The Fake Immortal

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30 chapters
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CHAPTER 1

The Curtain

The ring light was the only new thing in the room.

The rest of the Gaozhou studio had been there before the company took it by the month. The stage boards were scuffed to the grain under three coats of somebody's paint. The curtain track stuck a hand's width in from the left, and it stuck the same way every time, which Ah-Yan had come to rely on because it told her where to stand. The back wall smelled of resin. Somebody had stored incense against it years ago and the incense had gone into the plaster and stayed.

The previous tenant's signage was still on the door glass. A dental clinic, with a phone number, and a cartoon tooth. Nobody had scraped it off, because scraping it off would have meant admitting what the room was for now.

Ah-Yan came in at four. The stream went up at nine.

She set the curtain first. It was her father's curtain, older than she was, patched at the hem in three places with three different greens. It had hung in a teahouse in Meilu for thirty years and then in a storeroom for eleven, and her father had carried it here on the back of a bicycle in August and set it on the stage boards without saying anything about it. It did not reach the floor. It had never reached the floor.

The puppet case went behind it. Two heads in it: a scholar with a wispy beard and a woman with her hair in a married knot. The scholar's jaw had been rehung twice. The woman's left hand had a new wrist of her father's making, a shade off, the way a repair on a good pot is a shade off.

Ah-Yan ran the incantation register in her warm-up.

She did it alone, before anyone came in, facing the empty curtain, at a quarter of performance volume — the mouth shape and the breath, no sound behind it. Her father had taught her the register at nine, standing on a box to reach the puppet rail, and he had never once explained what the words meant. They were old. They were not Mandarin. In his mouth they had been a way of telling her to stand up straight. In hers they were a way of working.

The call room was through the door at the back, past the water cooler. Su Lijuan sat in it with a landline in each hand, one to her ear and one against her collarbone, talking to a woman in Dianbai about her knees.

"—I'll tell her you asked. She'll be pleased." A pause. "Same as last month. The master says the body has to work alone, no other medicine, or you dilute it." A pause. "You take it easy. I'll ask after you Thursday."

She hung up and wrote a name in pencil on the sheet taped to the desk, then rubbed at the corner of the sheet where a different name had been.

Ah-Yan stood in the doorway. "How many."

"Enough." Su Lijuan turned the sheet over. On the back was a grid of given names with birthdays and towns and the names of grandchildren, some of them underlined twice. "Thursday's the big one. He wants the whole hour."

"Whose hour."

"His." Su Lijuan picked up a handset and dialled without looking at it. "Hello? Mrs. Liang? It's the studio. I'm calling about your husband's second course—"

Ah-Yan went back out to the stage.

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Deng Kai came at half past six with a plastic bag of Huazhou tangerine peel and a receipt in his pocket. He set the peel on the sound desk and took off his shoes before he stepped onto the boards, which he always did, though the boards were not clean and would not have been dirtied.

"Dialysis," he said. "Paid. In full, for the year."

"Chen Futang's son?"

"Chen Futang's son came to the temple on Sunday to thank me and stood in the courtyard and cried." Deng looked at the curtain, at the three greens at the hem. "He asked whether he could kowtow. I said the courtyard was uneven."

Ah-Yan laughed. She had not meant to.

"Your father's curtain is short. He knows it's short. He carried it here on a bicycle in August and he hasn't mentioned it once since."

"He doesn't mention things."

"No. He does that instead." Deng put the receipt in his shirt pocket and buttoned the pocket. "The troupe's going to need forty for Nianli and I have twenty-two, plus the promise of a stage in Meilu that isn't a stage. He'll do the four nights for nothing, and then he'll go home and make puppet heads until two in the morning, and I will have taken another year off him."

Ah-Yan put her hand on the puppet case. The scholar's head was where he had put it, which she noted because her father would have noted it, and she had begun to notice herself noticing.

"We go up in half an hour," she said.

"Then I'll get out of your light."

※

The chat filled from twenty to nine. Names came in with their questions already attached, the way regulars do: whose grandson was sitting an exam, whose hip had been operated, whose wife's cough had come back in the cold. Su Lijuan worked two handsets and a tablet, and Ah-Yan watched her from the stage and saw her write a name in pencil and then, once, turn the sheet over and start a new one.

At nine the count went past a thousand and the stream went up.

The screen showed the studio as the company had dressed it: a low table, a bronze censer going, a lacquer box, and behind the box a length of red curtain with nothing whatsoever visible through it. The audio carried her voice, filtered into a register that made her sound older and lower and further away. It was a good filter. It cost four hundred a month and it was the reason anyone listened.

She took the incantation from the top, the way her father had it, in the old breath. Nothing in it was about medicine. It was about a mountain, and a man who went up it, and water that was brought down. She had performed it in teahouses in front of forty people and it had never once sounded like this. Behind a curtain, to a thousand, in a voice that was not hers, it sounded like something being read off a wall.

Then the box. She lifted the lacquer lid with the head-and-shoulders piece and the fingers did what her father's fingers had done, and the scholar's jaw moved, and Master Pan spoke.

Master Pan's lines came off the tablet on the table, scrolling. She had written none of them. They arrived every Thursday in a file and she learned them on the Friday and performed them on the Sunday and the following Thursday there were new ones.

The golden elixir is prepared the ancient way. Cinnabar, as it was prepared in the old time, by the old hand. One course. Take it alone. Do not dilute it with other medicine, or you dilute it with your own doubt.

She held the pause where the script had a pause, which was a real pause, the one her father used before a line that mattered.

The pills came up on the camera then, out of the red box, in their blisters. One thousand nine hundred and eighty a course, and the number sat on the screen long enough to read and not long enough to think about, and the count went up by hundreds while it was there.

In the chat: *Master Pan, is it good for the kidneys.*

In the chat: *my mother is on it four months, she sleeps.*

In the chat: *Master Pan my wife's tremor is better.*

Ah-Yan said, into the scholar's moving jaw, "The elixir was given to save the valley. It is given now as it was given then."

Su Lijuan answered the kidney question on the second handset, off-mic, in the flat voice of a woman reading a bus timetable. "Yes, it's good for the kidneys. The master's detox clears the metal out. Tell her four courses, don't stop at one, or the metal goes back in."

Ah-Yan heard it. She kept the jaw moving.

Master Pan, my husband had a stroke, can he take it.

Ah-Yan looked at the tablet. The line was not on it. She looked at the back of the curtain, where the light was, and Deng Kai was standing there with his shoes off and his arms folded, watching the count.

She made a choice out of the register itself, which was the only material she had. "The water was brought down the mountain," she said, in the old breath, in the voice that was not hers. "It was carried in jars and it was not asked where it had been. Give him the water."

The chat took it the way the chat took everything.

※

They came down at half past ten. The count settled. Su Lijuan was still on a handset, still in the timetable voice, and Deng Kai was doing the studio's accounts on a laptop balanced on the sound desk, and Ah-Yan sat on the edge of the stage with the scholar's head in her lap and the beard between her fingers.

The filter had been off for an hour. Her own voice sounded thin to her, the way it always did afterward.

"Deng. What's actually in the pills?"

He did not look up from the laptop. He turned it a little, so she could see the screen, and it was a spreadsheet with the troupe's four nights of Nianli across the top and a column of figures that did not add up to four nights.

"Tangerine peel. Angelica. A pressed base, the same base a vitamin C tablet uses, out of a factory in Guangzhou that makes half the vitamins in the province. Some borneol for the smell. A trace amount of prepared cinnabar." He closed the lid of the case on the sound desk. "It's a good recipe. It's the recipe this temple has used since my grandfather's grandfather and I have not changed one item in it."

"That isn't what I asked you."

"No," he said. "I know it isn't."

He put his hand on the stage boards, flat, the way a man checks a floor.

"The woman in Dianbai slept last night," he said. "She has not slept since March. Her daughter works in Shenzhen and calls on Sundays and asks about her knees and hangs up in four minutes." He took his hand off the floor. "You can tell me what's in them all night. You can't tell me what to give her instead."

Ah-Yan turned the scholar's head over and looked at the rehung jaw, the two screws, the shade off.

"The man in the chat said his wife's tremor is better."

"A lot of things are better for four months."

"And the one about the kidneys. Su Lijuan told her it clears the metal out."

Deng Kai was quiet for long enough that the water cooler cycled.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't read the parts I don't want to read."

He put his shoes on by the door and stepped around the cartoon tooth on the glass on his way out, and did not look at it, and did not scrape it off.

Ah-Yan stayed on the stage. She put the scholar back in the case and closed the lid and put her hand on the lid and left it there.

From the call room, Su Lijuan's voice, timetable-flat and patient, going on with the next name on the sheet.

"Mrs. Wu? It's the studio. I'm calling about your second course—"

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CHAPTER 2

The Drawer

The lychee tree came up to the kitchen window now. Ah-Po's husband had put it in the ground the year they moved into the house, and it had taken most of thirty years to reach the glass. Every June the branches knocked against the frame until Ah-Po went out with a pole and brought the fruit down herself, rather than let it bruise against the sill.

Lin Shu stood in the yard and looked at where it had fallen. She had the pill in her coat pocket. She had put it there at seven that morning, before the station opened, and she had not taken it out since.

The street was doing its Saturday. Two houses down a woman was hosing a scooter and arguing with someone through a phone on speaker, in Cantonese, at a volume that carried over the wall. Further off, a speaker was running a promotional loop for a mineral-water truck. The neighbour's television had the midday news on, and the news was in Mandarin. The opera in Ah-Po's kitchen was in neither of those. All four of them went on at once without any of them giving way, the way sound worked in that part of town.

Under the lychee tree the ground was soft with last week's rain and going to mush. Lin Shu moved her foot and the skins came up around it, wet and dark, and let go again.

Inside, the opera was on. Ah-Po had the volume where she liked it, which was loud enough that Lin Shu could hear it from the gate. The singer was working a long ornament up into a note and holding it there longer than the note wanted to be held.

"You're early," Ah-Po said, from the kitchen. "The water's not on."

"I'm not early."

The kitchen was the way it had always been. The first thing Lin Shu did in it was put her bag down on the table and square it to the edge. The second thing she did was look at the shrine.

It took up the end of the sideboard between the thermos and a jar of preserves. A wooden plaque, a brass censer, three cups in a row, and a printed card with a face on it that Lin Shu had looked at her whole life without once reading it. The cups had water in them. The water had a ring of dust at the surface line, which meant it had been standing.

Ah-Po came in from the yard with an apron full of lychees and emptied them into a basin and ran the tap over them, hard, the way she ran everything.

"Your mother sent peel," Ah-Po said. "Huazhou. It's good this year. I'll cut some into the soup."

"She sent it to you in March."

"She sends what she has." Ah-Po lifted a lychee out, halved it with a thumb, and took the stone out. "Sit down. You look like you came to measure something."

Ah-Po's knees went when she lowered herself onto the stool. The right one first, then the left, a small drop each time. She put her hand flat on the basin edge to do it and took it away again quickly, as though the basin had been warm.

Lin Shu saw it. She had seen it every month for two years. She had the number for it somewhere in her head, the flexion loss that makes a hand go out to a surface, and she let the number sit where it was and said nothing about it.

"I want to talk about the pills," she said.

"The pills." Ah-Po put the halved lychee in a bowl and reached for another. "Which pills would these be."

"The box in your room. The red one."

The water went off. The opera carried into the kitchen and the singer found the end of the phrase.

Ah-Po wiped her hands on the apron, slowly, and looked out of the window at the tree.

"That tree is forty years old," she said. "Your grandfather put it in the year the wall went up. It gave nothing for eleven years. Nothing. Your grandmother wanted it cut."

"It's a good tree."

"It's a good tree." Ah-Po turned back. "Your grandfather knew it would be. He never once said so. He just kept putting water on it."

Lin Shu took the pill out of her coat pocket and put it on the table, and then squared the edge of the table where the pill was not.

"One thousand nine hundred and eighty," she said. "A course. Four courses in your room."

"Is that what they cost." Ah-Po said it the way she said the price of pork. "That seems about right."

"Ah-Po."

"It works, Shu."

Lin Shu had her answer ready. She had it ready in the car and she had it ready in the order she wanted to give it in, and what came out of her mouth was the two words she had decided not to use.

"It's pressed candy."

Ah-Po looked at the pill on the table for a while and then went on halving lychees.

"Your grandfather coughed for nine years," she said. "You know what he coughed from. He worked the shale and he coughed from the shale, and there was a man at the gate every month with a bottle in a cloth bag, and your grandfather gave him money and drank it. It did nothing at all. He knew it did nothing." She set the knife down. "He drank it because the man came to the gate and asked after his chest."

"That isn't the same thing."

"No," Ah-Po said. "It isn't the same thing."

She picked up the pill, turned it over once in her fingers, and put it back down on the table exactly where it had been.

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The offering took her a while and Lin Shu watched it from the doorway with her arms folded, which was how she watched everything in that house.

Ah-Po took the three cups down one at a time and emptied them into the plant pot and refilled them from the thermos. Then she set them back in a row and moved the middle one a finger's width to the left, and stood off, and looked at the row, and moved it back.

The middle cup. Lin Shu had watched her do that a thousand times and had never once thought about it, and standing there with the pill in her pocket she found she could see her own hands doing it. Not remember it. She saw it from a height. From the height of a child standing on a stool with a thermos too heavy to hold properly, in this kitchen, on a morning she could not have named, tipping water into three cups while someone behind her said *left, left, there*.

She had been eight. She had filled the cups because Ah-Po's hands had been bad that winter. She had done it badly. She had spilled water on the sideboard and been told, without any anger at all, that the middle cup goes to the left because that is where the guest sits.

That was all it was. She had filled cups when she was eight.

"Grandmother," Lin Shu said, and her voice came out flatter than she wanted it. "What did you just say."

"I didn't say anything."

"The words. In Cantonese. When you were doing the cups."

"I said the middle one goes left." Ah-Po straightened the row again. "That's all I said."

It was not all she had said. There had been something under the words. Four or five syllables in a register Lin Shu did not speak and had never once heard in that house. An old Min shape of a thing, the kind of phrase her grandmother used for the dead and not for the living.

Lin Shu stood in the doorway and waited for the rest of it to come back to her, and it did not come back. She put it away with everything else she had been too busy to attend to for two years.

"You've got red dust on your shoe," Ah-Po said.

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They ate. Ah-Po made rice porridge with the lychees in it, a thing she did only in the glut and only for herself, and she gave Lin Shu a bowl without asking, and the pill sat on the table between them and stayed there through the whole meal.

"Your grandfather's people are still at the temple in Gaozhou," Ah-Po said, somewhere in the middle of it. "The ones who keep the book."

"What book."

"The book. The one with the recipes in it, and the wells, and the part about the camps." Ah-Po moved her bowl a hand's width to the left, which was where she always put it. "He'd have walked you up there himself when you were small. He used to say you had the hands for it."

"I was eight."

"You were eight and you could hold a thermos level. That's more than most." Ah-Po drank her soup. "Your mother won't go up there. She calls it superstition and she calls it that in Mandarin so that I'll know she's being careful with me."

Lin Shu put her spoon down. "She calls it that because it is that."

"Mm," said Ah-Po, who did not explain herself, and reached for the tangerine peel.

At the end Ah-Po said, "The knees. The man on the screen asks after my knees."

"I know he does."

"He asked in April. And he remembered in April." Ah-Po began clearing the bowls, two at a time, badly balanced. "He asked whether the left was worse than the right. Nobody has asked me that. Not the doctor at the station, not your mother on the telephone, not you, standing in my kitchen."

Lin Shu looked at the pill on the table.

"You have an appointment at the district hospital on Thursday," she said. "Nine in the morning. I made it."

"To be told my knees are my knees."

"To be told which knees they are."

Ah-Po carried the bowls to the sink and ran the tap over them, hard, and stood with her back to the room for longer than the bowls needed.

Afterward Lin Shu went down the corridor to the back room, which she had not been in since the spring, and opened the wardrobe, and found the box behind the folded counterpanes. Four courses in it, in the red gift boxes, the foil still sealed, and under them a strip of white tablets with a green band, torn at the eighth, and a box with a hospital's name on it that had been turned face to the wall.

She stood there with the counterpanes in her hands for longer than she needed to.

She put the four red boxes in her bag.

She left the white tablets where they were, face to the wall, because taking them would have been a conversation and she was not, that afternoon, able to have it.

In the kitchen Ah-Po had the opera back up and was cutting tangerine peel into strips with a small knife, laying the strips out in rows on newspaper the way she laid out everything for Nianli. The middle cup on the shrine had gone back to the left. The water in it was clear.

"Grandmother," Lin Shu said, from the doorway, with the bag on her shoulder.

"Mm."

"The pills. I'm taking them."

Ah-Po did not stop cutting. "Take the red ones," she said. "Leave the peel."

She said it to the knife, and she went on cutting, and the strips went down in their rows, and Lin Shu stood in her own grandmother's kitchen with four courses of someone else's medicine in her bag.

She stopped in the doorway. She put her hand up to the strap and held it there, the way a person holds a rail, and then she took her hand off the strap and went out.

Behind her the opera found the end of the phrase and began another one.

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CHAPTER 3

The Tremor

The community health station on Guanghua North Road had a vaccine fridge that hummed in a key slightly above the room. By the time Lin Shu arrived at half past eight it had already been opened four times by a nurse who liked to check on it, which meant the temperature log had four more entries in it than the morning needed. He Yuzhen would be rearranging the whole fridge by expiry date before ten.

She was doing exactly that when Lin Shu came through, standing at the open door with a clipboard against her forearm, moving boxes of vaccine from one shelf to another in an order that had no relationship to anything except the numbers printed on them.

"The May stock is behind the June stock," He Yuzhen said, without turning around. "Somebody put the May stock behind the June stock. I want you to know I have worked out who."

"It'll be Kang Ruoyu."

"It'll be Kang Ruoyu." He Yuzhen slid a tray down a shelf and squared it. "He means well. He means well in the way a flood means well."

Kang Ruoyu came in at nine with two cups of coffee from the machine by the gate, set one on the chart Lin Shu was already writing on, and stood there waiting to be thanked. He was two years out and he still wore his coat inside the building, and he had the particular eagerness of a young doctor who has read something and wants an occasion to say it.

"The old man in two," he said. "The one with the cough. I've got him down as bronchitis but he's been in three times since April and he's on the same script."

"Which old man in room two."

"Shuangquan. The one from the shale works." Kang Ruoyu took a sip and then remembered the coffee was for her and held it out again. "He told me he's been taking something for it. A course of pills. He says it's from a temple."

Lin Shu put her pen down flat on the chart, parallel to its edge.

"Get me the file on Shuangquan," she said.

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Chen Futang came in at half past ten, which was his slot, and he came in with his coat buttoned to the throat although it was June and the corridor was warm. He was seventy-four and he had the particular upright carriage of a man who had spent his working life being looked at by people younger than him. He sat down on the examination couch, put his hands on his knees, and turned his head to bring his left ear round to face her at the angle, the way a man angles an ear toward a telephone that is not performing well.

"Doctor Lin."

"Mr. Chen."

He had been coming to the station for eleven years, and for eleven years she had written his blood pressure into the same grid on the same form. The grid was the shape of a slow climb that neither of them ever remarked on. She took the cuff off the wall and put it on his arm above the elbow and pumped it, and while the mercury was doing what the mercury did she looked at his hands where they rested on his knees.

There was a tremor in the right one. It was small and it was regular and it had a rate, and the rate was the thing that mattered, because a rate you could count was a rate you could belong to something.

She finished the cuff and wrote the number and did not look up when she said, "How long has your hand been doing that?"

The hand stopped doing it, which was how she knew.

"A while now," Chen Futang said.

"Since when has it been doing that."

"My grandson's was doing it when he was a baby. His mother was very worried." He turned his head a few degrees further round, hunting her with the ear. "It's nothing. It's the cold."

"It's June, Mr. Chen."

"It's a cold June."

She asked him to hold his arms out and he held them out. The right one went at the wrist with the small regular motion, and she watched it for as long as she could watch it without making a game of it. Then she asked him to touch his nose with his finger, and back to her finger, and back to his nose. He overshot the nose on the third pass and laughed about it, and she wrote down that he overshot the nose on the third pass.

The renal panel came back from the district lab at four in the afternoon, which was fast because the courier had been in a good mood. The two numbers that mattered were both on the wrong side of the line. And the wrong side of the line, in a man who had been on the same script for eleven years without a new diagnosis in eleven years, meant that something had arrived.

She sat with the printout under the lamp and read it twice and then a third time with the lamp moved, which was a thing she did when she wanted the paper to be wrong and the paper declined to be.

Mercury. That was the word the two numbers made, together with a tremor that had a rate. She did not think the word *mercury* with any drama attached to it. She was a physician, and the word was a box in a diagram she had drawn a hundred times in a hundred lecture halls: heavy metal, renal tubular injury, intentional tremor, and the exposure history you go looking for afterward. The exposure history was the only part she did not have.

She went and got it.

"Mr. Chen." She sat down on the stool rather than standing over him, which she knew was a thing that made old men talk. "You've been taking something. For the cough, and for the hand. Tell me what."

"It's a tonic. That's all it is."

"From where would I be getting it."

"The master. The one on the screen." He said it without embarrassment, the way another man would name a dentist. "He's very good. He's been very good to my son's family. He paid for the machine."

"The machine."

"For the blood. My son goes three times a week." Chen Futang leaned in, to the angle, anxious now to be heard rather than to hear. "The master pays for it. Out of his own. He asked after me in April and he asked after my grandson and

he knew the boy was sitting his exams. Nobody had asked me that. Not since my wife."

Lin Shu let a silence go by that was long enough to be an answer to something. Then she said, "Show me what you take."

He got the box out of his coat pocket with the careful slowness of a man taking out something he has been told not to show a doctor, and put it on the couch between them. Red gift box, gold foil, and inside it four blisters of small dark pills, and a printed card with a face on it and a line of characters under the face that promised long life to the valley.

She turned the card over. On the back there was a phone number and, where a lawful health product would have carried the blue hat and the registration number, there was nothing at all, because it was not a health product. It was registered as pressed candy, which meant it was a sweet, which meant it had made no claim, which meant it had broken no law in existing.

"One course," Chen Futang said. "One thousand nine hundred and eighty. It was on the screen and then it wasn't."

Under the pills, at the bottom of the box, folded flat, was a warranty card for a hearing aid. It had never been opened. Lin Shu picked it up and turned it over. The seal on the envelope was intact. The price on the front of it was four thousand and something, and she looked at it for long enough that Chen Futang noticed her looking at it.

"That was for the boy," he said. "So I could hear him. He says my name and I say *what*, and he's stopped saying it." He took the card out of her hand, gently, and folded it along its own creases and put it back in the box. "It was four thousand. The course was one thousand nine hundred and eighty. It was cheaper."

"It isn't a tonic, Mr. Chen."

"I know what it is," Chen Futang said, and buttoned his coat to the throat. "It's the only thing that comes to the house."

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He Yuzhen found her at seven with the fridge door open and her hand on a tray.

"You're not going home."

"I'm going home now."

"You've been in here since eight and you've eaten nothing and you've read the same printout nine times." He Yuzhen did not look at the printout. She looked at the tray she was squaring. "Thursday. I'll cover Thursday and Friday. And I'll put it in the log as cover, because last time I covered for you and you came in on the Saturday and did the Saturday as though nothing had happened. I want it written down that I did them."

"Thank you."

"I'm not being kind." He Yuzhen shut the fridge. "I'm building a record."

Lin Shu stood in the corridor with her coat over her arm and the printout folded in her pocket. She called Cheng Wei from the car park. It was where she made the calls she did not want overheard, and it was June, and the light was going long and orange across the refinery stacks on the far side of the river.

"It's mercurialism," she said. "I'm as certain of it as I am of anything. Tremor with a rate, renal tubular injury, no other exposure. I've got the panel and I've got the product and I've got the man. He's seventy-four and he's bought four courses."

There was a pause on the line, and in the pause she could hear a fan.

"Lin Shu," Cheng Wei said. "You want us to arrest a feeling?"

"I want you to read a lab report."

"I've got a lab report from a district lab on a man with a cough." The fan moved. "What's the product registered as?"

"It's candy."

"Then as far as I am concerned it is candy." A drawer opened. "Does the box claim to treat anything? Does the stream? Get me a stream where somebody says the words *cure* or *treat* or *detox* on the recording, with the product on screen, and I have something I can take upstairs. Until then I have a sweet, and an old man with bad kidneys, and no link between the two of them that a defence lawyer won't take apart in an afternoon."

"They say it every night."

"Then somebody says it every night, on a recording that exists in Hangzhou, on a platform we can't compel." Cheng Wei's voice did not change at all. That

was the thing about him that had always been hardest to be around. “Send me what you have. I’ll open a file. But I’m not going to be the second time.”

“Neither am I,” she said.

“That’s not a thing I’m going to discuss with you on a telephone in a car park.” The fan moved again, aimed at the wall. “Send it. And Lin Shu. Don’t go and take anything off anybody.”

The line went dead before she could decide whether that last part had been a warning.

She sat in the car with the printout on the passenger seat where she had put it, squared to the edge of the seat. She looked at it. She did not start the engine, and she did not go home for a while.

※

CHAPTER 4

Dansha

The station emptied at six. He Yuzhen locked the medicine cabinet and put the key in the drawer under the register, where it had lived for nineteen years. She went out with a bag of bean sprouts over her arm. At the door she stopped and looked back down the corridor at the light under Lin Shu's door, and did not say anything about it.

Lin Shu had the four red boxes on the desk in front of her in a row, squared to the edge, and the top one open.

She had taken one blister out and laid it flat and was looking at the pills through the plastic. Twenty to a card. Small, dark, a red-brown that was not quite the red-brown of a plant extract. She had been looking at them for twenty minutes without touching them. That was not examination and she knew it was not examination. She went on doing it because the alternative was to go home and think about the shape her grandmother's knees made when she sat down.

She turned the box over.

The gold leaf had two characters on it, printed in a seal script that had been chosen for looking old rather than for being old. 金丹. She read them the way anybody in that city read them, without effort. The sound of them came into her head with the shapes, the way sound always did. Then a second pair of characters came into her head underneath the first, uninvited. She did not know where she had got them, and she put them away.

She put on a glove. She took a pill out of the blister with the tweezers from the suture tray. She held it under the lamp and turned it and saw the speckle in it, a fine grain, the way ground stone is speckled in a sugar tablet when it has not been milled properly.

Then she put it on her tongue.

It was metallic. Astringent, with the dry pull at the back of the throat that a tannin leaves, and under the astringency a flatness with a faint sweetness to it, and the flatness was the thing. She had met that flatness before, in a preparation,

in a lecture hall, on the end of a spatula that a demonstrator had passed round a bench of students who all made the same face.

She took it out and set it on a gauze square and wrote on the pad, in her own hand, at speed.

Metallic astringency, dry retropharyngeal pull, flat finish. Consistent with a mercury salt preparation, probably a sulphide, adulterated or deliberately included. Sample retained for assay.

She wrote the time at the top of the page because she always wrote the time, and the time was 6:40.

Then she went on writing, in the same hand, in the same rush, and the words that came were not the words she had decided on.

—and the metal was given in the valley in the old time, when the water ran bad and the mountain sent down its smoke. It was given first and the water was given after, because the water is slow and the dying are not. The girl was carried through the flood. Dansha.

She stopped. She looked at the page.

The handwriting was hers. It was not her hand — the letters had gone upright and cramped in a way hers did not go, and the pressure was heavier on the downstrokes, and she had written out the margin and into the margin.

She read it three times.

Dansha. She knew the word. Every doctor in that province knew the word. It was in the pharmacopoeia and on the formulary of every TCM department in the city. It was cinnabar, and cinnabar was mercury sulphide, and it was given for palpitations and for sleeplessness and for the falling sickness. It had been given for those things for two thousand years by people who were not fools. She had prescribed around it. She had never written it in an archaic register in her life. There was no such register. She did not know where the sentence had come from, and the sentence was about a girl and a flood.

She looked at the clock. It said 6:52.

She had written four lines. She had no memory of writing three of them.

※

The district hospital had a noticeboard in the radiology corridor that nobody maintained. On the Thursday she had taken Ah-Po for the appointment, and waited forty minutes with her, Lin Shu had stood in front of it with a paper cup of water from the cooler and read what was on it. Reading things was what she did instead of other things.

A gum-health poster. A bus timetable for the 302. A property notice. A sheet from a fragrance trade association about agarwood grades, printed in two colours, tacked up at an angle by somebody who had taken it off a counter. *Wound-cultivated resin. Grade by district of origin. Dianbai and Hainan compared on oil content and incense yield.* Beside it, a photograph of a trunk that had been cut in six places and bound in cloth.

She had read the sheet for as long as Ah-Po's water took to cool. Ah-Po had been called, and had gone in, and had come out again, and had said nothing whatever about it. Lin Shu had not thought about the sheet again until that moment, in her own office, with a page of her own handwriting in front of her that she could not account for.

She sat back.

The explanation she had was available, and ordinary, and it was the one a colleague would have offered her inside a second. She had been on a fever ward for two years through the worst of it. She had worked shifts that ran into each other. She was tired in a way that had stopped announcing itself, and tired people lose time. Everybody on that ward lost time. She had watched a registrar stand up from a desk and walk out of a room and come back with a form nobody had asked for.

That was all true. It was also, she noticed, not enough, in the way that a correct answer can be not enough.

She put the page in her bag.

※

She came to standing at the window of her office with a full cup of water in her hand.

The window looked onto the car park and the car park was empty and the light was gone and the refinery stacks on the far side of the river had their aircraft lights on, red, in a row, blinking out of phase with each other.

The cup was full to the brim. She was holding it level. She had filled it at the cooler in the corridor, nine metres from the chair she had been sitting in. She had walked nine metres, and come back, and stood at a window with it. She had no memory of any part of that.

She stood there for a while and did the thing she would have done with a patient: took the history. When had she last been certainly inside her own minutes? At the desk, writing, 6:40. What was the time now. She looked at the clock on the wall. 7:31.

Fifty-one minutes.

She was a physician and she had an explanation for fifty-one minutes. The explanation was fatigue and the explanation was true. She put it down on the desk beside the bag and looked at it and did not pick it up.

The water in the cup was still cold. She had filled it at the cooler and the cooler had been cold and she had not drunk any of it.

She drank some of it. It tasted of the cooler and of nothing else.

Then she set the cup down in the middle of the desk, and moved it a finger's width to the left, and stood off, and looked at where she had put it, and moved it back.

She had not decided to do that. She had watched her grandmother do it, at the shrine, with the middle cup. She had just done it at a desk in a health station in Maonan District, at twenty to eight in the evening, with nobody in the building. She stood and looked at the cup for long enough that the aircraft lights went round twice.

※

Kang Ruoyu put his head in at half past eight on his way to the car park, having come back for a charger. "You're still here. I thought you'd have gone hours ago." "I'm nearly finished." "It's nearly nine." He came in and stood in the doorway with the charger held up, as though it were a permit. "Do you want the light on, or do you want to sit in the dark?" "I want the light off. Leave it off."

He reached in and hit the switch. The corridor light came in and flattened everything, and in the flattened light the desk looked like what it was. Four red boxes in a row. A page of handwriting under a stapler. A paper cup with water in it.

"You've got the boxes," Kang Ruoyu said. "Are those the ones off the old lady on Guanghua?" "They're evidence. I'm holding them." "Evidence of what, though? I'm only asking." She did not answer him. He waited in the doorway long enough for the silence to become something he had to fill. "I could put them in the drug cupboard and log them as held samples. That's what we did with the ones in March." "No. Leave them where they are." "No? That is what the cupboard is for." "Don't log them." She heard how it came out. "Not yet. Not until I know what they are."

Kang Ruoyu stood in the doorway with the charger in his hand. He looked at her with an expression she had seen on students who had been told something reassuring by somebody who did not sound reassured. Then he said goodnight and went down the corridor. She heard his footsteps go out through the door and stop, and start again, and go. At the outer door he stopped a second time, and she heard him stand there, and then the door went and he was outside and the car park was quiet.

She sat in the dark with the four boxes in a row.

The pill was still on the gauze square where she had put it. She picked it up with the tweezers and put it back in the blister and pressed the foil down over it. She squared the blister to the edge of the desk, put the lid on the box, and put the four boxes in her bag.

On the pad, the last thing she had written before the handwriting changed, was the time: 6:40.

She tore the page off at the perforation and put it in the bag with the boxes. She did not put a copy in the file. She did not tell He Yuzhen, and she did not tell Cheng Wei that she had put a possibly poisonous substance into her own mouth in a closed office at twenty past seven in the evening, and had then lost fifty-one minutes of her own life standing at a window with a cup she could not account for.

She locked up and walked out to the car park. She stood in it for a while in the warm dark with the bag on her shoulder, and the aircraft lights went round on the far side of the river, out of phase. Then she got in the car and sat with her hands on the wheel and did not start it.

At home she put the four boxes in the wardrobe, behind the folded counterpanes, where her grandmother had kept them.

She filled a glass at the kitchen tap and set it on the table. She moved it a finger's width to the left and left it there, and drank out of a different glass. Then she went to bed and put the light out without thinking about the wardrobe, and slept.

※

CHAPTER 5

Normal

The car was in the space outside the house and the engine was off and her hands were on the wheel. The last thing she could account for was the roundabout at the mouth of Guanghua North Road.

Between the roundabout and the space outside the house there were two sets of lights, a level crossing, and eleven minutes of suburban road that ran past the refinery wall. She had driven it four thousand times. She had no memory of any of it.

She sat with her hands on the wheel and looked at the dashboard. She did the arithmetic a physician does when she is trying not to panic. Establish the interval, then establish whether anything happened inside it. The interval was eleven minutes. Nothing had happened inside it. The car was undamaged, the wheel was straight, the handbrake was on, which was a thing she did without deciding to.

She got out and stood in the road and looked at the back of the car for a while.

※

He Yuzhen was at the desk when she came in, and she did not look up, and she said, "You were meant to be here at eight." "It's twenty past." "It's twenty-two past, and I timed you." He Yuzhen turned a page. "I'm not asking where you were. I'm telling you that I wrote eight in the log, and then I wrote twenty-two past. Now the log has two numbers in it. And I want you to understand that I am the one who has to explain those two numbers if anybody ever asks me about them."

"Thank you, Yuzhen."

"Don't thank me." He Yuzhen shut the log. "Ask me."

Lin Shu stood there with her bag still on her shoulder.

"I was driving home from here," she said. "I don't remember arriving. The car was outside the house and the engine was off."

He Yuzhen looked at her for longer than a nurse looks at a colleague. Then she said, "How many times has this happened." "A few times. Three, perhaps four." "A few is not a number a doctor uses, and you are a doctor, so use one." He Yuzhen opened the log again and wrote something and turned it round so that Lin Shu could see it. It was a line in the shift column with her own initials against it and *cover, HYZ* in the margin. "I have put you down as off from Thursday. That is the fourth time. If you want to argue with me about it, argue with me now. After today it is in the log, and after today it is a fact."

"I'm not arguing with you about it."

"Then say thank you properly, and go and do something about it, because I am not going to be the person who notices and does nothing." He Yuzhen went back to her page. "And take the Wednesday clinic off me. I don't want it covered by Kang Ruoyu. He'd do it, and he'd do it wrong, and then you'd come in at nine at night and fix it, and nobody would ever know he had done it wrong except me."

※

The referral took nine days because the district scanner was booked.

In those nine days she came to twice.

Once on a Sunday afternoon, standing in the bathroom at home with the tap running and the plug in and the water up over the waste, not running over, just up and still. She had no memory of going in. The book she had been reading was face down on the floor by the door, fallen open at a page she had already read.

She pulled the plug and dried the basin and stood there with her hand flat on the cold tap.

Once on a Wednesday, at the kitchen table, with a sheet of paper in front of her and a list of names written down the middle of it in her own handwriting. She knew some of the names. She did not know what they were a list of, or who had asked for it, and she turned the sheet over and wrote her shopping on the back of it and used it, and threw it away at the end of the week, and thought about it after.

She knew what she was looking for. She had ordered the sequence herself, in the correct protocol. She had typed the clinical indication into the request box, and the indication she typed was the one that would get it authorised: *episodic loss of awareness of uncertain duration, two months, in a physician with prior prolonged clinical duty. Exclude structural lesion.*

A lesion. That was what she wanted. A lesion was a thing with an edge and a location and a treatment pathway, and she had spent her whole professional life being able to point at a lesion and say what came next. She wanted a small, boring, operable lesion in a place that did not matter.

The scanner was in a low building behind the main hospital. The corridor smelled of the same coolant she had smelled in a thousand machine rooms. The technician was a young woman with a badge that said Radiology, and a laminated card of instructions that she read from without once looking at it.

"Anything metal?"

"No."

"Anything implanted?"

"No."

"You'll hear knocking. It's loud. Don't move your head. If you need me, squeeze this."

The earplugs went in. The table went in. The bore came down over her and the lights went off the ceiling. The knocking started. It was the noise she had sat beside a hundred times as a referrer, on the other side of the glass, with her arms folded. It was a completely different noise from the inside.

She lay in it and did the thing she had taught patients to do, which was to pick a place and go there and stay there. She picked the well at Gaozhou, which she had not seen since she was nine. She held the stone rim of it in her mind, and the cold coming up off the water, and she stayed there as long as the knocking allowed.

When it stopped she did not know how long she had been in the bore.

"All done," the technician said. "You can sit up."

※

The report came back on the Thursday. It was on her desk when she came in from a home visit, under a stapler, and she read it standing up.

No intra-axial or extra-axial mass. No area of restricted diffusion. No abnormality of signal in the temporal lobes, hippocampi, or elsewhere. Ventricular size and sulcal pattern appropriate for age. No enhancing lesion identified following contrast. IMPRESSION: Normal study.

She read it four times.

Normal.

She stood in the corridor of a community health station in Maonan District with a normal MRI in her hand. Nothing arrived. No relief, no drop in the chest, nothing at all. The nothing was the finding. A normal scan in a woman who had lost an afternoon was not a clean result. It was the removal of the last good explanation.

She had spent nine days hoping for a lesion. She had filled in a request form in the correct protocol, asking a radiologist to find her something operable. The radiographer had obliged her. She had found nothing. She had sent back a piece of paper that said the machine inside her head was fine, and therefore that the problem was the part of her that used it.

She folded the report and put it in the file and wrote the date on the tab and did the whole administrative sequence correctly, because doing things correctly was available to her when other things were not.

Then she went and stood at the window of her office for a while and looked at the car park and thought about the level crossing.

※

Kang Ruoyu came in at four with the coffee.

"The scan is normal," Lin Shu said. "Who's normal? What are you talking about?"

"I am. The scan's normal." She heard herself say it and did not soften it. "There's nothing in my head. Nothing that shows."

Kang Ruoyu stood with the coffee halfway to the desk. "That's good, though. Isn't it?"

"Is it."

"Well." He put the coffee down on the chart, where she would not drink it. "Yes. I'd have thought so."

"You'd have thought so because you're two years out, and you still think a normal scan is the end of a question." She did not mean it to come out like that and she let it stand anyway, which was a thing she had been doing more of. "A normal scan in someone who can't account for an afternoon means the scan didn't look in the right place."

"There isn't a right place for that."

"There's a right place for everything, Ruoyu. That's what the machine is for."

He looked at her with the expression she had seen before. It meant he had been handed something reassuring by somebody who was not reassured. Then he said, "There's a neurologist at the city hospital. Tuesdays. My supervisor says she's the one people go to when the scans come back clean."

"I know exactly who she is." "So go and see her, then." "I'm not going to a neurologist." Lin Shu picked up the coffee he had brought her and put it down on the far side of the desk, out of the way. "I'm going to see Wu Jinglun."

Kang Ruoyu's face did something he would have been embarrassed to have seen. "Oh." "Oh. Sorry." "He's good, though. He's very good," Kang Ruoyu said, too quickly. "He's very good. Everybody says so." "Everybody does say so," Lin Shu agreed, and straightened the coffee cup against the edge of the desk, and left it squared.

※

She made the appointment from the car park, on the phone, in the flat administrative voice she used for ordering supplies. The woman on the line gave her the following Wednesday at four, and asked whether she had been before. Lin Shu said no. The woman said *welcome* in a tone that seemed to be reserved for people who said no.

Then she sat in the car and did not start it.

The report was in the file with the date written on the tab. The four red boxes were in her wardrobe behind the counterpanes. The page of handwriting was in her bag. Nobody in the building knew about any of it except that she had been off four Thursdays, which was now in the log, which was a fact.

She had a normal brain and a body she could not account for. The next thing that was going to happen to her was that a kind man in a quiet room was going to ask her a question she had already asked herself, at a window, with a full cup of water in her hand. This time somebody else would be in the room while she failed to answer it.

She sat in the car with the appointment in the phone and did not start it.

She had chosen the one room in that district where nothing she said would be written down. She had not put it to herself in those words until she was sitting there, and when she did she understood that it was the reason she had not gone to a neurologist, and that she had known it in the car park in about nine seconds, and had said no to Kang Ruoyu anyway.

She started the engine and drove home.

※

CHAPTER 6

The Leaflet

The waiting room had four chairs, a water dispenser, and a plant that was alive. The magazine on the low table was a year old. The air coming out of the vent was colder than the air in any other part of that building. Lin Shu sat down and put her bag on her knees and held it there with both hands, the way people hold bags in rooms where they have decided not to put them down.

There was no receptionist. There was a door with a number on it, and the number was open at twenty past four, which was the appointment time, and she went in.

Wu Jinglun was fifty-one and he wore a short-sleeved shirt with a pen in the pocket and he had a cup of tea on the desk that he had clearly made for two people. He did not get up. He did not offer to shake her hand. He said, "Sit wherever you want." Then he went and sat down himself, in the chair that was not behind the desk, at an angle to hers. There was a corner of table between them rather than a barrier.

"Kang Ruoyu told me you'd come," he said. "He told me you'd come and he told me not to make a thing of it. He was quite firm about that."

"Ruoyu talks too much."

"Ruoyu is worried about you." Wu Jinglun moved his cup to the other side of the desk. "He's allowed to be. He's junior to you and he can see something's wrong and he has nowhere to put it. That's an unpleasant place to be at his age."

Lin Shu said nothing. She had her hands on the bag on her knees.

She had been in four hundred rooms like that one, and in every one of them she had been the person in his chair. The reversal did not announce itself. It arrived as a small mechanical difficulty, which was that she did not know where to put her bag.

He had a desk, and the desk was not between them, and there was a corner of table between them instead. The corner of table was the wrong size for a doctor's bag and the wrong height for a handbag, and she stood over it a moment longer

than was natural, and then put the bag on her knees and held it there with both hands.

A little way into that she worked out why the room was built the way it was built. It was built so that the bag had nowhere to go. It was built so that she would keep it on her knees and hold it with both hands for the whole hour, and so that he would be able to see her doing it, and so that when she finally put it down she would notice that she had put it down.

That was the kind of room it was. She had never sat in one.

"So," Wu Jinglun said. "Tell me what's been happening."

※

She gave him the version she had prepared in the car.

She gave him the eleven minutes. She gave him the Sunday afternoon in the bathroom with the tap running, and the Wednesday at the kitchen table with the sheet of names. She gave him the fifty-one minutes on the Saturday and the wall clock at 6:40 and the wall clock at 7:31. She gave him the two years on the fever ward. She gave him the December peak and the shifts that ran into each other, and the registrar who had walked out of a room and come back with a form nobody had asked for. She gave it all in the order a physician gives a history, with durations and intervals and the correct clinical register, and she watched herself do it and did not stop.

She did not give him the handwriting.

She did not give him the sentence about the girl carried through the flood, or the four lines written out into the margin, or the word *dansha* arriving in a mouth she had not opened. She did not give him the cup on her own desk that she had moved a finger's width to the left without deciding to. She did not give him the second pair of characters that had come up under the first one and gone away again.

She had not decided to leave those out. She noticed she had left them out the way she noticed she squared things, afterward, without being able to locate the moment of decision.

Wu Jinglun let her finish. He did not write anything down.

"That's very clear," he said. "Thank you. It's a better history than I get from people who come to me professionally." He paused. "Which is a strange thing to have to say to a colleague, and I'm sorry for it."

"It's a good history. Better than most."

"It is." He drank some tea. "What do you make of it?"

"I think I'm tired."

"Do you think that's what it is."

"I've been on a ward for two years. I worked through the worst of it. Everybody lost time. Everybody on that ward lost time." She heard the pace of it and could not slow it down. "It's the obvious answer."

"It is a very obvious answer," Wu Jinglun agreed. "And you don't believe it."

Lin Shu looked at the plant.

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't say anything. You said it in the order you said it in." Wu Jinglun put his cup down. "You gave me a diagnosis in the first ninety seconds and then you spent eleven minutes giving me the evidence against it. Nobody does the second thing. Not unless the first thing isn't holding."

※

He asked her the same question three times, and three different ways. Each time she answered the question that had been asked and not the one underneath it, which was the thing she was best at.

"What happened on the Saturday," he said. "Start at the beginning of the evening."

"I was at my desk. I tasted a substance I had confiscated from a patient."

"From a patient."

"From my grandmother. She's being sold it." Lin Shu heard herself correct it. She had corrected it because a psychiatrist would want to know about the grandmother. "There were four courses in the house. I took them."

"Without telling her."

"I told her I was taking them. I didn't tell her why." She paused. "I didn't tell her why. She'd have stopped me, and I wanted to know what was in them."

"And then."

"And then I lost fifty-one minutes."

"What do you think happened in them?"

"I think I was tired and I lost time."

"If you had to describe the fifty-one minutes to someone who wasn't a doctor. Not a diagnosis. The minutes themselves. What would you say?"

Lin Shu sat with it.

"I stood up," she said. "I walked to the cooler and back. I filled a cup." She stopped. "That's all I have."

"That's all you have."

"That's all I have."

Wu Jinglun nodded. He did not write it down. He did not reach for any of the words that would have made it small and filed, and he did not offer her one to use, and the not-reaching went through her like cold water.

※

Wu Jinglun turned his cup over on the table so that the handle faced away from him.

"Can I ask you something that isn't about the minutes."

"You can ask me anything."

"There was a patient."

It was not a question, and she answered it anyway, which was how she knew he had arrived there on purpose and had chosen to arrive without a question mark.

"There was a patient," she said. "On the ward. She was seventy-nine and she was mine for eleven days and I did everything correctly and she died anyway."

"Everything correctly."

"Everything. By the book. I could show you the chart." Her own voice had gone flat and administrative and she could not bring it back. "The chart is a model. I have never had a complaint."

"And she died."

"And she died."

Wu Jinglun let that sit. He did not fill it. He did not say *I'm sorry*, which she had been prepared for, and which would have been easier.

"After that," Lin Shu said, "I stopped believing it was worth the cost. That isn't a symptom. That's a conclusion."

"It's a very common conclusion."

"It's the correct conclusion."

"Mm." Wu Jinglun drank his tea. "You have been extremely careful not to tell me that you are frightened. You have given me a history, and a diagnosis of your own, and a ward, and a chart that is a model. There has not been one frightened sentence in the hour."

"I'm not frightened. I'm tired. There's a difference."

"No." Wu Jinglun set the cup down. "You're precise. It's a different thing, and I think it's the harder one, and I don't have a leaflet for it."

At twenty past five he stopped asking, and he asked her one question that was not the same question in a different shape.

"Who knows?"

"About the fifty-one minutes?" She thought about it properly, which she had not done. "Nobody at all." "Not one person."

"He Yuzhen knows I arrived without a drive. She doesn't know the rest." Lin Shu put her hand flat on the bag. "Ruoyu knows the scan was normal. Cheng Wei knows nothing. My mother doesn't know I'm here."

"And your grandmother."

"My grandmother thinks I took her pills because I disapproved of them." She heard how that sounded and did not correct it. "Which is true."

Wu Jinglun was quiet for a while. The vent went on. The plant was alive.

"You've told me the parts of it that are symptoms," he said. "You've told me very accurately, and I'm grateful, and I want to say clearly that I think you did the right thing coming. But you've been in here for an hour, and you have not told me the one thing you came in here to tell somebody. And I don't think that's because you decided not to."

"I decided not to."

"Then you decided it very fast," Wu Jinglun said, without any edge to it at all. "You did it in the car park. And you did it so well that you have been able to sit here for an hour and not notice."

The room was very quiet.

"I'm not going to ask you what it is," he said. "I want to say that out loud so that you don't spend the week preparing it. I'm not going to ask. And I'm not going to write down that there was something you didn't say. That would be the same question with worse manners."

※

He walked her to the door, which she had not expected, and at the door he took a printed sheet off a stack on the side table and held it out to her.

"It's a sleep-hygiene leaflet," he said. "Regular hours, no screens before bed, no caffeine after four. It's the least useful document in this building."

"Then why give it to me."

"Because if I give you nothing you'll think I found something."

Lin Shu took it. It was a single sheet, folded once, printed in two colours, and it had a drawing of a clock on it.

"You can come back," Wu Jinglun said. "Any time. You don't need a reason and you don't need to be worse."

"And if I am worse."

"Then come back sooner." He opened the door. "Lin Shu. I'm not going to give you a name for it today. Not because I'm being careful with you. Because I don't have one that fits what you've described, and a name that doesn't fit is worse than no name, because you'd stop looking."

She stood in the corridor.

Behind her the door went to, and she heard nothing at all, and she realised she had been listening for the sound of a pen.

※

She drove home by the level crossing and said the names of the roads out loud. At the kitchen table she put the bag down and squared it to the edge. She took the leaflet out and unfolded it and did not read it.

She put it in the drawer with the insurance papers.

Then she stood there with the drawer open and her hand on it. She thought about the hour, and about how he had written nothing down. She thought

about what it meant that a man whose whole profession was the recording of other people's minds had listened to her for an hour and put nothing on paper.

It meant there was nothing to write.

An abnormal scan would have been a paragraph. A paragraph would have been a referral. A referral would have been a clinic. A clinic would have been a person whose job it was to make it better. She would have gone there, and been treated, and been somebody's case.

She had a normal brain and a kind man with a drawer in which nothing had been written, and she was, now, officially, a person about whom nothing had been recorded.

She shut the drawer. She straightened the insurance papers so that the edges lined up, and left them squared. She went to bed at ten o'clock and slept the way she had slept for two years, all at once, without arrival. She woke at four in the morning with the taste of metal in her mouth and no water in the room.

※

CHAPTER 7

The Wall

The flat was on the fourth floor of a walk-up in Maogang. The lift had been out of service since before Lin Shu was posted. She went up in the heat with her bag on her shoulder and arrived with her shirt sticking to her back. The door was open and propped with a brick, and from the landing she could hear a man's voice coming out of a room inside, unhurried, talking about water.

Liang Xiuying was sixty-eight and she had been on the station's list for nine years and had never once come in. She had brought her husband out to the gate twice in a wheelchair and both times he had been asleep.

"He doesn't sleep," Liang Xiuying said, taking Lin Shu's bag off her before Lin Shu could decide whether to let her. "He shuts his eyes. It's different. Sit down, the fan's better by the window."

The front room had been arranged around the tablet. It sat on a stack of two telephone directories on the low table, angled up, at the height of a man in a reclining chair. The chair had been positioned so that the man in it was looking at the tablet and at nothing else. The fan was pointed at him and not at the room.

On the screen, a lacquer box, a bronze censer going, and a length of red curtain with nothing visible through it. The voice coming out of it was filtered into a register that made it sound older and lower and further away.

Liang Binghua was sixty-nine. He had had a stroke in the spring and the left side of him had not come back. He was watching the screen. He was smiling.

Lin Shu looked at the left hand in his lap. It had been curled since the spring and the nails were long because nobody cut them, and there was a fine regular movement in it now that was not in the notes.

"Mrs. Liang. When did the hand start doing that?"

Liang Xiuying looked at the hand the way a person looks at a piece of furniture in a room they have lived in for nine years. "I don't know. A while."

"When did the legs stop hurting?"

"About three weeks after he started." Liang Xiuying went to the sideboard and came back with a strip of tablets and held it out flat on her palm. "He was getting pains in his legs all night. Every night. Now he doesn't get pains."

Lin Shu looked at the strip and did not take it, and wrote nothing down.

"Nine o'clock," Liang Xiuying said. "Every night. He knows when it is. Half past eight he starts turning his head round to look at the table."

She said it the way a woman reports that a plant has flowered.

Lin Shu sat down on the chair that faced the fan's back and took out her notes and did not open them. On the screen the lacquer lid came up and a hand-and-shoulders puppet moved, and the voice said something about cinnabar prepared the ancient way, and Liang Binghua's smile got wider.

"Mrs. Liang," Lin Shu said. "How long has he been on it."

"Since April. Five courses."

"And the tablets from the hospital."

"The hospital tablets." Liang Xiuying went to the sideboard and came back with a second strip and held it out flat on her palm, the way you hold out something you have been accused of. "He was on two. Now he's on one, at night."

"And who decided that."

"Master Pan says the elixir has to work alone or you dilute it." She turned the strip over. "He's right, isn't he. If you take both then you don't know which one's doing it."

Lin Shu looked at the strip. She looked at the man smiling at the screen. She looked at the fan pointed at him and not at the room.

"Mrs. Liang," she said. "I need you to make a statement."

"About what."

"About what you've bought. What you stopped giving him. What you were told to stop giving him."

Liang Xiuying put the strip back on the sideboard, face down.

"It's the only thing he looks at," she said. "In the morning he looks at the wall. At nine he looks at the screen." She straightened the directories under the tablet, squaring the top one to the edge of the table. "You want me to say that to a policeman."

"I want you to say it to anybody."

"Then what do I put in front of him at nine?"

The fan went round. On the screen the box came up again and the voice went on about water brought down a mountain.

※

The market supervision bureau was in a building that had been an office of the grain administration until 1998, and the corridors still smelled of it. Cheng Wei's room was on the second floor, with the door open and a fan aimed at the wall.

He had a cardboard folder on the desk and he had not opened it. He listened to the whole of it without writing anything down. When she had finished he turned the fan a few degrees toward her, and then away again.

"The livestream," he said.

"The livestream, and the price, and the man's renal panel, and the strip on her sideboard with his name on it."

"Which strip."

"The hospital strip. She's cut him from two tablets to one on the master's instruction."

Cheng Wei sat back. "That's the best thing you've brought me."

"It's not enough."

"It's not enough." He turned the folder around on the desk so that it faced her and did not open it. "Do you know who the platform is."

"Hangzhou."

"Do you know who the licence holder is."

"A shell in Huiyang. The registered address is a lock-up."

"Do you know what the product is registered as."

"Candy."

"Candy." Cheng Wei tapped the folder once.

He had been her demonstrator in anatomy in the second year and she had been better at it than he was, and neither of them had referred to that since. Turning the fan a few degrees toward her and then away was what he did instead of saying things. "Then there is no product. There's a sweet. A sweet doesn't

treat anything. A sweet can't have made a false claim. So the only way this becomes a case is if somebody stands up and says the words *treat*, or *cure*, or *detox*, with the product on the screen, on a recording, in front of a witness. Have you got that."

"There's a woman in the call room. She says it every night."

"Then get the recording." He stood up. "Come downstairs. I want you to meet somebody."

※

Peng Jianhua was fifty-five. He had a drawer he kept locked and a key he kept in his pen tray, and he did not make a ceremony of opening it. Inside were four ring binders, and a photograph of a man in his forties standing outside a health-food shop with his arm round a woman who was not his wife.

"Mo Qingfa," Peng Jianhua said. "Two thousand and nineteen. A health-lecture circuit. Eleven towns, four hundred and sixty elders, a product made of starch, and a printed certificate from a university that had never heard of him."

"What happened?"

"I took nine months." Peng Jianhua turned to a page. "Two hundred and twelve statements. Eleven doctors willing to appear. A lab report showing the starch. Two hundred and twelve elders signed that they had been told it would cure their joints." He turned the binder round so that Lin Shu could see the page. "The defence argued that none of them had understood what they were signing. The court accepted it. Nine months, a fine he paid out of the takings of the next eleven towns, and no conviction. He is running a bigger circuit now in Zhanjiang and he has a shop in Huazhou with a certificate on the wall."

Lin Shu looked at the page. Two hundred and twelve names in a column.

"Why are you showing me this."

"Because you are going to ask me to do it again. Because Cheng Wei is going to say yes. And because I want you to hear what it costs from the person who actually paid for it." Peng Jianhua shut the binder. "Nobody in this building will say no to you out of laziness. They'll say no because the last time we were right and we still lost. The elders got a letter apologising for the delay."

"That is not a reason not to try."

"It's the only reason that's ever mattered." He put the binder back and locked the drawer and put the key in the pen tray. "Get the recording. Get it with the product on the screen. Get it from somebody who isn't the doctor who confiscated the pills. She's a party to this now. A defence lawyer will take her apart in an afternoon."

He said it without heat, and he was looking at her when he said it. She did not ask him how he knew. She walked out and left the folder where it was, unopened, on his desk.

※

Ah-Po was in the yard with the pole when Lin Shu got there, knocking lychees down onto a sheet. She did not stop while Lin Shu came in, and she said, without being asked, "You want me to sign something."

"Yes."

"What does it say."

"That I bought it. That I was told to stop my tablets. That I did stop them."

Ah-Po brought the pole down and a cluster came off and rolled on the sheet. "And who reads it."

"A court. A newspaper, probably."

"And your mother."

Lin Shu stood in the yard with her shadow going long across the sheet.

"Ah-Po," she said. "You could have had a stroke. The tablets are for your blood pressure and you stopped them because a man on a screen told you to."

"I know what I did." Ah-Po leaned on the pole. "You think I don't know."

"Then sign it."

"No." She said it the way she had said *leave the peel*, to the pole and not to Lin Shu. "Not because I don't believe you. Because if I sign it, then the only voice that asks after my knees is a criminal. And I have to sit in this yard for the rest of it knowing that." She picked up the sheet by two corners and the lychees rolled and settled. "You can take the pills. You can't take that as well."

Lin Shu stood there.

"He paid for a machine," Ah-Po said. "For a man's blood. Out of his own pocket. You find me the policeman who does that and I'll sign whatever you like."

She carried the sheet round the side of the house. The kitchen door went. The opera was on in the kitchen, loud, and the singer was working a long ornament up into a note and holding it there longer than the note wanted to be held.

Lin Shu stood in the empty yard with the lychee skins under her feet going soft, and the pole still standing where it had been left, leaning against the tree.

She picked up the pole and stood it against the wall, out of the way, and squared it to the corner of the wall, and left it there.

※

CHAPTER 8

Dianbai

She had been driving again for two weeks.

He Yuzhen did not know. The log had four Thursdays in it and a Wednesday taken off her. The fitness-to-work review that the log was going to produce had not arrived yet. And in the gap between the log and the review, Lin Shu had concluded that the eleven minutes at the level crossing had been a bad week, and that the Sunday in the bathroom had been a hot day, and that a person who says the names of roads out loud can be trusted with a car.

She said the names of the roads out loud. She had been doing it since June. Guanghua North Road, and the roundabout. Then the coast road south, with the refinery wall on the right going on for longer than it should. Then the turn for Dianbai, with the new signage that had gone up in the spring.

She was past the turn for Dianbai when she stopped being able to say the names.

※

She came to sitting in the car with the handbrake on and the engine off and the window down, and the air coming in was salt.

She was in a lay-by. Ahead of her, across a drain and a strip of wasteland, there was a street of low sheds with corrugated roofs and no signage. Men were carrying flat bundles in and out of them. The light was going orange and long. The whole street smelled of something sweet and resinous and faintly animal, the way a room smells after somebody has burned incense in it for a hundred years.

She looked at the dashboard. She looked at the phone in the cradle.

The last road she had named out loud was the turn for Dianbai.

She sat in the lay-by for a while and did not get out, because getting out would mean accepting the distance. Then she got out. She walked to the drain and stood at it and looked at the sheds. She put her hands on the roof of the car

and found that they were shaking, and she let them shake. Then she did the thing she did, which was to take the history.

Establish the interval. The turn for Dianbai was twenty-two kilometres behind her. She had left the station at half past five. It was twenty past seven.

She had lost an hour and fifty minutes on a coast road.

※

The conviction arrived before she had decided to have one.

It came up whole, the way the sentence about the girl had come up, and it did not argue. The resin in Deng Kai's pills was agarwood. It was not plantation stock from the ordinary graded supply. It had been produced by wound-cultivation in the groves outside Dianbai, and it had been sold off-books, because the good wound-groves do not sell through the auction houses and never have.

She stood at the drain with her hands on the roof of the car and she knew it.

And then, standing there, she did the thing she had not been able to do on the Saturday, which was to find the bottom of it.

She knew it because she had read it. On the Thursday she had waited forty minutes with Ah-Po in the radiology corridor of the district hospital, she had stood in front of a noticeboard with a paper cup of cooling water in her hand. And she had read a two-colour sheet from a fragrance trade association, with a photograph of a trunk cut in six places and bound in cloth. *Wound-cultivated resin. Grade by district of origin. Dianbai and Hainan compared on oil content and incense yield.* She had read it for as long as the water took to cool.

She knew it because she had a nose. Deng Kai's pills carried borneol for the smell, and something under the borneol. The something under the borneol was the same sweet resinous note that was coming off that street. She had put her face into a blister of it in a closed office, on a Saturday, alone.

She stood at the drain and said it out loud, to nobody, in the flat voice she used for dictating a referral.

"Agarwood, wound-cultivated, Dianbai origin, sold outside the graded supply. I read the trade sheet on the fourteenth of May and I identified the note organoleptically on the twenty-eighth of June."

That was all true. Every part of it was checkable and ordinary and hers.

She went and looked.

There was a culvert at the end of the lay-by with planks over it, and she crossed on the planks because she had no memory of coming and she was not going to leave with only a conviction. The first shed was open at the front and lit from inside by a single strip light, and the smell came out of it thick enough to taste.

Trunks were standing against the back wall. They were not logs. Each one had been cut in places, five or six wounds up the length of it, and each wound had been bound in cloth and left, and the wood above the binding had gone dark and dense and heavy in a way that unwounded wood does not go. Some of the bindings were new and white. Some were grey with years on them and coming away in threads.

A man in his sixties was sitting on an upturned crate by the door with a knife and a length of cord, re-tying one. He looked up when her shadow came across the light and he did not stop what his hands were doing.

"You're not a buyer," he said.

"No."

"Then you're in the wrong shed."

"I'm a doctor."

"That's not a trade." He pulled the cord tight and bit it off. "Go on, then. Look. It's not a secret. Everybody round here knows and nobody buys."

Lin Shu stood in the doorway of the shed and looked at the trunks with the wounds bound in cloth, and the photograph on the noticeboard in the radiology corridor of the district hospital came up in front of her so exactly that she could have drawn it, six wounds and a cloth binding and a caption in two colours, and the cup of cooling water in her hand, and Ah-Po in the chair beside her saying nothing about her knees.

"How long," she said.

"How long what."

"The binding. Before it's worth cutting out."

The man shrugged with one shoulder. "Years. Depends on the tree and the wound. Some of those have been tied since before I was born." He nodded at the

grey ones at the end. "The old man who did those is dead. Nobody's untied them. They're not for sale. They're just his."

Lin Shu stood there.

"Where do they go," she said. "The ones that do get sold."

"Depots. Middlemen. Some of it goes through the houses properly, with the papers." He tied the last knot and sat back. "The good stuff doesn't. The good stuff never has. You'd want to be a very good buyer to get any of it, and you'd want to know which family grew it, and you'd never ask on paper."

He looked at her shoes.

"You've got red on you," he said. "Off the floor. It's in the dust. Gets in everything."

She looked down at her shoes.

There was red dust in the seams of them.

※

She knew the dust. Ah-Po had named it to her, in a kitchen, weeks ago, before any of this had started, leaning over a basin of lychees and not looking up.

There's red dust on them from the agarwood sheds. It gets in the seams.

Lin Shu had looked at her shoes that afternoon and had accepted that she had been to the market, because a woman looks at her own shoes and assumes she knows where she has been.

She crouched down in the lay-by and put her finger in the seam of the left shoe, and came away with red on it. She sat back against the front tyre with her hand up in the orange light. And whether she had been to Dianbai before was not a thing she could have said.

Not that she had forgotten. That she did not know.

There was an ordinary explanation for the dust. She had been to a market at some point in the last two months and had not registered it. There were eleven markets within an hour of that house and she had been in three of them for things she could name. The ordinary explanation was available, and it was probably correct. She could not reach it. Reaching it meant knowing what she had done in an hour and fifty minutes on a coast road, and she did not know that either.

She sat against the tyre until the light went off the sheds.

※

The phone had nine missed calls and a message from Kang Ruoyu that said *are you alive* and a message from He Yuzhen that said *I have put the Thursday in the log as unstaffed. Ring me.*

She did not ring anybody.

She drove home on the coast road with the window down and the salt coming in. She said the names of the roads out loud, all of them, every one, and she did not miss any. She arrived at the flat with the list complete and her hands steady. She sat with the engine off and her hands still on the wheel and did not get out for a while.

She put the car in the space and sat in it.

Then she got out and went up and filled a glass at the kitchen tap and did not move it at all, and drank all of it, and filled it again.

※

The auction was in eleven days.

She had found that on the trade sheet too, at the bottom, in the small print. A quarterly grading and sale at a warehouse outside Dianbai. Open to the trade. No public admission. And a line about district-of-origin certificates being required for the top grades.

She sat at the kitchen table with the glass of water she had not moved and wrote the date on the back of an envelope, and she wrote under it, in her ordinary hand, three things.

Agarwood. Dianbai. Off-book.

Then she sat with the pen in her hand and looked at the three words. She knew what she was going to do with them. She knew what it was going to cost. And she did it anyway, which was the thing she had been doing since April.

She was going to go to a warehouse full of professional buyers and stand in it and tell them where a grove was. She was a community physician with no trade standing, no licence, no capital, and no way to account for the last two months of her own minutes. She would be asking strangers to accept a conclusion she

could source to a noticeboard and a nose, in a voice that had twice finished a sentence she had not started.

She wrote a fourth thing on the envelope.

Do not tell Cheng Wei until after.

She folded the envelope and put it in the drawer with the leaflet and the insurance papers. She shut the drawer.

Outside, the aircraft lights were going round on the far side of the river, red, in a row, out of phase with each other.

She went to bed at ten and woke at four with the taste of metal in her mouth, and no water in the room. She lay in the dark and did not get up for a long time.

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Part Two

The Sourcing Trail

> *The metal did nothing for the fever. The metal did nothing for anything except to make a man quiet and to make his hand stop shaking, which they mistook for the fever leaving, and which I let them mistake.*

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CHAPTER 9

The Pension Card

The sheds were doing more business in the morning than they had been at dusk. There were lorries. Two of them had Hainan plates. One had a tarpaulin over the bed tied down with new rope. Men were walking between the tarpaulin and the sheds carrying flat bundles under their arms, the way other men carry envelopes.

Tan Shunfa was on his crate with the knife and the cord. He had been at it a while, because there were four finished bindings standing against the wall of the shed behind him, and they had not been there the night before.

"You're back," he said.

"The auction."

"There's an auction every quarter. There has been for years."

"It's on the eleventh."

"It's on the eleventh." He pulled the cord and bit it off. "Trade only. No public admission."

"I'm a doctor."

"You said. That's not a trade." He nodded at the four bindings against the wall. "What is it you actually want."

"I want to know which family grew it."

Tan Shunfa sat back on the crate and looked at her for a while with his hands on his knees.

"That's not a thing you ask," he said. "That's a thing you know. Every buyer in that room will know, and not one of them will say it. If you stand up and ask it out loud, you'll be walked out. And you won't be walked out gently."

He picked up a fifth trunk and turned it so that the wound faced her. It had been cut twice, high up, and the wood above the bindings had gone the colour of strong tea.

"That's a two-wound tree off a grove outside the town. That's a four-wound off the hill road, and it's better, and it takes longer." He turned it again and put a finger on a third place that had been cut and bound and left pale. "And that's

been done badly. The binder went too deep and the tree's fighting it and you'll get almost nothing out of that one in ten years. You learn that by smell, not by looking. Looking is what people do who are going to be cheated."

Lin Shu looked at the pale wound.

"Can I smell them," she said.

"It's not a secret." He shrugged with one shoulder. "Nobody's ever asked."

※

She smelled them for two hours.

Tan Shunfa put a strip of each grade under her nose, in order, without saying which one it was, and made her say what she smelled before he showed her the next. The light came up the shed and went across it and moved on while she worked. Where the two-wound tree smelled sweet and flat, and slightly of coconut, and did not last in the nose at all, the four-wound off the hill road smelled of something darker and resinous that went on working after she had taken the strip away. It was the same note she had put her face into from a blister, in a closed office, alone.

The badly bound one smelled of sap and of almost nothing else. She said so. Tan Shunfa said, "That is right," and did not elaborate, and she worked out that she had got one right and that this was the whole of the lesson.

At the end he said, "There's a family on the hill road that's been binding since before the war. There's a family in the town that buys from them and sells on at three times and never says the name out loud. And there's a temple in Gaozhou with a book in it." He tied the last cord and bit it off. "You'd want to be asking the temple people, not me. I only grow them."

On the Sunday she drove out to the warehouse.

It was a converted fish-processing unit two kilometres inland, with a yard, and a roller door half up, and a trestle table across the entrance with a clipboard on it. In the yard there were fourteen men and one woman, all of them with a laminated card on a lanyard, two of them carrying calipers, and none of them in any hurry at all.

A young man at the trestle table looked at her card, which was a hospital identity card with her photograph on it and the word *Community Health* across the bottom.

"This is a trade sale," he said.

"I know."

"It's trade only. I can't admit the public."

"I'm not the public. I'm a physician."

"Then you'll want the medical suppliers' fair." He handed the card back with the photograph upwards, which was the courteous way to refuse a thing. "This is for resin buyers. District of origin, graded lots, minimum lots of two hundred grammes. You'd need a certificate and you'd need a buyer's number and you'd need to have been in the trade."

She stood in the yard and looked past him at the roller door, where a man was carrying a flat bundle in, and she could smell it from where she was standing. It was the hill-road note. It was darker and it kept going.

"Two hundred grammes," she said.

"Minimum lot."

"How much."

He told her. It was more than the station paid her in a month.

She went back to the car and sat in it with the yard behind her and the smell still in her nose, and she worked it out the way she had worked out three courses against a pension in a front room in Maogang, with a strip of tablets on a woman's palm. It came out the same way it had come out then. Nobody buys graded agarwood at two hundred grammes a lot in order to press sweets for the elderly at one thousand nine hundred and eighty a course.

※

He Shuangquan came in on the Tuesday with a paper bag over his arm. The pension card was in a plastic sleeve inside it, and the sleeve had gone soft and cloudy at the corners where his thumb sat.

He was seventy-one, he had worked twenty-six years in the shale pits, and he had the cough that went with it, which was the cough that half the men of that

age in that valley had. He came in and sat down and put the paper bag on his knees and did not open it.

"You've been in four times," Lin Shu said.

"Five times." "Five times since April." She took the chart off the rail. "And you're on the same script."

"I'm on the master's as well now." He said it the way a man reports that he has taken up a hobby. "It's helping. The cough is much better than it was."

"Helping what, though. Be specific with me."

"The cough." He opened the bag and took out a red gift box and put it on the couch between them, and there was a second one under it, and a third. "Three courses. I got them at the three-course price."

Lin Shu looked at the boxes and did not touch them.

"Mr. He. How much is the pension."

He told her the figure. He had already worked it out for himself and knew he could not afford it, and he did not look away while he said it.

"And the three courses."

He told her that too, and it was most of a month.

She put the cuff on his arm and pumped it and wrote the number. Then she had him hold his arms out. The right one went at the wrist with the small regular motion she had seen in a waiting room in June, in a man who had bought a hearing aid and not used it. She watched it for as long as she could watch it without making a game of it.

"Hold your hands out again," she said. "Mr. He. When did this start?"

"A while."

"Before the pills or after?"

He thought about it honestly, which was the worst thing about him.

"After I started on it," he said. "I think after."

She sent him for a renal panel. She wrote the request in her ordinary hand and put the clinical indication in the box that would get it authorised. She did not tell him what she was looking for. He did not ask, because he had been coming to that station for nineteen years and he trusted the room.

At the door he stopped and turned his head to bring his ear round to face her, at the angle.

"Doctor," he said. "It's helping. I want you to know that. I've not coughed through the night since April."

"I know," Lin Shu said.

"You're not going to tell me to stop."

"No."

He went out. She stood in the corridor and listened to him go down it, and the cough came twice, and then the door at the end of it went, and then there was nothing at all in the building but the fridge.

※

He Yuzhen was at the desk with the fridge door open.

"You've written a panel on Shuangquan."

"Yes."

"You've written it in your hand and you haven't put it in the tray." He Yuzhen did not look round. "I've been watching you not put things in the tray since April. I've been counting them. It's not a good hobby and I've got it."

Lin Shu put the request in the tray.

"You've put it in the tray," He Yuzhen said, "and you've put it in the tray because I said a thing about a hobby, and that's not the same as you deciding to."

"No," Lin Shu said. "It is not the same thing, no."

"Four Thursdays, a Wednesday, and a Thursday unstaffed." He Yuzhen shut the fridge and turned round with the clipboard against her forearm. "The review is coming. It'll be in the next fortnight. When it comes I'm going to say that you're tired, and that you're covering too much, and that you're the best physician on this list. All three of those will be true. None of them will be the reason."

"What's the reason."

"That part is yours," He Yuzhen said. "I'm not going to do that part for you."

※

She stayed until eight.

The station was quiet, the fridge had stopped cycling, the corridor light was off, and she sat at her desk with the three red boxes on it in a row, which she had not put there. She found that she had taken her phone out.

The drafts folder had one item in it. It had been refreshed monthly for two years and it had never been sent. *Application — Internal Medicine, Shenzhen. Phu Lei Industrial Park.* A salary figure at the top of it that was nearly three times what the station paid. And a start date that had been April two years ago and had been moved forward every month since, so that the date on the page was now three months in the past.

She opened it and looked at it and did not read it.

Then she put the phone face down on the chart and sat with her hands flat on the desk on either side of it, and did not pick it up again.

At home there was water in the room. She had filled a glass at the kitchen tap before she went to bed, out of the habit of it, and left it on the table. She had not moved it. She lay in the dark listening to the aircraft lights going round on the far side of the river, out of phase, and did not get up.

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CHAPTER 10

The Grading Table

Tan Shunfa put her in a work shirt that had belonged to somebody else. He gave her four flat bundles to carry. He told her to keep her mouth shut and her eyes down, and said that if anybody asked she was his niece from the town, come to help with the loading.

"They won't ask," he said. "They'll assume, and assuming is cheaper for both of us."

The yard had filled.

Tan Shunfa walked her in through a side gate that had a chain on it and no lock, and along the inside of the shed past stacked crates, and put her where the wall was.

"Stay there," he said. "If you have to move, move along the wall. Don't cross the floor." There were thirty-one men and two women in the yard, every one of them with a laminated card on a lanyard, three of them carrying their own scales, two of them with calipers, and all of them moving along the table in the same direction. Three had brought their own scales. Down the middle of the shed was a long trestle table with a white cloth over it, and the lots laid out on the cloth in order, each one on a square of black card with a number chalked on it.

Lin Shu stood at the back with the bundles under her arm and her eyes down.

The buyers moved along the table in ones and twos. They picked the lots up and weighed them in the hand. Two or three used the calipers on the dark wood. One man in a good jacket smelled each lot twice and wrote something in a small book. Nobody bid. Nobody spoke to anybody. It had the quality of a religious procession with the religion left out.

She had been in the shed for forty minutes when the argument started.

It was about lot nineteen. It was a big piece, dark nearly to black, with two wounds visible on the face of it and a third that had been planed away by somebody who wanted it to look like two. A man in a polo shirt was saying hill

road. A man with a leather folder was saying town, and saying it louder. The auctioneer stood at the end of the table with his hands behind his back, waiting for them to finish.

"Hilled road takes longer," the polo shirt said.

"Town stock's been getting better for ten years," the folder said. "You can't tell town from hill road on the face any more. You'd want the oil content, and you'd want the certificate, and there isn't one."

"Then it's uncertificated and you're bidding blind."

"I'm bidding blind," the folder said, "on a lot I've been buying from the same house for eleven years."

Lin Shu was at the back with four bundles under her arm.

She had her eyes down. She had been told to keep her mouth shut. She had the hill-road note in her nose from two hours in a shed on Tuesday. She had the flat sweet coconut of the two-wound tree to compare it against. And she had put her face into a blister of the same thing, in a closed office, alone.

She lifted her head.

"It's hill road," she said.

The table went quiet in the particular way a room goes quiet when somebody has said a thing that was not on the programme.

The auctioneer looked at her. He looked at Tan Shunfa, who was at the far end of the table with a bundle under his own arm and his face completely still.

"She's loading," Tan Shunfa said. "She doesn't know anything about any of this."

"She's right, though," said the man in the polo shirt, slowly. He had turned round to look at her. "Aren't you."

※

They put the lot under her nose.

Somebody had taken the bundles off her. There was a space at the end of the table. Lot nineteen was lying on the white cloth in front of her with the black card beside it, and four men were standing where they could see her face.

She put her hands on the cloth and put her face down to the wood and breathed in.

It was dark. It was resinous. It had a green note under the resin, the way cut grass has a green note. Underneath the green there was something faintly of coconut, and the coconut was what told her, because the two-wound tree had had the coconut and nothing else, and this had it a long way down under two other things.

"The coconut is underneath," she said. "It isn't on top. A town tree puts it on top."

Nobody said anything.

"How do you know that," the auctioneer said.

"Because somebody taught me on Tuesday." She straightened up. Her hands were shaking and she put them behind her back. "Two wounds off the town, four off the hill road, and a third one done badly where the binder went too deep. I smelled all three. The two-wound smelled of coconut and nothing else and it didn't last. This lasts."

The man with the leather folder looked at her for a long moment.

"That's the coconut test," he said. "Nobody uses the coconut test."

"Nobody taught me it had a name."

"It doesn't have a name. It's just what people who've been buying for thirty years do without thinking about it." He closed the folder. "Where did you say you were from."

"From Maonan," she said, because a lie would have been worse and because she had not been told what to say.

There was a pause that two of the men used to look at each other.

"You're not in the trade," the folder said.

"No."

"Then how."

She told them. She told them about the noticeboard in the radiology corridor of a district hospital, and the two-colour sheet from a fragrance trade association, and the photograph of a trunk cut in six places and bound in cloth, and the paper cup of water going cool in her hand while her grandmother sat beside her waiting for a scan of her knee.

She heard herself doing it. She was giving a history in the correct register with the durations and the intervals, the way she gave a history to Wu Jinglun in a

room with a corner of table in it, and she was doing it in front of thirty-one men in a converted fish-processing unit because a piece of wood had a green note under the resin.

"That's the worst provenance I've ever heard," the folder said.

"I know."

"And you were right."

"I know that too."

He looked at her for a moment longer, and then he did a thing she did not expect, which was to open the folder again and take out a pen and write something down, and to turn the folder so that she could see what he had written. It was her name, and *Maonan*, and under it the word *coconut*.

"That's not a threat," he said. "It's a note. I write down people who can do things." He shut the folder. "When you work out what you actually want, come and find me, and don't come through the old man."

"I didn't say I was from anywhere," Lin Shu said.

※

The lot went to the polo shirt at a price that made the man with the folder walk out of the shed. Lin Shu stood at the end of the table with her hands behind her back and did not know what to do with the fact that she had been right.

Tan Shunfa found her at the roller door at the end of it.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said.

"I know."

"You've made yourself a person who knows things." He was not angry. He had the flat resignation of a man who has watched somebody walk onto ice he had already warned them about. "Thirty men in that room just learned your face. Two of them will remember it in a year." "Is that bad, though." "It depends which two." He put a hand on the roller door and pushed it up another foot, and the light came in flat and orange across the yard.

The lots went after that, eleven of them, and the room went back to being a room. Lin Shu stood against the wall with her hands behind her back and watched the numbers go by, and somewhere in the middle of the eleventh lot she started adding them up.

Two hundred grammes minimum. Thirty-one buyers. Eleven lots cleared in forty minutes, and the smallest of them was four times the minimum.

It was not a quantity that went into sweets. It was not a quantity that went into a temple incense burner in Gaozhou, either, however many nights Deng Kai performed and however many elders arrived by the busload. It was a quantity that went somewhere with a door and a name on it, and it went every quarter, and it had been going every quarter for a very long time.

She stood against the wall and worked it out and did not write any of it down, because her hands were behind her back and because she had nowhere to write it.

"There's a man buys from the town house," Tan Shunfa said. "Feng Qingzhao. He's the one who doesn't say names, and he's the one who was right about the certificate." He let the door go. "He'll find you. Not today. But he'll find you. A person who can do the coconut test is worth knowing, and you're the only one in that room who doesn't know what you're worth."

"Am I worth something?"

Tan Shunfa looked at her with his hands on his knees.

"You're a physician," he said. "You're worth nothing in that room. You're worth a great deal in the other one." He picked up a bundle. "Learn which room you're in before you open your mouth again."

※

In the car she sat for a long time with the work shirt still on and the smell of the shed all over her hands.

She did the thing she had been unable to do on the Saturday in June and in the lay-by on the coast road, which was to account for herself. She could do it completely. She had read a two-colour sheet in a radiology corridor on the fourteenth of May. She had smelled three grades in a shed on a Tuesday for two hours. She had a physician's nose and she had used it on a blister at twenty past seven on a Saturday. There was nothing in the room that she could not source, and she wrote the chain out on the back of her hand with a ballpoint because there was no paper in the car.

Bulletin. Three grades. The blister. The coconut.

That was all of it. Every link was checkable and ordinary and hers.

She sat with her hand open on the wheel and looked at the four words in her own handwriting. The chain was complete. That made no difference at all, because the thing the men in that room had reacted to was not the chain. It was the certainty. She had opened her mouth and known a fact about a piece of wood with a sureness that had frightened the polo shirt into agreeing with her. And she had felt it arrive the way the sentence about the girl had arrived, whole, without argument, from somewhere she could not point at.

She started the engine.

She drove home along the coast road saying the names of the roads out loud, all of them, every one. She did not miss any. The list came back complete for the second time, and she noticed that she was no longer relieved by it.

※

CHAPTER 11

The Town House

He came on the Thursday.

She saw him from the window of her office, standing in the car park of the community health station in a light shirt with the sleeves turned back, holding nothing, looking at the building rather than at the door. He was forty-four and he had the particular patience of a man who has waited outside a great many buildings and has never once been asked to come in.

Kang Ruoyu was at the desk. "There's a man outside," he said. "He's been there twenty minutes. He hasn't asked anybody anything."

Lin Shu went out.

"You're the physician," Feng Qingzhao said.

"I am."

"You did the coconut test on lot nineteen without being asked, in front of thirty-one men, two of whom have been buying for longer than you have been alive." He did not move. "I have been thinking about that for nine days."

"So have I."

"I don't want to frighten you." He said it in the tone of a man opening a negotiation. "I want to know which one you are."

He waited, and the queue went in through the door behind her, and somebody's child cried in the corridor.

"There are two kinds of person who do what you did. One is very good and will be rich inside five years." He turned his hands over. "The other is a problem, and the second kind is the one I am usually looking at."

"And which am I."

"That's what I've come to find out." He looked past her, at the building, at the queue going in through the door. "Not here. Come to the shop. Tomorrow, or Saturday, whenever you're not working."

"I don't have a car I can be seen in."

"Then come on the bus," Feng Qingzhao said, "and get off two stops early, and walk. It's better if you walk."

※

The bus went along the coast road and then turned inland, and the refinery wall went past on the right, and then the town came up with its shutters down.

She got off two stops early, as she had been told to, and walked the rest of it, and the heat came up off the road in a way that made the distance longer than it was.

The shop was on a street in the town where the shutters were all down and the signage was sun-bleached. It had a counter, a glass case, and a cabinet of small wooden boxes. Behind the counter was a wall of framed certificates. One of them was from a provincial bureau. Two were from fragrance associations. One was a photograph of the shop front, with a group of men in front of it and a banner. In the middle of the group, holding the banner, was a man Lin Shu had seen in a photograph in a drawer in a bureau office in Maoming in July.

She stood in front of the counter and looked at it and said nothing.

The street was empty. A shutter came down somewhere along the row and the noise of it went past and came back.

The glass case had four boxes in it. Each was labelled with a district and a year. None of them had a price.

There was a fan on the counter. It was aimed at the wall.

The room behind the counter was open, and through the doorway she could see a table with a set of scales on it, a stack of black cards, a ledger with a pen laid across it, and a calendar with four dates ringed in biro.

She worked out without being told that those were the sale days.

A merchant who had been selling for eleven years had stood in rooms like that one four times a year for eleven years, and had never once been surprised by anything in them until a physician with no trade standing whatsoever opened her mouth about a coconut.

"Mo Qingfa," Feng Qingzhao said, from behind her. "He was a customer of mine for four years. Small lots, cash, always polite."

He came round the counter with two cups of tea and set one down in front of her and kept the other.

"He sells a different thing now. Health lectures, eleven towns, a product made of starch." He sat on a stool. "He is not in agarwood and he never was, really. He was in the certificate business."

"He has a certificate on your wall."

"He has a certificate from an association I also hold one from." Feng Qingzhao set his cup down. "The certificate is not the point."

He nodded at the wall of frames.

"Everybody in that room on the eleventh had a certificate. Lot nineteen had none, and it was the best lot on the table."

Lin Shu sat down.

"Tea?"

"Thank you."

"You're not going to ask me what I sell."

"You'd have told me if you wanted me to know."

Feng Qingzhao looked at her for a moment and then laughed, once, without any amusement in it.

"That's the second thing," he said. "The coconut was the first."

※

He talked for two hours. He did not once say a family name, and she noticed that he did it without effort, the way a man avoids a word he has decided not to use in front of his children.

There was a family on the hill road that had been binding since before the war.

He turned his cup a quarter turn and went on.

"There is a house in the town that buys from them. It sells on at three times and it holds the papers."

He counted them off on his fingers without appearing to.

"There are three other houses in this county doing the same thing with the same trees. They have not competed in forty years and they will not start now."

He drank some tea and set the cup down on the counter and did not pick it up again.

"And there is a temple in Gaozhou that buys from that house. It has bought from that house for as long as anybody in this trade can remember. It always pays. It has never once asked for a discount."

"You keep saying the temple," Lin Shu said.

"I keep saying the temple."

"Why."

Feng Qingzhao turned his cup a quarter turn on the counter, which was the second time that week that a man had done that in front of her.

"Because the temple is the only buyer in this county who does not resell," he said.

He held up a hand before she could speak.

"Every other house takes it and moves it on."

He put a finger on the counter between them.

"The temple takes it and it goes into the ground, or into a burner, or into a box, and it does not come back out again. And because it has been buying more every year for nine years."

He looked at her squarely for the first time since she had come in.

"And because in eleven years of selling I have never once been able to work out where it goes."

"How much?"

"How much what."

"Nine times. How much, in grammes."

He told her. She did the sum in her head and did not let her face do anything.

"You don't look surprised," he said.

"I've counted it already," Lin Shu said. "From the other end."

Lin Shu put her cup down.

"Nine years."

"Nine years. It was a steady buyer for sixty and then it started climbing." He looked at her. "You are a physician. You have just told me you work in a district where a great many people over seventy are being sold a product that is supposed to be prepared from this substance."

He sat back on the stool.

"I am a merchant. And I notice that a temple in my county has been buying nine times as much resin as it can possibly be burning."

The room was very quiet. Outside, a scooter went past with a basket of fruit on the back.

"I am not going to say a name," Feng Qingzhao said. "I want you to understand that before you ask me again. I will tell you what I sell and what I see and what I have sold and to whom, in general terms, for eleven years, and I will do it to anybody who buys enough. What I will not do is put a family name into a room with a physician in it. That is the one thing in this trade that ends a man."

"Then what do you want from me?"

"Nothing." He stood up and took the cups. "That is the part I have been trying to establish for nine days. I want to know whether you are going to be a problem."

He let that sit for a moment in the room with the certificates on the wall.

"I have decided that you already are. I would rather know about it early than late." He put the cups in a basin behind the counter. "Come back if you want the eleven years. It costs me nothing to tell you, and nothing to have told you."

※

She walked the two stops back, in the heat, past the shuttered street and the sun-bleached signage. She got the bus at the stop where the shelter had no roof.

At the flat she put the bag down and stood with her hands flat on either side of the table.

A temple that had been buying nine times as much resin as it could possibly be burning, for nine years, and paying for it, and never asking for a discount.

Nine years was not a scam that had grown. It was a scam that had been funded.

She thought about the four courses in the wardrobe in Maogang. She thought about the white strip with the green band, face to the wall. She thought about a woman in Maogang turning a chair to face a tablet at nine o'clock every evening.

Somebody had paid for all of it. Somebody had paid for years of it, in advance, out of a house in a shuttered street. Somebody had put money into Gaozhou nine years ago. The temple had started buying, and the buying had climbed every year since, and it was still climbing. And at the end of it were four courses of jindan in a wardrobe in Maogang, and a red box on a kitchen table in a house with a lychee tree in the yard.

She filled a glass at the tap and did not move it, and drank out of a different glass, and stood in the kitchen with the tap running.

The phone was on the table. She looked at it for a long time.

Cheng Wei had a file open and a fan aimed at a wall. He had told her three times to get a recording. He had told her not to take anything off anybody. She had not rung him for eleven days.

She picked up the phone and put it down again without unlocking it.

Not yet. She had written it on the back of an envelope in July, and folded the envelope, and put it in a drawer. The drawer was still shut and the instruction was still good.

Somewhere in a shuttered street there was a man with a folder who had written her name in it and the word coconut beside it. Who would give her eleven years of supply records for nothing. And who did not know that she was a physician who had already confiscated four courses from her own grandmother.

On the bus home Lin Shu held the handrail and did not say the names of the roads out loud. She did not need to. She arrived with the list complete and her hands steady. She had just been offered the one thing she had spent this whole year not being able to ask anybody for, by the worst person to get it from, on terms she could not refuse. And she had not said no.

She did not sleep for a long time. When she did, she went under without any of the gradual part, and woke at four with the taste of metal in her mouth, and lay in the dark and did not get up.

※

CHAPTER 12

Torn at the Eighth

The cuff read two hundred and forty over a hundred and thirty.

Lin Shu watched the mercury settle. She waited for it to come down further. It did not.

She took the cuff off and put it back on and pumped it again, because the first reading of a hypertensive emergency is always checked twice, and the second reading was the same.

Ah-Po was on the bed with her shoes still on. She had got as far as the corridor and then sat down on the floor. A neighbour had found her there and put her on the bed, and rung the only number in the house that anybody ever rang.

"Grandmother." Lin Shu put a hand flat on her chest. "Look at me. Is your head hurting."

"It's been hurting since Tuesday."

"Since Tuesday? Grandmother."

"I thought it was the heat."

"Are you seeing anything odd. Floaters, or a curtain coming across."

Ah-Po told her about the curtain. She described it the way she described the price of pork, in a level voice, with her hands folded on her stomach.

Lin Shu took her phone out and dialled the district hospital. She asked for the stroke pathway. She gave the numbers, and her own name, and her own credential. While she was talking she looked at the shrine on the sideboard. The cups were full. The water had a ring of dust at the surface line. The dust had been there since June.

※

The ambulance took forty minutes.

The neighbour made tea in Ah-Po's kitchen and did not drink any of it, and stood in the doorway of the front room holding the cup for the better part of an

hour, and then took it out to the corridor again and left it there on the floor, and nobody moved it, and by the time the stretcher went down the step it had a skin on it. Lin Shu sat on the floor beside the bed with her back against the frame. She held Ah-Po's wrist and counted. She thought about the corridor outside that wardrobe, and about the specific quality of the light in it in the afternoon, and about how she had stood in it for eleven years without once opening the door. She thought about opening that wardrobe in June with the counterpanes in her hands, and about a strip of white tablets with a green band that had been torn at the eighth and turned face to the wall, and which she had looked at and left exactly where it was.

She had looked at it. She had understood it. She had taken four red boxes out of that room. She had left the only medication in it that was keeping a woman of seventy-eight alive face to the wall in the dark. And she had gone out and squared her bag to the edge of the table.

The paramedic put a line in at the elbow and taped it down. The neighbour carried her cup of tea out of the room again without drinking any of it. The opera went on in the kitchen through all of it, at the volume Ah-Po liked. Ah-Po's hand was cool and dry and perfectly steady, and she did not let go of Lin Shu's wrist at any point, which was a thing she had never once done in seventy-eight years.

"Shu."

"Yes."

"He was right, though." Ah-Po's eyes were open and she was looking at the ceiling. "About the elixir. He was right that they fight each other."

Lin Shu did not say anything.

"You don't have to agree with me."

"I'm not agreeing with you," Lin Shu said. "I'm counting your pulse."

※

In the kitchen, while they were getting the stretcher up the step, she opened the wardrobe.

The counterpanes were where she had left them, folded, because she had folded them in June and nobody had been in since. The four red boxes were

gone. They were in her own wardrobe in Maonan, behind her own counterpanes. That was a thing she had not thought about until that moment, and thought about then with a clarity that had no comfort in it at all.

The strip was under them. Face to the wall. Torn at the eighth tablet, exactly as it had been.

She took it out and turned it over.

Eight tablets gone. It was August. She had been in that room in June. There were eight gone then and there were eight gone now. Which meant that in two months Ah-Po had taken none of her blood-pressure medication. She had taken four courses of a substance Lin Shu had tasted on her own tongue in a closed office and identified as a mercury salt. And Lin Shu had not told anybody. She had not written it in a file. She had not taken it to a laboratory.

She stood in the wardrobe with the strip in her hand.

The strip had a hospital's name on the box it came out of. It had a dosage and a date of dispensing in April. It had a line of instruction that said *one tablet daily, do not omit*, and the box had been turned face to the wall so that the instruction could not be read.

She heard the stretcher come up the step.

She put the strip in the pocket of her coat.

※

In the front room Ah-Po was sitting on the edge of the stretcher with a blanket over her knees. Her shoes were off at last. The opera was on in the kitchen at the volume she liked it, and the middle cup on the shrine had gone back to the left.

Lin Shu came in with her hand in her pocket.

She took the strip out and held it up. Then she put it down on the low table in front of her grandmother. On the top of the pile of telephone directories. In the middle of the room where the tablet usually sat.

Ah-Po looked at it.

"That's yours," Lin Shu said. "It's been in the wardrobe since April. You've taken eight of them and you've taken four courses of something else, and the something else has mercury in it, and I know it has mercury in it because I tasted

it, and I have known since June, and I have not told you, and I have not told your doctor, and I have not reported it, and I have not put it in a file, and the reason I have not done any of those things is that every one of them was a conversation and I did not want to have it."

Ah-Po looked at the strip on the directories.

"You took my pills," she said.

"I took your pills. Both times."

"And you left me that." She did not raise her voice. "You went through my room and you took the thing I had chosen and you left the thing that keeps me alive in the dark. In the dark, Shu. Because it was easier."

"Yes."

"Say it properly, then. Out loud."

"I left it in the dark because it was easier for me."

The paramedic was at the door. The neighbour had her coat. The opera went on in the kitchen.

Ah-Po put her hand out and picked the strip up off the directories. She turned it over. She looked at the eight gone and the twenty-two left. Then she held it in her lap with both hands, the way she held the lychee sheet by two corners.

"Thirty tablets," she said. "Twenty-two left in the strip." "I have twenty-two left. After today." "After today," Lin Shu said.

Ah-Po put the strip in the pocket of her own cardigan and buttoned the pocket.

"Get in the ambulance," she said. "You're coming, and you're going to sit in the front and not say anything, and when we get there you are going to tell them everything you have just told me, in that order, out loud, in front of me."

"I will. I promise you I will."

"And then," Ah-Po said, "you are going to explain to me why a doctor who can taste mercury went and hid her grandmother's medicine instead of asking her one question about it."

The stretcher went down the step. Lin Shu walked beside it with her hands at her sides, not squaring anything, not straightening anything, all the way to the road.

※

CHAPTER 13

The Review

The form came on the Tuesday. It was two pages, printed on the district letterhead. It had a box at the top that said FITNESS TO PRACTISE — INTERNAL REVIEW. Under that was a box that said INITIATED BY, and a name in it that was not He Yuzhen's.

He Yuzhen put the form down on the desk and turned it round so that it faced Lin Shu, and then she took a step back from it and stood with her arms folded, watching her read it.

"That's my name in the box," she said. "That is me. I put it there."

"I know whose name it is. I have known for two months."

"I want you to know that I have been dreading this for two months. I have also been waiting for it. Both of those are true, and I am not going to pretend otherwise."

Lin Shu read the form. It asked for dates. It asked for periods of absence. It asked whether the practitioner had self-reported any condition affecting concentration or recall, and the word *recall* was in bold.

"I wrote it," He Yuzhen said. "I put your name in it. Not because of the log. Because of the Thursday in July when you came in and told me you had driven home without remembering the journey. And then you went out and did it again. And then you did it again."

"I knew you would have to eventually."

"You knew I'd have to do it."

"Yes. I knew, and I let you do it anyway."

He Yuzhen picked the form up and folded it once and put it in Lin Shu's hand.

"Then take it upstairs," she said. "Don't make me carry it for you."

※

The interview was in a room on the second floor of the district bureau. It had a table and three chairs and a window that did not open, and a wall clock, and a poster about hand hygiene that had been up long enough for the corners to curl.

There were two of them, and neither of them looked up when she came in. A woman from occupational health sat with a folder open on the table in front of her, and a man from the bureau sat with a photocopy of the shift log squared to the edge of his own folder. Neither of them was unkind. The man from the bureau turned the log round so that she could read her own entries in He Yuzhen's handwriting. Four Thursdays, a Wednesday, and a Thursday marked *unstaffed*. He asked her about each one. She told him the truth about all of them, because there was no version of the truth that was smaller.

"Have you self-reported?"

"No."

"You may put it on the record now, if you want to."

Lin Shu looked at the window that did not open.

"Yes," she said.

The woman from occupational health took a pen out and did not write anything for a while.

"In your own words," she said. "Not a diagnosis. Just what happens."

And Lin Shu told her. She gave the eleven minutes at the level crossing and the Sunday in the bathroom and the Wednesday at the kitchen table with the list of names. She gave the fifty-one minutes and the wall clock at 6:40 and the wall clock at 7:31. She gave the hour and fifty minutes on the coast road and coming to in a lay-by outside Dianbai with red dust in the seams of her shoes. She gave the two years on the fever ward and the December peak and the shifts that ran into each other.

She did not give them the handwriting. She did not give them the sentence about the girl carried through the flood. She did not give them the word *dansha* arriving in a mouth she had not opened. She did not give them the cup on her own desk that she had moved a finger's width to the left without deciding to.

She noticed that she had left them out, afterward, without being able to find the moment of the decision.

"Thank you," the woman said. "That is very clear, and it is more than we usually get."

"It's accurate."

"It is." She capped the pen and put it down on the folder. "We're going to stand you down from clinical duties for eight weeks. Not a disciplinary measure. A pause, with pay, and a review at the end of it. We'd like you to see somebody in that time, and we'd like it noted that you came here and told us yourself, which counts."

"Eight weeks," she said.

"Eight weeks," the man from the bureau said again, and closed the log. "Dr. Lin, can I ask one thing that isn't on the form."

"You can ask me anything that is not on the form."

"Why did you come in and tell us? You managed not to for four months."

Lin Shu thought about it honestly, which was a thing she had learned to do in a room with a corner of table in it.

"Because a woman of seventy-eight is in a hospital bed in Gaozhou with no blood-pressure medication in her for two months," she said, "and because I am the reason, and because I could not work out how to be a physician and also be the person who did that, and standing down is the only version of it where both of those things stop being true at the same time."

Neither of them said anything. The window did not open.

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She walked out of the room and along the corridor and stopped at the water cooler, and stood there with the folded form in her hand for some time without filling a cup.

It was the corridor outside occupational health, on the second floor of a district bureau. It had a water cooler and a noticeboard. The light came in from a skylight and lay along the floor in a long bar. There was nobody in it.

She stood in the empty corridor for a while with the form folded in her hand and did nothing at all, and then she took her phone out of her pocket and held it and looked at the skylight instead of the screen.

The drafts folder had one item in it. She opened it, and it came up as it always came up. A salary figure at the top, and a start date that had been April two years ago and had been moved forward every month since until it was now three months in the past.

Application — Internal Medicine, Shenzhen. Phu Lei Industrial Park.

She read the first line of it. She read the salary figure. She did not read the rest.

Then she deleted it.

It took one movement of the thumb. There was no confirmation. The folder went empty and the screen showed her the ordinary list of applications with nothing in it, and she stood in a corridor in Maonan District and looked at an empty folder for a while.

She did not say anything out loud, because there was nobody in the corridor to say anything to, and because the thing she had just done had taken one movement of a thumb and had made no sound at all.

She put the phone in her pocket and walked down the corridor past the water cooler. At the door she stopped and straightened the stack of forms on the table so that the edges lined up. Then she took her hand off them and left them crooked, and went out.

※

In the car park Cheng Wei was standing beside his scooter with his helmet already on, having evidently come across from the bureau on the far side of the compound on purpose.

"I heard this morning," he said. "Before you came down."

"Occupational health rang us. Word travels."

"Occupational health rang us. They ring us when one of ours is stood down." He took the helmet off. "Eight weeks off, then."

"Eight weeks off, with pay, and a review at the end of it."

"That is not a punishment and I am not treating it as one."

"I know it is not a punishment. You have both been very clear about that."

Cheng Wei put the helmet on the seat of the scooter and did not get on it.

"Lin Shu," he said, "eleven weeks ago you asked me to arrest a feeling. I said get me a recording. Have you got anything at all on a recording?"

"No."

"Have you got anything?"

She stood in the car park with the empty folder in her pocket and thought about a wardrobe behind folded counterpanes, and a hospital bed in Gaozhou with a woman of seventy-eight in it who had been off her medication since April, and a district bureau where she had just told two strangers the truth about herself and been stood down for it.

"No," she said. "I have got a great deal in eight months and not one item of it is a recording."

"Then eight weeks is a good thing," Cheng Wei said, "because in eight weeks you will have to decide whether you are a witness or a party, and right now you are neither, and that is the worst of the three."

He put the helmet on and got on the scooter.

"Ring me," he said. "Not about the pills. Ring me when you've decided which one you are."

※

CHAPTER 14

The Knees

The district hospital put her on the third floor in a bed by the window. She was there for eleven days, and for the first four of them she did not say much.

Lin Shu came every afternoon. She came on the bus and walked up from the stop. She sat in the chair by the bed with her coat still on, and they talked about the tree and about the strips of peel on the newspaper and about whether the ward was warm at night. On the fourth day Ah-Po started on the neighbours.

On the fifth day she said, "You've got a form."

"I've got a form."

"Occupational health."

"Yes."

"And they've stopped you."

"Eight weeks." Lin Shu put her hands in her lap. "With pay."

"With pay." Ah-Po turned it over the way she turned everything. "So you're not a doctor at the moment."

"No."

"Then you can sit there as long as you like," Ah-Po said, "and there's nobody coming."

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She had her medication back.

It was on the bedside table in a small plastic tray, with a cup of water beside it. A nurse brought it at eight in the morning and at eight at night. She watched Ah-Po take it and wrote something on a chart. On the second afternoon Ah-Po took the morning one late, in front of Lin Shu, with the water, and made nothing of it, and did not look up while she did it.

Lin Shu watched her do it and said nothing about it. She understood that she was being allowed to watch, and that this was the whole of what her grandmother was going to give her on the subject.

On the fifth day, after the tablets, Ah-Po said, "You were going to explain."

"Yes."

"I'm not going to ask you twice."

"I know," Lin Shu said. "That's the first part of it."

※

She had worked out what she was going to say on the bus. She said it in the order she had worked out, which was the worst order, and she knew it while she was doing it.

"I didn't ask you," she said, "because I already knew what you'd say."

She kept her eyes on the bed.

"You'd have said yes. You'd have said the master says the elixir has to work alone and that the hospital medicine fights it. You'd have said it the way you say the price of pork, and you'd have been completely sincere."

She stopped.

"And I would have had to stand in your kitchen and listen to my grandmother tell me proudly that she had stopped the medicine that keeps her alive because a man on a screen told her to."

She stopped.

"I couldn't do that," she said. "So I took the pills instead. Taking them was something I could do. It felt like work. It felt like the only part of it I could get my hands on."

Ah-Po looked at her for a while.

"And the tablets."

"I left them in the wardrobe." Lin Shu kept her eyes on the bed. "Face to the wall. I looked at them and I put them back and I went out and I squared my bag on your table. I knew what I was doing. I want to be accurate about that, because I've told two people now that I didn't decide it, and that was a lie, and I did decide it, and I decided it in about nine seconds, and the reason I decided it was that taking them out would have been a conversation."

The ward was doing what wards do. Somewhere down the corridor a trolley went past.

"Go on," Ah-Po said.

"That's the whole of it. I didn't ask because I already knew. I didn't take them out because it was easier."

She looked up.

"And I have known since the ninth of August that both of those are the same thing, and I have not been able to make them into anything better."

Ah-Po nodded, slowly, the way she nodded at the price of pork.

"You thought I'd be ashamed," she said.

"Yes."

"I wasn't ashamed." Ah-Po picked up the cup of water and drank some and put it back on the tray. "I was doing what he said. I believed it. I have believed it since April and I believe it now and I am not going to stop, and if you had asked me I would have told you all of that with my chin up, and you would have had to hear it, and I think that's the part you couldn't manage."

Lin Shu did not say anything.

"You're not the first one of us who couldn't manage it," Ah-Po said. "Your mother can't manage it either. That's why she rings about my eating."

※

On the eighth day Lin Shu told her about the machine.

She had it from an old man in a waiting room in June, at an angle, with a hand over his ear, and she had not thought about it since.

"There's a man in this district," she said. "Chen Futang. His son's blood doesn't clean itself and he goes three times a week to a machine, and the master pays for it. Out of his own pocket. Not out of a fund. Out of his own."

Ah-Po was quiet for a while.

"How do you know."

"He told me. In June, in my room, with the red box on the couch between us."

Lin Shu put her hands in her lap.

"He wanted me to know that the man who sold him mercury was a good man." Lin Shu put her hands in her lap. "He said it proudly. He'd have said it about you."

Ah-Po looked out of the window.

"So the money that poisoned me paid for a man's blood," she said.

"Some of it."

"Some of it." She turned back. "And some of it paid for an opera troupe, and a bus, and rice for eleven villages. I've eaten that rice. So have you, at Nianli, since you were six."

Lin Shu did not say anything.

"You want me to hold both of those."

"I don't want anything," Lin Shu said. "I've stopped wanting things about it. I came to tell you what was in the drawer, and I've told you, and the rest of it is yours."

Ah-Po sat with that. Down on the far side of the river the refinery stacks had their aircraft lights going round, red, out of phase with each other, and it was not dark yet.

"I'm not going to sign anything," she said.

"I know."

"Not because I've stopped believing. Because if I sign, then the only voice in this world that asks after my knees is a criminal, and I have to sit in that yard for the rest of it knowing that." She was not raising her voice. "That's not stupidity, Shu. You can stop treating it as stupidity."

"I've stopped treating it as stupidity."

"Have you."

"Yes," Lin Shu said. "This week. When I worked out that the money which poisoned you paid for a man's blood in Gaozhou. I've been calling it gullibility since April. It isn't gullibility. It's a woman who was asked after."

Ah-Po did not say anything to that. She picked up the cup and drank some more water and put it back down on the tray.

※

On the tenth day the hospital moved her to a bed nearer the door, because she was going home. The physiotherapist had been twice about the stick. The corridor had a rail in it that she could not manage.

Lin Shu came at four and found her sitting up in the bed with the strip in her hand.

Twenty-two tablets left in it.

"I've been off it since April," Ah-Po said. "Eight of these gone in four months. Four courses of the other thing. I'm seventy-eight, and I'm going home tomorrow."

"Yes."

"And you're not a doctor for eight weeks."

"No."

"Then who's going to ask me about my knees."

Lin Shu stood in the ward with her coat still on.

Nobody had ever asked her about her knees. Not Lin Shu, not her mother on the telephone, not the man at the station in eleven years.

The only voice that had ever asked after them was a filtered voice coming out of a rented studio in Gaozhou, at nine o'clock at night. It had been selling her mercury. And it had been the only one.

"I will," Lin Shu said.

Her voice came out wrong. She heard it come out wrong.

"You'll ask me at Christmas," Ah-Po said, "and you'll forget by February, and you'll remember in June and feel bad about it, and that's how it goes with you people."

"Probably."

"Probably," Ah-Po agreed. She put the strip back in her bag. "But you said it standing there in a ward with your coat on, and that's more than anybody's managed since your grandfather died, so I'll take it."

She lay back against the pillow and shut her eyes.

"Sit down," she said. "Tell me about the tree. I want to know if it's finished."

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CHAPTER 15

The Retainer

The ancestral temple was at the end of a lane in Gaozhou that had been resurfaced twice and was still dirt at the edges.

It was not a large building. It had a tiled roof with the tiles going in three different ages of grey. It had a courtyard with a drain down the middle of it. At the corner was a banyan that had been allowed to do more or less what it wanted. There was a hand-painted board over the door with the family name on it, and the paint was going at the lower edge where the rain came off the eaves.

A woman of about eighty was sweeping the courtyard. She swept towards the drain and not away from it, and she had a particular way of doing the corners with the tip of the broom.

"Master Deng is in the hall," she said, without being asked. "He'll be a while. Sit in the shade."

"I can come back."

"He'll be longer if you go and come back." She went on sweeping. "Sit down. There's tea in the pot, it's cold but it's wet."

※

Lin Shu sat on the step in the shade of the banyan and waited.

She had come because she had eight weeks and no case and no standing and no idea what else to do with a Tuesday. She had not been invited. She had not rung. She had got a bus to Gaozhou and walked up a lane and presented herself at the door of a temple that sold the substance which had put her grandmother in a hospital bed. She had done it without telling Cheng Wei. She had done it in the week she was stood down. Both of those facts would be used against her later by somebody.

The hall was open at the front. Inside, out of the sun, she could see a long table and benches and about thirty people, most of them old, and a woman at

the front with a ledger. Deng Kai was at the far end with his back to her, doing something with his hands.

It took her a moment to understand that he was counting out money into separate paper envelopes, and that he was writing on each one, and that the people at the benches were waiting their turn without impatience.

He came out twenty minutes later, wiping his hands on a cloth, and he saw her on the step and stopped.

"Dr. Lin," he said. "You came."

"You knew I would."

"I hoped." He folded the cloth. "I've been hoping for four months. Sit down, don't get up. Huang Guiying, is that tea cold?"

"It's wet," said Huang Guiying.

She went back to the corners. The broom went into the angle where the wall met the paving and came out again with a small grey drift behind it, and she did that four times, and then she straightened up and looked at the banyan and went and got the bucket.

The lane was quiet. Somewhere off behind the hall a radio was playing, and the sound of it came through the open front of the building in bursts.

"That's what I thought." Deng Kai sat down on the step beside her, on the stone, in the shade, with his forearms on his knees. "You'll have had a hard week. I heard about the health station."

"You heard."

"There are two of us in this district that people talk about, Dr. Lin. That is all."

He said it without any weight at all, as though it were a thing about the weather.

"They'll talk about me for a year after and about you for a month. Then they'll find somebody else. The temple will still be here and so will the station, and we'll both still be doing the work."

Lin Shu looked at the courtyard drain.

"You're stood down eight weeks," Deng Kai said. "With pay, I expect. They do that now. It used to be that they just stopped putting your name on the list."

"They still do that."

"Not to you." He turned his head and looked at her properly for the first time. "You are too good and everybody knows it. That is the only protection you have got, and it is not much, and it does not last."

He looked out at the lane.

"I have watched four good people leave this district in nine years. Three went to Shenzhen. One went into the petrochemical side and earns four times what she earned here, and hates every day of it."

"Why are you telling me this."

"Because you have a folder on your phone with an application in it," Deng Kai said, "and because you deleted it on Tuesday, and because I know that because the woman who runs the stationery shop on Guanghua is Huang Guiying's daughter, and because you stood in her shop for ten minutes on Tuesday afternoon looking at nothing."

Lin Shu said nothing at all.

"I'm not going to pretend that's a coincidence," Deng Kai said. "And I'm not going to ask you what was in the folder. I'm going to tell you what I want, and then you can decide what I am."

※

He walked her round the back.

There was a lean-to at the side of the hall with a lock on it and a padlock that did not match the hasp. Inside were shelves, and on the shelves were boxes, and in the boxes were costume heads and hand puppets and a rack of spears with the tassels gone. Four benches folded out into a stage.

"Nianli," he said. "Four nights. The troupe comes in from Meilu. They sleep in the school hall and we feed them. The elders come from eleven villages, and some of them haven't missed a year since they were children." He put a hand on the rack. "It costs forty thousand to do properly. I have twenty-two."

"And the other eighteen."

"And the other eighteen come out of the elixir." He said it flatly, the way a man admits a thing he has decided not to be ashamed of in front of a particular person. "Yes. Out of the elixir. Out of a product I can describe to you item by

item and defend line by line. Which you will not defend. And which I will go on selling."

He put his hands flat on the door of the lean-to.

"Because if I stop, four nights becomes one night. One night becomes a video. And in five years there is nothing in that lean-to at all, and the Pans are a name on a board with the paint going at the bottom edge."

He shut the door of the lean-to and turned round.

"That's the whole of it," he said. "That's what I am. You can write that down."

"I don't need to write it down."

"Then what do you want, Dr. Lin?"

Lin Shu stood in the courtyard with the drain running down the middle of it and her hands at her sides, and for a moment she did nothing at all, and she noticed that she was not squaring anything and not straightening anything, and that this was the second time in a fortnight.

Lin Shu stood in the courtyard with the drain running down the middle of it.

"I want to see the manuscript," she said.

Deng Kai was quiet for a long moment.

"The Testament."

"My grandmother's husband's family kept it. Her name is Pan. She is one of the Maoming Pans. She has never in her life asked anybody for anything. And there is a book in this district with her family's name in it, and I would like to look at it."

"She told you about the book."

He said it evenly, and he sat down again on the step while he said it.

"She told me it had recipes in it, and wells, and a part about the camps." Lin Shu held his gaze. "She has never seen it. Neither have I. You have had it for sixty generations, and I would like to see it. I am not going to tell you why. You would not believe the reason, and I am not sure I do either."

Deng Kai looked at her for a while longer.

"It's in the hall," he said. "In a case."

He said it the way a man names a price.

"I will show you the title page, and the recipes, and the part about the wells, because those are the parts that make people give money. What I won't do is have you in that case unsupervised. I won't let you photograph it. And I won't tell you which chapter I have never read."

"Which chapter is that?"

"The last one," Deng Kai said. "And I can see that you already knew that."

He picked up the cloth again.

"I would like to know how. And I am not going to ask."

※

They had tea in the shade for another hour, and he showed her the ledger, and the ledger was real, and it had eleven villages in it and the amounts that came in from each and what went out for rice and for the troupe and for the bus hire, and there was a column for medicine that was larger than the column for incense, and she asked him about it, and he told her, and it was dialysis, and it was three people, and one of them was the father of a man who had cried in that courtyard.

At the end he said, "I want to make you an offer."

"I've got no standing for eight weeks."

"I know. That's not the part I need." He put the cup down on the stone. "Dr. Lin, I have wanted a physician attached to this temple for nine years."

He held up a hand before she could speak.

"Not a front man. Not somebody to put a name on a certificate. Somebody who reads the panels and tells me when one of them is going wrong. I cannot read a panel. I have three people on dialysis and a courtyard full of people over seventy, and no idea which of them is going to fall over next."

"And in exchange."

A scooter went past the mouth of the lane and the sound of it came and went. Deng Kai did not look at it. He was watching her hands. He was watching to see whether she had put them behind her back.

"In exchange you take nothing from me. No fee. No envelope. Nothing that can be produced in a courtroom." He said it steadily. "That is the offer."

He set the cup down on the stone between them.

"That is why it has taken nine years. There is only one kind of doctor who will take it. And there is exactly one of those in this district, and it is not me. It is the health station on Guanghua North Road. Which has never once accepted a yuan from me. And which is the only institution in this county that has not."

Lin Shu sat in the shade of the banyan with the cold tea going warm in her hand.

"Yours is the only one who never charged," she said.

The drain ran on. Somewhere in the hall behind them the ledger was being closed, and a bench was being moved, and a voice said something to somebody else in a tone that was entirely domestic.

"Yours is the only one who never charged," Deng Kai agreed. "I've tried. I have tried eleven times with eleven different people. Every one of them took something. It was never much. It was always something. And after that they could not tell me the truth about a panel, because they had a hand in my pocket."

He stood up and brushed the stone off the back of his trousers.

"You don't have to answer today," he said. "You are stood down. You have got time. And you have got a grandmother in a hospital bed because of me."

He got up off the step.

"You are entitled to eight weeks of hating me. Take them. Then come back and tell me no, or tell me yes, and either way I'll still be here, and the paint will still be going at the bottom of the board."

He went back into the hall.

Lin Shu sat under the banyan for a long time after he had gone. Huang Guiying swept the corners with the tip of the broom and did not speak to her. At some point she refilled the pot from a bucket and did not offer any. The drain went on running down the middle of the courtyard.

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CHAPTER 16

The Camps

From the Testament of the Jade Coffer, being the third book of nine, concerning the years of the hot fever in the valley.

They came down out of the hills in the fourth month and they came in carts and they came on the backs of their families and some of them came alone and would not say from where. The fever was in them before they reached the road. I had the well dug at the mouth of the valley in the year before, on my own silver, which was not mine but the temple's, and the temple's was the valley's, and I put a man on it with a stick and told him to let nobody draw who had the heat on them.

He was a poor keeper. He let his own brother draw.

I have written elsewhere what the fever does in the belly, and I will not write it here. What I will write is that I lost the keeper's brother and the keeper's brother's two children and a woman who had carried hers eleven days on the road to reach me, and that the keeper lived thirty-one years more and died in his bed in the twelfth year of the peace, and that he never drew from that well again, and that he used to sit by it in the evenings with his back against the stone.

I set the camps in three places. The first above the road where the water runs clear off the mountain and there is no standing in it. The second in the terraces below the Pan fields, which was a mistake, because the terraces hold the water and the water went bad in nine days and I had to move four hundred people in the night with torches, and four of them died of the moving and not of the fever. The third I put on the hill above the second, in the wind, and it held.

I have never written down that the terraces were my error. I am writing it now because the fever has taken the last of the men who were there and there is nobody left to be ashamed in front of, and because a book that only records the hill is a book that will kill somebody in a hundred years.

The rules were these. Nobody entered a camp who had the heat on them, and nobody left one who had it, and the dead were carried out past the third marker

and not through the camp, and every jar in every camp was boiled. Boiled. I stood at the fires myself for the first eleven days because the people would not do it, and the reason they would not do it is that the wood cost silver, and the fever was a thing sent by the mountain and not a thing in the water, and I could not argue them out of the mountain.

So I gave them the metal.

I want this set down plainly, because in the other books I have been careful, and I have been careful for sixty years, and the care has been a kind of lying.

I gave them the cinnabar. I gave it in the camps and I gave it at the well and I gave it in the houses, and I gave it because they would take it, and they would not take the boiled water, and the boiled water was the thing that saved them. The metal did nothing for the fever. The metal did nothing for anything except to make a man quiet and to make his hand stop shaking, which they mistook for the fever leaving, and which I let them mistake, and which I let them mistake for sixty years, and by which I got the wood boiled and the wells dug and the camps kept.

The metal killed some of them. I have written that too, in the fifth book, and in the fifth book I wrote that it killed the weak and the very old and the ones who would have died of the fever in any case, and that is true, and it is also the sentence of a man arranging facts.

It killed a girl of six whose mother carried her through the flood. It killed a ferryman who had nothing wrong with him at all and who took it because I gave it and because I was the man who had dug the well. It killed the keeper's brother's wife, who took it on the ninth day, and who would have lived, and I have known that for sixty years.

I told myself it was mercy. It was mercy. It was also the price of being listened to, and those two things sat in me together for sixty years and neither one moved.

What the valley has now is wells. There are eleven of them, and nine are still cut and two have gone in, and the water in all nine is drawn and boiled by women who would not know my name, and that is the whole of my gift and it is the only part of it that worked. I gave them a miracle because a miracle is a delivery system. I knew that at the time. I have never once said it.

If there is a man reading this who has the book because he has bought it, or whose father kept it, or who performs with it, then hear this part and not the other parts.

The wells are the thing. Boil the water. Keep the sick apart. Carry the dead past the third marker.

Everything else in these nine books is metal and smoke, and the metal and the smoke were what they would accept, and I am dead now, and there is nobody left to be ashamed in front of, and I am writing it down at last.

The wells are the thing.

Boil the water.

Keep the sick apart.

Carry the dead past the third marker.

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CHAPTER 17

The Girl of Six

From the Testament of the Jade Coffer, being the fifth book of nine, concerning the giving of the metal, and the accounting of those it took.

I have set down in the fourth book that the metal took the weak and the very old and the ones who would have died of the fever in any case. That is what I wrote, and I wrote it in the fourth year of the peace, and I was fifty-eight, and I had a great many people to feed and no wish to be stoned in my own valley.

It is not true. It is true of some of them. I am setting down the whole of it here, in the fifth book, where the numbers are, because a man who has kept a book of numbers has no business keeping a book of lies in the same hand.

The metal took, in the camps and at the well and in the houses, one hundred and four people that I know of, and perhaps twice that that I do not, for the valley was wide and I was one man and I did not go to every house. Of the hundred and four, thirty-one were under ten years of age.

I want that written plainly and I want it left where it is written, and I do not want it copied out and read at a temple fair.

Of the thirty-one I will set down three, because three is what a hand can hold and because eleven books of numbers is a thing nobody reads and one child is a thing nobody puts down.

The first was a boy of the ferry, nine years old, whose father worked the crossing at the Pan fields. He had nothing wrong with him at all. He was given the metal because his father asked me for it in front of other men, and because a man who asks a physician in front of other men has made it impossible to refuse him, and because I had learned by then that a refusal travels further than a dose. He was dead in four days. His father ferried at that crossing for another nineteen years and never charged a fare from anybody who was carrying a child.

The second was a woman of the terraces who took it on the ninth day and would have lived. I have written her in the fourth book as one who would have died of the fever in any case. She would not have. I saw her on the eighth day and

she was eating, and I gave her the metal on the ninth day because her husband had paid for it in silver and had paid in front of the camp, and a man who has paid in front of the camp will not be told that his silver is not wanted.

The third was a girl of six.

Her mother carried her from above the flood. It took eleven days. The mother came through the water at the road with the child on her back and the child was light, and the mother came to my door and put the child down on the stone and asked me to look at her, and I looked at her, and the child had the fever, and I gave the mother the metal.

I gave it because the mother had carried a child eleven days through water to reach a physician, and because she had nothing else, and because she had come to me and not to anybody else in that valley, and because I wanted to be the man she had come to.

It killed her before the night was out.

The mother sat with the child until the second bell and then she got up and washed the stone at my door, with water, with her hands, and she went back up the road, and she did not say anything to me at all, and she never came back, and I have never known her name.

I have the child's age. I do not have the child's name. I did not ask. I did not ask because I had given her the thing that killed her and a man does not ask the name of the thing he has done, and I have understood that about myself for sixty years, and I have never once been able to make it into a smaller thing.

The metal was given in the camps and at the well and in the houses, and the wells are the thing that worked, and the water was the thing that worked, and I knew it then and I know it now, and I let them believe the metal because the metal was what they would carry home and the water was what they would not.

I gave them a miracle because a miracle is a delivery system.

I have written in the first book that the mountain sent the fever and that the valley was punished. I did not believe it when I wrote it. I wrote it because they believed it, and because a physician who argues with the mountain loses his valley, and because I wanted the wood boiled more than I wanted to be right.

There is one more book after this one. I have not written it yet. I am sixty-one. I have the ink and I have the hand and I have the whole of the accounting in

front of me, and I find that I cannot put it down in the same hand as the numbers, and so I will put it down in whatever hand is left to me, and it will be the last thing in these nine books, and I will not sign it, and whoever keeps this book after me will read the recipes first, because the recipes are what a man looks for, and will stop there, and will not read to the end, and I know that, and I am writing it anyway, and there is no part of that which is to my credit.

※

CHAPTER 18

The Fan

The fan was pointed at him and not at the room, and it had been pointed at him since the spring, and he had stopped noticing where it was pointed somewhere in about the third week.

What he noticed now was the hour.

The light came off the window and went along the wall and up the wall and off the wall. Somewhere in the middle of the afternoon it reached the top of the doorway.

When it reached the top of the doorway it was half past five. When it had gone off the doorway altogether it was dark. And when it was dark it was nearly nine.

He had learned the light the way he had learned the sound the kettle made when the water was ready. And the particular noise of the key in the lock that meant it was her and not the boy from the shop. He had learned it because there was nothing else to learn it with. He lay in the chair with the left side of him gone out of him like a tide, and he watched the light go along the wall, and he waited.

The pills came at eight.

She brought them on a saucer with a glass of water. She gave him the red one first. Then she put the glass to his mouth and held it there while he drank, and wiped his chin with the corner of the cloth she kept over her shoulder for it.

He had got so that he could open his mouth when she came with the saucer. He had learned that too. It was the one useful thing the left side of him could still do, and it was the only thing she asked of him in the mornings, and he was glad to be able to do it.

The white tablets had stopped in the spring. He remembered the white tablets. There had been two of them, morning and night, in a strip with a green band. She had given him those. Then one day she had given him the red one instead, and had not given him the strip again.

And he had not been able to ask.

He had tried to ask. He had got as far as a sound in the throat on two occasions. Both times she had said, "I know, I know," and stroked his hair. He had not been able to make the rest of it come out.

After the second time he stopped trying. The stroking was kind, and he did not want to spend the kindness on arguing.

※

At nine the screen came on.

She turned his chair to face it. She had been turning his chair to face it for so long that he had started turning his head before she touched it. She had noticed that.

She had said, "He knows," to somebody on the telephone, in the voice people used for a child or a dog that had done a trick.

The screen showed a table and a box and a length of red curtain, and the voice came out of it lower and further away than her voice, and he liked the voice. He liked it the way he liked the kettle and the light on the wall. It came at nine and it talked about water.

The woman behind the curtain did the hands. He had watched the hands for six months and he had never once been able to work out whether there was a person behind the curtain or whether the hands were simply there, the way the light on the wall was simply there. He had decided, at some point he could not locate, that it did not matter.

The box came open. The pills came out in their blisters. The number came up on the screen and stayed there long enough to read.

He smiled.

He knew he was smiling. He could feel the shape of it on his own face, the way he could feel the chair against his back. He knew that she watched him smile. He knew that the smile was the reason the screen stayed on the two telephone directories, in the middle of the room where a table used to be.

He did not know whether he was smiling because he was pleased. He thought he was pleased. It was the only hour of the day when anything happened.

※

The hand had started doing something new in about the fifth month.

It was the left one, the curled one, the one with the nails she cut when she remembered. It lay in his lap with the fingers folded in and it had begun, in the fifth month, to go.

It was not a large movement. It was a small one and it was regular and it had a rate. He could feel it going in the wrist, the way he could feel the chair. It went on for a long time after he had stopped thinking about it, and started again when he thought about it again.

He had shown her.

He had managed, one evening in about the sixth month, to lift the hand a little way off his knee and hold it there. She looked at it. She said, "It's the cold," and put the rug over it.

It was not the cold. It was the sixth month and it was not cold. He had known it was not cold at the time and he had not been able to say so, and she had put the rug over it, and the rug had been kind, and the hand had gone on going under the rug.

He had thought about it a great deal after that. He had the whole of every night and most of every day, and he had nothing to do with the time except turn it over, and he turned that over more than he turned over anything else.

The hand had started in about the fifth month.

He had started the red pills in the spring.

He could not make the second thing follow from the first. He could hold them side by side in front of him, the way he held the light on the wall and the sound of the key, and he could not make one of them reach the other. There was a place in him where the reaching would have happened, and the place was gone. He lay in the chair with the two facts side by side in front of him, and no way of putting them together, and no way of handing either of them to anybody.

On bad nights he thought that if he could have handed her the hand, she would have taken him to somebody. She took him to the gate twice a year and she took him to the shop on Saturdays in the wheelchair, and she would have

taken him to a doctor. She was not unkind. She was the only person who came into the room.

He simply could not hand her the hand.

※

By the end of October she had stopped sleeping.

He knew because he was awake. He lay in the chair in the front room, because they had stopped putting him to bed in the spring. He heard her get up and go out to the kitchen and stand in there, and come back, and lie down, and get up again.

On one of those nights she came and stood over him in the dark with her hand on the arm of the chair, and she said, out loud, to nobody, "You look at the wall all day."

He had not been looking at the wall. He had been looking at the light going along the wall.

"And then you look at that," she said, meaning the screen, meaning the directories, meaning the room.

He wanted to tell her that the wall was where the light was. He got as far as a sound and she said, "I know," and stroked his hair, and went back to bed.

After that he tried, for about a fortnight, to look at her when she came into the room. Not at the screen. At her. He held her face with his eyes when she came in with the saucer. When she turned the chair. When she put the rug over the hand. He held it as long as he could keep it.

It was difficult. It got easier. Somewhere in the third week of it he found he was doing it without trying.

He did not know whether she had noticed.

He thought, on some of the nights, that she had not noticed, because she still said he looks at the wall all day, in the voice people used for a thing that had happened and could not be changed. And he thought, on other nights, that she had noticed and had decided not to say anything about it, because saying anything about it would have meant saying the rest of it, and the rest of it was the hand.

※

At nine the screen came on and the voice talked about water, and the hand went under the rug, and the light was off the wall, and he smiled.

He felt the smile on his own face. He knew she was watching it. He knew it was the reason the directories were in the middle of the room. He knew she had put them there, and that she had put them there for him. And he could not tell her that the thing he would have wanted was not the box or the voice or the hands behind the curtain.

He would have wanted to hand her the hand.

He lay in the chair with the fan pointed at him, the rug over the left side, the screen in front of him. He smiled at the hands behind the curtain.

The smile was real. It was the only thing he had. And it was enough to keep the directories in the middle of the room.

※

CHAPTER 19

The Recipes

The courtyard was swept before he came down.

That meant Huang Guiying had been at it since six, and that she had swept towards the drain again, and that she would say nothing about it and would refuse to be paid for it. She had refused to be paid for thirty-one years. She had a way of taking the envelope in both hands and putting it back in his coat pocket that made it impossible to do twice.

Deng Kai went out into the courtyard and stood in it and looked at the sky over the lane.

It was going to rain before evening. He could tell from the way the banyan was holding its leaves, which was a thing his grandfather had taught him and which he had never been able to explain to anybody under sixty.

"There's a man at the gate," Huang Guiying said.

"I know. He's been there since seven."

"You want me to—"

"I'll go out."

※

He was the father of a man who lay on a machine three times a week because his blood would not clean itself, and he had come to the temple on a Sunday morning to say thank you, and he had stood in the courtyard and cried, and he had asked whether he could kowtow.

Deng Kai had said the courtyard was uneven.

"You paid for the year," the man said now, in the lane, with his hands at his sides. "All of it. My father goes Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday. He'll go for a year."

"For as long as it's needed."

"I can't—" The man stopped and started again. "Master. My father bought four courses of your elixir. He told me. He spent most of a month's pension on it and he wouldn't say why, and I didn't know, and now I've found out, and I've

come here to tell you that I know, and to tell you that I'm still going to let you pay for the machine."

Deng Kai stood in the lane with the banyan holding its leaves above him.

"You've come a long way to say that," he said.

"I've come a long way to say that I don't understand it," the man said. "That's different. I want you to know I don't understand it. I've been to the bureau. I've made a statement. And he goes Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and you pay, and I can't make those into one thing either."

"Nobody's asking you to."

"I know." The man put his hands in his pockets. "That's the trouble with you. You never ask."

He went off up the lane. Deng Kai watched him go and did not call after him, and understood that the man had not come to be reassured and would not have thanked him for trying.

Huang Guiying was sweeping the corner where the wall met the paving.

"He'll be back on Saturday," she said.

"I know."

※

The troupe came at ten. There were nine of them instead of forty. They sat on the benches in the hall with their cases on their knees.

The woman who had done the lead for twenty-two years said that she would do the lead. That her voice was not what it had been. That she would do it anyway.

They had the borrowed stage. They had four benches that folded out into a stage. They had the school hall for two nights and the temple courtyard for one. Rice for three days and not four. Deng Kai told them that.

One of the younger men asked about the fourth night. Deng Kai said the fourth night was still on.

"In the courtyard?"

"In the courtyard."

"Master. We did eleven villages last year."

"I know what we did last year."

The younger man did not say anything else. Deng Kai stood at the front of the hall with the rack of spears behind him, the tassels gone off all of them.

He did the arithmetic he had done every morning since June. Forty thousand was what it cost to do properly. Twenty-two was what he had. The other eighteen came out of the elixir, and the elixir was pressed candy and old herbs and a note on a screen.

And the only thing he had never been able to do was make the last part of that into something he could say out loud to a room.

He had tried it twice. Once on a physician in a courtyard in the autumn, who had listened to the whole of it and had not said anything, and who had asked to see the manuscript. And once on a girl of twenty-six behind a curtain, who had listened to the whole of it and had gone on performing.

Neither of them had told him it was all right.

That was the thing he had not expected. He had built a life on the assumption that the people who saw it clearly would either take his money or leave, and in eleven years nobody had simply stayed in the room and looked at him.

※

The case was in the hall on the left, behind a curtain, in a lacquer box with a brass catch.

He went to it in the afternoon. The troupe had gone to the school hall to measure the benches. He needed the second recipe in the fourth book for the censer mixture, and the third book's instruction on the isolation of the sick was going out on paper and he wanted the wording right.

He opened the box.

He had opened it perhaps four hundred times. He knew the weight of it. He knew the particular give of the catch on the left-hand side. He knew the outer leaves were water-damaged along the bottom, because his grandfather's grandfather had carried it out of a flooded room in a cloth.

He turned to the fourth book and read the recipe for the censer. He checked the quantity of borneol against what they were using, and found they were using

rather more than the book specified. He made a note of it on the back of the ledger page he carried folded in his shirt pocket.

Then he turned to the third book for the isolation instruction, and read it, and copied out four lines in his own hand on the same page.

He was about to close the box.

The ninth book was at the back. He knew it was at the back. He had known it was at the back since he was nineteen. He had read the first eight books through in a fortnight on his grandfather's instruction. His grandfather had then closed the box himself and said, that's the recipes and the wells and the camps, and that's what people want, and that's what they'll pay for.

And he had not opened it again in Deng Kai's presence for eleven years.

He had never asked.

He had told himself for thirty years that he had never asked because his grandfather had not offered. He had understood, for about twenty of those years, that he had never asked because he already knew what was in it. That knowing it was written down somewhere in that box was a different thing from reading it. And that as long as he had not read it he could go on doing what he did, the way a man does a thing his grandfather taught him.

His hand was on the edge of the ninth book.

He took it off.

He closed the box and turned the key and put it in his pocket. He stood in the hall with the curtain drawn and the rain starting on the roof, and did the arithmetic again.

It came out the same way it had come out every morning since June.

※

At dusk he did the offering.

He did it at the shrine at the end of the hall, where the plaque was, with the paint going at the lower edge. He took the three cups down one at a time and emptied them into the pot and filled them and set them back in a row and moved the middle one a finger's width to the left.

He said the eleven seconds.

They came the way they had come since he was nine years old, out of the bottom of the lungs, low in the mouth, the vowels held too long, the consonants rounded the way his grandfather had rounded them. He did not think about the words. He had never thought about the words. They were the thing that went with the water, the way the broom went with the corner and the particular noise of the key went with Huang Guiying.

He stood off and looked at the row.

He had performed the register in front of eleven villages for twenty-two years. He had never once been able to say whether what he felt at the end of the eleven seconds was the old man, or was only the habit of him.

He had stopped trying to find out somewhere in his thirties. And the not-finding-out had become the thing he relied on.

It was the only part of his life he had never been able to price.

※

The rain came in off the lane and went across the courtyard towards the drain, and Huang Guiying came in with the broom and stood it against the wall out of the way, and did not speak to him.

"Guiying," Deng Kai said.

"Mm."

"The fourth night. I want it in the courtyard and I want it at the hour they come off the buses, and I want the lanterns up the whole length of the lane."

"You know what the lanterns cost."

"I know what the lanterns cost."

She looked at the shrine and the three cups and the water in them.

"You're asking eleven villages to come to three," she said.

"I'm asking them to come."

"And if they come and they see three?"

"Then they'll see three," Deng Kai said, "and they'll see it done properly, and that's the whole of what I've got."

"Then you've decided."

"I've decided." Deng Kai put the key back in his pocket. "Eleven villages was what we did last year. Three is what we've got."

He turned the key over in his pocket.

"And if I'm going to do three I'm going to do them as though they were eleven. The people who come are going to see what they're buying. And they're going to hear it said out loud in the courtyard, by a man standing on a bench."

Huang Guiying picked the broom up again.

"You're a fool," she said, without any heat at all, "and you always have been, and your grandfather was the same, and I've swept this yard for both of you."

She went out into the rain.

Deng Kai stood at the shrine with his hand on the edge of the sideboard. He did not square anything, because there was nothing in the hall that wanted squaring. He listened to the broom going towards the drain, and did not move for a long time.

※

CHAPTER 20

Which Doctor

She came on the Sunday, to the station, in a dress she had obviously been told to wear.

Lin Shu saw her through the window of her office. Ah-Yan was standing in the car park with a canvas bag on her shoulder and her hands empty, looking at the queue going in through the door and not joining it. She had been there long enough for two people to ask her what she wanted.

"You're stood down," Ah-Yan said, when Lin Shu came out.

"I am."

"So you're not a doctor any more. Officially."

"Eight weeks."

"And the grandmother."

"In Gaozhou. Two nights ago they moved her to a bed on the third floor."

"Is she—"

"She's stable." Lin Shu held up a hand. "She's stable and she is not better, and neither of those is your doing, and I would rather you didn't decide it was."

"Then I can talk to you." Ah-Yan shifted the bag. "Not here. Is there somewhere."

Lin Shu looked at the queue. Two of the people in it had been at the station since before she was posted, and one of them was holding a folded form that had been folded so many times the creases had gone soft, and none of them was in a hurry to be seen by a doctor who had just been told she was not one for eight weeks.

※

They sat in the bus shelter at the stop where the roof was missing. It was the only place on that road with shade and no windows. The bench was warm through the back of her coat.

Ah-Yan had a drive in the canvas bag. It was a small black one, the kind that came free with a laptop, and it had a strip of masking tape on it with a date on it in ballpoint.

"Scripts," she said. "Two years of them. Every Thursday's file, kept."

She turned the drive over once more.

"Because I keep everything. Because my father kept everything, and there is a rice bin at home with puppet heads in it going back to 1974." She turned the drive over in her hand. "Sales. What went out, what came in, what the call room recorded."

A scooter went past the end of the road and the sound of it came across the flat heat and went away. Ah-Yan did not look at it. She was looking at the drive, and she had the particular stillness of a person who has been holding something for eleven days and has not put it down. The call room records everything, Dr. Lin. There's a system. It's for quality. It's the same system any call centre has.

"And?"

"And there's a folder in it marked returns." Ah-Yan put the drive down on the shelf of the shelter between them. "People who stopped. People who asked for their money back. There are sixty-one of them. Eleven of them wrote in and said why, and eight of the eleven said the same thing."

Lin Shu did not ask. She had learned that.

"They asked which doctor treats it."

Lin Shu did not write any of it down. She had no paper and no folder and no standing, and she sat on the warm bench of a shelter with no roof and listened to a woman of twenty-six account for two years of her own life in a level voice, in the middle of a Sunday, on a road where the refinery wall went on past the stop and did not stop.

Ah-Yan's voice did not change.

The shelter had no roof and the shade had moved while they sat, and the light was now on the shelf between them and on the small black drive with the masking tape on it, and the date on the tape was very clear and had been written with a ballpoint by somebody who pressed hard.

"They asked which doctor treats Master Pan's detox."

Ah-Yan still had her hands in her lap.

"Because they'd been told it puts metal into you and then takes it out. And some of them had been to a doctor and been told something else."

She paused.

"And they wanted to know which one of us was right."

She looked out at the road.

"I read those eleven in one sitting. On the fourteenth, at two in the morning, in the call room, with a headset round my neck."

She put her hand flat on the shelf.

"And then I went and performed at nine that evening. I did the whole register."

She took her hand off the shelf and put it back.

"I did the ornament in the middle, where you hold the note longer than the note wants to be held. A thousand people watched it."

She looked at the road.

"One of them was a woman in Dianbai who has not slept since March. And I was very good."

"You were."

"I was excellent." Ah-Yan turned the drive face down on the shelf. "That's the part I can't get past. Not that I lied. That I was excellent."

※

Her father had known before she told him.

That was the thing she had come to say and had not known how to say. Ou Guisheng had come into the room on the Friday with a puppet head in each hand. He looked at the drive on the table. He put the heads down and stood there a while, and then he asked her whether she was going to the Grand Blessing.

"I said yes," Ah-Yan said. "And he said, not this year. He didn't say why. He didn't ask me anything."

She turned the drive over again.

"He went out and came back with the rice bin, and set it down, and opened it. Forty-one heads in it. He took out the scholar and he put it in my hands."

She stopped.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing." Ah-Yan's hands were flat on her knees. "He didn't say anything. He gave me the scholar and he went and made tea. And I stood in our front room holding a puppet head."

She stopped for a moment.

"And I understood that he had worked it out weeks ago. That he had decided not to ask me. That he was not going to tell me to stop. And that the only thing he had to give me about it was the scholar."

She put her hand over the drive on the shelf.

"He's sixty-one. That trade dies with him."

She said it without any weight at all.

"There are four men in Gaozhou who still do single-performer. One of them is in a home and can't hold the rail."

She said it without any weight at all.

"He has spent forty years on it and he has an audience of nobody. Then I go and get an audience of a thousand by putting a god behind a curtain."

Her hands were still flat on her knees.

"And he watches me do it, and he has never once said a word about it."

Her voice had not risen at any point.

"And now I'm going to hand this over and lose the thousand, and he knows that, and he gave me the scholar."

※

The date was on the masking tape.

Nianli. The Grand Blessing at the ancestral temple, the fourth night, which was the night the procession went out and the elders came from eleven villages and the testimony wall went up along the lane. Deng would be on the lane himself. Deng always was.

"There'll be plainclothes," Ah-Yan said. "There always are, at the big ones. Market people, sometimes. They stand at the mouth of the lane with a bag."

"Not for this."

The refinery wall went on past the end of the road. Somebody's radio was playing two streets over, and the sound of it came and went with the wind.

"How long have you got?" Ah-Yan said.

"Until the fourth night."

"No," Ah-Yan said. "Not for this."

Lin Shu picked the drive up. It was lighter than she expected.

"What do you want?" she said.

"Nothing." Ah-Yan said it immediately. "That's the thing. I've thought about this for eleven days and there is nothing I want."

She said it fast, before Lin Shu could ask.

"Not money. Not a reduced sentence. I haven't got a sentence. I'm a voice behind a curtain, and there is no curtain in a courtroom."

She counted them off.

"Not the elders. The elders will hate me and they're right to."

"Then why."

"Because of the eleven." Ah-Yan stood up and put the bag on her shoulder. "Because a woman somewhere is going to ask a doctor which of us is right. And I would like a doctor to be able to answer her."

She looked down the road.

"And I am not going to be the reason nobody can."

She looked down the road, where the refinery wall went on past the stop.

"I'll be at the Blessing," she said. "Fourth night. I'm performing. I can't not perform, it would be noticed." She turned to go. "Dr. Lin. When it happens. When you do whatever you are going to do."

She had her back half turned.

"I would rather you didn't tell me beforehand."

"Why not?"

"Because I'd talk you out of it," Ah-Yan said, "and because I'd be right."

She was at the corner of the shelter now.

"And because I'd like to be able to say afterward that I didn't know. Even though I will know. Even though I'm the one who taught you the register."

She walked off up the road. Lin Shu stood in the shelter with no roof and held a small black drive with masking tape on it, and did not move for some time, and the shade went on moving across the shelf until the date on the tape was in the sun and then out of it.

At the flat she put it in the drawer with the leaflet and the insurance papers and the folded envelope. She shut the drawer. Then she opened it again and took the envelope out and read the fourth line.

Do not tell Cheng Wei until after.

She had a recording. She had sixty-one people who had stopped and eleven who had asked which doctor. She had a date. And she had a woman who had performed a god for two years and was going to do it once more on the fourth night.

She put the envelope back and shut the drawer and did not ring anybody, and at four in the morning she woke with the taste of metal in her mouth and lay in the dark and did not sleep again.

※

CHAPTER 21

The Assay

She had four courses and no standing.

That was the whole of the problem. A stood-down physician cannot order a toxicology panel on a substance confiscated from a patient, because she is not a physician for eight weeks and the substance is evidence in a case that does not exist. She could not take it to the district lab. She could not take it to the hospital. She could not put it through the station, because the station had a log and the log had her name in it and He Yuzhen read the log every morning.

She went to Wu Jinglun.

He was in his room with the cup turned a quarter turn on the desk and the plant that was alive against the wall. He listened to all of it without writing anything down.

When she had finished he said,

"You want a quantitative heavy-metal panel on a consumer product. Off the books. Without a referring physician of record."

"Yes."

"That's a thing I can do."

"You can."

"I can do it because the lab at the city hospital will run a specimen for a colleague as a courtesy. They will do it once."

He turned the cup a quarter turn.

"And if they are ever asked, they will say a colleague asked them, and they will not be able to say which one."

"It will cost about four hundred, which you will pay, and it will take nine days, and I am going to write nothing down about it, and I want you to hear me say that out loud so that neither of us can pretend otherwise later."

"I know what it costs you."

"You don't." Wu Jinglun said it without any edge. "But you will, if it goes wrong, and I have decided to let you find out rather than to be told."

※

She brought him two pills from two different courses, in a sealed envelope. And a third pill from the blister she had kept on a gauze square in a drawer since June.

She did not tell him where any of them came from.

She did not tell him that one had been in her grandmother's wardrobe. One in a bedridden man's front room in Maogang. One in a paper bag on an old miner's knees, in a consulting room on Guanghua North Road. She did not tell him about the wardrobe behind the counterpanes, or the strip with the green band torn at the eighth, or the fifty-one minutes, or the sentence about the girl carried through the flood.

He did not ask. He had promised not to, eleven weeks earlier, in a room with a corner of table in it. He had kept it through a psychiatry appointment, an occupational health interview, and now this.

The promise was load-bearing. She had spent four months building a structure on top of it that she could not take down.

"Nine days," he said.

"Nine days."

"Dr. Lin." He capped his pen and put it down. "You came to me in June and told me you were losing time. You have since been stood down, deleted an application, confessed to your grandmother, and put a possibly poisonous substance in your own mouth in a closed office with nobody in the building. I have written none of that down. I want you to consider that the fact that I have not written it down is not the same as the fact that it did not happen, and that when this comes out, and it will come out, the absence of a record will not protect you. It will only mean that there is no document, and documents are what people believe."

"I know."

"You keep saying you know." Wu Jinglun picked up the envelope. "It isn't the same as having heard it."

※

She spent the nine days doing the things a person with no standing does.

She sat with Ah-Po on the third floor in Gaozhou for two afternoons and did not mention the pills at all. On the second afternoon Ah-Po asked her to cut the peel, and she cut it, and they laid the strips out in rows on newspaper.

Ah-Po moved the middle cup a finger's width to the left. She stood off, looked at the row, and moved it back. Lin Shu watched her do it and did not square anything.

She went to see Liang Xiuying in Maogang and sat in the front room with the fan pointed at the chair and not at her. At nine o'clock the tablet came up on the two telephone directories, and Liang Binghua smiled at the screen.

"You see," Liang Xiuying said.

Lin Shu said yes. She did not say anything else. And she did not tell her that the thing her husband was smiling at had mercury in it.

She went to the district hospital and stood in the corridor outside a ward on the third floor. She did not go in. She was stood down, and going in would have been a thing she could not undo.

On the seventh day she took the bus to Dianbai and walked to the sheds and stood in the yard and did not go in. Tan Shunfa came out and looked at her and did not ask her anything.

After a while he said, "You've got red on you again."

She looked down. There was no red on her shoes. She did not correct him.

※

The result came on the ninth day, by hand, in an envelope, and Wu Jinglun gave it to her in his room with the door shut.

She read it standing up.

Mercury, expressed as Hg, in two of the three specimens, at a concentration that was not a contaminant and was not a trace. The third — the oldest, from the blister she had kept on a gauze square since June — carried it at the highest level of the three, and had a sulphide speciation consistent with cinnabar, and a particle size distribution consistent with a milled mineral and not with a botanical extract.

She read the numbers twice. She did the arithmetic a physician does. Convert the concentration into a daily dose. Convert the daily dose into a body burden. Then ask what a body burden of that size does to a man of seventy-one with a miner's cough and a kidney that was already failing.

And to a woman of seventy-eight who had been off her blood-pressure medication since April, taking four courses instead.

It did what she had thought it did.

It did it slowly, which was the worst thing about it. It did not kill anybody in a night. It took months. And it took them from people who were already old. It presented as a tremor, and as tiredness, and as the knees going.

Every one of those things happens to people over seventy anyway. That was the whole of the design, and it had been working for nine years.

Wu Jinglun was sitting down. He had not said anything since he handed her the envelope.

"You've gone white," he said.

"I'm all right."

"Dr. Lin."

"I'm all right." She put the report on the desk and squared it to the edge, and took her hand off it. "I need to make a telephone call."

※

Cheng Wei answered on the fourth ring. The fan was going. He said, "Lin Shu," in the tone of a man who has been waiting eleven weeks for a call and has prepared several things to say.

"I've got it," she said. "Quantitative heavy metal. Mercury, as Hg, in two specimens out of three, at a concentration that isn't a contaminant. Speciation consistent with cinnabar. I've got the panel, I've got the product, I've got three named people with renal injury and tremor dated after exposure, and I've got a recording of a curative claim made live by an employee of the seller, which I did not obtain and which I am now handing you the location of."

The fan moved.

"You've got a recording," Cheng Wei said.

"Sixty-one stopped customers and eleven written complaints asking which doctor treats the detox. All of it on a drive that a former employee of the seller handed to me on the ninth of August, at a bus shelter on the Maonan road. Which I have had in a drawer for eleven days without reporting it."

A long pause.

"Why are you telling me this," Cheng Wei said. "You've had eleven days to destroy it."

"Because I'm stood down and I've got nothing left to lose. And because you asked me in a car park in July whether I was going to be a witness or a party."

She heard him put the cup down on the desk, a long way off, and not pick it up again.

"I have spent eleven days being a party, and I would like to stop."

A long pause, and then he said, "Where is the drive."

"At my flat. In a drawer."

"Don't move it. Don't copy it. Don't photograph it." He was already standing. She could hear it. "Lin Shu. Is there anybody who knows you have it."

"Yes," she said. "One. "And she's performing on the fourth night. And she asked me not to tell her anything beforehand.

The fan went on.

"And I haven't."

"Then we have between now and the fourth night," Cheng Wei said, "and you are going to come in tomorrow at nine, and you are going to tell me all of it from the beginning, including the parts that make you look like a party. Especially those."

"I know."

"You keep saying you know," Cheng Wei said. "Say the other thing."

Lin Shu stood in Wu Jinglun's room with the report still on the desk and the plant that was alive against the wall.

"I'm frightened," she said.

※

CHAPTER 22

Pan Gong Is Here

She had been home a fortnight. The third floor had a corridor with a rail in it that she could not manage on a stick, and she had asked to go, and the district hospital had done what it could with a woman of seventy-eight who had been off her medication since April.

Lin Shu went on the Tuesday. She took the bus to Gaozhou and walked up the lane with the lychee tree at the end of it. The tree had finished. The skins under it had gone down into the grass.

The shrine was on the sideboard with the cups in a row and fresh water in them. She had done them herself that morning, standing, with the stick against the sideboard, and she had done them badly, and she had not said anything about it.

Ah-Po was in the front room in the chair with the reclining back, with a blanket, and her stick against the wall, and she was doing something with her hands.

"Grandmother."

"Sit down." Ah-Po did not look up. "I'm re-tying the binding on the scholar. Your great-uncle gave him to me and the cord's gone."

She had a puppet head in her lap and a length of cord. She was working it round the neck of the thing with a thoroughness that had nothing to do with the cord.

Lin Shu sat down.

※

The episode came the way they came now, which was without announcement.

One moment she was looking at her grandmother's hands on a puppet head. The next moment she was standing at the sideboard with the thermos in her hand and the cups down.

She had no memory of getting up. The light in the room had gone long and orange. And Ah-Po was sitting very still in the chair with her hands in her lap, watching her.

Lin Shu had the thermos. She tipped water into the first cup. She tipped water into the second.

Then she stopped, because she had come to and she knew what her hands were doing, and she stood there with the thermos in her hand and the third cup empty and her own heart going.

She put the thermos down.

"Grandmother, I'm going to—"

She did not finish it. What came out of her was not the sentence she had started.

It came up out of somewhere below speech. In a register she had never used in her life. Low in the mouth, with the vowels held too long and the consonants rounded the way Cantonese rounds a word for a child.

She heard it in her own voice and it was not her voice. It went on for some time. It was about water, and about presenting water, and about the guest who sits to the left, and about the road the water came down, and about carrying it in jars.

It was the offering cadence. She had never been taught it. She had stood on a stool in that kitchen when she was eight, with a thermos too heavy to hold properly, spilling water on the sideboard. She had been told, without any anger at all, that the middle cup goes left because that is where the guest sits.

She had heard it. That was all it was. She had heard it four thousand times and absorbed it the way a child absorbs a language, and it had come up.

She came to with the third cup full and her hand on the rim of it, and Ah-Po was crying.

Not quietly. Ah-Po had her hand up over her mouth and her shoulders were going. The tears were running down into her collar. And she was making a sound that Lin Shu had never heard her make, in sixty years of knowing her.

"Grandmother—"

"Pan Gong is here." Ah-Po got the words out around her own hand. "He's here. He's standing at my sideboard doing the water."

"Grandmother, listen to me."

"He's here." Ah-Po took her hand away from her mouth. Her face was streaming and she was not trying to stop it. "He's doing it the old way. The way my grandmother did it. Nobody does it that way, Shu. I haven't heard that in fifty years. I thought I was the last one."

Lin Shu stood at the sideboard with her hand on the cup.

"Grandmother, listen to me."

"He's here." Ah-Po took her hand away from her mouth. Her face was streaming and she was not trying to stop it. "He's doing it the old way. The way my grandmother did it. Nobody does it that way, Shu. I haven't heard that in fifty years. I thought I was the last one."

Lin Shu did not let go of the cup.

"You taught me," she said. "When I was eight. On the stool. You said the middle cup goes left."

"I say it every time." Ah-Po's hands were shaking on the arms of the chair. "I have said it every time I have done the water for sixty years. It is just the words that go with it."

She stopped. She looked at the puppet head in her lap as though she had forgotten it was there, and put it down on the floor beside the chair.

"You do not learn them," Ah-Po said. "You are standing there while somebody says them."

"I have never heard you say it."

"You have." Ah-Po's chin was going now and she did not cover it again. "Four thousand times. You were never listening."

Lin Shu stood with the rim of the cup under her thumb.

"Nobody listens to their grandmother doing the water," Ah-Po said.

The room was very quiet. Outside, a scooter went along the lane and the sound of it came through the window and went away.

Lin Shu put the cup down.

"I cannot say it," she said. "When I am myself. I have tried, since June. I cannot get my mouth round any of it."

Ah-Po looked at her for a long moment and did not answer that, and did not try to.

She poured the third cup out and filled it again, in the ordinary way, and put it back in the row, and moved the middle one a finger's width to the left.

※

They had tea. Ah-Po made it, unsteadily, and did not treat it as an occasion. They talked about the tree, and about the strips of peel on the newspaper, and about whether the third floor had been warm at night.

At the end Ah-Po said, "You want me to sign it."

"Yes."

"The one about Master Pan."

"Yes."

Ah-Po turned her cup a quarter turn on the table.

"I'm not signing it because I've stopped believing," she said. "I want that written down somewhere."

She set the cup down and put her hands flat on the table.

"Because if you take my signature and then tell people I've seen the light, you will have taken the second thing as well as the first."

"It'll say what you say."

"Then let me say it to you first." Ah-Po put both hands round the cup. "I believe it. All of it."

She turned the cup a quarter turn and did not drink.

"I believe he's real. And I believe he was at my sideboard this afternoon."

"And I am going to go on believing both of those things until I die. And you are not going to talk me out of either one, and I would rather you didn't try."

"I wasn't going to."

"No," Ah-Po said. "You weren't. That's the difference between you and your mother." She drank some tea. "But I'm going to sign it."

"Why?"

"Because of what he did this afternoon."

Ah-Po set the cup down and did not pick it up again.

"He came into my kitchen and he did the water the old way. In front of my granddaughter. In the year of my life when I couldn't get up off the floor."

She was looking at the shrine and not at Lin Shu.

"And I have been giving money to a man who says he speaks for him. And if that is true, and it is true, then the man who speaks for him has been taking old people's pensions and putting metal in them and telling them it's mercy."

She looked at the shrine.

"And I know which of those two I would rather have in my kitchen," Ah-Po said. "And it isn't the one with the shop."

※

The statement took two hours. It was taken at the kitchen table by a woman from the market supervision bureau with a tablet, and Cheng Wei sat in the corner on a hard chair and did not intervene at any point, and at one stage he got up and moved the blind so that the light was off Ah-Po's eyes.

Ah-Po signed it in her own hand, slowly, with the stick against the table for support.

It said that she had purchased four courses of a product marketed as the Golden Elixir, at one thousand nine hundred and eighty yuan a course, over a period of approximately four months, from a seller operating a livestream retail channel.

That she had been instructed by the seller, in a recorded communication, to discontinue prescribed antihypertensive medication on the grounds that the elixir must work alone. That she had done so, for a period of approximately four months, with the consequence that she had required emergency hospital treatment on the ninth of August. That she was seventy-eight years of age and that her family name was Pan.

At the end Ah-Po said, "Put that I still believe in him."

The woman with the tablet looked up. "Mrs.—"

"Put it in." Ah-Po did not raise her voice. "If it isn't in there then it's a lie, and I've signed enough things in my life that were somebody else's idea of the truth."

The woman looked at Cheng Wei. Cheng Wei said, "Put it in."

So it was put in, in her own words, in the record, along with everything else.

※

Lin Shu walked out to the lane with Cheng Wei afterwards and stood in it in the last of the light, with the skins of the lychees gone down into the grass at the end of it and the tree still knocking at the kitchen frame in the small wind that comes before dark.

"She's your witness," Cheng Wei said. "Elderly, named, family name, documented harm, and an instruction to discontinue prescribed medication from a recorded communication. That's the strongest thing I've had in eleven months."

"She's also a believer."

"Yes." Cheng Wei put his helmet under his arm. "She always will be. That's not a problem for the case and it isn't a problem for her, and you should stop treating it as a problem for you."

"I didn't explain it to her," Lin Shu said. "What happened at the sideboard. I could have."

She stopped.

"I could have given her the stool. The thermos. The four thousand times."

"Why didn't you?"

Lin Shu stood in the lane with the lychee tree at the end of it and the skins gone down into the grass.

"Because it might be true," she said.

Cheng Wei looked at her for a moment. Then he put his helmet on and got on the scooter and said, "Four nights," and went off up the lane.

He did not say anything else about it at all, which was the kindest thing he had ever done for her.

※

CHAPTER 23

The Seizure

The order came on the Thursday.

Cheng Wei had it at half past nine in the morning and he used it by eleven. That was faster than anybody had expected and slower than he had wanted.

The difference between those two things was four hours. Four hours in which a platform in Hangzhou could be telephoned, and a licence holder in Huiyang could be moved, and a shed outside Dianbai could be emptied.

He took six people. Two of them were plainclothes who had been standing at the mouth of lanes with bags for eleven months and had never once been asked to open one.

They went to the studio first.

It was rented by the month. The dental clinic's signage was still on the glass with the phone number and the cartoon tooth. The door was unlocked.

Inside there was the stage, and the curtain track that stuck a hand's width in from the left, and the back wall that smelled of resin.

The call room had two landlines and a tablet, and a sheet taped to the desk with names in pencil on it. On the back was a grid of given names, birthdays, towns, and the names of grandchildren. Some of them were underlined twice.

Su Lijuan was in it. She had a handset in each hand.

She did not run. She put both handsets down and put her hands flat on the desk. She said, "Am I allowed to finish the call."

The officer said no.

"Then tell her I'm all right, because she'll worry."

Nobody said anything. She said it again, quietly, to the sheet.

They took the tablet. They took the sheet. They took the drive from the sound desk and the lacquer box. They took four courses of the product from a cardboard box under the table. They took the registration documents from a filing cabinet that had a padlock on it and no key, and they found the key in a mug on the windowsill.

At the door one of the officers scraped the dental clinic's signage off the glass with a screwdriver. It came away in one piece. The phone number and the cartoon tooth went into an evidence bag with everything else.

※

The temple came second, and that was the one Cheng Wei had not wanted to do.

He had it in writing. He had an order that covered premises, records, and stock. He had a genuine lineage, a genuine manuscript, and a sixty-generation claim. He had a duty to execute the order without regard to what the building was.

He walked up the lane with the drain down the middle of it and the banyan at the corner doing what it wanted. He took his shoes off at the step without being asked to.

Deng Kai was in the courtyard.

He had known for a day and a half. Somebody had telephoned him. Not Cheng Wei, who had wanted to and had not been permitted to.

He had spent the day and a half doing what a man does. Getting the ledger right. Telling the troupe that Nianli was cancelled. Paying three months of dialysis in advance out of an account that was about to be frozen.

And moving the puppet heads out of the lean-to into the school hall, where they would not be under a warrant.

He was standing with his hands behind his back and Huang Guiying was sweeping towards the drain, and she did not stop.

"Master Deng," Cheng Wei said, from the bottom of the step.

"Officer." Deng Kai did not move and did not put his hands down. "You'll want the case in the hall. It's the lacquer one, on the left, and the key is in my pocket, and I'm giving it to you, and I want it recorded that I gave it to you and did not make you break the glass."

"It is recorded. Both of those things."

"And you'll want the books." Deng Kai took a second key out. "Those are the temple's. Those aren't mine and they never were, and I would like them back

when you've finished with them, and I understand that I may not get them, and I'm asking anyway."

Cheng Wei took both keys.

He opened the case himself, with Deng Kai standing at his shoulder. The Testament of the Jade Coffer was in it in a cloth sleeve. He lifted it out with the care a man uses for a thing he has been told is old.

Deng Kai said, "Sixty generations."

Then he said nothing else at all.

The ledger came out of a cupboard. The stock came out of a store room. Four courses of the product came off a shelf in the hall itself, in a box, where they had been left in plain sight. That was the single worst piece of evidence in the building, and the only thing in it that Deng Kai had not thought about.

At the door Cheng Wei said, "There will be charges, and there will be a great many of them."

"I know what the charges are. I have known since Tuesday."

"Selling an unregistered product with a curative claim. Fraud. Grievous bodily harm, if the panels come back the way they will."

"I know." Deng Kai was still standing with his hands behind his back. "Officer Cheng. Can I ask you one thing that isn't about the case."

"You can ask it."

"Dr. Lin." Deng Kai did not look away. "Is she a party to this?"

Cheng Wei thought about the wardrobe behind the folded counterpanes, and the four courses that had been in it, and the tasting in a closed office at twenty past seven on a Saturday, and the eleven days a drive had sat in a drawer.

"Everybody's a party to something," Cheng Wei said. "She gave a statement. It'll be in the file."

"That isn't an answer."

"No," Cheng Wei said. "It isn't. But it's the one you're getting, and it's better than the one you'd have got from anybody else in this building."

※

They were finished by four. The lane was full of vehicles and the banyan was doing what it wanted and Huang Guiying had swept the whole courtyard twice, towards the drain, and had not stopped for anybody.

Lin Shu was at the flat when the telephone went.

She had not been on the operation. She had no standing. She had given a statement as a witness. And she had spent the day doing the things a stood-down physician does, which was to sit with Ah-Po and cut peel and not mention any of it.

"There's a manuscript," Cheng Wei said. "It's evidence now. It's in a bag in a room in the district bureau and it's going to be catalogued, and the person who catalogues it is going to be a clerk with a form, and the form has boxes for author, date, and subject matter, and there is no box on it for what that book actually is."

"And who is the person who catalogues it."

"That's what I'm telling you." The fan moved. "You. Tomorrow. Nine o'clock. You'll be logged as a temporary consultant with read access, which is a thing I can authorise and which nobody will query, and you will read a Jin-dynasty manuscript into a form, and you will not photograph anything, and you will not remove anything, and you will report to me anything that is not a recipe."

Lin Shu stood in her kitchen with the phone against her ear.

"Why me," she said.

"Because you're the only person in this district who knows what's in it," Cheng Wei said, "and because you told me in a car park in July that you would rather be a witness than a party, and because I have decided to let you be one for as long as I possibly can."

※

She catalogued it for six days.

The form had boxes and she filled the boxes. Author: unattributed, disciples' hand, multiple. Date: Jin dynasty, indeterminate, with later annotations. Subject matter: medical, ritual, hydraulic. Condition: good, with water damage to the outer leaves and a repair to the spine in a hand later than the text.

She read it in order, which is not how a clerk reads a thing. Cheng Wei gave her a room at the bureau with a table and a lamp and a fan he aimed at the wall himself before he left her to it.

On the fourth day she came to the book about the camps. On the fifth day she came to the book about the numbers, and read the hundred and four and the thirty-one, and the ferry boy, and the woman of the terraces who was eating on the eighth day.

She read the girl of six, and the mother who washed the stone at his door with her hands and went back up the road.

At the end of it she found that there was one more book after it.

She did not read it on the fourth day or the fifth.

On the sixth day, at about half past four, with the light going long across the table and the fan going and nobody else in the room, she turned to the last page of the ninth book.

It was in a different hand. The ink was different. The lines ran level across the page in a way none of the other pages ran, and it was short, and it was signed, and it was the only page in the whole manuscript that was signed.

Lin Shu sat with it for a long time.

Then she put the manuscript back in its cloth sleeve. She squared the sleeve to the edge of the table and put her hands flat on either side of it. She did not photograph it and she did not remove it.

She went and found Cheng Wei, and told him there was a page in the evidence he was going to want to hear read out loud, in front of people, by the only person who could read it in the register it was written in.

"Which is him," Cheng Wei said.

"Which is him," Lin Shu said. "And not me."

※

Part Three

Nianli

> *The wells are the thing. Boil the water. Keep the sick apart. Carry the dead past the third marker.*

※

CHAPTER 24

The Ninth Book

She read it on the seventh day, at about half past four, with the light going long across the table and the fan aimed at the wall and nobody else in the room.

It was four pages in a hand that was not the hand of the other eight books. The letters were formed the same way and the pressure was wrong, and the lines ran level across the page without the slight downhill drift that ran through everything else, and at the bottom of the last page there was a name.

It was his name. It was the only place in the whole manuscript where he had put his name to anything.

※

This is the ninth book and it is the last, and I am sixty-one years old and I have been writing for nine years and I have not been able to start this one for six of them.

I want to say first what I am not going to say. I am not going to say that I was deceived. Nobody deceived me. I made the cinnabar with my own hands in a mineral-lined chamber and I watched it go round and come back, and I knew what it was at every stage, and I gave it to people who were dying and I gave it to people who were not dying, and I took silver for it, and I built eleven wells with the silver, and I boiled the water of a valley that would have died of its own drinking.

So the accounting is this. Eleven wells. Nine still cut. Two gone in. The water in all nine is drawn and boiled by women who do not know my name, and that is the whole of what I did that worked.

And one hundred and four dead that I know of, and perhaps twice that, and thirty-one of them under ten years of age, and a girl of six carried eleven days through the flood by a mother who washed the stone at my door with her hands and went back up the road, and whose name I never asked.

I have written in the first book that the mountain sent the fever. I did not believe it. I wrote it because they believed it and because I wanted the wood boiled.

I have written in the fourth book that the metal took the weak and the ones who would have died anyway. That was a sentence of a man arranging facts. The woman of the terraces was eating on the eighth day.

I have never written anywhere that I knew. I have never written that I stood at those fires for eleven days arguing with people about the price of wood while a thing was in their water that I could have shown them, and that I chose, deliberately, in the fourth month of the second year, to give them a miracle instead of a demonstration, because a miracle is carried home and a demonstration is not.

The cinnabar was my sin.

Not the mercury. The mercury is a mineral and it does what minerals do. The sin was that I knew which of the two was doing the work and I let them believe it was the other one, and I let them believe it for sixty years, and I let them believe it because the believing was the delivery system, and I told myself that a physician who is not listened to treats nobody.

That is true. It is also the sentence under which every mountebank in this province has ever operated, and I wrote it first.

If you are reading this and you have the book because you bought it, or because your father kept it, or because you perform with it: the wells are the thing. Boil the water. Keep the sick apart. Carry the dead past the third marker. Do not sell the metal. Do not let anybody tell you that the mountain sent it.

And do not read only the recipes. The recipes are what a man looks for. I have known that for sixty years and I have built nine books on it.

I am not sorry about the wells.

I am sorry about the girl, and I have never once been able to make the sorrow into anything that would be of use to anybody, and that is the whole of my confession and it is not a large thing and it is the only true thing in these nine books.

※

Lin Shu sat with it for a long time.

Then she put the manuscript back in its cloth sleeve, and squared the sleeve to the edge of the table, and went and found Cheng Wei, and told him that the last page was signed, and that the man who wrote it had spent nine books arranging for nobody to read the ninth, and that there was one person in that

district who could read it in the register it was written in, and that he was going to refuse.

"He'll refuse," Cheng Wei said.

"He'll refuse for a week. Then he'll do it, because he'll work out that it's the only thing left that's his." Lin Shu put her hands flat on the desk. "And when he does it, it has to be somewhere with people in it."

"Why?"

"Because he spent sixty years performing," Lin Shu said. "He is not going to stop by writing something down. He is going to stop by standing up in front of a crowd and doing the only true thing he knows how to do."

※

Deng Kai was charged on the ninth day.

Seven counts. Selling an unregistered product with a curative claim. Fraud. Obtaining property by deception. Grievous bodily harm, on the strength of three named panels and a fourth that had come back from a hospital in Gaozhou with a woman of seventy-eight on it and a note against her name that said *hypertensive emergency, medication discontinued on third-party instruction.*

The assets went the same afternoon. The bank account went, and with it three months of dialysis that had been paid in advance and would now come back out of the clinic's funds as a frozen transfer, and a fund for the troupe, and the money for the bus hire.

The temple did not go. It was not his. It belonged to a lineage and the lineage was not on charge, and the rites that were not commercial were not an offence, and Cheng Wei got that in writing on the second day, in a paragraph of four lines, because he had gone and asked for it before anybody had thought to ask him to.

Nianli was not cancelled after all. It was going ahead on the fourth night with three villages instead of eleven, and a stage borrowed from the school, and a troupe of nine, and no procession, and Deng Kai in the courtyard with his hands behind his back, watching it happen.

He had refused to read the Testament aloud.

He had refused it once, in a room with a table in it, politely, and had explained that the book was evidence and that he would not perform with evidence, and that he had done enough performing. And then he had gone back to the temple and swept the courtyard with Huang Guiying for two hours, and the next morning he had asked what time the Blessing started.

※

Ah-Yan came to the flat on the Wednesday.

She had a bundle under her arm, wrapped in newspaper, and she put it on the table and unfolded it, and inside was the scholar, and under the scholar was a sheet of paper with writing on it in two columns.

"This is what I do," she said. "Before the register. Every night, before I go on. It's the breath and the mouth shape and it takes forty minutes and it is the only reason I can do the ornament in the middle without thinking about it."

She turned the sheet round so that Lin Shu could read it.

"I'm going to teach you that," Ah-Yan said. "Not the register. Not the words. You already have the words and you cannot say them, and I have stopped being surprised by that and I have decided it does not matter, because what you have to do on the fourth night is not be possessed. It is to be believed."

Lin Shu looked at the two columns.

"And if I can't do it?"

"Then I'll have taught a doctor to fake it, which is the thing I have been afraid of for two years, and we will have both done the worst thing available to us." Ah-Yan put the scholar on the table between them. "And you will still be better at it than he is, because he believes it."

※

CHAPTER 25

How It Is Made

They rehearsed in the school hall, because the hall had a floor that did not creak and a door that locked, and because the temple courtyard had Huang Guiying in it and a drain, and because Ah-Yan would not rehearse where anybody could hear.

There were eleven days to the fourth night.

"Stand there," Ah-Yan said. "No, there. The light comes off the stage on the left and if you stand where you were standing you're in your own shadow and they'll read it as nerves."

Lin Shu moved.

"Good. Now." Ah-Yan sat down on the edge of the borrowed stage with her feet hanging. "Tell me what you think you're doing."

"I'm going to speak in a cadence I can't produce when I'm myself, in front of a crowd, so that Deng Kai—"

"No." Ah-Yan held up a hand. "That's the plan. I asked what you think you're *doing*."

Lin Shu stood on the stage in the school hall with the light off to the left.

"I'm going to pretend to be possessed by a dead man."

"Yes."

"Who may or may not be present."

"Yes."

"And if he is," Lin Shu said, "then I'm using him."

Ah-Yan did not say anything for a while.

"Yes," she said. "You are. That's the first true thing you've said in four days and you've been avoiding it since Wednesday."

※

They worked on the breath for two hours.

Ah-Yan had her father's method and taught it the way he had taught her. Which was by putting a hand flat on her diaphragm and telling her to stop, over and over, until she could feel the difference between breathing from the top and breathing from the bottom.

"It's not magic," Ah-Yan said. "Everybody thinks it's magic. It's the bottom of the lungs and a soft palate and about nine hundred hours."

"And the register."

"The register is four hundred hours on its own." Ah-Yan took her hand off her back. "You already have the register. You've had it since you were eight. What you don't have is the breath, and the breath is what makes them believe it, and the register is only what makes them believe it's old."

"And the words."

"You have the words." Ah-Yan said it without any weight at all. "You said them in front of your grandmother on the eleventh of August at about four in the afternoon, and you could not say them before that and you cannot say them now, and I have stopped asking about it, and it does not matter, because you will have a script."

"You've written me a script."

"I've written us both a script." Ah-Yan got off the stage and went to the bundle in the newspaper and came back with the sheet. "Mine is a confession. Yours is a confession. They're different confessions and they're both true, and that's the trick, and the trick is four thousand years old, and I learned it from my father at nine, and he learned it from his father at eleven, and neither of them ever once told me what it was for."

She turned the sheet over and looked at the back of it, which was blank.

※

They worked on the script for three days.

It was a page and a half, written in the archaic register, with no modern noun anywhere in it. It was a confession in the voice of a man who had known which of two things was doing the work, and had let them believe it was the other one.

It did not mention mercury. It did not mention a price. It did not mention a livestream, or a platform in Hangzhou, or a licence holder in Huiyang, or a call room with two landlines.

Lin Shu looked at the sheet. There was no product in it and no price and no name of any kind.

It was about water, and metal, and a mountain, and smoke, and a girl carried through a flood. And it said, at the end, in the register, that the metal was the sin and the wells were the thing.

"What it doesn't do," Ah-Yan said, "is say anything a lawyer can use. There's no product in it. There's no claim in it. That's deliberate. The claim gets made by him, live, on the night, when he hears it, because he can't help himself. He'll stand up and he'll say it treats something. He's done it eleven times in eleven villages and he'll do it again with a thousand people watching and a woman from the bureau at the mouth of the lane."

Ah-Yan had gone to the bundle and come back with a cup of water from the tap in the corner, and she set it down on the stage and did not drink it.

She did not look up.

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then we've got a dead man's confession of a two-thousand-year-old fraud, which is worth nothing. And you'll have faked a possession for nothing." Ah-Yan rolled the sheet up. "He'll do it."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've watched him do it ninety times," Ah-Yan said, "and because he believes it, and because a man who believes it cannot hear somebody else say it in the correct register without wanting to correct them."

※

On the fourth day Lin Shu got the breath.

It came at about nine in the evening, in the school hall, with the light off to the left and the door locked and Ah-Yan's hand flat on her back, and she felt the bottom of her own lungs open and the soft palate go, and the sound that came out was lower than the sound she had been making for three days.

Ah-Yan took her hand off her back and did not say anything.

"Do it again," she said.

Lin Shu did it again.

"Again."

She did it again, and on the third time Ah-Yan sat down on the edge of the stage with her feet hanging, and put her face in her hands, and stayed like that for some time.

The school hall was very quiet. Somewhere out in the corridor a door went, and the caretaker's footsteps went away down it.

"Ah-Yan."

"You sound like him." Ah-Yan's voice was muffled. "You sound like my grandfather. I haven't heard that since I was eleven years old and he was standing behind me on a box."

"I learned it from you in four days."

"You learned it from him in thirty years," Ah-Yan said, "and you've been carrying it around since you were eight without knowing, and I have just spent three days teaching a doctor to produce the exact sound that my family has produced for four hundred years, and I do not know what that makes me, and I have decided not to find out before the fourth night."

She took her hands off her face.

"Again," she said.

※

On the ninth day she asked the question.

They were sitting on the edge of the stage with their feet hanging, in the dark, with the door still locked, and Lin Shu said, "What if it's real."

"What if what's real."

"The thing on the eleventh of August. My grandmother's sideboard." Lin Shu kept her eyes on the far wall. "You've been assuming it's a memory. So have I. So has everybody. But you watched me learn the breath in four days and you heard me produce a register I cannot produce when I'm myself, and you heard the sound come out that you hadn't heard since you were eleven. So you know that something is available to me that I cannot account for, and that you have heard it come out of me."

"I do," Ah-Yan said.

"So what if it's him."

Ah-Yan sat with her feet hanging for a long moment.

"Then on the fourth night you will open your mouth in front of a thousand people," she said, "and something will come out that is not on the script, and it will be true, and it will be the first true thing anybody in that lane has heard in nine years, and it will also be the most successful piece of theatre in the history of this province, and both of those will be completely the case at the same time, and you will never be able to tell which one did the work."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one there is." Ah-Yan stood up and picked up the bundle. "Dr. Lin, I have known since I was nineteen that everything I do is both of those things. That is what being good at this costs. You are about to find out whether you can carry it."

At the door she stopped.

"And if you can't," she said, "then don't do it, and we'll lose, and he'll keep selling, and I'll have handed over a drive for nothing, and at least I'll have been the only person in that lane who didn't pretend to know."

The door shut. Lin Shu stood on the borrowed stage in the dark with the light off to the left and her hands at her sides, and did not square anything, and did not straighten anything.

※

CHAPTER 26

Nianli

Three villages came instead of eleven.

The buses came at two in the afternoon and they came along the lane with the drain down the middle of it, and there were four of them, and they were school buses hired from a depot in Meilu, and they disgorged about two hundred people onto paving that had been swept that morning by Huang Guiying, towards the drain, twice.

Some of them had come for forty years. A woman of ninety-one was carried out of the first bus in a chair by two men who were themselves past seventy. A man in a good jacket stood in the middle of the lane with a leather folder under his arm and did not go into the courtyard at all, and after an hour he got back into a car and was driven away.

The testimony wall went up along the lane at three.

It was eleven sheets of A4 in plastic sleeves, taped to the boards the school had lent, and it had been put up by two officers in plain clothes who had stood at the mouth of lanes with bags for eleven months. It had names on it. It had dates. It had a line at the top that said *if you recognise anything on this sheet, the officer at the end of the lane will take a statement*, and a telephone number.

Nobody looked at it for the first two hours.

At about half past four an old woman stopped in front of it, on her way back from the water, and read the top sheet all the way down. She stood there for a long time. Then she went and found the officer at the end of the lane and said something to him, and he got out a tablet, and they stood in the mouth of the lane for twenty minutes with the buses going past behind them.

By six there were four people waiting to give statements, and by eight there were nineteen.

※

Ah-Yan performed at seven.

It was the borrowed stage in the school hall, and the curtain was her father's, and it did not reach the floor, and it had never reached the floor, and the track stuck a hand's width in from the left, which was how she knew where to stand.

She did the whole register. She did the ornament in the middle where you hold the note longer than the note wants to be held, and the two hundred people in the hall went quiet in the way crowds go quiet, and a woman in the third row cried, and Ah-Yan did not look at her.

Ou Guisheng was at the side of the stage with the scholar in his hands.

He had come at five and he had not said anything to anybody, and he had stood at the side of the stage throughout with the puppet head against his chest, and at the end of it Ah-Yan came off and he put the scholar into her hands and went out to the yard and sat on an upturned crate and did not come back in.

Lin Shu watched from the back of the hall.

She had the script rolled up in her coat pocket and she had not looked at it since the Tuesday, and she knew it by heart, and she knew that knowing it by heart was not the same as being able to do it, and she had spent nine days finding out what the difference was.

At half past eight the woman from the bureau came and stood at the side of the stage and said, "It's twenty to," and went away again.

※

Deng Kai was in the courtyard.

He had swept it twice with Huang Guiying, towards the drain, and then he had stopped sweeping and had stood at the corner with his hands behind his back, watching the lane fill and empty.

He had read the Testament aloud.

He had done it on the Wednesday, in a room with a table in it, to Cheng Wei and a barrister and a woman taking notes, and he had read the ninth book from the first line to the signature, in the register, without stopping, and it had taken nineteen minutes, and at the end nobody had said anything for a long time, and the barrister had asked him whether he understood that he had just read a confession into the record, and Deng Kai had said that he understood it, and that he had known what was in the ninth book since he was nineteen years old, and

that he had chosen for thirty years not to read it, and that he had now read it, and that he would read it again.

"Where?" the barrister had said.

"Where there are people," Deng Kai had said.

So he was in the courtyard with his hands behind his back, in a temple that was not his and would not be forfeited, at a festival with three villages instead of eleven and a stage borrowed from a school and a troupe of nine, and he was waiting.

He had not been told what was going to happen.

He knew there were officers in the lane. He knew there was a wall with names on it. He knew that a physician with no standing for eight weeks had been given read access to a manuscript and had spent six days cataloguing it, and he had worked out what that meant on about the second day, and he had not asked, and he had gone on sweeping.

Huang Guiying came past with the broom and did not speak to him, and he said, "It's swept," and she said, "It'll be dusty again by ten," and went on sweeping.

※

At nine Lin Shu went behind the curtain.

There was a stool there and a thermos, and she sat down on the stool with the script in her hand and did the thing Ah-Yan had taught her, which was to breathe from the bottom and to let the soft palate go, and to do it forty times, and to stop when she got it wrong, and to start again.

Through the curtain she could hear the hall.

She could hear two hundred people, and the shuffle of them, and somebody's radio, and a child, and the bray of a speaker being tested at the far end. She could hear the woman from the bureau say something to somebody and go out through the door.

She could hear Deng Kai come into the hall.

He came in from the courtyard and he stood at the front, and the hall went quieter, and he said something to the people near him in the ordinary voice he

used for the elders, and somebody laughed, and he said something else, and the laugh went round.

He had done this eleven times in eleven villages. He was good at it. He was the best Lin Shu had ever seen at it, and she had watched him do it in a courtyard in Gaozhou with a ledger open, and she had watched him count money into paper envelopes for thirty elders, and she had watched him put a hand on a rack of spears with the tassels gone.

She put the script on her knee and breathed from the bottom, and let the soft palate go, and did it again, and stopped when she got it wrong, and started again.

Behind her, at the side of the stage, Ah-Yan said, very quietly, "Twenty to."

"I know."

"You can still stop."

"I know," Lin Shu said.

She breathed from the bottom. She got it right on the eleventh time. The sound that came out of her was lower than the sound she had been making for nine days, and it was the register, and it was four hundred years old, and it belonged to a man on a crate in the yard with a puppet head against his chest, and to a woman of ninety-one carried out of a bus in a chair, and to nobody in particular at all.

She put the script in her hand and stood up.

※

CHAPTER 27

The Gap

She came out from behind the curtain and the hall went quiet.

She did not walk to the front. She stood where the track stuck, a hand's width in from the left. That was where Ah-Yan always stood. Lin Shu had watched her do it ninety times from the back of that hall, and had learned it without being taught.

She breathed from the bottom. She let the soft palate go. She looked at the third row and not at the front, which was the other thing Ah-Yan did.

Then she began.

It was the cadence. It came up the way it had come up at a sideboard in Gaozhou on the eleventh of August. Out of somewhere below speech. Low in the mouth, the vowels held too long, the consonants rounded the way Cantonese rounds a word for a child. She heard it in her own voice and it was not her voice, and two hundred people in a borrowed school hall stopped moving.

She gave them the water.

She gave them the mountain and the smoke and the road the water came down. The carrying of it in jars. The guest who sits to the left. The boiling of it, and the keeping of the sick apart, and the carrying of the dead past the third marker.

The hall did not move. Somewhere at the back a bench creaked and stopped.

Then she gave them the confession. It was the script. A page and a half in the archaic register, with no modern noun anywhere in it.

It said that the metal was the sin and the wells were the thing. And that a man had known which of two things was doing the work, and had let them believe it was the other one for sixty years.

She got through the first two pages of it.

She has the first two pages. She has said them. She has the sound of her own voice saying them. She has the third row, and the woman in it who had cried

during Ah-Yan's register, and the old man at the end with his cane catching on the mat.

She has the moment she looked up.

She has all of that and she has given it twice to the same two officers.

She looked up from the script. Deng Kai was standing at the front of the hall with his hands at his sides. His face had gone the colour of the paper, and he was not moving.

She has that. She has the colour of his face and the position of his hands and the fact that he did not move at all.

After that there is a gap.

※

It is not a long gap. It is not the fifty-one minutes and it is not the hour and fifty on the coast road. It is a short gap, and it is the shape of a man turning round in a doorway.

What she has is the script in her hand with the last page of it turned over, and the hall making a sound she cannot describe and does not try to, and her own mouth still moving.

Then she is standing with her back against the side wall of the hall, her hands flat on the plaster. Ah-Yan is in front of her with both hands on her upper arms. The woman from the bureau is at the front saying something into a radio. Two hundred people are standing up.

There is a recording. It is on at least four telephones and possibly nine, because people film these things, and the gap is in it, and what she said in the gap is in it.

She has never watched it. Nobody has played it to her. She knows that it was in the register and that it was not on the script. That the last page of the script was still folded when she found herself against the wall. That is all she has, and she has never been able to add to it, and she does not try.

※

Deng Kai had heard the register and he had not been able to say whether he had been committing fraud in the presence of the real thing.

She saw it. It was the only part of the gap she has from the outside. He Yuzhen's daughter filmed the first four minutes of it from the side, and brought it in on the Monday in a plastic bag. Lin Shu watched those four minutes once, in her own flat, with the sound off.

He is at the front. He is holding a cup of tea he has not drunk. The register comes off the stage and he stops, and he looks at the stage, and then he looks at the floor, and then he puts the cup down on the ledge without looking at the ledge.

Then he takes a step forward.

What he says on that recording, with the sound off, is one sentence of about nine words. She has watched it enough times to count the shape of it. The woman from the bureau is already moving, and the officer at the mouth of the lane is already moving.

And Deng Kai says the nine words into a hall of two hundred people, with eleven sheets of A4 on the wall along the lane outside.

It is a curative claim. It is made live. It is made with the product on a table at the front and the lacquer box open and four courses of it in plain sight on a shelf behind him that nobody had thought to move.

The room was not the thing she could not account for.

※

Deng Kai said the nine words, and the woman from the bureau was already moving, and the officer at the mouth of the lane was already moving.

And he did not stop.

He put his hands behind his back, which was where he put them. He stood in the middle of the borrowed stage and waited until the hall had gone quiet in the particular way a hall goes quiet when it does not know what it is waiting for.

Then he began.

It was the register. It came out of the bottom of the lungs, low in the mouth, the vowels held too long, the consonants rounded the way his grandfather had rounded them. Two hundred people had heard that voice from behind a curtain for two years. They heard it now from a man standing in a school hall with his

hands behind his back, and four courses of his own product on a shelf behind him that nobody had thought to move.

He did not have the book. The book was in an evidence bag in a room in the district bureau, and he had not seen it since a Wednesday.

He did not need the book.

He said that the metal was the sin. He said that a man had known which of two things was doing the work and had let them believe it was the other one. He said that the wells were the thing, and he said boil the water, and keep the sick apart, and carry the dead past the third marker.

He said it in the order it was written. He did not stop. He did not look at the officers coming up the lane.

It had taken nineteen minutes on the Wednesday, in a room with a table in it, to a barrister and a woman taking notes. It took eleven now.

Then he put his hands back behind his back. He said, in his ordinary voice, the voice he used for the elders and for the price of pork:

"I sold it for one thousand nine hundred and eighty a course. That part is mine. The rest of it is sixty generations old, and I have had thirty years to read to the end of it, and I did not, and nobody stopped me."

Nobody moved.

Huang Guiying was in the doorway with the broom.

Deng Kai stood on the borrowed stage in a school hall with his hands behind his back and did not deny anything and did not run. The woman from the bureau came up the lane with two officers behind her, and the hall watched her come, and he waited for her, and he did not take his hands from behind his back.

Ah-Yan went up onto the stage at ten past eleven.

She did it without being asked and without anybody stopping her, and she stood at the front in the ordinary light with the curtain still open behind her, and she waited until the hall had stopped moving, and then she said it.

She said that she was the voice. She said that she had been the voice for two years and four months. That the voice was filtered, and the filter cost four hundred yuan a month, and that it was the reason anybody listened.

She said that she had performed the register at nine in the evening on the fourteenth of August, in a studio in Gaozhou, to an audience of one thousand

and forty. Having read eleven written complaints at two that morning, in which eight people had asked which doctor treated Master Pan's detox.

She said that she was very good at it, and that being good at it was the whole of her qualification, and that she had never once asked what was in the pills.

She waited until the hall had stopped shuffling.

She said: "That's not an act. I'd know. I'm the act."

Then she said what she had done. She had handed a drive to a physician at a bus shelter on the Maonan road. And she had spent nine days teaching that physician to produce a sound her family had produced for four hundred years.

So that a dead man's confession might be performed in front of a crowd, by somebody with the standing to be believed.

"And I got what I wanted," Ah-Yan said, "which is that she was believed, and that he was not. And I would like it recorded that I have been doing this since I was nine years old, and that my father taught me, and that he is sitting on a crate in the yard outside with a puppet in his hands, and that I am not going to be the last person who can do it, because he made sure of that."

She came off the stage. Ou Guisheng was at the side of it with the scholar against his chest. He put it into her hands. They went out through the door together. The drive went on outside with the carts and the tarpaulin.

Nobody stopped them.

※

Cheng Wei drove her back.

He did not say anything for the first twenty minutes, and then he said, "You did what he does."

"I know."

"I'm not accusing you. I'm telling you what's in the file." He changed down for the level crossing. "You used their belief as an instrument. It worked. It was the right thing to do and it was also that. Both of those are going to be in the report. There is no version of this where one of them isn't."

"I know," Lin Shu said.

"You keep saying you know." The crossing lights went round and the barriers came down. "Say the other thing."

She looked at the barriers.

"I'd do it again," Lin Shu said. "And I don't know whether that makes me better or worse than him, and I have stopped expecting to find out, and that is the part I can't get past."

Cheng Wei sat with the barriers down and the engine running.

"That's the answer," he said. "That's the one I've been waiting eleven months for. Not the good one. That one."

※

CHAPTER 28

What Was Left

Deng Kai pleaded guilty on the sixty-first day.

He pleaded to all seven counts in a hearing that took nineteen minutes. He did not offer a plea in mitigation. When the judge asked him whether he had anything to say, he said that he had read the ninth book into the record and would like it read again in open court. The court declined. He accepted that.

He was remanded. Sentence was set for the eighth week.

The assets went in February. The bank account was gone. The three months of dialysis paid in advance came back out of the clinic's funds as a frozen transfer, and then went back again. The fund for the troupe was gone, and the money for the bus hire.

The temple did not go.

It was not his. It belonged to a lineage, and the lineage was not on charge, and the rites that were not commercial were not an offence. The four lines Cheng Wei had got in writing on the second day held. The 冼太庙 at the far end of the county went on holding its own fair on the twenty-fourth of the eleventh month, as it had since the Kangxi era. Opera and worship at every temple in city and countryside, and nobody charged with anything.

Nianli went ahead in three villages with a stage borrowed from a school and a troupe of nine.

※

The restitution came to about nine thousand yuan each for the four who were injured, and rather less for everybody else, because the fund had to cover the costs of the investigation first, and the costs of the investigation were large.

It was paid out on a Thursday, in a room at the district bureau with a table in it and a woman with a tablet. Cheng Wei stood at the end of the table with a stack of envelopes. He was the only person in the building who knew all sixty-one names.

Chen Futang came at ten. He had the pension card in the plastic sleeve gone soft at the corners. He sat down on the chair. The woman read out his name and the figure, and he signed, and she gave him the envelope. He held it in both hands and did not open it.

"Is that all of it," he said.

"That's all of it, Mr. Chen."

"It's more than the machine cost." He turned the envelope over. "The one I didn't buy. It was four thousand and something."

Cheng Wei said, "It is."

"So I can buy the machine."

"You can buy the machine."

Chen Futang put the envelope inside his coat and did it up. He sat for a moment longer than he needed to, and then he said, "My grandson's seven now. He's stopped saying it. He doesn't say it at all now." He got up. "I'd have heard him say it once. That's what I'd have got for four thousand."

He went out. Cheng Wei watched him go down the corridor and did not say anything, and the woman with the tablet called the next name.

Liang Xiuying came at half past eleven. She had the bag with her husband's medication in it, and she signed, and she took the envelope, and she opened it and counted it there at the table because she wanted to know.

"That's not a month," she said.

"It's not a month," Cheng Wei said.

"Of the care. The chair, the pads, the the the the—" She stopped and started again. "It's not a month of any of it."

"No."

"Then what is it."

"It's the correct figure arrived at correctly," Cheng Wei said. "That's all it is. I've been saying that for five weeks and it hasn't got any better."

Liang Xiuying folded the envelope and put it in the bag with the medication.

"He looked at me yesterday," she said. "For about a minute. Not at the screen. At me." She did the bag up. "I'd have paid nine thousand for that in March and I wouldn't have got it, because that isn't what the money was for."

She went out. He Shuangquan came at twelve, and signed, and took his envelope, and said, "It wasn't helping. It was helping. It just wasn't helping with that," and stayed twenty minutes talking about the pits because there was nowhere else to go and because Cheng Wei stood there and listened to all of it.

There were sixty-one envelopes. By two o'clock there were nineteen people in the room and forty-one envelopes left on the table, and the woman with the tablet was calling names into a room where nobody said thank you.

Cheng Wei stood at the end of the table with his hands on the back of a chair.

He had got the figure right. Five weeks getting it right, against the fund, against the costs, against a barrister who wanted to argue about contributory exposure. It was the correct number. It was the only number anybody could have arrived at.

He watched Chen Futang's envelope go into a coat pocket, and Liang Xiuying's into a bag of medication.

He had spent eleven months building a case in order to hand twenty-six people an amount of money that would not cover a month of anything. That was the outcome. It was correct. Both of those things were completely true, and he was never going to be able to make them into one thing.

The clinic was Ah-Po's idea and it took four months to become a room.

It began with a conversation in a yard with a lychee tree in it, in the autumn, with the skins gone soft in the grass and the tree knocking at the kitchen frame. Ah-Po was on the step with the peel and a small knife and Lin Shu was beside her, and Ah-Po said, without any preamble, that the thing which had been sold to her had not been medicine.

"It was somebody asking after my knees," Ah-Po said. "That's what I bought. I know that now. I knew it by August. And I still believe in him, and both of those are true, and I have stopped trying to make them into one thing."

She cut a strip of peel and laid it in the row.

"So somebody has to ask," she said. "That's all."

She laid another strip in the row.

"Somebody has to ask. It can't be a screen. And it can't be me, because I'm the one they feel sorry for."

The room was a leased unit on the ground floor of a walk-up in Maonan, two doors from a stationery shop, with a window that opened and a drain in the yard and a fridge that hummed in a key slightly above the room.

It had two chairs and a couch and a blood-pressure cuff on the wall, and a table for the peel, and a shrine on the sideboard with three cups in a row.

It was funded by the restitution, minus costs. Plus eleven thousand yuan that Deng Kai had instructed his solicitor to transfer from a personal account that had not been frozen, with a note that said *for the asking*. Plus a further sum from the bureau's victim support allocation, which Cheng Wei had applied for three times.

It was not enough. Four days a week instead of six. One physician and a nurse three mornings. A waiting list, and money that would run out in the following March. Everybody involved knew it, and nobody said so at the opening.

Ah-Po was the first volunteer.

She came on the first morning at twenty to eight with the peel cut and in rows on newspaper. She made tea in a pot she had brought from her own kitchen. She sat by the window and asked the first three people who came in about their knees.

She was not a clinician and did not pretend to be. When the nurse tried to give her a form to fill in, she put her hand over it and said, "I'm not here for the form."

※

Liang Xiuying came on the fourth day.

She came in with her husband's medication in a bag and sat down. She said he had stopped smiling at the screen in October. That she had not known what to do about it. That for two months she had put the tablet in front of him at nine o'clock every evening and he had looked at the wall.

"He looks at me now," Liang Xiuying said. "Since about the second week of November. Not much. But he looks."

She had the pension card in a plastic sleeve gone soft and cloudy at the corners.

Ah-Po asked her about her knees. Liang Xiuying told her, at some length, and Ah-Po listened to all of it, and then asked whether the left was worse than the right. Liang Xiuying said that it was. Ah-Po said, "Mine too." They sat with that for a while.

Chen Futang came in the fifth week and sat in the waiting room forty minutes without complaining. When he went in he brought a box with him. In the box was a hearing aid. He had had it fitted, and wanted somebody to check that he was putting it in the right ear.

He Shuangquan came in the second month. He was on a different script. His cough was the cough it had always been, and his hand still went at the wrist, and he had stopped taking anything from anybody.

He sat in the chair and said, "It wasn't helping," and then said, "It was helping. It just wasn't helping with that."

And he stayed twenty minutes longer than he needed to, talking about the pits, and Ah-Po asked him about his knees.

※

On the last morning of the eighth week Lin Shu went to the well at Gaozhou.

It was one of the nine still cut, on the hill road above the sheds. There was a stone rim, and a banyan at the corner doing what it wanted. The water was down a long way and the cold came up off it.

She had the Testament's ninth book in a bag. She was not permitted to remove it from the district bureau, and had been given four hours' supervised access on a Sunday. She had photographed nothing and copied nothing. She had read it three times in a room with a window that did not open, until she had the last four lines by heart.

She sat on the rim and read them out loud, to nobody, in the register, in her own voice.

It took eleven seconds.

The wells are the thing.

Boil the water.

Keep the sick apart.

Carry the dead past the third marker.

Then she sat on the stone in the cold coming up off the water, owing somebody water. She did not square anything and did not straighten anything.

She went back down the hill road to where the sheds were. Tan Shunfa was on his crate with the knife and the cord. He looked up and said, "You've got red on you." She looked down, and there was no red on her shoes, and she did not correct him.

※

CHAPTER 29

Eight Weeks

The review came in the eighth week and it took forty minutes.

The woman from occupational health was the same and the man from the bureau was the same, and the room had a table and three chairs and a window that did not open, and the poster about hand hygiene had gone more curled at the corners.

They had a psychiatric report. Wu Jinglun had written it, and he had written it properly, and it said what was true, which was that she had presented with episodic loss of awareness of uncertain aetiology in a physician with two years of prior prolonged clinical duty, that a structural cause had been excluded, that the episodes had reduced in frequency and duration since the discontinuation of the duty in question, and that in his opinion she was fit to return to clinical practice with a follow-up at six months.

It did not mention a manuscript, or a heavy-metal panel, or a bus shelter, or a drive in a drawer.

It did not mention that he had never once asked her the question she had come in to be asked.

"You've been off eight weeks," the woman said. "You self-reported. You cooperated with a criminal investigation as a witness. You've had a psychiatric report. And you've had a grandmother in hospital and a property loss and a great deal of press."

"I have."

"So." She turned a page. "Why did you self-report? You managed not to for four months. Something changed."

Lin Shu thought about a kitchen in Gaozhou with a strip of white tablets on a pile of telephone directories.

"I stopped being able to do both," she said. "I couldn't be a physician and also be the person who had left her grandmother's medicine in a drawer in the

dark. Standing down was the only version where those two things stopped being true at the same time."

"Was it a difficult decision?"

"It was the easiest one I made all year," Lin Shu said. "That's what frightened me."

The man from the bureau closed the folder.

"You're cleared to return," he said. "Four days a week for the first month. And Dr. Lin. The board would like it noted that in eleven years of these reviews, nobody has ever given that answer."

※

He Yuzhen was at the desk with the fridge door open when she went back.

She did not look up. She moved a tray of vaccine from one shelf to another in an order that had no relationship to anything except the numbers printed on the boxes.

"Tuesday," she said. "Wednesday I want. Thursday I'll do myself."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me." He Yuzhen shut the fridge. "Ask me."

"You were right," Lin Shu said. "About all of it. The log and the counting and putting my name in the box. You were right and I was wrong and I have had eight weeks to work out how to say that, and that is the whole of it."

He Yuzhen stood with the clipboard against her forearm for a moment.

"That's better," she said. "That's the first thing you've said to me in a year that wasn't precise." She opened the fridge again. "Now move the May stock. It's behind the June."

Kang Ruoyu brought her coffee on the first morning and put it on the chart, and she drank all of it, and he watched her do it with an expression she had seen on students who had been handed something by somebody who had changed.

"Four days," he said.

"Four days."

"Is that permanent?"

"I don't know." Lin Shu set the cup down. "Nobody knows. That's actually the answer to most of it."

※

Cheng Wei came to the clinic in the second month, on a Thursday, and stood in the doorway with his helmet under his arm and did not come in.

"It's small," he said.

"It's small."

"There are two chairs."

"There are two chairs and a couch and there will be three chairs in March if the allocation comes through, which it won't." Lin Shu was at the table with the peel. "Do you want to come in or are you going to keep doing that."

He came in. He looked at the shrine on the sideboard and the three cups in a row and the water in them, and he looked at it for slightly longer than a man looks at a piece of furniture.

"Eight weeks," he said. "You could have gone."

"I know."

"You'd have been in Shenzhen by now. Three times the money. A start date that wasn't in the past." He turned the helmet over in his hands. "You deleted it in a corridor. I've thought about that a lot, actually. Eleven months, and that's the thing I think about."

"It wasn't a decision," Lin Shu said. "That's the part I can't make into anything good. I deleted it in nine seconds with nobody in the room and then I straightened some forms and left them crooked. There was no moment where I chose."

Cheng Wei put the helmet under his arm properly.

"That's usually how it goes," he said. "The big ones. There isn't a moment."

He went to the door and stopped in it.

"There's a sentencing in a fortnight," he said. "He'll get four to six. There's an appeal. There will be restitution proceedings for two years." He did not turn round. "The temple's fine. The rites are fine. I got it in writing and it held."

"Thank you," Lin Shu said.

"Don't thank me." Cheng Wei was almost out of the door. "Ask me."

"Will you come on a Thursday," Lin Shu said, "and let Ah-Po ask you about your knees."

There was a pause, and then Cheng Wei said, "That's the worst thing anybody has ever offered me," and went off down the road, and came back on the Thursday, and sat in the second chair, and told Ah-Po about his knees at some length, and she listened to all of it.

※

In the fifth month the notice came that the market supervision bureau was opening a second referral pathway for livestream health product complaints in the western districts, and that it was being funded from the same victim support allocation, and that the reason it existed was a folder in a drawer with a photograph in it of a man called Mo Qingfa standing outside a shop with his arm round a woman who was not his wife.

Peng Jianhua sent it himself, with a note that said *this is yours as much as anybody's, and I am still not saying the name*.

He Shuangquan came in on the first day it opened and made a complaint about a different seller, in a different county, and it took him two hours, and Ah-Po sat with him for both of them.

Liang Xiuying came in on the second day, with her husband's medication in a bag, and said that he had started smiling at the screen again in January, and that she had stopped putting it in front of him, and that she had worked out in about November that he had been smiling at it because it was the only thing in the day that happened, and that she would rather he looked at nothing.

"He looks at me either way now," she said. "That took eleven months. I'd like the eleven months back."

"We can't give you those," Lin Shu said.

"I know," Liang Xiuying said. "I'd still like them."

※

CHAPTER 30

Boil It Anyway

The first morning of the clinic was a Tuesday in the last week of the eighth month.

Lin Shu got there at twenty to seven and the room was cold and the fridge was not humming yet. She went round and opened the window, which she had not done in any other room she had ever worked in, and stood in it for a while with the air coming in off the yard.

There were two chairs and a couch and a blood-pressure cuff on the wall. The table for the peel was against the far wall with newspaper folded on it. On the sideboard, at the end of it, between the thermos and a jar of preserves, there was a shrine: a wooden plaque, a brass censer, three cups in a row, and a printed card with a face on it that Lin Shu had looked at her whole life without once reading it.

She had carried the shrine over herself on the Friday, in a cardboard box, on the bus.

※

Ah-Po arrived at ten to.

She had the peel cut and in rows on newspaper, and a pot from her own kitchen with a lid on it, and she set the pot down on the peel table and put the newspaper beside it and went to the sideboard and stood in front of the shrine with her back to the room.

Lin Shu watched her.

Ah-Po took the three cups down one at a time and emptied them into the plant pot and refilled them from the pot she had brought, and set them back in a row, and moved the middle one a finger's width to the left, and stood off, and looked at the row.

Then she said the words.

She said them in the register, in the ordinary voice she used for the price of pork, at about a third of performance volume, with her hands on the edge of the sideboard. Water, and presenting water, and the guest who sits to the left, and the road the water came down, and the carrying of it in jars.

It took eleven seconds.

"Grandmother," Lin Shu said.

"Mm."

"That's it."

"That's it." Ah-Po straightened the row again. "My grandmother said it over me when I was nine and I've said it at that sideboard for sixty-nine years, and it's eleven seconds long, and there is nothing else in it." She turned round. "You want to learn it or not."

"Yes."

"Then stand here." Ah-Po moved aside and indicated the place in front of the sideboard with the flat of her hand. "Not on a stool. You're too big and you'd tip the pot."

Lin Shu stood in front of the sideboard.

"The cups go down one at a time," Ah-Po said. "You empty them into the pot, not the sink, because it's the same water. Then you fill them from the pot you brought, not from the tap, because it has to be water you carried."

She poured a little out of the thermos to show her, onto the floor of the plant pot, and wiped her hand on her apron.

"Then the row. Then the middle one, a finger's width left, because that is where the guest sits." Ah-Po paused. "And then you say the eleven seconds. Any time. Morning or evening. It isn't morning and evening, that was your great-grandmother being thorough."

"And the words."

"You say the words." Ah-Po picked up the pot. "They're the words that go with it. You don't learn them. You're standing there while somebody says them, four thousand times."

Lin Shu took the cups down one at a time.

She emptied them into the plant pot. She filled them from the pot on the peel table. She set them back in a row and moved the middle one a finger's width to the left, and stood off, and looked at the row, and moved it back.

Then she said the eleven seconds.

They came up the way they had come up at a sideboard in Gaozhou on the eleventh of August, out of somewhere below speech, in the register. The voice that said them was hers. Nobody came into the room. The window was open and the fridge had started humming in a key slightly above the room, and out in the yard the first patient of the morning was coming up the path.

Ah-Po was crying.

Not loudly. She had her hand up over her mouth the way she had in a kitchen in August, and the tears were running down into her collar, and she was not trying to stop them.

"You've got it," she said, around her own hand. "You've had it since you were eight. You've just never said it."

"I know," Lin Shu said.

"You're not going to tell me what happened in August."

"No."

"Good." Ah-Po took her hand away from her mouth. Her face was streaming. "He was here, you know. I'm not going to stop saying it and you're not going to talk me out of it, and that's the end of it."

She wiped her face on her sleeve, unconcerned, and picked up the knife.

"Sit down," Ah-Po said. "The peel's not cut fine enough and the first one'll be here at eight."

※

The first one was He Shuangquan.

He came at five past with the pension card in a plastic sleeve gone soft and cloudy at the corners, and he sat in the second chair and did not say anything for a while, and then he asked whether the clinic was free, and Lin Shu said it was, and he asked who paid for it, and she told him, and he sat with that.

"Sixty-one," he said.

"Sixty-one."

"Sixty-one of us." He Shuangquan put the pension card down on the arm of the chair. "And the rest of it's his. He's doing four to six years for what he did to me and you're running a clinic out of his money."

Lin Shu did not deny it.

"Doctor. I'm not being difficult. I'm asking how you square that."

"I don't square it," Lin Shu said.

"Then don't."

"I don't." She held his chart and did not open it. "Mr. He, I have never once been able to make those two things into one thing, and I have stopped trying."

She set the chart down.

"The room is open on a Tuesday because sixty-one people were sold mercury and one of them was you. The money for the fridge came out of that. Both of those are true and I am not going to tell you that one cancels the other."

Ah-Po had been at the window with the peel. She turned round.

"He's right about the knees, though," she said. "That was real. The rest of it was a lie and the knees were not."

She picked the knife up again.

"I've had four months to work out what to do with a man who was kind to me and poisoning me at the same time. What I've got is that I take the room and I don't take him, and I don't forgive him, and I would rather he knew that than thought we'd settled it."

"Will he know?"

"He'll work it out," Ah-Po said. "He's not stupid. He's a man who decided the ends were worth it, and he was right about that too, and that's the part I can't put down."

He Shuangquan looked at the shrine on the sideboard and the three cups in a row and did not ask about it, and Ah-Po asked him about his knees, and he told her, at some length, and she listened to the whole of it and asked whether the left was worse than the right, and he said that it was.

Liang Xiuying came at nine with her husband's medication in a bag, and Chen Futang came at half past and sat in the waiting room for forty minutes without complaining, and Kang Ruoyu came at eleven with two cups of coffee from the machine by the gate and put one on the chart where Lin Shu would not

drink it, and then came back at twelve and found it empty and looked at it for a moment too long.

He Yuzhen came on the Thursday, unannounced, and stood in the doorway with her arms folded and looked at the room and the two chairs and the fridge and the shrine, and said, "The May stock is behind the June stock," and then said, "No it isn't," and came in and sat down and let Ah-Po ask her about her knees.

※

At four o'clock Lin Shu went round and shut the window.

The room had been warm all day and the fridge had not stopped humming and the cups on the shrine had a ring of dust at the surface line, and she took them down one at a time and emptied them into the plant pot and filled them from the pot on the peel table and set them back in a row.

Ah-Po had gone home at three with the peel in rows and the knife washed.

The cups were where she had left them. She tipped out the water and filled them again from the pot, and set the middle one a finger's width to the left. She did not stand off. She did not look at the row. She did not move it back.

Then she said the eleven seconds, in the register, in her own voice, to nobody, with the door shut and the room warm and the fridge going.

She picked up the middle cup and drank some of it.

The water was clear. It had been standing since the morning.

"It's clean," she said, to the room.

She set the cup back down in the row, a finger's width to the left of where it had been.

"Boil it anyway."

※

> *The cinnabar was my sin.*

Colophon

丹砂即我之罪。

Dansha ji wo zhi zui.

The cinnabar was my sin. — the ninth book — the one page the physician put his name to, and the last line he wrote

Pan Maoming is the rare immortal a city is named after: a healer of the Gaoliang hills in western Guangdong, remembered from the Jin dynasty, who refined cinnabar the old way and treated the fevers of the river valleys, and was deified by the people he dosed. The legend keeps no ledger. It does not say what the elixir cured or what it killed, because the ledger was never the part anyone wanted. This novel supplies one — nine books in a temple box, the ninth signed — and sets it beside a studio in Gaozhou where a puppet named Master Pan sells the same metal, four courses at a time, because a miracle, as the first Pan confessed, is a delivery system.

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.

The Fake Immortal · 30 sections · 52,796 words. Typeset from a single Markdown source, which also produces the online reader and the EPUB.

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