Flores knows it, but nothing Enlai’s said sets off the flashes. “Then what do you call getting serviced in a Cadillac Eldorado?”

“So I’m a john. Big deal. I’m not a pimp.” Enlai smirks—that smug grin from the portrait. It’s the contagious, alluring sort. Flores resists. “I’m not even a regular john.”

Flores glares at a stoplight. God, he wishes he had an articulate response.

Enlai slaps him lightly on the bicep. “Do me a favor. Swing by Skidmore.”

I’m not in the habit of doing favors for—“Satyricon Peng can wait until tomorrow.”

“I’ll pay for your *premium* gas. Just do it.”

Urge to grit his teeth is growing. Flores depresses the clutch, switches gears. He’d dropped O’Neri at Cedar Hills before jumping onto 217 S for Tigard, and now the asshole wants him back in Portland. Only to drop him back again.

“Or would you rather get back to your sex slave?”

Egging him on, angling for cheap shots. Well, he’s falling for it. Hook, line, sinker. “Fine.”

They’re on 26 E when Enlai says, “I get the vibe you don’t like me much.”

Only because you stole my clients and my office, pendejo. Flores doesn’t say it. The comeback is obvious: you should’ve done a better job of it. You’re a failure.

“And I might be drunk,” Enlai continues, “but I noticed we wandered off topic. What’d you dig up on me?”

“Nothing endearing. You did well enough in school in Beijing, and you got a scholarship to OSU, majoring in finance. Average grades for the first two years. Then midway through your sophomore year, you impregnated a junior communications student. She dropped out, and you fled the country.”

Enlai rolls the joint between thumb and forefinger. “I transferred.”

“To Peking University.” Flores sees flashes of the campus in the spring—pink blossoming trees, pagodas and intricate traditional gates. “As I said, nothing endearing.”

“Hey, buddy, you didn’t have my parents. Go to America, they said. Get filthy rich. Then come home and marry some money-grubbing woman. They’re not all like that, but—well, it’s all status and family pressure. Get a house. Get a car. I had plenty of reasons for not wanting that.”

“You could’ve told your parents off.”

“Well, shucks, why didn’t I think of that? And I *did*, eventually. Only it was too late.” Enlai glares at the tip of his joint. “Why should I give a shit what you think anyhow? When I graduated, I came back, didn’t I? We tried to make it work. It didn’t.” He takes another long drag. “I pay child support, same as anyone else.”

A woman shouting. Toddler pounding a plastic bowl on a highchair, face plastered with dry yogurt. When Flores paid a visit, the boy was nearly ten years old, digging holes in the backyard and sipping lemonade. The mother, Anessa, had been reticent at first, but eased into talking trash easily enough. Flores nodded along to her stories, finding the memories exaggerated for dramatic effect. Nothing new. Despite her claim that Enlai fought for custody out of spite, Flores was grudgingly skeptical. Kid must be close to fourteen now.

The rain has died to a sprinkle as the car rolls through Old Town. “Get on Naito Parkway,” Enlai says. When they reach the Broadway Bridge, Flores parks in a lot beside a warehouse-to-apartments conversion job. He shuts off the engine and looks at the other man. There’s a thumping whirl overhead as tires roll along the bridge.

Enlai gets out, wobbles. “You can’t just swing by Peng’s house and knock on the door. He sometimes hangs out around here.”

Two teens shoot H between the bridge’s tower foundations, hidden from the street lamps. Enlai ambles over to them, says something. One looks ready to bolt. The other stays in place. Skittish one shakes his head. They talk a bit.

Enlai gets back in the car. “He hasn’t shown up tonight.”

Flores resists the urge to sigh in frustration. “There are other angles I want to take on this. If Chinese expats are being murdered, *assassinated*, then there will be obituaries. Articles. Witnesses.”

“That won’t get you any closer to the girl.”

“Yeah? And what would you rather do? Interview every ‘homeless’ man in Portland?”

Finished with his joint, Enlai tosses the roach from the window. “That. And ask Meng some pointed questions.”

This much they can agree on. Flores doesn’t trust her to give anything away, however. “Have you heard of the White Stag they’re after?”

“Only White Stag I know sits over Burnside. I’ve looked the ‘net up and down and found jack.”

Flores trusts Enlai’s surfing abilities over his own. Has to. He didn’t have access to a deck until age twenty-three, and by then he was too old to learn the agile styles of kids who started early. Deck surfing was nausea inducing, and he only wired in when necessary.

He moves to start the engine. Enlai touches his hand. “Hold on. I want to ask you something.”

Flores waits, dreading the question.

“Your little—” Enlai wiggles his fingers, searching for the word. “Ability. What’s it like when the memory’s about *you*?”

“Complicated. Strange.” A mirror within a mirror. An often occurrence when his family eagerly told and retold embarrassing stories of his childhood. Flores hates his reflection. Not only does

he see himself through another person's eyes, but he suffers feedback from their emotions. "It can be confusing."

"But it works."

"It works *too* well."

Enlai leans back and smiles. "Well, you're not the only snoop in this car."

"Cut the long wind-up and spill it."

The self-satisfied smile broadens. "The last time was two weeks ago." Enlai in his sedan: stopped at red on Couch Street. Flores recognizes his own taillight two cars down and almost groans. "I was following you from your office. You didn't do much that day besides chase deadbeats who didn't make their car payments. But you weren't going home. You turned off into this little parking garage."

The sedan rides his bumper, following close up a narrow ramp. Flores can't believe he didn't spot him.

Enlai keeps talking. When Flores' car pulls into a space, Enlai parks two spots behind him, his sedan half-hidden by a truck but otherwise out in the open. Flores winces as he sees himself get out of the car. Charcoal Zara suit—the one he wears when expecting sex. Black bluchers shining as he rounds the car and unbuttons his jacket. Enlai's sports announcer voice: "That's right, and off it goes." Flores tosses the jacket into the back seat.

In his waistcoat now, Flores paces around the Mustang, rolling up the sleeves of his striped pressed shirt. Checking the alignment of his tie in the window reflection. Smoothing out his hair, tucking it behind his ears. Untucking it. Pacing and throat clearing. Several cars drive by. All the while, Enlai observes.

"You did that for about ten minutes," Enlai explains with a knowing smile. "Then a guy came up."

The man's a good six foot five, quarterback build, his pale skin sickly under the garage lights. Hair balding or shaved, covered by an askew baseball hat. Tattoo of an eagle screaming down his left bicep. Gold chain. Muscles bulging out of a form-fitting T-

shirt. Jeans and muddy hiking boots. Shady: a man who crushes beer cans against his skull. Enlai grabs the butt of his M9. Fingers grope the door handle. One wrong move, and he's ready.

Flores frowns at the man, and they stare, cautious, feeling each other out like a pair of tomcats ready for a brawl. Flores steps forward first, says a name. A smile from the quarterback, and soon they're shaking hands and whispering in each other's ears. With a playful tug on Flores' tie, the man kisses him, pushes him against the car. More whispering. Flores' hands groping quarterback ass. They cast furtive glances around the garage. Enlai sinks into his seat, breathing hitching.

Erringly certain the coast is clear, they grab for each other's belts. Quarterback tears open a condom, lets Flores roll it on, then gently bends Flores over the car's hood. They couple rough and quick; the quarterback pumps steadily while Flores clutches the car, teeth clenched. The muffler falls off.

Unable to look away, Enlai grips the steering wheel between his fists. He gnaws on it.

Flores tastes leather.

"And that's what happened." Enlai wags a finger. "You should be more careful, amigo. That shit can be dangerous."

"I've always been able to hold my own," Flores mutters, doing his best to come off indifferent. Trying to hide the night's second hard-on.

Enlai scoffs, still appraising Flores with faint amusement. "You live around here, right? I'll spare you the long trip and take a cab. I have business in the area anyway." He props open the door. "Good night."

Flores watches him stumble down Naito parkway, unable to decide if he's glad to be rid of him, or disappointed.

The hangover is an indelible mark throbbing in her skull, but O’Neri prepares for the day with routine motions. She’s dumping cereal into a bowl when her deck buzzes. 8 AM. No way in hell is Flores awake.

It continues to vibrate. Sighing, she wires in.

Enlai’s avatar—a miniature version of himself in a tuxedo— orbits around her. “About time! What was the holdup?”

“Oh, God, it’s you.” O’Neri drops the bowl in front of Jack. “How are you so cheery?”

“Hangover? Tsk. I don’t get those.”

“You’re even more of an insufferable prick than I thought.”

“Mom,” Jack says. “Mom.”

Enlai pins an invisible badge on his jacket. “Insufferable prick. I like that. I have a proposition for you.”

“*Mom.*”

“Is that so?” O’Neri says. “What, Jack?”

Jack points to his cereal. “You didn’t put milk in.”

While she pours out the milk, Enlai twirls around like an imp. “What do you think about coming and working for me?”

“Don’t you have enough goons on your squad?”

“C’mon. You’re wasting your time with Flores. You don’t know what you’re worth.”

“To you, or a zoo?”

“Vivian, someone with your skills deserves more. With me, you’ll be getting a salary. An impressive one. No more of this paycheck to paycheck nonsense.”

“I’m doing just fine without turning on my friend, and I don’t need you pointing out my options. What’s the real reason you called me?”

“Very well.” Enlai conjures a pair of ragged bat wings, shrinks to pixie size, and flutters to her shoulder. She laughs at that. Most people use generic avatars because capturing one’s own essence—

minute facial expressions and all—takes incredible skill. In contrast, Flores is terrible at cyberspace manipulation. His avatar is a talking snake—not out of fancy for any mythos, but because summoning limbs is too difficult. The snake doesn't even move its mouth. "I'd like you to invite Ms. Meng over to your office this morning," says pixie Enlai.

"I can think of a thousand people I'd rather see."

"Pretty please? I need you to stall her for an hour while I skulk around her house."

"We're not ones to respect the concept of trespassing, are we?" O'Neri watches Jack shovel cereal into his mouth. He's painted each of his nails with a different color of marker. She doesn't have the energy to ask. "And what am I supposed to talk to her about?"

"You'll think of something, I'm sure."

"Yeah, I bet. On a side note, what's your motivation for helping us out here?"

Cheshire cat smile. Enlai fades out.

She kisses the boys good-bye. On the bus to Old Town, O'Neri rings Meng, makes up a story about Flores wanting to see her. It works. Ten minutes after she opens the office, Meng strides in, mincing in a silly dress poorly suited for the Portland rain. "Where is Mr. Flores?"

O'Neri presses her lips together. "Unfortunately, you just missed him. He had to follow a lead."

"That's a lie."

"You caught me. Sit down. I have some questions for you."

Morning canvassing; the neighbors offer nothing of use. An old man had been sitting on his porch—1950s style—during the kidnapping, but saw no one come or go from Meng's house. Two

other doors go unanswered, and Enlai makes a mental note to check back in the evening. A cheese-breathed dick in a business suit shoves him in the rosebushes when Enlai follows him to his car.

Enlai is dusting dirt from his slacks when Meng's sedan pulls from the garage and drives off. Right on schedule. The house is big, bigger than his, with topiaries in the front yard. He climbs the fence, does a survey of the yard, peeks through first-story windows. Nobody home beside the maid dusting the family room.

The maid answers the front door. When he makes a pretense at seeing the woman of the house, she shakes her head, whisks him to a sitting room full of stiff chairs, and rearms the security system. Five minutes of flipping through *Town & Country*, making note of the cameras in the ceiling. No way in hell are those cameras only for show. When the maid moves off to the kitchen, Enlai tiptoes from the sitting room.

The study is locked; he doesn't risk trying to pick it. Not yet.

On the staircase: pictures of mother and daughter. School photos of Sarah with half her hair bleached blonde, the other dyed blue. Five-three, one-hundred five pounds, he guesses. Light brown eyes. Enlai wants to call up his friend in Missing Persons, but that wouldn't jive with the mother. Might as well throw the kid to the Kraken.

He checks the girl's bedroom first, opening drawers slowly. There's a bag of dry, flaky weed under the rolled up socks. A glass pipe full of sticky resin taped to the back of the dresser. That explains the girl's juvie record; not the brightest bulb when it comes to hiding her activities. Enlai flips through papers he finds inside the desk. Old homework, mostly, and a journal entitled "Free-writing." On first glance it's all teenage complaints, but there can always be a morsel of information hidden. And without Sarah's interface deck, it'll likely be the best route into the girl's mind. He takes it.

Nothing else worth noting. If the girl struggled against her captor and knocked anything over, it's been cleaned up. There's a flash through the drawn blinds, followed by the crack of thunder.

The master bedroom is clean. Neiman Marcus in the walk-in closet, and a rack of Jimmy Choos and Blahnic's hiding a combination safe. No luck there; safecracking is out of his league. Enlai turns over a python embossed pump in his hands. Worn once or twice. "What do you do for a living, lady?" he asks the shoe.

With Sarah's journal tucked under his bomber jacket, Enlai tiptoes downstairs.

Glancing around, he pulls his snake-tipped pick and torque wrench from a pocket and sets to work on the study's lock. Crouched, he works at the lock, scrubbing with the pick and shifting the torque on the plug. Two pins have set when a finger taps his shoulder.

The maid, staring at him.

Enlai lowers the tools. "It's exactly what it looks like, but—"

She points to a nearby bureau. In the left-hand drawer, buried under a ratty phonebook from the nineties and miss-matched rubbish, he finds a key.

It opens the study lock with a satisfying click.

"Not a lot of love lost between you and your employer, huh?" says Enlai, grinning.

The maid stops him. "Don't—" She gesticulates, and he quickly catches her meaning.

"No worries, honey, I'm not going to steal anything." The walls of the study are inlaid bookcases done in red cedar. Spines on Chinese literature and history and economics and world affairs line the shelves. Enlai picks books at random, flips through the pages, sets them back. On the oak desk sits an external hard drive, its casing shiny white plastic. No monitor. He synchs his interface deck with it and dives.

The drive is brimming with traps and mines, nasty shit that ranges from a bee sting to a brainfry. He limbos past the thorns and

vines, but it's slowing him down, keeping him from the good stuff. The maid stands behind him, nervous eyes on the front door.

Enlai short-cuts, makes a guess where the files will be. Like lock picking, he prefers trying it the quick and dirty way first. But when he gets there, none of the files are of any interest. Birthday pictures, music. He doubles back, tries another route.

He almost trips into a pit. As Enlai backs away, it grows, pulls, drags. He runs.

Enlai dabs sweat from his forehead and points to the window. "If—If she starts coming in, I'll go out that way." The maid puzzles out his meaning, then goes to stand beside the window. Smart woman.

After five unsuccessful tries, he's still no closer. The traps are everywhere, and although Enlai can see them coming, avoiding the mines takes mental energy. His concentration is growing ragged. One clumsy step, and he'll be hallucinating for weeks. If he's lucky.

Then, at last, the right folder creaks open and baptizes Enlai in data. Security files blossom at his feet, and he plucks the ones from Tuesday night. Cameras in the entryway, the hallways. He splices them together, fast-forwards, pinpoints the right time.

A woman in white slinking through the house. She brings the guard to his knees, snaps his neck.

It gives Enlai shivers.

He copies the security footage from the past three months—all that's left since the last wipe.

Then he finds the jackpot: Meng's address book, written in Chinese.

At seven in the morning, Buena nudges Flores awake. He's curled on the floor, sleeping bag tight around his shoulders. She

asks about him missing work; he checks the time and laughs himself back to sleep.

In his dreams, his ribcage is splayed open. Wild boars chew his bones.

10 AM: a spider crawls across his nose. He scrambles up, slapping his face. Buena giggles.

Flores opens the front door, retrieves the newspaper before the hipster from upstairs has a chance to grab it. Buena has already eaten, and pesters him with questions as he scrambles eggs. How long do I have to stay here? When can I go home? Where's your T.V.? Why *don't* you have a T.V.? Flores doesn't have answers. All he does is shrug and scrape eggs in the pan. "Give me some time."

Chores for the day: grocery run, pick up dry cleaning, buy stamps.

Find Satyricon Peng, a Chinese expat roaming Portland's streets.

He drives, stopping at a convenience store for milk and cereal. Slouched in front, a woman strums on a battered acoustic. Head-shakes at the mention of Peng. Her fingers fly over the frets, contorting in chords. On his way to the dry cleaner's, similar reactions from random passersby and homeless. Half haven't heard of him, the other half haven't seen him.

Inside the post office on Hoyt, Flores spots Officer Bud Lynn. He's a skinny kid with close-cropped red hair. New to the force, eager to please. "Hey, Ray," he says. "What's up?"

"Bud, do you know of a transient, goes by the moniker Satyricon Peng?"

"Yeah. Yeah, last time I saw him was a few days ago. He was having a coffee at Powell's. What's he done? Run on his car payments?"

Flashes confirm it: a pudgy, bearded Chinese man sipping tea at a counter, reading James Frey's newest drivel. "Nothing, that I know of."

“He’s not transient, by the way.”

“What?”

“He’s not homeless. I don’t know for sure, but I’ve never caught him sleeping on the streets. Goes to the shelter every now and then, but—” Bud reaches for his radio. “Want me to find out his last known address?”

It’s a seven-story building near a doughnut shop. The apartment is on the sixth floor. Wiping raindrops from the lenses, Flores readjusts the binoculars, getting a bead on the window. The curtains are partially drawn; he can’t make out any movement inside. He goes inside, climbs the complex’s spiraling staircase. Apartment 633. No answer at the door, no sounds of life.

Back in his car, Flores sits and watches the rain patter. He should go back to the office, or at least check in with O’Neri. Maybe she made a breakthrough while he was sleeping. But Flores remembers Ted the repo man, coming to reclaim the furniture today. He’d rather not be there. Flores rubs the bridge of his nose and opens *The Oregonian*, scanning for leads.

Nothing. Not even a mention of Luzzy.

He drives through Skidmore, parks on the street underneath the Broadway Bridge. The junkies are gone. Joggers run by with their hoods up. Perhaps he should check the shelters next, for good measure. Hit Peng’s apartment after lunch, maybe kick the door down.

Flores catches movement in the side view mirror. Khakis running, men yelling: “Over there!”

Flores slams the gas. The tires squeal as he takes off down Naito. A left turn—three men hoofing it in the rearview, giving chase. He’s gone a block when a truck darts straight into the road from a side alley, blocking his path. Flores hops the curb and speeds past. Spins the wheel as the Mustang fishtails.

Shots hitting the trunk. Flores shrinks down and guns it. If he hurries, he can get on the highway and shake them. Another left turn.

The three men are running toward him, guns drawn. One shoots out his left tire. The street's too narrow, they're too spread out. He can either hit them, or—

Flores slams it into reverse, three-point turns. The right passenger window explodes in shards of glass.

On the other side of the road: the truck barreling down, blaring its horn. It hits him head-on.

Skull hitting glass. Dazed, Flores looks up. The Mustang's engine is kicking black smoke, and the truck's driver is getting out. Shakily, Flores pops into reverse again. The runners are coming for him, then scatter as they spot the Mustang reversing. He grits his teeth as he tags one with the bumper. With a thud, the man rolls under.

The car has gone fifty feet when the engine sputters and dies.

From the side compartment, Flores slips on brass knuckles. A boot kicks in the window and a hand reaches in to choke him. Flores grabs it, breaks fingers. As the man screams, other hands drag him from the car.

Three men grabbing him, shouting: "Get him! Get that fucker!"

Flores body-blows one, kicks another. Throws a third against the Mustang, fistfuls of greasy hair, dragging his face across broken glass. Flores shouts back: "*Cabrón! Cabrón! Cabrón!*"

One jerks his arm, folding it behind his back while the others land blows on his face, stomach, legs. Flores grapples with his free hand, wrestles. A tire iron catches him in the temple.

Flores sinks to wet concrete.

He wakes up coughing, choked by paint thinner.

“I heard a man was asking after me,” a deep, mellifluous voice says, “but I was told he was Chinese. Honestly, I was expecting Hsiung.”

Where—? Flores shifts his eyes. A ceiling of high beams and pipes. Musty stench of mold, overpowered by paint thinner. His head feels swollen, and when he touches his lips, the fingers come back bloody. Groaning, he moves to sit up. There’s a rattle—his left hand holds him back. He’s cuffed to the metal frame of a hideaway bed. With his own handcuffs.

“Are you two partners?” the voice presses.

Flores rolls around the bed, manages to sit and nearly vomits from vertigo. He gasps, gags. Goddamn paint thinner. He brings his waistcoat to his nose and sniffs. He’s drenched in the putrid stuff.

Satyricon Peng rotates ninety degrees in his chair. A big man whose muscles have since gone to fat. His moustache and long beard are flecked with gray. He smiles without showing teeth and holds up a container of turpentine featuring the Mona Lisa. They share the same deranged smirk. “Proletariat gasoline,” he says.

If the goal is to make it impossible for Flores to breathe, then it’s working.

“Out with it, Mr. Flores. Are you and Hsiung working together?”

“No.”

Peng flips through Flores’ wallet. His fingertips are smeared yellow and blue. “I have your private investigator license right here. If you’re not together, then that means I have *two* private dicks looking for me. What a coincidence.”

There’s a shuffle of cloth and Flores turns. Behind him, one of the goons glowers. His face is slashed and bloody from a trip through glass shards. Flores has a feeling that his own face is worse off.

“Ignore him,” Peng says, tossing the wallet onto the bed. “Your face was bleeding profusely, Mr. Flores. It took me a

considerable time to control. Would you like a scotch? Single malt. It'll take the edge off." Without waiting for an answer, he pours a generous amount into a tumbler. Trundling in the chair, Peng hands it off.

Flores stares at it. Swirls it. Sniffs it. Frowns.

"It's not poisoned. Or laced with sodium pentothal. Or Quaaludes, for that matter. That's not my style."

Flores has no reason to believe that, *but to hell with it*. The alcohol stings his lips but goes down smooth.

Beside the bed, there are stacks of boxes imprinted with brand names. Flores pries off the cover of a nearby box and brushes aside the Styrofoam packing peanuts. Underneath are dozens of brain-machine interface decks, top of the line, each one specially packaged for resale. Another box contains shrink-wrapped video games. A third: women's makeup.

"Rest stop off the I-5 corridor," Peng explains. "A truck driver left his rig unattended."

Once Flores drains the glass, he says, "I'm beginning to believe that all Chinese immigrants are either gangsters or criminals."

Peng laughs. "Chalk that up to living amongst the trees—hard to see the big picture. In your line of work, you're not dealing with the most upstanding citizens. Unfortunately for me, it's difficult to stay under the radar and remain legitimate. It gets expensive."

"That's what I wanted to talk about."

"I figured as much." Peng lights a cigarette. Flores' flinch draws another Mona Lisa smirk. "Who hired you?"

"Can't say that I remember."

Peng rolls closer. The cigarette's cherry burns orange. He's not a man for bluffing. Flores honors his clients' privacy, but this one isn't worth the third-degree burns. "Angela Meng."

A vein in Peng's neck twitches.

"You're not the target, though," Flores continues, watching the man relax. "What's the White Stag, Peng?"

“If that’s what Meng has you after, then you should drop this case while you’re still only waist deep. There’s a Hungarian myth about the White Stag. It goes like this: Old Nimrod, aka the ‘Mighty Hunter before the Lord’—his people found themselves in a strange, barren land. That was after Babel. Nimrod and his sons Hunor and Magyar understood the voice of Hadur the Powerful God (as opposed to the frail, feeble God) as he spoke through thunder. Hadur said, ‘I’ll lead you to the promised land.’ So one day, at sunset, the White Stag appeared at the edge of the forest. Only Nimrod and his sons saw it. Hunor and Magyar rode off to capture it. They chased the Stag to a fertile valley, to which they led their people.

“The tribe settled there for years, until the White Stag appeared again. Off went Hunor and Magyar, chasing the White Stag, until they came upon two moon maidens dancing in an enchanted forest of birches. The brothers caught the faeries, and married them. Their people became the Huns and Magyars. And a man known as Attila eventually led them to the promised land.” He smirks. “What do you think of that?”

“I have little use for fables.” Flores tries a different tact. “Meng hired me because her daughter has been kidnapped.” The neck vein bulges again. “They want something called the White Stag, and Meng is reticent on what that is.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“I’m under the impression that whoever kidnapped Meng’s daughter may also be behind the assassins who came after you years ago.”

Peng, smoking, spins back toward his desk. “If that’s the case, then I reiterate my earlier warning. Stop now. Go back to representing cuckolds. It’s safer than chasing stags.”

“Can’t.”

“The pay is too much to turn down, I take it? Meng has always had her ducks in a row.”

“Tell me what happened. With the assassin.”

“You’re quite demanding, given your current position. Let’s see. In my youth, I studied art in England before relocating to San Francisco. Beautiful city, nothing like this dark, dreary place. I painted whatever came to mind. My inspiration was what I’d heard and what I’d seen, stories of the places I lived. That was enough to brand me a suspicious character.”

“You’re a Chinese citizen. They could’ve had you extradited.”

“For what crime? Seditious paintings? Telling Jiang Zemin to go fuck himself? Excuse me if this comes as a shock, but relations between your country and mine are less than amicable. Even if the Party put in the request, the United States wouldn’t honor it. The CCP works around that impediment, and it’s called extrajudicial execution.” He pauses. “Spare me any of the self-righteous indignation on the tip of your tongue.”

Flores isn’t here to debate policy. “Who’d they send for you, and how did you get away?”

“I suppose you can say I was lucky. I saw him coming. He wasn’t the subtle kind—I spent most of my time in a Berkley coffeehouse with my friends. It’s burned into my memory. That day we were talking Marxism, and he walked in, dressed in white, like a pompous ninja, and killed the barista first. Kung fu, too fast. Everyone was screaming and running like hell. In that chaos, I popped out the back. I shook him, left everything behind. I hitchhiked north.”

The flashes flutter past. Peng, twenty years younger, reclines on a couch with starving artist types. Snatches of dialogue: Peng insisting that Dianetics cured his childhood asthma. He trails off as the coffeehouse clientele shift their attention toward the door. A masked man, in white, carrying a sword Peng’s memory pegs as a *jian*. A young man, laughing, slaps the stranger on the back. The masked man cuts him down, moves past as customers shriek and scatter. Peng runs through the kitchen, shoving aside the staff, and takes off down an alley.

Another flash: Peng looking down at himself from a rooftop. Flores fights waves of vertigo, unable to understand what he's seeing. The Peng below is doubled over, panting, as the stranger approaches and runs him through. The Peng below howls, falls. Wiping his blade on the fallen man's sweater, the stranger ambles away. The Peng above watches the man go. Once he's out of sight, Peng clutches his own shoulders, curls up, and sobs.

"What year was that?" Flores asks, struggling to regain his mental footing.

"'94."

"Had you—had you been to Portland before?"

If Peng finds the question strange, he doesn't let on. "I visited. Several times."

"And a man of your age outran a trained assassin?"

"Perhaps my assassin wasn't in top physical condition. I've told you what I know. I was lucky, and smart enough to keep my head down long enough for the winds to change."

"And what kind of seditious activity was Dwaine Lu up to?"

The mention of Luzzy prompts a scornful snort. "Luzzy was a damned fool. A shithead, if you want my honest opinion. He ran webcams of children, he ran girls. He dealt dope when he needed the extra cash, or came begging me for it. The man was a regular at Spirit Mountain, and terrible at pai gow and craps. Not that his lack of skill ever stopped him."

"So his murder wasn't politically motivated?"

"He was opinionated on the subject, but hardly knowledgeable. Your public schools at work, there." Peng taps at his knee thoughtfully. "What makes you think Luzzy was murdered by the same people who came after me?"

"Circumstantial evidence."

"I haven't heard of any murders for close to twenty years. It's quiet. Not enough for me to turn legit, mind you, but it died down nevertheless. If it's picking up, this time killing Chinatown thugs, I'd guess that someone is independently hiring the assassins."

An interesting theory, suggesting that Luzzy was murdered for crossing the wrong person. “And how does Meng fit in?”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Your daughter’s life might depend on it.”

Peng coughs on smoke, laughs. “You think she’s *my* daughter? That’s a stretch.”

Flores lets it slide for now. “Who would be gunning for Meng? You keep your ear to the ground, right? You know gangsters. Who could it be?” And why would that person want Meng on a flight to Beijing?

“Damned if I know.”

“Maybe you’re the one after her.”

“First I’m Sarah’s father, and now I’m responsible for her kidnapping?”

“Why are those mutually exclusive possibilities?”

Peng laughs again. “As I said, I’m only guessing that someone hired Luzzy’s assassin. If you follow Occam’s razor, it’s more likely that he was done in by one of his enemies, of which he had many. As far as your White Stag is concerned, years ago, those of us—Chinese expats—we started a support group of sorts. That way those of us in hiding could protect each other. That was the theory. We’d gathered names and addresses, memorized them, then passed it along. The data was encrypted, and there was a codec to decipher it. Follow? That information changed hands quickly but secretly. We’d meet in flesh space. Cyberspace was far too dangerous. That data, we referred to as the White Stag.”

The images are jumbled—men and a few women meeting in dark rooms, whispering over poker tables. Everything in Chinese. Flores feels an undercurrent of secrecy, but it’s the illicit kind. Another memory leaks through: Meng in her late twenties standing on a rocky beach, hands clasped inside a baggy gray sweater as the wind whips across her hair. “Leading you to the promised land?” Flores says.

“Precisely. My belief is that the assassins eventually found it or tortured the secret from someone, and that’s how they came to find me.”

It’s too pat; Flores doesn’t like it. “Are you suggesting there’s another, newer codec?”

Peng shrugs and dabs out the cigarette. “That’s no longer my scene. John, please release Mr. Flores and escort him out in the usual fashion, tout suite.” Peng casts Flores a passing glance. “And I apologize about your car. I’ll have someone drop by with your belongings.”

Flores imagines the Mustang in flames. He imagines it sinking into the Columbia.

“Oh.” Peng swivels. “And if you see that asshole Hsiung, tell him that I’m running out of patience.”

18

She’d met Dan at the roulette wheel in the presidential suite. He was in his early thirties, handsome, his black hair sculpted in a pompadour. Sipping beer and smiling wide—clearly on a winning streak. Nuwa caught his eye—she caught several eyes, but couldn’t care less about the others—and approached. She watched him play, blew on the dice, and answered his questions in Cantonese. “I’m doing a photo shoot,” she said, and Dan believed her. Nuwa chit-chatted. He sweet-talked.

The invitation back to his room was inevitable. They shared an elevator with an elderly couple. As Dan kissed her, Nuwa ran simulations of snapping his neck. The results were less than optimal. Better to wait for fewer witnesses.

Dan led her to his room, the one she’d scoped hours earlier. The simulations were comparatively better here; each time, he died within seconds, and no one immediately caught on.

Dan was leading her by the hand to the couch when his deck buzzed. His smile turned apologetic.

Nuwa could've killed him before he wired in, but she held back. She had patience. The targets were getting stranger, seemingly more random, and she wondered where this man fit in.

She went back to her room and watched Yanhong sleep. These moments were few, precious.

Now Nuwa sits at a beachside restaurant, a wide brim hat shading her from the sun. She watches the waves until Dan swaggers over, bows, kisses her fingers. Trite, but Nuwa can't help but smile. They share a light lunch in relative silence, people-watching. She reaches for the check. He grabs it away.

The beach is brimming with people, children wading into the ocean in bathing suits, but Nuwa knows plenty of intimate spots where a couple can be alone together. She has scoped them as well. Rising, Nuwa points down the horizon and leads him into the warm sand.

19

The man pulls off the blindfold. Flores blinks. The sun peeks through thick clouds, bright under the rain's glare. Everett Street, not far from where he'd lost the car. By the time Flores turns around, the lead man is gone.

Flores can feel the stares as he makes his way home. The turpentine is affecting him less, now that he's outside, but he's dizzy, legs wobbly. Fierce migraine, and the sun isn't helping. Flores gets to his building, stares up at the spiraling staircase, and calls the elevator down. He rides it up. When the elevator door opens, he fumbles his keys. Slipping through his fingers, the keys drop down the shaft—in the crack between elevator and third floor—and clatter to some dark, secret concrete floor beneath him.

Sighing, he leans against his front door. Pounds on it. “Buena!”

The door swings open. Buena gapes as he walks in. “What— what happened?”

She hangs back as he grabs a stack of fresh clothes. “Wait,” he says, and retreats to the bathroom.

Flores’ face is as bad off as expected. Stitches will be in order. He strips and showers. Caked blood flakes away, fresh blood runs down the drain. He has to scrub hard to get the turpentine out of his skin.

Once toweled and dressed, Flores calls Buena into the bathroom. She sits at the edge of the bathtub and watches him swab hydrogen peroxide over his wounds.

“The day before you ran,” Flores says, “was Luzzy acting any differently?”

“I didn’t see him very much. He didn’t speak Spanish, so...”

“Did he have any enemies, people who hated him?”

Head shake “no.”

“How about someone he feared?”

Another head shake.

Flores tosses aside a bloody cotton ball. “Did the other girls mention anything? *Think*. Some of them had to be bilingual. Did they ever talk about Luzzy’s partners? Frequent visitors?”

Buena rests her chin in a fist, frowns. Flores lets her mull it over. Perhaps he should pay Luzzy’s house another visit, but decides against it. He has a hunch that his old friend Alfred Keefe has cleared out by now.

“There was one man,” Buena says. “We had to call him Mr. Wu. He came by the house a lot and argued with Luzzy. And— yes, there was another man. He was named Grant... John Grant, I think. He and his friends came by a lot too, and some of the other girls said they had to make them happy, but Luzzy never asked me to. He had me go to this other man. I had to see him every few weeks. But I don’t remember his name.”

“Describe where he lives and what he looks like.”

Buena does, and Flores gets a bead on a condominium complex called Casa Shanghai. He wires in, gets the address. She’s still talking, and he sees flashes of white couches, art he recognizes from Meng’s walls, a kitchen done in emerald marble. Number on the door: 504.

Flores calls up Wendell again, asks him to look up rap sheets and DMV records on men named Wu, men named John Grant living in the Portland area. The results are pages long. No choice but to print out the stack of photos. Flores hands them to Buena. “Look these over and tell me if anyone looks familiar,” he says. “I have to go.”

20

Bus ride to Legacy Good Samaritan. On the way, he messages O’Neri. Her mermaid avatar appears on his lap, arms crossed over her chest. “Goddamn, Flores,” she says, “it’s nearly three o’clock. We were worried about you.”

“We?”

“Enlai and me. We’ve been at the office, waiting for you since forever. What’s the deal?”

“I was held up. I’ll tell you later.”

“Some guy came by and took all the fucking chairs. I almost sapped him. Why didn’t you—”

Flores focuses on making his snake avatar shake its head.

O’Neri relents. “I guess that can wait. We’re following more leads. Why don’t you meet us at Silver’s around five?”

He agrees, and O’Neri’s avatar pops off.

The ER waiting room is full like it’s the fourth of July. Flores gives the nurse his information. She hands him two Tylenol and a paper cup of water for his headache. Flores sits between a boy with a broken arm and a man vomiting his organs into a plastic bucket.

After thirty minutes, the nurses call the man back. People come and go. After the one and a half hour mark, Flores hears his name.

A nurse takes him back to a cot. When the physician finally glides through the curtains, he pries out a light, clicks it on. He flashes the miniature lamp in Flores' eyes, back and forth. The doctor grunts and sets to work on Flores' face with the dexterity of an expert tailor. He's an older man, with thick Coke bottle glasses. There's no small talk; he doesn't inquire into how Flores acquired the wounds. Flores appreciates a man who does his work quietly.

Once finished, the doctor says, "Keep these dry for forty-eight hours. Schedule an appointment in five days." He leaves.

Bus ride back, Flores' head throbbing. His wristwatch reads 5:16 upon reaching Silver's. The bouncer glances over his ID. "Oh," he says, "Mr. Hsiung mentioned you. He's up at the top."

The bar is like a clown car—bigger on the inside. Flores weaves through drunks and squeaking waiter robots. Loud retro music throbs to the beat inside his skull. Tables are raised in tiers around a central shaft, revolving slowly like a merry-go-round. Spiraling like DNA. It's a queasy sight, and Flores has to force himself to climb each tier, one by one, ignoring the strippers dancing around the supporting shaft.

O'Neri and Enlai are chatting over drinks, Enlai puffing on a joint, evidently oblivious to city ordinances. Flores can smell the weed from ten feet away. They catch sight of him and O'Neri jumps to her feet, sputtering questions. Enlai's frown borders on concern.

"We can get into it later." Flores slides into the booth. "Right now I need something to eat." A glance to Enlai. "Doesn't this dive of yours serve food?"

Enlai smiles and bites on the joint. "You sure about that? I hear this place has a rat infestation."

They share a fleeting, uncomfortable smile and Enlai vaults over the table, promising to take a look in the kitchen.

Once he's out of earshot, O'Neri scoots closer. Her eyes rest on Flores' bandages. "Fuck. Tell me you at least put up a fight before you went down."

"What makes you think I went down?"

O'Neri sips her martini. "You're not really the boastful kind, but—let's say it's in your eyes."

What to say to that? "Tell me. What's *he* doing here?"

"Who? Enlai? It's his bar."

"You know what I mean."

She sighs. "He's been... actually pretty helpful. I talked to Meng this morning—a colossal waste of time. That woman's got a face like granite. It doesn't give anything away. Enlai broke into her house while I kept her distracted."

"He's still trying to help with this case? Why? Did you promise to cut him in?"

"No, no. Though it would only be fair. The traps on Meng's hard drive were doozies, by the sound of it."

"Then what's he after?"

O'Neri takes another sip, then she smirks. "Try to take this gracefully. My hunch is he's sweet on you."

Flores raises his brows and curses as the expression jerks the stitches. They'd been spying and digging dirt on each other since day one. It was born out of what Flores considered a mutual dislike. But Enlai's recent tailing surpassed professional rivalry. There were plenty of possible motivations—curiosity, depravity. Genuine affection didn't fit. Enlai wasn't hurting for money; he'd gotten into the private eye business because he was, at heart, a peeping Tom. A voyeur. The business justified and satisfied his need to invade another person's privacy.

O'Neri starts, "He's not—"

"If you're about to say *he's not that bad*," Flores interrupts, "then I hate to break it to you. The man's connected to Satyricon Peng, and not through an intermediary either. Straight line. Enlai

owes Peng something, and I suspect he was trying to contact Peng last night, get the jump before I found out.”

Flores is about to continue, but O’Neri’s eyes drift above his head. Footsteps on carpet. Enlai carries over a pasta entrée, a glass of red wine, and coffee. “You better be tipping well.” He winks and climbs over the table again, slipping between Flores and O’Neri. He takes a long pull from his joint. “So who beat the shit out of you?”

“Satyricon Peng’s people.” Wrapping noodles around his fork, Flores notices Enlai lean forward. He describes how he’d sought to track down Peng that morning, and had instead attracted the attention of the flunkies.

“Jesus,” O’Neri mutters when he mentions the gunshots, the truck ramming his car. “Why the hell didn’t you run?”

“It never occurred to me.”

“Uh-huh. Fucking machismo.”

“Where’s Peng staying?” Enlai asks.

As if you don’t know. Flores chews, swallows. “I was blindfolded when they led me away. I never saw the exterior of the building, but I know it was a warehouse.”

Flores doesn’t mention his suspicion that Peng is Sarah’s father. Instead he describes Peng as a seditious painter turned underground criminal whose business dealings remain foggy. Fencing, counterfeiting, and piracy are Peng’s most obvious black market services. What he does mention is Peng’s deduction that the assassins coming for Luzzy, Meng, and the White Stag are not motivated by politics but business rivalry.

Enlai holds in a lungful of pot smoke, holds it, holds it. Blows it out his nose. Despite his bloodshot eyes, he still manages to come off as suave. “Vivian and I were thinking along those lines. Meng’s as close to apolitical as it gets, and Luzzy didn’t even have a GED. Not exactly threatening stuff. Unless Meng is funneling cash to revolutionary organizations, I’m not seeing the connection.”

“We’ll get to that later,” O’Neri says. “Go on, Flores.”

Next is the codec. “He said that Chinese expats had a system for secretly keeping in touch with each other, and part of that was an address book written in code. They referred to that book and its codec as the White Stag. The assassins were, for obvious reasons, very interested in the information.”

O’Neri shakes her head. “He might be telling the truth there, but that doesn’t feel right to me. It’s not jibbing. It almost smells like a red herring.”

Flores gulps down the wine and says, “I agree, but it’s worth keeping in mind. Anyway, what progress did you two make?”

“First, I found the girl’s diary.” Smothering his joint, Enlai reaches underneath the booth. He opens up a black leather briefcase and slides a notebook across the table. “There’s not much in there besides bad poetry and teenage drama, but we were able to lift a few names. A few of her friends, and a couple of her mother’s. We spoke to the kids, but they’re clueless. The real find was in Meng’s hard drive.” Enlai wires himself in, then holds out his interface deck pointedly. “Jack in.”

Flores hesitates, lowering his fork. He carefully plugs the share wires behind his ear and lets Enlai guide the way through Meng’s data. There’s a crack, and a video streams through. The entryway of Meng’s house. Jodie opening the front door, getting thrown back. A woman in white padding across the floor. Jodie running away, out of camera range. In the hallway, the woman vaults onto the guard’s shoulders, snaps his neck, and proceeds into a darkened room—all in fluid, unhurried motions. The hallway remains empty for a minute. Then the woman emerges with Sarah, wilted, over one shoulder. She descends the stairs. Jodie pops from behind a corner, axe swinging. There’s no sound, but Flores can read the expletives on Jodie’s lips. Out come the knives. Jodie goes down.

Flores yanks out the wires. Except for the difference in gender and weapons, this assassin behaves much as the one in Peng's memories.

O'Neri smiles thinly. "Just like I said, right?"

"What I don't get," says Enlai, "is that this is Meng's own security feed. She knew what the assassin looked like. Yet she mentioned none of this to you."

"Almost like she doesn't give a shit if we find her daughter," O'Neri says.

That's because Meng's main concern is the White Stag. Flores finishes off the wine and peers into the empty glass. "Either way, it doesn't tell us where the girl is, does it? She could be two feet away or across the world. Was there anything else on the hard drive?"

Enlai smirks. "Only Meng's personal address book."

"Well? Share it."

"Huh-uh, gumshoe. That video was only a taste. If you want the good stuff, you have to give me what I want. It's only fair."

Flores sets his teeth. "*No me chingues.*"

"What?"

"He told you," O'Neri says, "more or less, to shut up."

Enlai's grin widens. "No luck there. Listen—"

"No." Flores pushes his plate away. "*You* listen, Big Boy. This is my case, and I'm not playing your game, so share it or I'll rip into you like a fucking bag of Jiffy Pop."

Enlai's laughter is loud, accentuated by the weed. "*Big Boy?* Oh, you have no idea." He snickers, dabbing at his eyes. "Guess I'm glad you didn't call me Pruneface."

Flores glares.

"Okay, okay, Christ, enough with the evil eye." Controlling himself, Enlai offers up the deck again. "You sure know how to harsh a buzz, Flores."

Flores doesn't thank him. Enlai wonders if the man even understands the risk he'd taken, raiding that hard drive. Normally Enlai would be offended, miffed, but the weed's mellowing. He's too filled with brotherly love to mind.

He saunters down the street, letting the cold wind and rain ruffle his hair as Flores leads them through a swanky condominium complex. No worries.

He wonders if Peng mentioned his name to Flores, but Enlai isn't about to show his hand by asking.

Buena says Luzzy often sent her here," Flores is telling O'Neri. They reach the right building and climb a spiraling exterior staircase. "Which lends me to believe that he had good reason to butter this man up. I checked with the Multnomah assessor. The condo is owned by Franklin Lai."

Enlai closes his eyes. It had to be Frank Lai. He'd started blackmailing that shithead years ago, when he was just getting started in the PI business. Enlai had discovered Lai funneling money to a developer of kiddie porn. Lai fancied himself a financier, an entrepreneur, and Enlai squeezed him, convinced him to invest in other pursuits. Diversify. In strip clubs, particularly. Enlai had paid little attention to the porn developer himself—that man had nothing to his name, nothing to offer. Now Enlai was putting together the link between Lai and Luzzy.

Flores continues, "And Lai's name is right in Meng's address book."

"Meaning we've got him as a suspect," O'Neri says. "That's cool with me. Point me in the right direction. I'll—"

"How about I brace this one?" Enlai interjects. "No offense, Vivian, but this might take more finesse than you going King Kong on his ass."

O'Neri shrugs it off. Flores shoots him yet another suspicious glance, but doesn't protest. "Suite 504," he says.

Lai's welcome mat is written in Chinese. Enlai stares at it, blinks. He's lived in the U.S. almost as long as China; he wouldn't dare lay out a mat like that. Tacky. Stinks of desperation, clinging to a culture that's slipping away and losing its hold. As he stares, the mat's colors start to swirl. One symbol morphs into a dog's head, silently barking. Its mouth opens and closes. Then it's just a mat again.

O'Neri says, "You waiting for something?"

Enlai chuckles. He'd only planned to get buzzed. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get this baked."

"G—" Flores shakes his head, facing up at the night sky. "Goddammit."

"Just slap me if I start staring at the wallpaper and drooling, okay?"

Flores smiles.

"—On the arm. Slap me on the *arm*. Got it?"

Inside, the garbage disposal rumbles. It dies once Enlai starts knocking. Footsteps plod to the front door then stop. Enlai can almost hear Lai hyperventilating through the peephole. After a lingering moment, Lai opens the door a crack and bars the way. If he was scared before, he's putting on an air of calm now. He's a short man with square framed glasses and a mullet. Shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow.

"This isn't a good time," says Lai, drying his hands on his slacks. His accent has improved since last they talked.

"You never told me you'd moved, Frank. I would've thrown you a housewarming party."

"My kids are here and—"

"Yeah? This is a good neighborhood. Great schools."

Lai's eyes flicker between faces. He clears his throat.

"C'mon, Frank. You know you have to let me in."

Lai steps back. His face works as Enlai pushes through. Flores and O'Neri follow behind. One kid sits at the dining table, studying a book. A smaller one lies sprawled on a white couch. In

Cantonese, Lai tells the kids to stay put, that daddy will be in his office. The older one nods.

Lai leads them to the office. Enlai can feel the man's calm shedding by degrees. Good. Years ago, Lai had been a tough one to brace, refusing to admit that he was anything but a legitimate businessman, even when Enlai presented the evidence. Bank records. Cyber traces. Photographs of Lai in Luzzy's living room. And the books. Fuck, the stag books. Lai had only broken when Enlai drew the revolver, offered the deal. I can turn you in. I can shoot you. Or we can be friends. He'd earned Lai's fear.

The office is hexagonal. Brazilian Cherry hardwood floors. Glass terrariums occupy two walls. Snakes and lizards crawl underneath logs. Opposite the terrariums, two floor-to-ceiling windows overlook a red brick courtyard and garden. A fire burns in a granite slab fireplace. Lai has moved up in the world since they last met.

"F-feel free to sit down," Lai says, gesturing to a suede couch. He lowers himself to a chair, folds his hands neatly over one knee. "What can I do for you?"

Enlai stays standing, while Flores and O'Neri shuffle around, inspecting the room. "Thanks for the hospitality, Frank." Enlai spots an inset hutch between the terrariums and helps himself to a gin and tonic. "You seem to be moving up in the world, huh?"

Lai squares his glasses. He switches to Cantonese. "Who are these other people, Mr. Hsiung?"

"English," Flores snaps.

Enlai stirs the highball. "You heard the man. Don't worry about those two, Frank. They're here to make sure I stick to the script."

"Then get on with it! I did everything you wanted, didn't I? You promised to leave me alone."

"Easy." Behind him, Enlai can almost feel Flores' suspicion growing, can hear the gears turning. It's like the man has a nose for sniffing out corruption. "This is unrelated to your previous

transgressions. Or maybe it isn't. We'll have to decide. See, Frank, I've heard birds tweeting, and your name's been coming up a lot, along with Angela Meng."

Lai tilts his head, as if waiting for more.

"Which strikes me as strange, especially since Meng's daughter recently went missing."

No response from Lai. Not even a twitch.

"More accurately: she's been kidnapped and held for ransom. Well, Frank? What're your thoughts? Do you have a grudge against Angela Meng? Is that it? Maybe you hate women, just a little bit, and you couldn't stand her—encroaching on your territory, maybe? You wanted to put Meng in her place, so you sent someone after her daughter..."

That gets a rise. "How dare you!" Lai jumps to his feet. "I have children myself. I wouldn't, I would *never*."

One-handed, Enlai pushes Lai back into the chair. "You've done worse things to kids, shitbird."

"Keep your voice down!"

"Then again, I don't care why you did it. Where's the girl?"

"I—I—" Lai snorts air through his nose like a bull. "I wouldn't--didn't touch her. I had nothing to do with it."

"But you know who did."

"I didn't *say* that!"

"Frank, I'm not a patient man. You know that. And as I get older, I find that it's actually getting worse." Enlai draws his Colt Python from its holster and swings open the cylinder. To his surprise, neither Flores nor O'Neri move. He smiles and downs the remaining gin. They expect him to bluff. "Somewhere, this girl is tied up and scared. And I think you know where."

Lai's eyes widen and settle on the revolver's nickel barrel as, one by one, Enlai plucks rounds from the chamber. Bullets clatter to the hardwood floor. Enlai jerks the revolver, snapping the cylinder shut. Spins it, cocks it. He contemplates pressing the

barrel to his own temple, then reconsiders. No, that would only make Lai suspect that he palmed the sixth bullet. Can't have that.

Enlai taps the barrel against the left lens of Lai's glasses. "C'mon, bare your soul to me."

"I don't know anything!"

Enlai, singsong: "*Bullshit!*"

"I swear! I don't, didn't—"

Enlai squeezes the trigger and Lai flinches. Click.

Lai is sweating streams now. "I wouldn't, I would not ever— Meng is my, my—she *hired* m-me. I work for her!"

"As what, Frank? A harmless bagman? One, your physique is less than imposing. Two, you didn't bank the cash for this sweet pad by running Meng's errands."

"I manage her books!" He bursts into a string of profanities.

"What does she do, Frank?"

"She owns a tea shop."

"You're telling me she's getting rich on organic bohea and shou mei?" Enlai looks over. Flores stands beside him, frowning.

"We're not buying it, Frank."

"I'm telling the t-truth!"

Enlai cocks, pulls the trigger. Click.

Lai shudders.

Enlai is about to fire again when Flores grabs his wrist and wrenches the revolver away. He opens the cylinder and removes the remaining bullet. The look Flores gives Enlai speaks volumes: *You're sick.*

Lai collapses into a quivering, stammering fit. "I h-had n-n-nothing to do... she came from Hong Kong with her m-mother. In the eighties. Her mother was b-brilliant, a businesswoman. With *guanxi*. They had v-video sh-shops in San Francisco. Th-that's not it. Her mother was a *shetou*."

"What?" Enlai whispers in Cantonese.

"You're... they won't go back. They c-can't."

O'Neri steps forward. "What's he rambling about?"

“Snakeheads.” Enlai crouches and feeds the revolver with the discarded rounds. His baked brain is sprinting from the fog. He’d suspected Meng of extortion, or operating a run-of-the-mill protection racket. Portland’s Chinatown was too small to support full-blown tongs. O’Neri hovers, bombarding him with questions. Enlai clamps Flores on the shoulder and moves past, heading for the front door. “Good luck. I quit.”

Flores chases him outside, into the rain. “Wait. *Wait*. Why?”

Enlai doesn’t turn around. “This thing just went from dipshit crime to gang war in ten seconds. This is FBI territory. ICE shit. I’m a normal kid from Beijing, Flores. No superpowers. If I get involved, it’ll be me getting my neck broken, not you. They haven’t been killing Mexicans.”

“I’m not *Mexican*.”

“Whatever. I like easy money. Fighting tongs is out of my league.”

He anticipates Flores to shout at his back, call him a coward. That’s what Enlai would do. But Flores stays silent. He lets him go. Enlai wonders why he expected him to do otherwise.

22

That the boss contacts her so soon after the last task doesn’t surprise Nuwa. He’s never respected the concept of downtime. And since Nuwa doesn’t really *need* the rest, why provide it? No, it isn’t the boss’ inability to grant her a personal life that surprises Nuwa. It’s that the next assignment is in Portland, Oregon.

She wants desperately to question the capriciousness of it.

“Will I be going?” Yanhong asks as she watches Nuwa pack.

“You’ll have to. Someone has to watch over the girl.”

Sarah is lying on her side, staring at the television in a drugged daze. It isn’t even powered on.

Yanhong flops to the bed and sighs.

“I can’t believe he gave up,” O’Neri says between reps, voice strained.

“I can. He won’t do anything unless it’s for his own personal gain.” Flores watches the muscles along her arms and chest flex as she benches the barbells. Her bedroom is separate from her husband’s, the result of strange hours and *other* issues. A full bed with brass frame sits flush against one corner, leaving room for the bench press, the free weights, a treadmill. “We don’t need him.”

“Probably not. But... it was convenient having an extra hand. Especially one that knows Chinese.”

“Yet we’re not any closer to breaking this case.”

O’Neri lowers the bar onto the uprights and sits up. “Do you think he’s right? About this being beyond us?”

“No.”

She stretches her arms. “If Meng’s really a snakehead, I can see why she wants to avoid the police. Thing is, she’s gotta have some suspicion who’s after her. Rival gangs, maybe. Without any hints, we have nothing to go on. And I’m not keen on hitting up every person in her address book.”

Flores is beginning to see the wisdom in Peng’s warning. Stop chasing stags. The more leads they follow, the farther they get. But he’s never turned down a case mid-way. He always follows through. It’s his fractured pride, it’s the money, and most of all it’s the innocent girl caught in the middle of her mother’s dealing. “Meng has money and her own men,” Flores says. “If she had the ability, she would’ve mounted a rescue herself.”

“That’s... not making me more confident.”

Pushing back blue curtains, he peers out the window. After Enlai had left, they’d tried pressing Frank Lai for more information, seeking suspects. Anyone with a motive. But he’d been a blubbering mess, and neither of them had the heart to brace him further. “We’re going about this the wrong way.” Across the

street, a couple argues in front of a window. “Snakeheads are like coyotes, smuggling people into other countries. Their obvious rivals would be other tongs, or the triads based in China. Maybe a pissed off customer.”

“And ICE,” O’Neri adds, lying back on the bench. “And DHS. And the FBI.”

“None of which would kidnap a child.”

“ICE would.”

Perhaps, yet his gut tells him it doesn’t fit. Flores hugs her goodnight and catches a bus to Old Town. As it rumbles along, he flips through Sarah’s journal. It begins at the start of the year, with a list of New Year’s resolutions. She wasn’t meticulous about writing each day—entire weeks are missing from the pages. Most entries are dull recounts of school days, with the same cast of characters. Classmates, teachers. Complaints about an overbearing mother. He sees Valina in this girl, but perhaps he’s reading too much into the words. Searching for familiarity. Valina was angrier, bitter at a young age, and had good reason. Sarah is more self-indulgent, he decides, flipping through page after page of song lyrics. Flores pauses at the poetry Enlai mentioned:

*Death is an exaggeration
An ease at escape
Every circle has a circumference,
encumbering, encompassing,
Suffocating every being
who enters this life
eventually.*

Jesus. Several times, Sarah mentions Meng’s trips to Hong Kong, Guatemala, Mexico, and LA. She is never invited along. By the time the bus wheezes to his stop, he’s halfway through and no closer to a lead.

A large box is sitting outside his front door. Inside he finds his wadded up dry cleaning, that morning's groceries (spoiled), an old parking ticket, scratched CDs, detritus of gas receipts and loose change, and a tattered new age self-help book. At the bottom: a children's DVD. A sticky note attached to its surface sports a smiley face written in red pen. Flores crumples the note in his fist.

Buena is already asleep, covers pulled up to her chin. Beside the bed, she's set aside two of the print-off photos from earlier. John Thomas Grant and Hok-Yin Wu.

Carrying the sheets back into the living room, Flores sits at the couch and wires in. He spends an hour switching between Meng's security feeds, analyzing the faces of guests. Five people reappear, over and over. Meng's uncle, two nephews, her brother, and a non-relative he can't identify. Her men. Flores wants to interview all of them, but is wary of invoking Meng's ire. Besides the occasional postal worker, no other people come through. Not a surprise. This only tells him that Meng is smart enough to avoid doing business at her own house.

On a fresh page in Sarah's journal, Flores sketches. One large circle with Meng's name underlined. Followed by her uncle and the other relatives. A second circle: Luzzy, Ryan Chu, Satyricon Peng. Connection between both circles: "San Francisco." Frank Lai with a question mark. He's puzzling out other names, trying to fit them into categories, when he falls asleep—

—and wakes to the deck buzzing.

He's still wired in. Normally the deck is set to automatically answer calls. When Flores rubs his eyes, blue and green question marks fizzle around the room. The punctuation dissipates like popping balloons and the form of a stag takes shape. A mature blacktail deer, with white fur, levels its massive eight-point antlers at him.

Flores opens his mouth, fingers stroking the wires at his neck.

The stag stares at him with black eyes, snorting and posturing. Stomping one hoof, he paws at the carpet, scraping fibers. A damn good avatar.

“Who are you?” says Flores.

The stag blinks and turns away. Slowly, he marches toward the kitchen, raising his forelegs high. Flores follows, wary of getting too close. When the stag reaches the front door, he pauses and walks straight through.

Flores unlocks the door and throws it open. He pokes his head through, looks right, looks left.

The hallway is empty.

24

They're a block away from the elementary school when Jack gives her the look. O'Neri smiles and releases his hand. It feels like eons ago when she was in his place, squirming and sputtering at her mother's obnoxious shows of affection. “I'm not a *kid*, mom,” she'd insisted, and maintained that if she ever had children (yeah, right) she'd treat them like adults.

Jack looks up at her, squinting against the sun. He straightens up, salutes. One of his newest phases.

O'Neri returns the salute. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Jack turns and runs off toward the school, backpack swaying from side to side like a pendulum.

Her deck vibrates in her pocket. O'Neri wires in and nearly laughs as Flores' snake wiggles down her arm. It's more worm than snake, really. “Awake already?”

“Meet me at Hank's,” lisps the snake. The rendering is worse than usual. Its tongue isn't even moving.

O'Neri signs off and hitches a series of buses to Pioneer Courthouse Square. Hank's is a cheesy diner. Kitsch plates and photos of hotrods and Elvis hang precariously on the walls. She

finds Flores and Buena in a red vinyl booth, half finished with their breakfast. Sniffing, she slides in beside Buena.

The girl's face lights up and she waves. "Hola."

"*Buenos días.*" O'Neri sniffs again. "Smells like you've been burning the midnight oil, Flores. And by midnight oil, I mean a pack of Marlboros."

He shrugs. Underneath the table, he's fiddling with something between his hands. "I was working through the night. Have you eaten?"

"A couple of chuck pot roasts, so I should be good for a while. Why'd you bring the kid along?"

"I found a shelter for women who've been through..." Flores scratches his nape. "You know. This sort of thing. I'm going to take her over once we're done here. Anyway, last night I made a few breakthroughs. First, I was visited by a white stag."

O'Neri orders a coffee and frowns as he describes the encounter. "Somebody's avatar, huh? Are you thinking the White Stag's a person?"

"Someone who caught on to our investigation."

"Considering we've been less than clandestine, that's not hard to believe."

"It disappeared the second it left my apartment. I tried a trace, but it went directly to an unregistered account. Whoever's behind this, I don't read good intentions. They're either trying to fuck with my head or throw me off the trail. At best, it's someone dropping a hint."

"Satyricon Peng?"

"That was my first thought. I won't rule him out—it seems like his style—but he tried warning me off the case. After the stag left, I biked over to our friend Ryan Chu's."

"By yourself?"

Flores continues to play with whatever's in his hands. "I couldn't sleep, and I only intended to stake out the house. I had a suspicion he was holding out on us before. And I was right. He

was having a party—BMW's parked out front, men guarding the door with automatics. Most of them were teenagers. But the real star is Hok-Yin Wu.” Flores pushes a print-out of a handsome Chinese youth across the table. Mid-twenties, O’Neri guesses. “According to Buena,” he continues, giving the girl a brief smile, “Wu was a frequent visitor to Luzzy’s. In 2005, he was sentenced to three years for extortion and deported back to China. Obviously he made his way back.”

“Okay. So Chu is a shithead and his friends are gangbanger shitheads.” The waitress comes by with O’Neri’s coffee. “Thanks.” She stirs in a packet of sugar. “What’s this have to do with our case?”

“After an hour sitting there in the rain, who should drive up but Angela Meng’s nephew. I couldn’t get close enough to hear anything--not with the dog around—but he talked with Wu for ten minutes, and then the whole crew gathered up and left.”

O’Neri smiles at the thought of Flores crouched in Chu’s bushes. What a goddamn, stupid risk. “And you couldn’t chase after them on your ten-speed,” she finishes.

“Mhm. I rented a car this morning. And I met with another frequent visitor to Luzzy’s: John Grant, esquire.”

“His attorney?”

“Indeed. He’s about what you’d expect from a criminal lawyer with a quality client like Dwaine Lu. With Luzzy dead, I managed to convince him that no one was likely to bring up a breach of confidentiality with the Disciplinary Council’s Office. It turns out that Luzzy was very... upfront... about his ambitions. He’d been doing business with Wu’s gang and running prostitutes for years, but he had sights on expanding. He wanted to use Meng’s smuggling pipeline to traffic—” Flores winces. “Fresh meat.

“Luzzy got his hands on the names of Meng’s contacts in Shenzhen, Bangkok, Guatemala, Tijuana, Vancouver, you name it. My guess is that he convinced one of Meng’s lesser associates to capitulate, with promises about the good money to be made in sex

trafficking. I'll further guess that Luzzy bragged about his new enterprise to everyone within earshot."

"And the wrong person overheard." O'Neri wonders how much Flores paid that shyster to get his cooperation. "You've got that smile on your face. What're you leading up to?"

Flores rests his hands on the table. Between two fingers, he holds a newspaper clipping the size of an obituary—an article deserving little attention in the national news.

O'Neri takes it. "Hotel Owner Killed Along Pacific Coast." *The body of Joshua Dan (Dan Yeung), 38, was found along the beach of Monterrico, Guatemala this afternoon. Dan was a well-known businessman and owner of the Star Palace Hotel. An investigation on the cause of his death is underway.*

"Meng's Guatemalan contact, I take it?" says O'Neri.

"If my guess is right, and there's only one assassin," Flores says, "then that's where Sarah is."

"Unless the assassin stowed her away somewhere else."

Flores drops his chin. "That's a possibility."

O'Neri finishes off the coffee and looks between Buena and Flores. "If you're right, then whoever hired our assassin is trying to... what? Take over Meng's pipeline?"

"Not take over. Shut down."

25

Enlai tracks his quarry to a rundown apartment complex in Beaverton. Burt De Vinge, a squat man of forty, emerges from the sports coupe and climbs a staircase. He disappears around the building, and Enlai scuttles through an overgrowth of brambles, chasing De Vinge's shuffling footsteps.

De Vinge knocks on a second story door, pats out a drumbeat on his thighs. When no one answers, he lifts the welcome mat and unlocks the door.

Enlai waits a few minutes before following. He jots the apartment number and address and peers across the street. The neighborhood is familiar, and his eyes settle on a blue and green apartment building shaded by oak trees.

The scuffle at the waterfront was only the beginning of his turf war with Flores. Enlai wasn't given to grudges, but he didn't take fights lightly, and he couldn't stand losing. With his camera and its data sinking to the bottom of the Willamette, Enlai refused to back down. He paid acquaintances to badmouth the rival agency in both cyber and meatspace, posing as former dissatisfied clients. Flores responded by planting rats and rotten meat in the Silver's kitchen and contacting the Multnomah County Health Department. Soon they were meddling in each other's cases, slashing tires and falsifying documents.

One night, after a particularly nasty round of one-upmanship, Flores jumped him in a barbershop alley. Enlai had been itching for it. They grappled; Flores punched him and threw him against a stack of boxes. Enlai wrestled him to concrete. They fought for leverage, Flores angling his knee for a shot at Enlai's groin. "Scrappy," Enlai said, breathless, and caught Flores in a headlock. Choking him in the crook of an elbow, Enlai drew his 9-millimeter pistol and pressed the barrel to Flores' temple.

Flores went still.

"Turn out your pockets," Enlai panted. He repositioned himself behind Flores, getting a better hold. "Go on."

Slowly, Flores made a show of emptying each pocket, tossing aside his wallet and interface deck.

"That's it? Not even a knife?" Flores struggled, trying to elbow him. Enlai tsked. "Nuh-uh. I checked the records, little gumshoe. Not a single firearm registered to your name."

"Criminals carry guns."

Enlai laughed. "Is that why you've got a hard-on for me? You think I'm a criminal?"

Flores was silent for a long moment, maybe assessing his surroundings. Plotting escape, revenge. Enlai wished he could see his face. “You have no respect for laws,” said Flores at last. “Not even basic morality. You didn’t get into this field to help people. You did it for your own self-aggrandizement.”

“Guilty as charged.” Enlai released Flores from the headlock but kept the pistol in place. “You know, I was afraid you’d try some conflict resolution crap. Talk about our shared interests. Compromise or something. I figured you were too high-minded for a good old fashioned fight.”

Through layers of clothes, Flores trembled. Not from fear. “People like you aren’t worth reasoning with.” His voice shook with rage. “You’re so fucking convinced you’re hot shit, you don’t care about others. You just manipulate and use them to suit your whims. There’s only one way to get through to people like that.”

People like you. Enlai lowered the pistol and stood. “This isn’t about me. It’s about your damn pride. Let me give you a piece of advice. Let it go. Worry less about ‘morality’ and focus on getting ahead. ’Cause nobody else is paying attention. The world’s run by people like me.”

Enlai left him, convinced that was the end of their little feud.

* * *

It wasn’t.

While the frequency of their interactions died down, the nastiness escalated, and Enlai feared he’d miscalculated by suggesting that Flores “focus on getting ahead.” One night, Flores’ lady partner ran him off the road and into a ditch, totaling his car. Two weeks later, Enlai had his revenge. He took out a loan from Satyricon Peng and purchased some prime real estate: Flores’ office space in the Pearl District. Enlai had bribed the building’s owner for his tenant’s leasing information, then signed a five-year

lease before Flores could renew. It was at an inflated rate, but the *fuck you* rang loud and clear.

There was a pre-tornado calm hanging between them after that. Enlai bumped into Flores at the bank; Flores ignored his snide wave, face betraying no emotion. But Enlai felt the dry, static charge in the air. He wasn't about to regret what he'd done, but he foresaw the situation unraveling out of his control.

That's when he knocked on her door.

She was stout, gray hair dyed an unnatural shade of brunette. Kind, open face. Baggy floral print dress. She smiled. "Yes?"

"Gabriella Flores?"

"That's me, *sí*."

"I'm Enlai. We spoke on the phone."

"Yes, yes, come in." She beckoned him inside and shuffled to the kitchen to stir a cast iron skillet. Enlai detected strong whiffs of chilies, cumin, and tomatoes. A Jack Russell shoved Enlai's shins with her front paws and barked.

"Does your grandson visit often?" asked Enlai, inspecting walls filled with aging black and white photographs. Young, unsmiling people with dark hair and stiff collars. Families, women carrying infants. The dog trailed along, tail wagging.

"Ray's been very busy lately." Drying her hands on a towel, Granny Flores sat on a plastic-coated couch. "Do you have any siblings, Mr. Enlai?"

"Just Enlai. And I'm from Beijing." When she frowned, that answer evidently unsubstantial, he added, "I'm an only child. My parents literally put all their eggs in one basket."

"I see. Are you and your parents close?"

"Not really. I mean, we used to be, but—I brought them over here to visit a few years ago. Can you believe they hated America so much, they went back two weeks early?" Enlai paused, wondering how the conversation got turned around on him, and sat across from Granny Flores in the recliner. "It's public record that

you became Fl—Ray’s—legal guardian when he was twelve years old.”

“Yes. And Valina was eight.”

Flores’ little sister. Their mother was a cop, a member of Portland’s finest for thirteen years. Killed in the line of duty, 1992. Cause of death: gunfire. She’d attempted to stop a woman for speeding, and given chase on her motorcycle as the vehicle evaded, swerving through traffic. At a stoplight, she motioned for the woman to pull over. The woman drew a handgun and fired. Happened to cops all the time. Pulling over cars was one of the most dangerous parts of the job.

Granny Flores smiled as he suggested that their mother was the reason Flores joined the Academy. He’d been proud of her, played a cop in every child’s game, even when it didn’t fit. Enlai jotted a Freudian mental note: “mommy issues.” Little sister Valentina was more cynical, even as a toddler. When their mother recounted the day’s activities over dinner, Flores sat rapt. Valentina scoffed. After her death, Valentina grew impatient with mom’s saintly memory. Enlai tapped his chin. Electra complex.

“Ray took her death as hard as Jorge,” she said. “We all joked that Maria kept him out of trouble, but there was truth in it.” Granny Flores described her son with a fond smile. The youngest of three boys, Jorge was troubled from the start. Tantrums, fights at school. It worsened as he aged, culminating in multiple arrests for larceny and drug use. Flores’ mother was a calming force, but the underlying disturbance reappeared soon after she was gone. Two years later, he was serving ten to fifteen in a minimum security prison outside Tillamook.

“He’s been out for about six years,” Enlai said, scratching the dog’s ear. “Does Ray visit him?”

“He won’t. I’ve tried to convince him, but he won’t. Ray’s sweet at heart, but he holds on to his anger.”

“Yeah. So I’ve noticed.”

Granny Flores asked about whether he had any kids of his own, prompting Enlai to wonder who the real PI was around here. She was quick to wave away her son's lack of parental skill, his poor choices. Rearing children was hard work. On Enlai's prompting, she recounted the following years as she took over raising the grandkids. Valentina was a handful. Rebellious, quick to snap off an insult. Flores tried to act as a mediator, but Valentina's temper wasn't one to be soothed. "Ray," she said, "he was a sensitive child, and all that confusion... it made him depressed. He'd crawl into the bed with me, almost every night, for a long time."

At twelve years old. Enlai had enough ammunition against Flores to last a lifetime.

"I'd hoped he'd go to college," said Granny Flores. She fidgeted, making the plastic seat covers squeak. Flores hadn't done well in school. He was smart, but easily distracted, indifferent to learning that wasn't directly useful. While he studied and trained at the Public Safety Academy, Flores waited tables for extra cash. "That's where he met his friend, I think. The one who owned the detective agency."

"This friend—"

"Not friend. His..." Granny Flores shifted, playing with her bracelet. She leaned forward, whispering. "His *boyfriend*."

Enlai vacillated between annoyed and sympathetic. Poor old granny, dealing with the scandal of a gay grandson. The boyfriend convinced Flores to quit the Academy and join his agency. That lasted for a year. She glazed over the details of the breakup, discomfort spiking.

"Is that when he started his own agency?"

Granny Flores shook her head. "I got him to go back to the Academy. He was an officer for a few years, but he didn't like it. I told him to stick with it, but—" She paused. "I'm sorry, I think I'm a little confused about what this is all about. I thought you were here to help find Valina."

Enlai kept his face neutral. He had no idea Flores' sister was missing. Hadn't cared to pay attention to her. "I was getting to that. I just wanted a clear picture."

"I told you she was rebellious. She picked up her father's old habits. When she was thirteen, she'd disappear for days and never explain where she went. The fights we had, Heavens. I guess I couldn't handle her. I knew she did drugs, but—"

"What kind?"

"I—Well, Ray said it was crystal..."

"Crystal meth." Strange. Flores didn't strike him to be the kind to have a tweaker for a sister.

"Yes, crystal meth. One day she didn't come back. That was in 2005."

Missing for five years. Enlai wanted to wire in and check the leads. She would've been nineteen when she disappeared—a grown woman—but with the meth wildcard, she could be anything from dead, to walking the streets, to working a regular nine-to-five in Ohio. It meant everything and nothing. Flores must've launched his own private investigation. Hell, it might've been the reason he started his own agency. "What'd Ray find?"

"A movie stub." Granny Flores leaned forward again and brushed his hand. "I'm sure Ray is very good at this investigative stuff, but nothing's been done for such a long time. The police don't care. Will you try?"

Enlai wasn't optimistic. And although he wasn't against bleeding the old lady over a doomed case, there were easier ways to make a buck. His real thought was on Flores' reaction when he tracked down his sister. Undying gratitude? Bitter resentment? It could go either way.

Enlai spent the next five years searching for her.

Yanhong's choice in temporary shelter is not as lavish as the Star Palace, but suitable enough, considering the late notice. Sitting on their one rickety bed, Yanhong strokes Sarah's brow. It was another thirteen hour flight and she's still coming off the second wave of neurotoxin. If the boss requests her presence in Belize, Nuwa might opt to keep the girl here with Yanhong. Easier that way.

Nuwa tosses the newly minted U.S. passport onto the dresser. Yanhong has created a stack of them. Nuwa peers out the single window, watching the rain sprinkle the cracked sidewalk, and loads the pistol with a fresh clip. "Keep this near you," she says, dropping the gun between Sarah's legs. "Don't use it unless someone is trying to hurt you. Okay?"

Yanhong takes the pistol in two hands. Squinting, she levels it at the mirror on the other side of the room. "Okay." She licks her lips and sets the gun beside the television, barrel pointed at the wall. "I'm patching in now," she says, plugging into her deck.

As Nuwa walks through the parking lot and into the street, she can feel Yanhong's presence with her, a gentle hand on her back. She passes under the motor motel's unlit neon sign. Shaped as a palm tree, it flickers green and purple before going dark.

She's dressed for a casual stroll in a striped hoodie, ankle jeans, and leather ballet flats. Cold puddle water seeps into her shoes, but she ignores it, focuses on her surroundings, watching rooftops and balconies.

After five miles, Nuwa reaches a brick warehouse, the windows boarded up with plywood. There's a billboard on the roof. Yanhong's translation floats over her eye: "For Lease." Nuwa closes in on the steel back door. She tries the handle. Locked. "This is it?"

Yanhong's voice: "That's where the message came from. There's only two people jacked in."

Nuwa kicks the door twice, knocking it off its hinges. The moment it crashes to the floor, she hears men shouting in English, boots thumping down stairs. Stepping over the fallen door, Nuwa surveys the ground floor. The only light is the residual glow from upstairs. Shadows dart across. She's about to switch to thermal imagery when the fluorescents flicker overhead, buzzing like flies. Two Anglo men run forward, neither older than twenty.

The closest one is armed with nothing but a switchblade and a ridiculous Mohawk, dyed green. He doesn't need a better weapon; perched on the stairs, the second man has an SMG pressed against his shoulder, trained on her torso. An HK MP7 with a suppressor jutting from the barrel. Good working order, 40 round magazine. Nuwa nods in appreciation.

Yanhong translates their jabbering. "Private property," Switchblade says. "Stop and put up your hands." Mr. SMG frowns, shifting his weight from foot to foot, and asks who she is.

Nuwa keeps moving forward. When Switchblade rushes for her with the knife extended, Nuwa grabs his wrist, jerks his arm taut, and punches his elbow inward. Bone and cartilage snap. He drops, shrieking, and she steps past.

The second man's eyes bulge. Backing up the stairs as Nuwa closes in, he gets her in the submachine gun's sights and fires a burst. He's a good shot—the rounds hit her chest and sink deep, but Nuwa's chassis is stronger than Kevlar. Probing her chest with two fingers, Nuwa plucks out a spent round and lets it clatter to the floor.

He panics and looks ready to empty the clip when Nuwa throws the darts. Left eye. Two in the throat.

The clamor has alerted the building, and as Nuwa bends down to retrieve the knives, she hears more shouting. Bits of English. Bits of Mandarin. Nuwa climbs the stairs. A man rushes down, grabs at her. She knocks him over the railing.

Bullets rain down, and Nuwa blinks to infrared. Heat signature glowing orange on the third floor—a body lying prone, shooting an

automatic pistol between balustrades. Stepping out of range, Nuwa unscrews her right forefinger and tosses it up a floor. There's a clunk as it lands, followed by an explosive pop. The gas hisses out in a plume, and Nuwa sees the shooter clamber away. Choking and coughing echoes from all over.

Nuwa pauses, calls out, "Peng, tell your people to stand down."

More coughing. Peng's reply is in English. Muffled, yet loud. "Stand down. Just... let her come."

Knives resting between the fingers of her left hand, Nuwa climbs to the third floor. She picks up the collapsed gas canister, reconfigures it back into a finger, reattaches it. Switching back to standard vision, she circles around the slipshod office, ignoring the stares of Peng's hacking subordinates. Two lie curled in pill bug balls. Another frantically sucks air through a crack in a boarded window. Water drips from overhead pipes, collects into buckets. The air is pungent with rot, acrid with oil paint.

Nuwa finds Peng behind a desk strewn with papers, canvas, and brushes. Sweater pulled over his nose, he glares at her through bloodshot, teary eyes. "You're not one for subtlety."

"Subtlety is for the weak."

Peng snorts, chokes on gas.

Nuwa crouches down. "What do you have to say, that couldn't be done over a secure line?"

"I don't trust cyberspace, but perhaps I should, considering you dropped by unannounced and—" He doubles over in a coughing fit.

"You're living on borrowed time, Peng. If I'd been the one assigned to you, you'd be dead."

"He *did* kill me."

"Only a piece."

Peng wipes his mouth, then his eyes. "I've heard about your latest assignment. What did Meng do to earn your wrath? You've been turning a blind eye to her operation for years... or is it the

underground bank? The Bank of China must be losing billions from those remittances.”

“Get to the point.”

“Meng hired a private investigator to find her daughter. Raymond Flores, a Latino man. I tried leading him off the trail, but he isn’t the kind to be easily persuaded. You had a good idea there, kidnapping her daughter. Much as Meng loves Sarah, though, and wants to protect her, she’s stubborn. Meng can’t abide being ordered or threatened.”

“Is it only this one man?”

Peng shrugs. “His card said ‘Flores and Associates’; I’d guess there is at least another.”

“Yanhong?”

“I’m searching,” Yanhong’s voice replies.

Nuwa pockets the throwing darts and scrutinizes Peng’s face. She’d expected worse news; it was hardly surprising that Meng would hire a couple of private detectives. Nuwa is lucky the entire West Coast isn’t on the alert. And although it is unlikely that two PIs will be a threat, Nuwa prefers to err on the side of caution. “Is that it?” she says, voice filled with exaggerated boredom.

Peng struggles to stand, leaning heavily on the desk. “Is... is Sarah safe? Can you at least promise that she’s only a convenient bargaining chip, that you won’t hurt her?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.” Nuwa moves toward one of the boarded up windows and kicks it open, letting in gusts of cold, fresh air. The humans suck in deep, relieving breaths. That’s all the respite she can reasonably grant, she thinks, as she jumps out onto the sidewalk below.

Flores depresses the ringer button and hears an electronic buzz echo from inside. At his elbow, Buena shifts uncomfortably. “It’ll be fine,” he assures her.

A soft voice chirps over the intercom: “Yes?”

“It’s Raymond Flores. We had an appointment.”

“Come on in.”

Another buzz. There’s a click as the front door unlocks and slides open, disappearing into the frame.

“Please come into Room A,” says the same voice. “On your right.”

Flores leads the way through a foyer strewn with colorful plastic toys. Inside Room A, they find two couches facing a low desk. Perched on a wooden stand, a steel bird painted like a blue jay lifts its head.

“Please, sit, you two,” she says, first in English and then in Spanish. “My name is Tara. I’m the shelter manager.”

An AI. Sitting, Flores begins to explain the situation in Spanish so the bird doesn’t have to bother repeating herself. The AI interrupts. “Let her speak for herself, Mr. Flores.”

Buena hesitates and speaks in halting tones, going through it slow. Flores holds his breath, waiting for the horrible wave of images and feelings and scents to hit him one more time.

Buena has reached the part in her story where the white woman is loading her into the SUV when Tara throws open her wings. “I’m sorry I have to interrupt, Buena, but how old are you?”

“Fourteen.”

“I want to let you know that I’m a mandatory reporter. Do you know what that means, Buena?”

“No.”

Flores says, “It means she has to report child abuse and neglect if she has a reason to suspect it.”

“To the police?”

“Yes,” Tara says. “If you’d rather stop here, then, that’s absolutely fine.”

Buena nods vigorously, leaving no doubt.

“Mr. Flores, our shelter here is for women seeking safety from domestic violence. We only have fifteen beds, and we’re always turning people away. We have no choice—we just don’t have the room.”

“She’s—“ He resists the urge to blurt out how she’s been abused, how badly she needs these services. It’s unfair to require police involvement just to get food and shelter. “She doesn’t have anyone here, nowhere to go.”

“But she isn’t in imminent danger of being harmed.” The bird fixes him with a beady eye. “I can refer you to a homeless shelter and mental health programs, but we just don’t have room.”

“She’s fourteen years old, and after all she’s been through, you’re going to dump her in a homeless shelter?” The thought of it makes his stomach churn. Adults have been abusing her for three years; he can’t throw her back on the street. “No, can’t do it.”

The bird looks between him and Buena. Servos whirl as her neck moves. No need to wait for an AI to make a decision—she changes her mind with a slight nod. “We had to discharge a client this morning. We have only one bed. I can process her, but she can’t stay for the full forty-five days. I’ll give you as many referrals as I can, but after seventy-two hours she needs to leave.”

Buena turns to him. “Only three days?”

“That’ll be enough.” Flores touches Buena’s arm. “You’ll be safe here. And if I don’t have something figured out by then, I’ll drive you home myself. I promise.” Standing, he dips his head to the AI in gratitude. “Thank you. And you do have human staff, right? She’s not used to...”

The bird opens her beak. “We have supportive and experienced staff here twenty-four hours a day, and I personally monitor the shelter to ensure that it stays welcoming and safe.”

Flores nods, unsure if he's sold on the idea of leaving her here until Buena smiles. "I guess I'll see you soon," she says.

28

With Buena safe at the shelter, Flores returns to the office. On the way, he wonders if he could've done more. It feels like he's dumped her off like a nuisance, abandoned and forgotten. Despite the AI's support and quick dismissal of his concerns, fear lingers: Buena will be deported without thought, never understanding what happened, blaming herself.

Flores concentrates on cold-calling hotels. He and O'Neri hover over their desks, receivers pressed to ears. Confirmation: a woman with a Chinese name had booked a three-bed suite at the Star Palace Hotel, checking out the day Dan was murdered. An hour later, three Chinese-American women boarded a 7:35 PM flight from Guatemala's La Aurora International Airport to LAX, the third a teenager. The credit card used to pay for the hotel room did not match the names on the American passports, but Flores suspects all are convincing fakes. Confirmation: LAX security footage of two women pushing Sarah along in a wheelchair. Boarding passes to PDX.

"Why drag the poor kid all the way to Guatemala," O'Neri says, "just to bring her back?"

Flores can only guess. "Loose ends."

O'Neri suggests cold-calling every form of lodging in the Portland metro area. "It's worth a shot," she says. "There's a chance that they stayed at the Star simply because that's where the target was, but they've gotta sleep somewhere, right?"

As Flores considers the other possibilities, he's less optimistic. Not only could the assassin be using accommodations outside of Portland, she could be staying with contacts, or squatting in an abandoned building. They try it anyway, asking about visitors

checking in within the last twenty-four hours. They quickly meet blocks—the hotel managers are reticent, refusing to give up their customers’ identities, or misidentify the origin of their visitors’ names. After several hours of fruitless leads, Flores is ready to give up.

Suddenly O’Neri slams down the phone and grins. “Palm Sun Motel. Two women speaking Chinese, and a girl in a wheelchair. They checked in this morning.”

Flores shrugs on his coat. “Let’s go.”

29

From the roof, Nuwa peers down, watching the building’s front entrance. Rainwater drips from her hair and off the tip of her nose. The two targets emerge, carrying umbrellas, and hurry to a green compact car parked along the street. They argue, lips and hands moving. Both finally get in, the man driving, and the car pulls away.

Nuwa follows the car in her mind as the tracking device moves. She feels the car drive several blocks, turn right, and then park again.

She should’ve killed both of them in the office.

“I wouldn’t forgive you if you had,” Yanhong says, half-scolding. “They’re only concerned about the girl’s safety.”

“They’re only concerned about the reward.”

“That doesn’t matter. Promise me you won’t hurt them.”

It’s the second time in the course of hours that’s Nuwa has been asked to make such a promise. It’s a ludicrous request—the *nature* of her existence is to do harm. The car sits in front of a butcher’s shop for ten minutes before pulling away again and heading west.

Nuwa vaults off the roof and lands in an alleyway. The tracker burns red as the car proceeds west, then turns south. Suddenly Nuwa breaks into a sprint.

Yanhong's figured it out, and panics. "They're coming for me. They're coming right for us! Nuwa, what should I do?"

"Stay there for now." Nuwa quickens her pace and ventures that traffic will slow down the car enough to allow her to catch up. Although incapable of tiring, her top speed is no faster than the average marathon runner. "If I don't make it in time, get out of there."

"What about Sarah?"

"Leave her. You can't carry the girl—they'll find you."

"But you spent so much time—"

"*Leave her.*" Nuwa realizes now that letting the girl live had been a foolish mistake. If she had simply followed the usual plan and killed the brat, Meng would never have hired private detectives. Meng would not have cooperated either, but she isn't doing so *now*.

Yanhong protests, claims that the detectives wouldn't hurt her. Nuwa shakes her head, teeth clenched, and runs. She's closing the distance—almost, almost—but suddenly the car is zooming along, half a mile from the motel.

"Run, Yanhong," Nuwa says. "Run now."

30

Flores parks in the Palm Sun Motel's expansive rear lot and pops the car's hatch. From here, the front door of room 110 is visible. "You stay here," O'Neri says for the third time, getting out, "I'll beat the door down, clean house, and bring the girl back. You drive her home. I'll call a cab or something."

They'd gone over it on the car ride. Flores still isn't confident in O'Neri's ability to differentiate friend from foe while in wolf

form. O’Neri insisted that, short of calling the police and engaging Meng’s ire, she was their best option.

O’Neri is halfway across the lot when Flores spots the assassin coming for them. She’s soaked through, black hair matted to her skull. It’s the eyes—dull, predatory—that send him on the alert. Flores throws open the car door and shouts, “Vivian!”

O’Neri spins and rushes for the woman. Change of plan. Flores runs past, heading for the motel room. Glance over the shoulder: the assassin sprinting, trying to head him off. O’Neri grabs the woman, tackles her to the concrete. He runs, room 110 in sight, and grabs the knob.

The door swings inward. There’s a gasp. A young woman—the one who had accompanied the assassin to the airport—stands in the doorway. The woman holds Sarah up in one arm, and carries a suitcase in her free hand. The black butt of a pistol juts from the waistband of her skirt.

She opens her mouth, closes it, drops the suitcase. “We weren’t going to hurt her.”

Stepping forward, Flores grabs the pistol and pulls the door shut. “Kidnapping is enough, in my book. What did you do to her?”

“She’s only drugged.”

“What’s your name? Your real name?”

“Y-Yanhong.”

“Yanhong, do me a favor and set her down in that chair.”

She casts him a wary stare and shuffles backward. Sarah has at least thirty pounds on her; Yanhong is puffing by the time she lowers the girl into the chair.

Flores crouches and rubs the back of Sarah’s hand with a thumb. “Are you okay? Can you talk?”

Sarah’s eyes struggle to focus. “Y-yeah,” she slurs. Her left hand forms a weak fist.

“Can you bring her out of it?” Flores asks Yanhong.

“I can lessen the drug’s effects, yes, maybe enough for her to walk, but—”

“Do it.”

Another wary look in his direction. She throws the suitcase on the bed and snaps it open. As she tosses aside sweaters and blouses, animal snarls fade and swell through the thin walls. The growls grow louder and her searching turns frantic. Flores hates guns, but he pulls back the slide and keeps the barrel trained on Yanhong’s back.

Underneath layers of clothes, she finally develops an opaque gray case and tugs on a zipper. Between her fingers, she holds up a syringe. “This is it.”

“Should I warn you against trying anything funny?”

“I think you already did.” Yanhong preps the vial, tapping glass and squirting liquid. As she nears Sarah, the girl winces and tries to shrink away.

The girl’s dread sets Flores into protection mode. “She’s just going to wake you up, okay?”

Sarah hisses through her teeth, near hyperventilating, as Yanhong jabs the needle into her shoulder. The hissing doesn’t die down until the woman has backed away.

“It should take effect within five minutes,” says Yanhong.

Flores nods and instructs her to stand near the bathroom—far from Sarah and the exit—as he wires in and contacts Portland’s finest. The wolf in the parking lot continues to snarl. It’s a welcoming sound, reassuring him that O’Neri is still fighting, but also puzzling. She should’ve torn the assassin to shreds by now. In his periphery, Yanhong hugs herself, shoulders slumped. Sarah begins to move, rocking back and forth in a familiar motion. Flores gets an image—a girl in sixth grade, crouched behind the kiln in her art class’ supply room. She rocks on her haunches, dried clay dust white against her cheeks. He can’t place the memory.

After several minutes holding in the void of cyberspace, an officer appears. His avatar is a knight in silver chainmail, astride a white destrier. Flores almost laughs.

He's explaining the situation when there's a burst of excited whooping from outside. Flores sets the pistol on the nightstand and pushes the blinds aside. Gawkers gather in the parking lot, shouting and throwing bottles. Police sirens drawing closer. Through the mob, Flores catches bits of gray fur. Teeth snapping. A human arm, the skin torn away, dull black bone underneath.

"Jesus," Flores says.

The knight's head tilts up. "What?"

A thunderclap bang. His ears ring, deafening him. Outside? In the parking lot: heads turn, looking in his direction.

"N-not human," Sarah stammers, and Flores smells the gunpowder. She looks up at him, mouth hanging open as she sucks in deep breaths. "I-I thought... they're n-not human."

31

Screams draw away the crowd like a whirlpool. Even the beast loosens its jaws from her throat. As the great wolf pulls away, Nuwa slams her heel into its chest, rolls, and runs. It doesn't follow; it's already lost in the descending chaos.

Nuwa bolts down the street. Yanhong's voice is gone, her presence no longer a gentle hand on her back. The only voice sharing Nuwa's mind repeats the same word: *dead*.

Down into an alley: Nuwa ducks behind a dumpster and pulls her knees to her chest. It'll only be for a moment—she knows alleys and side shops will be the first place the police will look. This time she disconnects without a request. She has to find out what happened.

Back in the dark, watery tomb. The casket grinds open, and Nuwa stares up at buzzing fluorescents. One of the android nurses

leans down, glossy torso hanging in Nuwa's periphery. "He's been alerted to your return, Mr. Zhang," she says. "Please wait."

Nothing to do but sit in the lukewarm pool and let the water lap her face. The water feels like nails scraping her cheeks. Bodies of other agents hang in suspension, hidden from her view in the nest's deep recesses, but Nuwa knows they're there.

At last a man approaches. Nuwa doesn't recognize him; he's handsome, with a charming moustache. Nuwa feels a burst of joy—perhaps the boss has finally been replaced.

"Mr. Zhang," he says in the boss' familiar clipped voice. Sinking dismay. The boss must have been saving up for a new face.

The boss reaches down and pulls up the translation screen, his every move stiff. Angry.

Once the screen is ready, Nuwa thinks, "Did you see?"

The boss stares at her, jaw set, and refuses to look at the screen. Finally he casts it a brief glance. "Of course I *saw*. I do nothing but sit and watch all of you, day and night."

"I lost my connection to Yanhong."

"She was shot in the chest and died quickly."

Nuwa makes a choking noise through the ventilator. "It was that private detective."

Again the boss does not immediately read the translation. When he does, he releases a long sigh. "It wasn't the detective. It was your own damn *hostage*. You understand? Your own hostage panicked and shot Yanhong with the pistol you gave her."

"She *couldn't*, no, she was drugged."

"Much of the blame lies with Yanhong herself. She knew she should've run, as you said, but Yanhong had to bring the girl along. She couldn't even kill her. Perhaps she felt the girl knew too much to be simply abandoned. I can only watch and draw my own conclusions." The boss runs a finger across the screen, wiping away a layer of dust. "Foolish as it was, it isn't surprising. She was

a perfectionist and preferred her details settled. That was her strong suit.”

Nuwa blinks rapidly. There’s an eyelash lodged in the corner of her eye. “I can fix it, I can kill them.”

“You’ll do no such thing. If you had stayed within the parameters, you wouldn’t have added this useless complication. It didn’t work. And now I have to send you another handler and repair your chassis. I should have you permanently disconnected and sent back to your village. I’m confident your family will take good care of your daily needs.”

Nuwa panics, mind splintering in different thoughts. The screen becomes a jumble of disconnected pleas.

“Yes, you have been loyal. And I bear some blame for allowing this to continue. Yanhong was a good assistant, and you’ll have to make up for her loss.” Crouching down, the boss lowers his voice. “You’ll do that by wiping out Meng’s local associates.

It’s a multiple team job, and one that would attract attention from the American authorities. “What about the detectives?”

“They’ve done their job. They won’t be crossing your path again. Focus your energy on finding the Stag.” His fingers brush across her cheek, stroking stubble. “Can you do that? Or would you rather go home?”

The police keep Flores at the motel for an hour before shuffling him off to the station. Finally the assigned officer leaves him alone in a windowless room with a Styrofoam cup of tepid coffee and his interface deck. Across the city, they’re grilling O’Neri in her hospital room. This time, when the mermaid avatar appears in his lap, one arm is wrapped in a sling. “They’re demanding my registration papers,” she says, “even though I keep

telling them the documents are filed away. It would take the lazy fuckers five minutes to look it up.”

Flores concentrates; the avatar snake nods its head. The more he focuses, the less he dwells on Yanhong.

“And hubby isn’t pleased.”

“With you? Or with me?”

“Both of us. It’s been so long since anyone has injured me in wolf form.” The mermaid grins. “It was unbelievably close. Thrilling, actually. I have no idea what that thing was, but it wasn’t human. No doubt about that. You know, I almost wish I could fight it again.”

Sarah’s voice, small and trembling: *Not human*. Flores bunches his slacks between fists, smoothes out the fabric. “This isn’t a game.”

“Pfft. Listen, they’re not releasing me yet, and hubby has to take the kids home. You mind picking me up? They’ve drugged me up on some powerful shit here.”

Flores agrees and is yanking the wires from behind his ear when the door swings open. Meng closes it behind her and takes his hand. For a long moment she only stares at his hand, turning it over, as if memorizing the details of his cuticles and knuckle hair. Meng is dressed in black, her paisley scarf the only touch of color. “Thank you,” she says, letting go. Meng’s eyes are rimmed red and puffed, but she smiles. “Thank you for bringing her back. And so quickly.”

Coming from Meng, the emotionalism feels so foreign that Flores doubts its authenticity. “Is she okay?”

“She’s fine—she’ll be back to her old self by tomorrow.”

“The police—”

“I wouldn’t concern yourself over it. All the evidence lines up on Sarah’s side. She was trying to get away, and that woman was preventing her from escaping. Sarah acted out of self-defense. You can’t blame her for that.”

“Sure.” The police taking his statement was a mere formality—Flores had understood that. But Sarah’s actions had amounted to nothing less than murder. A murder he could forgive, but still a murder. “And what about the White Stag?”

“What about it?”

“You have your daughter back, but whoever kidnapped her is still out there. They want something from you. And I don’t think they’ll give up.”

Meng shrugs. “It’s business. It will all be resolved.” She leans in and kisses him. “I’ve delivered your payment, along with a generous bonus. I’ll keep your card if I should need you again.”

Flores manages to keep his expression noncommittal. “Of course.”

33

“How will you spend your share of Meng’s dirty money?” Flores asks.

O’Neri grins. Her face is a patchwork of bruises, her left arm in a cast. The internal injuries are only visible when she moves wrong, prompting a wince. Together they must look like a pair of brawlers. Yet O’Neri sits up taller than usual, head high with pride. “Paying off my student loans. Maybe taking a vacation with the family.

Flores fingers the green olive in his martini. “All in all, a clean case.”

“Hmm.” No doubt picking up on his tone, O’Neri takes in a deep breath and glances around the bar, looking at everything except Flores. “That Chinese woman getting to you?”

“Her, and Buena—”

“It wasn’t your fault that she—okay, fuck that, it *was* your fault. What the hell were you thinking, just setting a loaded gun down like that?”

Flores bristles, knee-jerk defenses on his tongue. *Yanhong was clear across the room, and it was only for the briefest moment. How was I to know?*

“That was some amateur shit, right there.” O’Neri touches his forearm, as if to take the sting out of the words. “Amateur shit, but not worth agonizing about. She had it coming.”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“Call me an asshole, but I don’t feel much pity for people who kidnap and kill for a living. You’ve gotta balance sensitivity with reason, and when you do that, you figure out that some people just aren’t worth it. Be more like Enlai. He wouldn’t let it get to him.”

Be more like Enlai. “That’s a joke.”

O’Neri laughs. “Maybe.” She empties her beer and looks ready to say something--mouth open, green eyes bright with secret mirth--then stops. “I shouldn’t be drinking on these meds.”

Halfway through the fourth beer, she gets the idea to wire up Enlai to brag about their successful case, all done without his help. When he doesn’t answer the summons, O’Neri insists that they hit the local bars and clubs he owns. The hours drag on. Enlai never shows.

It’s nearly midnight when Flores gets home. Two days without sleep make his limbs heavy. The scent of Buena’s hair lingers on his pillow; Flores strips the bedding, throwing it to the floor in fistfuls. He falls asleep, still fully dressed.

In the middle of the night, Flores wakes, startled by some nightmare. He brews a mug of coffee and sits in the kitchen, listening to the regular thumps and creaks of the building. Lost, Flores gropes through his pockets and wires into the BMI deck.

The White Stag returns, pixel by pixel.

Across a bridge, Nuwa finds a quiet brick building and scales its steel fire escape in a series of jumps. Once at the top platform, she peers into a window. Dark inside, no movement. She shatters the glass with a kick and slips inside. The rooms are empty, the air dank from leaking pipes. From one window, she has a commanding view of the river and the city on the other side. Atop a squat building, a white deer leaps over English text. The tip of the stag's nose glows red. Nuwa wishes Yanhong were here to translate the words.

Sirens wail across town as Nuwa inspects her right thigh. The damage is superficial—a gash in the artificial flesh, not even deep enough to expose skeleton. When she presses against the wound, a clear, viscous fluid seeps out. The damage to her hand is a greater problem.

There is a rustle and Nuwa narrows in on the movement. A rat scuttles across the floorboards and disappears into a recess in a wall. Nuwa lowers her head. The new helper won't be here for several more hours. She waits.

Silence here is nothing like the village. There, quiet could last for days, even when the children were home. Father had a daughter by a first marriage and another by a second, but the first he had always considered a son. No one was permitted to correct him. That child was Siyu Zhang—a miserable boy who thought himself a girl.

Father was a schoolteacher. They had standing. Zhang taught his sister Bao what he'd learned in school and, after their chores, they played in the fields. Zhang confessed his dreams and fears.

The older he grew, the more difficult living in his body became. At Father's request, Zhang joined the People's Liberation Army Navy Marine Corps. He'd intended to stay for only three years, devoting the minimum time to his country before returning home. Bao's letters weren't enough. In the day to day, sometimes

he managed to find moments to daydream or think. Others, he worried that someone would find out. He kept his mouth shut and told no one. Most days he coped. The rest filled him with an unbearable self-loathing. *When I get out*, he promised himself, *it will all change*.

Ships can't stay at sea, and when they came to port, Zhang wandered. Sex proved confusing at best, uncomfortable at worst. The men were too rough, and the secrecy—the thought of getting caught—terrified Zhang. The women focused between his legs and grew impatient when he couldn't stand the touch.

Soon it would be over. But he was a capable combatant, quick and smart. Good at following orders. The brass noticed and promoted him, began to groom him for command. Zhang came home for shore leave, but he gave up on staying. The miserable boy gave up on being a girl. Loath to admit it, the navy had grown on him.

It seemed fitting that when he was finally becoming comfortable, certain he could live this life, his legs grew weak and began to twitch. Zhang had hated his body since he was a child. Now it terrified him. He tried hiding it, masking the symptoms by avoiding the other marines. Eventually he took a misstep and tripped. They sent him to the hospital.

The prognosis was two to five years. Discharged, he returned home. Bao was forty-two, with a husband and two children, already caring for their ailing father. She didn't have the ability to take on the stress of a brother who was rapidly falling apart. But Bao made Zhang a room without complaint. She fed him, took cues from the nurses and therapists. And—up until the point where he lost the ability to swallow—they talked. “I missed you,” she'd say, sponging sweat from his forehead, on the verge of tears.

Zhang was on the ventilator when the man came. “Such a pity to serve so bravely and die so young,” he'd said, with a smug smile that incited Zhang's quiet rage. “How would you like to live past forty-five?”

The man held up a plastic panel and attached the electrodes. Technology so perfect it was obscene. *Why would I want to live any longer like this?* Zhang wondered. The words scrolled.

“Not like this,” the stranger corrected with a widening smile. “You’ll live as before. Like a man.”

35

Flores closes his own office on weekends, but the sign on Enlai’s is more enterprising. The front window announces: “24-Hour Service, 7 Days a Week.” The same dark-haired kid from before is manning the front desk. He shakes his head as Flores draws near. “Mr. Hsiung is on a workman’s comp case. Would you like to see another one of our associates?”

In a side office, one of the case managers is explaining a contract in a nasally, pedantic voice, while the client grunts along. Flores gets comfortable in one of the leather couches, crosses his legs. “I’d rather wait.”

The receptionist shrugs and returns to his deck haze. Flores waits until the boy’s eyes have glazed over before moving past into a hallway. Familiar—everything from the lingering scent of formocresol from the adjacent dentist’s office to the unique click his shoes make on the textured ceramic tile. Enlai has set up his office in O’Neri’s old space. Better view from the window. O’Neri’s seashells and balsa longboard are gone, replaced with inoffensive abstract paintings.

Flores had no reason to be bothered that Enlai ignored O’Neri’s requests to chat the night before. But ignoring *him*—that won’t stand.

Despite the scattered bits of marijuana shake, Enlai’s desk is neatly organized. Flores thumbs through the day planner. Personal notes, appointments, phone numbers. He hears footsteps clattering, getting closer, and rips out a page. It’s safe in his pocket as a large

man with triangle eyebrows stomps in. “I suggest you get moving quick, son.”

Flores brushes past. “I was just leaving.”

36

Leaning through the car’s window, Enlai stuffs a twenty into the kiosk. He punches buttons. The kiosk dings and two interfacers extend from a plank, stinking of isopropyl. Enlai hands the first to Lisa. She smiles coyly and murmurs a “thanks.” Enlai’s own interface snaps flush against his skin, the transceiver’s stubby wire curling behind his ear.

Enlai had been late picking Lisa up. Paperwork, contacting clients. She shrugged it off—a good sign. By the time they pulled into the grassy field, a mass of cars were already jammed together, blocking the wide screen. Not that it matters. Already rom com previews are flashing across Enlai’s field of vision, unobstructed by SUVs and the rain. As long as his eyes are trained in the screen’s direction, he has a commanding view of actresses tripping into wedding cakes. He smells the sugar in the frosting, feels it spray his slacks.

“You know,” Enlai says, brushing a nonexistent smear of frosting from his knee, “Dallas still operates one of those old school drive-in theaters—you have to tune in to right radio frequency to even hear the dialogue.”

Lisa’s shoulders tense. She glances at him, then fiddles with the popcorn in her lap.

Enlai forges on. “What’s the appeal in theaters? It can’t be the idea of a shared experience—I’m more irritated by the people taking up space and making noise. Then there’s the logistical issues. You have to pay for the ticket, the food, the babysitter. I don’t have to worry about that if I stay home. At home, I can

multitask, pause the feed whenever I want. It's all about opportunity cost. So why do we do it?"

Enlai has to repeat the question before Lisa mumbles, "I don't know."

"Are you actually watching the previews?"

A sigh. "No."

"And I can get hammered and not worry about getting home. If it's nostalgia, why do we let ourselves get nostalgic over pointless traditions?"

This time, Lisa doesn't attempt an answer. The silence drags, becomes swallowed by explosions. Opening credits cartwheel. Panning forests kick up earthy scents of fungi, wet leaves, dirt. A hunter in a camo jacket lumbers through the trees, panting and clutching his stomach. Fiddles whip dramatic peaks. Blood seeps from a deep gash wound. Enlai runs a finger across the gouges in the man's lower abdomen, rubs his fingers together. The blood is slimy, too greasy. Lisa seems to anticipate an impending comment and shoots him a warning stare.

Enlai lowers his hand.

Tap tap on the passenger window. Lisa flinches, spills her popcorn. "What the heck is that?"

The dull tapping continues, knuckles on glass. "Maybe it's management," Enlai says, though he has other suspicions.

Hesitantly, Lisa tries to peer out. Enlai can't make out more than a silhouette.

The tapping slows, gets louder. Lisa frowns. "Should I..."

Pressing a button, Enlai rolls down the passenger side window. A hand appears, bills folded between fingers. Flores' voice: "Sorry, lady. Your date's a dud and you can do better. Call yourself a cab."

"I... *what?*"

"You heard me. Take the cash and find a guy with personality."

“I don’t—” Lisa leans forward, inspecting the wad of cash. She snatches it up, tosses aside the interfacier, and bolts from the car, popcorn in hand, as if Enlai might stop her.

“Hey!” Enlai twists in his seat. “Goodnight to you, too!”

Flores sits down beside him, closes the door. “Sorry about that.”

Enlai snorts. “Yeah, right. So I’m a dud, huh?” On the screen, the hunter crawls through the underbrush, crying for help and frantically looking over his shoulder.

“I would’ve called you something else, but I didn’t want to be crude. Besides, it wouldn’t have worked out anyway.”

“Yeah?” Enlai winks. “It already *has*. If you know what I mean.”

“You’ve already slept with her?”

“I only date someone after I know the sex is good. It’s one of my little rules. Beats falling in love and finding you’ve got shit for chemistry.”

Flores fiddles with Lisa’s discarded interfacier, plugs in. “Cynical.”

“Hey, at least when *I* fuck someone, there’s a good chance we’ll see each other again.”

To Enlai’s delight, Flores closes his mouth, momentarily stymied. “I never said I didn’t understand,” he says. “What movie is this?”

“What, *Grizzly*?” Dipping into a jacket pocket, Enlai fishes out a joint and lights up. Holds the smoke in, releases. “It’s a remake of some ’70s flop.” He coughs. “This bear goes around, attacking hunters and campers. It’s like *Jaws*, except... in a forest. And the shark’s a bear. And Richard Dreyfuss isn’t in it. Will you hold me during the scary parts?”

“We’re not sticking around for the scary parts. I wanted to tell you—O’Neri and I found the girl.”

“Yeah, I know, I have friends in PD.” Ahead, a little boy wanders from a campsite and shrieks upon stumbling on the

hunter's rotting corpse. "And Vivian's many drunken messages filled me in on the rest. You didn't need to come all this way to gloat—I figured you'd find her without me. I'm not *that* damn arrogant."

Flores adjusts his fedora. It's brand new, along with his suit. Spoils of their success, Enlai guesses. He looks damn good in it. "I didn't come to gloat. These past two nights, a white stag has been visiting me."

Scent of tree sap as forest rangers split up to investigate. This won't end well. "Oh, you little scamp. Did you dip into my acid stash?"

"It's not a hallucination—it happens while I'm wired in."

"There's your problem, then. Don't wire in before bedtime. That's one of those rules, like not eating before you jump in the pool."

Flores snaps his fingers under Enlai's nose. "Try to focus here. Both nights, that stag tried to lead me out of my apartment, but vanished once I got to the hallway. Someone's using the stag as their avatar to tell me something."

"If I were you," Enlai says, "I'd ignore it. Your case is closed, man. Finito. Meng, she's ruthless, and if she wouldn't turn over the Stag to save her own damn daughter, she won't tolerate you poking around."

"That's precisely why I need to figure out what's going on. I found Meng's daughter because Sarah was, more or less, an innocent. I took Meng's money because I needed it."

"But..."

"But now..." Flores squirms, and Enlai can feel the goody-two-shoes bleeding heart spiel coming on. "I've worked a lot of cases for people I hated. Lousy excuses for human beings. Men who beat their wives and call me because she's found someone better. Guys skipping town to shirk child support. Gold diggers and stalkers and frauds."

"I call those the *good* cases."

“Usually there’s nothing I can do. The client takes the evidence and walks away. This time, I have an opportunity staring me down. Here’s someone who’s breaking the law, routinely exploiting the desperation of others—”

“Fulfilling an economic need. It’s *bidness*, honey.”

“Spare me the Microeconomics 101 lecture.”

“Sorry, did that go over your head? I forgot you’re not a college boy.”

Flores’ eyes flash that rage; he grabs a fistful of Enlai’s shirt, shoves him back against the seat. “Will you *listen*? There’ve been murders done in Meng’s name. I’m certain of it.” Still gripping the front of Enlai’s shirt, Flores rubs his temple with a finger. Enlai can’t read his expression. “Murders, and who knows what else.”

Tentatively, Enlai lays a hand on Flores’ fist. “You did your part. You saved the day. Let that assassin take care of Meng for you.”

“It’s already occurred to me that the stag might be a trap, but if I can find a way to shut down Meng’s operation cleanly, without harming anyone in the process, then I’ll take it.”

“Let me guess. You tried tracing it, but you’ve sucked and failed, and now you need a hacker virtuoso to sort it out.” Enlai takes another drag from the joint. “Listen, I’m a survivalist, and not the kind that loads up on freeze-dried beef stroganoff and M16s. The real kind. When I can, I mess with the people who give me shit. But I also steer clear of the bigger fish.”

“Like Satyricon Peng?”

“Like fish you haven’t even heard of. You don’t have any idea what’s out there. It’s not cowardice; it’s being smart and minding your own fucking business, right? I told you before—I’ve got more to lose.”

Flores says, “I never called you a coward.”

“Well, there are plenty of decent hackers in this town. Hell, I’ll refer you to some.”

“And I’m fully capable of finding them myself. But I don’t trust them. So I’m asking you.”

Enlai’s head swims. *What did he just say?* He dabs out the joint in the ashtray and pulls back, resisting as a force draws him sideways. Enlai looks up, realizing that Flores is tugging him by the shirt. His hands go to Flores’ shoulders. They meet halfway, staring at each other. It’s the first time he sees Flores uncertain.

Enlai intends the kiss to be gentle, a light brush, but Flores doesn’t let him break away. When Enlai reels Flores in by the tie, one hand stroking the small of his back, Flores climbs into his lap and kisses him roughly.

“You’re playing with me,” Enlai whispers at last, breathless.

“I—” Flores lowers his lids, peering at him sidelong. “I don’t treat people like pawns.”

It’s intended to be accusatory, but there’s no force behind the words. “Pardon me.” Enlai squeezes Flores’ ass as the other man straddles him, grinding into Enlai’s erection. “I forgot who I was dealing with.”

Enlai’s lips curl in a grin as they kiss again. Fingers shaking with anticipation, he undoes the first two buttons on Flores’ shirt. A grizzly snarls in the background. Someone screams two cars down. Flores’ cologne and the movie’s gunpowder. One hand grabs Flores’ nape. The other goes for his crotch.

Flores catches Enlai’s wrist, one finger scolding. “Not so fast.”

Enlai ignores the protest and grabs his cock through the fabric of his slacks. Sucking in a breath, Flores leans against him, objections forgotten. He mutters incoherent encouragements in Enlai’s ear. Then: “Back seat.”

That’s all he needs to hear. “Or,” Enlai says, rolling back the driver’s seat, “I can fuck you right here.”

He’s unbuckling Flores’ belt when something vibrates. Before he can wrestle the deck away, Flores has tossed aside the interfacer and is wired in, eyes going blank. He stays that way for a long,

frustrating time. Enlai taps the armrest and sulks as the grizzly terrorizes a lost hiker.

When Flores revives, he says, “We’re going back to my place.”

Enlai has the sneaking suspicion they won’t be alone. “O’Neri?”

Flores bites Enlai’s lower lip. Consolation prize. “Move over. I’m driving.”

37.

It’s been nearly a full day when the replacement helper finally arrives, holding up her credentials in one hand as she strides through the abandoned building. The other hand carries a fat leather suitcase. “I’m Fei-Yen,” she says, stopping before Nuwa’s feet. “I apologize for taking so long. I was stationed in Khartoum.”

The girl is green—that much Nuwa knows by instinct. Sending her a rookie is intended as an affront, but she chooses to see the benefits. Yanhong had been in service for only three months when she became Nuwa’s assistant. It had allowed Nuwa to groom the girl to her needs over the years. Nuwa waves the explanation away. “I don’t need excuses. Get to work.”

“Here?” When Nuwa doesn’t answer the question, Fei-Yen kneels and throws open the suitcase. First she straps a light around her head and switches it on. Then, rolling out a mat, she arranges tools on its surface and hands Nuwa an instrument the size and shape of a screw. “Plug the homing device in. And remove your clothes, please. I need to see exactly where your chassis has been damaged.”

Nuwa strips, leaving a tattered pile of clothes in a corner. She plugs the instrument into her chest socket and feels the cool homing liquid seep through her artificial veins, pooling in the areas where the chassis is damaged. The liquid is invisible to Nuwa, but

Fei-Yen's implants make it easy to spot: "It glows blue," Yanhong had once said. Arms outstretched, Nuwa stands still as Fei-Yen circles around, making silent notes of what she sees.

"This will take some time," Fei-Yen says, inspecting Nuwa's damaged hand. She reaches for a laser tool and sets to work. "After speaking to the boss, I was expecting a man. I've seen plenty of women prefer male skins, but not the other way around. They don't seem to like the attention we women get. Are you running some kind of experiment, Mr. Zhang, or is your target a man?"

"No experiment. And my name is Nuwa."

"So the target *is* a man. I don't think I'd ever be able to seduce someone without knowing them first..."

Nuwa shuts off her audio channel, tuning out the girl's tedium. Thus far the rookie's lack of experience is proving more annoying than helpful.

Half an hour later, Nuwa feels a pat on her thigh. Fei-Yen has finished attaching the flesh to her hand. She says something. Nuwa reads her lips: "Turn around."

Nuwa faces the window and feels a needle pinching her right calf. A thought crosses her mind. She switches her hearing back on. "I want you to change my face as well."

"Certainly. Would you rather be a Caucasian woman? I can change your skin pigment—"

"No. Just alter my face."

Flores settles behind the driver's seat, adjusting the belt and mirrors. Enlai is rambling off a stream of nonsense, blathering this and that about theaters, nostalgia. Bullshitting over the human condition, one hand on Flores' knee. He only half listens, attention focused on the road, berating his lack of self control. Inability to keep his emotions in check.

Next case, when it is O’Neri’s turn to lead, she’s going to give him hell. He can feel it. O’Neri never liked following, but they established early on that it was impossible to maintain a partnership with only one of them calling the shots.

When they arrive, O’Neri has already let herself in with the spare key. Enlai lingers in the kitchen, sniffing the air. “It’s strange, being here *invited*. What’s that smell?”

O’Neri’s chin jerks toward the pot. “Coffee.”

Enlai whistles, appraising her injuries. “Wow, someone did a number on you.”

“You should see the other woman,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Should we be doing this here? Maybe the office would be better, or someplace neutral.”

“Nope. Better to do the trace where the avatar contacted him,” Enlai says. He throws open cupboards, shuffles through their contents. Flores bristles as he breaks open a bag of pretzels and starts munching. “It’s better at evoking memories that way.”

“Uh-huh, and does being stoned also help?”

“Frees the mind, Vivian,” he says through a mouthful. “I’m ready. Let’s continue this in the boudoir.”

Flores hangs up his hat and flicks rain from its brim. “Actually, the stag visited me in the living room and kitchen.”

“That thing I said about evoking memories works in the, uh, general vicinity.”

Flores isn’t surprised. When he crosses bedroom’s threshold, O’Neri on his heels, Enlai is already seated at the desk, interface deck in hand.

“Make yourself comfortable on the bed,” says Enlai. “Vivian, honey, you stand right there, near the door. If something happens, I want you to step in and disconnect me.”

“If something happens,” she repeats. “What kind of trouble should we expect?”

“That really depends on the nature of the defenses I’m up against. Most traps will detonate some form of traumatic brain injury. The severity depends on the trap and how well I avoid it.”

“And Flores? Is he at any risk?”

Enlai grins. “He’ll be fine. If you need an analogy, picture him holding a big ol’ vat of sulfuric acid, and I’m about to stick my arm right in it. I could freak out, knock the vat over and burn him, but that won’t happen. I’m a professional.”

“Excuse me if I don’t put much faith in your professionalism.” O’Neri frowns at Flores. “We can find a safer way to get Meng. More up front.”

“That’ll have to wait for plan B,” Flores says. To Enlai: “Tell me what to do.”

Enlai scoots the chair flush with the bed. “We’ll interface brain-machine-brain, just like before when I shared that data. Wire in like normal and I’ll follow you.”

Once they’re connected, Enlai instructs him to relax and concentrate on the stag. Flores visualizes a deer with a crown of antlers guarding the living room couch. Then the furniture drops away, becomes a garage. The stag morphs into a bright green and yellow riding mower, its wheels flecked with bits of grass. Gasoline and motor oil. A man in khakis and a polyester button-down rustles through a shelf, muttering to himself, knocking over caulk and old batteries. He hurls a bag of nails against the mower and punches a wall. “Tina,” he says. “*Tina*, did you move my tools again, you dumb bitch?”

It’s not his own memory, but Flores shudders.

Enlai’s rests a hand on his wrist. “You’re pushing too hard. That’s its first defense—it’s trying to redirect you. Try to focus on details.”

Flores remembers the stag’s black eyes, the way he scraped the carpet with a hoof. The stag solidifies like the familiar memory flashes, frozen with a moment’s detail. A tear in his left ear. The

floor lamp's sheen glinting off the stag's nose. O'Neri's father drops away and the stag glows red.

"Good," Enlai says, "I can see the string. Now sit tight and let me handle the rest."

Enlai closes his eyes and leans back in the chair, his brows pinched in concentration. He's quiet save for the faint whistle of breath through his nose.

After five minutes, O'Neri shakes her head. "After he stormed off that night, I thought he'd laugh you off. What did you say to get him to do this?"

"Nothing. I just asked."

"Told you he was sweet on you."

Enlai chuckles. "I *can* hear you." Click of a tongue. "Okay, I'm through the first rung. Our culprit's based in the northern hemisphere. No surprise there. I wish there was a way to skip past—hold on."

Enlai goes silent again, and Flores watches him, noticing every twitch of a muscle as if it holds a clue.

"Getting sticky," Enlai says at last. "They've got a good setup here. I'm lowering myself down the shaft, and traps are everywhere—turrets in the walls, mines along my string. I could drop straight down, but I'm positive there's a bed of spikes waiting for me." He pauses, taking long, deep breaths. Flores grazes his fingers along Enlai's knuckles. "There. I'm through the second rung."

"And?" O'Neri asks.

"Almost tripped a neural net shockwave. Hold on. I've pinned the origin to North America, and—*and*—"

"What?" Flores doesn't like that hesitation. "What happened?"

"Shit, I triggered an alert." Enlai bares his teeth. "Sensitive. I've got alarms going off in my head."

O'Neri moves toward the coupled interface decks. "Then get the hell out of there!"

Enlai throws a protective hand over the wires. “No, no. I’ve got it under control.”

“Are you crazy?” O’Neri tugs on strands of blonde hair. “You’re going to get your fucking brain fried.”

“I know that. But if I pull out now, I won’t be able to get back in. Not this way. And besides, I have a feeling they won’t brainfry me.”

“Enlai,” Flores says, “if you’re trying to show off, then stop. I believed you when you claimed to be a skilled hacker. You don’t have to do this to impress me. This isn’t our only option.”

“You needn’t worry your pretty head. They won’t fry me.”

“What gives you that impression?”

“PI gut instinct.”

Flores hesitates. He has always cautioned himself against relying too much on instinct. The gut isn’t impartial. Then again, there are circumstances when there is nothing else, nothing logical to follow. No leads, no evidence. Nothing but a niggling intuition. Flores stares Enlai in the eye. “My gut says you’re fucked.”

A smile flickers across Enlai’s face as he rolls back his shoulders. Eyes closed and voice neutral, he verbally walks them through his actions. With the alert clamping down security, he has to move faster along what he calls the “guiding string.” Flores can’t distinguish metaphor from reality. Instead he exchanges furtive glances with O’Neri and waits for a sign that it’s over.

“Okay.” Enlai swabs a sleeve across his forehead. “I’m at the last rung. There’s another bomb here, but I can move past it if—” Enlai grunts and gasps for breath, like he’s been sucker punched in the gut. He clutches his chest and howls.

O’Neri’s on it in a second. She yanks the wires from the interface decks, disconnecting both of them. Flores grabs Enlai by the shoulders before he can slip out of the chair and guides him to the floor. Enlai thrashes, hollering in Chinese, and O’Neri has to sit on his waist to keep him subdued.

“I knew this was a bad idea,” she mutters, hands clenched around Enlai’s wrists. To Flores, she asks, “Are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, I’m *fine*,” Flores says. He crouches beside Enlai, winces as he violently struggles in O’Neri’s grip. Enlai’s pupils are dilated black, his clothes sweat-soaked. Flores can’t make sense of his words, but his dazed, semiconscious panic is reminiscent of a psychedelic bad trip, or a deck haze crisis.

O’Neri’s voice turns worried. “He’s hallucinating. Got some serious psychosis here. We should call an ambulance.”

“Wait. Stay there.” Flores runs to the bathroom and throws open the medicine cabinet. Bottles and tubes tumble into the sink, rattling, scattering pills. He opens a box, pries out a metallic strip wrapped in clear plastic, and hurries back to the bedroom.

“What are you doing?” O’Neri says as he lifts Enlai’s t-shirt, exposing lean pectorals.

“Just keep holding him down.” Flores tosses aside the strip’s plastic casing and pushes the slider to “maximum dose.” The metallic strip flexes between his fingers. A hundred stubby needles jut underneath like a centipede’s legs. Flores lays the strip across Enlai’s chest and presses the needles deep into the flesh.

The reaction is immediate. Tension drains from Enlai’s muscles. His shouting slows into a lost muttering, his pained expression now that of a fitful dreamer.

Sitting back, O’Neri releases Enlai’s wrists and squints at the strip’s label. “What kind of drug was that?”

“Now isn’t the time. Let’s move him off the floor.”

O’Neri waves away the offered help and rips off the sling. With her injured arm now free, she lifts Enlai to the bed with a brief wince. “Why do you keep tranqs on hand?”

“They’re antipsychotics.” Flores turns away, avoiding her surprised stare. This is his fault. From the bed, Enlai lets out a low groan and shivers. Flores leans in, touches Enlai’s forehead, and recoils. “He’s hot. Feverish.”

Flores retrieves a thermometer from the bathroom and presses it into Enlai's ear. When it beeps, O'Neri recites the reading. "105.6." She gives him a nod. "You start the tub, I'll bring him over."

The bathtub faucet feels like it is trickling water, taking eons to fill. Flores shifts his weight anxiously, testing the temperature and twisting the dials as he finds it too warm, too cold. When the tub is full, O'Neri carries in Enlai—stripped down to his dress slacks—and lowers him in. Enlai yelps the instant he hits the lukewarm tap and splashes frantically, struggling against O'Neri. She restrains him with her eyes rolled to the ceiling, unfazed by the whimpering that fills Flores with pity, and waits until the thrashing dies down.

Once he's calmed, O'Neri grabs a towel and dabs at her wet clothes. "Would it be rude to make fun of him for this when he gets better?"

Flores lifts his head. "You think he'll get better?"

"Dunno. I've never dealt with anything like this before—most of my friends spend their time in meatspace." Sitting on the toilet seat, she browses the selection of magazines. "But when Jack had a high fever last spring, this helped bring it down."

Enlai's groans echo off fiberglass and linoleum. Flores presses his forehead against the wall.

"Stop that," O'Neri says.

"What?"

"The agonized regret crap. Enlai's a big boy and he knew the dangers better than us. Even if he did this just to get in your pants, it's still not your fault."

"It's—" Flores rubs the bridge of his nose. "More complicated than that."

"Even if you *want* him in your pants, it's not your fault."

Flores does the "you're right" acquiescing nod. There's no point arguing. O'Neri's convinced that he blames and punishes himself for everything. "Addicted to martyrdom," she calls it. That

tendency is difficult to avoid when he occupies more time in others' shoes than his own.

He perches at the tub's edge while O'Neri flips through a Korean chemistry journal. The water goes from tepid to cold. "Why do you have a magazine on weather?" she asks. "You've got to be the dullest bastard. I didn't even know they *made* weather magazines."

Flores snatches it away. "It was for a case."

"When were we investigating a meteorologist?"

He's about to reply when Enlai squeezes his hand. "You two," he wheezes, "are giving me a headache."

Flores lets out a surprised laugh. "Are you sure that's not your brain frying?"

"Shit." He winces. "Maybe. Why am I in the bathtub?"

"Because your dumb ass got a fever of 105," O'Neri says. "And you were a real baby about it."

"That doesn't explain why I'm wearing pants."

"I wasn't going to strip you down. This isn't a romance novel."

"Too bad." Enlai wobbles to his knees and winks at Flores as they help him out. "This is about the time I'd be getting laid."

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It's a struggle to keep warm; Enlai huddles under wool covers and shivers as his mind unravels alien images. There's logic hidden somewhere, but it's out of his grasp. Mathematical equations charting event horizons. Pied piper flutists leading children over a hill. His skull throbs, overflowing with nonsense.

They'd agreed that he'd have a better chance of recovering at home. On the highway, Enlai's nose began to trickle blood. It had taken all his energy to convince O'Neri not to reroute to the hospital.

There's a shuffle from the closet and Enlai sighs. "What are you doing *now*?"

"Nothing."

Bullshit. He can hear the pop of a three-ring binder. Objects moving against cardboard. Lifting the covers, he peeks underneath, spots Flores rifling through a box. "Don't you ever give up?"

"No."

From the kitchen, the kettle whistles. Flores trots off, leaving Enlai to his jumbled thoughts. They keep him occupied until Flores reappears at the bedside with a mug of steaming green tea. Enlai sits up just enough to cradle it between hands.

"Are you feeling better?" Flores asks.

"I still can't make sense of what I'm seeing." He sips the bitter tea, abandons it on the nightstand, and throws the covers back over his head. "Maybe eventually, I'll understand, but as of right now I'm afraid I've wasted your time."

The mattress dips, springs squeaking, as Flores sits.

Enlai waits for him to speak. Rail off about his arrogance backfiring into failure. It doesn't come. Enlai's never been fond of silences. Licking his lips, he says, "I'm sorry."

The silence drags. Then he feels a pressure on his shoulders, strong hands running down his back. A chin rests in the crook of his neck. And Enlai realizes that Flores is hugging him. "You'll figure it out," Flores says. "We'll figure it out."

8

Contributing Authors

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E. Firdawsi *spends her weekdays writing copy and dreaming of fiction. Chasing the White Stag is her first jaunt into noir/cyberpunk, and her first completed work featuring a telegraphic prose style. When she isn't writing, she's usually exploring the wilderness of the Pacific Northwest or watching a campy movie with her partner of six years.*

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Al Lukehart *is a 23-year old illustrator living on the east coast. In addition to making art, she loves yoga, reading, bellydance, and Dungeons & Dragons! More of her art can be seen at www.lukehartstudio.com.*

