

CHAPTER 1

April 9, 2019, Misawa, Japan

Jack Shu saw the afterburners kick in, the flight of four F-35 Lightning II aircraft leave the gravity of earth and head into the night sky. It was but one of many flights leaving the airbase, a stream of lights bursting into the night one after the other, some headed out over the Pacific Ocean, others over the Sea of Japan, but this one was special. Special to him.

The cold began to seep in under his trousers, an unrelenting contact from the iron park bench he was sitting on, as if it was asking him to leave. But he could not. He had a mission here, and he would see it through.

The airbase in Misawa was about as far north in Japan as one could get on the main island, leaving him in the upper echelons of cold weather on the spit of land, but the April chill wasn't bad enough to drive him inside. He was too invested in a small bud in his ear.

Connected to a scanner tuned to the open-net air traffic control frequencies emanating from the tower behind him, he was listening intently. So much so he actually had a bead of sweat on his brow in the forty-degree air. Like a scientist conducting an experiment in a controlled environment, he was unable to alter the outcome once it was started, but he wanted to see the results. All that remained was to watch and wait. Or in his case, listen.

The initial contact from the aircraft sounded normal, which was not what he wanted to hear. He had a lot invested in this particular experiment, and if it didn't work, he would be the one paying the bill.

The F-35 jet, known as the "Lightning II," was the most advanced fighter

aircraft ever envisioned. Capable of unimaginable things, from stealth penetration to combat control of synchronized drones, it was unstoppable. With construction on each airframe ongoing in more than twelve countries all over the world, it was the finest fighter aircraft ever to take to the skies. The ultimate killing machine, but it had an Achilles' heel.

Jake worked for a company called Gollum Solutions, a subcontractor of a subcontractor for BAE Systems—a common occurrence in the byzantine world of military procurement. You'd be hard pressed to find a military contractor who didn't take the profits first and then subcontract out, but in this case the subcontracting company's name had a double meaning.

It was derived from the riddle of the ring in J. R. R. Tolkien's novels. Built solely to gain the contract for the F-35, Gollum Solutions promised to solve the riddle through software, and in so doing make the F-35 invisible. Just as the ring could do. As enticingly clever as the name was, what the owners never realized was that there were two sides to the ring, and they would pay a price for it.

The ring in Tolkien's world was corrupting, with anyone who wore it turning against his nature to serve a different master, and the name Gollum would prove prophetic. Which is where Jake Shu came in. A Chinese American, he was well placed to create havoc for money. A Gollum in his own right, he had worn the proverbial ring, and had been corrupted.

Two months ago, he'd been detailed from his company in Australia to the F-35 final assembly plant in Japan—an unexpected advantage. Japan had the only such plant outside of the United States, with all other F-35s being built in Fort Worth, Texas, and because of it he had an opportunity.

He'd helped with the byzantine assembly process, his expertise being in software integration. He'd done the job he was asked—along with a bit more—and was now wondering if it had worked.

Sitting in the cold outside the control tower, now it was time to see if his inject actually mattered, because a human being was behind the controls. At

the end of the day, he could alter the sensors of the plane, but the pilot was king. And yet that man only did what his sensors told him to do. At least that's what Jake hoped.

His inject was simple: Change what the pilot thought was correct. There was ample reason to believe that his alterations would work. Plenty of pilots crashed because they thought one thing and the unforgiving earth thought another. The difference in those cases was that they chose to disbelieve what their instruments were telling them.

What if the instruments themselves were telling the pilot something different?

The helmet of the F-35 was a monstrosity—a four-hundred-thousand-dollar piece of gear that offered the pilot innumerable feeds, showing him everything that was occurring within his airspace. He could read the world in real time, gaining an unrivaled capability to defeat anything that chose to fight. The pilot read all of those feeds and trusted them explicitly. And it was all software driven.

The pilot controlled cameras that could detail everything around the aircraft, allowing him a 360-degree view that would be impossible without the helmet. He had feeds telling him every threat near the aircraft within a hundred miles. He had sensors that detailed when to fire his weapons, only locking on when the computer told him it was correct, giving him an unparalleled ability to prevent collateral damage in modern warfare. He had more control over his destiny than any pilot in history.

But what if what he was seeing was wrong? If his actual experience wasn't what was happening? What if his helmet told him one thing, and reality was another?

Jake heard the control tower say, "Comet four-two, Comet four-two, go to thirty-one five. Inbound aircraft at thirty-seven."

He heard, "Yes. Understood."

He waited with bated breath, conflicted. If this worked, he was murdering a person he'd never met.

He heard, “Comet four-two, you just passed through twenty thousand feet. I instructed thirty-one five. Are you understanding?”

Most of the Japanese airbases used by the United States were manned and operated solely by Americans, a symbiotic relationship that Japan allowed because the country fell under the U.S. umbrella of protection. Misawa was different. It was the only combined airbase in the Pacific theater, run jointly by both Japanese and U.S. personnel, and as such, had been chosen as the base for the first Japanese F-35s to showcase the partnership between the two countries. Jake knew that the men inside the control tower were Japanese, as was the man in the aircraft. They spoke English, because that was the air traffic control language the world over, but it was still a little surreal. Especially since he wasn’t Japanese.

The pilot responded, a little miffed, “Yes. Knock it off.”

Jake heard nothing for a pregnant second, and then the voice from the tower showed its first bit of urgency. “You’ve passed through fifteen thousand at five hundred knots. Acknowledge.”

“I understand. I have it.”

Nothing more. Then the voice from the tower became frantic. “You’re at two thousand feet and going six hundred knots. Acknowledge. Acknowledge.”

Jake waited, but heard nothing else. He knew the radar track ended at one thousand feet. He stood up, glanced left and right, and then saw the first indicator of his success—five men rushing out of the tower. He waited a beat, then sat back down, wanting to hear the tower’s calls.

There was nothing else broadcast, the plane lost to radar intercept at one thousand feet. The recovery of the aircraft would take four months, the body of the pilot itself not found until a month after that, with the United States concerned that the Chinese would attempt to find the top-secret information lying on the ocean floor.

The final report was that the pilot had experienced spatial disorientation flying over the Pacific Ocean at night, where the horizon and the ocean

joined seamlessly into one. There was a lot of chatter among the pundit class about the Chinese stealing the vaunted technology of the F-35 by submarine or other means, but they failed to realize that the Chinese had no intention of diving into the depths of the Pacific for technology that had been destroyed by a plane flying at six hundred knots straight into the ocean. Why should they?

Since Mao Tse-Tung, they had been the masters of unconventional warfare, and this was just one more moment of their success. Why find an aircraft at the bottom of the ocean to learn its secrets when you can make every single one of them irrelevant?

Jake dialed a number on his cell phone and said, "It's done. And I think it worked."

CHAPTER 2

December 2019

Amena spiked the ball and I dove for it, barely able to get it back into the air. A floater that I knew she was going to smash. She leapt up and hammered it again with a little bit of rage. I didn't even try, watching it bounce away. I looked at her and said, "Really?"

She gave me a little impish grin and said, "I thought your reflexes were quicker. Sorry."

We were in our small driveway on a narrow lane in Charleston, without even a net, and I knew she'd done it on purpose. All we were supposed to be doing was tapping the ball back and forth, like before a volleyball game, and she had decided to turn it into a contest. I wasn't sure if it was because she was mad about being forced to leave the house, or upset at herself for agreeing to the plan in the first place.

At thirteen years old, she was taller than most girls her age and was pretty athletic. I'd decided to get her interested in volleyball, because the school she was set to attend had a pretty good team. I'd paid for a couple of lessons, and in so doing had turned her into a monster.

A refugee from Syria, I'd collided with Amena on a mission in Europe after her family had been slaughtered by some very bad men. She'd ended up being pretty critical to saving a lot of lives, and after the loss of her family, she was all alone. So I'd brought her back to America after it was over. Okay, that sounds like I'd gone through the wickets with the U.S. Department of State to introduce a foreign refugee into America, but I hadn't. I'd basically

smuggled her into the country using a covert aircraft belonging to the organization I worked with.

Called Project Prometheus in official top-secret traffic—but just the Taskforce to all of us minions—its sole mission was protecting the United States from attacks that others in the Department of Defense or the CIA couldn't prosecute, which is to say it operated outside of legal bounds. And therein lay the problem.

I'd basically turned an enormous covert infrastructure into my own personal coyote operation, but instead of bringing a load of Salvadorans across the Rio Grande in the back of a pickup, I'd flown Amena into the United States on a Gulfstream jet leased to my company. It was bad form all the way around, not the least because it could have exposed the entire organization, and with it our less than stellar following of the U.S. Code, but she was worth it. She had prevented a catastrophic attack at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, and she'd deserved the rescue.

Of course, the higher-ups in the Taskforce hadn't taken that view. Called the Oversight Council, they supervised all Taskforce activity, approving each mission on a case-by-case basis. Except for this one. When they found out what I'd done, they tried to slip her back out of the country and introduce her into the refugee flow out of Syria, but I was having none of that. The odds of her ever showing back up in the United States were marginal at best, and she'd earned the right to be here, regardless of the less than legal means I'd used.

Amena ran into the bushes beside the driveway and grabbed the ball, knowing I wasn't going to chase it after that hit. She handed it to me and said, "If this isn't a honeymoon, why can't I go?"

I took the ball, knowing she was playing me. I said, "It's not a damn honeymoon. Quit saying that. You can't go because you have school. You've been begging to go to school for months, and today's the day."

"But that was before you taught Jennifer to SCUBA dive. Before you

planned a trip to Australia. Before the choice was being stuck inside your house or going to school. Now it's going to Australia or going to school. I'd rather go to Australia. Unless this is a honeymoon for you two . . .”

In the end, me and the National Command Authority of the United States agreed to a compromise, which is a polite way of saying I took on the president of the United States over Amena's fate. It had been a little bit of a fight, but they'd agreed to wash her documents as having been sponsored by a global company that engaged in worldwide protection of antiquities. A company that was a do-gooder on the world stage, protecting what was honorable and just in the sands of history. My company, Grolier Recovery Services. It was a unique solution, because in truth, while my company did in fact run around the world saving old pottery shards, its sole purpose was to put a bad guy's head on a spike. But I'd agreed.

The sticking point was that the sponsor had to be something more than a company. It had to be a family unit, with actual names. Which is where Jennifer Cahill, my partner in crime, came in.

If I had a Facebook page, under relationships it would say, “It's complicated.” Jennifer and I were business partners first and foremost, but we were definitely more than that, if either one of us had the courage to admit it. We'd danced around the commitment to our relationship for years, sometimes falling back onto just the business partner side of things, but always with the benefits side of the house, if you get my meaning.

My feelings had slipped out on occasion, as had hers, but we'd conveniently forgotten those instances, like an embarrassed family member who doesn't discuss what the drunk uncle blurted out at Thanksgiving.

The truth was I loved her and had just been too damaged to commit—and she had been the same way. Amena had short-circuited all of that angst, forcing us to face reality. Something I was happy about, but I wasn't so sure about Jennifer.

Because of the immediacy of her situation, Jennifer and I had actually tied the knot at the justice of the peace, becoming officially married, but

Jennifer thought it had a veneer of corruption around it. When she'd said "I do," she'd expected a wedding, but there wasn't any time for that. We needed to be a family unit immediately—but she was still expecting a ceremony. Which is what Amena was talking about. We couldn't be taking a honeymoon when we hadn't had an official wedding ceremony.

I batted the ball to her, saying, "Stop that talk. You'll just get Jennifer wound up. You're going to school, and we're going to Australia. It's just a vacation."

The truth of the matter was we were leaving the country solely to make Amena rely on the boarding school she was attending. In effect, to take away her ability to call us every night or come running home for support. I was forcing some tough love, but I couldn't tell her that.

She hit the ball back, this time with a soft lob setup, and I leapt up and smashed it, driving it past her head and causing her to flinch, the volleyball bouncing into the street behind her. I hit the ground grinning and then heard, "What in the world was that? Are you crazy?"

Amena now sported her own grin, knowing I was going to have my ass handed to me. I turned around and saw Jennifer on the stoop of our Charleston single with a suitcase, looking like she wanted to gut me.

I said, "Hey, wait a minute. You didn't see what she did earlier. I was just acting like a front line on the court . . . She asked me to do it."

With a pious look, Amena said, "It's hard practicing with him. He is very mean."

My mouth fell open and Amena broke into a smile, chasing after the ball. She came back, stood next to me, and gave me a small hip bump, both of us looking at Jennifer, waiting on the pain. Jennifer shook her head and said, "I can't deal with two children. One is enough. Help me with the suitcase."

Amena lost her smile and said, "Why can't I come with you guys? If it's not a honeymoon?"

Digging into her purse for her car keys, Jennifer looked up in surprise and said, "Honeymoon? Who said that?"

She looked at me and I pointed to Amena, then picked up the suitcase, hustling to get out of the blast radius.

Jennifer said, “Amena, go inside and make sure you’ve got everything you need. You won’t be able to come back here until we return in a couple of weeks.”

Amena scowled, but unlike she would do with me, she listened to Jennifer and went back inside.

Jennifer came over to me and said, “What was that about?”

Cramming the last suitcase into the back of her little Mini Cooper, juggling the other bags, I said, “I’m getting that Jeep I saw online yesterday. I don’t care how much they’re charging. This is a clown car.”

My ancient Jeep CJ-7 had been destroyed almost a year ago, and we still hadn’t replaced it because I was a picky shopper and hadn’t found one I liked, forcing both of us to use her little midget vehicle. But my attempt to deflect the question fell on deaf ears.

She repeated, “What’s Amena talking about?”

I sighed, closed the hatchback, and said, “She thinks she can’t go because I’m taking you on a honeymoon. That’s it. She came up with it all on her own.”

Jennifer snorted. “We’re not having a honeymoon until we have a real wedding. You can’t weasel out of that by taking me to Australia and then calling it a honeymoon after the fact.”

I raised my hands and said, “That’s not from me. That’s from her. I didn’t say a word. You know the only reason we’re going is to get her settled at school. That’s it.”

Amena came out carrying a small satchel and Jennifer squinted at me. I lowered my voice and said, “Enough talk about why we’re going.”

Jennifer whispered, “If you think going to Australia and hanging out with some old Taskforce guys is my idea of a honeymoon, you’ve got another thing coming.”

I grinned and said, “Hey, he’s giving us a free place to stay. We’re diving the reef. That was *your* idea.”

Amena came up and asked, “So? Is it a honeymoon?”

Jennifer looked at me and I said, “No, it’s not. We can’t have that until after a proper ceremony.”

“What’s a proper ceremony? You guys go to Australia and I’ll never see you again.”

Jennifer laughed. “That’s not going to happen.”

I said, “What are you talking about? We’ll be back in two weeks.”

She became earnest. “Trouble follows you. It always has. You’re going to get in trouble. And I’ll be left alone.”

I knelt down and said, “That’s not going to happen, doodlebug. It’s not.”

She took my hands and said, “You promise?”

“I do. It’s just a vacation. That’s all.”

She looked into my eyes and said, “Until the bad man shows up.”

And I knew what she was telling me. She’d seen the bad man more than once, and was convinced it was the natural way of things. The bad man just always showed up.

I said, “Don’t worry about that. You’re in the United States. The bad man is gone.”

I saw her eyes tear up and she said, “The bad man is always there. Even here. Don’t leave me to him.”

It broke my heart. I hugged her and said, “Hey, come on. There is nobody out to get you here. You’re going to be in good hands. It’s what you wanted.”

She broke my embrace, looked into my eyes, and asked, “If the bad man finds you on vacation, you’ll kill him, right? Come back to me?”

That took me aback. What kid thinks her parents are going to be attacked on vacation, and then wishes that the parents would kill the attackers? For the first time I realized that this was more than just a foster-parent relationship. We were never going to have a normal family, because we most decidedly

weren't normal, as much as we wanted to be. She'd seen me operate—had seen me kill—but because of her love for me, she couldn't get it around her head that I was, in fact, worse than the evil she'd encountered. There was nothing on earth that would keep me from protecting her.

I looked at Jennifer and saw a tear in her eye. I hugged Amena and leaned into her ear, whispering, “I *am* the bad man. Remember that.”

CHAPTER 3

Yu-Feng “Paul” Kao didn’t consider himself a bad man. When he looked in the mirror, he didn’t see a trace of evil, but he was doing something bad now. And he knew it.

As an officer in the National Security Bureau of Taiwan—a combination of the United States’ FBI and CIA—he had a duty to protect Taiwan. And sometimes that duty led to doing unpleasant things.

Tall and lithe, he had a shock of jet-black hair and an angular face full of sharp contours. His visage looked as if it were perpetually at stage three of a four-stage sketch, the drawing taken away before the artist was allowed to smooth over the rough edges.

He pulled into the tourist parking lot at the Shifen Falls, about an hour east of his headquarters in Taipei, dodging the engorged tour buses and the myriad of pedestrians wandering about like cattle. He found a spot away from the crowds and turned off the engine.

He turned to his passenger and said, “You ready to go?”

A young man with fear in his eyes, the person next to him said, “I guess so. What do I do if he attacks me?”

“He won’t attack. He wants what you have. He wants to make some money. Just don’t forget your cover story. Whatever you do, use the name Feng Main. Don’t slip up and give him your true one. That’ll be a deal breaker.”

The kid nodded, seeming unsure. Paul patted his arm and said, “It’ll be okay. Just don’t forget to turn on the recorder. Get what he has to say, give him the money, and keep acting like you’re a conduit from the PRC. He wants to believe. He wants the pipeline to continue. I’ll wait right here.”

The kid looked up sharply and said, “You’ll wait here? Am I alone? Shouldn’t we have more cops here? More people to help? Once I’m in the park, I’ll be on my own.”

“We already have people in there. If he tries anything, we’ll be all over him. But don’t force that. I need him to continue. I want to break open the entire network.”

The kid nodded vaguely. Paul waited a moment, then leaned back and said, “What’s your name?”

Hesitantly, the kid said, “Feng. My name is Feng Main.”

“What do you do?”

With more courage, he continued, “I’m a university student. I’m a student.”

“Who do you work for?”

Like a robot, devoid of fear, he said, “The People’s Republic of China. The Ministry of State Security.”

“Good. Stick to the truth and it’ll be okay.”

The kid opened the door, took one look back, and left, walking toward the bridge spanning the river by the Shifen Falls. Paul watched him go and prayed he’d make it back. Not just because of the case he was building, but because he honestly felt a little twinge of guilt for sending him in. There were no other operatives in the park. If something went wrong, the kid was on his own.

Feng Main was, in fact, a university student. A stupidly naïve Taiwanese native who had been approached by the People’s Republic of China to foment insurrection inside Taiwan. The tradecraft had been sloppy and the payouts easy to find, so much so that it scared Paul. If the masters in Beijing from the Guoanbu—the Ministry of State Security—were this sloppy with Feng, it meant they just didn’t care what he did. Which meant he was an afterthought, and Paul was missing the real penetration.

The PRC’s MSS intelligence service was the largest in the world by far. It

had tentacles that reached throughout the globe, and a history of successfully hiding what it did because it blended traditional trained operatives with people from the Chinese diaspora. It was impossible to tell whether someone was a real Chinese agent or just some immigrant with ties to the homeland whom they'd co-opted. And the MSS was very good at its mission.

Russia eliminating double agents with nuclear poison in London? Amateur stuff. North Korea killing the half brother of the leader with a nerve agent in Malaysia? Ridiculously overt. The MSS would never even have been mentioned. They were a controlled beast, without emotion, like a wall of water directed at a rock. They had no fear, no pity, and no sense of failure. Eventually, Paul knew, the rock would lose. His job was to turn off the water.

After the unrest in Hong Kong and the explicit indications that the MSS had been operating inside the city since before the riots, Paul had been directed to ferret out Taiwan's own hidden threat. In short order, he'd found Feng. And it hadn't been hard. Which made him question what he was missing. Clearly, the MSS hadn't put a lot of stock in the success of Feng. But they *had* recruited him to interface with the Bamboo Triad, and that would be enough to help.

The Bamboo Triad was a criminal gang not unlike the Cosa Nostra, an organized crime ring solely concerned with profit, running everything from prostitution to drugs in Taiwan—with one exception: They also worked for the MSS to destabilize Taiwan.

Paul watched the kid disappear on the path and felt a pang of guilt. Maybe the MSS had been sloppy for a reason. Maybe they were trying to ferret out his own security service's reach. If that was the case, the kid was dead, but that alone would provide some help for Paul. He wouldn't be able to penetrate whatever plan the Triad had in play, but at least Feng's death would prove that the MSS had penetrated his own organization somehow.

It would be a small consolation to Feng, but sometimes bad things had to happen to protect the nation.

The kid reached the pedestrian bridge crossing the river and took one look back. Paul saw it, but ignored the fear spilling out. Feng disappeared, and Paul settled in to wait.

He would be waiting a long time.

CHAPTER 4

Feng hesitantly walked across the footbridge, getting run over by kids and grandparents all marching to the falls. A light drizzle began to fall, coating him in a dusting of water. The other tourists began breaking out umbrellas, forcing him to dodge the spines. He slipped past one, hit another pedestrian with his back, apologized, and then was yelled at for stepping into a selfie picture attempt on the bridge. The encounters frazzled him.

He continued walking in a daze, wondering how his life had gone so wrong. He wasn't the only university student who had been approached by the PRC for help. They were brazen in their attempts, just as they were with the state-run television stations and every other aspect of Taiwanese life. The PRC was everywhere, and he still didn't understand how he'd been picked up when everyone else was doing it, and none of it was harmful as far as he could tell. Just small things, really.

He'd gotten money to spread stories accusing the incumbent government of corruption, or talking about how China had only helped Taiwan. Nothing but social media posts, and he was paid good money to do them. Then the PRC had asked him to do something more, and he'd agreed. More good money. It wasn't like it affected anything in Taiwan. He still heard his parents and grandparents bitching about Beijing, so it wasn't as if he were altering the balance of power, even with the presidential elections happening in January, three short months away.

And then he'd been put in touch with a man called the Snow Leopard. A leader inside the infamous Bamboo Triad. A completely criminal organization that was continually tracked by the police for drugs, prostitution, extortion, you name it. Only now they'd formed a political party, giving them protection

for their political actions under the constitution of Taiwan while also giving them cover as being “persecuted” for their “political” beliefs. Called the Chinese Unification Promotion Party, it took all its direction from Beijing, and was a small but growing presence inside Taiwan, with a stated goal of allowing the PRC to absorb Taiwan.

Feng had put no thought into the Triad’s control of CUPP because, honestly, politics bored him. Unlike his parents, who had had to practice air raid drills as children, or his grandparents, who were convinced that every day was their last, he’d grown up in a democracy. It was unfathomable to him that a giant country like China would do anything against his little island. Which is why he took the money. It was all harmless.

Until it wasn’t.

When Paul had first knocked on his door, a file of evidence on his misdeeds in hand, Feng’s heart had dropped to his stomach. He was no master spy, and he’d immediately admitted everything he’d done, professing it was harmless. All he’d wanted was a little money, and nothing he’d done was that bad. It wasn’t like he was selling state secrets. Just some social media stuff, which was allowed in Taiwan. What had he done that was criminal?

And then he’d been shown the last exchange, where he’d actually transported money and dropped it off in a trash can. He’d protested, saying he had no idea where the money had come from or why he was delivering it. It was just another avenue for cash, and he’d done it. Paul had shown him how the money had ended up financing propaganda at a state-run television station, and Feng had become queasy, finally asking what Paul wanted him to do. He couldn’t bring shame on his family, and he most certainly couldn’t be outed as a Chinese spy. And now he was going to meet a member of the most brutal Triad on the island, ostensibly to get the man to commit to treason so Paul could rip the Triad apart.

It was a far cry from posting a couple of social media posts.

He reached the other side of the bridge, walked through the crowds surrounding various food stands. The rain began to pick up, but the children

were still tromping about, riding metal horses and bench swings, running about through a mix of locals and foreign tourists.

He kept going, reaching the stairway to the lower viewing level, his breath starting to come in small gasps. He descended for what seemed like an hour, one switchback of stairs after another, all of them built into the rock face leading to the viewing platform. He reached the bottom and saw the giant granite wall to his front, the water spilling out like a miniature Niagara Falls. He glanced around and found that the metal stairs he had been using were grafted onto the old, ancient ones carved out of the stone, back when the miners came here for relaxation. They went right, behind the rocks to the river, but the new path led to the left, toward the viewing area.

He went that way, seeing the falls spilling out to his front. Ordinarily there would be a huge crowd fighting for selfies with the falls as a background, but the rain had put a damper on that. There was only a smattering of people in the overhang, and a single man sitting on a bench, ignoring the waterfall.

Feng hesitantly went forward, circling a family taking pictures, an umbrella blocking all of the shots from the falls. He approached and saw a man of about sixty, with salt-and-pepper hair, a thin mustache, and cruel eyes. It wasn't until he came close that he noticed a vicious scar circling his neck, like someone had tried to slit his throat and had missed.

The man looked up from his newspaper and said, "Feng?"

Feng nodded, and the man stood, saying, "Follow me."

As soon as his back was turned, Feng turned on the recording device, and then began to follow. They left the viewing area, going back the way Feng had come, but when the staircase began rising against the cliffs, the man took the old route. The one carved right into the rock. Feng looked around him, trying to spot the protection he had in the sparse people around, but saw no one who resembled a policeman. He wondered if they were hidden in the cliffs.

Feng continued following, and within minutes they were lost to the tourists, crossing over the rock wall and walking along the land next to the river,

the expanse of stone blocking the view from the official tourist path. They descended into a small bowl, the waterfall lost from sight, and he saw two other men waiting, both of them squatting on their haunches like they were cooking dinner at a camp, a spilling of cigarette butts at their feet. They had been waiting awhile.

One had tattoos covering his face. The other had a narrow smile with gaps in his teeth that reminded Feng of a snake's jaw, but what drew Feng's eyes were his hands. They looked like they'd been dipped in acid, the skin misshapen as if melted wax had been poured over them. Feng felt the adrenaline rise, once again wondering about his police protection.

The man leading him felt the reticence and said, "I'm Chao Zheng. The Snow Leopard. Do not worry. Come."

Feng descended deeper into the bowl, shoved his hands in his pockets, and waited. The two men rose and circled him, until he was in a ring of them. The Leopard said, "You have the money?"

Feng shrugged a messenger bag off of his shoulder and lowered it to the ground, saying, "Yes, yes. But it must be used in a certain way."

The Leopard said, "I know. A very special way. But not the one you intended."

Feng said, "What?"

The Leopard pulled out a knife and said, "Not the way you intended. You claim to work for China, but you don't. I'll take the money, but it will be used for them, not what you wanted."

Feng said, "Wait, what? I'm here because you asked for me. I'm just the messenger. I'm a nobody."

"Take off your shirt."

And Feng knew he was dead. He didn't move. The tattooed man leapt forward and ripped his shirt upwards, exposing the recording device. Feng began to tremble, looking wildly around for a police presence that wasn't coming.

He said, "It's not me. I was captured. I was just doing what I was told."

The Snow Leopard leaned forward and said, "You're good at doing what you're told, yes?"

"Yes, yes, yes. I'll set them up for you, if you want. I'll do what you ask."

The tattooed man trapped his hands behind his back, torquing his arms up until he yelped. Feng said, "I'm not against you. I can help! I'm on the inside now. They think I'm with them. But I'm not."

The man with melted hands grabbed him by the hair, jerking him off balance to the water. He fell to his knees, looking up at the Snow Leopard, the river rushing by a foot in front of him. He said, "Please, I can help."

"I'm sure you can. I believe you. You'll do what I ask?"

"Yes, yes. I promise."

The Leopard nodded at the tattooed man and said, "I'm asking you to not hold your breath. This has to look like an accident, and it takes a lot longer if you do."

Feng sprang up, and was immediately shoved back onto his knees, the mud seeping through his clothes. He flailed his arms above his head, trying to break the hold on his neck, but failed. He shrieked, the sound lost in the rushing of river water. He felt his head being lowered, shouted, "No, no, no!" and then it went under the surface. He fought valiantly, then weakly, then his body went slack. The Leopard watched him struggle with the detachment of someone drowning a cat in a bag. When it was done, he pushed Feng's body into the current of the river, the carcass bobbing away from him.

He said, "So it's true. We've been penetrated somehow."

Acid hands said, "Maybe we should back off for a little bit."

The Snow Leopard picked up the satchel, opened it, then said, "Maybe we should ramp it up. Quit hiding. Take it to them for a change."

He turned to the tattooed man and said, "It's not like we don't have the support."