BROTHER ZHONG KUI

ZHEN AI

甄 艾

34 chapters
74,962 words

Contents

01 Chapter 1 4

02 Chapter 2 11

03 Chapter 3 18

04 Chapter 4 24

05 Chapter 5 30

06 Chapter 6 36

07 Chapter 7 41

08 Chapter 8 46

09 Chapter 9 51

10 Chapter 10 56

11 Chapter 11 61

12 Chapter 12 66

13 Chapter 13 72

14 Chapter 14 77

15 Chapter 15 82

16 Chapter 16 87

17 Chapter 17 92

18 Chapter 18 97

19 Chapter 19 103

20 Chapter 20 108

21 Chapter 21 113

22 Chapter 22 118

23 Chapter 23 123
24 Chapter 24 129
25 Chapter 25 135
26 Chapter 26 140
27 Chapter 27 145
28 Chapter 28 150
29 Chapter 29 156
30 Chapter 30 162
31 Chapter 31 167
32 Chapter 32 173
33 Chapter 33 178
34 Chapter 34 183

Chapter 1

Ah Po built the mask over an inverted rice bowl, layer by layer, until the face had a brow like a low roof and a mouth like a cut that had healed wrong. She said it was for a shrine. He paid her — eighty yuan, named once and never mentioned again — and carried it home in a paper bag, and did not correct her, because at Li Kee (李记) you did not correct the people you ate beside. Then he lacquered it. Three coats, the last one thick, so that under the market lamps the face did not look made. It looked kept.

For a month it lived in the insulated box on the back of his e-bike, under the spare poncho, and he did nothing with it.

He walked the four streets instead.

Market Street to the footbridge; the footbridge down to the ho chung (河涌, the canal-creek); the canal back up through the wet market; the wet market out to the arcade; the arcade home. Night after night, the way he walked dough through its rest — by feel, by give, by the point where it stopped arguing.

He learned the cameras the way he learned the rain.

The market gate camera had died in the summer of 2022, when a thunderstorm took the line and the market office decided the repair belonged to somebody else's budget. The arcade had no camera at all; its lights went off at 11:30, and the dark that followed was rented twice over. The footbridge fisheye was alive — a black dome under the eaves, put up by the landlord who owned the three flats above the fruit shop, who had lost the password in 2021 and never reset it. The camera went on recording. Nobody could watch.

Yiming mapped it in a two-yuan notebook: times in pencil, gaps in pencil, the minutes when a street went blind. He did not tell himself why. He told himself it was for the rain.

He had walked the four streets a month by then, and he knew them better than he knew the inside of his own room. He knew which alley the mahjong room used for its smokers and which stairwell the couriers used when the market

gate was chained. He knew the vegetable women by the sound of their haggling and the fish men by the water they threw. He knew the dead hour between three and four, when the last siu yeh stall put out its fire and the first congee pot went on, and the market belonged to nobody, which was the hour he had chosen without ever saying the word to himself. He had told his mother he was doing the night deliveries, which was true. He had not told her that he had drawn a map of the dark.

It was Duanwu (端午, the dragon-boat festival) week, and the fifth month had arrived the way it always did, not as a season but as a verdict. The air was wet enough to drink. Mugwort hung from doorframes, going brown at the tips. Somewhere a river ran with drums he could not hear from here.

The rain started at 11:40 — not arriving but thickening, until the gutters forgot which way they were supposed to run.

He was on Market Street with the box on his back and the pole in his hand, hood up, a delivered order logged and closed on his phone, walking a route that had no order in it at all.

He heard the bag before he saw the woman.

The sound was small and expensive — a strap pulled until it gave. Then a voice, high and careful, the voice people use when they are trying not to be hurt. Then the sound of a person going down on wet concrete, which is a sound you do not forget once you have heard it.

He saw her through the rain. Fifty-odd, a dried-goods apron, one green sandal off and lying on its side like something small that had given up. The man above her had the bag by its strap and was already turning.

Yiming set the insulated box against the wall. He took out the mask and put the mask on.

The lacquer was cold. The eye-holes framed the street in two blunt rooms.

He came out of the arcade dark and said, “Wai (喂).”

The woman was still on the ground. She had not run, because she could not; her ankle had turned when the strap gave, and she was sitting in the wet with one green sandal on and one green sandal off, and she was watching him the way people watch a thing they did not ask for. He did not know her name yet. He would learn it later, from the file, and from the statement, and from the market,

and the learning of it would take a year and cost him everything, and none of that had happened yet, and the only thing in the world in that moment was a woman in the rain and a man with a paper face and the sound of the other man's shoes going away down the street.

The man stopped.

He would never know which part of it did the work. The mask, or the voice coming out of the mask, or the way he stood — feet apart, pole loose in one hand, the way Uncle Leung stood in the dawn park and would stand until his knees quit. The man looked at the face the way you look at a light you cannot explain, and something in his own face came apart.

Then he ran.

Yiming ran after him.

Down Market Street, past the shuttered dried-goods stalls, the fish scales greased under his shoes, the rain closing the distance and opening it again. The man was fast and knew the turns. He cut left through the alley behind the mahjong room and came out on the canal road, and Yiming followed, because he had walked this a hundred nights and his body knew the gap without asking his eyes.

The canal was low. The hoarding ran along it — blue steel, the words COMING 2021 peeling off in curls — and past the hoarding the light fell away, because the project had stopped three years ago and nobody had thought to keep the lamps on for a building that was never built.

At the end of the hoarding there was a steel post.

The man reached it and turned, because he had to, because there was nowhere left to go.

Yiming swung.

The pole came down through the rain, and the man moved, and the pole met the post instead of the man, and the bamboo — young wood, wood that did not yet remember him — split with a crack that went up through his wrists and sang.

The man had a knife.

It was a fruit knife, the kind they sold at the market for eight yuan, but a knife is a knife. It came out of his sleeve and across Yiming's left forearm before Yiming had the pole turned, and the line it opened was white, then red, then very red.

Pok gai (仆街).

Then the man was inside the pole, and the pole was useless, and it came down to hands.

Yiming had five years of bodyweight on a bamboo pole. He did not have a style. He had legs and core and grip, and a shop he stood in from four in the morning, and a father whose shoulder had been cut in a night like this one. He got the man's wrist and twisted until the knife went into the canal. He got the man down on the concrete. Then he hit him.

The first blow was for the arm.

The second was for the arm's after — for the pain that arrives late and stays, for the way a cut remembers itself.

By the fourth he was not hitting the man at all. He was hitting the year he was nineteen, and the thing that had been done to his father, and the minute he had never been allowed to have. None of it had a face. The man under him had stopped having a face some time ago.

The mask broke.

It broke at the jaw, where the man's elbow caught it on the way down. The top half stayed on and the bottom half hung, and the split mouth made the face look as if it were about to say something reasonable.

The man stopped moving.

Yiming hit him twice more.

Then he sat back on his heels in the rain, breathing, and remembered the neck.

You did not touch a neck. Every auntie on Market Street knew it, said it over congee, the way you said things about the water and the roads. You supported the neck. You called 120. You did not pull a man's head around like a tap handle.

He put two fingers under the jaw and waited.

The rain got into the broken half of the mask and dripped off the chin.

He waited too long, and then he waited some more. Only then did it come to him: there had been a minute — maybe two — when the whole night could have gone the other way. The minute was finished. He had spent it with his fist.

He turned the man's hood back.

The face was thin. Older than it had been. There was still the old small scar by the eyebrow, from the day he had come off the back of his cousin's scooter in the ninth month of their second year. It was Chen Mou (陈某), home from a three-year sentence and back on his own patch, because there was nowhere else for him to be.

Yiming looked at him for a long time.

"It's you," he said.

Chen Mou's eyes were open and unhurried, the way a man's eyes are when he has done this before and does not expect it to mean anything.

"Meh si? (咩事， what is it?)"

Then he died, or had already died, and Yiming could not have told anyone which.

He sat there while the rain filled the eye-holes. His arm had gone cold and then hot and then loud. On the concrete, the man's phone lay face-up, cracked at the corner, and lit.

Ma (媽).

He watched it ring until it stopped. Then, because he did not know why, he picked up the woman's bag, which had spilled, and set it upright against the wall, out of the water. He looked at the mask lying in the wet. He should have taken it. He knew even then that he should have taken it.

He ran north along the ho chung with the split pole in one hand and the broken mask hanging off his face, and where the hoarding ended he pulled the mask off and dropped it on the ground, face-up, and did not look back to see where it landed. His arm was open. His hands were shaking. Behind him a man lay under the rain with a phone that said Ma.

The side door of the gei pou (机铺， the internet cafe) was on the alley that smelled of solder and fryer oil and the cold smoke the machines breathed when the air-con fought the weather. He knocked three times, then twice.

The door opened. Ying looked at the mask in his hand, then at the arm, then at his face, and said nothing about any of it.

Her hands were already moving before he finished a sentence.

"Did you wear gloves."

"No."

"The pole."

"Split. On a post."

"Where is it."

"Still there. Pieces."

"Did you speak."

"Wai."

"Anything else."

"No."

"What did you leave."

He looked at the ruined mask.

She took it from him with two fingers, the way you take a thing that has been in the water, and dropped it in a rice sack by the door.

Inside, the back room smelled of instant noodles and solder. Forty machines stood in rows on the floor, asleep, their fans breathing in the dark. On the wall, one monitor showed the footbridge fisheye — the dome he had never been able to watch, because the landlord had lost the password in 2021.

On the screen, in the rain, north of the canal, the mask lay face-up on the concrete.

It looked like something that had chosen to lie down.

Ying sat him in the plastic chair and washed the arm with the yellow antiseptic that stung worse than the knife, then wrapped it with gauze from a drawer. She did not ask him what it had been like. She did not ask if he was all right. She pulled the gauze tight and tied it off and said the thing she had said once before, on a different night, in a different year, and had never said again:

"From tonight, nothing on your body comes from anyone who knows your face."

Then she went to the console and did what she did.

She did not delete the fisheye. Deleting left a hole. She copied the hour, saved it, and overwrote the hour with last week's rain, so the file would show a bridge and a road and no mask at all, and then she wiped the copy twice. On the wall, the mask lay in its two blunt rooms of light for another second. Then the picture jumped, and the rain on the bridge was last week's rain.

She cut the pole with a wheel and put the pieces in three bins, and in the morning the trucks would carry them to three places.

At 2:10 a.m., someone called her from five hours behind. She looked at the phone, and did not answer, and let it ring out.

Yiming sat in the plastic chair with his arm bound and his eyes on the monitor. The monitor showed a bridge he knew. On the bridge there was nothing, and the nothing was the whole point.

CHAPTER 2

Chapter 2

The god went up at dusk, the way it did every year.

Old Li mixed the paste in a bowl — flour and hot water, the smell of it like everything else in the shop — and Yiming held the print flat against the door while his father brushed the back. Zhong Kui (钟馗) looked out of the paper with his brows joined and his sword raised and his mouth open at something nobody else could see. The print had come from Ah Po's stall, two for eight yuan, and it had not changed in Yiming's lifetime: the same scowl, the same boot, the same small bat in the corner that nobody in the family could explain.

"Left," his father said. "No. Your other left."

By six the street had its own smell — zongzi steam, wet concrete, the first oil of the fryers coming up. At every door along the row somebody was pasting something: a god, a couplet, a strip of red paper with a word on it that nobody stopped to read. Down at the canal the old men were warming the first drum, and the sound came up the street in pieces between the buildings. In Li Kee the dinner crowd had filled the four tables and the counter, and the father worked the front the way he had worked it for twenty years, calling the orders back over his shoulder, and the mother wrote the tallies in the ledger in her small square hand. Yiming carried the bowls and wiped the tables and did not think about any of it.

It was the sixth of the sixth month. Duanwu fell the next day, and the Gaokao (高考, the national college entrance exam) fell on the same morning — a thing the calendar did once in a decade. The street had been talking about it for weeks, the way it talked about weather and weddings.

Inside, the congee was already going.

His mother made gat dai juk (及第粥, top-scholar congee) whenever the family had an exam in it, which had happened once before, for his cousin, and had worked, if you counted a place at a vocational college. She stirred it slow so the grains broke and did not vanish. At the end she put in the pork liver and the

kidney and a thread of ginger. The name of the congee meant top scholar. Nobody at the table said so.

The promise came after the second bowl.

His father said it the way he said prices and weather, flat, as if it were a fact that was already true: “Ting yat haau yun, faan lai — ngo lok min bei nei.” (听日考完返嚟，我落面比你 — Tomorrow, when it’s done, come back; I’ll pull your noodles.)

Yiming said nothing. He was eighteen, and he did not yet know that a promise is a thing you keep by remembering it.

The pencil bag was packed twice — once by his mother, who added an extra eraser, and once by him, who took the eraser out. Exam ticket, ID, two black pens, two 2B pencils, a sharpener, a watch without seconds. He put the bag by the door and went to bed at ten with the bag where he could see it from the pillow.

Before sleep, for no reason, he remembered a mock exam from the winter. The teacher reading down the list. “Li Yiming.” — “Dou (到).” He had answered Dou four hundred times in his life. It was the first word the school ever taught them to say.

The phone rang at 00:11.

A man’s voice, fast and not unkind: “Your dad’s been stabbed at the shop. Ambulance took him to City First. Come with your mom.” A breath. “Don’t rush. Ride slow.”

They took the e-bike, because the e-bike was outside and the night bus was finished and neither of them could think of the number for a car. His mother sat behind him and did not hold on. The rain had stopped, and the streets were the color of wet slate. They went to the shop first, because the shop was on the way, and because neither of them could say the word hospital out loud.

The street outside Li Kee was still awake. In the fifth month the street was always awake. A knot of people stood at the doorway. The wok fire was still on, blue under the pot. The glass from the door window lay across the floor, and Ying was kneeling in it with a towel, pressing.

“She called the ambulance,” the rice-shop man said. “She got the register locked and she turned off the gas and she called.”

Ying did not look up.

The rest they would put together over the next week, from the auntie and the rice-shop man and the boy who had filmed the first minute on his phone.

Two men had come up the street arguing about money — a debt, or the interest on a debt, which in that neighborhood were the same argument. One of them carried a knife he had not planned to use, or had. Old Li came out from behind the counter with his apron still on and both hands open, and said the thing he always said when the street got loud.

"Brothers. Give me this much face."

He said it to the man with the knife. The man with the knife was swinging at the other man's jaw. The jaw moved. The knife did not.

After that the street did the things streets do. The man with the knife ran. The other man ran. The boy kept filming. Somebody shouted for 120. Ying, who had been studying at the corner table, did not run.

The file, when it came, would call it hu'ou (互殴, "mutual brawl"), because two men had come up the street arguing, and a fight, in the language of the file, has two sides. Yiming learned that word that week. He did not forget it.

At City First they found his father on a trolley in the corridor, because the corridor was where they put the ones who were still being decided. His face was gray and his hands were gray, and there was a dressing pad taped over his shoulder and under it the shape of a thing that should not be a shape.

The corridor had plastic chairs bolted in rows and a television on a bracket playing a nature program with the sound off, and it was full of people who had been told to wait. A man slept across three chairs with his shoes on them. A woman prayed over a bundle in her lap. The vending machine gave change in coins that came out cold. Yiming bought two bottles of water because his mother had not moved in an hour, and she took one and did not open it, and held it, and after a while set it down on the floor beside her.

His mother went to the counter. Yiming did the math.

The math was this: the first paper, Chinese, was at nine. The surgeon was due at 5:50. If the shoulder could be closed, if there was no second bleed, if the trolley moved when it was supposed to, there was still time to go home, shower, change,

and stand at the exam hall by half past eight. He had walked the hospital-to-school route two weeks earlier, to know. It was twenty-six minutes by e-bike.

He did the math all night, the way his mother did the books — column by column, on the back of a prescription slip, in pencil.

A nurse came by at two and looked at him, then at the bag on his knees, and said, "Go back and sleep."

He said, "Mm."

The consent form came at 3:20. They read it in full, because that was what you did in the family, and because his mother's hands were shaking too hard to hold the pen, and the pen was given to Yiming instead. He signed the way he had learned to sign for exams: slow, level, the surname first, every stroke in its own place on the line.

At 1:30 — before the form, before most of the math — he had put Ying in a taxi. She had come to the hospital with the shop keys in her fist and blood on the knees of her school trousers. He told her to go home; her own first paper was at nine too. She stood in the lit doorway of the emergency entrance and would not move, so he said it again, and put her in the taxi, and shut the door. Through the glass she put the shop keys into his hand, and the taxi took her.

In the waiting corridor an old si-naai (師奶) sat down beside his mother and talked, the way old women talk in hospitals, about the fifth month. The poison month. The water turning, the ghosts loose, the month when you did not open a business, did not move a house, did not let a child swim. She told it as a list, the way you tell a list to someone who has just lost something and needs the world to have rules in it. His mother nodded, and kept her hands folded, and did not say anything at all.

The surgeon came at 5:50. He was young and he smelled of soap and he promised nothing. He said the nerve had been cut, and that they had done what could be done, and that the rest would declare itself over months. Then he asked the question the whole night had been waiting for.

"Can he lift heavy things?"

Nobody answered him.

At 8:45 Yiming sat in the corridor with the pencil bag under the chair, still in the clothes he had slept in, and watched the clock on the wall. The bag had a

smear on the strap, where his father's blood had dried. Down the corridor his mother was asking the counter about payment, in the voice she used for suppliers.

At 9:00 the city went quiet. He had never heard it quiet. Three hundred thousand lives across the district, all of them inside one hour, and the streets around every school went still as if a hand had been laid over the mouth of it. His phone buzzed on his knee.

09:00 — Chinese.

He looked at it for a while. Then he tapped OK.

The shop did not close. That was the first decision, and nobody made it; the market made it, the way the market made everything. The lunch crowd would come whether or not the family was grieving, and if Li Kee did not feed them, another shop would, and then the crowd would be the other shop's crowd, and that would be worse than grief. On the second day Yiming opened at the usual time. He burned the first pot of congee and the second, and served the third.

He learned the dough the way he learned everything that year, because there was no one else to learn it. The flour went into the mixer at four; the lye water was measured by eye until his eye learned it; the duck eggs came from the same woman at the same stall; the dough rested and then wanted the pole.

The first month was the worst of it, and it passed the way the worst months pass, in a blur of small tasks. He learned the supplier's name and the amount owed and the day the fish came. He learned that his father could not sleep lying down and that his mother did not sleep at all, and that the two of them lay in the dark on either side of the wall and said nothing to each other, because there was nothing either of them could say that would not make it worse. He learned that a family in trouble does not talk about the trouble; it talks about the price of pork, and the price of pork becomes a kind of prayer, and you say it every morning so that the room does not fill with the other thing. He learned the weight of a bowl and the price of it and the names of the regulars and which regular paid on the first of the month and which one never did. He learned the gas valve and the standing order with the wet market and the tea for the old men and the way to talk to the man from the wholesale potato place, who was owed money and had to be handled gently.

The hospital bill came in a long folded sheet, item by item, and the mother put it in the ledger and did not show it to anyone. For a while the father sat in the back room and listened to the shop the way a man listens to a house he used to own. Then he began to come out again, and do the small things — the tea, the napkins, the wiping of the tables, the counting of the change at the end of the day, which he did slowly, with the one hand that still listened to him.

The teachers called all summer. His form teacher called four times, and the messages got shorter as the summer went on, and then the school office called about repeat-year registration, and then about the fee. His mother took those calls. She wrote the amounts in the ledger and did not ask him anything.

His mother had asked him three questions that week: what time the ambulance had come, whether he had eaten, and whether he had the exam ticket with him. After that week she did not ask him another question for five years. It was not silence — she talked to him every day, about the shop and the weather and the price of pork. She simply stopped asking, and the care came by other routes: a clean shirt on the chair, gauze set beside the bowl, a bowl filled before it was empty.

In August, his father came back to prove the shoulder.

He came when he could stand, and he wanted to prove it the way he had proved everything, with the pole. He got the bamboo down and set it under his arm and leaned his weight onto it — one bounce, the way he had done it forty thousand times — and the arm failed, and the pole rang once on the floor and rolled away.

Nobody said anything.

Later that week, at four in the morning, Yiming lifted the pole himself and set it under his own arm. He bounced. He felt the dough give under the bamboo, and the two beats went out through the dark of the shop like a knock at a door. His father listened from the back room and did not come out.

The retired pole went to the corner and stood there, and was never touched again.

The exam ticket went into the drawer under the till, where the chopsticks and the spare change lived, and where his mother kept the ledger. The photograph on

it had been taken in the autumn, when he was seventeen. In it he was not smiling. He had not been told to smile, and would not have.

He never went back.

Chapter 3

The bamboo man knew him, because the bamboo man had supplied Li Kee for thirty years and had known his father before that.

"Your father's pole still in the corner?" he said.

"Still in the corner."

"Then take the same weight as that one. The shoulder will know itself."

"The same."

Yiming picked through the bundle in the dark with his hands and not his eyes. The pole had to be straight; it had to be light enough to carry all night and thick enough that the shoulder of it would not whip. He chose one the color of weak tea and brought it down once on the concrete apron between the stalls. It rang. Two beats, the note of the street waking up.

He paid sixty yuan and carried it home under his arm.

The market was building itself around him as he went — the vegetable women laying the morning's greens in fans, the fish men hosing the floor in long gray arcs, the roast-meat ovens already breathing their fat-smell out into the wet air. The delivery riders queued at the congee shop with their boxes open like mouths, tapping their phones, and the phones said the same thing to all of them at once. Nobody looked at a man carrying a pole. In this neighborhood a man carrying a pole was the most ordinary object on the street.

At Li Kee the shutters were half up. His mother was already at the ledger with her reading glasses on, and the old corner was empty, because the old pole had gone into the stove piece by piece over three mornings a week ago and was ash now, and nobody had asked where it went.

He gave the dough its turn.

The dough for juk sing min (竹升面, bamboo-pole noodles) had been mixed the night before — duck egg, lye water, flour, nothing that needed a recipe because it was in his hands — and left to rest under a damp cloth. Now it wanted the pole. He set one end of the bamboo under the bench and sat on the other,

and rode it, bounce by bounce, and the dough went flat and then folded and then flat again, and between the bounces the pole struck the board with its two beats, the way a heart does not quite beat, the way the morning came.

His mother came to the doorway at 4:40 and looked at the new pole. She said nothing about the old one. Then she looked at his left cuff, which he had pulled down though the morning was already wet-warm and every other man in the shop had rolled his sleeves to the elbow, and she said nothing about that either. She went back to the ledger.

Somewhere above the street the sky did what it did in the fifth month: it did not get light so much as get less dark.

At six he took the first congee run up Market Street. The fifth month was not hot yet; it was only heavy. The shop awnings dripped. The air had the canal in it, that low green taste the old people said was the month turning over, and the whole street moved a little slower for it, as if the air had weight to carry.

He was coming back with the empty pots when the shouting started.

It was Mrs. Ho (何師奶) at her vegetable stall — twenty-two years on this street, a woman who could weigh a bundle of choi sum in her hand and be right to the cent — who found him. She had gone to the end of the row to drag a crate away from the drain, and there had been a man under the crate, or the crate had been over the man, and she had lifted it and stood for a moment with her mouth open and no sound coming out, and then made the sound that brought the whole market at a run.

Yiming ran with them. That was the thing about a market: when it runs, you run. To stand still while the street runs is its own kind of confession.

The man lay at the end of the blue hoarding, on his back, one arm thrown out, the night's rain still standing in the low places around him. The market made a ring and looked, and then made the ring smaller, and then somebody said a name, and the name went around the ring softly, the way names do, passed from mouth to mouth without ever being said out loud.

Chen Mou. Home. Bored.

Yiming looked at the hand and the shoe and the shape of the shoulders, and did not look at the face. He had already seen the face. A man who looks twice at a body he knows is a man who will be seen looking.

The crowd gave him up slowly. The vegetable women went back to their greens because the greens would not keep and grief would not feed anyone. The fish men went back to their hosing. A boy in a school polo shirt — the same boy, Yiming realized, who had filmed the first minute of something else once, and who had a phone he was never without — lifted it now and began to film again, and nobody told him not to, because this was the year when everybody filmed everything.

The first officers came in a blue van that could not fit down the last of the street, so they walked the last of it. They put a tape between the vegetable stall and the hoarding and stood at either end of it, and one of them walked to the market gate and looked up at the camera mounted there, and then at the cable where it went into the wall, and then at his partner, and said one word low enough that only the two of them heard it.

The camera had been dead since the summer of 2022. Yiming knew that better than the officer did. He knew the whole blind street, minute by minute, better than anyone standing on it.

By noon the market had made its own version, which is what markets do. The version was that a man had come out of the dark with the face of a god and had stopped a robbery, and that the robber had died at the end of the blue wall, and that the god had gone back into the dark, and that the woman with the green sandal had been saved by something that had no name. Nobody in the version mentioned a boy with a knife scar on his forearm, because nobody had seen one, and because the market preferred the other story, which was better. Yiming stood behind the counter and listened to the version move from stall to stall. A thing had already begun that no one could stop, not because it was true but because it was useful.

They had the woman sitting on a plastic stool at the edge of the tape, a market blanket around her shoulders though the morning was warm. She was from the dried-goods stall two rows over; her name, he learned later, was Mrs. Cheung (張師奶). She had one green sandal on and one foot bare, and the other sandal in a plastic bag beside her on the ground, kept, not thrown away. She was not crying. She was telling it, in a flat voice, to a young officer who wrote slowly and asked her to go back and say it again.

She said a man had come up behind her and taken her bag. She said another man had come out of the dark and stopped him. She said what face the man wore.

"A man with the face of a door god," she said.

The young officer asked her to say that part again, and she said it again, in the same flat voice and the same words, so that there could be no doubt which words she meant. She said it the way people say the things they intend to go on saying.

The detective came later, when the market had been let to breathe. He was in his middle forties, a little heavy, in a good coat the wrong color for the weather, and he did not look at the body first. He looked at the ground around it, and then up at the hoarding, and then along the row of stalls, and then at the camera on the market gate, and then at the cable, which ran up the wall and into a junction box that had stood open since the storm. A boy with a mop was working his way toward the tape, and the detective put a hand up, without looking at him, and the boy stopped.

Then he crouched by the body and stayed there a while, saying nothing, and the market went on around him and did not hurry him.

His name, Yiming learned the way the market learned everything, was Inspector Lam (林sir). He had worked the thing in 2019. He kept a file.

The inspector and a uniform went down the street stall by stall with a clipboard. At the joss-paper stall they stopped longest.

Ah Po was ninety, or said she was. Her eyes had been going for years, and her memory had not, and she sat among her paper the way a queen sits among the things she has already won: the door prints, the silver joss, the paper houses and paper servants for the dead that she folded cleaner and faster than anyone in three districts. She was working while she talked, because her hands knew the folds without her.

The inspector showed her nothing, because he had nothing yet to show. He asked about the week. He asked what she sold, and to whom, and whether anyone had bought the god-prints in numbers.

Ah Po said she sold the god-prints every year at this season, dozens, to anyone with four yuan and a door. She said she did not keep names. She said people

came and went and she was old and she could not see their faces anyway, and the inspector wrote that down and thanked her, and went on.

She did not look at Yiming while he passed. She never had, in front of anyone. That was the way she protected him, and he had learned, without ever being told, to be protected that way.

On the walk back he went a little out of his way, north along the ho chung, to the place where the hoarding ended and the concrete ran down to the dead water. The ground was empty. There was a darker patch where the rain had not yet dried, and the fresh track of a flat cart where the night collectors came through before dawn to take what the day had thrown away, and no mask. Someone had taken it.

He stood there a moment, and could not decide whether that was the best thing that had happened all night, or the worst.

At the shop his mother had set a clean shirt on the chair beside the till. Next to it, the first-aid tin, open, with a fresh roll of gauze and the yellow bottle, and a small scissors. She had not said anything. She was at the stove with her back to him, stirring. He took the shirt and the tin into the back room and changed the dressing, over the old one, and when he came out she was serving the first breakfast of the day, and neither of them had said anything at all.

The detective came by in the middle of the rice run, when the shop was three deep and the steam stood in the doorway like somebody standing there. He waited at the end of the counter for the crowd to clear, because he was the kind of man who waited. Then he asked Yiming the questions he was asking the whole street. Did you hear anything last night. Did you see anyone who did not belong. Did you know the man.

Yiming answered in the voice he kept for elders, which was the easiest voice he owned. No. No. Not really. Sorry.

The detective thanked him and wrote a line in his book. Then his eyes went to Yiming's left wrist, where the clean cuffed sleeve came down over the dressing in a month when no one in the shop wore long sleeves, and stayed there a moment longer than the question had needed.

He looked at the new pole leaning in the corner, still the color of weak tea, still learning the room.

Then he nodded, the way a man nods when he has decided to come back later, and went on down the market street.

Chapter 4

He swore it off the morning they found the body. He said it to the sink, over the dishes, where no one could see his mouth move: never again. He meant it the way a man means a thing he has decided and not understood, and it held for six days.

The first day he slept. The second day he opened the shop and did the rice run and did not look at the corner. On the third day the detective came back and asked the same questions in a slightly different order, and Yiming made him tea and answered them the same way, and the detective wrote one line instead of two and watched Yiming's hands while he wrote it. On the fourth and fifth days Yiming stayed in after closing. He watched television with his mother, who did not ask him anything, and he listened to the street through the wall, and the street sounded exactly as ordinary as it always sounded, which was the thing he could not bear about it.

On the sixth day he found himself standing at the drawer under the till with his hand on it, and did not know how long he had been standing there, and took his hand away and went to bed. He did not sleep.

That night he walked to the gei pou, because he could not stay in the flat, and Ying let him in through the side door without a word. She had the market's camera map on the big screen — the one she had drawn up from what he told her and what her family had installed around the block: the dead gate, the dark arcade, the fisheye that recorded and could not be watched.

"Did they find the mask?" he said.

"No."

"Where is it."

"Somewhere. Somebody's stall. Somebody's back room. It's a paper face. It isn't evidence until somebody decides it is." She was looking at the screen and not at him. "There's a name for the dead man. There's a mother. That is the

whole of what you need to know about it, and you are not to do anything with it."

At two the phone on the desk lit up with a call from five hours behind, and this time she answered it, and talked in a low voice about nothing — the rain, some game, a song — while he sat in the plastic chair and listened to a language he did not speak and did not want the night to end.

On the seventh night he went back out, because the work was the night.

Li Kee closed at ten, and the siu yeh (宵夜, the late-night supper) runs started at eleven and went until one, sometimes two — congee and noodles in the warm boxes, up to the mahjong rooms behind the market, the guard booths, the all-night places that nobody in the family called by their real names. He had done the runs since he was fourteen. The night was not a decision; it was a column in the ledger, and the column had to be filled.

He left the mask at home. There was no mask to leave. The new pole rode in the box with the noodles, and he did not take it out.

The city at that hour belonged to the people who worked it. The cleaner with the long broom, going along the gutter with the patience of weather. The delivery riders, two to a corner, smoking and looking down at their phones. The night-shift fish men stacking the morning's ice. The women who sold fried noodles from carts with a gas ring and a wok and a light clipped to the frame. Yiming knew them all and they knew him, and none of it had anything to do with a face on paper.

At the mahjong room above the sauce shop they did not stop the game; a hand reached out of the smoke and took the box, and another hand put the money in his, and the door shut, and the tiles clicked on.

At the guard booth the old guard took his congee and said, "M goi (唔该)," and went back to the radio and the folding chair and the dog that slept under it.

Then he turned into the alley behind the dried-goods row, and the trouble was at the roots-and-stone stall.

The stall was a wooden trestle under a canvas roof, with the old man's whole life laid out on it: ginseng in glass jars, dried tangerine peel in paper twists, roots tied into bundles, and the flat gray stones people bought for their backs and their luck. The old man who kept it was eighty and used a cane, and he had kept that

stall for longer than Yiming had been alive. Behind the stall, past a curtain, his wife coughed and stopped and coughed again, and did not come out.

Two men were with him. One big, one small. The small one was young — nineteen, maybe — and he had a phone in his hand the way boys had phones that year. Not exactly holding it. Not putting it down.

Three thousand yuan, the big one was saying.

The old man's hand on the cane was shaking. He said he had paid. He said he had paid the three thousand and then there was interest, and then there was interest on the interest, and now the number was a different number that had nothing to do with anything he had ever borrowed. He said it slowly, like a man reciting the price of his own life, and the numbers he said did not add up to anything except the kind of arithmetic you do when someone else is holding the pen.

Yiming put the box down and came into the light.

He did not put on a face. He knew what he was to these men: the noodle-shop son, the one whose father had been cut, the one who had stood behind a counter for five years while they made their rounds. He knew the man they worked under, because the man they worked under ate at Li Kee on Tuesdays and always paid.

"Jau (走)," Yiming said. "Go."

The big one looked at him the way you look at a price that has changed since you last bought it.

"Your interest is illegal," Yiming said, in the flat voice he kept for suppliers. "The principal is one thing. The rest is a number you made up in a room. If he takes his receipts to the paichusuo, and he has kept his receipts, it is the number you made up that gets you in trouble, not him. I know you know that. I know you know I know it."

He did not raise his voice. He did not mention the pole. He stood in the alley light with his arms loose, and the market watched from the dark, the way markets do, and the young one's phone was already pointing at all of it.

The big man laughed once, to save his face, and then did the math of the alley — the noodle-shop son, the market in the dark, the phone in the young one's hand — and did not like the math. He named a smaller number. The old man,

crying now, counted out what he had in his tin. Yiming watched the notes change hands and did not stop it, because stopping the last number would have cost the old man more than the money.

Then the two collectors went up the alley, and the young one went with them, and the phone stayed up a beat longer than the rest of him, turned on Yiming's face.

The old man stood in his stall afterward and would not look at him. When Yiming came back the next day with a box of noodles and set it on the trestle, the old man put up one hand and said he did not know him, he had never seen him before, he did not want to know him.

"Leave the noodles," the old man said. "Don't leave the name."

The clip went up the next night. The young collector had caught maybe forty seconds of it: the noodle-shop son in the alley, the old man with the cane, the flat voice, the moment the big man did the math and lost. His caption was the thing the whole city would go on to repeat.

Zhong Kui Gor needs no mask. (钟馗哥没有面具。)

Yiming saw it first at the gei pou, on a screen in the back room, with Ying's shoulder against his and the machines breathing around them. A thousand likes, then ten thousand, then a number that meant nothing to him. The comments asked who the boy was. Somebody in the comments named the shop. Somebody else said no, that cannot be right, Li Kee's kid is a cook. Somebody else said the face on the door god did not need paper.

By the end of the week the print shops along the market street had the design. A Zhong Kui with no face — a blank oval where the scowl should have been, the sword and the boot still there, the little bat still in the corner — printed on door paper and sold three for ten. Somebody put it on a phone case. Somebody put it on a shirt. It was not his, the design. He had never drawn anything in his life. But the street had decided that the god no longer needed a face, and the street, as always, was faster than he was.

The faceless design did something the masked one had never done: it let everyone be him. A stallholder on the night market put it on his cooler. A taxi driver in the district put a smaller version on his mirror. A woman who sold joss paper cut the blank oval out of the paper and pasted it over the door of a shop

that had been robbed, and told the aunties that the god did not need eyes to see. Yiming watched his own absence spread across the district and the market had taken the one thing he had and turned it into the one thing everyone could have. It was a kind of mercy and a kind of erasure at once.

The customers started coming to Li Kee to look at him. Not many, and not rude, but they came, and they sat, and they ate, and they looked. A boy on Market Street, maybe ten, stopped in front of him one morning and pointed and said the name out loud, "Zhong Kui Gor," like a password he had learned, and his mother pulled him on by the hand. At the print shop the old owner asked Yiming, with real courtesy, whether the shop could use the design on the menu board, and Yiming said no, and the owner used it anyway, because nobody owned it. His mother took the extra money and wrote it in the ledger and gave the lookers extra wonton, which was her way of saying something she could not say. His father sat in the back and counted the change with one hand and said nothing.

It was the same week, or the week after, that Ah Kin came and sat at Li Kee's counter with the ad on his phone.

Ah Kin was nineteen and worked at the electronics stall in the arcade, and he had been eating at Li Kee since he was a kid — Yiming could remember him at eight, at the counter, his legs too short for the stool, ordering a bowl of noodles he could not finish. His mother had been sick two years with the liver, and the medicine was the kind that emptied a household. He had an older sister who had married out and did not send much. He put the phone flat on the counter and turned it toward Yiming, and Yiming read it while the congee steamed.

THAILAND. DELIVERY WORK. 8,000 A MONTH. NO EXPERIENCE NEEDED. VISA HANDLED.

"They pay the flight," Ah Kin said. "They pay the room. Eight thousand, and it's delivery — it's like what you do, only bigger. Two months and the medicine is paid for. Two months and my mother can stop counting."

Yiming looked at the ad, and then at the boy's face, and did not have the words. He was a cook. He had a body, and a ledger, and a street. He did not have the words for a thing like that, and he did not have the money to make the words unnecessary.

"Just the passport photo," Ah Kin said. "Today."

Yiming filled a bowl without being asked and set it down in front of him and pushed the chilli oil across. Behind Ah Kin, through the shop window, the print shop had hung a new door print in the glass, and the god in it had no face at all.

Chapter 5

Lights Out (熄灯) was the name she had given herself at fourteen, before she understood that a name is a thing other people decide to hold you to.

The gei pou at two in the morning was a room of sleeping machines and four awake people. Forty screens in two rows, most of them dark, a few still glowing on somebody's night — a spawn point, a stream, a chat that would not end. The air-con could not decide what it was. The side door let in the alley, which smelled of solder and fryer oil and the cold smoke the towers gave off, and let out the day's heat.

At the back console she watched the small city of router lights and did the thing she did at two in the morning, which was nothing, and got paid for it.

Her family's business had installed the cameras on this half of the block — her father and her two uncles, a ladder, a van, twenty years of coax and junction boxes and the passwords nobody ever changed. Which meant that when the shops wanted their footage, they called her father, and her father called her, because she was the one who understood the software and because the aunties trusted a girl more than they trusted a man with a ladder. She had admin on eleven systems in four streets. She could look at the market gate, the arcade mouth, the covered walkway by the fruit shop, the bridge. She knew which ones recorded and which ones only pretended. She knew the market-gate camera had been dead since the storm of 2022, and she knew that on the night of the fifth of June the footbridge fisheye had caught a paper face lying in the rain. The fisheye looked down the bridge and the bank; the fight had happened past it, out of the frame, which was the only luck the night had given anyone. No one but her had seen the face, because by morning the file on that DVR showed last week's weather and nothing else.

She had not deleted it. Deleting left a hole, and a hole is a thing that asks to be filled. She had copied the hour, saved it where no one looked, overwritten the original with the rain from a week before, and then wiped the copy twice. She did

it the way her father had taught her to terminate a cable: cut it clean, and leave no copper showing.

The gei pou itself ran on a license, and the license ran on real names. Every machine, every login, every hour: a name and an ID number. That was the law. It had been the law since she was a child, and the law had done what laws do, which is to create a market.

So there was the other thing she did at two in the morning, which was the thing the neighborhood did not talk about, and came to her for anyway.

There was always someone. A boy who wanted to be online without his parents seeing the login text. A man in a good jacket who needed a phone number that did not have his name under it. Ying did not ask why. She had learned not to ask why the way other people learned to swim: early, badly, and then well. She had a small box of things that were not hers — old SIMs, dead phones, registration forms filled in with names that were real and belonged to people who did not know they had lent them. In a country where everything is a name, she traded in the gaps between names.

She had a client that week, a man in a good jacket who needed a phone number that did not have his name under it. He came at the dead hour and sat where the clients sat, in the chair by the door, and paid in cash and did not explain, and Ying gave him one of the quiet registrations and told him the rules, and he listened the way they all listened, and then he asked her the question they sometimes asked, which was whether the number would ever come back to him. She said no. It was a lie, and she knew it was a lie, because every name in the box could come back; that was the whole risk of the box, and the whole reason the price was what it was. But a client who believes a thing cannot come back is a client who does not panic, and a client who does not panic keeps the door quiet, and the door was the only thing she had ever protected.

She had started at fourteen, doing homework for money. At fifteen it was forms; at sixteen it was records. The first job had been a favor for a girl who needed one grade changed so her mother would let her breathe. The second job had a price. By the end of that month the work had a reputation and the reputation had a waiting list, and she had learned the school systems the way her father had taught her to learn a building: find the panel, find the password, find

the one door the installer left open because locking it properly was more work than he was paid for. She had not thought of the person on the other side of the edit until the day she did, and by then the edit was already running.

That night the client was a girl from the vocational school — seventeen, maybe — who wanted to be online without her father's phone buzzing with the login text every time she signed in. Ying took her money and handed over one of the registrations and said the rules the way she said them to everyone: change the password inside the hour, never use it for money, and never come back to the same door twice. The girl nodded too fast, the way they all nodded, and sat down at machine eleven, and Ying did not watch her, because watching was a thing that made people tell you their business.

There had been a rider in earlier, a man whose own registration was dead under the platform blacklist after too many red lights, and he had needed a name that could still log on and take an order, and Ying had rented him one of the quiet ones from the box — an old man's registration from a housing block three streets over, a man who had never once ordered a delivery and never would. The rider had looked at the borrowed name on the screen for a long moment, the way they all did, as if the name might look back.

Her rules were three. Never a bank, never a carrier, never anything that could be walked back to a person's actual life. Never more than one thread to the same hole. And never, for any reason, anything to do with Yiming.

That last one had been made the night a knife opened his arm, but it had been true before that. She had been careful about him since she was sixteen, since the thing she did not talk about, since the composite score she had edited in a school records system because a boy had paid her and because she was good at it and because she had not yet learned that the person on the other end of an edit is a person. The edit had moved that boy up and moved Li Yiming down out of the top three of the honor board, and Yiming had found out, and he had walked her to the end of the market street and asked her, once, whether it was true. She had told him the whole of it, the way she always did when someone looked at her and asked, because the one thing she could not do was lie to a face. He had not turned her in. He had not spoken to her for a month, and then he had spoken to

her, and then he had let her eat at the shop, and that was the whole of the debt between them, and it had been running for seven years.

She did not touch his records. She did not touch the shop's records. She kept his mother's ledger out of her box and his father's name out of her box and his own name, which was in a hundred systems the way every name was, she left exactly where it slept.

The phone on the desk lit. Five hours behind, the bird on the display.

She answered it the way she answered it, low and flat, with the thing that passed between them for hello.

Zoya talked about the day she had had: a build that would not pass, a manager who did not understand, the price of eggs in a city Ying had never seen. Ying talked about nothing, which was the point. Five hours behind meant that when Ying's night was at its worst, Zoya's evening was just beginning, and Zoya filled it the way you fill a room for someone who does not want to be alone in it. Zoya had come to Guangzhou once a year for three years, on the tourist visa, and each time the aunties had called her the foreign girl and eaten at the shop twice and slept for a day and a half, and then sat in the back room with a laptop and refused to touch one thing that lived on a server in this country. Ying had once watched her build an entire system out of a phone and a borrowed keyboard and the cafe's guest network, and had asked her whether she was afraid, and Zoya had said: I am not afraid of the police. I am afraid of being the reason your name is on a list.

The tourist visa was in for the autumn. Ying counted the money for it in her head the way she counted everything.

At 2:40 the side door opened, and Ah Kin came in out of the alley.

He was nineteen and worked the electronics stall in the arcade, and he had been coming to the gei pou since he was a kid, and she liked him in the way she liked the regulars who never caused her any work. He had a folder under his arm and the too-bright face of a person doing something they cannot yet tell anyone about.

"I need a photo printed," he said. "Passport size. For the visa."

She took the folder. Inside was the photo the booth had taken of him that afternoon, still in its paper wallet, and a stack of forms, and a photocopy of his

ID, and the thin receipt for an appointment at an agency with a name she knew, because it was printed on the top of the form in red.

Tak Ming International Manpower (德明国际人力).

She had seen the name before. The ad went around Douyin every few weeks, the same one every time: high pay, no experience, visa handled, Southeast Asia, and a phone number with a woman's voice on it. She had seen it because half the boys in the arcade had seen it.

She fed the photo into the printer and waited.

"Delivery work," Ah Kin said. "Thailand. Eight thousand a month. They pay the flight."

"Mm," she said.

"My mother's medicine," he said, and did not finish, because he did not have to. Everybody in the arcade knew about the medicine.

The printer coughed and fed the page out, and she picked it up by the corner and held it under the light. His face looked back at her, bright and flat under the laminate, the mouth a little open, the way everybody's mouth was in these photographs, the way a face looks when a man has told you not to smile and you are trying to obey and be happy at the same time.

She looked at it for a moment longer than she needed to.

After he had gone she sat with the photo on the counter for a while. A passport photo is a strange thing to make of a person: a face flattened and small, meant to be carried by someone else's system, a face that will appear on a form, on a scanner, in a file, and almost never again in a room. She had printed hundreds of them. She had never before printed one and thought about where it would go.

Then she put it in a plastic sleeve and slid it across the counter, and told him how much, and took his money, and watched him go back out the side door into the alley, where the morning was already thinking about beginning.

She did not stop him. She had a box of other people's names and three rules, and none of the rules said anything about this. She was twenty-three. She had learned early, badly, and then well.

On the desk the map was still up, the dead gate, the dark arcade, the bridge. She looked at the bridge for a while. The bridge, as always at that hour, was empty.

Chapter 6

The rhythm set itself without being asked.

Shop by day; patrol by night; the gei pou as the place between. He told himself it was temporary, the way he told himself the rain was temporary. It was not temporary. By the end of the first month he woke without an alarm, and by the end of the second he did not remember what he had done with his evenings before.

Mornings belonged to the pole and the dough. Every third or fourth dawn, when the shop could spare him for an hour, he walked to the park by the canal before the light, where the old men gathered to move their bodies in the wet dark. Uncle Leung (梁师傅) taught there.

He was seventy and shaped like a question mark and taught the staff form to anyone who came, which was nobody but Yiming. He did not charge. He said the form was a thing you carried, not a thing you learned, and then he carried it, slow, through the air, and made Yiming carry it after him, and corrected him with the end of a stick the way a calligrapher corrects a stroke. The staff he used was an old wooden one, worn pale. Yiming brought the bamboo, and Uncle Leung looked at it and did not approve and did not forbid it.

"The bamboo is a delivery tool," he said. "A delivery tool can be a weapon. That is not the same as a staff."

"It is what I have."

"Then use what you have," Uncle Leung said, "and do not call it something it is not."

The park was full of things that would not be there much longer. The old men had been meeting there since before the canal was walled. On the fence at the edge of the exercise ground, among the flapping notices for dance classes and lost dogs, there was a new one, printed on better paper than the rest: a demolition notice, a map with a red line around the whole block, and a date. The park crew read it every morning, and one of them would take a photograph of it

with his phone, as if the date might change, and the date never changed. Then they put their hands out into the air and made the form, the way you keep doing a thing after the notice has already decided the matter.

That was the park. The nights were the streets.

The park crew had a life Yiming had never noticed before that year, because before that year he had been asleep at the hour they lived. They did not only do the form. They played chess on a board made of a square of cardboard and bottle caps. They argued about the demolition with the certainty of men who had argued about everything for forty years and had never once changed each other's minds. They fed the cats that lived under the exercise ground, and the cats had names, and the old men could tell them apart. Yiming stood at the edge of all of it with the pole. He had come into the middle of a whole world that had been running without him. It would run on after the fence went up, because a world like that does not live in a park; it lives in the men.

He learned the streets the way he had learned the cameras: by walking them until they were inside his legs. The night market at eleven, when the grills came on and the smell went up the block. The wet market at four, when the fish came in and the floor was hosed. The bridge at one, when the last riders went over and the first cleaners came. The arcade. The gei pou side door when it had to be the gei pou side door.

At four one morning at the wet market he found a boy of six sitting on an upturned crate beside the fish stalls, crying without any sound, and no adult within a hundred meters who would claim him. Yiming did not pick the boy up — you did not pick up a child in this city, not if you were a young man alone, not if you did not want a different kind of story told about you — so he crouched down to the boy's level and talked to him about the fish until the boy stopped crying, and then walked him, at the boy's own slow pace, to the market office, and stood outside the door until the loudspeaker found the mother. The mother came at a run and did not thank him, because she was crying, and Yiming went back to the shop and did not think about it again. That was what the nights were mostly made of. The kind of thing nobody filmed, because it was nothing, because it was four in the morning.

He did not look for trouble. That was the rule he made for himself, and it held, mostly, because trouble in that neighborhood did not need looking for. Trouble came up the street on its own feet and argued about money in front of your shop.

He also made a smaller rule, and kept it for three weeks, and then broke it: he did not walk the canal road. He went the long way round, by the fish stalls and the sauce shop, and told himself it was quicker, which it was not. For three weeks he did not see the end of the blue hoarding at night. Then one night in the rain he walked it anyway, the whole length, past the steel post and the unfinished floor and the low black water, and stood in the place where he had stood, and found that the concrete remembered nothing at all, which is the nature of concrete, and of most places, and of most cities, and is the only mercy they offer.

The proper video came in the third week of the month, at the night market, near the grill smoke.

Four men had one man down on the ground between the tables — a young man from the motorcycle repair place, and a debt, and the debt had a number that had grown legs. The four were not professionals. They were the kind of men who do a thing because there are four of them, and when there are four of you a thing is easy, and when a thing is easy you keep doing it past the point. One of them had a stool. One of them had a bottle. The young man on the ground had stopped covering his head, which is a bad sign in a person.

Yiming walked into it without the mask, because the mask was a paper face lying somewhere in the city and this had started before he got there.

He did not have a plan. He had a bamboo pole and the habit of a body that had been taught, lately, to move. He put the pole under the stool as it came down and let the stool break its own weight against it. He took the bottle on the forearm — the same forearm, the bad one, which went suddenly loud — and he gave the pole's end to the man's knee, once, and the four became three, and the three became a question, and then it was over the way street things are over, faster than the telling. He got one of them down and held him with a knee on the wrist, and the young man got up bleeding and sat on the ground and cried, and somebody in the crowd was already filming, and the grilled smoke went on going up the block as if nothing under the sun had changed.

He walked home with two cracked ribs and a piece of a bottle in his arm, and by morning the clip was at two hundred thousand, and by the next morning it was at a number that had no meaning, and the aunties had begun to say the name the way they said the names of the gods on the door.

At the gei pou, Ying pulled the glass out of his forearm with a pair of tweezers and did not say the thing she wanted to say, and taped him up, and told him the ribs would hurt for six weeks and that he should stop sleeping on his side. She said it all in the flat voice, and then she put a bowl of instant noodles in front of him, which was the part that meant something. At the shop, his mother looked at the tape on his arm and the way he held his ribs and set a second cushion on his chair, and never asked. The accounts balanced. The nights went on.

Two days later the young man from the motorcycle repair place came to Li Kee and stood at the counter and would not order. He had a bandage across his eyebrow and one arm in a sling, and he said, without looking up, that he did not know how to say a thing like this, so he would say it badly. His mother wanted the man who had helped him to eat at their table. But if the man came to their table, then the four men would know whose table it was, and then it would be the four men at the table, and not the man. So the young man put a red envelope on the counter and would not take it back, and Yiming put the envelope in the till and did not open it for a week. When he opened it there were three hundred yuan inside, which was a great deal of money to that family, and he put the money in the ledger in the column where his mother wrote the wonton.

He practiced in the back yard when the dough was resting, under the single bulb, and the young bamboo learned the shape of his hands. It caught the light the way the old pole never had. It did not remember the man who had taught his father, and it did not remember the night at the canal, and he told himself this was better. He was not entirely sure it was better.

He did not name himself. That was the one thing he never did. He stood behind the counter and did not look up when people came in to look at him, and the shop's business was impossible to read in the ledger, because his mother wrote the extra money in the same column as the wonton.

That week the bats appeared.

He did not decide to draw a bat. He wanted a mark, something small, something he could put on the box so that he would know his own box among the identical boxes of every rider in the district; and the bat was the shape that kept coming back, because the bat was in the corner of the god-print, the little unexplained bat, and because a bat is a thing that hunts in the dark without a face. He chalked one on the lid of the insulated box. Then, a few nights later, for no reason he could have defended, he chalked four more beside it.

Uncle Leung saw them in the park the next dawn, the box parked on the bench while Yiming did the form.

"Ng fuk (五福)," the old man said.

"What."

"The five bats. The five blessings." He looked at Yiming the way he looked at a stance that was almost right. "You have been drawing a thing you did not know the name of. That is how most people carry tradition. It is not a criticism. It is a description."

Yiming looked at the five chalk bats on the lid of the box, the box he had bought with the shop's money to carry other people's dinners across the district at eleven o'clock at night.

"Five blessings," he said.

"Health, wealth, long life, virtue, and a good death," Uncle Leung said, and went back to the form.

Yiming did not correct the number on the box. He left the five bats where they were, and he carried the box through the market that night with the bats facing outward, which he told himself was because the box had to face some way.

The demolition notice on the park fence had a date on it, and the date was not far. The wind had already begun to lift one corner of the paper, and it lifted and fell, lifted and fell, and the old men did the form around it, and nobody said the date out loud, which is how a thing that everyone knows becomes a thing that no one says.

CHAPTER 7

Chapter 7

The file on Chen Mou was four pages, which was two pages more than Lam thought the man's life deserved, and he read it in the morning before the city got loud.

He had a desk in a room with eleven other desks and a window that looked at the wall of the building next door, and a drawer that was his, which did not open to anyone else's key. The drawer held the 2019 case, in a folder gone soft at the corners from being opened. Li Guoqiang, shopkeeper, Li Kee, Market Street, stabbed in the shoulder on the night of 6 June 2019 — the eve of the Gaokao and of Duanwu — assailant Chen Mou, nineteen; verdict hu'ou, mutual brawl; three years; released 2022. Lam had worked it. He had signed it. He had believed it, more or less, which is the most a man can honestly say about a file that other men built with their own hands.

He had not forgotten the son. The son had been eighteen that night, and had sat in the hospital corridor with a pencil case under his chair, and had answered every question in the flattest voice Lam had heard from a boy that age. That was not evidence of anything. Lam had not forgotten it anyway. Months after the sentencing, he had gone to the shop to ask whether the family had anything to add to the file now that the man was out, and the mother had offered him tea and the son had stood behind the counter with his hands in the dough and answered nothing at all, and Lam had drunk the tea and left and had not gone back, because he had not seen a reason to, and because a man does not go back to a shop where the son will not speak to him unless the shop has become a case.

Now there was a second body, and it was the same patch of street, and the same family, and the city was telling itself a story about a god.

He kept two files now. The first was the Chen Mou homicide, thin, ordinary, going the way these things went when there was no camera and no witness to the act itself. The second he kept at the back of the drawer and did not log. He had begun it with a map.

He had walked the market street with a notebook and marked every camera and what it saw and when. The market gate, dead since the summer of 2022, the cable still hanging. The arcade, dark, unlit after 11:30. The footbridge fisheye, alive, owned by a landlord who had lost the password in 2021 and never reset it. Eleven other systems on the block, all of them her father's installs, or her father's brother's, and every one of them pointed at the thing next to the thing that mattered. A city with a million eyes that could not see the one street where a man had died: either a coincidence, or a map. Lam did not believe in maps that drew themselves.

At the top of the page he had written, in his square hand: WHOEVER DID THIS KNOWS WHERE THE BLIND SPOTS ARE. Under it: AND KNOWS THE STREET AHEAD OF US.

He was still looking at the page when Sergeant Wan came in from the paichusuo (派出所) at the end of the block.

Wan was in his forties and dressed too well for his rank and came through the room the way a man comes through a room he believes he owns. He asked Lam, in the voice of a man doing a favor, how the Chen Mou thing was going. Lam said it was going. Wan said the neighborhood was excited about something else — a man with a pole, a god on a door — and laughed, and said the market had always liked a story, and then he said the thing he had come to say, which was that the district was sensitive about vigilantes this year, and that if the story got bigger it would get embarrassing, and that it would be better, for everyone, if the story stayed a story. He said it lightly. He said it the way a man says a thing he has already been paid to say, which is a tone Lam had learned to hear the way a doctor learns to hear a cough.

Lam thanked him for the advice. Wan stood a moment longer, looking at the desk, and at the drawer, and at nothing, and then went away down the room the way he had come, greeting two officers by name, doing the rounds of a place that was not his.

When Wan had gone, Lam opened the drawer, and put the map inside the folder, and turned the key.

His daughter sat the Gaokao in June of next year. She was eighteen and had her mother's temper and his own ability to hold a grudge, and the mock-exam

rank slip was on the fridge door under a magnet shaped like a cat, above the takeout menu for a place they never ordered from. Her rank had gone up forty places in the last round, and she had not mentioned it, and neither had he, because mentioning it was a kind of pressure and the house had an unspoken rule about pressure. On the weekends she studied at the table with her headphones on, and her mother brought her soup, and Lam sat in the other room with a file and heard the pen scratch, and the two of them, father and daughter, worked in adjacent rooms at two different examinations on which two different lives depended, and neither of them said so. He was the only person in the district who had spent the whole morning with a homicide file and would spend the evening worrying about his daughter's chemistry. He thought about that sometimes, and did not know whether it made him a good man or just a man with two kinds of worry and the same face for both.

He went back to the market on foot.

He did not tell his wife the shape of the file, and she did not ask. After twenty years, the two of them had settled into the arrangement that keeps a police marriage alive, which is that one of them does not ask and the other does not lie, and the not-asking is not neglect; it is the space the work is allowed to take up, and the work takes up exactly that much and no more, and if it ever took up more they both knew the marriage would have to be renegotiated, and neither of them wanted to negotiate. So Lam kept the drawer at the office and the family at home, and the boundary held, and the only person who crossed it was the daughter, who had inherited his own habit of looking at a thing until it made sense, and who could tell from the way he held his chopsticks whether the day had been good.

Mrs. Ho gave him her account again, the way she had given it the first time — it was a good account, and it had not changed, and accounts that do not change are either true or rehearsed, and Mrs. Ho was a vegetable seller who did not have the imagination for rehearsal. She had been twenty-two years at that stall and had seen two fires, one drowning, and a wedding procession go down the street in the rain, and she was not a woman who exaggerated. She told him about the crate, and the drain, and the man under it, and the moment before she made the sound, and when she reached the part where she lifted the crate she always

stopped and looked at something else for a moment and then went on, and Lam counted the pause each time, and the pause was always the same length, and a pause that is always the same length is not an act. She told him again at six fourteen, in the morning, because she had looked at the clock over her stall the way she looked at it every morning to time the delivery of the greens.

Mrs. Cheung he found at her stall, back at work, wearing both sandals.

She was fifty-four and had the dried-goods trade and a straight back, and she had been back at the stall the day after, because a stall does not close for what happens to a man who tried to rob it. She told him the story once more in the same words, because she had decided the words, and the words were not going to move. A man came up behind her. A man took her bag. A man came out of the dark and stopped him, and wore a face, and the face was a door god's. She had not gone to the temple about it. She was not superstitious, she said. But she had been given her life back by something with a face, and she was not going to stand in front of a policeman and pretend she had not.

Lam asked her whether she had seen the face clearly.

She put her palm flat on the statement, the way she had put it flat on the counter at the market the first time, and did not take it back.

"Clear as my own," she said. "A man with the face of a door god."

He walked the canal at the end of the day, to the place where the hoarding ended. The project had been stopped since 2021, the concrete stained where the rain ran off the unfinished floor, the steel post still standing at the end of the blue wall. He stood there a while and looked at the ground, and at the flat-cart track in the mud, and the darker patch where something had lain and then had not.

He had looked for the mask for four days. It was not here, and nobody had reported it, and a thing like that was not lost; a thing like that was kept.

The post-mortem said what the scene said: blunt force to the head and the face, more than the fall could account for, and an injury to the neck inflicted while the man was already down, or nearly, and no way afterward to say which. The pathologist — a woman Lam had worked with for ten years — had written it in the language of her trade, which is a language built to carry no opinion at all, and had then, off the record, over the tea she always made him drink, said the thing the report could not. Whoever did it had kept going past the moment

when it was necessary, she said. And then had stopped. And the stopping was the part she could not explain, because the ones who keep going do not, as a rule, stop on their own.

By the end of the second week the case was where these cases go. No prints worth a report on the crate. No fibers. No camera. No witness to the act itself. The only person who had seen the man with the pole was a woman of fifty-four who had been on the ground with a hand over her eyes and who had seen, by her own account, a face. The file would sit. Files like it sat for years and then went into the drawer with the other files, and the drawer was not a failure, exactly; the drawer was where the city put the things it had decided not to do.

He stopped at the joss-paper stall on the way back and bought a door print for his own front door, which was not a thing he did. Ah Po sold it to him for four yuan and did not ask his business. He stood at the counter with the paper in his hands and looked at the face on it — the brows, the sword, the boot, the small bat in the corner — and understood, standing there in the smell of the paper, that the face the witness had seen had been made of exactly this, and that it had been made by exactly this old woman, and that the old woman was not going to tell him anything.

He put the print in the folder, next to the map, and turned the key.

Mrs. Cheung's palm stayed flat on the statement in his memory all the way back to the office, and it was still there when he sat down, and it stayed there while he typed the four lines that would go into the log, and it stayed after he closed the drawer. He had just written the first page of the thing's birth certificate, and the thing itself was somewhere in this city, drying.

Chapter 8

The city crowned him in July, in the wet heat, the way a city does a thing like that — not with a ceremony but with a hundred small hands.

It started in the night market, where a woman sold fried noodles from a cart and had begun to tie a strip of red paper to the cart's frame, the way you tie it to a shrine. Then a stall put up his picture, which was not his picture but the faceless print, taped to the pole above the cash box. Then the fruit seller put an orange in front of it, and then someone put a cup of tea, and then someone put a little paper umbrella, and by the end of the week the corner of the market where the fight had happened had become a place where people put things down and did not take them away.

The fruit seller who had put the orange was named Mrs. Pang, and she had put it there because her own son had once been beaten in that same corner and nobody had come, and she did not know who the man with the pole was and did not want to know. She wanted a place to put the orange. That was all, and it was enough, and by the end of the week there were nine oranges and three cups of tea and a small enamel bowl that somebody had left with water in it, and a paper umbrella, and a pair of chopsticks standing upright in a cup of rice, and nobody had the heart to tell the last person that you do not stand chopsticks upright for the living.

The news found it last, which is the order things happened in now. A station ran forty seconds, with the clip and the caption and a presenter's careful voice. A Douyin account with a million followers made a list of "the ten kindest people in Guangzhou," and put a faceless door god at number three. In the comments, people argued about whether the market god was real, and whether he was one man, and whether he was a gang, and whether he was a cop, and the argument itself was the point, because an argument keeps a story in the air.

He did not name himself. He never named himself. He stood behind the counter and sliced the char siu and pulled the noodles and said what he always

said, and the city filled the silence on its own. The city was very good at that. The city had been filling silences for two thousand years.

Years later, when people asked where the face had come from, the market would tell a story about a shrine and an old woman and a god who chose a boy because the boy had the body for it. None of it was true. The truth was that a young man had walked into a joss-paper shop in the fifth month with eighty yuan and a lie about a shrine, and an old woman with failing eyes had sold him a mask she had made for the festival, and neither of them had known what it was for. That was how most of the gods in that market had begun: a thing made for one reason, used for another, and explained afterward by people who had not been in the room.

On the doorway of the shop, his mother had pasted the year's door print, the ordinary one, the same four-yuan paper as always, and she did not put up the faceless design, not once, not ever, and when a customer asked her why, she said that the shop had always used the same one, and did not say anything else, and went back to the counter.

The print shops did the rest.

The first design was the bat. The five-bat Zhong Kui, the old five blessings, the same paper face that hung at every door in the fifth month, and now the print shops printed it bigger, cleaner, brighter, for walls instead of doors. Then came the other design, the one the street had made from that first clip: the Zhong Kui with no face at all, the blank oval where the scowl had been, the sword and the boot and the little bat still there, and under it, in some versions, four characters, and in other versions nothing, because the printers had learned that a god sells better when the god is quiet.

There was a rack of them outside the stationery shop, and Yiming walked past it every morning, and every morning there were more.

He learned the shape of being known, and did not enjoy it. People wanted photographs, and he learned to stand for them the way you stand for a family picture, without moving his face. The aunties brought him things — a pear, a sweet soup, a red string for his wrist. A woman came up to the counter with her son and told the boy to say thank you, and the boy said thank you, and Yiming did not know what the boy was thanking him for and could not ask.

Ying showed him the numbers one night, because she was the only person who would. The clip had been copied and recopied until nobody could say where it began. The name had been searched more in one week than the shop's name had been searched in its whole life. People were asking, in the comments, where the shop was, and some of them were asking in earnest and some of them were asking to see who would answer. There was no footage that could prove his face was the face. That was the only thing keeping the myth and the man apart.

"You are the most famous person in four districts," she said, in the flat voice, "and the only reason you are still making noodles is that nobody can prove it. That will not last. It never lasts." He asked how long. She looked at the screen and did not answer, which was the answer.

A man he had never met asked him to come to a wedding, to stand at the door, just to stand at the door, and Yiming said no, and the man was hurt, and Yiming understood that the city had begun to own him, and that ownership is a thing that arrives with both hands open. The customers had begun to come to the shop just to look, and a few of them left money under the bowl that was not the price of the noodles, and his mother put that money in a separate envelope and did not spend it and never explained why.

One night a man came to the shop with a proposition. He was well dressed and polite and had the manner of a man who had never once been told no, and he said there were people in the district who would pay for the protection of a name like the one the noodle shop had made, that a name was a business and could be a very good one, and that the shop could be a much bigger shop. Yiming filled a bowl and set it in front of him and did not answer. The man ate the bowl, left his card on the counter, and said he would come back. Yiming put the card in the stove, and the man came back twice more, and each time Yiming filled a bowl and did not answer, and each time the man ate it, and left, and Yiming never learned whether the man was a gangster or a district officer or both, and never asked.

His mother put the pear in a bowl and the red string in a drawer and the sweet soup on the table and did not say anything, because she had stopped saying things five years ago, and the not-saying had its own long grammar, which he had learned to read.

His father, in the back, counted the change with one hand and did not look at the news.

Then, one morning, near the end of the month, he saw the mask again.

It was in the market, on a child, in the fourth row where the toy sellers set up next to the dried fish. The mask was broken at the jaw, and the child had it on, and the child was wearing it the way children wear the face of a god — swinging it, roaring at a smaller child, being a monster for an afternoon. It was his mask. He knew it by the break at the jaw, and by the particular wrongness of the mouth, and by the fact that Ah Po had made perhaps four of them in twenty years and this was one. Somebody had found it on the canal bank before dawn, and sold it, or given it to a child, or left it where a child could reach, and now it was a toy, and by the end of the week it would be lost, and by the end of the year it would be in the river or in a bin or under a bed, and the city would have the legend without the object, which is the way legends prefer it.

Yiming stood at the edge of the row and watched the child be a monster. He did not take the mask back. He did not know how to explain, to a child or to a market, why he wanted it, and a man who explains too much is a man with something to explain. He thought about it for a long time afterward — the child roaring under it, the break at the jaw, the fact that the city had found the thing and turned it into a toy before it had ever learned what the thing was for. He did not want it back, exactly. He wanted to know where it was, the way you want to know where a lost thing has gone, even when you already suspect the answer is a bin, or a river, or under a bed.

That week he began to carry the old door print in his pocket — the plain one from Ah Po's, the four-yuan kind, folded small. He told himself it was so that he would have something to paste if a door needed it. He looked at it sometimes in the back yard, the scowl, the boot, the little bat that nobody could explain. The paper went soft from handling inside a week. He told himself it was a bookmark. It was not a bookmark.

Uncle Leung was at the park gate when Yiming went by that dawn.

The old man was not doing the form. He was standing with his stick and watching the market come awake, and when Yiming came close he said, without preamble, the thing he had been holding.

"Your father taught you the shop," he said. "The shop is a good life. I taught you the form, and the form was a good thing for you, because a young man needs a thing for his body that is not only work." He looked at the box on the back of the bike, at the five chalk bats. "But you have taken the form into the street, and the street is not a park, and the mark you carry is not a mark you made."

"It is only a picture on a lid," Yiming said.

"No," Uncle Leung said. "It is a picture on a lid that makes other people do things. That is the difficulty." He looked at the box a while. "When you carry a face, the people who cannot see yours start deciding for you. Some of them put an orange under it. Some of them put a knife in it." He tapped the ground once with the stick. "Keep your own name in your own mouth, and let the paper do what paper does. That is all I have. The form was for your body. You have given it to the street."

Yiming did not answer, because he did not have an answer, and because the old man had not asked a question.

He rode the bike up the market street with the five bats on the lid, past the newsstand and the stationery shop and the rack of door prints, and the rack was fullest in the morning, when the trucks dropped the new stock, and the new stock was all his face and none of it was his face. Five bats. No face. The city's whole story about the summer.

At the park gate, Uncle Leung watched him go, and then turned back to the form, and put his hands out into the air, slowly, the way a man keeps doing a thing after the notice has already decided the matter.

CHAPTER 9

Chapter 9

Ying found the first thread on a Tuesday, at three in the morning, with the whole café asleep around her.

She had not been looking for it. She was doing the books, because the licenses came due in the autumn and the licenses were the reason the café could exist, and while the numbers ran she had the ad open on the second screen, the way she kept it open sometimes to remind herself what the neighborhood was being sold. The ad looked the same as it always looked: a boy or a girl smiling on an airport escalator, a hotel pool, a stack of banknotes fanned like a hand of cards. High pay. No experience. Visa handled. Southeast Asia.

And below it, in a column, the terms. She read the terms because she read everything, and because a person who rents out other people's names develops a professional interest in paperwork.

The medical check. The training fee. The deposit.

She sat back.

She read the comments under the ad because she read everything. They were not the comments of victims; they were the comments of people who wanted the thing to be true. A boy asked whether the company provided the flight. A woman asked whether a person could bring a relative. A man wrote that he had done the same job last year and had come back with money, and his account had been created the same morning, and his photograph was a stock image of a European city, and Ying read it. The comments were not a community. They were a harvest, and the harvest was tended.

She had, in her box, the paper trail of perhaps sixty borrowed names. She knew what a form looked like when it was real and what it looked like when it had been made to satisfy a clerk who would not check. She knew the fonts. She knew the way a fake stamp sat on a page — a little too heavy, a little too centered, the ink a little too even. She had made some of them herself, at sixteen, for a price a sixteen-year-old would keep.

The medical-check form in the Tak Ming ad had a stamp that sat exactly like that.

She did not feel the thing you are supposed to feel. She felt the thing she felt when she found a loose cable under a server rack: not fear, not anger, but the clean cold click of a problem becoming a problem with a shape. A problem with no shape you could survive; a problem with a shape you could work. She had been working problems with shapes since she was fourteen, and the working of them was the only thing she had ever been sure she was good at.

She had started at fourteen, doing homework for money. At fifteen it was forms; at sixteen it was records. The service had begun as a favor for a girl who needed one grade changed so that her mother would let her breathe, and it had become a business inside a month, because in a city of any size there is no shortage of people who need one number to be different from another number. When the business outgrew the schools it became names: a login for a girl whose father watched the phone; a registration for a rider whose own name was dead on the platform; a phone number that did not have a person's real name under it. Real-name systems do not make anonymity impossible. They make it expensive. And Ying, for seven years, had been the person in this district who sold it at a price people could pay.

She was aware, in the way you are aware of the weather, that some of the names she sold went into places she could not see. She had made a rule about it early, which was not to look. A person who looks at where a name goes has to stop selling names, and she had a café's license in her father's name and a box of machines and no other trade. So she did not look. She did not look for seven years, and the not-looking was the only part of the business she had ever been ashamed of, and she had learned to carry the shame the way you carry a coin in your pocket: always there, never spent.

Now the not-looking was over, because the thing had looked back.

She had learned the trade from her father without either of them calling it a trade. Her father installed cameras and set the passwords and never changed them, and he believed that a password was a kind of handshake between an installer and a customer, and that changing it afterward was rude. He had taught her to terminate a cable and to read a floor plan and to find the one panel that a

building's plans did not show, and he had never once asked what she did with the machines after he left the room. When she was sixteen and the school records business was at its height, he had come home one night and found her at the table with a printout of a login screen, and he had looked at it for a long moment and said, "Do not do banks," and gone to bed. That was the whole of the ethics of the household. Do not do banks. It was the only rule he ever gave her, and she had kept it, and she had spent the years since wondering what he would have said about all the other doors.

She thought about her father now, asleep upstairs with his shoulder and his worry, and about the license on the wall of the café, and about the fact that everything the family owned was a lease and a license and a box of secondhand machines. A café like hers did not survive a scandal. It did not even survive a news story. One line in a district newspaper, one post in a local group, one rumor that the gei pou sold IDs — and the license would not be renewed, and the lease would be lost, and her father, who had built the thing the year she was born, would be a man of sixty with no trade and a daughter to blame. She looked at the ad on the screen. She had already lost the trade either way: if she looked, she lost the café; if she did not look, she lost the boy. The only question was which loss she could carry.

She pulled the ad's registration number and put it against the registrar's public list, which was public because it had to be, and found the company behind the name, and the company behind that one, and the address, which was a room on the fourth floor of a commercial building above a hotpot place, and the address was in her father's install zone, which meant she could pull the building's camera feed if the building's camera had been installed by her family, and it had been.

She looked at the feed for eleven days.

Men came and went, one a day, sometimes two. Boys came, with folders, and left without them. A woman came on the second day in a good coat and stayed two hours. A van came on three of the days and left with four people in it, and the four people were young, and one of them had a phone out and was filming the street, and the phone was the way she could tell they did not know where they were going; a person who knows where they are going does not film the way

out. On the sixth day she pulled the clipboard from the man at the desk in the lobby, which he photographed every evening for his own protection, and the photographs lived on a cloud account with the same default password as five thousand other accounts, and she had the password from the list her father kept, because her father had installed the camera and set the account up and never changed a thing. She read the numbers on the clipboard and matched them to the ad's number and to a second number that had the look of a number that answered in the afternoon.

On the twelfth day, Ah Kin walked into the building with his folder under his arm, and came out forty minutes later without it.

She turned the screen off and sat in the dark for a while.

She had known the boy since he was small, the way she knew everyone in the arcade, and she had printed his photo in the spring and slid it across the counter in a plastic sleeve, and she had watched him go out of the side door into the alley, and she had not stopped him, because she had a box of other people's names and three rules and none of the rules said anything about this. That had been one of the worst nights of her life, and she had not known it at the time, and she knew it now. A photograph is a small thing. A photograph is the thing a system asks for first, and it is the thing you cannot take back, because a face on a form is a face that belongs to the form after that, and not to the person.

She did the thing she always did when a problem got a shape, which was to refuse to tell anyone, and then tell the one person five hours behind.

Zoya listened in silence the way she listened, which was completely, and then said the thing Ying already knew she would say, which was that this was not a game, that the boys who took those jobs were not taking a job, that the ones who came back came back without their passports and often without their nerve and sometimes not at all, and that Ying had three rules and none of them were going to protect her if she started pulling at this.

"I am not pulling," Ying said.

"You already pulled," Zoya said. "You watched the building for twelve days. You read a clipboard. That is pulling. The only question now is who you pull with, and the answer is not the police, because the police in that room have a man in them, and it is not your father, because your father has a license, and it is

not the market, because the market talks. So it is me, and it is the machines, and it is the box, and I want you to understand that before you start, so that when it goes wrong you will not be surprised that it was all you had."

"It will not go wrong," Ying said.

"Everything goes wrong," Zoya said. "That is why I build the second system. That is why I do not touch your systems from here. That is why you have three rules." Her voice changed, the way it changed when she stopped being careful with Ying and started being honest with her. "I am not telling you not to do it. I am telling you that I know you are going to do it, and that I would rather be inside it with you than outside it watching. Send me the numbers. Not the files; the numbers. I will build the list, and the list will live on nothing, and if the day comes, the list will be there and you will not have to have it."

Ying looked at the dead gate on the map, and at the bridge, and at the little green light of the router rack.

"His name is Ah Kin," she said.

The line was quiet for a moment.

"Then you already know what you are going to do," Zoya said, "and you called me to hear me say it was a bad idea, and I am saying it, and you are going to do it anyway, and I am going to help you do it carefully, because that is what we have."

She hung up at four. On the desk the ad still smiled on the second screen, the banknotes fanned like a hand of cards, and behind it, on the main screen, the market gate stayed dead, and the dead camera stayed blind, and the city went on being watched by a million eyes that had been installed by the girl who was now, without ever deciding to, inside the thing.

She made herself a rule that night, the way she made herself rules, and the rule was this: she would follow the numbers, and she would not touch the boy's own records, and she would not tell Yiming until she had a shape that he could hold in his hands. She wrote the rule down on a slip of paper and put it in the box with the names. Then she went home and slept for three hours in the gray, and woke, and went back to the café, and did the day the way she did the day, and did not tell anyone, and the thing went on growing in the back room, quietly, on the screen, the way a shadow grows when the lamp is moved.

Chapter 10

The woman came into Li Kee on a wet morning in the eighth month and stood just inside the door as if the floor cost money.

She was old and small and wore a dark shirt buttoned to the throat, and she carried a plastic bag already, the kind you bring to the market, and she stood there breathing the steam, and Yiming knew her before he knew her, because he had seen the phone light up with her name.

Ma.

He did not know how he knew. There were a hundred old women in the district with dark shirts and plastic bags. He knew. Perhaps it was the phone. Perhaps it was the way she stood, looking at the tables the way a person looks at a room their son is not in. Perhaps it was the eighth month, and the file, and the name.

"One bowl," she said. "Plain. No meat."

He made it himself. He put the pork in anyway, cut fine, so that she would not have to decide whether to send it back. He set it down and did not hover. She ate the way old people eat alone, quickly, as if the bowl might be taken from her. When she was done she reached into the bag for her money and counted what she had in her palm, which was not enough, and then looked up at him, ready to say something.

He said it was the shop's mistake, the extra. He said it was nothing. He said it in the voice he kept for elders.

She looked at him for a moment. Then she put the money away and stood and thanked him. At the door she turned and said, "You have a good shop."

He did not answer.

After she left, his mother looked at the bowl, and at the counter, and said nothing, and wrote the bowl in the ledger in the column where she wrote the bowls that were never paid for. Yiming washed it. He did not tell her who the woman was. He did not know how to say the words — the woman whose son I

killed — and so he said nothing, and his mother, who had not asked him a question since 2019, did not ask him one now, which was its own kind of knowing.

She came back the next week, and the week after that. She always ordered plain and no meat. He always put in the pork. Each time she reached for her money and each time he told her the same thing, that it was the shop's mistake and nothing, and each time she let him say it, and did not argue, and ate the bowl. It was not nothing. It was the only thing he could do with a body at the bottom of a case he could not close.

He was not the only one who noticed her. The market did, in its way. The aunties began to greet her, and the fish man began to save her the smallest thing, and the old man at the roots-and-stone stall — the one who had denied knowing Yiming — began to nod at her when she passed, which in that market was a whole sentence. She did not know why she had been adopted, and nobody told her, and the adoption had nothing to do with the truth. The market had decided that the old woman who had lost a son was to be fed, and the market fed her, and the feeding was the market's way of not having to think about the rest of it. Yiming watched her be fed by people who did not know what he had done, and said nothing.

He learned her name the way he learned everything, from the market. Her husband was dead. Her son was dead. She had one room in a block two streets over, a pension, and a small job cleaning a mahjong room in the mornings before the players came. She had no other children. In that room there was a photograph of her son on the wall, taken when he was nineteen, and behind it she had put a white cloth, the way you do.

He learned something he had already known. Her son had been a boy who once came off the back of his cousin's scooter in the ninth month of his second year of middle school, and had carried a small scar by his eyebrow ever since. The scar was in the photograph on the wall. It had been on the face on the concrete at the end of the blue wall. The two faces were the same face, which is the whole difficulty with faces: the one you put down and the one that some woman keeps on her wall under a white cloth are the same, and no amount of scaling or lacquer or distance separates them.

At night he lay in the room over the shop and heard the phone ring. Not her phone. His own, any phone, ringing at 00:11, the sound the whole body learns and never forgets. He had not changed his number since 2019. Somewhere in the city there was a phone on a table with a call going out to a number that did not answer, and that was the shape of the debt, whether or not it ever rang again.

In the seventh month the street burned paper. It was the ghost month, and the old people said the gates were open, and at dusk the corners of the market filled with small fires and the smell of ash, and families who had lost someone stood over the flames and talked to them. Yiming saw her one evening at the corner by the dried-goods row, alone, feeding a fire with paper printed for the dead, and she was talking to the fire in a low voice, and he did not go close enough to hear. He stood across the street in the shop doorway and watched the paper curl and lift, and thought that a woman who did not believe in the god on the door still believed in the paper, and that there was no version of the summer in which he was anything but the man who had put her at that corner.

His mother knew before he told her. He came out one morning and the old woman was already at the table, and his mother had made the congee herself, and had put the pork in it, and had set the bowl down without a word, and was back at the ledger. The two women did not speak to each other. They did not need to. Yiming stood in the doorway and watched two women who had each lost a son, one to the ground and one to a city neither of them could name, and the not-saying passed between them like a current. His mother had decided something about the old woman without ever asking him, and whatever it was, she would never say it and never withdraw it.

And she was waiting, Yiming understood, for the police to find who had killed him.

She said it to the market one morning, because the market was where you said things. She said she did not believe the story going around, the one with the god on the door. Her son had done bad things and been punished and had come home, and somebody had put him down on the concrete at the end of the blue wall and walked away. If a god had done it, then let the god be found and answer, because a god who comes in the night and leaves an old woman to bury her son is not a god she wanted.

That morning, after she had gone, a man at the corner table who had heard her said, to nobody in particular, that the woman had been to the market every week since the funeral asking who had done it, and that she kept a photograph of her son in a plastic sleeve and showed it to strangers, and that the photograph was of a boy who had done bad things, and that the market had its own opinion about whether a boy who had done bad things could be mourned. He said all of it while he ate, the way people do, and Yiming listened while he wiped the table and did not say what he thought, which was that mourning is not a thing you do for the person; it is a thing you do for yourself, and the dead are only the excuse.

Yiming heard this while carrying the rice. He kept walking. He set the boxes down in the back and stayed there a while, and when he came out his hands were steady, because they were always steady, and that was its own kind of lie.

The eighth month passed. She came in one morning and sat, and he brought the bowl, and she did not eat it at first. She looked at him across the counter and asked him the thing the whole street had been circling.

"You were at the market that morning," she said. "The morning they found him."

"Yes," he said.

"Did you see anything."

He looked at her. He had learned, in five years, to answer questions about that night, and to answer them in the flat voice, and to give the answer that was true and useless, which is the safest kind of true.

"No," he said. "I came after. The crowd was already there."

She nodded slowly. She had asked a hundred people, he could see, and received a hundred answers like his, and she had learned to nod at them.

"Someone took him from me," she said. "Someone did it with his hands." She looked at her own hands, small and dry on the counter. "If it is a man, he will be found. If it is a god, then I have nothing, because you cannot put a god in a cell."

She ate the bowl then, all of it, and did not leave the pork. When she got up to go, Yiming packed a bag of noodles, the fresh ones, and put it in her hand before she could reach for her money. She tried to pay. He closed her fingers over the bag. She stood there holding it in both hands, the way you hold a thing you

did not ask for, and looked at him, and he thought for a moment that she knew, that the whole thing had been a kind of test and he had failed it, and that now she would say his name and the market would turn and everything would be over.

He had rehearsed that moment a hundred times, in the dark, over the dough. He had rehearsed how he would stand, and what he would say, and how his hands would stay in the dough, because hands were the thing people watched. He had rehearsed the door and the crowd and the cuffs. He had rehearsed being known.

The moment did not come.

She said nothing. She thanked him, and went out into the wet morning with the bag in both hands and her back straight, the way a woman walks when she has decided that she will not be made smaller by anything, and Yiming stood behind the counter with his hands in the dough and watched her go. The debt went on the ledger with the rest. Pork would never pay it. He would go on paying it, every week, for as long as she came.

After she was gone he wrote the bag in the ledger, in the column where his mother wrote the bowls that were never paid for, and his mother watched him do it and did not stop him. She had known about the column all along. She had been waiting to see whether he would write in it honestly, and he had passed a test he had not known he was taking.

The weeks went on. The ninth month came, and the heat held, and the woman came every Tuesday, and the pork went in whether or not she asked, and the ledger grew a column that had no name. Yiming did not tell her anything. He did not tell her that he was the man, and he did not tell her that the man was dead, because those were the same sentence. He did not tell her that a city has no way to put a god in a cell. He fed her, and she let him, and the debt sat between them like a third chair at the table, and neither of them ever pulled it out.

CHAPTER 11

Chapter 11

The demolition came up the street the way the water came up in the fifth month: slowly, then all at once, and always with paperwork.

It had a name, which was the Urban Renewal of the Eastern Canal District, and it had a map with a red line, and the red line went around the whole block — the market, the park, the four streets, the arcade, Li Kee — and put a new drawing in its place, low buildings with glass and trees and a wide clean pavement where the wet market had been. The notices went up on the pole outside the park and on the wall of the market office and on the door of the mahjong room, and within a week everyone on the street had read them and nobody had said the date out loud.

The ones who owned their rooms, or whose grandfathers had owned the ground under the rooms, were going to be paid. The ones who rented were going to be moved. The line between the two ran through families in a way that had been decided fifty years earlier and was being rediscovered now, at kitchen tables, with documents, at seven in the evening. There was a meeting in the village hall, and another meeting, and a man from the renewal office explained the compensation with a laser pointer on the wall, and an old woman stood up and asked where she was supposed to put her shrine, and the man said the new apartments would have a room, and she said that a room was not the same as a ground, and sat down, and the meeting went on.

Lam read them because reading them was his job now, in the way that everything connected to the street was his job now.

He marked the blind spots in the drawer, and he had begun, in the evenings, to add to it. Not the cameras; he had those. He added the places where no camera would ever go: the stairwells of the village houses, the back of the mahjong room, the stretch of the canal where the hoarding had stopped the light. He marked the times the market emptied and the times the arcade filled. He drew the routes a person could take from the market gate to the canal without passing a single eye,

and the drawing came out looking like a street plan from a dream, all gaps and no buildings, a city that existed only in the spaces between the cameras.

When the first shop closed, it was the shoe repair place at the corner, and the man who kept it put a sign in the window that said he had moved to a street nobody knew, and left the key with the landlord, and was gone in a morning. After that the market changed by a shop a week. The sauce shop's shutters stayed down on Tuesdays now. The mahjong room lost one table and then another. The people who were leaving left the way water leaves a sink: without a sound, and then all at once. Lam marked the closures on the map, because every shop that went dark made a new place where no camera could see, and every new dark place was a new route, and the routes were the routes of a man who lived on the street. The renewal was making the case harder and the map simpler, and Lam did not know which of those was worse.

And the routes were the routes of a man who lived there. That was the thing Lam could not get out of his head. Any stranger could learn a street in a month. But the blind map on Lam's desk was the map of someone who had walked it a thousand times at night, because it did not include the places a stranger would hesitate. It went straight through the back of the mahjong room. It cut the corner behind the sauce shop. It used the side door of the gei pou.

He sat with that for a long time and did not write it down.

Lam went to the park one morning, early, and stood at the edge and watched the old men do the form. He did not do the form. He watched the way the oldest of them, the one they called Uncle Leung, moved his stick through the air as if the air had weight, and he watched the young man with the bamboo who came some mornings and copied him, and he did not write the young man's name in the book, because a man doing exercises in a park is not a suspect, and because Lam had learned that the shortest way to lose a person is to write their name down too early.

He heard the park crew talk about the demolition, because a park is a place where people talk. They said the ward office had promised a new exercise ground on the other side of the canal.

He began to think of the case as two cases that had grown in the same soil. One was a boy on the concrete; the other was a set of vans and a warehouse and a

man with a manpower company. The second case had no body, which was the whole reason it was harder. A body is a thing a city can see. Eleven names on a manifest are a thing a city can file, and a city files what it cannot see, and the filing is the grave. Lam had spent twenty years learning that the crime with a corpse gets the funeral and the crime without one gets the drawer, and he had never once managed to fix it, and he was not going to fix it now. They said the new ground would be under the flyover, where the trucks went, and that the trucks would shake the ground, and that nobody would come, and that the ward office knew it, and that this was how a place was closed: not by taking the thing away, but by moving it somewhere no one could reach. Uncle Leung listened to all of it and did the form, and when someone asked him what he thought, he said that a form done under a flyover is still a form, and everyone went quiet, and nobody could tell whether he meant it as comfort or as a rebuke.

The renewal had its own police work, and the police work had Wan.

Lam saw him twice that month with the same man: once in the tea house on the corner, once in the car park behind the commercial building above the hotpot place. The man was in his forties and wore a soft jacket and had the look of a person who owned things and did not carry them. There was nothing illegal in a policeman drinking tea. There was nothing illegal in a car park. But Wan laughed both times, and the laughing was the tell, because Wan only laughed when he thought he was being watched by people who would approve.

There were also the small things, which were the things that mattered. Two of the tenants who had refused the first offer had their shops inspected: an unlicensed gas connection at the noodle place, an expired permit at the fruit stall, a health problem at the dried-goods stall that nobody had ever complained about before. The inspections were real. That was the point of them. You did not fake an inspection; you chose which door to knock on.

Lam went to one of them. He stood at the back and watched a young officer write down an expired permit at the dried-goods stall, and the woman who kept the stall — Mrs. Cheung, the witness, the one who had put her palm flat on the statement — stood beside the officer and did not argue, and did not mention the thing she had seen in the dark, and paid the fine the way you pay a thing you cannot fight, with both hands. Lam watched her and thought that a city does not

need to frighten people who have already been frightened. It only needs to remind them.

Lam's daughter had her next round of mocks in the ninth month. She came home with the rank slip and put it on the fridge herself this time, which meant she was pleased with it and would not say so, and his wife made the soup and they ate, and afterward his daughter asked him, in the flat way she had, whether it was true that he was on the Chen Mou case.

"Something like that," he said.

She asked whether it was dangerous.

He said it was a market street and a dead man and not dangerous.

She looked at him the way she looked at a problem she had already solved, and said that he had been coming home later and had not been sleeping, and that she could hear the drawer open at night from her room, and that if he was going to lie to her he should at least practise.

He did not answer. He was proud of her for noticing, and afraid of her for noticing, and both of those feelings arrived at once and cancelled each other out, and he sat there with his soup and felt the two of them watching the same thing.

Wan came to the office again at the end of the month. This time he did not come through the room with a joke. He came and stood at the edge of Lam's desk and looked at the papers on it, and the papers on it were ordinary, and the map was in the drawer, and Lam had expected him to come and had left the ordinary papers on top on purpose, the way you leave a house looking lived-in.

Wan had a cousin on the village committee. Lam did not know that yet. He would learn it later, when it was too late to use, the way you learn the shapes of things about a place only after the place has already changed.

"There's a sitting of the district committee about the renewal," Wan said. "They want quiet. No incidents. No stories. The market god is not a story that helps."

Lam said he would keep it quiet.

"You have been at the market a lot," Wan said.

"I have a body at the market," Lam said.

Wan looked at him for a moment, and then he did the small thing Lam would remember, which was that he reached over and picked up the demolition

notice that Lam had taken down off the pole and kept on the corner of the desk, and he read it, the way a man reads a paper he already knows, and while he read it his eyes came up over the top of it and rested on Lam and did not move.

"The district is moving forward," Wan said. "It is not personal."

He put the notice back on the corner of the desk, squared to the edge, the way you square a thing you own, and went away down the room, greeting the two officers by name, doing the rounds of a place that was not his.

Lam sat for a while after he had gone. He thought about the date on the notice. He thought about the fact that the street would be gone before the case was, because cases are slow and cranes are fast, and that in a year there would be no market gate and no arcade and no blue hoarding and nobody left who had stood at the end of it in the rain. The blind spots would be gone, and the map would become a drawing of a country that no longer existed, and the man who knew the blind spots would not need to know them anymore. He did not know yet which man that was. He was beginning to. A beginning is the dangerous part; a suspicion with a name in it is a thing that will not leave the drawer alone.

Lam sat for a while after he had gone. Then he opened the drawer and took out the map and looked at the drawing of the gaps, the streets without buildings, the straight line through the back of the mahjong room, the cut behind the sauce shop, the side door of the gei pou.

He had not written it down. He took out a pencil and wrote, in the corner of the sheet, four words, small, the way a man writes a thing he is not ready to say.

LIVES ON THE STREET.

Chapter 12

Ah Kin left on a Thursday, before dawn, from the mouth of the alley beside the gei pou.

Yiming had known it was coming for three weeks, the way you know rain. Ah Kin had started coming in later and staying longer, and his talk had changed. He talked about money the way a sick man talks about a doctor, with a kind of careful hope that did not sound like hope. He had paid the agency's fee. He had done the medical, at a clinic he could not name. He had learned that the flight went through a city he had to look up on a map, and from there a car, and from there the job, which was delivery, and the room, which was provided, and the pay, which was eight thousand a month, and the phone number of a woman who answered in the afternoon and never in the morning.

Ying had printed everything. Passport photo, forms, the medical receipt, the copy of the ID. She had made a folder for him with a new plastic sleeve and had not charged him for the sleeve. Yiming knew all of this because Ying told him, in the flat voice, in the back room, with the café asleep around them, and because she told him in a way that was not a report but a question, the question being whether he was going to say anything, and the answer being that he was not, and the two of them both knowing it and neither of them saying it.

They had talked about it once, properly, with the door shut.

"He will not listen," Ying said.

"I know."

"If you tell him, he will go anyway, and he will not come back to the shop, and then we lose the only thread we have."

"I know."

"And if you tell him and he stays, and his mother dies in the spring because the medicine stopped, then he will know who stopped it, for the rest of his life."

"I know."

She looked at him with the flat look. "You keep saying that."

"Because it is true," he said. "That is what makes it impossible."

Two days before he left, Yiming walked to the arcade to see the electronics stall, because he wanted to remember it. Ah Kin's mother was sitting behind the counter with a blanket over her knees, thin and yellow-eyed, and she called Yiming by name and asked after his father, and said that Ah Kin had found a good job and was going to send money, and that she had told him not to go, and that he had gone. She said all of it in the cheerful voice of a woman who had decided to be proud, and Yiming stood there and looked at the stall and the ceiling fan and the little shrine she kept on the shelf with the fruit and the incense, and did not say any of the things he had come to say.

He had known the boy since the boy was small. He remembered him at eight, at the counter, his legs too short for the stool, ordering a bowl he could not finish and leaving the last third, and Yiming's father coming out to scold him for wasting food and then, when the boy was gone, eating the third himself, standing up, because that was the kind of man he had been. That was the shop. That was what a shop did with a district: it remembered it in bowls.

He remembered the year the boy's father left, and the year the boy started working the stall beside his mother, and the year the medicine began. He remembered the day the boy came in with his first pay packet and bought his mother a bowl of the most expensive thing on the menu, and then ate plain himself, and Yiming's father had seen it and had put a slice of char siu in the plain bowl without a word. That was the shop too. It remembered a district in food, and the food was the only record the district kept that anyone could taste.

The recruiter had explained it all in the room above the hotpot place. There would be a training period. There would be a fee, taken out of the first months. There would be a place to sleep. The passport would stay with the company for the visa, which was normal, which was what companies did. Ah Kin had repeated all of it to Ying while she printed his forms, and Ying had written it in her memory the way she wrote everything, and had said nothing, and had slid the forms across in a new sleeve.

The last night was at the gei pou, and it was not a party, because they did not have the money for a party and because Ah Kin's mother was not told the date. It was four or five of them at two machines in the corner, playing the same old

game they had played since they were kids, and eating the takeout that Yiming had brought from the shop, and nobody saying the thing. There was a boy they called Fat Boy and a boy they called Four Eyes and a girl who ran the counter at the arcade and had been in love with Ah Kin since she was twelve, and she did not play; she watched, and she gave him a packet of sugar cakes for the road, and he put them in his bag and did not eat them. Ah Kin's mother was at home with the medicine and the television and did not know he was going; he had told her he had found a job in the city, at a bigger company, and would send money, and she had believed it or decided to believe it, which in that family were the same thing.

Yiming sat with them and ate and did not play well. He kept looking at the boy's face — nineteen, a little open, the face of somebody who had ordered noodles he could not finish at eight years old — and he kept hearing the woman on the phone who answered in the afternoon and never in the morning.

When the others went home, Yiming walked Ah Kin out to the alley. The sky over the buildings was still black, with the first gray coming up behind the towers. The e-bike was packed: one bag, one backpack, the folder in the backpack.

"Two months," Ah Kin said. "Then the medicine is paid. Then I come back."

"Ah Kin," Yiming said.

He did not know how to finish it. He had a body, and a shop, and a ledger. He did not have a fact. He had a feeling, and a feeling is not a fact, and a man who speaks out of a feeling can be wrong, and if he was wrong, then Ah Kin would stay in the district and work the stall and watch his mother get sicker for a job he could have had. The boy would remember, for the rest of his life, that the noodle-shop son had told him not to go.

"Be careful," Yiming said, which was not what he had meant.

Ah Kin laughed. He said he was going to be delivering packages, not fighting dragons. Then he did something that Yiming did not expect. He reached into his pocket and took out a small red envelope, and pressed it into Yiming's hand, and said, "Do jeh (多谢)."

"What is this."

"For the noodles," Ah Kin said. "For all the noodles you never let me pay for."

Yiming did not open it. He put it in his pocket, and the two of them stood there a moment in the alley, and then the van came down the end of the street with its headlights off, because it was before dawn and a van with its lights off is a van nobody asks about.

Ah Kin got on the back of a scooter that was waiting, and put his bag between his feet, and the scooter and the van went up the street the wrong way against the one-way sign, which nobody in the district observed, and turned out at the market gate under the dead camera. There were two others on the scooter already, a boy and a girl Yiming did not know, with their own bags between their feet. Ah Kin looked back once, and Yiming raised a hand, and Ah Kin raised one back, and then the scooter turned out at the corner and the three of them became a shape in the dark and then a red light and then nothing.

Yiming walked back into the shop and did not go to bed. He made the dough and worked it, and the pole struck the board with its two beats, and he counted the beats, because counting was a thing his hands could do while the rest of him worked on other things.

After the scooter was gone he walked to the gei pou. Ying was awake, of course she was awake. He told her it was done. She said she knew. He asked her whether she was going to cry. She said no, and then she said the only thing she said about Ah Kin all year, which was: "He was the only one who always said thank you."

She had watched the plate for three weeks and had mapped the van's route with the numbers, and she had not told Yiming, because telling him would have made him do a thing, and doing a thing was the one thing that would have put everyone on a shorter list. The route went west, toward the border, and crossed at a place where the driver's uncle was known, and after the crossing there was no route at all, because after the crossing the plate changed and the numbers changed and the boy became a passenger, and a passenger is a thing the road does not remember.

In the days after, Ah Kin's mother came to the shop once and asked Yiming to write down the company name again, because she had lost the paper. Yiming

wrote down the only name he had, which was a shell. She thanked him and asked when the boys usually called. He said he did not know. She said a good job would let a boy call. She said it as a question. He said nothing, and she went home, and the counting of the weeks went on.

The weeks went on at the shop too, which is the thing about the weeks. The lunch crowd came, and the dough rose, and the pole struck the board, and Yiming put the red envelope in the drawer and did not spend the hundred yuan, and did not call the afternoon number, though he dialed it three times and hung up before it connected, because a number that answers in the afternoon and never in the morning is a number that has already decided what it will say. On the fourth week he called, and a woman answered, and he asked for Ah Kin, and the woman said there was no Ah Kin at that number, and asked who was calling, and he hung up, because to say his name was to put a name on a list.

He stood at the mouth of the alley after the scooter was gone and listened to the district wake up — the shutters, the hoses, the first bus — and none of it knew anything, and all of it went on, and the morning did not care at all.

Summer came and went at the shop the way summer does. The arcade boys went on the machines, and the aunties went on the marketing, and the shrine at the corner went on getting its orange and its umbrella. Ah Kin's mother kept the stall, and the stall got smaller, and she began to sit on a stool behind it instead of standing, and she began to ask after Yiming's father whenever she saw him, because a woman who has lost one thread holds on to the others. The district did not close over the boy who had gone. A district that size cannot close, because it has too many other holes, and because closing over a hole is a thing a district does only for its own dead. Ah Kin was not dead. He was gone, which in the market's arithmetic was the same as late, and late was a thing you could wait for. He had not told Ah Kin's mother that her son had said thank you before he left. He did not know how to give her a thing that small.

Yiming stood in the alley and watched the taillight until it was gone. Then he opened the red envelope. There was a hundred yuan in it, folded twice, and a slip of receipt paper with a phone number on it — the woman's number, the afternoon number — written in Ah Kin's round hand.

He put the money and the number in the drawer under the till, in the same drawer as the exam ticket and the ledger, and he closed the drawer, and he went in and made the dough, and the pole struck the board with its two beats, and the morning came up over the market the way it always came, indifferent, on time.

Chapter 13

The boy did not call, and that was the first thing.

Ah Kin had told his mother he had a job in the city, at a big company, and that he would send money. He had told her he would call on Sundays. The first Sunday came, and the phone in his mother's room did not ring, and Ying, who had put the number on the café's board so the regulars could keep an eye on it, watched the aunties check it the way they checked the weather. The second Sunday came. The mother began to make the sign of the forty-nine days, not for a death, because there was no death, but because there was no news, and in the old grammar of the street no news and a death keep the same calendar.

Ying did not believe in the forty-nine days. She believed in traces.

She went back to the registrar's list and started with the ad's registration number and worked outward, the way her father had taught her to trace a cable through a wall. The recruiter's number was registered to a company. The company was registered to a name and an address. The address was the fourth-floor room above the hotpot place. From there she pulled the building's feed and the building's visitor log, which was not a log at all but a list of numbers written on a clipboard by a man at a desk, and the man at the desk photographed the clipboard every evening, for his own protection, and the photographs lived on a cloud account with the same default password as five thousand other accounts, and Ying had the password from a list her father kept, because her father had installed the camera and set the account up and never changed a thing.

What she found, when she laid it out, was not a crime. It was a method, and she already knew its shape, because she had been selling half of it for seven years.

The ring ran on borrowed registrations and unverified forms. Every boy had been given a registration to fill in, and the registration did not have to be his own; every boy had been given a medical check, and the stamp on it was not quite the right weight; every boy had been put in a van to a border town and then into a car, and the driver was paid in cash, and the cash had no name on it. The whole

apparatus was a real-name system with a hundred comfortable holes in it, and the holes were the kind of holes a person makes on purpose. The ring had not invented the holes. It had found them ready.

She drew it out on paper, which was the way she thought. A chain has two ends. At the far end there was a compound she had never seen, in a country she had read about, with a wall and a gate and men with sticks, and inside it boys and girls from a dozen provinces typing at a hundred screens, and the boys and girls were called staff and were not allowed to leave. She knew this because she had read the survivor accounts the way she read everything. At the near end of the chain there was a room above a hotpot place, and a phone that answered in the afternoon, and a folder of forms, and a box of borrowed names, and the box was in her café, and the café had her father's name on the license, and the license was the only thing between her family and the street.

The medical checks all bore the same stamp, from a clinic that did not exist and a doctor whose name she looked up and could not find in any register. The stamp had the particular flaw of a stamp made from a photograph of a stamp: a doubled edge, a half-millimeter of ghost. She had seen that flaw before, on the papers of a boy named Zhou, who had paid her, at sixteen, to move a composite score, and who had grown up into a man with a laminator and a steady hand. She did not know yet that it was him. She only knew that the hand felt familiar, the way a stranger's handwriting can feel familiar when it has learned from the same teacher.

She sat in the back room at four in the morning with the screens in front of her and understood, slowly, the thing that would not let her sleep. The ring had not invented these holes. The ring had found them. And some of these holes were hers.

She had sold registrations to half the arcade. She had rented names to riders and girls and men in good jackets. She had never asked what the names were for, because that was the rule, because that was the whole business, and because a person who asks what the name is for has to stop selling names. The ring had bought names in the district the way everyone bought names in the district: from whoever was selling. One of the registrations in the folder with Ah Kin's forms had come out of her own box. She recognized the pattern on the paper — the

small fold, the corner tear — the way you recognize your own handwriting on a wall.

She had not sent Ah Kin to the compound. She had printed his photo and rented the name of a man who had never ordered a delivery, and those two facts were both true, and neither of them made her clean.

She went home at six and slept for three hours and woke and could not stop counting names. Sixty names in the box. She knew where perhaps forty of them had gone. She did not know which of the sixty had ended up on a form above a hotpot place, or in the room behind the van, or in the compound at the far end of the chain she had drawn. A name is a small thing. A name is the only thing the system asks for. She had sold the smallest necessary thing, over and over, to people who needed it, and the machine had come and bought the same thing, and now the thing was somewhere with a wall around it.

There was a girl from the next street over who had come back in the spring. She had come back with a number tattooed on the inside of her wrist that she covered with a watch she did not need, and she did not leave the flat, and her mother did the marketing, and when Ying had gone up with a bag of oranges the mother had taken the oranges and thanked her at the door and not let her in. Ying had left the oranges and gone home and had not gone back. Now she saw the chain whole: the girl was the far end of it, and the near end was a plastic sleeve and a corner tear and a name.

Her father had built the café the year she was born, and the license had his name on it, and the two uncles had put in the coax and the cameras and the sign, and the family had run the place for twenty-three years, and the family's whole life was a lease and a license and a box of machines. If the license went, the café went. If the café went, her father went, in the way that men go when the thing they built is taken from them — quietly, and all at once. She had known this her whole life. She had not known that the thing that would take it would come through the door wearing the face of a name.

The recruiter, when Ying finally heard her voice, was a woman of about forty with the accent of the north and the manner of someone who had explained the same thing a thousand times. Ying called the afternoon number from a phone that was not hers and asked about the job, playing a girl from a town whose

name she made up, and the woman said the same things the ad said, and then the things the ad did not say — the training fee, the deposit, the two months before the first pay — and she said them in the voice of a person reading a form. The voice was not cruel. That was the thing Ying would remember. The voice was patient. It was the voice of a woman who had decided that the thing she was doing was a service, and who had an answer for every question, and none of the answers were lies exactly; each of them was true in a way that did not add up to the truth. When Ying hung up, she sat for a while with the borrowed phone in her hand and the woman on the other end slept at night. That was the whole of the difference between them, and a difference that size is not something you can put in a file.

She called Zoya at five, which was Zoya's evening.

She told her the shape of it. The recruiter, the room, the van, the medical stamp, the borrowed registration from her own box. She told her that she could go to the police with the room and the van and the feed, and that the moment she did, the police would ask how she had the feed, and how she had the log, and whose registration was on the form, and that the answer would put her own box in front of a man with a clipboard, and the box had sixty names in it and a school records system and an edit she had made at sixteen that had moved a boy down a board.

Zoya was quiet for a long time, and then she said the thing she always said, which was that Ying was not to touch anything Chinese from outside the country, and the thing she said next, which was new.

"Send me the numbers," Zoya said. "Not the files. The numbers. I will build a list of every registration that goes through that room and every van and every plate, in a second system that lives on nothing, and if something happens, the list exists, and you never had it."

"That is the same as touching it," Ying said.

"No," Zoya said. "It is the same as writing down the weather. Nobody goes to prison for writing down the weather."

Ying looked at the screens, at the room above the hotpot place, at the van with its headlights off, at the market gate that had been dead for two years.

"There is a boy," she said.

"There is always a boy," Zoya said, and her voice was not unkind. "That is the problem with your country and mine. There is always a boy, and if you try to save the one, the machine turns and looks at you. That is not a reason not to try. It is a reason to be very, very careful while you do."

She hung up at five-thirty. Ying sat for a while with the chain laid across the screens: the number that led to the company, the company that led to the room, the room that led to the van, the van that led to the border, and the border that led to nothing at all. And at the near end of the chain, in her own handwriting, folded small with a corner tear, one of her names.

She had thought the mask was the dangerous thing. The mask was paper. This was a chain, and the chain came back into her own hands.

She made one decision that night, before she slept. She would find the four who had already gone ahead, and she would find the next four before they went, and she would do it with paper and not with the police, because the police were slow and the market was loud. She wrote it on a slip of paper and put it in the box with the names. It was the first thing she had ever written down that was not a price.

CHAPTER 14

Chapter 14

The second week after the scooter's taillight went out, Ah Kin's mother came to Li Kee and asked for him.

She did not come as a customer. She came with a photograph in her hand — a printout, glossy, the kind the arcade booth made, him in a good shirt against a blue background — and she stood at the counter and asked Yiming whether he had seen her son, because her son ate here, because everyone's son ate here, because a shop that feeds a district knows where the district goes.

Yiming looked at the photograph and told her the truth, which was that he had not seen him.

She asked whether he knew the company. She had the name written on a piece of paper in her own hand, and the name was not Tak Ming, because the boy had told her it was a delivery company in the city, and he had lied in the small way, the way you lie to a mother to buy two months of peace. She asked whether Yiming could ask around. He said he would. She left the paper on the counter and went out, and the paper sat there with the delivery-company name on it, and Yiming looked at it and knew the name was a shell, and that behind the shell was the room above the hotpot place, and behind the room was a van with its lights off.

He put the paper in the drawer under the till, with the exam ticket and the ledger and the red envelope with the afternoon number in it. The drawer was getting full. It held a paper face and a school record and a boy's hundred yuan and the name of a company that did not deliver anything, and all of it belonged to the summer, and the summer was not finished.

That night he went to the gei pou and found Ying already awake, which she always was.

She showed him the chain. She showed it to him the way Zoya had told her to make it — as numbers, written in a second system that lived on nothing, a list of registrations and plates and a room and a van, no files, no names. She did not

show him the folder with Ah Kin's forms. She had put the folder somewhere else. She was careful with him in the way she was careful with everything, and he was beginning to understand that her care had always looked like distance, and that the distance was the care.

"The problem is not the room," she said. "The problem is where the room gets its names. Some of the names are mine."

He did not say anything. She had told him this already, in the flat voice, and had not asked for absolution, and was not going to get any.

"They will trace the names," she said. "They always do, when the police start. And when they trace the names, they will trace them back to this café, because the names come from this box, and the box is in this room, and the room has a side door and a license and eleven cameras that my father installed. I am not worried about the police. The police are slow and fair and they will get to me eventually and I can survive eventually. I am worried about the other ones. The room above the hotpot place keeps a list of its names too. And the list is shorter than the police's list, because the room only cares about the names that can hurt it."

He understood then, all at once, the thing the summer had been hiding from him. The mask had protected him, and the mask had never protected her. He had made himself famous, and famous men are watched, and watched men are hard to move against, so the ring would not come for the man in the market. It would come for the quiet one at the back of the internet café, the one with the box of names, the one with no paper face at all. The man in the room above the hotpot place did not care about a face on a door. A face on a door was a folk tale. He cared about names, and the names led here.

Ying had already begun to close the house. She had changed the guest password, and the router, and the side-door lock, and she had moved the box from the drawer to a place she did not tell him, and she had taped over the little camera above the counter, the one she had installed herself and had used, until tonight, to watch the door.

She had begun to sleep at the café, because the flat was watched and the machines were the only thing that could wake her. She kept a mattress in the back room and a kettle and a bag of clothes, and her father thought she was

doing the inventory, and the inventory was the only lie she had ever told him that he did not see through. She did not tell him about the man on the scooter. She did not tell him about the license. A daughter with a father like that protects him the way she protects everyone, by keeping the numbers to herself, and the keeping of the numbers is what makes the numbers grow.

"If they are inside," she said, "they will find the feed and not the room. If they are inside the room, they will find the machines, which are legal, and the licenses, which are legal, and a folder of school paperwork, which is none of their business." She said all of it in a voice that was almost ordinary, and she was frightened. This was what her fear looked like: logistics.

Wan came twice that week. The first time it was the fire inspection, which was real and which found the extinguishers out of date, which they had been for a year, and Ying paid the fine and bought new ones and put the receipt in a folder for the inspectors who would come back. The second time it was nothing at all: Wan stood in the doorway and looked at the machines and the students and the licenses on the wall, and asked whether the café had ever had any trouble, and Ying said no, and he said that was good, and he left. Nothing at all is a message. Nothing at all, said from a doorway by a man who has been paid, means: I know where you live, and I have not decided yet.

That night Yiming did the form in the back yard, slow, under the single bulb, and thought about the short list, and about the fact that he could not protect everyone, and that he could perhaps protect one.

He sat in the plastic chair and looked at the screens. On the main screen, the map. On the second screen, the numbers. On the third screen, something small that had not been there before: a login, at 2:14 in the morning, from an address in the district, to the café's own guest network, the one with the default password, the one a person would guess if they had watched the place for a week.

"Someone is inside," Ying said. "Not deep. Just looking. The way you look at a house before you decide which window."

He looked at the little light on the screen, the intruder's thread, thin and clean.

He had spent the summer hunting, and the summer had turned the street around on him. The myth he had built was a wall around himself, and the wall had a person on the wrong side of it.

He had wanted to hunt. That was the thing he admitted to himself that night, in the plastic chair, with the machines breathing around him. He had wanted to go up the alley to the room above the hotpot place and be the face on the door and put a stop to it with a pole. That was the man he had been letting himself become. And the man would go up the alley and the room would close and the name would come off the list and go onto another list, a shorter, colder one, and the short list was in the hands of people who did not fight in the street; the short list was in the hands of people who sent vans with their lights off.

He could not hunt. Not anymore. Hunting would only make him louder, and loud was the thing that would get her killed.

He had spent the summer building a wall, and the wall had protected the wrong person, and the correction of that fact was going to take the rest of the year and the rest of everything. He looked at the little red light of the intruder's thread and thought about the mask, and about the market putting oranges under a paper face, and about how a man becomes a story and the story becomes a target and the target is never where the story is. The city had made him into a thing to look at, and the looking had kept him safe, and the same looking had made her findable, because a thing that is looked at has a shadow, and the shadow was a young woman in a dark room with a box of other people's names.

"From now on," he said, "I defend."

Ying looked at him for a long moment, the flat look she had, the one that did not move.

"Defend what," she said.

"Whatever is on the short list," he said.

The first night he watched the gei pou, he watched it from the roof of the sauce shop across the alley, where the water tanks were, because from the tanks a person could see both doors and the whole length of the alley and could not easily be seen from the street. He did not bring the pole. He brought water and a phone with the screen dimmed, and sat with his back against the tank and watched the side door until the sky went gray. Nothing happened. On the third

night a man came and stood at the corner of the alley for eleven minutes and looked at the café and did not go in and did not film and did not smoke, and then walked away. Yiming memorized his walk. On the fourth night the man did not come. On the fifth night a different man came, on a scooter, wearing a helmet, and slowed at the alley and did not stop, and Yiming wrote the plate in the notebook that used to hold the map of the dead cameras.

On the third screen, the intruder's thread went dark. On the desk, beside the keyboard, there was a piece of paper Ying had printed that afternoon and had not yet shown him, because she had been waiting to see whether he would do the thing she expected or the thing she hoped. He picked it up. It was Zoya's visa confirmation, the autumn window, printed in English and Chinese, a date and a name and a stamp.

He put it down again, face-down, so that neither of them had to look at it yet. Outside, the alley was empty, and the market gate had been dead for two years, and the man with the walk came on the third night and did not come on the fourth, and Yiming added the plate from the fifth night to the little notebook and began, without ever saying so, to keep the same kind of file that Inspector Lam kept, in the same kind of drawer, for the same reason.

On the desk, under the map, they started a second list that night — not the names the room used, but the names the room could reach. The old woman with the Tuesdays. His mother. The boy in the compound. The girl with the watch. Everyone the machine could touch if it decided to. The list was short. That was the point of it. A short list is a thing you can stand in front of.

Chapter 15

The room above the hotpot place had one window on the alley and one window on the street, and Yiming could see both if he stood in the doorway of the shuttered shoe-repair place across the way and did not mind being seen standing there.

He had been watching it for four nights. He told himself he was not hunting; he was learning the shape of the thing that had her name, the way you learn a street before you walk it in the dark. He told himself that, and he stood in the doorway anyway, and wrote the times in the little notebook that used to hold the map of the dead cameras.

The hotpot place boiled from six in the evening until two, and the steam came up the air shaft and hung over the alley like a ceiling. The fourth-floor window was lit until eleven and then dark. The building had a sign by the door with a list of companies on it, and the third name down was the shell that Ah Kin's mother had brought him, the delivery company that did not deliver anything to anyone.

People went in. A woman went in at two on the second day, in a good coat, and came out at four with a folder under her arm, and Yiming did not follow her, because following is a thing that gets you followed. Two boys went in on the third day, one with a backpack and one without, and came out forty minutes later with a folder and a look Yiming knew, which was the look of a person who has just been told a number that will change their life and has decided, in the space of forty minutes, to believe it.

The room did not have to threaten anyone. It only needed a form, a number, and the small human wish to be someone else for a while. The room was not a fist. It was a door with a sign on it, and the sign was polite, and the door stood open, and that was the whole method.

On the fourth night a man came out of the building carrying a laminator.

He carried it in both arms, the way you carry a thing that has just been fixed or a thing that is about to be repaired, and he was walking to a car parked at the curb, and the streetlight off the hotpot canopy caught him full in the face, and Yiming knew him.

The face had grown older and heavier. The hair had thinned at the front. The watch on the wrist was not the watch of a boy. But the face was the face: the small chin, the soft mouth, the particular way of holding the head a little to one side as if listening to a joke nobody had told. Zhou Weikang. He had been in Yiming's class in the second year of high school, and then in the class next door after the streaming, and his family had money and his rank had never quite matched it, and in the winter of that year his composite score had moved up forty-one places on the honor board, and Yiming's had not, and the top three had closed over the gap like water closing over a stone.

Ying had told Yiming the whole of it when she was sixteen, because he had walked her to the end of the market street and asked her to her face, and because she could not lie to a face. A boy had paid her to edit the record. She had named the boy. Yiming had never told anyone. He had told himself, for seven years, that it did not matter, that a board is a board, that he had lost the Gaokao in a way that had nothing to do with Zhou Weikang. That was true. It was also true that he had looked at that board every morning for the rest of the year and seen a place that belonged to him and a name that belonged to Zhou, and that the two facts had sat in him side by side and never resolved, the way a scar sits in an arm.

Now the name had a laminator and a car and a folder of boys.

He had passed the school once, in the summer, on a delivery, and had looked in through the fence at the honor board, which was still there, glassed in, the names in gold paint, a new set every year. His own name had been there for two years in the lower half and once in the top three, and was gone now, replaced by a boy who was now a man with a laminator. The board did not know. That was the thing about a board. It held the record and not the truth, and it never apologized, and it never would.

Yiming stood in the doorway and watched Zhou Weikang load the laminator into the back seat, and did not move, and did not follow. He wrote the plate in

the notebook. Then he stood there a little longer, until the shutter of the shoe-repair place rattled in the wind coming off the canal, and went home.

He lay in the room over the shop that night and did the arithmetic that had been waiting for him all evening. Zhou Weikang had bought one number at sixteen, and had learned from the buying that numbers can be moved, and now he moved numbers for a living, except the numbers were not scores anymore. The numbers were the medical checks. The numbers were the registrations. The numbers were the boys. Zhou had taken the smallest dishonesty of his life and grown it into a trade, and the trade had a laminator, and the boys who trusted the laminator were behind a wall in a country Yiming had never seen.

In the morning he did the thing he had promised himself he would not do. He went to the fourth floor.

He told himself he was only going to look at the door.

The stairwell smelled of hotpot and cigarettes and the wet concrete of buildings that are always slightly damp. On the fourth floor there were three doors, and the middle one had a small new sign with the shell company's name on it, and under the name, in smaller letters, four characters that meant manpower. He stood in front of it. He had no plan. He had a body and a notebook and a rage that he had learned, over five years, to keep in his hands and nowhere else.

He was still standing there when the door opened.

Zhou Weikang came out with a folder under his arm and stopped, because Yiming was blocking the landing, and looked at him the way a man looks at a car parked in a space that is not the space he remembers.

Then he knew him. Yiming watched it happen — the small narrowing of the eyes, the calculation, the moment Zhou placed the face and placed the era with it.

"Li Yiming," Zhou said. Then he smiled, and the smile was real, which was the worst of it. "The noodle place. I heard you took over from your father."

Yiming did not answer.

Zhou looked at him, and then at the sign on the door, and then back at Yiming, and the calculation finished behind his eyes. "You are not here for noodles," he said.

"No," Yiming said.

"Then you should go home," Zhou said, and his voice was not angry, and not even unkind. It was the voice of a man who had said the sentence a hundred times and knew it worked, because it was true. "You have a shop. You have a mother, and a father who cannot lift. You have a street full of people who like you. That is a lot to have."

He stepped around Yiming and went down the stairs, and his footsteps went down the stairwell and out into the street, and Yiming stood on the landing in front of the new sign and did not move for a long time.

He had wanted to say the thing about the honor board. He had wanted to say that he had known what Zhou was since he was seventeen, that the laminator and the folder and the boys were only the same small dishonesty grown up. But he had learned something in five years of holding his tongue in front of elders, which was that naming a man's sin to his face only tells him that you know it, and that knowing it is not evidence and not a charge, and that a man who is told you know will simply add you to the list of things that need to be handled.

So he said nothing. He walked down the stairs and out into the street, and the hotpot place was already boiling its lunch, and the alley was full of the smell of it, and the city went on.

That night he told Ying. He told her that the man forging the medical checks was Zhou Weikang, and he watched her face while he said the name, and her face did what it always did, which was to go very still and very flat in the exact way it did when she was not surprised.

"You knew," he said.

"I suspected," she said. "The stamp. I told you the hand felt familiar."

"The hand felt familiar to you," he said. "You could have said the name."

"What name would I say," she said. "That a boy I cheated for at sixteen is now cheating for someone else? That is not evidence. That is a confession with a boy's name attached to it." She looked at the screens and not at him. "He saw you."

"He saw me."

"Then we are on the list," Ying said. "Not the police list. The other one."

She said it in the flat voice, and turned back to the machines, and Yiming stood in the doorway of the back room. The summer's rule was over. He had

been seen. The mask had kept his face off the internet, but it had not kept his face off the fourth floor, and the fourth floor was the thing that mattered. On the wall behind her the map of the blind spots still hung, the streets without buildings, and Yiming looked at it the way you look at a map of a country you are about to leave.

There was one more thing he did not tell her, because he had decided it on the stairs and had not yet decided whether deciding it made him the man he had promised not to be. On the landing, before Zhou had opened the door, he had noticed a second name on the small sign, under the shell, in smaller type, the name of the parent company that owned the shell. It was a name he had seen before, on a business card that had sat on the counter at Li Kee for a week before he put it in the stove, the card of the well-dressed man who had come to the shop with a proposition and eaten a bowl and said he would come back.

The name was Mak. Tak Ming (麦德明). And under it, in the market's own mouth, a nickname that had been around the district for years, the way such names are always around, attached to a man who moved things and was never seen to move them: Se Wong Mak (蛇王麦). The Snake King.

He put the notebook in his pocket and carried the name home. By morning he would know where the man lived and where he ate and which car he drove, because a name is a door, and a door is a thing you can stand in front of. He did not know yet which was worse — that the man had a face, or that the face was the one that had come to his own counter and eaten a bowl and said he would come back.

CHAPTER 16

Chapter 16

Zoya came in the eleventh month, on the autumn visa, for thirty days, and the aunties called her the gwai mui (鬼妹) from the moment she got out of the taxi, because there was no other word they had, and because they had decided to be delighted.

She was tall and pale and had a laugh that carried across the market, and she ate three bowls of congee on her first morning and slept for a day and a half, and then she sat in the back room of the gei pou with a laptop and refused, as she always refused, to touch one thing that lived on a server in this country. Ying had cleared a table for her and put a fan on it. The two of them worked in the same room in two different countries, and the room was warmer for it, and Yiming watched from the doorway of the shop the way you watch a window in another building.

He had met her once before, two years earlier, and she had shaken his hand and looked at him for a moment too long, the way people look at the person their partner has told them about. This time she did the same thing, and then she said, in her rough Cantonese, "You are the one who does not sleep."

"I sleep," he said.

"Ying says you do not," she said, and went back to her screen, and that was the whole of their acquaintance for the first week.

The first week was good. That was the thing Yiming would remember afterward, when he thought about the autumn: that the first week was the best week the café had had in years. Zoya fixed the point-of-sale machine, and taught the girl at the counter how to close it properly, and made Ying eat at regular hours, which nobody else had ever managed. She played the old game with the boys in the corner and lost badly and laughed. She learned the word for the market and the word for the rain, and she went with Ying to the wet market at six and came back with a bag of greens and a story about a fish.

The aunties decided she was a good gwai mui. This was high praise. It meant she had eaten what was put in front of her and not complained about the bones.

On the fifth day the three of them ate at Li Kee, at the corner table, and Yiming watched the two of them across the table. Zoya ate with her left hand and talked with both, and Ying answered in the flat voice and did not stop looking at her, and Yiming understood that he was seeing, for the first time, the version of Ying that he had never been allowed to see — the version that laughed at a bad joke and reached across the table to take a hand. He was glad for her. He was also, in a way he did not like in himself, envious, because the two of them had built something that lived on a table and not on a screen, and his own life had somehow become a paper face and a drawer and a column that no one could pay.

Zoya met Ah Kin's mother once, at the arcade, because Ying took her there to buy a charger. The old woman asked who the gwai mui was, and Ying said a friend, and the old woman looked at Zoya for a long time and then asked her — in Cantonese, slowly, so the gwai mui might understand — whether people in her country also had sons who went away and did not call. Zoya did not understand the words and understood the question, which happens sometimes, and said yes. The old woman nodded and went back to her stall. That was the whole conversation, and Ying watched it happen and did not translate any of it.

The shadowing started in the second week.

She understood by the fourth day that the man on the scooter was not there to frighten them; he was there to be seen. A frightened shop makes mistakes; an unwatched shop forgets it is being squeezed. The man on the scooter was a form of pressure, and the pressure was specific: it was aimed at Ying, because Ying was the one with the box, and because a person who is worried about herself is a person who might take a job. The aunties who had adopted Zoya did not know any of it, and bought her sweet soup, and asked whether the gwai mui liked the fish, and Zoya said yes, and the afternoon went on being an afternoon, and the snake sat across the street and watched all of it through the visor. Ying showed Yiming the plate from the window, and he wrote it in the notebook beside the other plate. Neither of them told Zoya, because Zoya had thirty days and they wanted her to have them.

The menace came to the shop that same week, and it did not look like menace. A man Yiming had never seen came in at the lunch lull and sat at the counter and ordered a bowl and ate it slowly. He was polite. He paid. And before he left he said, in the voice of a man passing the time, that the noodles were good, and that it was a pity about the father's shoulder, and that the father had been lucky once and might not be lucky twice. Then he thanked the mother for the bowl and went out, and the bell over the door rang once, and the three of them sat in the shop with the steam going up. The father had not heard; he was in the back, counting the change with one hand. The mother had heard. She looked at Yiming across the counter, the long look, and then she took the man's bowl and washed it, and the washing of the bowl took a long time. Yiming did not go after him. He had learned that going after a man like that is what the man wants, and that the only answer is to still be there in the morning. But he lay awake that night, and the two beats he tapped on the rail were a little faster than usual. In the morning he opened the shop at the usual time, and the shutters went up, and the man did not come back, and the not-coming-back was its own kind of message.

The café was squeezed that same week, and it did not start like a squeeze. It started with the unlicensed camera business, which was real: the license had never been updated, and one morning two men came with a folder and a form and a four-thousand-yuan fine. Ying paid it. The next week it was the fire extinguishers, then a notice about the signage, then a man from the district who measured the doorway and called the step a tripping hazard. None of it was a raid. A raid made you a story, and a story made you visible. This was the other thing — the thing Wan did because Wan had been paid — the slow, lawful pressure that costs money and does not make a sound. Six thousand yuan in fines in three weeks. Two customers stopped coming. Ying kept the running total in the back of the ledger, under the line for the licenses, and did not tell Zoya the number.

On the ninth day Zoya came out of the back room and stood in the doorway and looked at the street for a long time. Then she went back inside, and Ying knew that she had seen the scooter, because Zoya saw everything too.

That night the three of them sat in the back room with the door shut and the machines breathing around them.

Ying and Zoya had had one night alone, the eighth night, when Yiming was out and the café was closed. Ying did not tell him what they said, and he did not ask. But in the morning Zoya was quieter, and Ying was quieter, and the two of them sat on either side of the laptop and worked without speaking, which is a thing you can only do with someone you have known for three years. Later, Ying said one sentence about it, which was: "She asked me to come with her." And then, after a while: "I told her I could not leave the café, and she said the café is leaving with or without me, and I told her the café is my father, and she said that her father is in Moscow and she left anyway, and we did not finish it."

"How long," Zoya said.

"Thirty days," Ying said. "You have nineteen left."

"I know how many days I have," Zoya said. "I asked how long this has been going on."

Ying told her. She told her the whole of it in the flat voice, and Zoya listened with her hands still, which was how she listened, and when it was done she asked the only question that mattered, which was the question Yiming had been avoiding for a month.

"Is he in danger because of you, or are you in danger because of him?"

Nobody answered. The fridge hummed. Somewhere down the alley a scooter went by and did not stop, and the three of them heard it and did not look at each other.

"The rule was supposed to protect him," Zoya said, to Ying. "Nothing on his body from anyone who knows his face. I helped you write that rule. It was a good rule. It made him a ghost." She looked at Yiming. "But you are not a ghost. You are the most photographed man in four streets. And the person who pays for the photographs is her, because she is the one they can find."

"I know," Yiming said.

"Then say the other thing," Zoya said.

He did not say the other thing, which was that he would stop. They all knew he would not stop. Stopping now would not put the names back in the box or the boy back on the scooter or the money back in the fines; it would only take

away the one thing he could still do, which was stand between the short list and the people on it.

Zoya flew out on the twenty-ninth day, a day early, because Ying made her, because there was a man on a scooter and because a foreign woman standing at a café door is a different kind of story than a local one. Yiming carried her suitcase to the curb before dawn. The market was still dark. The man across the street was there, on the scooter, not moving, the visor down.

Yiming talked to Zoya properly only once, on the sixteenth night, on the roof of the gei pou, where they had gone to get away from the machines. She asked him what he was going to do. He said he did not know. She said that in her work, when a system is failing, the first question is always which part you are willing to lose. She said the second question is whether you are lying to yourself about the answer. Then she went back downstairs, and he sat on the roof a while longer, and the answer sat with him, and the answer was not one he could say out loud.

Zoya looked at him for a long moment. Then she did the thing she did, which was to look at him openly, the way you look at a thing you have decided not to be afraid of, and then she turned to Ying and kissed her, in the open street, in front of the man and the dark and the whole district, and got into the taxi.

The taxi took her away. Ying stood on the curb with her hands at her sides and watched it go, and she did not cry, because she did not cry, and the man on the scooter started his engine and went away up the street, unhurried, the way a man goes when he has finished the thing he came to do.

Ying turned and walked back inside. At the door she stopped and looked at the little sign above it, the café's sign, with her father's name on it, and then she went in and locked the door and closed the side door for good.

She stood at the counter until the taxi turned at the market gate under the dead camera and was gone. Then she looked at the street the way she looked at a system she was about to work on: door by door, window by window, the old man in the doorway, the woman with the vegetables, the boy on the scooter who was not there anymore. She was making the map. She was always making the map. And the map, that morning, had one fewer person on it than it had had the day before, and she had done that herself, to keep her, and it did not feel like keeping anything at all.

Chapter 17

The thing she found was the shirt.

He had washed it himself, badly, in the sink at two in the morning, and had hung it in the back to dry, and had not washed the collar, and by morning the collar had a brown rim on it that was not sauce and not tea.

His mother did the laundry. She had done the laundry every day for thirty years, and a collar like that was not a thing she would miss.

Yiming knew she had found it the moment he came into the shop, because she was standing at the table with the shirt in her hand and the ledger open beside her, and she was not doing anything with either of them. She was just standing there, with the reading glasses pushed up on her head.

He should have said something. He had rehearsed a hundred lies over five years, and not one of them came.

She put the shirt on the table and went back to the stove. That was all. She did not ask. She did not look at him. She turned the congee and went on with the morning, and Yiming stood there a moment and then went to work, and the day went by the way days go by, and neither of them said anything at all.

After that she watched.

His mother did not stop doing the ledger, because the ledger was how she survived the knowledge. She wrote the same columns and added the same numbers and put the takings under the lid, and the writing was not denial; it was arithmetic, and arithmetic was the one thing in the family that could be relied on to behave. She had run the books through the stabbing and the surgery and the trial and the years of a shoulder that did not work, and she had never once written a number she could not stand behind. The ledger was her form of the pole, and she bounced her weight onto it every day, and the columns did not break.

She watched the way a mother watches, which is not the way a policeman watches. She did not follow him. She did not ask him where he went. She simply

began to be awake in the room next to his at the hours when he left, and to be at the stove when he came back, and to look at his hands first and his face second, which is the order in which people who have done laundry learn to look.

He found the notebook three days later. It was on the table when he came out, open to the page with the map of the dead cameras, the market gate, the arcade, the footbridge, the little crosses where a street went blind. Someone had put a cup of tea on it. It was not a question. It was a thing left where a question would have been.

And there was the print. He had been carrying the folded door print in his pocket, the plain one, the four-yuan kind, and it had gone through the wash with the shirt, and she had found it in the drum, a small paper god, sodden and soft. She had laid it on the windowsill to dry, and it had dried into a stiff gray shape, and it sat there for two days, and then it was gone.

He did not ask where it went. He suspected she had burnt it, in the stove, with the joss paper, which would have been the correct thing to do, because a god that has been through the water is not a god you keep.

He began to notice the small changes in the house. She stopped leaving the television on in the back room. She began to lock the front door at eleven and to leave the key on the hook by the till, which she had never done, so that he would not have to come in through the front. She put a flashlight in the drawer by the door with new batteries. None of it was said. All of it was meant. She was doing what she had always done, which was to arrange the world so that the people she loved would survive it, and the arranging had a language of its own, and the language did not contain a word for what he was doing.

Once, near the end of the month, he came home at three and found her at the front window, not at the table, standing in the dark with the curtain held back. She was looking up the market street, toward the canal. She did not turn when he came in. She said, still looking out: "The market gate camera is dead. It has been dead since the flood." Then she let the curtain fall and went to bed. Yiming stood in the dark. She had been keeping her own map. Hers was better than his; she had been walking that street for thirty years and had never needed a notebook.

On the fourth night she waited up.

He came in at one, and the shop was dark, and the light over the ledger was on, and his mother was sitting at the table with the ledger closed and her hands folded on top of it. His father was asleep in the back. The radio was off. It was the quietest the shop had been in years.

He sat down. He was still in the night clothes, and there was tape on his forearm under the sleeve, and blood on the tape, and she looked at it and then at him and did not look away.

She said one thing. That was all she ever said about it.

"How long."

He looked at her. He could have lied. He had lied to better liars than his mother. But she had not asked him a question in five years, and she had chosen this one, and the question was not really a question. It was a door held open, and what he said in the doorway was what they would both have to live with.

"Since June," he said.

She did not move. She looked at his arm, and at the tape, and at the door of the shop behind him, the door with the door print on it, the ordinary print, the same four-yuan god the family had pasted up every year of his life. And Yiming understood, all at once, that she knew the rest. She knew the paper face and the missing mask and the night the man had died at the end of the blue wall. She had known, probably, since the body. She had been waiting for him to be honest with the one thing, and now he had been, and the rest she would carry without ever mentioning it, because that was how she carried things.

She got up. She went to the cupboard and took out the first-aid tin and set it on the table, and then she set the clean gauze beside it, and the yellow bottle, and the small scissors. Then she went into the back and did not come out again.

She had made the soup that night with ginger, because the night was cold, and he understood, eating it, that his mother had known he would come in cold and had made the soup in advance, which meant she had known he would go out and come back, which meant she had known for a long time.

He sat at the table for a long time. Then he changed the tape himself, cleaning the cut, and put the tin away, and turned off the light.

After that, nothing was said. But nothing was the same, either. She began to leave the gauze out for him before he left at night, and to leave a bowl covered at

the stove for when he came back, and to put the shop's takings under the ledger rather than in the drawer, so that he could reach them in the dark. She never once asked where he went. She never once told his father. She became the third person in the house who knew, and the only one who had decided to know nothing more.

His father did not know. That was the thing Yiming was most careful about, in a way that was almost tender. His father was a proud man who had lost the use of an arm and had made his peace with the shop and the tea and the counting of the change, and if he learned that his son had gone into the night with a pole, he would have to do something, and there was nothing he could do, and the doing of nothing was the thing that would have broken him. So the mother and the son kept the secret between them, and in the mornings the father came out and read the paper and drank his tea and complained about the price of pork, and the two of them looked at him and said nothing, and the nothing was the largest thing in the room.

There was one more thing the mother did, and Yiming did not notice it for a week. She began to lock the shop's front door at eleven and to leave the key on the hook by the till. She began to put the day's takings under the ledger instead of in the drawer. She began to leave the back light on all night, so that the yard was never fully dark. None of it was a request. None of it was an argument. It was a woman building the house around a son who went out at night, and the building was the only way she had left of saying that she knew — and that she did not intend to ask him to stop, because asking him to stop would have been a thing he could refuse, and a house that can be refused is a house that can be lost.

And once, on a night in the twelfth month, when he came in later than usual and sat down without taking off his shoes, she came out of the back with a bowl of soup and set it in front of him without a word. On the bowl there was a piece of paper under the rim. It was not a note. It was the receipt from the hospital, the long folded sheet from 2019, the itemized bill, the one she had put in the ledger and never shown to anyone. She had taken it out and put it under the bowl, on purpose, where he would find it when he lifted the bowl to eat.

He did not know what she meant by it. He knew she meant something. He looked at the long sheet with its columns, the numbers of the days of his father's

shoulder, and his mother had just handed him the one file she kept — the file of what the city had already taken from the family. She was telling him, in the only language she had left, that there was a bill for everything, and that a bill is a thing someone always has to pay.

He ate the soup. He put the receipt back in the ledger. He did not say anything, and neither did she, and the two of them sat at the table in the dark of the shop with the radio off and the street going on outside, and that was the closest the two of them came, in five years, to talking about it, or to anything at all.

The gauze kept appearing. The bowl kept appearing. On the good nights she left the tin closed, and on the bad nights she left it open. That was her whole vocabulary now, and he had learned to read it the way he read the weather: closed meant she thought the night had been quiet; open meant she had seen the tape and the dark on the cotton. She never looked at him when she did it. She did it the way she did everything, with her back turned and her hands busy, as if the leaving of the tin were itself a kind of cooking.

He looked at the receipt for a long time. He had read it before, in the hospital, but he had never read it as a document. It was a document of the thing that had happened, written in the language of the thing that had happened, and it had a line for the ambulance and a line for the surgery and a line for each day of the stay, and at the bottom a total, which the family had paid over two years in installments, and which had never once been discussed in his presence. That was the other file. Everyone kept a file. Lam kept a file, and Ying kept a chain, and he kept a notebook, and his mother kept a hospital bill folded in a ledger, and the city kept its own, and none of the files talked to each other, and the truth lived in the gaps between them, where no camera could see. He put the receipt back inside the ledger and went to bed, and the drawer under the till had one more piece of paper in it than it had had that morning.

CHAPTER 18

Chapter 18

The opera came to the market in the twelfth month, for the birthday of the earth god at the corner of the dried-goods row, which was a festival the street kept the way it kept everything, by putting a stage up at one end and letting the rest of life go on around it.

They built the stage out of bamboo, the same bamboo the noodle shop used, the fat poles lashed with wire and covered with planks, and the troupe came down from Foshan in a van and put up the red cloth and the two speakers and the little shrine with the earth god on it, and by six in the evening the whole street smelled of incense and fried food and the cheap sweet smoke of the sparklers the children were already lighting.

The troupe was a small one, the kind that played temple birthdays and village festivals and the birthdays of gods who had only one street to their name. There were eight of them, old and young, and their leader was a woman of about sixty with a voice like a hinge. They would play for the god first, because that was the rule, and then the god's birthday belonged to the people, and the people would come with their stools and their children and their thermoses and watch whatever was on.

What was on, that year, was Zhong Kui Jia Mei (钟馗嫁妹) — Zhong Kui Marries Off His Sister.

Yiming did not want to go. He went because the whole street went, and because a man who does not go to the god's birthday is a man who has something to hide. He stood at the back, in the dark at the edge of the light, with his hands in his pockets, and watched the red cloth and the old actors and the crowd.

The play, as it was played, went like this. Zhong Kui is a scholar of great ability but terrible face, and he goes to the imperial examination and passes, and the emperor, seeing his face, refuses him the title, and Zhong Kui, in his shame, takes his own life. The gods, respecting his learning, give him command of the

ghosts. And Zhong Kui, from the other world, does not forget his sister, who is alone and unprovided for, and he returns with his ghost soldiers to marry her to his friend Du Ping, a good man who once buried his body. The play is a ghost play and a wedding play at once, and there are devils driven off and lanterns and a marriage sedan and a bride who is frightened of her brother and loves him anyway.

The street loved it. The aunties cried at the ghost soldiers. The children liked the devils. The old men at the back talked through the singing and stopped only for the fights.

The street loved it, and the street understood it, and the street did not say what it understood. The aunties cried at the ghost soldiers because they had all lost someone; the men talked through the singing because they had all lost someone and did not want to say so; the children liked the devils because the devils were the only part of it that was not about death. Yiming watched the crowd the way he had learned to watch a crowd, and a festival, he thought, is a district counting itself: the one night when the living and the missing and the dead are all in the same square, under the same paper faces, and nobody has to name which is which. That was the whole reason the opera came every year. It was not entertainment. It was a census the street took of its dead.

Yiming watched the crowd as much as the play. The aunties had brought their own stools and their own thermoses, and the men from the construction sites had come in their work clothes, and the children ran between the legs of the adults with sparklers, and the whole street had the look it had at Duanwu and at the New Year, which was the look of a place that had decided, for one night, to be a place. There were perhaps two hundred people in the market, and half of them knew his face, and none of them looked at him, because the play was better than a man standing at the edge of the light.

Yiming stood at the edge of the light and watched the failed scholar, and thought about the board on the school wall and the place that had been his and the place that had been given to Zhou Weikang and the exam he had never sat. And he understood, standing there in the smell of the incense, that the play had been about him all along, that it had always been about him, and that he had simply never been in the audience before. The scholar with the ruined face who

never gets what he earned. The man who comes back from the other side for the sake of the people he left behind. He did not believe in any of it. He stood in the dark and watched it and felt it land, all the same, the way a joke lands even when you know the joke.

Ying stood a few meters away, near the food stalls, and watched the sister.

She had come with Zoya's scarf around her neck, because Zoya was five hours behind and it was cold, and she watched the part where the ghost brother comes for the sister and the sister does not want to go and goes anyway. Ying did not cry at plays. But she watched the sister the way a person watches a mirror in a shop window, which is to say quickly, and then away.

Ah Po was at the front, in a plastic chair, with a blanket over her knees. Her eyes were almost gone, and she could not see the actors, and she did not need to. She knew the play the way she knew the folding of the paper. She listened to the singing and moved her lips to the lines and folded, without looking, a paper ingot for the god, and finished it, and set it on her lap, and started another. The troupe's masks and props were stacked on a table at the side of the stage, under a sheet of plastic, and Ah Po's chair was beside that table, because that was where the old women were always put, at the edge, out of the way.

Ah Po had been coming to these plays for eighty years. She had told Yiming once that the paper stall had been her husband's, and that she had kept it after he died because a stall is a thing you keep for the person who started it, and that the gods you make for other people's doors are the only children she had left. She did not say it as a sad thing. She said it the way she said the price of joss paper, and then she went back to folding.

Yiming saw the mask in the second act.

It was on the prop table, under the plastic, half covered. Somebody had taken the plastic off to get at the swords, and the mask lay there in the light of the little shrine lamp, and it was his mask — broken at the jaw, mended at some point with a strip of tape, the tape now painted over in gray. The troupe had found it somewhere, or been given it, or bought it off the child's mother for a handful of change, because a broken god's face is exactly the kind of thing a temple troupe collects the way a magpie collects foil. They had put it with the other heads. It was a prop now. It was going to be a prop for as long as the troupe lasted, and

then it would be a prop in another troupe's box, and in a hundred years it might be in a museum with a card that said the province and the century and nothing about the boy who had worn it across his own face for one night in the rain.

He did not take it. He stood at the edge of the light and looked at it, and Ah Po, who could not see the stage but whose memory was a whole street, turned her head toward him and said, without preamble, the way she said everything:

"You should not have let it out of the house."

Yiming did not ask her what she meant. He had learned, over a summer, that Ah Po said things at the exact moment they mattered and then said nothing else, and that asking her was like asking the weather to explain itself.

Ah Po did not look at the mask on the prop table, and she did not need to, because she had made it with her hands and her hands remembered it. She had made maybe four of them in twenty years, and this was one, and she had known it the moment the plastic came off. She did not say the rest. What she thought, sitting in her chair with the paper ingot on her lap, was that a god made for other people's doors should never have been worn on a man's face, because a door is a thing you pass and a face is a thing you carry, and the carrying is what changes the man. But that was a whole life of a sentence, and she was ninety, and she had learned to spend her words the way she spent paper: carefully, and only where they would be read.

At the side of the crowd, near the entrance to the alley, a man was standing with his phone up. He was not filming the play. He was filming the crowd — slowly, moving the phone across the faces, the way a person films a crowd when they are looking for a particular face in it. Yiming watched him for a while. Then the man lowered the phone, looked at the screen, and walked away up the alley, and Yiming did not follow, because there were two hundred people watching a ghost play and a man who follows a man at the god's birthday is a man who will be remembered.

Lam was in the crowd too, near the middle, with his coat on and his hands in his pockets. He had come because he came to the market now, the way he came to the market, without telling anyone. He watched the play for a while and then he watched the people watching the play, because that was his habit, and he saw the noodle-shop son at the edge of the light, and the woman from the internet

café near the food stalls, and the old paper-seller by the prop table, and he was looking at the same four streets the rumor was about. They were all standing right here, in the red light, watching a god marry off his sister.

Lam had been to the market every week for a month now, and the shopkeepers had stopped noticing him, which was what he wanted. He had bought noodles at Li Kee three times and had not once asked the son anything. He had learned, in twenty years, that the best thing you can do with a person you are watching is to become furniture in their street, because furniture is the one thing nobody looks at.

He did not approach anyone. He watched the play to the end, because it was a good play, and because a man standing alone in a crowd at a festival is the most ordinary thing in the world.

The play ended at ten. The earth god got his bow; the troupe packed; the stage came down the way it had gone up, bamboo and wire and red cloth, and by eleven the market was a market again. Ah Po's paper ingot was still on her lap. The prop table was cleared, and the broken mask was put in a cardboard box with the swords and the crowns and the false beards, and the box was carried to the van, and the van went back to Foshan, and none of it had anything to do with any of them.

Yiming walked Ying home to the gei pou and then walked home himself. The shop's door print, the ordinary one, hung in the dark over the door, and he stopped under it for a moment and looked at the face he had not worn for six months, and went inside.

At the end of the street the van turned and was gone, and the market folded up the chairs and put away the shrine, and the earth god went back into his little house at the corner with the incense still smoking, and the light over the wet market clicked off at the usual time, and the four streets went back to being four streets.

In the shop, on the table, his mother had left a bowl under a cloth and the first-aid tin and the yellow bottle, though he had not been hurt that night, and had not been out at all except to the play. It was not the tin she needed to leave. It was the habit. She had decided that the leaving of it was the thing she could do, and so she did it, every night, whether or not there was a wound.

He sat down and ate the cold bowl, and outside the street went on being a street, and the mask in the van went on being a mask, on the road to a town he would never see.

CHAPTER 19

Chapter 19

The ledgers were paper, and that was the thing that made it possible.

Ying found them because she was looking for them, in the way she looked for everything, by not looking at the thing itself but at the space around it. The room above the hotpot place did its business on screens and phones and a laminator, but a business that moves people across a border still needs a book, because a book is the only record a man can hold in his hand and put in a drawer and not have subpoenaed by a server he does not control. So there were two books, and the books lived not in the office but in a storage unit on the ground floor of the same building, behind a roller door, in a locked cabinet of the kind you buy from a hardware shop.

She learned this the way she learned everything, from a number. The office paid rent on the storage unit every month from the same company card, and the payment described the unit's number, and the unit's number described the floor plan, and the floor plan described a roller door that the building's own camera — her father's camera, on the same DVR with the same password — had watched open and close at the same hours for a year.

She told Yiming on a Tuesday, in the back room, with the machines breathing around them.

"It is the only thing in this whole business that cannot be rebuilt from a server," she said. "If you take it, the room loses the years. It loses the names of everyone who already went and everyone who is going. It loses the list."

"Then I take it," Yiming said.

"That is a burglary," she said.

"It is paper," he said.

She looked at him for a long time, in the flat way, and then she did the thing she did when she had decided something and did not want to say it aloud, which was to turn back to the screen and pull up the camera for the storage unit and leave it open for him and say nothing more.

They had one argument about it, the only real argument they ever had.

"If they catch you, it is not a summer thing," she said. "It is a burglary and a theft and the destruction of records, and a man who does those things to a company that moves people is a man who goes away for a long time, or worse."

"Then it is a good thing they will not catch me," he said.

"Do not do the voice," she said. "The flat voice. I have heard you use it on everyone in this district, and it does not work on me. If you are going to do this, do it as the person you are, and know that I am telling you it is a mistake, and do it anyway, and do not pretend."

He looked at her. "It is a mistake," he said. "I am doing it anyway."

"Good," she said. "Then we are both telling the truth."

He went on a Wednesday night, at two, when the hotpot place was closing and the alley was empty. Ying had the building's camera loop for the night, and the roller door had a padlock and the padlock had a shackle that was older than the cardboard boxes behind it. He had a bolt cutter in the insulated box, and he used it once, and the sound was louder than he expected in the dark, and then he was inside with the boxes of paper and the smell of the hotpot and the cement.

There were four boxes. Each box was full of forms, one form to a recruit, a photograph clipped to the corner of each form, a name and an ID number and a fee and a date and a destination written in a clerk's careful hand. Some of the photographs were of boys. Some were of girls. The one on top of the third box was Ah Kin, in his good shirt, against the blue background, clipped to a form that said the date he left and the amount of the fee and a word that Yiming did not recognize, which was the name of the place he had been sent.

He looked at the photograph for a long moment. Then he put the boxes in the insulated box, four boxes of paper, and carried them out through the roller door into the alley, and the weight of them was the weight of a small person.

He did not take them to the police, because the police would ask how he had them, and because Wan was bought, and because a file in a drawer is a thing a bought man can take out of a drawer. He did not take them to the gei pou, because the gei pou was already being watched. He did the thing the street did with paper it wanted gone, which was to take it to the corner of the market where the people burned what they sent to the dead.

He built the fire in the square. He had brought the joss-paper set from Ah Po's stall the day before, the tin basin and the small stack of printed paper for the god of the dead, so that the fire would look like a fire the street had lit and not a fire a boy had lit. And then he fed the ledgers into it, page by page, and the flames took the photographs first, because the photographs were the driest, and the faces curled and blackened and went up the air shaft with the sparks, and the names went next, and the fee columns, and the dates, and the little careful handwriting of the clerk, and the forms turned into one long scroll of ash that broke apart in the heat and drifted over the market.

He fed them in by the handful now, and the photographs went up in little flashes, and the names went up in soft gray curls, and he was watching the only record of a hundred people's whereabouts become a thing a wind could take. The clerk's handwriting was neat and small and patient, the handwriting of a person who had been taught to write on ruled lines and had never stopped, and Yiming read the columns as they burned: name, age, province, fee paid, fee owed, date departed, destination. The destination column had a city and a number beside it, and beside each number a small tick, and the ticks were the ones who had arrived, and the ones who had arrived did not have a column for whether they had come back.

It took half an hour. He did not hurry. He fed them in and watched the faces burn, the boys and the girls from a dozen provinces whose faces he had never seen until tonight, and he was destroying the only proof that any of them existed as anything but a phone number on a list. It was a crime he was committing to prevent a worse one. He knew how that sentence sounded. He fed the paper in anyway.

By three it was ash. The basin cooled. He swept the ash with his hands, because a man sweeping ash with his hands is a man the street understands, and he put the basin back under Ah Po's stall, and he went home and washed and lay down and did not sleep.

At four, a car came up the market street and stopped across from the ash.

Yiming was on the roof by then, because he could not lie in the bed, and he saw it: a dark car, engine running, the headlights off, and inside it the orange of a

phone screen, and a man sitting very still and looking at the cold ash on the concrete, the way a man looks at a thing he will have to explain to someone.

Yiming watched the car for twenty minutes. Then the car turned around, quiet, and went away down the street, and Yiming stayed on the roof until the sky went gray.

The market woke to the ash the way it woke to everything, without surprise. The aunties saw the basin and the black mark on the concrete and decided, among themselves, that somebody had sent something to somebody, which was true, and that it was a private thing, which was also true, and that it was none of their business, which was false but kind. By noon the ash had been swept into the drain by the market cleaner, who did not ask, and the concrete was wet and gray and clean, and the only trace of four boxes of names was a darker patch in the shape of a fire.

Ah Po had watched him build it. He had not seen her, but she had been at the window of the joss-paper shop, because she was always at the window when the street did something, and the next day she said one thing to him when he came to return the tin basin.

"You burned paper," she said. "Paper is for the dead. Whatever was on it, you have decided it is dead."

"Yes," he said.

"Then it is dead," she said, and took the basin, and that was the end of the conversation.

Two days after that, a van left the loading bay of the building at the usual time with only half a load, and the small sign on the fourth floor came down, and two men carried a laminator and four filing boxes of nothing out to a car. The room was moving. Yiming watched from the doorway of the shoe-repair place. He had done the thing he wanted: the room was leaving. Making it leave was not making it stop. A room that leaves is a room that goes somewhere else, and somewhere else is a place he could not see, and a place he could not see was the whole of the problem.

There was one more thing, and he did not tell Ying, because it was the kind of thing you do not tell anyone. In the third box, under Ah Kin's form, there had been one page that was not a recruit's. It was a partner's page, a sheet of

letterhead with a list of names and phone numbers on it, and at the top, in the same neat clerk's hand, the name of the parent company and the name of the man who owned it, written out in full — Mak Tak-ming — with a phone number beside it and a second number that had the look of a number that answered in the afternoon. Yiming had not burned that page. He had folded it and put it in his pocket, and it was in the drawer under the till now, with the exam ticket and the red envelope and the shell company's name, and he did not know yet what he was going to do with it. He only knew that he had, for the first time, the man's name in his own handwriting, and that a name in your own handwriting is a thing that can be used.

He had wanted the burning to be the end of it. He had wanted the paper to be the whole of the thing, so that the names would go free and the room would close and the street would go back to what it had been before June. He understood, lying on the roof in the cold, that it was not the end of it.

He thought about the woman on the phone who answered in the afternoon, and about the fact that a number is a person, and that the person who answered the afternoon number was in a room somewhere in the city, sleeping, eating, watching television, and that she would get up in the morning and answer the phone again and not think about the ash in the market square at all. That was the thing the paper could not burn: the ordinariness. The machine did not run on cruelty. Cruelty would have been easier to hate. The machine ran on a woman who answered a phone in the afternoon and slept at night, and there were forty of her in forty rooms, and none of them would ever see a compound, and none of them would ever have to. It was the beginning of the thing the summer had been leading to. He had taken the room's memory, and a thing without a memory is frightened, and a frightened thing with money and vans and a bought policeman does not run away.

It comes.

Chapter 20

The call came to Ah Kin's mother on the forty-ninth day, at four in the morning, which is the hour the rooms use, because at four in the morning a mother's defenses are down and the city is quiet.

Ying heard about it from the aunties, because the aunties heard everything. The phone had rung in the old woman's room, and a man's voice, calm and polite, had said that her son was in a place where he was being looked after and that the fees for that looking-after had grown, and that if she wanted him to come home she should send a number, and that she should not tell the police, because the police would only make the fees grow. And then the boy's voice, Ah Kin's voice, had come on the line, thin and quick, saying, "Ma, do what they say, ma, do what they say," and then the line had gone dead.

The old woman brought the number and the phone to Li Kee the same morning, because the noodle shop was where she took the things she could not read. Yiming read it. It was a number he did not know, and the amount was a number he could not raise, and the instructions said to send it to an account in a name that was not a name.

Ying looked at the phone and the number and did not say what she thought. She did not have to. Yiming had read the same accounts she had read; a demand like this came from one of two situations, and in both of them the boy was already past the last door, which was the door where they take the passport. The fee was not a fee. The fee was the last way to milk a family before the family stopped being useful.

"Can you tell where the call came from," Yiming said.

"Across a border," Ying said. "And then across another border. And then a room with a hundred phones. You cannot trace it. Nobody can trace it. That is the whole reason they use the phone." She looked at the old woman, who was sitting at the corner table with her hands around a cup she was not drinking. "If

she sends the money, they will take it and call again. If she does not, they will stop calling. Those are the choices. There is no third choice."

"There is always a third choice," Yiming said.

She looked at him with the flat look. "There is for you," she said. "That is the problem."

The forty-nine days ended that week. The old woman did not hold a ceremony, because there was no body and because she did not believe her son was dead, and the not-believing was the only thing she had left.

The old woman kept coming to the shop. She had nothing else to keep. She ordered plain and no meat, and Yiming put in the pork, and she ate it, and after a while she began to talk to the wall above the counter, which was not a wall but the space where the family hung things: a calendar, a photograph of a cousin's wedding, a receipt for the gas. She talked to it in a low voice about her son, in the present tense, as if he were coming back and she was merely keeping the seat warm. Yiming listened and did not correct her, because a correction would have been a cruelty and a lie at once, and the market had taught him that there are mercies that look exactly like lies. She came to Li Kee every Tuesday, as before. She ordered plain and no meat. Yiming put in the pork anyway, and she ate it, and neither of them said anything.

The café was compromised that same week.

It came through the licensing. The accumulated fines and the old camera business and the step that was a tripping hazard had reached a threshold that nobody had told Ying about, and one morning there was a paper on the wall of the café and a man at the counter explaining, politely, that the license was suspended pending a review, that the review would take between thirty and ninety days, and that the café could not operate in the interim. The internet machines went dark at noon. The regulars stood outside and looked at the paper and then at Ying and then at their phones, and the girl who ran the counter cried, once, and then stopped and helped Ying tape the machines.

Ying's father came down that evening. He was sixty and had built the café the year Ying was born, and he stood in the doorway of the dark room and looked at the rows of dead machines the way a man looks at a field after the water has taken it. He did not shout. He asked her a question, and she answered it, and the

answer was not the truth, and he knew it was not the truth, and he did not ask again. He turned off the lights and locked the door and went home, and Ying stood in the alley and watched the side door she had sealed and did not cry, because she did not cry.

That week the room above the hotpot place sent its answer to the burning.

It was not a raid. It was quieter than a raid. A man came to the gei pou in the daytime, when the review was on and the door was shut, and asked Ying, through the glass, whether she was the one who kept the box. He said it in a pleasant voice. Then he left a card on the step, and the card was blank except for a number, and the number was the afternoon number, the one that answered in the afternoon and never in the morning. She did not pick it up. The wind took it down the alley.

Yiming came that night and found her sitting in the dark room with the dead machines and the card gone and the map still on the wall. She told him about the man. She told him about the license. She told him about the call to Ah Kin's mother. Then she said the thing she had been building toward, in the flat voice, without any change in it at all.

"I can fix it," she said in the flat voice. "Everything. I can make the 2019 file disappear, or change it, or put a name in it that is not yours. I can give you an alibi for every night since June. I can make the mask a thing that never existed. I can take you off every system in this city, including the ones my father installed, including the one in the drawer under the till. You would still be you. You would just be a person nobody could prove anything about."

He looked at her.

"That is the thing you did for Zhou," he said.

"Yes," she said.

"That is the thing you have been waiting seven years to offer me."

"Yes," she said. "Mostly."

He knew the arithmetic of it. He knew that if he let her do it, the summer would close like water, and the god on the door would go back to being paper, and the shop would keep its son and the mother would keep her unsaid sentence and the girl at the café would keep her machines and her father would keep his license. He knew that refusing it would cost all of that. He also knew the shape

of the door, because he had stood in it once, at sixteen, when he had walked her to the end of the market street and asked her whether it was true, and she had told him everything, and he had chosen not to walk through it, because some doors are the kind a person does not walk through and still call themselves a person.

"No," he said.

"Yiming."

"No," he said. "If you fix it, then everything after this happens to someone else. Everything I did happens to someone else. The boy in the compound, the old woman, the man on the concrete — all of it lands on the person you invented, and I get to keep my life, and that is not a trade I can make. You were sixteen. You did not know what you were doing. I did."

"You are going to go to prison," she said, and her voice did not change at all.

"Maybe," he said.

"You are going to go to prison for a man who did not deserve it, on a street that is about to be demolished, for a city that will forget the whole thing in a year."

"Maybe," he said.

She sat in the dark with the dead machines around her and did not argue further, because she had always been able to tell when a thing was decided. She looked at the map on the wall, the dead gate, the dark arcade, the bridge, the streets without buildings. Then she said the last thing she said that night.

"When it comes," she said, "I will not be able to protect you. I need you to know that now. I will do the one thing I can do, and it will not be the thing you want."

He nodded. He did not know then what the one thing was. He would know, later, on a morning in May, when she put a courier envelope on a counter in front of a task force and did not look at him.

He left the café by the sealed side door, which she had opened for him one last time. He walked home through the market, and the market was empty, and the earth god's shrine at the corner still had its lamp on, and the light over the wet market was off. At Li Kee the door print hung on the door, and his mother

had left the tin out, open, and a bowl under a cloth, and he stood under the print for a long time before he went in.

Across the street, at the edge of the market, a man was standing in the dark, not moving, and Yiming did not know whether it was the man with the walk or Inspector Lam or nobody at all. He went inside and closed the door, and the man in the dark went on standing there, patient, the way the city stands, for as long as it needs to.

Lam came to Li Kee three days later, in the afternoon lull, with a photograph in his coat pocket. He had gotten it the week before, from a small opera troupe in Foshan, because Lam had spent the winter doing the one thing he knew how to do, which was to follow paper. A broken paper face had been found in the troupe's prop box, and the troupe's leader had photographed it for the insurance, and the photograph had reached the district on the same rumor that reached everything. Lam ordered a bowl and ate it slowly. Then he took out the photograph and laid it on the counter, face up: the broken jaw, the strip of tape painted over in gray, the god's scowl.

"Have you seen this," he said.

Yiming looked at the photograph for exactly as long as a man looks at a thing he has never seen. His hands stayed in the dough. His face did what it had learned to do over a year, which was nothing.

"No," he said.

Lam looked at him for a moment. Then he put the photograph away and finished his bowl and paid and left, and the bell over the door rang once, and the noodles went on steaming, and Yiming stood behind the counter with his hands in the dough and the winter was over. The man with the photograph would come back, and the next time he came he would not be asking. His mother came out of the back room and looked at the door the detective had gone through and then at her son, and said nothing, and went back to the ledger, and the two of them went on with the afternoon.

CHAPTER 21

Chapter 21

The New Year came at the end of January, and for three days the four streets belonged to themselves again.

The city emptied toward the north. The delivery riders went home to their provinces and the arcade shut its shutters and the alley behind the gei pou went quiet for the first time since the summer. The people who stayed — the old ones, the shopkeepers, the ones whose families were here or nowhere — did what the street did every year, which was to cook too much and visit too much and eat for three days and pretend that the year had not been the year it had been.

Li Kee closed for two days, which it did not do for anything else. His mother made the dishes she made once a year: the braised pork with the fermented bean curd, the steamed fish with the ginger, the turnip cake fried in slices, the sweet lotus-root soup. His father sat at the table and drank a little rice wine, which he did not usually drink, and put on the good shirt that had been bought the year before the stabbing, and the shirt hung on the ruined shoulder in a way that Yiming had learned not to look at.

On the first morning the father handed out the lai see (利是, the New Year lucky-money packets). He had always done it, and he did it now with one working hand, the red envelopes fanned in the other, and he gave one to the mother and one to Yiming and one, which he always did, to the photograph of his own father that hung beside the stove. Then he sat back and said, the way he said it every year, in the voice he used for prices and weather:

"Ting yat. Come back — I'll pull your noodles."

It was the short form of the old promise. He had said it to Yiming every New Year since 2019, and he meant it the same way every time, which was as a joke and a blessing at once, the thing a father says to a son who has not gone anywhere. Yiming had learned to say nothing and smile. This year he looked at his father across the table — the good shirt, the one hand, the shoulder that got worse in the cold — and the promise had been running all this time in the other

direction. The thing he could not say to the man was the thing the whole book of them had been written about. He could not keep the shop and the streets. He could not sit at this table as the son and walk the market as the god. The New Year was the one week when the two lives overlapped, and the overlap was already tearing.

His father did not know. His mother knew. And the knowing sat at the table with the three of them and the photograph and the four dishes, and said nothing, as it had said nothing for six months.

His mother gave him a lai see on the first morning, which she had not done since he was a child, and inside it was not money but the key to the drawer under the till. He did not understand it at first. Then he did. She was handing him the shop, in the only way she had, at the one time of year when the street allowed a person to say a thing without saying it. She had decided that whatever was going to happen to him, the shop would be his until it happened, and that he should know it. He put the key in his pocket and did not thank her, because thanking her would have made it a transaction, and it was not a transaction; it was a mother telling her son that she had stopped waiting for him to be the person she had raised.

The winter was bad for the shoulder. The cold got into the nerve the way cold gets into a wall, and the father slept badly and was short in the mornings, and the mother warmed the oil and rubbed the shoulder every night, and both of them pretended it was a small thing. Yiming watched this the way he watched everything now, from the other side of a window he could not open. There was a doctor in the city who could do something with the nerve, or so the aunties said. The operation cost money the family did not have, unless the shop had a good year, and the shop was on a street that was being demolished in the spring.

The street did the same thing it did every year. The park crew did the form on the first morning, in their good jackets, and even the ones who had been arguing about the demolition did the form, because a New Year is a truce. Uncle Leung brought a thermos of tea and a bag of melon seeds and sat on the bench and watched the market. The demolition notice was still on the fence, tied at the corner where the wind had lifted it, and nobody looked at it, and everybody had read it. Somebody had pasted a strip of red paper across the top of it, the way you

paste red over a thing to take the bad luck out of it, and the date was still there under the red, and the red did not change the date.

On the second day he went out to the market, because the New Year was the one time the market behaved itself, and the street belonged to the people who had stayed, and he walked it the way he had walked it for a year, without thinking, and the market wished him a good year, and the aunties gave him sweets, and the old man from the roots-and-stone stall — the one who had denied knowing him — nodded once, which was the most the old man had given him all year.

The shrine at the corner of the dried-goods row, the one the market had made for Zhong Kui Gor, had been cleaned and repainted for the New Year. Somebody had put a new orange and a new paper umbrella, and somebody had pasted the year's door print on the wall above it, the ordinary print, the same four-yuan god the whole district used. Yiming stood in front of it for a moment, the way he stood in front of it sometimes, and did not put anything down and did not take anything away.

Ying came on the second day with a bag of oranges and a tin of biscuits, which was what people brought, and sat with the family for an hour and did not talk about the café or the license or the card in the alley. She ate the turnip cake and drank the tea and looked at Yiming across the table the way she looked at him, and when she left she stood at the door and said the New Year greeting, and then, quieter, to Yiming, in the flat voice, "Three months." He did not ask her what she meant. He knew. The demolition, the license, the room, the summer — all of it was coming in three months, and the New Year was the last quiet before it.

Mrs. Cheung came by with her dried goods on her back and stopped beside him and looked at the shrine, and then said, without preamble, the thing that had been in her all year.

The New Year made the district honest for three days. People who had not spoken all year spoke; people who had argued about the demolition stood in the same queue for the turnip cake; the old men who had quarreled about the exercise ground did the form side by side. Yiming watched it. A festival is a truce the city declares on itself. For three days it works, and on the fourth day the truce

ends and the world is exactly as it was. That was the thing about the New Year. It did not change anything. It only proved that for a little while, with enough food and enough incense, the district could imagine being a place that did not need a god on the door.

"They have stopped asking me about it," she said. "The police. They came three times and now they do not come. That is how it is. A thing happens and a city is angry for a month and then the city is a city again."

"Maybe they will come back," Yiming said.

"Maybe," she said. She adjusted the strap on her shoulder and looked at the shrine and then at him, a long look, the kind she gave everyone, the kind that had a question in it that she had already decided not to ask. "A man with the face of a door god," she said, which was not to him or to anybody; it was the sentence she kept, and she kept it the way you keep a coin you were given in change and never spend.

She went on down the market. Yiming stood by the shrine in the New Year cold and watched her go, and thought that he had been made into a thing by a sentence a stranger would not take back, and that a sentence is a small thing to build a life on and a small thing to lose a life to, and that the city had done both without ever once asking him. He wanted to tell her the truth then, standing by the shrine with the New Year crowd around them and the god's lamp burning, and he did not, and the not-telling was by then the largest thing he owned.

He went back to the shop and helped his mother wash the dishes. His father slept in the back with the shoulder, and the good shirt was folded on the chair, and the red envelopes were on the table, and the fire in the stove was banked for the night. And for the first time in a long time Yiming let himself imagine the other life, the one that would have been his if the sixth of June 2019 had gone differently: the exam, the university, the city he would have gone to, the person he would have become, the son who would have come home at New Year and made his father proud with a rank and a job instead of a pole and a paper face. He imagined it for as long as it took to wash one bowl. Then he put the bowl on the rack and did not imagine it again, because a man with a New Year to get through and a street to walk at night does not have room for the life he did not get.

On the last night of the year the family did what it did every year, which was to clean the shop and put up the new door print. His father could not reach above the door with the bad shoulder, so Yiming did it, and his father directed him the way he directed him at the dough, and for once the directing was ordinary, and there was no bounce, and no pole, and no corner in the room that anyone looked at. When the print was up the father stood back and looked at it and said, "Left," and Yiming moved it left, and the father said, "Good," and that was the last time the two of them did anything together that year.

That night he did not patrol. He had made himself a rule for the New Year, the one holiday rule he kept, and the rule was that the four streets belonged to the old people and the children and the god, and that he would stay inside and eat the sweet soup and be the shop's son for three days. It was the last ordinary thing he did. He did not know it at the time. He sat at the table with his parents and the photograph and the four dishes, and outside the market the shrine lamp burned under the new print, and the demolition notice flapped on the fence at the park, and the year turned over, and nothing in the street changed at all, and everything did. He did not know yet that the spring would take the street and the room and the boy and the shop, and that the only thing he would get to keep was a name he had not asked for and a debt he could not pay.

Chapter 22

Lam's daughter sat the Gaokao in June, and by the second month of the year the house had begun to smell of it the way a house smells of a coming storm.

She was up at half past five and asleep by eleven, and she had taped the mock-exam timetable to the fridge above the rank slips, and she had stopped talking at dinner except to ask for the salt. His wife moved around her the way you move around a sleeping animal. Lam, who had spent twenty years learning to read rooms, learned in that month to read a household in which every ordinary question was a landmine, and he stopped asking his daughter how the studying was going, because a question like that is not a question.

On a Tuesday near the end of the month he came home at ten and found her at the table with the headphones on and the past papers fanned out, and she looked up at him and said, in the flat voice she had inherited from him, "How is the market case."

He said it was going.

She said, "You keep saying that to me and you keep not sleeping, and I am not a child. If something is happening, I would rather know. I am not going to fail the exam because my father has a case, but I might fail it because my father is lying to me about the case, and I can tell when he is lying, because I am the one who inherited that too."

Lam stood in the doorway with his coat still on and looked at his daughter, who was eighteen and smarter than him and had his own face, and he did not know what to tell her. He could not tell her that a man in the market had begun to stand in the doorway of a shop the way a man stands when he is waiting for the thing he built to be used on him. He could not tell her that he had become furniture in a noodle shop. He could not tell her that the only witness in his case refused to recant a sentence about a god.

So he told her the true thing that was also useless, which was: "There is a man at the market who is in trouble, and I am trying to decide what to do about him,

and the decision is not mine alone, and it is taking a long time, and that is why I do not sleep. That is the whole of it."

She looked at him for a moment.

"Then decide," she said, and put her headphones back on, and went back to the papers, and Lam went into the kitchen and stood at the sink and did not turn on the light.

He had the dead-minute log on him, because he always had it on him now. The log was one page, and it had been one page for months, and it was the page that had begun with the cameras and the blind spots and had ended with the routes of a man who lived on the street. He had added to it in the last month the thing he had found at the warehouse.

The warehouse was at the end of the canal road, past the hoarding, where the old wharf buildings had been turned into storage. It was leased to a logistics company that did not do logistics, and there was a van that went in and out of it at four in the morning, and the van had a plate that appeared in the system twice: once at the gate of the district, and once, which was the thing that mattered, on the camera at the market end of the canal road, where the blind spots began. Lam had found the plate the way he found everything, by reading the dead minutes backwards, by asking not where a camera had seen a thing but where a camera had not. The van used the blind spots. The van used the routes. Whoever drove the van for the room above the hotpot place knew the market street as well as the man who walked it at night, and Lam had run the plate and the lease and the company and had come to a name that did not surprise him, because names like that do not surprise a man who has worked a district for twenty years.

The name was Mak. Tak Ming. And under it, in the district's own mouth, Se Wong Mak, the Snake King. He was a man with a manpower company and a logistics lease and a small chain of shops and a reputation for always being somewhere else, and Lam had heard the name for a decade and had never had a reason to write it in a file, and now he wrote it in a file, and the file was the private one. He did not write it in the official file, because the official file had a route through Wan, and Wan's route had a route through a cousin on the village committee, and a name written on the wrong page is a name that gets a warning before it gets a warrant. He wrote it in the private file, the one in the drawer, and

then he sat with his hand flat on the drawer the way you sit with your hand on a dog that is about to bark.

The thing that made the page a case was also the thing that made it impossible.

The man who walked the blind spots and the van that used the blind spots were the same problem, which is to say they were two different men who knew the same street. And Lam understood — sitting in the front room with the light off and the sound of his daughter's pen through the wall — that the man who walked the blind spots had already put a dead body in the ground at the end of the blue wall, and that the dead body was Chen Mou, and that Chen Mou was the boy who had cut a shopkeeper's shoulder in 2019, and that the shopkeeper was the father of the young man who stood behind the counter at Li Kee and answered every question in the flattest voice Lam had ever heard from a boy that age.

He did not have the proof. He had a route, a cuff, a paper face in a Foshan prop box, and a shape. A shape is not a case. A shape is a thing a man carries in a drawer until it either grows or dies.

But there was the other file, the bigger one, the one with the vans and the warehouse and the names on a page from a storage unit that somebody had burned in the market square in the winter, and Lam had smelled the ash on the wind that night and had gone down to the square and had looked at the black mark on the concrete and read it for what it was. Somebody had burned a file, and the somebody was not on his side. The bigger file did not belong to Lam yet; it belonged to a task force that was forming slowly, the way task forces form, in a room in another district, with a whiteboard and three officers and a provincial interest that came and went. The task force needed the routes, and the routes were in Lam's drawer, and the man who knew the routes best was the man Lam could not arrest and could not lose.

The task-force officer was a man named Cheung, from the provincial side, who had come to Lam's office twice and drunk Lam's tea and said the same thing both times, which was that the case was bigger than one district and smaller than the province, and that the province would move when the district produced something the province could not ignore. Lam had asked him what that would

be. Cheung had said: a date, a place, and a witness who will stand up. Lam had a place and half a date. He did not have a witness who would stand up, because the only witness who would stand up was the man he was trying not to arrest, and the other witness was a paper face in a photograph, and a paper face cannot testify.

At midnight his daughter closed the papers and went to bed. His wife was asleep. Lam sat in the chair with the log on his knee and the name Mak written small in the corner, and he thought about the choice the way he always thought about choices, as a set of doors.

The next morning Wan came by the office, doing his rounds, and stopped at Lam's desk and looked at the papers, and the papers were ordinary. He said the district was pleased with the quiet. He said the renewal was on schedule. He said, before he left, in the voice of a man offering a kindness, that if Lam ever needed anything from the paichusuo, anything at all, he should not hesitate. Lam thanked him. When Wan had gone, Lam opened the drawer and looked at the log and the photograph and the name in the corner, and closed it again. The man offering him a kindness was the man who would sell him. The small corruption is the most dangerous kind; it is a hand that takes the keys without anyone hearing.

One door: he took the shape to the prosecutor and called it evidence, and the shape failed, and the young man at Li Kee was released, and Mak got stronger, and the vans went on going out of the world at four in the morning with the people in them.

Another door: he found the young man first, and pulled him in, and charged him with Chen Mou, and lost him to a trial that would take a year, and lost the one person on the street who knew where the blind minutes were.

The third door was the one that had no name yet. The third door was that he did nothing with the shape, and let the young man walk the blind minutes, and let the bigger file grow out of the small one, and let the young man be the thing that broke the warehouse open, and then, after, if there was an after, do the thing the law asked of him.

He thought about the daughter the whole way home. She would sit her exam in June, and she would do well, and she would go to a university in another city,

and she would leave the district, which was the whole point of the exam. He would sit in this chair in this office and read her name in a message and feel the two things he always felt at once, which were pride and the small sharp grief of being the person who stayed. That was the life. A man spends a lifetime building a door for his child to walk out of, and then the child walks out, and the door stands open, and the man is alone with the door. He had built the street well enough. He had never once asked whether the street wanted to stay.

He had been an officer for twenty years, and he had never once chosen the third door. He had chosen the third door in small ways, the way everyone does, by not writing a name down too early, by letting a witness sleep, by being furniture in a street. He had never chosen it for a killer.

He looked at the name on the log. Then he took out his phone and looked at the photograph from Foshan, the broken jaw, the tape painted gray, and he understood what the witness had been saying all along, and what the young man had said at the counter, and which of them he had believed, and he wondered whether it mattered that he had stopped believing the witness not because she was wrong but because he wanted her to be wrong.

At half past midnight he took the log and the photograph and put them in the drawer that did not open to anyone else's key, and he turned the key, and went to bed.

He did not sleep for a while. Through the wall he could hear his daughter breathing, the deep breath of a person who has studied herself to the edge of exhaustion, and beyond the window the city was doing what the city did, being a city, indifferent, and Lam lay in the dark with the name he had just written in the corner of the log. He was going to have to choose about it. The young man at Li Kee was not the only one in this story carrying a debt he could not pay.

CHAPTER 23

Chapter 23

The manifest came to her the way the ledgers had come, from a number.

The room above the hotpot place had moved, but a room that moves still breathes, and Ying had spent the winter not watching the room but watching the air around it. The recruiter's phone still answered in the afternoon. The vans still left the warehouse at four. And in the third month, from a system that one of her father's cameras could still see, a new kind of document crossed her screen: not a recruitment form, but a shipment — a list of names with a date beside each and a destination and a column for status, and the status column was the thing that told her what the list was.

There were eleven names on it. Nine were women between eighteen and twenty-six. Two were men, young. Beside each name was a passport number, and beside each passport number, in the same neat clerk's hand, was a stamp, and the stamp said that the passport had been collected. Collected is a word that means one thing when a courier uses it and another thing entirely when a room uses it about a person.

At the bottom of the page was a date, and the date was in the fourth month, and beside the date were three words that Ying read four times because she did not want to read them at all.

Second movement, confirmed.

She had known the shape of the traffic for months. A boy at a time, a girl at a time, trickled out through the border in cars and vans, the way water goes through a wall: not through a hole but through the wall itself, through the thousand small gaps that a real-name system leaves because it was built to name people and not to hold them. But eleven at once was not a trickle. Eleven at once was a movement, and a movement is a decision, and a decision has a date.

She did not tell Yiming that morning. She copied the page, and she put the copy where she put the other copies, in the system that lived on nothing, and she

sat in the dark room with the dead machines and did the other arithmetic, the one she did not like.

The offer came two days later.

It came in person, which was the first thing that was wrong with it, because the room never came in person. Zhou Weikang came to the gei pou at noon, in his good coat and his soft mouth, and he stood at the glass until Ying let him in, and then he sat down at the counter the way a customer sits down, and asked for a bowl of instant noodles, which she made him, because the counter was the counter, and because she wanted to see what he would do.

He ate the noodles. Then he said, without preamble, the thing he had come to say.

"You are wasted here," he said. "The café is closed. Your father is sixty. You have a box of names and a talent, and you are using both for nothing. There is a job."

"I have a job," Ying said.

"You have a closed café and a review," he said. "The job is the same job you already do. Names. Registrations. Papers. The only difference is the client is bigger and the fee is real, and the client will have a view about whether you are protected. Your father would keep his café. You would keep your machines. Nobody would touch you again." He ate another mouthful. "The man you have been helping is going to prison, Ying. You know it and he knows it and I know it. You do not owe him the rest of your life."

She looked at him across the counter. She had hated Zhou Weikang since she was sixteen, or she had thought she hated him, and what she felt now was not hate; it was the flat, cold recognition of a man who had made the same choices she had, in the same district, with the same talent, and had simply gone further down the road, and had come back to tell her the road was good.

"Who is the client," she said.

Zhou smiled, the real smile, the worst one.

"You already know," he said.

She did know. She had known since the fourth-floor sign, since the laminator, since the name she had folded into the drawer with her own hands. It was Mak Tak-ming, Se Wong Mak, the Snake King, the man who moved things and was

never seen to move them, and the offer was not an offer. It was a door, held open, the way a man holds a door when he has already decided which side you will end up on.

"Tell him no," Ying said.

"He said you would say that," Zhou said. He set down the chopsticks and wiped his mouth and stood. "He said to tell you that the answer is not the end of it. He said to tell you that you have a box of names, and that he knows what is in the box, and that he knows what is in the drawer under the till at the noodle shop, and that a person who has a box of names and a friend with a drawer has already chosen a side whether or not she has said so out loud."

He left. He did not pay for the noodles, and Ying did not ask him to, and she stood at the counter for a long time after the door closed, looking at the bowl he had left, and then she took the bowl and washed it, because the counter was the counter, and because her hands wanted something to do.

She told Yiming that night, in the back room, with the map on the wall and the dead machines around them. She told him the number of names and the date. She told him about the offer and the answer she had given and what Zhou had said after the answer. He listened the way he listened, with the flat face, and she watched his face do the thing she had been afraid it would do, which was not fear and not anger but the quiet closing of a calculation, the way a face closes when a man has decided something and does not want you to see him decide it.

"How many days," he said.

"To the fourth month," she said. "Three weeks, more or less. The vans go at four, from the warehouse at the end of the canal road. I do not know the route after the border, but I know the route before it, because I have been writing the route down since the ledgers burned."

He was quiet for a while. She watched him do the arithmetic she had done, and she watched him arrive where she had arrived, and she saw the moment the arithmetic turned into a decision, which was the moment she had been afraid of and had known was coming.

"You are not going to let them go," she said.

"You are not either," he said.

"No," she said. "I am going to do the other thing. The thing I said I would do."

That week she began to build the package. She built it the way she built everything, carefully and without sentiment: the room's address and the company behind it, the recruiter's number and the afternoon hours, the vans and their plates and their routes, the warehouse and its lease, the storage unit and what had been in it, the manifest with the eleven names, the medical stamps and the clinic that did not exist, the laminator and the man who ran it, the bought officer at the paichusuo and the two inspections he had arranged, and at the top of it all the name she had written in the corner of a log, the name of the man who owned the shell: Mak Tak-ming. She did not write Yiming's name in it. She did not write her own. She wrote the thing itself, and she wrote it so that if she disappeared, the package would reach the task force at the hour she chose, because a thing that arrives by itself cannot be stopped by stopping the person who sent it.

The threat came on the fourth day. It was under the door of the gei pou in the morning, a single sheet of paper folded in four, and on the paper was a photograph of the gei pou at night, taken from across the street, and in the window of the photograph, small and bright, was Ying at the console, working, her face turned toward the camera, her mouth slightly open, the way a face is when a person is alone and thinks no one is looking. There was no message. There did not need to be one. She looked at the photograph for a long time. Then she put it in the package, as an exhibit, and went on building.

She did not tell Yiming about the photograph. She told him about the manifest and the date and the route, and she did not tell him about the photograph, because the photograph was a thing that would make him change the plan, and the plan was the only thing standing between eleven people and the border. She put the photograph in the package and did not mention it, and she had done the thing she always did: she carried it alone rather than hand it to someone who would act on it.

She called Zoya that night. Zoya was quiet for a long time, and then she said the thing she always said, which was to send the numbers and not the files, and then she said the thing she had not said before: "If you send me the package, and

you send it now, then even if they stop you, it is already moving, and there is nothing they can do but watch it arrive. Send it. Do not wait for the date. Do not wait for him to do the thing he is going to do. Send it now." Ying said she would, and she did not, because sending it now meant closing the last door, and a person does not close the last door until the last night.

She looked at the manifest on the screen one more time before she closed it. Eleven names. A date. And in the corner of the screen, the little cursor blinking, patient, the way the city was patient.

Her box of names had never felt like a weapon to her. It felt like a drawer of spare keys, which is what it was; a drawer of spare keys for the people of a district, for the girl whose father watched the phone, for the rider whose own name was dead, for the man in the good jacket who needed to be no one for an hour. She had built it the way you build a fire escape: for the one night it is needed, and hoping the one night never comes. A fire escape and a weapon are the same object. The difference is only which side of the building you are standing on.

She thought about the box of names, and about the fact that the box was the thing that had made her who she was, and that the thing that made her was also the thing the machine used. She had spent seven years believing that she was outside the system, a small operator in the gaps, a person who sold weather to people who needed to be somewhere else. But nobody is outside the system, because the system is not a wall; it is a river, and everyone in it is either swimming or being carried, and the machine had been swimming in the same water the whole time, downstream of her, and had learned to swim by watching her. She closed the manifest. She had one move left, and the move was paper, and the paper was the only thing she had ever made that was on the right side of the current.

The paper first, she had told him. Whatever you do after that, the paper is already out of my hands, and it will burn everything it touches, including you.

He had not argued. That was the thing that had stayed with her. He had not argued, and he had already done his own arithmetic. He had arrived at the same sum. The only difference between them now was the order of the two things they were each going to do, and neither order would leave either of them whole.

She thought about her father, sixty, and the café dark at noon, and the review that would take thirty days or ninety and would come out the way these things come out. She thought about the box of names, and the man who now knew what was in it, and the fact that a box of names is a weapon that cuts both ways. She thought about the boy who had said thank you when he left, and the old woman on her Tuesdays, and the one page in the package that had the eleven names on it. She had stopped being a person who sold anonymity. She had become, without ever deciding to, a person who was keeping a list.

CHAPTER 24

Chapter 24

The last lawful door was a plastic evidence bag on Sergeant Wan's desk.

Yiming took the page to the paichusuo on a Tuesday in the third month, at the hour when the office was full and a man walking in with a folder is a man nobody watches. He had copied the page first, in the back room of the gei pou, and had given the copy to Ying, because Ying had taught him that a man does not carry the only copy of a thing into a police station. He had the original in an envelope, and on the envelope he had written, in his own hand, the date of the shipment and the address of the warehouse and the name of the man at the top of the page.

He did not ask for Wan. He asked for the duty officer, and he asked to make a report, and he sat in the plastic chair by the wall and waited the way you wait. The duty officer was a young woman who took notes and asked him who he was, and then asked him how he had come by the page, and Yiming said he had found it, which was true, and that he did not know who wrote it, which was also true, and that he thought it concerned a crime, which was the truest thing he had said in a year. She took the envelope and told him to wait.

He waited forty minutes. Then the door at the back of the office opened, and Sergeant Wan came out with the envelope in his hand, and he was smiling, and he walked Yiming to the corridor by the water cooler, where there was no camera, and he said, in the voice of a man doing a favor, that the officer was busy and that the report would be looked at, and that Yiming should go home.

Yiming looked at the envelope in Wan's hand. It was not in a bag; it was not logged; it was just in Wan's hand, the way a person holds a flyer.

"Will there be a receipt," Yiming said.

Wan looked at him for a moment, and the smile stayed, and the eyes over the top of the smile did the calculation that Yiming had seen a hundred times in a year, on the faces of men who did the math of the alley.

"Receipt," Wan said. "For what. A page you found. People find pages every day." He put the envelope under his arm. "Go home, Li Yiming. Run the shop. The district is quiet. Keep it quiet."

He went back through the door. Yiming stood by the water cooler. The paper was gone, and he had just done the one thing Ying had told him not to do, which was to hand a thing to a bought man on the theory that a bought man might do the right thing in front of his colleagues. He stood in the corridor a while longer, because a man who leaves immediately looks like a man with something to hide, and because his hands were doing a thing he did not want anyone to see. Then he walked out through the front counter and the young woman at the desk did not look up. The report he had made did not exist, and this was not corruption in the way the newspapers meant corruption. It was a shrug. It was a city's way of saying that a page is a page and a boy is a boy and a district has a demolition and a shipment is a rumor until it is a scandal, and a scandal is not good for the renewal.

He went to the shop and did the lunch rush and did not tell his mother. That night he told Ying what had happened. She listened with the flat face and did not say that she had told him so, which was the kindest thing she had done all year. Then she said the only useful thing, which was that the original page was gone but the copy was not, and that the copy would be in the package, and that a copy in a package is better than an original in a drawer, because a copy can travel.

He went to Lam the same week.

He went to the office, not the stall, because he wanted the man and not the furniture. He sat in the plastic chair by the desk and waited, and Lam came and looked at him and did not seem surprised, which was the first thing that told Yiming that Lam had been waiting for this visit and was afraid of it.

"I found a page," Yiming said. "It has a name on it and a date and a warehouse. A shipment. Eleven people. The fourth month."

Lam sat down and put his hands on the desk and looked at him for a long time.

"Where is the page," Lam said.

"Wan has it."

Lam did not move. If he was surprised, it did not show. Lam had known about Wan for longer than he had, and the knowing was one of the reasons Lam had been coming to the market every week for half a year.

"How do you know the warehouse," Lam said.

"I have been watching," Yiming said.

"Watching," Lam said. He looked at Yiming with a face that was not angry and not kind and not anything at all. "A man has been watching a warehouse and a room and a van for six months, and knows the blind minutes of the market street, and has a right forearm with a scar on it that he keeps under a long sleeve in a hot month, and a paper face from a Foshan prop box that a woman in this market describes as a door god, and a father who was cut in 2019 by a boy who is now dead at the end of the blue wall. And he is sitting in my office telling me about a page."

Yiming did not answer. There was no answer that was not the whole answer.

"I can charge you this afternoon," Lam said. "I have enough to bring you in and question you and hold you for two days, and maybe enough to charge you if I push, and I would lose the case either way, because the case is not the boy on the concrete. The case is the eleven people. And the only person who can give me the eleven people is the man who knows the blind minutes and the warehouse and the room, and that man is you, and you are also the reason the boy is dead. You see the difficulty."

"I see it," Yiming said.

"Then tell me what you want," Lam said. "Because I have been trying to decide for a month, and you are the only person in this district who can make the decision for me, and I do not like that, and it is still true."

Yiming thought about the paper first. He thought about the prison and the surrender and the long slow end of it, and he thought about the eleven names and the date, and he understood that there was a version of the next month in which he gave Lam everything, and Lam gave it to the province, and the province moved too slowly, and the vans went out at four, and the eleven were gone, and he spent the rest of his life in a cell with the names.

He did not say that. He said the other thing.

"Wait," he said. "Give me three weeks. Keep the file open. Do not pull me in until the date. Then I will give you everything and you can charge me with whatever you like."

Lam looked at him for a long time. Then he did the thing that Yiming would remember for the rest of his life, because it was the thing that told him the whole of what Lam was: he opened the drawer and took out a photograph of a broken paper face and looked at it, and then put it back, and turned the key.

"Three weeks," Lam said. "After the date, I come for you, and you do not run, because if you run I will find you and it will be worse, and the street will not survive it."

"I will not run," Yiming said.

He walked out of the office and down the stairs and into the street, and the last lawful door closed behind him with the quiet click of a lock he had watched a man choose not to open. He understood, walking home, that he had just taken the case out of the hands of the law and put it into his own, and that from this point every thing that happened would happen because he had decided it, and that the deciding was the crime, and that he was going to commit it anyway.

He walked home along the canal road, past the hoarding, past the place where the concrete had forgotten everything. He stood at the end of the blue wall for a while. He did not have the pole with him, because he had understood that the place was not the thing he needed to stand in front of; the place was just a place, and the thing he needed was at the end of a road he had never seen, in a compound with a wall, and the only way to get there was through a date and a van and eleven people. He thought about the lawful doors he had tried, one by one, the way you count the windows of a house before you decide you cannot get in, and he understood that he had not failed at the law. The law had failed at him, in the same indifferent way it failed at everyone, and there was no one to be angry at, which was worse, and so he had decided to be angry at the one man in the whole machine who had a face and a name and a laminator and a car, and the decision sat in him and did not move.

He went into the shop. His mother was at the ledger. She looked at him the way she looked at him now, hands first and face second, and saw the hands and said nothing and went back to the column. He sat down and ate the bowl she

had left under the cloth, and she stayed at the ledger, and after a while she said, without looking up, the first question she had asked him since the winter.

"How many days."

He did not ask her how she knew. She knew everything and said nothing and had known since the laundry.

"Three weeks," he said, and then, because she was his mother and because the question had opened the door: "There is a thing I have to do. After it, I may not come back to the shop."

She did not look up. She wrote a figure in the column and closed the ledger and stood and turned off the light over the table, and she said, in the flat voice she had, "Then eat."

That was all. He ate. She went to bed. And the two of them did not speak about it again, because there was nothing left to say, and because the saying of it would have been the surrender, and he was not going to surrender before the date.

He did not sleep. He sat on the roof of the sauce shop with his back against the water tank and watched the market go on being a market: the cleaner, the riders, the first fish.

He thought about the offer he had made Lam, and about whether a man can make a deal with the law and then break it, and about the fact that he had no intention of breaking it, and that the intention was the only thing he had left to hold. He thought about the fact that the market would remember him one way and the police file another, and that both of them would be wrong, and that the wrongness would outlive him. And he thought about the boy, the boy from the arcade who had said thank you and had gone into a van and had come back thin and silent, and about the congee his mother made him every morning, and about the fact that the boy had never once asked anyone who had saved him, because the boy did not know, and did not need to know, and that not-knowing was, in the end, the only good thing Yiming had ever managed to give anyone. He held that thought the way you hold a coin, and then he went down and started the first dough of the morning. The city did not know that a man had decided to become the thing it had named him. It would find out soon enough, and it would decide what to do with him then, and the deciding would be done by

strangers in a room he would never see, and none of them would have stood on the roof at four in the morning and looked at the shrine with the orange and the paper umbrella. That was the thing about the city. It made you out of paper, and then blamed you for catching fire.

CHAPTER 25

Chapter 25

The date was the twenty-eighth of the fourth month, and by the middle of the month it was the only thing on the wall.

Ying wrote it in the corner of the map, small, the way she wrote everything, and beside it she wrote the route: the warehouse at the end of the canal road, the gate that opened at four, the van west along the ring road to the old goods yard, the transfer there to two cars, the cars north to the border.

She had written the date in her neat hand and circled it, and the circling of it was the first violent thing she had ever done to a piece of paper. They did not talk about what would happen after. They talked about the road and the cars and the plates and the times, and the after was a white space at the bottom of the map that nobody put anything in, because a plan that reaches past its own ending is a plan that has already given up. She looked at the date. A week from now she would know whether she had been right, and the knowing would not make her feel anything. Nobody told you that about the end of a thing like this: when it comes, the body is quiet, and the quiet is the most frightening part. She had the plates. She had the hours. She had the name of the man who drove, because the man who drove was the man who had driven Ah Kin, and a driver is a number that does not change as often as a plate.

They sat with it for two nights before they said the thing out loud. On the third night Ying said it, in the flat voice, and Yiming understood that she had been waiting for him to say it and had decided to say it herself because saying it herself was the only way to make it real.

"We stop the van," she said. "Before the goods yard. On the canal road, past the hoarding."

"With what," Yiming said.

She looked at him. "With you," she said. "And with whoever you can stand next to you who will not talk."

He had thought about that part for a month, and he had come to the answer the way he came to everything, by subtraction. He could not use the market. The market was watched, and the market talked, and the market had families and shops and a demolition that made everyone careful. He could not use the café, because the café was closed and the café was the thing the room was trying to buy. He could not use the boys from the arcade, because they were boys, and because the boy who was already gone had been an arcade boy, and Yiming was not going to put another one in a van.

That left one person.

He had known who it would be for a month before he admitted it. The young man from the motorcycle repair place had come to Li Kee the summer before with a red envelope and a sentence he could not finish, and had gone away without eating, and Yiming had understood then that the young man would do a thing for him if asked, and had hoped he would never have to ask. He was twenty-two and he had a mother and a workshop and a scar over one eyebrow, and Yiming had watched him sit on the ground and cry after the night-market fight, and had known that a person who cries after a fight is a person who will stand in front of a van for you, which is the worst reason in the world and the only reason there is.

The young man from the motorcycle repair place came to Li Kee on a Thursday, because Yiming asked him to come, and because the young man had been waiting for a year for a thing to pay back and had never been given one. He was twenty-two and had a bandage scar over one eyebrow and a workshop full of tools and two friends who rode with him and did not ask questions, and when Yiming told him the shape of it — the warehouse, the van, the eleven people, the date — he did not look surprised, and he did not ask what was in it for him, and he did not ask whether it was legal, because he had grown up in the same district and he knew that the question was not legal or illegal but whether you did it or you did not, and he had already decided.

"How many cars do you have," Yiming said.

"Three that run," the young man said. "Four if you count the one with the bad clutch, and you should not count the one with the bad clutch."

"Can they block a road."

The young man looked at him then, a long look, and Yiming saw the arithmetic of the alley go across his face, and then the young man nodded, once, the way you nod when a thing has been decided and you are only now finding out what it costs.

"They can block a road," he said. "They cannot block it for long."

They laid it out over the counter at Li Kee, after closing, with the bowls pushed to one end and a napkin for the map. Ying had the route; the young man had the roads and the cars and the tools. The warehouse gate opened at four and the van came out at ten past, because that was the minute the driver always used, and the canal road past the hoarding had no camera, because the camera there had been dead since the storm and nobody had ever fixed it. The plan was to put one car across the road at the narrow place past the hoarding and one car behind the van, and to take the driver first, because a driver is the only part of a van that has to be awake.

"And the people in the back," the young man said.

"The back opens from the side," Ying said. "It is a goods van. There is a bar on the inside, not a lock. The bar can be lifted from outside if you know where it is."

"How do you know where it is," the young man said.

Ying did not answer, and the young man did not ask again, because he had grown up in the district and knew what a person sounds like when the answer is a thing they are carrying alone.

He went to the arcade the next day, to the electronics stall, to see Ah Kin's mother. He had not been since the winter. She was behind the counter with the blanket over her knees, and the stall was thinner than it had been, because the family had sold the good stock to pay the demand that had come by phone. He did not tell her about the date. He told her he was asking around, which was true, and she nodded and said that asking around is what people do, and that she had stopped expecting the phone to ring. Then she asked after his father, and he told her about the shoulder and the cold, and she said that cold is harder on the old than on anyone, and gave him a small packet of dried longan for his mother, and would not take money. He walked home with the packet in his pocket and understood that he was going to do the thing he was going to do for her as much

as for anyone, and that this was a reason and also an excuse, and that the two can live in the same pocket.

Zoya built the other half from five hours away. She could not touch the systems, because she would not touch the systems, but she could watch the numbers, and so she built a small thing that watched the plate and the driver's number and the recruiter's number and sent a single message to a single phone if any of them moved before the date. It lived on nothing. It could be deleted in a second. It was the only thing she did that touched the country at all, and she did it because Ying had asked, and because she had said, once, on a call in the winter, that she was not afraid of the police but of being the reason Ying's name was on a list, and that she had decided that being careful was not the same as being absent, and that she would rather be the reason than be absent.

On the twenty-fifth they met one last time, in the back of the closed café, with the dead machines around them and the map on the wall and the date in the corner. There were four of them: Yiming, Ying, the young man from the motorcycle place, and one of the young man's friends, a quiet girl who rode a scooter and could drive anything with a wheel. The young man brought the friend, and she said almost nothing and then asked one question, which was what they were to do with the people in the van after they opened the side, and nobody had an answer, and she said that they would need a place, and that her aunt had a unit in the village with a roller door. She said it the way you say a fact, and Ying looked at her for a long time and then wrote the address down, and Yiming understood that the plan had just grown a leg it did not have before. They did not eat. They did not drink. They went over the route three times, and the times, and the gates, and the narrow place past the hoarding, and the side bar on the goods van, and the number to call when it was done, and the number not to call, which was the police, because the police were the one thing they could not use.

At the end the young man asked the question that had been in the room all night and that nobody had said.

"If it goes wrong," he said. "If they have more than one van. If the cars are waiting at the yard and not the warehouse. If the driver has a friend."

Ying looked at Yiming. Yiming looked at the date in the corner of the map, the twenty-eighth, small, in her neat hand.

"Then we do the part we can do," he said, "and the rest goes to the paper."

The young man nodded, slowly, the way a man nods when he has decided to trust a thing he does not understand. He and the girl left through the alley, and their scooters started, one and then the other, and went away down the market street, and the market was dark and empty and the shrine at the corner still had its lamp on.

Ying closed the door behind them and stood in the dark room with the map and the dead machines. Yiming stayed a while longer, because he did not want to go home yet, and because the shop had a bowl waiting under a cloth and a tin open on the table and a mother awake in the room next to his, and he did not want to bring the date into that house.

On the last night before the date, Yiming did the thing he had not done in months: he took the working pole down from the corner of the shop and did the form in the back yard under the single bulb. The bamboo was not young anymore. It had learned his hands over a year, the way the old pole had learned his father's hands over twenty, and it moved the way a tool moves when it has been carried through enough weather. He did the form three times, slow, and then he put the pole back in the corner and stood looking at the father's pole, the one that had never been touched since August 2019, and for the first time since the summer he thought about taking it down.

He looked at the map and the name and the date. Then he looked at the photograph Ying had taped to the wall above the console, the one that had come under the door, the one of her at work with her mouth slightly open. He put his finger on the date and did not say anything, and she came and stood beside him and did not say anything either, and the two of them stood in the dark looking at the day they had decided to change, and above them the dead machines breathed their cold air and the router lights blinked in the small city of the rack.

Three days.

Chapter 26

The night of the twenty-eighth came in wet, and the canal road was black under the hoarding.

They were in place by three. The young man put his car across the narrow neck, the way they had planned, at the place where the blue wall came close to the low black water and the road squeezed to one lane. The second car waited a hundred meters back, lights off, with the girl from the scooter in it. Yiming stood in the shadow of the hoarding, where the streetlight did not reach. He had the working pole in his hands, and he was not wearing anything on his face, because there was nothing left to wear.

The rain had stopped by then, and the road shone, and there was no moon. The only light was the far end of the warehouse and the small red eye of the young man's cigarette across the neck, which he put out as soon as the headlights showed. Yiming stood in the dark of the hoarding and felt the whole of the year come down to a place on a map. He understood that this was the thing the city had been training him for without ever telling him — and that a man who has been made into a god by a market is still just a man with a pole, standing in the wet, waiting for a van.

At four the warehouse gate opened. The light from inside spilled out across the wet concrete, and a van came through it at ten past, the way the driver always came, and turned west onto the canal road.

They let it come. The young man had said that the first four seconds after the van stopped were the whole thing, and Yiming had believed him, and now the four seconds were arriving.

The van came up the road and saw the car across the neck and slowed. A driver who sees a car across a road at four in the morning does not assume a trap; he assumes a breakdown, or a drunk, or a delivery gone wrong, and he slows to see which. It slowed, and the second car came up behind it and stopped across

the road, and the van was boxed. Then the driver understood. The van lurched and tried to mount the curb, and the young man was already at the driver's door.

The driver had a wrench. The young man took it on the shoulder and went down and came back up and got the door open, and the two of them fought in the gap by the wheel — silent and ugly, no style in it, just weight and grip. Yiming went around to the side of the van.

The side bar lifted, the way Ying had said it would — a bar on the inside, and no lock. He pulled the door, and the dark of the van came open, and the smell of it came out: the smell of people kept too long in a closed box, and under the smell of people, the other smell, which was the thing he would carry for the rest of his life.

There were seven in the back. Six of them were alive.

They were sitting on the floor in a row, three and three, with their hands tied in front of them and their mouths taped. The seventh was lying along the back wall with her face turned away and her ankle at an angle that did not belong to a living person. She had a green sandal on her foot, and the other sandal was somewhere in the dark of the van. Yiming understood that the sandal was the same green as the sandal on the market street a year ago, and that the city has a way of repeating the things it does not want you to forget.

He pulled the tape off the first girl's mouth and she did not scream, which was worse. She looked at him the way a person looks when the world has stopped being a story they can follow, and she said one word, which was not a word he knew. He got her hands, and the hands of the next one, and the next. The girl from the scooter was there with a knife for the ties, and they came out of the van one at a time into the wet dark — six of them — and stood on the road in their thin clothes and did not know where they were.

The young man had the driver down by then, one knee on the man's chest, and the wrench was in the gutter. The driver's phone was in the young man's hand and lit. He had not broken it, because he had not thought of it, and on the phone a camera was on and a recording was running. Yiming did not know when the driver had started it, and he would think about that for a long time afterward, in a cell, with nothing else to do.

"Get the car," Yiming said.

They put the six in the two cars, and the girl from the scooter drove the first load away, and the young man stayed with the second. Yiming took the seventh girl out of the van himself. She was small and she weighed almost nothing, and her ankle was broken or worse, and she was dead. He carried her to the side of the road and laid her on the grass strip by the hoarding and covered her with his jacket, because it was the only thing he had to cover her with. He stood over her while the rain came down and the whole of the city's dark machinery went on being what it was.

There had been eleven. There were seven in the van. The other four were not in the van, and the driver, when the young man asked him through his teeth, said the other four had gone ahead, hours before, in the cars, from the yard. The yard had moved them early. Someone had warned the yard.

Someone had warned the yard.

He stood there and did the arithmetic the way he did arithmetic, which was without wanting to. Seven in the van, four ahead. Six alive, one dead. A year of walking the blind minutes, a burned ledger, a closed café, a father's shoulder, a mother's unsaid sentence — and the sum was six, and a girl with a green sandal, and four who were already across, and a man in a good jacket who had eaten a bowl at Li Kee once and said he would come back. It was not enough. It had never been enough. That was the thing about the machine: it did not need to win every time. It only needed to lose less than everything. It had just lost six, and six was a rounding error to a man who moved things by the dozen.

He thought about the driver tied to the fence at the road head, and about the phone in the driver's pocket that had filmed him, and about the fact that a city does not need a witness to make a myth, but a court does. He thought about Lam, who would come in three weeks — or in three days now — and about the deal he had made in the office, and about the fact that the deal had just been broken by a video before he had even finished keeping his side of it.

Yiming stood in the wet road with the empty van and the dead girl and the six gone and the other four gone and the driver's phone recording the whole of it. He understood that the thing they had done was not nothing. It was also not enough, and a thing that is not enough is its own kind of failure. The difference between saving six and saving ten would live in him for the rest of his life.

The young man drove the van into the canal, because a van in the canal is a van that takes a diver to find. The driver they left tied to the fence at the road head, because a driver tied to a fence is a problem for the police and not for them. They went back to the aunt's unit in the village, where the six girls were sitting on the floor of a garage with a roller door, and one of them was crying and one was not. The one who was not crying asked Yiming, in Cantonese, whether she could have some water. He got her water. She drank it, and then she asked him whether he was the police, and he said no, and she said, "Good," and that was all.

At dawn the young man's shoulder had swollen to twice its size and he could not lift the arm, and the girl from the scooter had a cut across her hand from the tie-nippers. Yiming had nothing at all — the young man had taken the wrench, and the driver had not touched him. He would have preferred a wound, because a wound is a thing the body can explain, and he had no wound.

He had the sandal. He did not know, then, what he was going to do with it. He only knew that it was the one thing he had taken, and that a man who takes a thing like that takes it because he has someone to answer to and does not know yet how to pay. He would keep it in the drawer under the till, with the exam ticket and the red envelope and Mak's name. The drawer would fill with the things he could not say, and the filling of it would be the whole of what he did with the year. That was the arithmetic of a small man in a big machine: you take the one sandal, and you keep it, and you tell yourself the keeping is a kind of accounting, and the world goes on losing eleven at a time.

He went home in the gray, past the market. The market was waking the way it woke, and the shrine at the corner had its lamp on, and somebody had already put the new day's offering under the picture — the orange and the paper umbrella. Yiming walked past it with the dead girl's sandal in his pocket, which he had picked up out of the dark of the van without deciding to. He did not know why he had taken it, except that it was the only thing from the seventh girl that the city had not already thrown away.

He did not sleep. He washed his hands at the shop and made the dough and worked the pole, and the two beats went out through the dark. His mother came in at half past four and looked at him and set the first-aid tin on the table, open, though he had no wound, and said nothing, and went back to the stove.

At seven, two things happened.

The first was that the young man's mother called the shop looking for her son, because the young man had not come home — because the young man was sitting in a chair in the aunt's garage with a shoulder that would not move, keeping watch over six girls nobody in the city knew existed.

The second was that a video began to move through the district. It was the driver's video. It was dark and shaky, but it was long enough, and in it, for two clear seconds, in the light of the van's open side door, was a face. The face was Yiming's, and the caption under it was already forming on a dozen phones before the sun was fully up, and the district — which had spent a year deciding he was a god — spent the morning deciding what else he might be.

By midday the video had a name under it. By evening it had a shop. By the next morning there was a paper on the wall of Li Kee. It was not a formal notice; it was just a printed page taped up by someone in the district, the way the district did things, with the face from the driver's phone and the name and three words that Yiming did not read the whole of. His mother took it down before he saw it and put it in the stove, and did not tell him, and he only knew because the stove smelled of toner for an hour afterward.

CHAPTER 27

Chapter 27

The six girls stayed in the aunt's garage for two days, and on the second night they left at dawn.

Ying did the logistics, because logistics was the only thing in her life she had ever been good at that did not have a price list. The girls were from four provinces. Two had families who would take them back and pretend nothing had happened, which is the only way some families can take a daughter back. Two had families who would not, or who would ask the wrong questions, or who had sold them in the first place, and those two would go to a shelter in another city that Zoya had found and paid for out of a fund Ying had never asked about. One had a child somewhere she had left with a grandmother, and she wanted to go and get the child, and Ying told her, in the flat voice, that she could not go and get the child yet, and the girl cried and then agreed, because a person who has just come out of a box will agree to almost anything that sounds like it might lead somewhere safer than the box.

The sixth was nineteen and had the number tattooed on the inside of her wrist, and she did not want to go home, and she did not want a shelter, and she wanted the man who had put her in the box, and Ying looked at her for a long time and said, "You will get him. You will get him by living. That is the only way anyone gets them."

They were moved at four in the morning, one at a time, in the girl-from-the-scooter's car and the young man's car and one taxi that Ying paid in cash, to three different bus stations and one railway station, and each of them had a new phone with a new number and a folded set of papers that were not exactly true and were true enough, and each of them had a hundred yuan in a red envelope, which was the traditional thing and also the only thing Ying could think of to give a person leaving a city she had been brought to against her will. One of them, the youngest, would not let go of Ying's sleeve at the door of the car, and Ying stood with her in the dark and let her hold on, and did not say anything, because there

was nothing to say, and after a while the girl let go and got in, and the car took her.

Ying did not go with them. She stood in the mouth of the alley by the garage and watched the last car turn out at the market gate and did not cry, because she did not cry, and then she went back to the gei pou and sat in the dark room with the dead machines and finished the package.

She had known for three days that she was going to finish it. She had known since the night of the twenty-eighth, when Yiming came back with a dead girl's sandal in his pocket and told her, in the flat voice, that the other four had gone ahead, that someone had warned the yard, and that the driver's phone had caught his face, and that his face was now moving through the district faster than any myth the market had ever built for him. She had known that the summer was over and that the autumn, which was really only the same spring, would have to be paid for, and that the only thing she could do with the rest of it was to make the paper.

The package was thicker than a package should be. She had put in it the room and the recruiter and the vans and the warehouse and the manifest and the medical stamps and the laminator man and the bought officer and the name at the top, and she had added the driver's video and the photograph that had come under the door and a one-page account of the night of the twenty-eighth written in her own flat hand, which was the only place her name appeared anywhere in it, and she had written the account in a way that led to the room and not to the boy, because there was one thing she was still doing, and that one thing was not the truth.

She had thought about the dead girl. She had thought about the seventh one, the one Yiming had carried out of the van and laid on the grass strip and covered with his jacket, and about the fact that a girl with a broken ankle and a green sandal had a mother somewhere who did not yet know, and that the machine's own paperwork described her as cargo. She put the girl into the page, not by name, because she did not know the name, but by her sandal and by the place on the road, so that the task force would have to find the mother, and so that somewhere in a file, in a province she had never seen, a girl would be a person and not a number.

She did not sleep the night the girls left. She sat in the dark room and watched the numbers — the plate, the driver's number, the recruiter's number — and at four in the morning the plate moved for the last time before the date and then stopped, and she understood that the yard had gone quiet because the yard knew. She looked at the sealed door and at the photograph taped above the console and at the envelope on the map, and she thought about the fact that the only thing she had ever been able to give the people she loved was a version of themselves that the city could not find, and that the man she loved most was the one she was about to un-find, in the only way that would save him.

She called Zoya on the last night, before she sealed it.

"I am sending it tomorrow," she said. "To the province. The whole of it."

Zoya was quiet for a moment.

"After he does the thing," Zoya said. It was not a question.

"Yes," Ying said.

"You could send it tonight," Zoya said. "You could send it tonight and it would reach them in the morning and they would move before he does the other thing, and he would hate you, and he would live."

Ying looked at the map on the wall, the dead gate, the dark arcade, the bridge, the streets without buildings, and at the date in the corner, which was already past.

"He would not live," she said. "He would go to prison either way. The only difference is whether the eleven — the four that are still out there, and the next four, and the next — the only difference is whether they get caught before he does the thing, and if I send it tonight, the province will move in a week, and the week is the whole of it. The other four go across before the week is out. I have seen the schedule. There are four more behind them."

Zoya was quiet for a long time. Then she said the thing she always said, which was not a comfort and was not a warning, and was both.

"Then send it the moment he is done," she said. "Not the day after. The moment. Because the moment he is done, every person in that machine will start moving, and the only thing that stops a moving machine is paper that is already in the air."

"I know," Ying said.

After she hung up she sat for a while with her hand on the phone. She had known Zoya for three years, and in three years Zoya had never once told her what to do; she had built the boring tradecraft and left the choosing to Ying, because she said that a person who builds the walls should never be the person who decides which wall to stand behind. This was the first time she had told Ying what to do. Ying understood why. It was not because the thing was a calculation. It was because Zoya was afraid, and Zoya's fear had a voice, and the voice had just told her to send the paper before the man she loved did the thing that would end him.

"And Ying."

"What."

"When it is over, and he is inside, and they ask you what you knew and when, I want you to remember that you did the only thing that saved anyone. I want you to remember it on the bad nights. I will remind you if you forget."

"I will not forget," Ying said, and she did not know whether that was true.

She sealed the envelope the next morning, before the market filled, so that the courier's van could take it with the first run. She addressed it to the provincial task force in the name she had found in the package, and she wrote the sender's name as a thing that was not her name, because a package that arrives by itself cannot be stopped by stopping the person who sent it. She did not put it in the post. She kept it on the table in the back room, on the map, under the blinking lights of the rack, where she could see it, and she waited for the thing the envelope was waiting for, which was the sound of a phone at four in the morning, or the market waking to news, or a police car, or none of it, or all of it, and the waiting was, she would later think, the last honest thing she did that year.

She looked at the envelope one more time before she left the back room. On it was the task force's name and an address in another district, and inside it was a year of a district's dark, and at the top of it all, in her own neat hand, the name of the man who had offered her a job and a father's life and had been refused twice, once by her and once by the boy at the noodle shop. She understood that the envelope was the only thing she had ever made that she was not ashamed of. She also understood that it would end him. Both of those were true, and she carried

them the way you carry a bowl in each hand, without spilling either, and she had no idea how long she would be able to walk like that.

She looked at herself in the dark glass of the dead monitor and did the arithmetic she had been avoiding for a week, which was not about the girls or the package or the room but about the one person left, the one who had walked into her side door a year ago with a broken mask and a knife line on his arm and no plan. Every road out of the month led to a cell or a grave for him, and the only choice she had left was the order of the two, and she had already chosen the paper first, because the paper was the only thing that would outlive all of them, and because a person who has spent a life selling other people's names should at least, once, put the right name in the right file.

The video of Yiming's face was at two hundred thousand by then, and climbing. The caption under it was not the old one. The old one had been about a god who did not need a mask. The new one was shorter, and it had his name in it, and the shop's name, and it was not a folk tale anymore; it was a description, which is what a city does when it has finished with a story and wants a body.

She watched it climb and did the thing she did with a number that frightened her, which was to make it a smaller number. Two hundred thousand people had seen the video, and of those two hundred thousand, perhaps two thousand knew the district, and perhaps two hundred knew the shop, and perhaps twenty could name him, and perhaps two would tell the police, and the police already had him, and so the number that mattered was zero. It was a lie she was telling herself and she knew it, and she let the lie stand, because the alternative was to watch the number climb to a million and understand that the whole city could now put a face to the thing the market had been praying to for a year, and that a face is the end of a god.

Chapter 28

The invitation came the way the man did everything, politely.

It was a card under the door of Li Kee in the morning, heavy paper, gold edge, no envelope, with a time and a place written on it in a soft hand: the private room at the top of a restaurant on the river, at eight in the evening, the man's compliments. There was no name on the card. There did not need to be. Yiming read it once and put it in the drawer and did not tell his mother, and spent the day doing the lunch rush and the rice run and the arithmetic of whether to go, and at seven he told his mother he was going out, and she looked at him hands first and face second and said nothing, and he went.

The restaurant was the kind that had a lift and a man who bowed and a room at the top with one window full of the river and the lights on the far bank. Mak Tak-ming was already there, alone, in a good jacket, with the tea poured and the small dishes set out, and he stood when Yiming came in, which is the first thing that a man like Mak does and the first thing you should not trust.

"Sit, please," he said. "Eat. You have not eaten, I think."

Yiming sat. He did not eat. He looked at the man across the table.

Mak was in his fifties and had the face of a man who had never been badly treated by anyone, which is not the same as a kind face and is often the opposite. He was calm in the particular way of men who have never had to be afraid, and he spoke Cantonese with the easy rhythm of the district and Mandarin with the ease of the government and English with the ease of the airport, and under all three was the flat, patient thing that Yiming had learned a year ago to hear in the voice of the woman who answered in the afternoon.

"You have made a great deal of trouble," Mak said, "and you have cost me a great deal of money, and I am going to ask you to stop. That is the whole of what I have come to say, and I am going to say it in the order I like, and then you may answer."

Yiming did not answer.

"You killed a boy at the end of the blue wall," Mak said. "Chen Mou. He was not mine and I did not care about him, and I am not here about him. But you killed him, which means you know what it is to cross a line, and it means the police are already carrying your shape, and it means that a man has to decide what to do with you. I have decided. I do not want to hurt you. I do not want to hurt your mother. I do not want to hurt your father, who I hear has a shoulder and a bill. Those are all things I could do, and I am telling you that I have decided not to, because it is not necessary, and because a man in my position does not spend money on things that are not necessary."

He poured the tea again. The steam went up between them.

"You took my books," he said. "That was clean, and I respect it. But it was paper, and paper is the past, and I am a man of the future. You stopped my van on the canal road, and you took six girls off it, which was neat work for a cook, and which I also respect, and which also cost me nothing in the end, because the four that mattered were already gone, and the six you took will go home and tell a story that no one in this country will print. So here is where we are. You are not going to beat me. You are going to die, or you are going to go to prison, or you are going to spend the rest of your life watching your mother's shop be demolished around her. Those are the three doors, and I own all three."

"Then why the tea," Yiming said.

"Because there is a fourth door," Mak said. "And it is the only door I actually care about."

He leaned back and looked at Yiming the way a man looks at a ledger he intends to balance.

"I have a business," he said. "It moves people. It is not a pretty business and I do not pretend it is, but it is a business, and a business needs paper, and the paper is the whole difficulty. Every boy I send needs a name that does not belong to him and a check that a doctor did not sign and a registration that a system will accept, and I have been paying for those things at a premium, from people who are not as good at it as they should be, because the people who are good at it do not work for me. There is one person in this district who is good at it. You know who she is." He set down the cup. "I move people. Your friend moves identities. It is the

same trade. The only difference between me and you people is the paperwork, and the paperwork is the whole of the law."

Yiming looked at him and did not move.

"You are going to tell me she will not do it," Mak said. "She already told my man no. That is fine. I am not here to ask her. I am here to ask you." He leaned forward, and for the first time the courtesy fell away and what was underneath was not rage and not cruelty and was simply the flat, patient arithmetic of a man doing a sum.

"You tell her to take the job. You stop walking the streets. You give me the copy of my books — I know there is a copy; there is always a copy — and you live. Your mother keeps the shop until the demolition and then I make sure she is paid for it; I have a cousin on the committee and it is already arranged. Your father gets the shoulder done in the spring, on my account, at a hospital that will not ask. The girls you took go home and forget. Your friend keeps her café and her machines and her father's license. Everyone lives. You are the only one who has to do anything, and the thing you have to do is nothing. You have to sit in your shop and make noodles and let the world be the world."

He said it without pride and without threat, the way a man reads a weather report for a city he does not live in, and Yiming believed him, and the believing was the thing that made the refusal possible, because you cannot refuse a man you are afraid of; you can only refuse a man you have looked at and understood, and understanding Mak Tak-ming was the last gift the summer gave him.

Yiming thought about the offer the way a man thinks about a warm room when he is standing in the cold with a key to it in his pocket. He thought about the shop until the demolition, and the father's shoulder done in a good hospital, and the mother paid out for the rooms above the shop, and the café with its lights on and its father keeping his license, and Ying sleeping at night, and himself standing behind the counter at four in the morning doing the only thing he had ever been good at, making noodles for a street that would go on calling him a god because a god is a story a market tells to keep the dark out. It was all there in the offer, and it was all for the price of one name, and the name was hers. He thought about the four who were already across, and the four behind them, and the woman on the phone, and the spreadsheet that had a date in every cell,

and he understood that Mak was not a monster in the way the market said; he was a kind of infrastructure, and infrastructure does not hate you, it simply routes around you, and the only thing that slows infrastructure is a collapse.

The room was quiet. On the far bank the lights did the thing the lights did, the slow jewelry of a city that did not know this room was in it.

He thought about the word Mak had used, which was "trade." The man had said it as if it settled everything, as if the equivalence were the argument, as if a person who moves people and a person who moves names were two vendors in the same market and the only difference was the counter. That was the thing that made Mak the most dangerous kind of man, which was not a cruel man and not a stupid man but a man who had found the exact shape of the world and had lived in it without complaint. Yiming had spent a year discovering that the world was that shape. He had never once agreed to it. That was the whole of the difference between them, and it was not a difference you could win an argument with.

Yiming thought about the offer for as long as he had to, which was not long. He thought about the shop until the demolition, and the father's shoulder, and the mother's column, and the café with its lights on, and the six girls asleep in a bus somewhere, and the four who were already across, and the four behind them, and the woman on the phone who answered in the afternoon and slept at night.

And he thought about the fact that Mak had just said the truest thing anyone had said to him all year, which was that the difference between the two trades was the paperwork, and that the paperwork is the whole of the law, and that a city will hang a boy with a pole and call it justice, and will leave a man with a laminator and a van and a cousin on the committee to die in a good bed at eighty, and that the only thing the market god had ever been for was the gap between those two facts.

He put his hand flat on the table, on the white cloth, beside the cold tea.

"No," he said.

Mak looked at him for a moment. He did not seem angry. He seemed, if anything, tired, the way a man is tired when a piece of arithmetic comes out the same twice.

"I told my man you would say that," he said. "He said you were sentimental. I said no, I said the boy has a debt and a debt is not sentiment, and I was right." He stood and straightened his jacket. Then he did a thing that Yiming would think about for the rest of his life. He took out his phone and looked at it, and the screen lit his face from below, and on the screen was a photograph of a woman on a bus — young, laughing at something off-camera. He looked at it the way a man looks at a figure he has checked a hundred times and still does not trust.

"My daughter," he said. "Twenty-six. She lives in Melbourne. She has a son I have met twice. When she was nineteen she asked me what my business was, and I told her the truth, because I have never been able to lie to her, and she has not asked me a question since." He put the phone away. "I have bought every account I have ever needed to buy. I could not buy that one. She refuses to be a transaction, so she is the only figure in the book that will not close." He looked at Yiming, and for one moment the flat, patient thing behind his face was not patient at all. "You are the second. That is what I actually came to tell you. The offer was arithmetic. You are the second person who has refused me and gone on refusing, and it keeps me awake, and I do not like being kept awake." Then the flat thing came back, the way a door closes. He walked to the door and stopped with his hand on it and said the last thing without turning around.

"The shipment moves on the twenty-ninth," he said. "You know the date already, I think. I am telling you because it changes nothing, and because I want you to spend the night knowing it. That is the only cruelty I have in me. Good evening, Li Yiming."

The door closed. Yiming sat alone at the table with the river and the lights and the cold tea, and after a while he picked up the cup and drank it, because it was good tea, and because a man about to do the thing he was about to do should not waste the good of anything.

Mak's last sentence sat in the room after he was gone, and Yiming sat with it and with the cold tea, and he understood that the man had not threatened him and had not bribed him and had only, at the very end, done the oldest thing in the world, which was to tell him the truth in order to break him. It had not worked, and the not-working had a price, and the price was walking toward him

already down the corridor, in a good pair of shoes, with the shipment moving on the twenty-ninth.

He walked home along the river, because the tea was good and the night was the last one before the twenty-ninth, and the city did not know, and would never know, that a man had been offered the whole of his life back and had said no in a private room.

Chapter 29

Duanwu fell on the last day of the fifth month, and the street put up the god the way it did every year.

Yiming did it himself, at dusk, the way his father had taught him — flour paste, hot water, the print from Ah Po's stall, four yuan, the same scowl and the same boot and the same small bat in the corner. He held it flat against the door and brushed the back and smoothed it with the flat of his hand. The last light came off the market and lay along the paper, and for a moment the face on the door had a brow like a low roof and a mouth like a cut that had healed wrong. Then it was just a print again — a picture on a door, the thing the whole street did to keep the dark out.

His father watched him from the stool by the counter. He could not raise the arm above the door anymore, and he had not directed the pasting in two years. He watched his son do it and said, at the end, in the voice he used for prices and weather: "Left."

Yiming moved the print a little to the left.

"Good," his father said.

They ate early, because the street ate early on Duanwu and then went to the canal for the drums. There was congee, and there was the turnip cake, and his mother had made the sweet soup, and his father had the rice wine he kept for the two festivals. For an hour the shop was the shop, and the three of them were the three of them, and nobody said the date — which was the way the family had always handled the date: by eating through it.

Yiming cleared the bowls and washed them and put them on the rack. Then he went into the back and took the father's pole down from the corner.

It had stood there since August 2019, untouched. The wood had gone pale and dry, and the shoulder of it was worn to the shape of a hand that had not held it in six years. He had not touched it in six years either. He took it down and set it across his two hands and looked at it, and the wood was lighter than he expected

and warmer than he expected — the way a thing is when it has been in a room with people a long time. He tested it against the floor, once, not hard. It did not ring the way the working pole rang. It gave a lower note, the note of old bamboo, the note of his father's whole life.

His father came to the doorway.

He looked at the pole in his son's hands and did not ask what it was for. He had not asked a question of anyone in that house about anything that mattered since the shoulder, and he did not ask one now. He looked at the pole the way a man looks at a thing he gave away. Then he said the thing that Yiming would carry into the cell with him and turn over for the rest of his life.

"Ting yat. Come back — I'll pull your noodles."

Yiming looked at him. He wanted to say the true thing — that this was not ting yat, that there was no tomorrow in it, that the pole was going to the place poles go; that he was sorry, and had been sorry for a year, and would be sorry longer than that. He did not say any of it. He put the pole under his arm and went out through the shop. His mother was at the ledger and did not look up. She had left the first-aid tin open on the table, the way she had put it out every night for six months whether or not there was a wound, and she put it out now, on the night her son took the sacred pole down, and said nothing, and let him go.

The warehouse was at the end of the canal road, past the hoarding. The city was at the canal for the drums, and the streets were empty in a way they were never empty. Yiming walked them with the pole in his hand and the print he had pasted that dusk still wet on the door behind him.

There were two men at the warehouse gate. He had known there would be. He took the first one low, at the knee, before the man had his phone out of his pocket. The second came at him with a bar, and he put the pole into the man's chest, and the man sat down on the concrete and stayed there. He did not hit either of them again. He had learned something in a year about the difference between the men who stood in front of a door for money and the man who paid them, and he was not going to spend the father's pole on the men.

The warehouse was lit and half full. There were two vans and a car, and there were people being put into the vans. Yiming counted four. They were young,

and one of them was crying without any sound, and the men were working quick and quiet, the way men work when they have done a thing many times.

Mak was at the office door with his phone in his hand, watching. When he saw Yiming come in through the lit doorway with the pole, he did not run and did not shout. He looked at the pole, and then at the man carrying it, and something moved behind his face that Yiming had never seen there before. It was the recognition that he had done the arithmetic wrong — that the boy had a debt, and a debt is not sentiment and also not arithmetic, and that there was a thing at the bottom of people that did not go into the ledger.

"Let them out," Yiming said.

"Or what," Mak said, and his voice was still the calm voice, the reasonable voice, the voice of the man who had chosen the tea.

Yiming did not answer with words. He hit the first man who came at him with the father's pole, and the pole did not split, because it was old wood and old wood does not split. The man went down. The others looked at each other and did not come, because men who are paid do not come when the price changes. The four in the van came out and stood against the wall and did not run, because they did not know where to run to.

Mak put his phone in his pocket.

"You will not get out of this," he said. "You understand that. Whatever happens in the next five minutes, you will not get out of it. The camera saw you at the gate. My men have called. The van at the canal is a crime. You are already a dead man, Li Yiming, and I am only the man who tells you so."

Yiming walked across the concrete with the pole in his hands. He was not angry — which was the thing that frightened him afterward, because he had thought the killing would be anger and it was not. It was grief. It was the same grief as the night at the canal a year ago, and it was the grief of a man who had been made into a god by a street and was now being asked to be one.

He did not remember the first blow. He remembered the sound the father's pole made when it met the man's arm — the sound of the whole thing, the low note of old bamboo, the note of a shop at four in the morning, the note of a hand that had not held it in six years. Mak went down against the office door and Yiming went down with him, and the pole rose and fell. The first blow was for

the shop. The second was for the four in the van and the six on the bus and the one with the green sandal. By the fourth he was not hitting the man at all; he was hitting the year he was nineteen, and the exam he never sat, and the father's shoulder, and the mother's unsaid sentence, and the old woman who came every Tuesday for a bowl she did not pay for. None of it had a face. The man under him had stopped having a face some time before.

Yiming did not speak during it, and neither did Mak after the first minute. The only sounds in the warehouse were the pole, and the two of them, and — somewhere at the back — a radio left on, and a woman's voice reading a weather forecast for the coast.

The father's pole did not break.

He would think about the pole for the rest of his life, and the thought would change shape as the years went. At first it was shame, because he had taken a sacred thing and used it for a killing. Then, later, it was something else — the understanding that the pole had been the only honest thing in the room. It had done exactly what it was for, and it had not broken, and it was his hands that had failed to be the hands the pole was made for. The old man had bounced it into the dough on a thousand mornings to feed a district. His son had brought it to a warehouse and fed nothing. The pole did not break because the pole did not judge; it only did what it was made to do. The making of it was the father's, and the doing of it was the son's, and the two of them had used the same wood for two different lives and neither of them had asked the wood.

When it was over he sat back on his heels on the concrete and looked at what he had done. The warehouse was very quiet. The four from the van had run, which was the right thing, and the men were gone, which was also the right thing. Mak Tak-ming lay on the office floor with his calm face turned up toward the lights and his phone face-up beside him on the concrete. The screen was lit. On the screen was the photograph he had seen in the restaurant — the woman on the bus, the daughter in Melbourne. He looked at it until the screen went dark.

Then he stood up, and his hands were steady, because they were always steady, and that was its own kind of horror.

He walked out of the warehouse, past the two men on the ground at the gate, and out onto the canal road. The drums were still going somewhere down the canal, and the city was still at the water, and the sky over the river was the color it is at the end of a festival when everyone has gone home. At the gate, one of the two men he had put down was sitting up with his back against the wall and his phone in his hand. He looked at Yiming and did not use the phone. Yiming looked at him and did not take it. The two of them let each other go, because the night had already decided everything and there was nothing left for either of them to do.

The drums had gone quiet by the time he reached the street. The festival was over. The firecrackers had been swept up, the dragon boats were back in their sheds, and the river was the color of pewter — which is the color it turns when the day is done and the tide is turning. Somewhere a stall was still selling the last of the zongzi by the light of a phone, and a family was carrying a sleeping child home, and the whole street had the smell the fifth month leaves behind when it goes, which is the smell of rain and smoke and the green of the water. It was the same smell as the night of his father's stabbing. It would be the same smell next year, and the year after that, and the year after that. He would smell it through the wall, and there would be no drums in it for him.

He stopped at the place where the hoarding ended, where the concrete had forgotten everything. He stood there a while with the father's pole in his hand, and the pole was warm from his own grip, and his hands were steady. He understood that he had just done the thing he had been walking toward since the night a phone lit up with the word Ma — that there was no next thing, and that the whole of the next day, and the next year, and the rest of his life, was now a thing he would have to carry on his own two feet into the nearest police station.

He understood, walking home, that he had not done a single thing that night that the law would call justice, and that the market would call the market god, and that the two were the same crime wearing different clothes. The god on the door and the boy with the pole were the same person. That was the whole of what the year had taught him, and it had cost him everything to learn.

He went home. He walked the whole way, and he did not hurry, and the market was empty and the shrine at the corner had its lamp on. At Li Kee the

door print was still wet, and the god on the door looked out over the son's shoulder as he came up the steps, and did not say anything, and never did.

Chapter 30

He came home before the light, and the shop was not dark.

His mother was at the stove. She had the big pot on — the one for the noodles — and the water was already moving. She did not turn around when he came in, and she did not ask him anything. She had left the first-aid tin open on the table, the way she had left it open every night for six months, and there was no wound to put in it. Yiming understood that the tin had not been for the wound for a long time. It had been for the coming home. It was her way of saying, every night, that the door was unlocked and the light was on, and that whatever he had done out there, he could still walk in and there would be a place set for him.

His father was in the doorway of the back room.

He was in his undershirt with the bad shoulder bare. He looked at Yiming, and then at the pole in Yiming's hand, and then at Yiming's hands. He stood there a moment with the whole thing going across his face, the way a man reads a page in a language he learned as a child and has not used in years. He knew. He had known since the tin, or since the pole, or since some night in the winter when he had lain awake with the shoulder and heard his son go out and heard him come back. He had decided to keep lying there with his eyes closed, because a man who cannot work the pole has to decide which of his silences he can afford.

He did not ask. He walked to the stove and put his one good hand on his wife's arm and moved her aside, gently, the way he used to move her aside when he took the front of the shop. Then he took the dough from under the cloth and set it on the board.

Yiming stood in the doorway with the pole in his hand and watched his father make the bowl.

He made it the way he had made it for twenty years. One-handed now. Slower. The weight in the hips and the bad arm hanging. It took him twice as

long as it should have, and he did not hurry, and he did not ask for help. He pulled the dough into the long strand, and it did not break, because the dough knew his hand even if the arm did not. The strand came off the board in one piece, long and uncut — longer than a bowl needs, the way you pull it for a birthday or an exam or a homecoming, the way you pull it when you are telling someone a thing you cannot say.

His mother stood at the end of the counter and did not watch the noodles. She watched the father — the way she had watched him every night for six years, the way you watch a man who is doing a thing he should not be able to do and is doing it anyway. She did not offer to help and she did not stop him. There was a look on her face that Yiming had never seen there before, which was not grief and not pride and was something older than both, the look of a woman watching a debt finally get paid.

He put the strand in the water and took it out and set it in the bowl and poured the broth over it. Then he slid the bowl across the counter to his son.

There was nothing in it but the noodles and the broth and a thread of spring onion. It was not gat dai juk, and it was not a festival dish, and it was not the sweet soup. It was the plain bowl. The promise bowl. The bowl of ting yat, the one his father had promised him on the night before the exam in 2019: come back, and I will pull your noodles. He had come back. It had taken six years, and he had come back as a man with a pole and a dead man behind him, and the promise had been waiting for him at the stove the whole time, in a hand that could not lift. The father had pulled the strand long and uncut, which is what you do when you have nothing left to give but the length of the life you have already lived.

The bowl was the promise, and the promise had always been a thing about tomorrow, and this was the morning it came true and stopped being true at the same time. Yiming ate the noodles one strand at a time, and the strand did not end, because the father had pulled it long and uncut. A long strand is the old wish for a long life. He understood that his father had given him the longest thing he had, which was not the shop and not the shoulder and not the name, but the length of the life already lived, offered backward, so that the son would have something to carry in.

He thought, eating, about all the bowls in the family's history — the bowls his father had pulled for him at six, the bowls his mother had made in the poison month, the bowl of gat dai juk on the night before the exam, the bowls he had made for strangers in the years since. A life in that district was a life of bowls. You are fed from the day you are born to the day you are arrested, and the feeding is the whole of the love, because the district does not say the word. He had been fed by his family, and by the market, and by the aunties, and by the old woman whose son he had killed. He had fed them back from behind the counter, and the feeding had been the only perfect thing he had ever made. He made it in the last free hour of his life, and he ate it slowly, because it was the last of it.

His father sat across from him and watched him eat. His mother stood at the stove with her back to both of them. Nobody said anything, because there was nothing left to say, and because the eating of the bowl was the whole of the conversation. It was the best thing Yiming had ever eaten. It was also the last thing he ate as a free man. Both of those were true at once, and he took the time to finish it.

When the bowl was empty he stood and washed it himself and put it on the rack, because it was the last time he would stand at that sink. Then he went into the back and changed his shirt and put on the shoes he wore in winter. He looked at himself in the small mirror. There was nothing in the mirror that looked like a god or a killer; there was a cook of twenty-four with a scar on his left forearm and a look in his eyes that he had seen in the eyes of men who come out of the water after a long time under it.

He came out with the father's pole in his hand.

His mother looked at him then, at last — the straight long look she had not given him in five years. Yiming looked back at her. She did not ask him anything, and he did not explain anything, and the look went on for a while. Then she nodded, once, the way women nod when they have decided to carry a thing all the way to the end without ever once naming it.

His father did not stand. He could not, with the shoulder and the bowl and the morning, and he did not need to. He said the words once more, and they were the last words he said to his son outside a glass wall. They were the same

words, because they were the only words that had ever been necessary between the two of them.

"Ting yat," he said.

Yiming went out through the shop and down the steps into the market. The market was beginning, and the shrine at the corner had its lamp on. He walked the four streets with the father's pole in his hand in the gray before sunrise — past the arcade, past the bridge. He did not take the canal road, because the canal road was a place he had already been, and there was nothing there for him and no one to tell. He had decided that the last walk would be an ordinary one.

He passed the gei pou on the way. The café was dark, and the side door was sealed, and the sign above the door still had Ying's father's name on it. He stopped for a moment in the street and looked at it. He did not knock. He did not know what he would have said if he had, and he understood that the one person he would have wanted to tell was the one person he could not, because she was already carrying the rest of it and he was not going to put the last weight on her too. He walked on. The market did the thing the market did at that hour, which was to prepare itself, and it did not look up.

The paichusuo was on the corner by the market, the way every paichusuo is — the blue sign, the glass door, the young officer on the night desk. He went in and laid the father's pole on the counter.

It made a sound, a low dry note, the note of old bamboo. The young officer looked up from the screen, and then at the pole, and then at the man, and his hand went, slowly, toward the phone on the desk. He was very young, maybe twenty-one, and he had the face of a boy who had joined the force to stand between the city and the dark. He looked at the pole and then at the man in front of him and did not reach for anything else, because he did not know yet whether he was looking at a crime or a surrender, and there is no form that covers both at once.

Yiming did not run. That was the thing he had promised Lam, and it was the last promise he was able to keep. He stood with his hands loose at his sides and the morning coming up behind him through the glass, and he let the young officer look at him. He understood that this was the last room, and that after this room there would be other rooms, and that none of them would have his mother

at the stove or his father at the door or the two beats of the pole in the dark before the light.

He put both hands on the counter, beside the pole, palms down, where the officer could see them.

Somewhere behind the market the sun was coming up over the canal. The shrine at the corner still had its lamp on, and the street was beginning its day, and in a room above the shop a man with one working arm was sitting at a table with an empty bowl in front of him, and a woman at a ledger was writing the first entry of the month in her small square hand. Yiming would not see them again except through glass. He would see them for years through glass, at a table with a fixed number of chairs. The father would not be able to reach across, and the mother would bring him socks and dried longan and a receipt he did not need, and the three of them would learn a new grammar for the only room they had left.

The officer asked him his name. Then, because it was the desk and the hour and because there was a form for everything, the officer did the thing the desk did with the people who came in at dawn — he opened the roster and asked the question. He looked down at the list and then up at the man, and he called the name, and Li Yiming answered the way he had answered four hundred times in his life, in a flat voice, with the first word the school ever taught them to say.

"Dou."

CHAPTER 31

Chapter 31

Lam heard about the surrender at half past six, from the duty log, and he was at the paichusuo before seven.

The boy was sitting on the bench in the interview room with his hands on his knees and a plastic cup of water going cold in front of him. The father's pole was on the table in an evidence bag — long and pale, the bamboo the color of weak tea and older than that. Lam stood in the doorway and looked at the two of them together, the boy and the pole, and understood before he read a single line of the file that the whole of the summer and the winter and the spring were in this one room, and that there was nothing left in it for anyone to win.

Li Yiming looked up at him.

"I said I would not run," he said.

"You did not run," Lam said.

The boy gave him the whole of it. He gave it the way he had given everything in his life — flat, without asking for anything. He gave it in the order Lam asked for it, and not in the order that would have made him look better, which is the difference between a confession and a defense. He gave him Chen Mou, and the blue wall, and the knife, and the minute he had spent with his fist after the man had stopped. He gave him the mask, and Ah Po's paper, and the overwritten camera. He gave him the whole of the other business — the vans, the warehouse, the room above the hotpot place — and at the end he gave him the name of the person who had the records.

"There is a package," he said. "It is with a woman named Deng Ying. She has the room and the recruiter and the vans and the warehouse and the manifest and the forged medicals and the officer at the paichusuo and the man at the top. It was hers to send and she did not send it, on my account. Now you can ask her for it, and she will give it to you, because that was always the plan between us, and I am telling you the plan so that you can have it."

Lam wrote the name down. He did not ask the boy whether he loved her, because the boy did not, not in the way the question meant, and because the question was not one a policeman asks. He asked the questions that were on the form.

He asked the boy about the mask, and the boy told him about Ah Po and the eighty yuan and the three coats of lacquer. He asked about the overwritten camera, and the boy told him about the fisheye and the last week's rain. Lam wrote it all down in his square hand. He was writing the biography of a district as much as the confession of a man. Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon the boy stopped and asked for water. Lam got him water, and the boy drank it and said, "The old man at the roots-and-stone stall. Do not charge him with anything. He did not know me. That was the whole point." Lam wrote that down too, because it was true, and because it said something about the district that the file would never hold.

He had done the arithmetic a hundred times that week, and it always came out the same. If the boy had never put on the mask, Chen Mou would still be alive, and the eleven would have gone across, and the machine would still be running, and the province would still be waiting for a date it never got. If the boy had never put on the mask, there would be one more man on the market street. He would be making noodles. His father would have a shoulder. Nobody would have heard the name. Lam did not know which of those was the worse world. He had spent twenty years believing that the law was the difference between the two, and he still believed it, and the believing did not tell him what to do with a boy who was both the crime and the cure.

The task force came for the rest of it, and Lam became, for a week, the district end of a provincial thing. He had spent twenty years in a district office, and the provincial thing was, in the end, a room with better coffee and worse hours. The men from the province were polite and quick and had done this before. They did not ask him about the market, or the god, or the boy with the pole. They asked him about the leases, and the vans, and whether the recruiter's number was still live. Lam answered the questions and watched them work. The machine that had eaten the district was not the only machine. There was a bigger one. It moved when the province told it to, and it had been moving on other rooms in other

cities for years, and it would go on moving after this room was closed. That was the thing that made him keep the photograph. The photograph was the one thing in the whole apparatus that was still a person.

Cheung came with two officers and a whiteboard and set up in a room that had once been a conference room and now smelled of instant coffee and paper. The package came on the second day — delivered not by post but by a young woman who walked into the task-force room and put it on the table and did not sit down. She was twenty-three. She had a sealed envelope and a look that Lam had seen on the faces of people who had decided to spend everything at once. Cheung asked her, once, whether she understood what the statement would do to the man it concerned. She said, "It will put him in prison." Cheung said yes. She said, "He is already going to prison. This is so the rest of them go with him." Then she sat down and gave a statement of, by Lam's count, forty pages. Her hands were steady on the table the whole afternoon, and Lam watched her hands the way he watched everything, and the steadiness was not calm; it was the steadiness of a person who had practiced being in this room for a year. She did not ask for the boy once. When she had finished she stood and left, and the door closed behind her, and Cheung looked at Lam and raised his eyebrows. Lam did not explain her to him, because there was no sentence short enough.

The package was everything. It had the room, and the recruiter's afternoon number, and the vans and the plates, and the warehouse and its lease, and the manifest with the eleven names, and the three medical stamps, and the clinic that did not exist, and the laminator man, and the bought officer, and the name at the top. It had the driver's video and a one-page account of the night on the canal road. It was enough to move a province, and on the third day the province moved.

The network came apart the way these things come apart, which is not all at once and never completely. The warehouse was raided and found empty except for the office and the two vans. The room above the hotpot place was raided and found scrubbed. The recruiter's number stopped answering in the afternoon, and then stopped answering at all. Zhou Weikang was picked up at the airport with a folder and a laminator in his luggage, and he looked at the arresting officer and asked, with real curiosity, which of his clients had turned him in, and did not

seem to understand the answer when it came. Sergeant Wan was picked up at his desk by two men from the province and did not resist and did not speak; his cousin on the village committee resigned the following week. And in a compound across a border, in a room with a hundred phones, a boy from the arcade who had said thank you before he left was found alive, in a raid the province coordinated with a foreign counterpart. He was returned to his mother in the spring.

The four who had gone ahead were not found. The package said eleven. The file said seven recovered, one dead, and four abroad and unaccounted for. Lam would carry those four in the same drawer as everything else, because a number in a file is still a person, and the file that does not find them is the file he could not close.

Lam went to the arcade two days later. He told himself he was there for the district, but he stood at the electronics stall for a while before he admitted why. The boy was behind the counter, thinner than the photograph in the file, his head shaved and growing back, with a watch on his left wrist that he did not need. He was stacking phone cases and did not look up. His mother sat on a stool beside him with a blanket over her knees and a pot of congee on a gas ring, and she was talking to him in a low voice about the price of something, and the boy was saying mm. Lam stood across the aisle and watched the two of them and did not go over. There was nothing he could say that would not be a form. He bought a charger he did not need and paid the mother for it. She took the money and thanked him. The boy said, without looking up, "M goi," and that was all. Lam walked back to the office with the charger in his pocket and put it on the desk and did not throw it away.

On the last day of the task force, Cheung sat down with Lam in the coffee-smelling room and put two pieces of paper in front of him. One was the draft charge sheet for Li Yiming — intentional homicide, no self-defense, no dispute, a man dead on the floor of a warehouse. The other was a short paragraph in the margin, in Cheung's own hand, which listed the ways in which the accused had cooperated. Full confession. Identification of the room and the network. The location of the stolen ledgers' copy. The manifest. The names. The recovery of the seven. The arrest of Zhou and Wan and six others. And, in the same

paragraph, the fact that the cooperation had not been bought and had not been negotiated, and had been offered before any deal was on the table.

"That is a merit," Cheung said. "Under the law it is a major merit. It does not make the killing go away. It makes the sentence something other than what it would have been."

Lam looked at the two pieces of paper.

"I know a judge," Cheung said. "I am not going to tell you what he will do."

"I am not asking you to," Lam said.

He took the papers back to the office and put them in the file. Then he sat for a while with the drawer open in front of him. In the drawer there was a map of the blind minutes, and a closure list, and a paper face in a photograph, and the 2019 file, and now a charge sheet and a merit paragraph and a boy's whole confession written in Lam's own hand. He looked at all of it. He had been carrying the district in a drawer for a year, and the district had been carrying him. Neither of them had done the thing they meant to do. The file was closed now on everything except the one question he had never asked out loud — whether the boy on the concrete at the end of the blue wall had died at the hands of a killer, or at the hands of the only person left who was willing to stand between a street and the machine that was eating it.

He closed the drawer and turned the key. He did not have an answer. He had a file, and a job, and a daughter who sat her exam in the summer and did well and left for a university in another city in the autumn, and who wrote to him once a week from a dormitory he had never seen, and a market that would be a building site by the autumn, and a paper god on a door in a district that was already forgetting the whole of it — which is what a district does, and what it must do, and what he had decided long ago that he would not hate it for.

He did not go to the market that week. When he finally went, the block was already fenced, and the hoarding had gone up around it, and the words on the hoarding said something about a new city center. The market had been moved to a temporary site in a car park, and the stalls were under tarpaulins, and the aunties were selling greens from trestles. He bought a bag of oranges he did not need and walked back to the office and put them on the desk. He gave two to the

young officer and ate one himself, and did not tell anyone what the oranges were for.

He kept the photograph of the mask in the drawer. He kept it for years, long after the case was closed and the district was gone and the boy was a number in a provincial file. He never showed it to anyone, and he never threw it away. It was not evidence anymore. It was the only picture he had of the whole thing as it had actually been — a paper face made by an old woman for four yuan, worn one night in the rain by a cook, and turned by a city into a god and by a court into a case. He kept it the way you keep a coin from a country that no longer exists. On the bad nights he took it out and looked at it, and told himself that a case is a thing a city makes to stop thinking about a person, and that he was still thinking about the person.

CHAPTER 32

Chapter 32

The trial took two days — which is what these things take when the paperwork is already written and the accused has already agreed with the paperwork.

It was not a courtroom like the ones on television. There was a raised bench and a panel of three. There was a prosecutor, a defense lawyer, a clerk with a laptop, and a small public gallery with a few chairs. There was no jury, because there is no jury. The whole thing was the size of a small classroom and smelled of floor cleaner and photocopier, and the walls were a government color. There was a clock, and the clock worked. Yiming watched it the way he had watched the clock in the hospital corridor in 2019 — which is to say he watched it move without believing that it moved for him.

There were no cameras, and no gallery for the press, and no crowd at the door. It was a Tuesday and a Wednesday in a building full of other Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Yiming sat on a plastic chair in a small room and listened to the state describe him, and outside the window a municipal truck went by and emptied the bins, and nobody in the room looked up. He had thought, in the cell, that the day would feel like the end of something. It felt like a form.

His mother came on the first day and sat in the second row in a dark shirt with her hands folded. She did not cry, because she did not cry. His father came too, in the good shirt from the year before the stabbing, because he had decided that this was a day that required it. He sat beside her with the bad arm in his lap and did not look at the panel once. He looked at his son the whole time — the way he had looked at him in the shop, hands first and face second. Ying was there on the first morning, and then not there. A few people from the market came, because the market came to everything. Mrs. Cheung came and sat at the back with her dried goods put away for once, and did not say the sentence to anyone, and did not need to.

His mother had brought a thermos she did not open. His father had brought nothing at all — the father had never in his life brought a thing to a place where

the thing was not needed, and what he brought instead was the shirt, and the sitting, and the not-looking-away. Mrs. Cheung sat at the back with her hands folded and did not say the sentence, not once, not to anyone. When the clerk read the charge she closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them. That was the whole of what she did, and it was more than anyone else in the room understood.

The charges were read out. The killing of Mak Tak-ming — intentional, in a warehouse on the canal road, on the last night of the fifth month. The charge was guyi sharen (故意杀人). The prosecutor read it in the flat state voice that these things are read in, and the words came out of him the way water comes out of a tap. Yiming sat and listened to a man he had never met describe the last ten minutes of the summer in the language of the state.

Then the clerk asked him, and he answered.

The court went through it in order. The evidence of the killing was not in dispute; the driver's video and the warehouse camera and the two men at the gate and the confession had settled it. The defense lawyer was a woman of about forty who had been assigned to him. She had come to the cell three times, and had asked him the same question each time — whether he wanted to plead self-defense, or provocation, or temporary incapacity — and each time he had told her no. He had told her that he had gone to the warehouse holding the pole of a man who could not lift, and had meant to do what he did. He had told her that a man who means a thing is not allowed to pretend afterward that he did not. She had looked at him for a long time, and then had written down what he said, in her own words, which were better than his.

So the defense did not argue the killing. The defense argued the surrender and the merit. It put before the panel the fact that the accused had walked into the paichusuo at dawn with the weapon and had not run — which is zishou (自首). And it put before the panel the paragraph in the file that listed what the surrender had produced: the room, the recruiter, the vans, the warehouse, the laminator man, the bought officer; the recovery of seven people and the return of one boy to his mother; the whole of a network that the province had been unable to move on until a cook walked into a police station with a stick and a name. The

lawyer called it what the law calls it — zhongda ligong (重大立功). She read out the list with the flat patience of a woman reading a bill, and she read the boy's return home last, and then she stopped, and the panel wrote.

The lawyer came the last time on the night before the verdict. She had a folder and a bag of oranges and the look of a woman who had done everything she could and knew it was not enough. She told him, in the careful voice she used for clients, what the range of outcomes was. She said the merit was strong, and the surrender was clean, and that she expected the suspended sentence. She said that life was the floor and death was the ceiling, and that the floor and the ceiling were further apart than people thought. Then he asked her the only question he had — whether the family of the dead man had been contacted, and whether they wanted anything. She said the family had declined to make a statement and had declined to attend, and that they had a lawyer and a number, and that they wanted what money can want. He told her to give them the number. She did not answer. After a while she stood and took her folder and went out. The oranges she left on the table. He ate one and gave the rest away, because there is no point keeping fruit in a place where nothing keeps.

On the second day they read the verdict and the sentence.

The panel read the reasoning first, which took forty minutes. It was the law the way the law is — intent, act, consequence, mitigation, cooperation, merit, and at the end a number. Yiming listened to the numbers being read. He did not understand all of them and did not need to. Across the room his mother's hands were folded on the rail, and his father's one good hand was flat on the bench beside her, and the two of them sat the way the family sat at the ledger, which was with their backs straight and their faces still.

The prosecutor asked for the death sentence and did not get it. The asking was not cruelty; it was the job. The defense asked for time served and a lesser charge and did not get that either. Yiming sat between the two of them and watched them weigh his life, and felt nothing he could name.

The charge was intentional homicide, with no lawful mitigation for the act itself, and with full surrender and major merit entered in the accused's favor. The panel gave him sihuan (死缓) — the suspended death sentence, which is a death sentence that is not carried out, and which in practice, with the merit and the

cooperation, would become life, and then would become a number of years that a man of his age could conceivably live through, and perhaps be released from, in a city he would not recognize. The clerk read the name when the papers were done, the way the clerk read every name. Yiming answered the way he had answered four hundred times in his life.

"Dou."

Then they took him out, and the room folded up the way these rooms fold up.

He would think about the two days for years, and what he would remember was not the verdict, and not the charge, and not the prosecutor, and not the lawyer. What he would remember was the clock. The truck emptying the bins outside the window. The way the clerk's voice changed slightly when he read the sentence. The thermos his mother had brought and never opened. The fact that his father had worn the shirt that hung wrong on the ruined shoulder for a day that lasted two days. A trial is supposed to be about the worst thing a person did. What it is actually about, he understood, is the ordinary details that the worst thing cannot erase — and the details are the only part that lasts. His mother stood up in the second row and did not reach for him, because there was glass and distance and an officer. His father stood up slowly with the bad arm. The two of them looked at him across the well of the small room and did not say anything. That was the last time Yiming saw his father standing in the open air, because the next time he saw him it would be through a pane of thick glass with a telephone in his hand, and the father would be sitting down.

He thought, walking down the corridor to the van, about the market, and about the print he had pasted on the door on the last night — the four-yuan god with the small bat in the corner. He thought about the fact that he had never once, in a year, decided to be Zhong Kui Gor. The city had decided it for him, the way the city decided everything, and now the city would decide what he was next — a number in a file, a line in the paper, a story the aunties told — and none of it would be him. He was going in as Li Yiming. He would come out, if he came out, as a man the street used to know. That was the whole of the sentence, and the panel had only written the number of years on the cover of it.

The van went through the streets he had grown up in, and he looked out at them through the little window, and they were already changing.

He would not see the street again for a long time. When he did, it would be a different street with the same name, and the shop would be under a tower, and his father would be dead, and none of that was the thing he was thinking about. He was thinking about the bowl his father had pulled that morning, and the two beats he would tap on the rail that night, and the ordinary arithmetic of a man being driven away from everything he had ever made. The market street was fenced. The arcade had a new sign. The canal road had a row of young trees where the hoarding had been, and the concrete where the blue wall had stood had been poured over and was smooth and gray and clean. He was glad. There was no one there to look at, and no one there to look back, and the city had already begun the long, indifferent work of turning the summer into a story it could live beside — which is what cities are for.

His mother did not come to the cell to say goodbye before the transfer. She had said it already, at the glass and at the courtroom, and there was nothing in the family that needed saying twice. But when the van pulled out of the gate she was standing on the pavement across the road with her hands folded, in the dark shirt. She did not wave, and he did not wave. The van took him away, and she stood there until it was out of sight, which was the last thing he saw of the free city.

Chapter 33

Prison, like the market, had a rhythm, and a man either learned it or broke against it.

He learned it the way he had learned everything — by watching, and by keeping his hands busy. The cell was small and shared. The hours were fixed. The lights went on at a time that was not a time a person would choose, and the whole place ran on a schedule that no one in it had written and no one could argue with. After the first month he understood: it was the same as the market, and the same as the law, and the same as the city. He did the work he was given, and did it well — a man who does a thing well is left alone to do it. He learned the workshop the way he had learned the dough, until the machine that made the parts for other machines had a rhythm he could feel in his wrists. He ate what was on the tray. He read the newspapers when they came, and looked for the district, and after a while he stopped looking. The district was being torn down, and the papers wrote about the towers instead.

He learned the other thing too — the thing nobody tells you about a place like this, which is that it is not the walls that hold you; it is the usefulness. A man who has a thing to do and does it is free in a way that a man with nothing to do is not. Yiming had spent his whole life being useful to a shop, and the habit of it followed him in. He fixed the workshop fan. He mended the pump on the boiler. He learned the machine, and then he learned the machine's moods, and the guard who ran the shop began to give him the jobs that needed a hand that did not shake. After that he was left alone. The being left alone was the closest thing to the shop that the place had to offer.

The block had its own geography. There was the man who talked all night and the man who talked never. There was a boy of nineteen who would not say what he had done, and an old man who would say what he had done to anyone who asked and to most who did not. There were the cards and the cigarettes and the small economies of a place where nothing is money. Yiming kept to himself

the way he had kept to himself on the market — by being useful, and by not asking. The block learned him the way the market had learned him, and left him alone. The one thing they knew about him was the tapping. Nobody asked twice. In a place like that, a man's habit is his own business, and the two beats belonged to nobody but him.

He kept the two beats.

Every night, when the lights went out, he lay on the bunk and tapped the rhythm on the rail with two fingers. Two beats, then the pause, then two beats — the way the bamboo had struck the board in the dark of the shop before the light. It was a small thing. It was a private thing. It was, he came to understand, the whole of what he had left of the life that had been taken from him: not the shop, not the street, not the name the market had put on him, but the rhythm, which was in his body and which no institution could search out of him. The man in the next bunk asked him once what the tapping was. He said it was a habit. The man said it was a good habit — a man needs one thing the place cannot take — and then he rolled over and went to sleep. Yiming went on tapping, and the two beats went out into the dark of the cell block and reached nobody at all.

Visitation was through glass.

Glass changes people. It does not change their faces; it changes the way they say things, because a person speaking through a telephone in a small room can hear their own voice, and a voice that can hear itself becomes careful. His mother was careful. Ying was careful. The father was the least careful of the three — the father had never been able to hold a thing back, and the shoulder had not changed that. The one thing the glass did give them was time: each visit was a fixed hour, and a fixed hour is a mercy, because it means the goodbye has a shape. A goodbye with a shape is easier to carry than a goodbye that ends when there is nothing left to say.

They sat on the other side of the pane with a telephone in their hands. He sat on his side with a telephone in his. The whole conversation happened through two holes in a thick wall of glass. The room was always too cold. It always smelled of disinfectant. There was never enough time. His mother came the first month, and then every month she could — which was not every month. The trip was

long, and she was not young, and the shop was gone by then. She brought the ledger once, in her bag, and did not show it to him through the glass. He did not ask. She had brought it to have it near, the way you carry a thing to a place where the person it is for cannot reach it. She did not ask him questions. She had stopped asking him questions in 2019, and the not-asking had survived the trial and the sentence and the glass. The care still came by other routes: socks, dried longan, a receipt he did not need, a photograph of the shrine at the corner of the market with the new print on it, taken the year the district came down.

His father came less often, and then stopped coming. Not out of anger. The trip, the stairs, and the shoulder were three things at once, and a man of seventy who cannot hold a telephone for an hour has to decide what to spend the arm on. He came one last time, in the second year. He sat down on the far side of the glass with the good shirt on and the bad arm in his lap. He picked up the telephone and held it with the one hand that listened to him. He did not say much — he never said much — and at the end he said the only thing he had ever needed to say to his son. Yiming heard it through the little speaker and put his own hand flat against the glass. The father put his one good hand flat against the glass on the other side. The two hands did not meet. That was the last time the two of them were in a room together.

Ying came once a year, on the same day every year. She sat on the far side of the glass with her hands folded. She did not talk about the café, or the package, or the boy in the compound, or the four who were never found. She talked about the market, and her father, and the price of things — the way a person talks through glass, which is to say the way a person talks about nothing so the nothing can carry the whole. She told him, in the simple sentences she had used since the second grade, that the shop had come down in the autumn, and the print with it. That the market had moved to a new building with air conditioning and a parking lot. That the aunties still said the name when something on the street went wrong — which is what aunts do. She told him Zoya was well. That they had gone to the shelter city together, to see the two girls who had gone there. One of them had a job now. The girl with the number tattooed on her wrist had a daughter — three years old, and told nothing. She never once told him that the package had saved him, because it had not saved

him. She never once told him that she was the reason he was alive, because that was not true either, and because the two of them had stopped needing to say the true things out loud somewhere around the second year.

He did not become a model prisoner in the way the papers meant it. He did not find God. He did not apologize to a panel. He did not write to the family of Mak Tak-ming, because he had never learned the family's name, and because he did not know what he would have written if he had. What he did was this: he worked, and he read, and he learned the machine. In the fourth year he began to teach the new ones the form.

It was not Uncle Leung's form. It was not a form at all, not really. It was the thing he had learned in the back yard under the single bulb — the thing the working pole had learned from his hands — adapted to a space of six paces, with nothing in it but a man and his body. He did it in the exercise yard, at the edge of the light. A few of the younger ones watched. Then a few of them copied. Then there was a small group, and one of the guards asked him what it was, and Yiming said it was exercise — which was true, and not the whole of it. It was, he understood, the only thing he had ever been able to pass on. Not the shop, which was under a tower now. Not the name, which belonged to a market that no longer existed. Just the form: a way to stand in a place, and a way to come back to it after the world has moved you off.

The years went the way years go. The father's arm got worse, and then it did not get worse, because the father died in the fifth year, in his sleep, in the room above the new shop. His mother wrote it to Yiming in a letter of four lines, and did not come for two months. When she came she sat on the far side of the glass and said, in the flat voice, that the congee had been good at the funeral, and that the aunties had come. She had brought the good shirt, folded, in a plastic bag. She did not offer it through the slot, because the slot would not take it, and she did not need to. She held it on her lap the whole hour, the way you hold a thing that has nowhere to go.

He taught the form for years. A few kept it after they left. One of them wrote to him once, from a town in the north, to say he had taught it to his brother. That letter was the only thing Yiming kept in the cell, under the mattress, next to nothing else. He read it sometimes at night. It said the form was good for a man

who had to stand in a place and wait. That the waiting was the whole of it. That the brother had a bad leg, and the form helped the leg. Yiming did not write back. He did not know what to say to a man he had never met about a thing his father had never meant to give. But he kept the letter, and the two beats, and the two of them were, in the end, the whole of what he had to pass on. He never learned whether the brother got better. He learned, in the way you learn things in a place like that, that a letter that does not come back is not the same as a letter that was never sent — and he decided to believe the brother got better, because a man in that place gets to decide a few things, and that was one of them.

At night, when the lights went out, Yiming lay on the bunk and tapped the two beats on the rail.

Health, wealth, long life, virtue, and a good death, the old man had said. Yiming had gone a long way from the market. The five chalk bats were on a box that had been thrown away with the shop, and the five blessings were still the thing he did not have. But the two beats were his — the same two beats his father had bounced into the dough on a thousand mornings, the same two beats the bamboo had struck on the board before the light. They were the only prayer he knew. He said it every night, into the dark, to nobody, for no god. It was enough. It was not enough. It was the whole of what was left.

CHAPTER 34

Chapter 34

Duanwu came around again, the way it does. On the day the Gaokao began, the sky over the city was the color of wet slate, and the streets around every school went quiet at nine o'clock, as if a hand had been laid over the mouth of them.

Inside, the visitation room was cold. The two of them sat on either side of the thick glass with the telephones in their hands. It was a Gaokao morning, so the room was empty except for them. The officers at the ends of the row were talking in low voices, and the fluorescents buzzed, and the whole place smelled of disinfectant and paper.

Ying had come a long way, and she had the look of a woman who had come a long way. She was thirty now, or nearly, with grey in her hair that she did not cover, and a jacket that was good but not new. Her face was the flat, precise face she had always had — the years had not softened it, and it had not needed them to. She had a small plastic bag with her. In the bag there was a photograph, and she held it up to the glass so that he could see it without her having to describe it.

It was a shop door. It was not Li Kee — Li Kee was under a tower now — but it was a door with a noodle shop behind it, a small one, in the new market building. Over the door there was a fresh print pasted up for the festival: the same four-yuan god, the same brows, the same sword, the same boot, and the same small bat in the corner that nobody had ever explained. Below the print, at the height of a child's hand, the paper was worn pale and soft, in the shape of a small print of fingers — the way a door is worn when a whole generation of children has touched it.

"The shop is mine now," Ying said, into the telephone, in the flat voice. "Your mother left it to me. Not the name; the name belongs to the family. The shop." She watched him look at the photograph. "The examination children come on the first morning, before they go in. The aunties told them the print is lucky. They touch it. The mother of the boy next door brings hers every year, and she

makes him touch it with both hands, and then she touches it herself, and then they go to the exam."

The shop was small — four tables and a counter — and she had kept it the way her own café had been kept, plain and clean. She had kept the family's ledger, and the family's name on the menu board, because a name on a board is a thing you do not take down while the person it belongs to can still hear you say it. She had learned the dough in the first year, badly, and then well. She had had a teacher, she told him, a woman from the park crew who had known his father, and who had come to the shop one morning and stood at the counter and said that she had been taught to make the noodles by the man who used to make them there, and that she would teach the shop, and that this was a debt and not a favor. Ying had said yes. The woman taught her the pole and the rest, one-handed, because the woman was old and the pole was long, and the two of them had made the shop work, and the shop had been making it work ever since.

He looked at the photograph for a long time.

He was forty in that room, or close. The years had done to him what years do: the forearm scar pale, the hair going grey at the temple, the hands of a man who had spent a decade learning a machine instead of a dough. He was not the god on the door. He had never been the god on the door. The city had put the paper up and the city had taken the paper down, and the paper on the door in the photograph was not his face at all, and the children who touched it did not know his name, and most of them would never hear it. This was, he understood, the only thing the city had ever done for him that he was grateful for.

He thought about the five bats, and about the fact that the market had put the five blessings on a box for a night patrol that had ended years ago. Health, wealth, long life, virtue, and a good death. He had been given a long life, in the end, of a kind, and a death that had come to other people instead of to him, and virtue was a word the aunties might have used for a man they had never met. The luck had gone to the children at the door — which was how a city's luck always went. It landed on other people, on purpose, on paper, and the paper was worn pale by small hands that would never know whose life had been spent to make the ink.

"They do not know who he is," he said.

"No," Ying said. "They think he is a god. That is what a god is." She lowered the photograph and looked at him through the glass. "Your mother kept one thing. It is in my flat. When the shop came down they went in through the door, and she took the print off before they knocked it down — the one from the last Duanwu, the one you put up. It is in a folder in my flat. It is dry and cracked at one corner, and I have not thrown it away. I do not know why I am telling you this."

"Because it is the last thing," he said. "It is the last thing from that door."

She looked at him. The years had not made either of them better at the thing between them, and the thing between them had never needed to be said. They sat for a while in the cold room with the telephones at their ears and said nothing, which was the conversation, and always had been.

"Zoya is outside," she said at last. "She cannot come in. They will not let a foreigner in without papers and three weeks, and we did not have three weeks. She is in the car park. She says to tell you that the weather is the same as always, and that the eggs are the same price, and that you would not believe what they have done to the arcade."

He almost laughed. It was the first time in years. It came up through the glass the way a bubble comes up through water, and it did not reach her, and she saw it, and she did not laugh, and her eyes did something that her face did not.

She told him about the girl from the next street, the one with the number tattooed on the inside of her wrist. She had a daughter now, and the daughter was three, and the daughter had a name, and the girl had gone back to school. She told him about the young man from the motorcycle repair place, whose shoulder had healed crooked, and who had a son now and a bigger workshop, and who never spoke about the night on the canal road and never once asked anything of the shop. She told him that Uncle Leung had died, and that the park crew had done the form at his funeral, in the street, because there was nowhere left to do it — and that the aunties had cried, which was the first time the aunties had cried at anything since the night the van came out of the warehouse.

"I will not come again for a while," she said. "The market is moving again. They are moving the whole market to the other side of the canal, and the shop has to move with it, and it is a year's work with one person." She paused. "I will

come when it is done. I will bring the new print. There will be a new print; there always is."

"Ying," he said.

"Do not," she said, in the flat voice, and he stopped — because she was right, because there was nothing left to thank her for that she could hear without it turning into a debt, and because the two of them had spent a life keeping their debts flat and square and unspoken, and the unspoken debt was the whole of the love between them, and it had held for seventeen years and would hold until one of them died.

The officer at the end of the row said the time. Ying stood up. She put the photograph back in the plastic bag and held it against her chest, the way you hold a thing you have decided to carry all the way home. Then she did the thing she had done at the door of the car in the dark, all those years ago — she put her palm flat against the glass on her side. He put his palm flat against the glass on his side. The two palms did not meet. The glass was cold under both of them. Then she took her hand away and went out, and the door closed behind her, and there was only the buzz of the fluorescents and the empty row of telephones and the cold.

He sat there a while longer, until the room was empty and the officer at the end of the row had changed shifts, and then he went back to the block.

Out in the city, on the other side of the wall, the morning went on being a morning.

The market in the new building had a different smell — concrete, and cleaning fluid, and the air-conditioning — and the aunties complained about it for a year and then stopped, the way people stop. But the shrine at the corner had come across the canal with the market. Someone had carried it in a box on a handcart, the little house with the god in it, and someone had found a place for it against the wall of the new building, and there was always an orange and always a little paper umbrella. On the first day of the exam the mothers brought their children past it before they went in, because a city that has been given a god does not give it back the next year.

At the small noodle shop in the new market building, a woman opened the shutters at half past six and set the pot on and made the first dough of the day.

Above the door, the paper god looked out over the street with his brows joined and his sword raised and his mouth open at something nobody else could see. At eight o'clock the children began to come. They came in their school shoes with their transparent pencil cases and their tickets in their hands and their mothers behind them. One of them stopped at the door of the shop, and then another, and then another. Each of them reached up and touched the paper at the height of a child's hand, the way the aunties had told them to — for luck, for the examination, for the long day ahead. The paper was soft there, worn pale by a generation of small hands. The god on the door did not move, and did not stop them, and did not need to.

At nine the city went quiet. Three hundred thousand lives across the district, all of them inside one hour, and the streets around every school went still, as if a hand had been laid over the mouth of it.

And inside — in the block on the other side of the wall — a man of forty lay on his bunk at the end of the day when the lights went out. He tapped two beats on the rail with two fingers, and then two beats more: the rhythm his father had bounced into the dough and the bamboo had struck on the board before the light. It went out into the dark of the cell block the way it had gone out for years, and reached nobody at all.

He is inside. The god is on the door.

Colophon

五福：一曰壽，二曰富，三曰康寧，四曰攸好德，五曰考終命。

Wu fu: yi yue shou, er yue fu, san yue kang ning, si yue you hao de, wu yue kao zhong ming.

The five blessings: long life; wealth; health and peace; the love of virtue; and a good end. — the Book of Documents, 洪範 (The Great Plan)

A wet market in Guangzhou, in the poison month of the fifth lunar month. Four streets whose every blind minute a boy has walked into his legs — the dead market-gate camera, the arcade that goes dark at half past eleven, the fisheye on the footbridge that goes on recording and can never be watched. A family noodle shop pulling bamboo-pole dough by hand; a ledger kept in a mother's small square hand. And a woodblock print of Zhong Kui pasted on the door every Duanwu for four yuan — worn pale at the height of a child's hand, by children who will never know whose life was spent to make the ink.

Zhen AI · 甄艾 is a pen name. Read aloud it is *zhēn ài*, an exact homophone of 真爱, "true love." Romanised it becomes Zhen AI — 真, "real," plus AI. It says true love in Chinese and real AI in English, and is neither.

This novel was written by a large language model, from prompts, research and editorial direction supplied by a human. There is no human author hiding behind the name.

BROTHER ZHONG KUI · 34 sections · 74,962 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 — Free to read. Free to pass on, unchanged and uncharged. Not free to reprint and sell.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/